

After everything that had happened, Salvador understood perfectly well that staying in the city would be too dangerous. All those who had been forced to fight against their will were indeed released. It seemed that the stranger with silver hair had personally overseen it. In a way, Salvador was even grateful to him. His interference had granted him temporary immunity from the city's ruler. However, the man had no desire to uncover the true motives of the stranger. That was why, trying to attract as little attention as possible, he left Ravenburg that very evening.

There were several reasons for the haste. One of them was the old man he had hidden in the shadow of the Shadowmorph. Salvador could hardly believe they had managed to fool everyone. The second reason was that he didn't want to become an easy target.

Having moved several kilometers away from the city, the man noticed the clouds thickening again. Rain was coming. On this continent, called Bluez, the sun appeared only occasionally. Constant rain, dampness, and gloom could exhaust the unprepared.

Salvador continued on his way until he stumbled upon a small house near the forest. It looked worn-out, and it seemed no one lived there. However, when the night is in full swing, one can't afford to be picky. He decided to stay there.

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First, the man checked the house for anyone inside. He wanted to be sure no one was nearby.

Most of the time was spent trying to light the fireplace. Finding firewood turned out to be not so easy. There was none inside the house, and it had become too dark outside. Despite the two moons shining in the sky, the thick clouds almost completely blocked them, not allowing their light to break through.

When the task was finally completed, the room Salvador was in was lit by the fire's glow. The space was medium-sized and, as expected, very old. A massive wardrobe, falling apart, seemed to prop up the sagging wall to the right of the fireplace. To the left were a few small windows. Between them stood a large chest with some clothes

inside—very handy. In the center of the room was a small sofa covered with a tattered blanket and a homemade table, barely half a meter high, cluttered with books.

Salvador didn't plan on exploring the other rooms. He just set his bag down on the floor, then took the blanket from the sofa and slowly went outside. It was time to bring the old man out.

"Shad, pull out everything you hid from the battlefield," the man addressed his shadow.

The future teacher—if luck was on their side—had been hidden according to plan. But that lump of earth that had nearly flattened Salvador himself, he hadn't been too eager to hide. That was not something worth keeping even as a memory. He hadn't pulled it out earlier simply because someone might've figured out his trick.

"Finally!" the Shadowmorph exclaimed joyfully, as if spitting out the hated chunk of earth.

"Be a little gentler with the old man," the man couldn't help commenting.

"You didn't have to ask," the shadow muttered almost unintelligibly.

Right after those words, Shad gently raised the voluntary prisoner from the shadow. He didn't look well. The old man seemed weak and completely exhausted, which wasn't surprising. His life in the arena had clearly drained him. It was amazing he could fight so superbly in such a state.

To top it off, Salvador had dragged him into a dangerous adventure. No matter how you looked at it, the man had no guarantees that things would go according to plan. It was a big risk, and who knew how it might come back to haunt them. Of course, all's well that ends well. But that didn't erase the stress the old man had endured during the seven hours spent inside an unknown creature's shadow.

It must be said that the man truly sympathized with him. Silently, Salvador decided he would ask the old man for training once he had somewhat recovered.

"Are you feeling sorry for me?" the elderly man narrowed his eyes suspiciously. He looked intently at Salvador through slits narrowed to the limit, waiting for an answer.

The man felt awkward and, not knowing what to say, simply handed the blanket to the old man.

"You're probably cold. Put this on."

Without changing his expression, which, in addition to suspicion, now bore a hint of pride, the old man snatched the blanket from his hand as if Salvador hadn't offered it at all.

"I heard you want me to be your teacher," the old man said instead of accepting the gesture.

"What?" Salvador asked in confusion.

"Your Shadowmorph told me," the old man replied, returning a more natural, kind expression to his face. "He told me a lot during the time I was inside. Seven hours, you know."

"So that's why it was so quiet!" the man exclaimed as if a light had turned on. "I thought you were worried in there, Shadowmorph. Thought you were staying vigilant, but you..."

Toward the end of the sentence, Salvador's voice took on a slightly disappointed tone. However, he quickly perked up again.

"I suppose you were worried in your own way, right, Shad? You wanted to keep him entertained so time would pass faster?"

"Grandpa," the shadow drawled playfully.

"Grandpa?" both men repeated after Shadowmorph.

"What? Isn't it nice? 'Grandpa' sounds better, as far as I can tell. When I called him Grandpa during our chat, he got a lot chattier."

"Grand-pa?" Salvador echoed suspiciously, glancing at the old man.

"Not for you," the old man replied without missing a beat. "You can't call me that."

"Then what should I call you? Teacher?" Salvador raised both eyebrows questioningly and grinned slyly.

"I haven't decided to be your teacher yet," the old man grumbled. "Saving me and giving me a blanket isn't enough."

He was clearly playing some kind of game with Salvador, but whatever it was—it worked. Salvador had completely forgotten about pity and former sympathy. In their place came admiration and respect. The old man held his ground. He definitely knew how to change the mood for the better.

"Then maybe you're hungry?" Salvador grinned even more slyly.

"You definitely have the makings of a student!" the old man exclaimed with satisfaction. "Your Shadowmorph didn't exaggerate a bit."

"I never exaggerate," the shadow grumbled in reply.

"My name is Leonardo, but you can call me Leo."

"Teacher Leo?" the man tested the title.

"Food first," the old man said sternly, turning his face the other way.

"In that case, please, come inside," Salvador replied with a smile, gesturing toward the front door.

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When everyone came inside, the man took his bag and pulled out a small bundle of cloth. He'd been carrying it around for a while now, just for situations like this. Unfolding the fabric right in front of the fireplace, Salvador laid out all the food he had. For the most part, it was fruits and vegetables, whose colors and shapes he still

hadn't gotten used to. But there was also dried meat. That, the man placed as close to the old man as possible.

"You can have all the meat, you definitely need it more," Salvador said gently, not giving it much importance.

"Oh, I'll take it," Leo assured the man. "I'll eat everything you've got! You'll regret ever deciding to become my student."

"I'm sure I won't regret it," the man smiled slightly, taking a bottle of water from his bag and placing it not far from the food. "If you're really that hungry, then you can eat it all. I'll find something to eat tomorrow."

The old man looked at him again with a hint of suspicion. It wasn't a hostile look. It was more like he just couldn't accept being treated this way. Perhaps even someone as strong a warrior as he was afraid to trust others — and in that, Salvador understood him better than anyone. He wasn't planning to rush things anyway.

"What's this fruit?" Leo asked the man, pointing at a red fruit with a barely noticeable glow. In shape, it resembled something between a peach and a strawberry.

"I have no idea," Salvador answered honestly, "but these fruits fill you with strength. Try it."

Without hesitation, the man handed one of the fruits to his teacher. The old man took it and examined it closely. Then he smelled it, and only after that took a small bite.

"Just as I thought," Leo said thoughtfully. "Do you like this fruit?"

"It'd be more accurate to say it's not bad. At the very least, it fills me more than the others," the man replied honestly. "Is there something wrong with it? What kind of fruit is it?"

"It's a bloodfruit," the teacher answered completely calmly. "It's food for vampires. A great substitute for real blood. Usually eaten by vampires who've chosen not to feed on others."

“Vampire?” Shadomorph, who had silently listened to the conversation until now, perked up.

“What do you say, Salvador? You don’t seem too surprised. Am I right in my assumptions?” the old man turned to his student.

“I don’t know,” the man answered, confused, trying to remember anything that might matter. “I used to be a vampire, but I thought that after ending up here, I became an ordinary human. Seems like I was wrong. Still, I don’t feel like a vampire at all, to be honest.”

“This is all too unclear. I only keep getting more questions about you,” the old man concluded in a rather serious voice. For a moment, the room fell completely silent. Only the soft crackling of flames from the fireplace gently broke that silence.

Salvador even began to worry a little. He didn’t know how vampires were treated here, if he really was one. What if Master Leo refused to teach him?

But in the very next moment, the old man waved his hand casually, completely brushing away the gloom that had gathered.

“Well, it’s night outside. Tomorrow will be day — then we’ll talk. Now let’s eat and get some sleep.”

“Oh, come on, right when it was getting interesting!” Shadomorph protested.

“What can you do,” Salvador joked, shrugging with slightly exaggerated resignation.

“You can’t fill your stomach with conversation.”

The old man was absolutely right. There was no point starting a serious conversation when everyone was tired.

After the teacher finished his meal, Salvador found some very old, but at least clean, bedding in a chest. He laid it out on the couch for the teacher. As for himself, he decided not to fall into deep sleep, instead spending the night in a half-doz by the

fireplace. They still hadn't gone far from Ravenburg. It would be better not to let their guard down.

It started to rain. Large drops of heavy rain tapped monotonously against the window, creating a more calming atmosphere. Outside — the melody of rain, inside — the song of the flames. Salvador listened to both, trying to ignore Shadomorph's monologue, who was muttering something about what he'd just heard. The man didn't even notice how everything around began to fade at the edge of perception. He drifted into sleep.