Standing now in the middle of the battlefield, Salvador was carefully watching his opponent. He didn't care about the audience or what they were shouting from the stands. It didn't matter whether the spectators supported him or condemned him. He hadn't cared about that now, nor earlier, when he was only descending to the site of the battle.

What truly mattered now was Shadomorph's reaction and the opponent himself. The old man, despite his age, had never lost a single match since arriving here. Moreover, Salvador had seen with his own eyes what he was capable of. And yet, knowing all of this—why was the man still standing here? Why was he so calm, looking so boldly into the eyes of such a dangerous opponent? The answer was simple: he knew why they were here. There were reasons for this fight.

Of everything Salvador had heard about the old man before, one fact was commonly agreed upon: he possessed the earth gift and had developed it to a nearly godlike level.

All gifts passed through four stages of development: gifted, master, miracle worker, and godlike. Each next level was incomparably higher than the one before. Salvador didn't know exactly how the gifts evolved. His own mastery of Shadomorph barely reached the level of a master. The old man, without a doubt, possessed the level of a miracle worker. The difference in their gift levels was simply enormous. Obviously, deciding to fight such an opponent wasn't the wisest decision Salvador had ever made. He understood this, but it was too late to back out.

It's worth noting that, at the moment, what unsettled the man most was Shad's silence. After his last words—that it was the end—he hadn't spoken a word.

Perhaps the shadow had given up early or was scared. Maybe he was simply disappointed in such a reckless decision from his bearer. Or maybe all at once, and he was just in shock. Whatever it was, Salvador decided to break the silence.

"Hey, Shad, how are you holding up? Ready to show yourself?"

"Oh, come on, don't pretend you care how I'm doing. If you really did, we wouldn't be here right now," Shadomorph replied with obvious displeasure.

"I'm not pretending. How you are doing directly affects the outcome of our fight," the man replied seriously, denying the shadow's words.

"You're saying we have a chance to win?" Shadomorph changed his tone to one of disbelief. "I seriously doubt that."

"Of course, we have a chance to win," Salvador hurried to encourage his shadow, though his voice faltered partway through. Who was he kidding? Of course the difference between him and the opponent was enormous—no way around it.

"Listen," he tried to recover, "we've been through a lot together, and I'm glad our fates are intertwined. You're more than my gift—you're the one I trust with my life, understand? My decision back then led to what we have now. And now, I believe we're here for an important reason. I believe our destinies are tied to this opponent. And if I'm right, we can win."

"That kind of logic could only come from someone like you. I completely fail to understand your motivations. Belief? Assumptions? To me, all of that is something ephemeral, beyond my comprehension," the shadow answered honestly, but immediately added, "What is enough for me, though, is what you said about us. It's because you always consider me that I respond in kind. If you need victory, I'll do everything I can to get it."

"You say you don't understand my motivations, say human emotions are alien to you, and yet you give the most touching speeches, Shad."

"Are you mocking me right now?" the shadow asked coldly. "I'm not some—"

"Not at all," Salvador cut off Shadomorph's mistaken assumption. "On the contrary, I'm grateful to you. I rely on you, so—shall we give it our all?"

"I'm in!" the shadow growled approvingly.

"And so, ladies and gentlemen!" rang out the confident voice of a masked stranger standing on the raised platform above the battlefield. He threw his arms wide with a certain nonchalant grandeur before continuing: "Both opponents stand before you, ready to fight for victory! As you all know, according to the arena's rules, any brave soul who defeats the reigning champion gains the right to have any wish fulfilled. But in case of defeat, they lose their freedom and are obliged to entertain you in future battles... with no hope of release!"

The stands exploded with screams and howls. Enthusiastic, impatient, and merciless, the crowd thirsted for spectacle.

"I think I'm starting to figure out how the old man ended up here," Shadomorph said in a low and clearly unfriendly voice.

"That sheds some light on a few things, but it doesn't reduce the number of questions," Salvador agreed with the shadow. "For now, we need to focus on winning. We'll talk about what we've seen later."

"And so, by the power granted to me from above, I declare the battle... begun!" boomed the confident voice of the masked man. He paused for a moment, as if sharing in the audience's excitement, and only then slowly returned to his place. He truly acted like the true master of the tournament.

"I don't like him," Shadomorph said honestly.

And so, the battle began. Or rather, the announcement of the battle's start had happened, but nothing new had occurred for several minutes. The crowd grew increasingly impatient: disgruntled shouts, strange words devoid of meaning, and even worse, movements. But neither Salvador nor the old man budged. They had merely adjusted their positions into defensive stances, watching each other with studying gazes. Neither wished to make the first move. Both wanted to learn more about their opponent. In the end, it was Salvador who gave in. This couldn't go on forever—waiting for the unknown was the worst part.

Switching to an offensive stance, he dashed forward. He moved toward his opponent,

swiftly closing the distance between them. Reaching the right range, Salvador leapt, spinning to increase the force of the strike. He aimed to hit the old man in the chest with his right leg, but the elder, who had stood unmoving and awaiting the attack all this time, easily parried the strike. Because Salvador had been airborne just before the strike, he didn't notice that the ground had trembled slightly. And just at the moment his foot was supposed to land on the target, an earthen shield grew up from the ground, blocking its creator. It's worth noting that the old man didn't try to protect himself with something massive. On the contrary, he had excellent control over his gift and created a shield just large enough to successfully block the blow.

Wasting no time, the old man immediately switched from defense to offense. He continued using small elements of his gift: spears, pillars, shields, and the like. Salvador didn't sense overt hostility toward himself, but even so, the opponent left him no room to recover. Moreover, the old man, despite his advanced age, had no issue using basic physical attacks. He was fast and agile beyond his years, though his body looked painfully thin. Because of that, Salvador couldn't bring himself to attack the old man with full force. Perhaps that was foolish in such a situation, especially given the vast difference in power levels. Still, something about it just didn't feel right.

Salvador kept dodging, retreating step by step. Shadomorph wound around his arms and legs, strengthening and shielding them. But still, the man wasn't doing the most important thing—he wasn't attacking. And without that, victory would be difficult to achieve.

At some point, the old man apparently grew tired of the charade. He stopped and, glaring at Salvador, stepped forward with his right leg. This allowed him to take a stable stance for wielding his gift. Feet spread wide, knees bent, arms slightly flexed at the elbows—aimed straight at his opponent. A moment later, the old man stomped the ground with confidence, and the earth beneath Salvador's feet began to shake. The tremor was so intense that just staying upright was difficult. On top of that, the old man continued to attack Salvador with earthen spikes, shooting up from the

ground toward their target. Salvador managed to deal with those too, looking more like a dancer than a man in the middle of a serious duel with his future on the line. But it couldn't last forever—his strength was running out. Eventually, one of the spikes got through, heading straight for his chest. If not for Shadomorph successfully covering the impact point with his own body, it likely would've ended with more than a couple broken ribs.

"Salvador, what's going on? Why aren't you attacking?" Shadomorph finally asked. "You had openings—granted, you could count them on one hand."

The man, who had just been thrown several meters back and was nearly on his knees, looked once again at his opponent with golden eyes.

"He's not our enemy," Salvador answered honestly. "I want to win. I understand how much depends on it. But I also need him alive. Honestly, I'm afraid to hit him. His strikes are powerful, but his body... I'm not sure it could withstand serious blows."

"Are you out of your mind? How are you planning to win without hurting him?"

"Your shadow is right," the old man spoke to the man for the first time. "Without harming me, you will not claim victory. And who do you take me for? Do you think a couple of your blows will take me down? Let me tell you something, young man—when you see your target, do not hesitate. Doubt will bring you to me."

Salvador understood very well what the old man was trying to tell him, and he was undoubtedly right.

"Shad, we need a plan," the man said to his shadow.

"Really? You think so?" Shadomorph replied, a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Cut it out and listen. I want you to eat him."

"And I'm the one acting crazy here?!" the shadow exclaimed, genuinely outraged.

"You see what I see and feel what I feel. We are one. You learn the world through me. You know my thoughts. So listen to them!"

Shadomorph fell silent for a few moments, then, as if struck by inspiration, exclaimed approvingly:

"This might actually work! Excellent plan, I must admit. Too many 'buts' in it, but it's better than nothing. Let's do it!"

Salvador tried harder than before to focus on his bond with the shadow and on his own energy. He wanted to allow Shadomorph to draw more strength from him, which would surely grant them greater control over the Gift.

"Hey, old man, I think I'll take your advice!" the man shouted confidently before launching an attack on his opponent.

Salvador used shadow amplifiers on his legs to increase the power of his jumps and running speed. This gave him some advantage in agility. However, given his opponent's skill and power, it didn't make things much easier overall. Salvador still had to dodge constantly, barely avoiding being caught by a boulder or a spike suddenly shooting from the ground at the least expected moment. But after several more seconds of this relentless sprinting, Salvador stopped dead in front of one of the incoming boulders—and it didn't look like he intended to move.

"Now!" he said firmly, staring death in the eye.

"Right now? I'm not ready yet, I—" Shadomorph began to protest.

"Just do it. I know it'll work."

Salvador said it, but the trembling ground from the oncoming boulder made his heart race. At the last possible moment, he threw his right hand forward, closing his eyes tightly. A second later, he opened them again—but there was no boulder. Not in front of him. Not anywhere around.

"Was that you, Shad? Or the old man?" Salvador asked his shadow. He felt noticeably weakened, but that didn't explain what had just happened clearly enough. "Did the plan work or not?"

"It worked!" Shadomorph replied proudly. "I can open the pocket."

"That's great news," Salvador exhaled in relief, eyeing the old man. "But I was supposed to do it."

"I know, I know. Next time I'll—"

"Next time you have to do it. I don't have the strength for three tries."

"Understood," Shadomorph replied briefly, but a moment later his voice became triumphant. "So now it's time for the feast?"

"Yes. We need to catch the right moment," Salvador agreed with his shadow.

All this time, the old man hadn't attacked. He had been observing the man with suspicion. He was definitely starting to sense something.

"I'm not finished yet!" Salvador called out to his opponent once more. "No more mercy, Shad!"

"Yesss!" the shadow growled in a low, delighted voice. "Let's begin!"

The man resumed his combat stance. Meanwhile, his shadow, in a matter of moments, broke free. Like a massive wave of black matter, it surged beside Salvador, forming a kind of three-meter-tall cocoon. Immediately, the thing began sprouting front and hind legs, then a head, and finally a long tail. In just a few seconds, the entire mass took the shape of a huge creature, somewhat resembling a reptile. Even its eyes burned with crimson flame, instilling real fear.

"Well, this fight is getting more and more interesting," the old man commented. He didn't look terrified—but he definitely became more serious.

"Glad you're enjoying it," Salvador replied with a smile. "Sorry, but I don't have a choice. I need this victory—nothing personal."

"Don't expect me to give up so easily."

"Of course," the man agreed, moving into the offensive. This time, he attacked the old man using shadows wrapped around his arms like whips. At some point, Salvador even thought that such an application of the Gift was intriguing in its own way.

With the shadow whips, the man moved easily across the battlefield, able to dodge and attack simultaneously. But the old man didn't just stand there either. He literally covered himself in a protective layer of earth, resembling scales. Breaking through that would be nearly impossible.

Salvador kept closing the distance. He attacked again and again, each time significantly shrinking the original gap. In the end, he got so close that the old man was forced to concentrate fully on him—just for a moment. And that was exactly what Salvador needed.

"Don't miss the decisive moment, old man," the man said softly as his gaze met the green eyes of his opponent.

The old man said nothing. He leapt several meters back and immediately struck the ground with his fists. As a result, two humanoid figures began to form before him. Judging by their build, they were meant to be excellent warriors. However, before fully completing their shapes, the newly created beings launched an attack on Salvador. It was clear they truly considered him a threat to their creator.

"Nice attack, but it seems you forgot about me," Shadomorph spoke from behind the old man. "What's that saying of yours? Ah—bon appétit!"

"What?" was all the trapped opponent managed to utter.

The moment Shadomorph consumed the old man, he immediately shrank back to his regular size, returning to Salvador through the shadowy tether that connected them.

The warrior constructs attacking Salvador froze in place—and with them, the entire arena. Silence fell—heavy, tense, full of confusion. No one had been prepared for this. No one could believe what they'd just seen. Even the expressions on the warriors' faces showed genuine surprise before their bodies crumbled entirely into dust.

"What? What's going on here?!" the same masked stranger jumped up from his comfortable seat. "I don't believe it, this is some kind of fraud! Seize them!"

"Hold on, hold on a moment," said the man sitting on the right in a calm voice, stopping the enraged observer. He slowly rose from his seat and walked over to the edge of the platform, where he gently rested his hands on the railing. A few strands of silvery hair peeked out from beneath his mask. "You can't do that."

"Why can't I?! This is my city, which means my rules!" quickly objected the owner of this place, speaking up for the first time.

"Yes, but this is my domain, which means the rules..." replied the silver-haired man in the same tone.

"What? But how…" the masked stranger became truly upset. And who could blame him? Not only had he gotten rid of the old man who had bored everyone, but now he also had to fulfill the winner's wish.

"How what? Just finish what you started, and let's be done with it," said the man, wasting no time and turning his gaze to the tournament's victor.

Their eyes met for the second time, and this time Salvador was sure of it. A familiar feeling washed over him in an instant. The feeling of a friend nearby.

"Something's wrong with that observer, Salvador?" asked Shadowmorph, evidently sensing the same thing.

"It feels like I know him," Salvador answered honestly, though it couldn't be true.

"Why not?" the shadow asked, clearly not understanding.

"He simply can't be here, trust me," Salvador replied with sadness in his voice.

"If you say so," Shadowmorph quickly accepted the situation. "So, when will those guys who are supposed to seize us show up? That man was shouting 'Fraud! Seize them!'"

"That's not quite what he shouted, Shad," Salvador chuckled. "Seems like that unknown guy is on our side. Whether out of whim or boredom, he stood up for us. I can't hear their conversation, but judging by how the dirty-playing owner of this place is groveling before the other, I'd say we're safe."

"Well, almost safe," Shadowmorph justified himself. "You're right, you don't need to hear them to see who the real master here is."

The conversation between the two observers continued for a while, while the other two remained seated in their chairs. Eventually, one of them finally accepted his defeat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began the masked man in charge of the entire spectacle in a triumphant voice,
 "We have witnessed something incredible, bordering on the impossible. It's hard to believe, but…"

"It's you who apparently finds it hard to believe," Shadowmorph muttered quietly.

"But we have given our word, and now we must fulfill one wish of the winner."

The unknown man looked at Salvador with clear reluctance.

"Tell us, what is it that you dream of? State your wish."

"I want to leave this city freely, without obstruction. And I want neither you nor anyone else to pursue me or stand in my way," Salvador answered almost immediately. However, judging by the reaction, no one liked his answer. No one present was inspired by what they heard.

"Hey, Salvador, that's kind of a small ask. You beat the local champion. Wish for something more impressive."

"Well then, in that case, I wish for you to release everyone condemned to fight here for your amusement."

And now, for the first time, the audience reacted the way they should. The place filled once again with life and joyful shouts.

"Champion! Long live the victor! Hooray!" the crowd cried. Meanwhile, the owner of the place turned pale and staggered. He wasn't ready for this. He was in a kind of shock and couldn't react properly to the situation. Letting everyone go meant losing far too much. But disobeying the man with silver hair standing beside him meant losing everything—even his life. This was no longer a choice between better and worse. This was a choice between worse and even worse.

"I… I don't…" the arena master began his speech hesitantly. At that very moment, all present fell silent. Not out of fear, not out of respect—they simply wanted to hear his answer.

"I…" he began again, casting a wary glance at the man beside him. "Well, I'm simply powerless in this situation. If that is your wish, we shall fulfill it!"

The audience erupted again in joyful cheers.

"Freedom! Champion! Hooray! Long live the victor, our hero! Freedom!" they cried, and the master of the place reluctantly joined them. But who knows what his lips were truly saying.

"Salvador, tell me—are we heroes now?" Shadowmorph asked in an excited voice.

"For today? Yes," Salvador replied with a smile. "Enjoy the feeling."

"Only today?"

"Only one wish will be granted, remember? And judging by everything… we won't escape pursuit now."

"Oh come on…" Shadowmorph exhaled in defeat. "That guy definitely won't leave us alone now."

"Exactly," Salvador continued to smile, waving both hands at the crowd.
 "Enjoy your last peaceful day."