

“It’s much livelier here today,” said the tall man, walking leisurely down the cobbled road. He had been in Ravenburg for only a few days, passing through, and during all that time, the weather and atmosphere had remained unchanged. Dampness, gloom, greyness, and mist reigned everywhere.

To be fair, such weather conditions were not unique to this city. Ever since Salvador had crossed the Aldagger Sea, the weather had quickly begun to shift to its current state. Apparently, this was one of the continent’s defining traits.

Another distinctive feature was the architecture. The dark, damp buildings showcased the full grandeur of the Gothic style. The sharp spires of the high rooftops soared into the sky, and the intricate ornamentation on the structures themselves gave the impression that someone had embroidered these buildings from stone. It’s also worth noting that the most remarkable elements here were the stained-glass windows. They impressed with their dark elegance and the deep, truly unique stories depicted in the glass images. However, they only reached the height of their magnificence at those rare moments when a lone sunbeam, having accidentally wandered onto this continent, struck one of them. In such moments, the glass, as if having absorbed a bit of life, cast multicolored reflections all around. It was in those fleeting moments that cities like Ravenburg revealed their full beauty.

The third feature of this continent, Salvador believed, was its inhabitants. Most of them were pale and depressive—at least the humans were. As for the other races, they were either more aggressive or excessively bold. In short, this continent was teeming with all kinds of creatures—from well-known ones like vampires, demons, and werewolves, to lesser-known beings like Furies, Elviriums, and Incubi. Salvador still didn’t know all the races, but he was genuinely trying to understand them.

“What did you expect on the day of the tournament?” came a reply to the man’s neutral remark from seemingly nowhere.

In truth, that wasn’t quite accurate. Though to an outside observer Salvador might

have appeared to be walking alone down the street, this was far from the case. The one he was speaking to was his own shadow. An unusual shadow. A creature wielding the power of shadows, it bore the name *Shadomorph*. If such a being could exist independently, it would certainly be classified among the dark races. But that was impossible. That's why Shadomorphs were considered parasites, living off their hosts. Once they merged with someone, they were doomed to remain the shadow of a randomly chosen individual for the rest of their lives.

"I've never understood why tournaments are always packed with people, or why spectators are so amused by watching someone get beaten or killed for entertainment. And look now—everyone's rushing there so they don't miss the coming spectacle," Salvador remarked, his tone more disappointed than bored.

"And yet you're going too," Shadomorph noted slyly.

"I'm not going there for entertainment, and you know that perfectly well," the man replied indifferently.

"Of course. You're going to see the old man who once ruled this city and is now doomed to fight to the death with no chance of ever leaving this place, right? So, you'll watch him—then what? You think you'll manage to free him? Do you really believe he's the one you're looking for?"

"Believe it or not, don't you find his story interesting? I need a teacher, and according to the information we've gathered, he might be the right fit."

"Ah... I have a feeling trouble is coming. We crossed this continent for him, but we still know far too little."

"Which is exactly why we'll observe first, then decide how to proceed. And... we're here, Shad."

Salvador hadn't expected the battleground to be so large. It was clear this event was a source of pride for the city—perhaps even the entire region. The arena had a circular

shape, with a radius of about a hundred meters. At an equal distance from the edge, the seating began and extended for a hundred and fifty meters. Each row of seats rose higher than the one before it, making the battlefield the lowest point in the structure.

On one side of the circle, a raised platform stood out—clearly meant for special guests. Directly beneath it was an arched gate with a grate, likely where the fighters would emerge. The entire area was unmistakably Gothic in style, but without excessive ornamentation—likely so no one would mourn too much if something got broken.

To say the place was crowded would be an understatement. Creatures of all kinds filled the space, some claiming their seats, others using their powers to create makeshift thrones of stone, ice, metal, or whatever else their imagination allowed. A few even floated above, watching from the air.

As for the special guests on the platform—identifying them was nearly impossible. All four wore masks and sat in seemingly luxurious chairs. Attendants moved constantly around them, refilling their glasses with drinks. Not that Salvador would have recognized any of them without the masks.

“Hey, Salvador, we’re late! Look, the fight has already started,” Shadomorph said with excitement, as if he'd been waiting for this moment.

Only now did Salvador turn his attention to the fighters and realize how much he'd been distracted. Everything happening around him was so new. Strangely, he had nearly forgotten why he'd come.

And it was all—because of the old man.

Besides the one Salvador had come to see, there were three other men in the center—clearly his opponents.

“Look at this! Three against one old man!” Shad couldn't hold back his disapproval. “What could better represent this kingdom than this?”

“I don’t like how it looks either,” Salvador agreed, “but something tells me this won’t be a problem for him.”

The man watched everything: how the old man stood, how he moved, where he looked. He tried to catch every detail. This was only possible because he’d gone almost all the way down to the arena floor. Oddly enough, there were plenty of empty seats close to the battlefield.

As for the opponents, they were all young men, seemingly placing more faith in numbers than skill. The tallest was lean and appeared the most neutral. The stockier man had a cocky expression, confident that victory was near. The shortest—and likely youngest—seemed the most reckless and uncontrollable.

All three attacked at once, none intending to hold back. Each unleashed elemental powers without a hint of restraint. The tall one controlled wind, the youngest used fire, and the third—water.

The tall fighter launched himself several meters into the air and rushed at the old man, creating a small whirlwind around himself as he closed the distance. It was about three meters tall—enough to damage limbs.

Seeing the whirlwind, the short man shouted gleefully, “Just what I needed!” and immediately cloaked himself in flame, leaping into the vortex with his partner, turning the attack deadly.

The third man hung back, as if searching for something. But he too was drawing closer. When he finally found a source of water a few dozen meters away, he summoned a wave that surged toward the old man. The attacks came almost simultaneously. All three were going all out, using the full extent of their powers.

The old man remained where he stood. But he didn’t look bored or unserious. He was focused. His hands barely moved, as if he were doing something delicate, requiring immense control. And the result didn’t take long. The wave heading toward him suddenly shifted direction—now barreling straight at the other two fighters. But

before the water wielder could understand what had happened, a small earthen pillar shot up from the ground and struck his chin, launching him slightly into the air.

The result: one opponent down, the flame extinguished, and the remaining whirlwind—now without fire—was easily blocked by a dense earthen wall.

“Feels like it’s getting colder,” the old man remarked casually after the whirlwind crashed into the wall. “So many drafts—one could catch a cold.”

“Heh...” slipped out from Salvador’s mouth.

“Why are you laughing?” Shadomorph asked in confusion.

“If he has time for that kind of joke, then he’s definitely not fighting at full strength.”

“I think you’re right,” the shadow agreed. “But what even happened here?”

“Experience. The old man wasn’t fighting at full strength—he simply didn’t need to. All he did was use his mind, not brute force. The youngsters had a decent idea, but their powers didn’t mesh well. They should have taken turns instead of rushing in all at once. Had they done that, the old man might’ve found it at least a little interesting.

He used the element of surprise, and nothing more. First, he slowly shifted the ground beneath his opponent’s feet, turning him to one side. The water wielder lost his sense of direction for a second, but didn’t realize what had happened—he simply wasn’t prepared for such a move. He thought he had just mispositioned his hands. Then, as the poor guy tried to adjust the wave’s path, the old man suddenly spun him in the opposite direction.”

“Ugh, that’s too complicated, I barely understood any of that,” Shadomorph groaned.

“You don’t need to understand all of it,” Salvador waved him off. “The point is, the old man redirected the water flow where he wanted and knocked his opponent out before he could react. The stream swallowed the whirlwind, seeped into it and mixed with it. The flames were extinguished, and the fire wielder ended up soaked—basically defenseless. It won’t be easy for him to reignite. As for the little

whirlwind—you already heard what the old man thinks of that.”

“Wow! I like this guy!” Shadomorph exclaimed. “Wouldn’t wanna fight him myself.”

Salvador said nothing. He agreed with Shad, but seriously doubted they’d avoid that outcome. In any case, he returned his full attention to the arena.

Whichever way you looked at it, it was hard to believe the old man’s movements matched his age. He had to be at least seventy! And the way he controlled the earth... He did it so precisely, so naturally, that it gave the illusion the earth itself obeyed him willingly, as if protecting its master. Such smooth, effortless control of such a strong and stubborn element... This was more than experience. The old man truly deserved admiration. But few seemed to understand that.

After he knocked one of the men out, disapproving shouts came from all sides. It was as if the crowd wanted the old man to just let himself get beaten.

Salvador’s gaze never left the target. The old man moved like smoke, his movements barely noticeable. When he jumped, the ground seemed to gently lift him, then carefully catch him again.

The fire wielder couldn’t fully use his power at the moment. And what little he could do wasn’t enough for a serious counterattack. His partner tried to fix that by creating a wind sphere around the short man, hoping to dry him quickly.

But dodging enemy attacks while helping the fire wielder left the skinny man unable to go on the offensive himself. As a result, the two of them kept retreating, again and again, letting the old man toy with them like a cat with mice.

This went on until the fire wielder’s clothes dried enough to use his power again. And as soon as the first signs of flame returned, the old man attacked them both.

The whirlwind user noticed the danger first. To help his partner, he had to stay close. And once he did, he immediately tried to rise into the air—away from the enemy and out of reach. But a ring of earth grabbed his leg, dragging him down with its weight.

The short man saw this and tried to fix it with a burst of flame, but the old man attacked him too. A column of earth shot straight at him, forcing a decision—help his partner and end the fight now by crashing into an unstoppable obstacle, or dodge and leave him to his fate.

“Damn it!” he swore, leaping backward to evade the strike. That moment was all it took for the whirlwind wielder to be pulled into the ground up to his ears. Without the proper gift, there was no way to get him out.

“What the hell?!” the short man blurted out in frustration.

“Thinking of surrendering already? Don’t be so hasty.” For the first time in the fight, the old man addressed his opponent directly. His voice was calm, with not a trace of hostility.

“Watching him, listening to him all this time, I just... can’t understand him,” Salvador muttered, lost in thought. “He doesn’t try to seriously hurt any of his opponents. But he’s doomed to fight here for the rest of his days. Who is this old man, really? What’s his story? Just look at him. His body’s clearly hardened from near-daily battles. But he’s underfed, skin and bones. And look at all those disappointed spectators—they clearly want him dead! Has he gone mad?”

“Well, I still don’t get why he didn’t escape,” Shadomorph joined in. “With power like that... If I were in his place, I wouldn’t have waited around.”

“Yeah—and you’d be dead the same day,” Salvador dismissed him.

“What? Why?” Shadomorph protested.

“Look closely at those four in masks. If it were that easy, he wouldn’t just sit here quietly. I dare say their power is no weaker than his—maybe even stronger. And I’m more than sure those four aren’t the only ones who can cause serious trouble.”

Salvador’s eyes slid slowly over the masked observers. He could barely see their faces from this distance, but for a moment, it felt like he locked eyes with the second

one. Physically impossible—but the sensation was so real it sent a chill down his spine.

“Did I imagine that?” he asked himself. With no solid answer, he turned his attention back to the arena.

Good timing, too. The flame wielder’s wild attacks were finally slowing, his advance weakening. He’d worn himself out. The old man hadn’t attacked once the entire time. He simply dodged with ease, occasionally egging his opponent on with casual phrases like “Try again,” or “Is that all?”

“What’s your problem?! Why aren’t you fighting?!” the fire wielder roared. Reigniting his body, he launched another attack.

“I am, sort of,” the old man replied, voice sheepish, pointing to the right. Instinctively, the short man turned his head—and was immediately struck in the forehead by a pillar of earth. He dropped, unconscious.

“No offense, but you really should do something about that hot temper, my friend.”

“You heard that? You heard it? He cracked another joke!” Shadomorph gushed. “It’s like he actually enjoys being here!”

“I don’t know, this is all way too strange. I still think there’s more to this,” Salvador said, eyes fixed on the old man. “He’s only wearing tattered pants—not even shoes. And it’s not exactly warm here. He used to be the city’s governor. And now what? He entertains the crowd with a peaceful expression on his face. And it’s not like they love him...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome!” boomed a confident voice from the masked observers. The third one stood and stepped toward the railing.

“As many of you expected, today’s winner is our undefeated champion—let’s give him a hand!”



Almost instantly, the arena erupted with even more boos and crude remarks.

“Seriously, what’s wrong with them?” Shadomorph asked, completely disheartened.

“Ignore them,” Salvador cut him off. “That’s not why we’re here.”

The announcer continued.

“However, today I have a special offer! Whoever steps forward and defeats our champion will be granted a wish—any wish, and we will make it happen!”

The crowd’s mood flipped in a second. Cheers erupted from every side. Almost everyone liked the idea.

“I’m glad to see the proposal excites you. So then—who dares to try their luck?”

Just one moment, one sentence—and the entire arena fell dead silent. So silent, you could hear the breath of those nearby.

“What? No takers? Are you really all afraid? All you have to do is defeat an old man, and any wish could come true! If you ask me, that’s a marvelous deal. Come on—be brave!”

“Yeah, this definitely smells like a trap,” Shadomorph muttered. “We’re not going down there. No way. I’m not that stupid. Wait! What the hell are you doing?!”

Salvador calmly raised his right hand and waited patiently for the speaker’s gaze to meet his own.

“I’m willing to try,” he declared confidently.

“You’ve totally lost it,” Shadomorph said, deflated.

“We’re doomed...”