

MAX HOFFER



СОДЕРЖИТ

НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ

БРАНЬ

18+

The Legend

«Confrontation»

Макс Хоффер

The Legend

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The main character is Athanasius Mirra, a warrior in the army of King Virgil. He is also patronized by General Swann, who raised him from an early age. But then, one day, the usual way of life changes with the arrival of the letter, from the king himself. And launched by this message, a series of events connects him with a girl named Unalia, who reveals to him the secret of ancient times. After that, an exciting journey begins beyond the boundaries of known lands. The gripping novel will immerse the reader in a universe of valor and courage, saturated with sweat and blood. Содержит нецензурную брань.

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Макс Хоффер

The Legend

Part I (Faces of the Past)

Introduction

For several years now, a bloody war has been going on between Meinard and the group of allied states of Arkon and Vauton. These three great countries were an oasis of civilization in the ocean of lifeless lands in the South and wild peoples inhabiting the Northern territories. Arkon and Vauton, once bitter rivals, rallied in the face of a common threat of extermination.

The "Marna" corps of the army of His Majesty King Virgil under the command of the famous General Swan, pushed back the army of Meinard, coming closer and closer to his capital. But the decisive battle was yet to come.

Athanasius Mirra – Arkon's warrior is on the front lines. He has nothing to prove in this war. He only does what he does best.

Chapter 1 (Change)

The sun had not yet appeared over the horizon, and Tan was already tying the laces on his boots. As often happened, he had a difficult night. Blame the nightmares that have followed him for a long time. These scary and brutal nocturnal references came from his childhood. In most cases, these were some small segments that were difficult to see in the fog. They were like a fuzzy reflection on the water surface. But sometimes, the dreams were vivid, as if it was happening now at the moment. The last thing he remembered before he opened his eyes was how his mother was screaming his name Athanasius !!! Athanasius !!! Run quickly, my boy ...

He raised his head, took in the air heavily with his lungs, and exhaled just as hard. More than thirty years have passed since the moment when his village was attacked. But to this day, the past did not let him go and did not give him peace. He missed her! On her soft hands and tender lips that kissed his disheveled head. His eyes were suddenly saturated with moisture. But Tan drove those thoughts out of his head. The time in which he lives does not forgive weakness. He could show such vulnerability only in moments when he was alone, but leaving his command tent, he became Athanasius Mirra – the commander of the vanguard of the army of His Majesty King Virgil! It should be noted that by the age of thirty-seven, Athanasius had already become known as a great warrior. He visited five major battles, which won the king Virgil control over the vast territory that once belonged to people who call themselves Meinardians. Tan paid tribute to the ability of Meinard's warriors to take a blow. They were ferocious people. They were physically very strong and powerful, in part, it was because of this that Tan was constantly exercising! He could not afford to concede in anything to anyone. Unlike the people of Meinard, the Arconians, which Athanasius was, were not as physically developed, but they had impressive growth, on average about two meters in height. They had blonde hair and good vision in the dark, which was passed down from their ancestors who lived most of their lives in caves. Although, with a sharp change in lighting, it took some time for the eyes to adjust. And also differed in skin color. The people of the Arkon race had white skin, while the Meinardians had dark skin, the color of red clay. And it is not surprising, given how hellishly their sun was burning at its zenith. Looking through the window opening, Tan did not find a single cloud in the sky, which meant that another hot day awaited him, although the summer was already over. He swore to himself. But still forced myself to get up. While the sun has not yet appeared, he will have time to perform the ritual that accompanied him on all campaigns. Namely, jogging, with a distance of about 7-10 kilometers, and after compulsory physical exercises with their own weight.

Throwing open the door, Tan went out into the street. I breathed in the air. -Very dry, he thought. How Athanasius yearned for the rain. Approaching a barrel of water, which stood next to the entrance to the tent, he scooped water into a jug standing there and poured all its contents onto his head. Suddenly, as if waking up from a dream, Tan heard sounds coming from the direction of the forest: singing of birds, rustling of branches. An unknown insect chirped in the grass nearby. And all these sounds reminded him so much of home. Smiling slightly, Tan went to perform his morning ritual.

A few hours later, having heavily refreshed himself, Tan was at the training base, where he checked and supervised the training of his squad.. They weren't the best of the best. But these were the very people with whom Tan wanted to serve and those who eventually replaced his family. Under his supervision, everyone performed the exercises with special zeal, because Tan enjoyed indisputable authority, both among ordinary soldiers and officers. Tan knew that rumors and various tales were circulating in the detachment and beyond about his military exploits. Tan even heard that he single-handedly chopped an entire enemy squadron to pieces. He always found it amusing how from mouth to mouth five people turn into fifty elite thugs. But the skill in working with the sword was not to be occupied by Tan. At the same time, add the speed and mighty strength that he had. And believe me,

there are few who would like to measure their strength with him. But nevertheless, from time to time such people were. As a rule, these were battle-hardened wars who wanted to write their names in history. Tan has fought over a hundred such fights. And he was never defeated. Therefore, there have not been many such challenges lately. The last challenge was accepted about two years ago. It was a large Arconian named Egon, who also had the blood of Meinard's people in his veins. Therefore, in physique he was not inferior to Atanasius. However, the battle did not last even one minute. Tan, like no one knew how to read his opponent, and after a little reconnaissance and parrying several blows of Egon's sword, he struck him with a lightning blow with his left hand from below in the jaw. The blow was delivered with such force that Egon's head threw back, and it seemed that it was about to tear off the spine. Needless to say, after that, he fell as if knocked down in the tournament circle, and Tan didn't even lose his breath. The face showed no emotion. He knew this would happen. This has always been the case. After that, Athanasius Mirra stopped taking calls. He even received an offer to go to serve in the guard of the castle of Virgil himself. Who would have thought, the son of a simple blacksmith, would be in the personal guard of the king. But Mirra did not need such work. Although he sometimes didn't know what he wanted, it was definitely not city life in a warm bed. The army is his home!

Tan, awakened by a woman screaming. This scream was like a bolt from the blue. He jumped out of bed and immediately grabbed the scabbard, in which was his faithful friend and companion, the sword that was forged for him by the masters from Ancalite, a place where good steel is valued. Places where weapons for the king's army were forged.

Everything was like a fog. With an uneven, staggering gait, Tan moved toward the door. Grasping the handle, he pulled towards himself, but the door would not budge. Then he pressed harder, but the door, as before, stood on its own, like a silent guard. Tan felt as if someone had taken all his power. Suddenly he heard a noise in the opposite part of the room. Tan turned around and saw a gaping hole in the wall, from which screams and bright light could be heard. So bright that it is impossible to see through it. Tan swallowed, from the fact that his throat was wildly dry and went to the doorway with full determination to find out what was going on. But the body did not obey him and instead of the usual speed, Tan barely moving his legs, dragging his sword in its sheath, across the floor, moved towards the light. Entering it, Tan found himself on the street ... The small village in which he was was half engulfed in flames. Some of the houses had already burned down, and some were just beginning to burn. People, women and children were running around, terrified trying to find salvation. At the end of the street, he saw a silhouette of a man emerge from behind a blazing house. He had a sword in his hands.

Dressed in all black, with a hood on his head, he began to look around. Noticing Tana, the stranger moved towards him. As he approached, there was a tension in the air. Suddenly, next to him, a shadow jumped out of the door of the house, it was Aengus, a neighbor's boy of about fourteen. The man cut off the guy's leg with a sharp movement of his hand, and with the second movement, he cut off his head just as quickly that Aengus did not even have time to utter a word. He did it without fuss, without unnecessary movements, as if he had swatted a cockroach. This was Wotan's representative. The territories of Wotan and Arkon were bordered by each other. However, a peace agreement was concluded between the rulers of both peoples, which had lasted for hundreds of years, and the representatives of Arkon were not afraid to build their houses near the borders. It is obvious that once it was one people, one tribe, but for some reason they split up. They were distinguished by the complete absence of hair and eye color. For Wotan's representatives, they were bright blue, which glowed in the dark. But this one was different. When he looked up, Tan saw that from the seemingly bottomless darkness in the hood, bright blue eyes with red blotches of bloody color were gazing at him. Tan waited, preparing to fend off the attacker. As the man in black approached, Tan began to realize how impressive his size was. Approaching a sufficient distance, the man in black

lunged to the side. At the same time, with a lightning-fast movement, he raised his mighty hand, in which was a sword, and with deafening force sent it directly to Tan's head. But Tan managed to raise his hand and his sword took the blow.

Thane's sword, which had been forged by Ancalite's finest craftsmen, shattered into tiny pieces. From the force of the blow, Atanasius sat down on his ass, leaning on the ground with his left hand, and on his outstretched right, he watched the handle of his former friend, with a small fragment of metal remaining in it. Tan just couldn't believe it. And the man in black loomed over him. Only now did he notice his war paint on his face, which made him even more terrifying. He had already raised his hand to complete what he had begun, but suddenly he heard the sonorous voice of his mother.

– Athanasius!

Tan turned around and saw his mother standing near the house, covered in blood and shouting:

– Athanasius, run quickly, my boy!

As always, the sun had not yet had time to show its sharp rays, and Tan was already sitting on the bed and thinking about the dream he had seen. Suddenly his thoughts were unceremoniously broken by a knock at the door. "What the heck?! Who else is there!" Tan thought.

Opening the door, he saw a young man, his name was Bercy and he was the personal adjutant of General Swann. Tan nodded his head to him so that he would immediately come in. Bercy was slightly overweight and shifted from foot to foot, not looking into the eyes of Athanasius. But he was very fulfilling and did all the work entrusted to him with diligence. He was always so nervous in the presence of Tan that it even slightly amused the latter, because he knew that the reason for everything was rumors about his ferocity in battle and exactingness to the soldiers. Athanasius decided to maintain the tension, and, frowning, with a steel gaze in his eyes, inquired about the reason for such an early visit. Hearing the question, Bercy immediately stretched out like a string and his cheeks trembled with zeal. It looked so comical that Tan could not restrain himself, smiled and, going up to Bercy, patted him on the shoulder. – Relax guy, what's up?

– General Swann, asks you to report immediately to his apartment, Bercy said;

– For what purpose? – Tan pressed;

“I don't know,” Bercy replied.

– Okay, inform the general that I will arrive now!

Bercy immediately turned around and headed for the exit, glad that communication with Tan was over.

Tan watched the departing young man, smiled and thought that not everyone in the army was destined to be a war and, shaking his head, closed the door.

Having dressed, he immediately went to the general. It took a good ten minutes to go to the general's house, so Tan, in order not to waste time, decided to take his brigantine with him and fasten it along the way. Because it is necessary to come to the general in a proper form and be ready to immediately go on a mission without delay. His sword was also with him. He was excellent. The handle was brown calfskin. The pommel and the V-shaped guard, the rays of which go in the opposite direction from the handle, were covered with gilding. The Ricasso blade was adorned with red tourmaline. The straight, double-edged blade hid behind an elaborate black scabbard. His pants and boots were of high quality leather, made to last, but already pretty well worn and well worn. His brigantine was trimmed with black leather. A pattern was embroidered on the chest and abdomen with white threads. Ornament from the lines. The bottom, unlike the standard form, was sharpened. Shoulders with similar embroidery and neck protection were also attached to it. The belts were designed in such a way that it would be possible to fasten it yourself, without helpers. She was in better shape than pants and shoes, although she had several marks from contact with the blades of opponents swords. Bracers with inserts of metal steel plates were made in the same style as the brigantine. He needed them in battle, because he practically did not use a shield.

At the door of the general's house, he was met by guards in the form of two guards with spears. Seeing the approaching guest, the guards tensed slightly, but as soon as they realized who it was, they immediately greeted him. Tan so put his right hand to his chest.

Bercy opened the door for him. When Athanasius entered, he found General Swann collecting things in the chests. The general, noticing Tan, gestured to Bercy that he would go out. Swann was gloomy, but this was not uncommon. Approaching Tan, he handed him a scroll with the royal seal. Athanasius, without taking his eyes off the general, asked:

– What is it?

– Read it.

Tan began to read and after a while, looking up at the general asked: – When?

As you may have noticed, I am packing my things, my boy. And as you might have guessed, I'm not crazy about this idea. My place is just like yours on the battlefield. But the king believes that he has too many politicians in his military advisers and it is time to dilute them with the company of a military general. " Hmm, Tan replied, theorists are a dime a dozen, but practitioners can be counted on one hand.

– All correctly answered the general and, coming closer to Tan, said: – You will go with me.

– What...? I AM...? General, I'm needed here. My place is here. We are aware of the concentration of strength of the opponents. A battle is coming soon.

"We both know that this war has already been won," the general said with a sad note in his voice.

– But what about my squad? My people? I must lead them with me!

– Athanasius, do you remember our first meeting?

Tan has a lump in his throat! And he immediately fell silent.

"When we came to the village, I was only twenty years old," the general continued. "Gloomy warrior", as I called myself then. I already commanded a detachment, the same as you are commanding now, and I did not know anything about the war! What we saw there changed me forever. Such atrocities have not been seen, even by those who have been in the battles of the war. All the villagers were killed! Their tortured and disfigured bodies were everywhere, where our eyes did not fall. And then in the compost pit, on the outskirts of the village, we heard a rustle. Everyone grabbed their swords, not knowing what to expect. But a boy came out of the pit, he looked only seven or eight years old. But contrary to the expectation that the guy would roar excitedly and tremble at nonsense, which would be logical, given what was happening, he just looked at me, and I looked at him. I looked, and could not believe in any way that a child could have such a look. There was everything in him ... I have never seen such a look either before or after – the general's voice trembled. Since then we have not parted with you. I taught you everything I know. You have a family, instead of the one that was taken from you. As you know, I have no one dearer than you. I am proud of who you have become. And I need you and your support, because I have no one to rely on in the capital. So what do you say?

Athanasius could not refuse.

Amid the peaceful and soothing clatter of hooves, Tan, General Swann and a dozen soldiers headed to the capital! Anamut, was the concentration of Arkon's power and power. Tanu had a chance to visit it somehow. He was amazed at the skill and greatness of the mastery of the architects of his people! I was even able to see the castle of the king from afar.

– Why now? Tan asked.

– I suppose there are several reasons for this. Firstly, in two weeks the meeting of the high command will take place, where the question of the final stage of the war will be decided. And the advice of an experienced military leader will be extremely useful. Also do not forget that 20 years ago, King Virgil and King Orme made peace between our states. And on this occasion, the king wants

to organize a feast and festivities. Of course, I understand that you have your own scores with the Wotans, but for me it is better to drink ale at the celebration of peace than to choke on blood in a war.

Tan understood this very well. Over the long years of service in the army, he saw a lot and agreed with the general. For all his hatred of Wotan, he even felt sympathy for King Orm.

Twenty years ago, Orme became a rebel general who overthrew his ruler, the brutal King Reim. And immediately after that, he made an appeal to end this senseless war unleashed by his king. When Athanasius was young and inexperienced, he assumed that Orma made the people king in gratitude for the liberation from the tyrant and the end of the bloody war. But now he knew that the power he received was due to the power that he had. There was an army behind him, that's the whole secret.

– You must understand, continued Swann, life at court is not sweet to me myself. However, this position opens up great opportunities and prospects. Tell me, how many senseless sacrifices could have been avoided if the council had people who know their business? Competent commanders who have fought more than once themselves?

There he looked at the general, and, meeting his eyes, nodded to him in approval.

After a few minutes of silence, and enjoying the chirping of birds and the sound of trees, General Swann continued.

– Tell me, how are you doing on the personal front?

The corners of Tan's lips lifted slightly. He could not seriously talk about such a topic. – Nothing serious. I guess I'm not made for family life.

– From what? the general asked. You're still young. Representatives of our race live on average about a hundred years. So you still have time to find that one. Have offspring. A reliable rear has not harmed anyone yet.

Tan retorted, – Well, judge for yourself, whose husband is always not at home, and who may not return from another campaign. Not an enviable share for a girl.

– So find yourself one that will share your hobbies.

– Warrior?! No really. These are completely crazy. Don't you know.

Then the general and Tan burst into loud laughter. – It's better as it is. Everything suits me.

– Do not take an example from me, Mirra! I will have no one to bring a glass of water before I die.

–Tan smiled again. “We both know the servants will do it for you.

Swann laughed. – Your truth. Since I am destined to settle in the capital at the court of the king, it is useless to wipe my ass myself. I may be misunderstood.

And they both burst out laughing. Yes, so loud that the birds fell from the trees and flew along the edge of a small cliff, along the river, dodging between the branches of the bushes and flying next to the heads of the leading soldiers. In the distance, hills were visible, and from the left on the other side of the river, fields of wheat went into the horizon

Swann was one of the few people who entered the innermost recesses of the soul of Athanasius. Tan was overjoyed about this. After all, everyone needs a loved one next to him, even if this relationship is not by blood.

It was a grueling ten days. Due to the fact that the meeting was to begin fourteen days after the departure from the "Marne" building, it was necessary to walk seventy miles a day. Everyone was pretty tired. But it was necessary. And now ten days passed, and the general with his retinue was already approaching the borders of Anamut. It was immediately clear that this was the capital of a prosperous state. Long before the city itself, wretched hovels and shacks had replaced houses skillfully crafted by Mister Wood, with gardens, vineyards and landscaped grounds. Increasingly, patrols and checkpoints began to come across on the way. During these 10 days, the cloudless sky with the blazing sun changed to a more welcoming one with islands of clouds, but still sunny and

blue. After another couple of miles the city appeared. The first thing that a traveler saw approaching the capital was two standing towers about 100 meters high, which settled above the rooftops and divided the city into northern and southern parts. One of the towers was occupied by the scientists of Anamut, and in the other there were soldiers who guarded the city. In the center was the king's castle. Although it would be more accurate to say, it was a complex of structures, which also included the future workplace of General Swann, the Anamut conglomerate. The meetings of which were attended by various representatives of state authorities, ranging from the military and ending with the masters of coins.

There were, of course, several passages to the city, but the central and largest was the Royal Gateway.

The general and his companions were in riding clothes, therefore, when they entered the capital, no one paid much attention to them. Another military who arrived in the city.

– Athanasius, find yourself a room in any of the visiting houses. And buy yourself some new clothes. You, however, are my confidant and in four days you will go with me to Duke Erhard. Bercy and I will stay at the Royal Guest Palace, at his invitation. You have a couple of days to spare, so don't waste them. Smiling at each other, they shook hands, and Tan headed towards his horse.

Suddenly the general called out to him. Turning around, he saw Swann throw something at him. After catching it, Tan realized that it was a bag of coins. He raised his head and looked at his old friend in bewilderment.

– Why are you looking at me like that, Athanasius? asked Swann, not hiding a smile. It is the king who pays you, not me. Then he climbed on a horse and with his retinue went further, deep into the city, where he was lost in a second among the people and stalls.

There he looked at the bag, smiled, tossed it with his palm and immediately caught it. Well, since the king pays for everything ...

Chapter 2 (Broken Sword)

She lay on the bed and was fast asleep, her arms clasped to her chest. The sun had already risen and with its rays was trying to break into the room through the cracks between the curtains. He tied the laces on his pants and did not take his eyes off her back, remembering the night before. From what, warmth spread through the body, and a pleasant shiver ran. To be honest, he didn't want to leave, but he always felt awkward in the morning. Her name was Gertie. A typical name for an urban peasant woman. But working as a courtesan was much more profitable. He took a coin from the bag and placed it on a nearby bedside table. It was golden. About her monthly salary, but he was not in the least sorry for him. She honestly earned it by giving affection and love to Athanasius. He put on his shirt and quietly walked out, praying not to wake her up.

When he went down the steps and went out into the street, the merchants, beggars, common people, were already pouring out into the street and doing their own thing, as it seemed to them important to them. He looked up at the sky, which was covered with islands of clouds. What a blue and incredibly beautiful, Tan thought. Then he walked slowly up the street. Thus began his second day. The first, he spent looking for a room and washing himself of the dust from the field. The room in a drive-through house called "Spattering Efa", on the ground floor of which there was a small tavern, was quite tolerable and was not cheap by the city's standards. Having paid the owner of the house, for high-quality cleaning and looking after his room, during the absence of the guest, Athanasius went to the city. After passing a couple of streets, the pleasant name "Naked Chest" caught his eye. When he entered the establishment, he was immediately greeted by the hostess, who kindly inquired about the client's name, where he was from, and his preferences. And after a short conversation, she took me to the room, where Gertie came a couple of minutes later. It seemed to him that for a girl of her profession, she entered the room too timidly. Gertie was extremely sweet and polite. And after a couple of mugs of ale, not a trace of Athanasius's embarrassment remained. It was a wonderful night, and it seemed to him that Gertie was also delighted. Although one cannot plead with the fact that, like any craft, this is also taught, and perhaps it was just a skillfully played role. But this was the matter of last night, and now Tan had a task no less difficult than a sortie into the enemy's camp. He needed to find new pants and boots. He was very demanding and attached to his things. The same was true for clothing. Athanasius knew that buying new clothes from him could take all day. But Gertie advised him a couple of decent places where he would not be deceived and he might be able to find something for himself. Approaching the first place, near the entrance, Tan noticed a boy who was playing the pity. Having earned a little, he went inside. "Gostra Golka" is the name of the tailor's establishment. But, having heard from Tan his wishes, he said that there are not many craftsmen in the city who sew good-quality clothes for soldiers. Because it should be not only beautiful, but also durable, practical, comfortable and of course should contain the elements of protection. But he knows one such master and will gladly show the way. The tailor went out into the street and called the very boy who was sitting next to the entrance. When the boy entered, the tailor introduced him as his little son named Tin. Then he turned to the boy and said that he would take him to his uncle Bert, to which he silently nodded and went out into the street. Thanking the owner of the workshop, Athanasius went out after the youth. About a quarter of an hour later, the boy took Tana into some remote house, unremarkable, without any signs about the workshop located in it. But, opening the door, he immediately realized that he had come to the right place. There was a dim light from candles and oil lamps. The windows are curtained. There were wooden mannequins everywhere, as well as stacks of production material. Tan realized that the sewing man here knew his craft well. Tan also noticed metal plates and scabbard blanks. In the depths of the corridor, a strong man appeared, but as he approached, it was evident that he was already at an advanced age. The man approached Tan and greeted him with his right hand to his chest.

- You are military? Tan asked, somewhat surprised.
- Once it was, the old man answered.
- How do you understand about me?
- You have a military bearing, a very strong physique, and you also have a special look.
- And which one?
- A look of sadness and valor.

Tan was about to ask him another question, but the old man unceremoniously interrupted him. I guess you're here to pick up a pair of new pants, not to bang out, huh?

That's right, and he told him about his vision of excellent and quality clothing.

The old man listened indifferently to him, then took measurements and said that by tomorrow morning everything would be ready. Everything will be delivered to his guest house. Athanasius thanked him, paid, and went out with Tin.

– And your uncle is silent, turned to the guy Tan.

– It's right.

– Where did he fight?

“I don't know, he never talks about it.

– Remind me of his name?

– Uncle Bert.

Clear. Well, come on, I'll show you where you need to bring your clothes tomorrow.

That evening, Tan did not abuse alcohol and spent time sharpening his sword. And before going to bed I organized a little workout for myself. As usual, he woke up before dawn after another nightmare. Sitting on the bed, he looked at the ammunition standing in the corner and the sharpened sword standing in the same place. Athanasius thought that he would gladly smash their head, the bastard who constantly came to him in his dreams. Rising slowly out of bed, he went to the window. Looking at the city awakening from sleep, he realized that he liked it more like that. Quiet, majestic and most importantly, without people. Maybe this is due to what happened to him in childhood, or perhaps due to his character traits, Athanasius loved loneliness. Not that he was a hermit of spiritual dreams, but long communication tired him. He loved silence and loved to be alone with himself. Many of his colleagues considered him strange, some rude, some even dangerous, but each of them knew Tan was smart. During the battles, like no one else, he made the right decisions with lightning speed, which helped to save dozens of lives. For this, in the army, Tan enjoyed indisputable authority. Every soldier dreamed of being in his squad, because this at least guaranteed a greater probability of survival.

Even yesterday, Tan noticed preparations in the city for a council of war and the celebration of the union of Arkon and Vauton. The entire elite of the armed forces will gather in the city, in addition, the allies will be present at the council, including King Orme.

There was a knock at the door. Tan had expected this, so not a muscle in his face quivered as the silence was ripped apart by blows to wood. He threw on a towel and walked to the door. Opening it, he found Tina standing near the door, in whose hands were three packages. Without saying anything, Tan walked away from the door and approached the place where his clothes were folded. Putting his hand down to the bottom, he pulled out a bag of coins.

– Put everything on the bed.

Ting did just that. Then Athanasius handed the boy a copper and, patting the guy on the head, thanked him for his work. Leaving the room, Ting was very pleased with himself. You could read it on his face.

Then Tan lit an oil lamp in order to better see what the boy brought him. Opening the first package, he found leather pants with skillfully sewn protection in the form of metal plates. Opening the second package, he found high boots in it. Having examined them better, Tan realized that these

boots have several additional details that he did not discuss with the tailor. First, the toe and heel of the boot were reinforced with metal inserts. In addition, the boots had a lacing with three fasteners in the front, along the entire length of the boot and looked very solid. Tan involuntarily smiled, having received aesthetic pleasure from what he saw, and in fact it is very difficult for him to please. Then his gaze fell on the third bundle. The agreement was only about pants and boots, and he could not put his mind to what was in it. Carefully opening the package, he saw that it contained gloves, which were also reinforced with sewn metal plates for the most severe strike in hand-to-hand combat.

“I’ll have to bring him a bottle of good ale,” Tan thought.

Without becoming a long wait, Atanasius proceeded to try on clothes, and not finding any flaws, he was satisfied, went downstairs to have a bite of a couple of chicken eggs and blood sausage. However, on the way to meet him, Bercy came across, who had just entered the guest house. Seeing Tan, he stretched out and was about to approach him with a marching step, but Tan, seeing this, immediately stopped him, slightly waving his lowered hand. Then he himself approached Bercy and asked why he was here. Bercy said that before tomorrow’s meeting, Duke Erhard is gathering generals for an informal meeting at his estate today. So to speak, a secular evening. The general will wait for Tan at his place, so that he would attend the evening with him as a confidant. Tan rolled his eyes in displeasure, but there was no choice.

“All right, tell the general that I’ll be arriving in the evening.

Bercy nodded, pressed his hand to his chest and left, and Tan sat down at the table to satisfy his hunger.

In the evening, Athanasius Mirra, in full uniform, including new clothes, stood near the general’s carriage. The only thing he didn’t wear from his entire arsenal was the gloves that Bert gave him. So it was accepted that a confidant should be staffed both for battle and accompany the general as his warrior at social evenings. Tan looked imposing. The local service staff looked out of the windows to look at this impressive war. The maids crowded at the windows. They winked at Tan and whispered to each other, laughing and biting their lips. And not surprisingly, Athanasius was in great shape as never before. His muscles wrapped around his arms like steel ropes. New, padded leather pants hugged his powerful thighs. He had shoulder-length light brown hair that was slightly wavy at the ends. The small bristles also added a brutal look. When the general went out, his face expressed seriousness, his lips were frowning, and frowning eyebrows stretched to the floor, but when he saw Tan, he cheered up and calmed down, because it was obvious that General Swann was nervous. Such evenings were new to him, but their attendance allowed him to acquire new acquaintances and promote his ideas among all the participants in the evening much more effectively than debates in the council. Swann knew this. Athanasius also knew this, therefore, when the general approached him, he whispered in a whisper, “General, this is like the first battle, you just need to start, and then everything will go like clockwork.” Swann smiled and patted Tan on the shoulder.

– Damn, how healthy you are! I myself was not small at your age, but I can definitely say that I am far from you. I’ve never seen a man of your size, comparable only to a bear, be so fast. Well, okay, the general gasped, let’s go to these vultures, we’ll show that we are not bastard either. Then they plunged into the carriage and, a procession of a carriage and ten mounted warriors moved towards Erhard’s estate.

About a quarter of an hour later, they arrived at the central doors of the estate. Erhard was an extremely influential figure and enormous funds were spent on such a house. To climb from the road to the central entrance, it was necessary to overcome a staircase with massive granite steps, which were polished to a shine. On the sides, which, flaunted the figures of lions frozen in a menacing roar. Along the way, a red carpet was laid along which servants stood with trays on which there were wine glasses with various alcoholic beverages. But Swann and Athanasius did not even look at them, stubbornly moving towards the door.

Castellan, standing not far from the door, bowed to the guests. Swann handed two invitations into his hands. After reading them, with a false smile, he bowed again to the general and gestured to the servants to open the door shutters made of gilded metal.

Moving towards the door, Tan suddenly smiled and whispered in Swann's ear. Decent generals lead women to a secular evening, and you drag a soldier in full uniform.

But, I'm a combat general, right? And the same could not help smiling.

Before entering, Svan said the phrase: – "Well, into battle ..." and, without slowing down, both went inside.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, I will fight, out of nowhere, the waiters with drinks and snacks were next to them.

– General Swann, how glad I am to see you today in this hall, throwing his hands up, said Duke Erhard. Coming closer, he embraced the general, not taking his eyes off Athanasius.

– God, who is this?

“This is my confidant and the best fighter in His Majesty's army, Athanasius Mirra,” the general announced with pride.

– How wonderfully harmonious he is!

– That's right, Duke!

– Excuse me not to call me that again! In an informal setting, for you I am Erhard, and that's it! The duke said with pompous resentment.

The way Duke Erhard looked at him made Athanasius uneasy. Suddenly Erhard turned sharply away from him, as from a bored toy, and again embracing Swann, led him to get acquainted with the palace elite of Arkon. Tan stayed where he was, watching as all the gentlemen in turn shook the general's hand, smiled and courted him. But, as soon as the general left, having said a couple of words, to meet other guests of the evening, their smile immediately disappeared. He saw them, screwing up their eyes, looking with envy at the trail of the future member of the military council.

– Yes, here's the mighty of this world for you, a snake ball, and that's all, Tan thought.

Deciding to look around, he took a glass of apple juice, and began his journey to determine the escape in case of emergency. He always did this, it was his habit. “If you want to survive, you have to be ready for anything,” Tan liked to repeat. Having walked around the hall a couple of three times, he already knew on which staircase how many steps, which doors were open and which were locked, as well as the number of guards. Then Tan set to work on the servant and after a while his gaze settled on the incredible beauty of the girl who was handing out glasses of wine. Something set her apart from the rest of the maid crew. She had a slender waist, but from the shoulders and hips, he realized that the girl devotes quite a lot of time to strength exercises. She had a firm gaze that noticed all the guests in the hall. But this gaze was exclusively watching the duke. Then the girl turned her head and their eyes met. Tan smiled at her, but the girl, noticing that she had become the object of someone's attention, was immediately lost in the crowd. An attempt to find her again turned out to be even. Tan found it a bit strange, but the course of his thought process was unceremoniously interrupted by the sound of the opening of the central doors. Time seemed to have stopped, and he saw the young general and two of his guards enter the hall.

– What the fuck?! Tan asked a question to himself.

As if having heard this question, Duke Erhard immediately climbed the stairs and, having passed a couple of steps to rise above the rest, stopped, turning to the guests.

“Ladies and gentlemen, at my invitation, we were joined by the general of the Batro corps of the army of His Majesty King Orma, an ally of His Holiness King Virgil. – Greetings, General Argos!

Argos greeted those present with a subtle nod of his head. He looked very young for such a title. Medium height. Athletic physique. With a direct and firm gaze. It was clear that he was not a bit, was not nervous and was not embarrassed by the attention to his person. Erhard then followed

the same procedure as with General Swann. A little courtesy and they went to all the guests to get to know each other as a sign of respect. Athanasius did not take his eyes off them. An explosive cocktail of anger, bewilderment, disgust, and oddly enough interest was seething in him.

Having met half of the guests, Erhard and General Argos retired in some room, judging by the entire personal study of the duke, at the door of which the retinue of Argos remained.

After staying there, they left for a while, and Erhard continued to acquaint Argos with the remaining generals and board members. At the moment when General Swann's turn came, Athanasius was somewhere three steps behind him.

– General Argos, began the Duke, let me introduce you to General Swann, now a member of His Majesty's military council.

– Greetings, General! said Argos, in a calm voice. His hairless face did not produce any emotion, but it was clear that, unlike the others, he had respect for Swann. Only then did Tan notice. Eyes. They were the same as in his dreams.

– I've heard a lot about you and your successes on the battlefield. How you know how to fight, there are legends, even among our soldiers, said Argos.

Swann opened his mouth to respond with courtesy to courtesy, which was required by the protocol of ethics and diplomacy, but Athanasius was ahead of him. Slowly coming out from behind the general and not taking his eyes off Argos, he said:

– Your skills also certainly deserve attention.

Argos's face showed surprise. He immediately looked at the duke.

This confidant of the Swann general, Athanasius Mirra, was pronounced by Erhard, and his speech sparked with irritation.

– You choose the moment to attack very carefully, right?

The Wotan was silent, while it was evident that he frowned. His brow ridges slid down.

“The most favorable time is at night, when there are only unarmed men, women and children in the villages,” Athanasius growled loudly.

The guests who were nearby were silent, watching the scene.

General Swann immediately turned to him. – These are the deeds of days gone by, he said, and began to take his friend away, turning him towards the exit.

– Maybe we should show you our skills, mister Mirra ?! pronounced Argos.

Tan stopped. The general's attempts to move him from his place did not lead to anything. He turned around. There was rage in his eyes. Clenching his hands into fists, he began to approach Argos. But Swann, catching up with Athanasius, whispered: – Come to your senses! What are you doing? And the red veil fell from his eyes. He looked at the duke, who was furious. His nostrils drew in eagerly, his eyes turned red, his lips narrowed into a barely visible line.

– I apologize! Mirra said, then turned around and headed for the exit.

–“How about a show fight before the opening of the celebrations,” Argos called after him.

Athanasius turned to face him, but did not approach, so as not to tempt fate.

“Arkon and Wotan,” he continued. What is not an excellent start to the celebration of the beginning of the great union – Our reconciliation! And, of course, demonstrations of fighting skills. As he spoke his last words, he grinned.

The duke, hurt by this impudent behavior, supported Argos. “So be it,” he said. Tomorrow, in the grand arena, before the opening of the celebration in honor of the peace and union of the states of Wotan and Arkon. A demonstration fight will take place. As far as I understand, the representative of Arkon has already been chosen, for there is no one who could compare with the inimitable Athanasius Mirra, Erhard said with an arrogant grin. Who will speak on behalf of Wotan? the duke turned to General Argos.

There was a deathly silence.

– I am!

– Athanasius! What the hell are you doing? General Swann asked him with obvious nervousness in his voice. “Forgive me, I don’t know what came over me. When I saw his eyes, it was like I was back at that time. I felt the same fear that I experienced then.

– Understand that I still have no influence on the local officials. People like the duke do not forgive such disrespectful behavior. You made a scene at his house! In his presence.

Athanasius was silent, completely lost in his thoughts. He just looked at the fire in General Swann's fireplace and recalled the horror from his childhood. Time has stopped for him.

– You must understand, continued Swann, I'm not worried about what you will do, this guy, on the contrary, breathed out Swan, I'm afraid that after you, he will be carried out of the circle on a stretcher.

– So what? Tan spoke indifferently, not taking his eyes off the fire.

– And then, Svan said sadly, that he is the son of King Orm.

Tan looked up, and in his eyes was read the gravity of what had happened.

– So, you will immediately pack your things and leave the city. I will say that you have recovered with my urgent report to the leadership of the Marne Corps and ...

Tan interrupted him without listening to his friend's proposal. – I'll perform tomorrow!

– What the devil !? Didn't you hear me now !?

– I heard everything perfectly. But I will stay and take this fight. All my life I have been trying to forget my past. But in truth, I always knew that I could not escape from it, it is part of me. I became what I became. You can't change me. And tomorrow this arrogant bastard will get his. And then ... Come what may.

He was nervous, putting on the last piece of his combat suit. These were the gloves Bert had given him. The morning was frosty. The air was damp and cold. Through the window opening, he looked at the sky, which was covered with clouds. They replaced each other and became darker and darker. – Yeah, not the best weather to start the holiday, Tan thought. – It looks like the rain is inevitable. But that didn't really bother him. He fought in much worse weather conditions. And now he was ready. But something did not give rest. He probably guessed that his fate would not remain the same anymore. He sat and thought about his mother. He remembered her last words, her farewell look, and a wild longing for her burst into his soul.

His thoughts were interrupted by a man in a long robe, apparently one of the organizers of the celebration. With great respect, he turned to Tan: "Mr. Mirra, it's time to get out." After these words, Tan stood up. He went over to the scabbard lying on the table and pulled out a sword. His comrade-in-arms, as always, was magnificent, sharpened and polished. Do not enter the circle yet, not yet entering the arena of the amphitheater, he heard the rumble of the crowd through the walls. Tan did not know how many people were there, but he guessed that a huge number of people would come to such an event. When the gigantic shutters opened in front of him, he suddenly remembered how General Swann had come to him a couple of hours ago. Before leaving for his seat on the balcony of the large arena, Swann hugged him, smiling slightly. However, Tan felt his close friend was nervous. In response, he also smiled and they both silently looked into each other's eyes for a while. Out of habit, he slapped Tan on the shoulder and said: – Don't hit him too hard, okay ?! Then he laughed and withdrew into the darkness of the corridor.

There he smiled, remembering this, and moved through the invisible wall that separated him from the crowd.

He walked to the center of the circle to an approving noise, looking around, and marveled at the scale of the amphitheater. It seemed to the spectators that a whole army had gathered. He saw that all the seats, both standing and sitting, were taken. Representatives of all classes were here. Common people were shouting, having fun, everyone was in high spirits. But suddenly, on the opposite side

of the circle, the shutters of the doors also began to open. At that moment, Tan stopped hearing the crowd. In the depths of the opening that had opened, there was impenetrable darkness, and he saw Argos emerge from it. Dressed in all black, he approached our hero with a confident gait. Coming closer, Tan noticed that he had never seen such strange protection in his life. She was whole from foot to neck. Tan did not notice a single seam or a single rope on it. The material did not look like metal hidden under the skin, but rather like wet clay. The torso was made in the shape of a human body. The armor had thickening on the arms and legs. In the area of the ribs, a round sign with unknown runes and lines that crossed each other was distinguished. The only thing that differed from monolithic armor was the traditional Voton schenti.

Before each of his battles, he saw excitement and fear in the eyes of the enemy. Lack of confidence in their abilities. But now everything was different, it seemed to him that Argos was even slightly grinning and the corners of his lips were raised. Suddenly, a horn sounded shrilly throughout the amphitheater, announcing the beginning of a week-long celebration. The man who spoke into the large brass megaphone happily announced that King Virgil and Duke Erhard are now present in the large arena. After a speech of eulogy addressed to His Majesty, the Duke took the floor as he walked out to the edge of the royal balcony. He also began to congratulate the people and praise the world, then introduced the two participants in the battle, saying that, before the start of the celebration, a demonstration battle would be fought between two representatives of the once warring races. In which blows to the head with a sword are prohibited.

Tan had already taken a fighting stance, but then Erhard said: – And at the end of my speech, I am proud and with great pleasure, I present to you, our guest, King Orm. The doors to the royal box opened, and King Orme walked into the balcony, dressed in beautiful black robes with gold embroidery.

I was dumbfounded there. His mouth opened involuntarily. He just couldn't believe what he was seeing. Before his gaze, the face of the past has just appeared. Next to King Virgil, smiling, stood the one who killed the inhabitants of his village 30 years ago. Someone who is involved in the death of his parents. His face has aged slightly. Combat clothes changed to royal ones, but it was him. Orm sat down on a chair next to the king and the duke bellowed: "Let the battle begin!"...

I fight after the last words of Erhard, drums sounded like thunder. Their sound was picked up by the harp, and some kind of wind instruments.

Athanasius came to his senses only after an attempt by Argos to strike from above. Tan, withdrew from the line of attack, pushing the corps back, and now all his attention was riveted on Argos. Argos made a couple of preparatory actions and struck with lightning speed from the bottom up. Tan repulsed his sword with a backhand, but immediately the opponent tried to make a stab in the stomach, turning on its own axis. Although it was difficult, Tan left the line of attack, but Argos did not yield and continued to test the strength of Athanasius's defense. The fighters moved in so much music. The crowd rejoiced at the confrontation they saw. King Orm did not leave a smile, with pleasure, and King Virgil, on the contrary, was focused, because his fighter was still only defending himself.

Tan had sweat on his face, but his eye was still hard. His few counterattacks, choked with the speed of the movements of Argos. Never before had he found himself in such a difficult situation. To say that Tan was surprised is to say nothing. It seemed that all this time, in battle, in no way affected the prince. He was fresh, breathing evenly, unlike Tan, who was already greedily sucking in air through his nostrils. Argos' attacks were accompanied by a smirk on his haughty face.

But Tan was experienced and intelligent. He noticed even minor things. And once again, when Argos tried to strike with a jab in the area of his chest, Tan took the body to the side and with all his might struck in the right side of Argos, who was strengthened by the gloves presented to him. And what was his surprise that from the blow Argos did not even frown, and Tan felt as if he had

smashed against the wall. – Your mother, what the hell was spinning in the head of our hero. What the hell is this armor made of? Tan managed to catch Argos several more times. He hit other parts of his body, but the effect was the same.

It seems that, and Argos did not meet a rival like Tan. It was evident that intermittent swallowing of air had replaced his calm, moderate breathing. Tan stared into his eyes, he stared back. Faint memories of the past appeared in Athanasius's head, and after the prince's rough attack with the sword and then the body, Tan fell to the ground, being on his knee. It was as if a horse had hit him. Her breath caught. Moisture and coldness settled in his lungs. Tan could not resist and had to clear his throat. Argos walked around him in circles, and no trace of his smile remained. Then, with a vicious grin, he raised his sword and slashed with superhuman speed, aiming at the head. The people gasped! No one would have been able to react. No one. But Tan, managed to give the body movement forward, and dived under the right arm of Argos, while pushing off the ground with his foot. He aimed his left fist at his jaw. Argos tried to dodge, but Athanasius was so quick that he was able to hit the prince and hit on a tangent. However, this was enough for Argos to lose his balance and fall, dropping his sword.

The rain began to drizzle. Athanasius glanced at the royal box. King Orme was darker than the night. There was such rage in his eyes that it seemed that he could kill at a distance. His gaze slowly moved from his son to his rival. The same damn look, Tan thought.

Argos noticed that Tan was completely infatuated with his father. He quickly raised his sword and struck as quickly as he could. Tan only managed to substitute his sword. The blow was so powerful that the vibration of the collision of the swords raced throughout the body. Then another blow, and another. On the final blow, Tan put his sword mechanically, without even seeing it. There was a clang, and Athanasius's sword shattered.

The music stopped. The entire amphitheater fell silent. There was silence. The rain began to pour in full force.

– Ufffff, gasped Argos, not taking his eyes off Thane. They looked at each other for a while, then Argos spoke: – Do you think this is the end? he said with hatred. – You're wrong! After these words, he threw his sword aside. “You disgraced me in front of my father. Get up motherfucker! Tan barely got up, leaning on his knee, seeing off his comrade on the last journey, the fragments of which were strewn across the circle.

Quickly closing the distance, the prince struck with his right then left hand. Tan staggered backward, covering his head with his hands. At that moment, two severe blows to the body flew to him. Tan counterattacked, but in vain. A barrage of blows rained down his face and body. Each blow felt like a hammer blow. My head was buzzing. My ears were ringing. In the eyes of an impenetrable veil. Only a few seconds separated Tana from unconsciousness. He swayed like a leaf in the wind, but still standing. Blood ran down his battered face. Everything seemed to freeze and at that moment, Tan received a blow to the head with an insane force.

He fell, no longer to the ground, but into the arms of darkness, and only the sound of erupting water from heaven connected him with reality!

Chapter 3 (New Friend)

Tan barely opened his eyes. The light was blinding to him. He grimaced in pain. And even the very contraction of the muscles on the face caused pain. He groaned slightly. How his face hurt.

Seeing that Tan woke up, the hospital's nurse immediately ran up to him and, putting her hands on her shoulders, quietly but affirmatively said: "You cannot get up, Mr. Mirra." You have a severe concussion, as well as a dislocated lower jaw, bruised ribs and kidneys. Tan made a heart-rending sound again.

– Where I am? He asked with a shiver in his swollen lips.

– You're in the hospital. You were brought here after the battle. Do you remember?

Tan was silent as if trying to remember what had happened in the past couple of days. He tried to collect all the books on the shelves in his library of the mind, which was smashed by Prince Argos. Then he sat up. His head was spinning.

"He's stubborn," said the sister, and forcibly pushed him back to the hospital bed. You only make it worse.

– I have to talk to General Swann, with the last of his strength Tan mumbled, after which he lost consciousness.

His father was sitting at a table in a huge oak armchair. On his right hand stood a servant, head bowed. And his back was guarded by two armed soldiers, the best of the best in their field. Dinner was already served with various dishes and treats. In the middle of the table there was a beautiful composition of berries and fruits, around which jugs of wine were dancing in an intricate pattern. Most of the candles were extinguished. Twilight has always been his father's companion. Flames leapt from a nearby fireplace, and the crackling of a burning tree echoed from the high walls of the castle. It was a hunting room with various trophies hanging on the wall. The muzzles of the slain beasts with glass eyes looked down on the arriving guest.

– Leave us! The king ordered and in one second they were left alone. He wiped his lips with a napkin, tossing it casually on the table. Then he got up and walked over to his son. Anger was what filled his eyes. Coming close and not looking away, he punched Argos' face with the back of his hand. From the blow on the prince's face, the skin turned red and a small bleeding scratch formed from the ring.

Argos opened his mouth, but before he could utter a word, Orm interrupted him: "I don't need any excuses from you now," he bellowed. Then he turned away and walked over to the fireplace, looking at the fire for a while.

–How could this have happened? without taking his eyes off the bewitching beauty of the flame, he asked.

– With all due respect, father, one way or another, I won! I showed them all what is the strongest race on earth!

– Anyway?! Turning slowly, he asked. An ordinary man, with ordinary weapons and ordinary protection, almost kicked your royal ass! You were wearing "Isar", your mother! And you dare to say something !?

– He is very well trained and strong. He's fast. I've never seen this. This warrior was in no way inferior to me.

– Oh, I didn't even notice! Orm said with undisguised irony, then turning away, he again drowned in his thoughts, absorbed in the sight of burning wood in the fireplace.

– Father?

– Yes?!

– Why did he look at you like that during the fight?

“That's interesting to me too,” said the king. Who are you, Athanasius Mirra? he asked the flame.

Argos was about to leave. But after a pause, he turned back to his father. “When will you be able to fully trust me, Father?”

– I trust you.

– Then tell me what is in the tower of the west wing at the very top?

– Soon you will find out about everything, I promise you. Until then, that's all! You are free.

– Good morning, Athanasius!

– Hi, General! he mumbled barely audibly.

– You look lousy.

– I feel even worse.

– Hmm, who would have thought that Prince Argos is so good. The general sat down next to Athanasius's bed.

–“It's not just him,” Tan replied.

– What are you talking about?

– His armor ...

– And what happened to him?

– I hit him. He beat with all his might. No armor could stand that.

– What do you mean by that?

– I don't know yet.

– What do you mean, “I don't know yet” !? AND?! Swann got angry. All! The page is turned over. The story is over. He won, the general said with annoyance!

– It's him.

– Who is he"?

“King Orme, this is the bastard who slaughtered the people of my village.

– Stop it, Athanasius. You're delirious. You got it a lot, it's understandable, but you can't ...

– General! Tan interrupted him. This face comes to me in dreams for 30 years. I know him by heart and will not confuse nickname with anyone else. It's him!

– Your mother! Swann said helplessly, lowering his eyes to the floor. And after a few seconds he said: Don't tell anyone about this, you hear! Nobody should know about our speech. The general whispered in a conspiratorial tone. Your words undermine twenty years of peace between our states, you understand that ?! – Rest for now. I need to consult.

Tan woke up as usual in the morning. There had been no news from Swann for a couple of days. During this time, his body got stronger. As the hospital attendants said, good heredity, everything heals quickly like a dog. However, the Tan was still moving with caution, without sudden movements. The bruised ribs made themselves felt. He was in a separate room. General Swann took care of this, therefore, the nightmares that tormented his soul at night and his early awakening did not disturb anyone. Approaching the window opening and opening it, he looked at the sleeping city. All these days, only one thought occupied his head: – Retribution will find everyone.

At that moment, he heard someone sneak up to the door of his room. Athanasius, despite the pain, like a cat, silently approached the door and stood next to it, pressing himself against the wall. The door opened slightly and a figure of a man in a dark cloak and a hood on his head entered the room. Without hesitation, he rushed at him, grabbing his clothes, but immediately got a trip and they both fell to the floor. The hood fell off my head. Beneath him was the same maid from the duke's house.

– You?! Athanasius was surprised. What are you doing here!?

– They want to talk to you. This is urgent. She answered with excitement in her voice.

– About what!? Who are you? What's going on here?

After a little delay, she said with regret: – General Swann is dead.

He did not immediately understand the meaning of her words. – What?

– My name is Una, and we have no time. They're coming for you!

And as soon as she uttered these words, suddenly they heard the clatter of hooves and a rude male speech outside the window. Athanasius quietly crept to the window and, looking out of the corner, began to inspect the area near the hospital. There were ten well-equipped fighters. Their eldest waved his arms and showed various directions, where one soldier later fled. With the others, he went to the hospital entrance.

Tan realized that most likely the girl was not joking, and if this was not an idiotic coincidence, he was the target of the soldiers.

– Why do they need me?

“While I'm here to explain to you, they will both capture us.

Tan could not help but agree with this statement. He walked quickly to the corner where his clothes lay. Unfortunately, the combat uniforms were sent to Pisky Efa, which Athanasius remembered with annoyance. Therefore, he put on his pants and boots, put on a white woolen shirt and left the room. Una followed him. In the corridor below one could already hear the noise and clatter of soldiers' boots. He immediately grabbed her by the forearm, pulling her towards the door of his room. Running back, he slammed the door, forcing it with a heavy wooden cabinet. Then he jumped to the window and looked down. Everything was quiet. They were on the second floor, so it was not difficult for them to go downstairs.

As he descended, he appreciated how cleverly Unya had succeeded. It was lucky that there was an apple orchard on the hospital grounds, and they could sneak from tree to tree unnoticed. Suddenly, Athanasius grabbed Una by the shoulders and pulled him over, hiding behind a tree. As it turned out, one of the soldiers was on duty in the corner of the building. Tan's brain began to actively seek a solution to the problem, but what happened next caught him by surprise. Una threw off his hands and with the words "Help" rushed towards the guards.

– That devil, thought Tan, gritting his teeth.

Then he heard a noise and, looking out from behind a tree, saw a soldier lying on the ground. Athanasius looked at her in surprise, but she just grinned.

– Why are you frozen? Hurry!

He didn't need to repeat it twice. He ran up to the guy who was lying on the ground and picked up his sword, which he had already managed to take out after hearing Una's cry. Apparently she hit him from behind, smart ...

She dived into a narrow street, Tan behind her. But they had already been spotted, and the pursuit began. They ran along the ragged walls of houses and debris lying along the road. Rats scattered in different directions at the sight of strangers at such an early hour. Following this, they heard the sound of whistles, signaling troublemakers. Tan knew that reinforcements would now be arriving in this area and that it was necessary to get out of it as soon as possible. The side was very sore, his chest was squeezing, his strength was leaving him. He had to stop.

“We need to hide,” he said.

– No, we need to run and quickly, said Una.

“We won't have time to run a couple of streets before they spot us, believe me,” he said with a breath in his voice.

– What to do?! There was excitement in her eyes.

He looked around, and suddenly realized that the houses around them were familiar to him. His feet were already walking along this cobbled street, and his nose breathed in the local smell.

The door flew open, and the first thing Athanasius saw was a long and well-polished sword.

– Hi Byrd! Pronounced Tan.

But the interlocutor was silent and only looked at him with an incredulous look.

– We have nowhere else to go, I'm sorry.

After a little hesitation, he fully opened the door, with a mute gesture, inviting them to enter.

They immediately ran into the house.

Nothing has changed in the room since his last visit. Tan leaned against the wall to keep from falling. As soon as he caught his breath, he raised his head and, looking at Byrd, said: – Thank you. Most likely, you saved our lives.

Without answering, Byrd went into another room and after a while returned with two mugs of water in his hands, somewhere hiding his sword.

After drinking greedily, Tan wiped the cold water droplets from his lips with his sleeve.

– And so, maybe you can finally explain what the hell is going on here ?! Tan turned to Una. – Why did these soldiers need me? What are they? What about General Swann?

– These are the duke's men! They received an order to bring you to him, and if this fails, then kill.

“You're also working for him, right?”

– I got a job as a servant in his estate to watch and observe.

– For Erhard?

– Behind the origin of the birth of a new union! Extremely powerful. A union that will drown the earth in blood, and here you and I cannot prevent this.

– What happened to the general? Tan asked quietly.

– Erhard killed him. The general arrived late at night to the duke, alone. I overheard their conversation. He argued that King Orme is not a benefactor, as he presents himself, but the instigator of that bloody war, the end of which we all celebrate. Erhard tried to explain to him that it was simply impossible, but Swann stood his ground. He hesitated, she continued to tell: – Then he told him your story and that he trusts you as himself, and if Erhard does not want to hear, then perhaps the other members of the council will listen to him. With these owls, he signed both you and himself a death warrant. After that, the general turned away to leave, but the duke thrust a knife into his neck.

– So you just stood there and watched it ?! He turned to her with disgust.

– Trust me, if I could do something, I would do it. His house is packed with soldiers. If I tried, I would have overtaken to take into account the general, and you would have lived a little longer.

He understood this. He also understood that it was he who was to blame for the death of his closest friend, who was only trying to do the right thing by entering into open conflict with the duke. From what a real storm broke out in Tan's soul, out of powerlessness, anger and incredible melancholy. Una saw it in his eyes. She went to Athanasius, placing her mug, with half-drunk water, next to him. She gently laid her hand on his shoulder and said quietly: “Retribution will find everyone. At that moment, a noise was heard outside the door. Bert ran to the door, opening it slightly and peering into the opening. Cursing from what he saw, he immediately closed it back. Turning towards Tana and Una, he said:

– Bastards are searching houses! Faster here. He drew back the carpet on the floor. Under it was a wooden hatch cover leading to the cellar. – Get in and see yourself quiet.

From the chase, Tan's side hurt so much that he barely went downstairs. Una thanked old man Bert in a whisper and followed Tan into the cellar.

Suddenly the door rattled, in a tone that could not be delayed. For some time, Bert needed to lay the carpet back, after which he obediently obeyed the soldiers.

From below, through the cracks between the boards, it was difficult to see anything. But by the shadows and voices, Tan determined that four people had entered the house.

– How can I be of help to the guards of His Majesty and our peace, Byrd said with mock courtesy.

– We are looking for fugitive killers who are hiding in nearby houses, said one of the soldiers, and immediately proceeded to inspect the room. Most likely an officer, Tan thought.

– I did not see anyone, sir, heard Tan Byrd's voice.

– Do you live alone? He continued.

– Yes, sir, one! It's just me in the house!

Silence fell again, broken only by the steps of the officer. Then he stopped abruptly and after a while asked: – Where are these mugs of water?

Tan and Una looked at each other and held their breath ...

– Sir, I am a sewing company, and these circles are left after yesterday's clients, Bert said.

Then, the officer took one of the mugs, brought it to his nose, inhaled, and then sipped it.

– Arrest him! Search the house, quickly!

After his orders, the officer turned to the old man and said through clenched teeth: – Where are they?

– Who? Bert was indignant.

– You think I'm an idiot ?! The water in the mug is icy. You just poured it. Answer me or I'll rip your belly open! The officer threatened. You will still be alive for a while, and then I will feed you your guts, if you don't tell me everything I want to know!

The old man was held by two, one more began to run around the rooms and examine them. Tan knew he needed help, but he was useless now. Due to injury, his defense would simply not be effective.

– I'm losing my patience, old man! The sound of steel stripping was heard. Then Bert said, “I'm sorry gentlemen, really sorry.

And then there was a crash from the fall of the body to the floor, fuss, fuss, screams and moans from incredible pain began. Blows, falls, more bumps.

It was unbearable for Athanasius to sit and watch the murder of the man who had just saved his life. Realizing that this was most likely the end, he abruptly got up, climbed the steps and tried to open the cellar!

– What are you doing? Una asked in a whisper.

The lid was latched on the back. The fight from above continued, and this indicated that Bert was still alive. With a growl, the Tan began to beat the wooden hatch with his elbow. The boards cracked, but didn't give in. Once again, he tried to strike, but stumbled and fell, rolling down the stairs to the ground. Suddenly he realized that the fussing above had stopped. – I didn't have time, it was spinning in his head. They heard the rug pull back. Then Tan realized that he had given away their location while trying to get out. The lock opened and light burst into the dark closet. To his great surprise, Bert's face was looking at him. He was bleeding from his nose and mouth.

– Come up. He said in a tired voice.

Tan and Una exchanged glances. Then she stood up abruptly and helped Athanasius to his feet. All four soldiers were lying on the floor, some of them no longer breathing. Bert, like the room, was covered in their blood. Athanasius looked around, then his gaze fell on the old man.

– Who are you?

– My name is Grubert Ebiner.

Tan's mouth fell open in surprise. Wait a minute, that same Grubert Ebiner? War hero?

– He's the one, the old man croaked. But after reconciliation, they tried to forget everything that reminded of the war, including me. But damn it, it's nice to flex your fists sometimes. He smiled and immediately his legs buckled. Athanasius managed to catch him and slowly put him on the floor.

Tan's hand holding his back was covered in blood. Grubert's clothes were pulled up and on the back, under the clothes there was a puncture wound, from which blood flowed along with air bubbles.

“A lung pierced,” Athanasius told him in despair. Una began to say that he urgently needed to be taken to the hospital, but Grubert said: “It's all over for me, but I don't regret anything. In my heart I felt that I had to help you. In the back room there is an old tapestry on the wall, remove it, behind it there will be a door to a secret room. – Here, this is for you! Byrd ripped the chain with a small key from his neck and handed it to Athanasius. There you will find everything you need, good luck to both of you. After that, he peacefully closed his eyes that will never open again. Silence fell ...

He swallowed hard, and then put his right hand to his chest, paying the last tribute to the great man. Then he got up and walked with a determined gait to the back room, where Grubert pointed. On the opposite wall from the entrance hung an antique tapestry depicting a battle scene. Tearing off the canvas, a small but thick metal door appeared before his eyes. He slipped the key into his mask and turned it surprisingly gently. Outside the door, sheer darkness reigned. Tan took the oil lamp and went inside. Una followed him carefully. When the light lit up the contents of the room, she said with undisguised surprise: – Yes, this can arm a whole squad.

The weapons room appeared before their eyes. On the walls and on the floor were placed: weapons, armor and shields, skillfully made, but wrapped in a large layer of dust. In the center of this room was a stone plinth. On it were: a brigantine, bracers and a scabbard with a sword. They were all done in the same style with lions. The way these items were made, it could be concluded that a lot of money was spent on their creation. “With gratitude from the king!” Read the inscription on the bronze tablet. They vegetated for a long time in this pitch darkness.

But their dream was over!

Putting on the armor of Grubert, he asked Unu to tighten the brigantine from the sides.

– You said that they want to talk to me?

– Right.

– Who?

– Master of the Order of the Children of the Midnight Star and one of the initiates.

– Initiates? Into what?

– Let's just say, after talking with him, your world will not be the same.

– Hmm, we'll see.

They both donned gray hooded capes and left the house.

Of all the abundance of weapons, Una took only a dagger with her.

Common people have already started pouring out into the streets. There were no soldiers in the vicinity, which could neither please.

– Where is your master waiting for us?

– In a place called Arna. North of Anamut.

– Long away?

– Two days' journey.

Tan said indignantly in two. – Out of the question.

– Why?

“I must avenge General Swann and Grubert.

– You still have such an opportunity. But first, you must speak to the master.

– What for?

– Because he will open your eyes! It is important!

When they entered, Tan could not even imagine that the old, shabby barn, from the inside, would look pretty passable.

– This is the place, in case of emergency, if there is an urgent need to get out of the city, said Una. She pushed the old chair away from the corner of the shed and began to tear the planks off the floor. When she finished, she reached into the niche that had formed and took out a bag of coins.

– And you are very organized!

– Thank you, my father taught me everything. And suddenly she met his gaze. There was silence. Embarrassed, Una lowered her eyes and continued: – I will go, arrange for the horses and a safe exit from the city, buy provisions and scout out the situation, while you lie down and rest. You will need strength.

Tan didn't mind. Moreover, most likely, a paper with his physiognomy and a sum of remuneration is already hanging on every pillar and house, and the herald is competing in eloquence to make him the last bastard. But instead of a bed, he sat down on a chair, placing it opposite the entrance and placing the scabbard with the sword on his lap. Then he closed his eyes. Una opened the door to get out, but then Atanasius said: – Thank you.

She stopped and looked at him. His eyes were still closed. Smiling, Una left, closing the door behind her and hanging the padlock.

He woke up, chilled to the bone. The sun did not break through the cracks between the boards, which meant it was night, Tan thought. Rising from the chair, he caught himself thinking that the pain in his side had practically passed, and he could move without much discomfort. But Una's absence worried him. He wildly wanted to eat, his stomach "rumbled" with displeasure. Tan lit a candle and tried to find food, but to no avail. But I found an excellent whetstone on the shelf. Faced with defeat, he decided to pass the time by sharpening his sword. The sword was glorious, Ancalite steel, a comfortable handle, perfectly balanced, it lay in the hand like a native.

On the street I heard someone talking and laughing. A group of people was approaching the barn. Athanasius abruptly stopped his work and began to listen attentively to what was happening on the street.

– Ahahahahahaha, if she told the truth, ahahahahahaha, I will make him kiss my boots! Said a rough voice.

– No, no, if he is really there, then I will lead him through the streets absolutely naked, ahahahahaha! – said a voice belonging to a young guy.

– Enough, you fools, be more serious – said the third. I doubt that he is sitting locked in a shed, waiting to be captured. She just gave herself some time. But at least we can profit from what is inside. Considering what she had with her, I hope she hid much more here.

“So it seems to be here,” said a gruff voice.

– It seems, answered the third. – Yunas, open the door.

– Yes! the guy said enthusiastically.

Tan, stepped back and hid behind an old canopy hanging on the wall.

A few seconds later three men entered the barn. They were the guards of the city gates. They had characteristic stripes on the right sleeve in the form of two towers. The one that was in charge was without armor at all.

– Which was required to prove, he said. The girl deceived us. Oh, and the boss won't like it. We do not waste time and get to work.

– Heh, a man with a thick beard on his face and a rough voice laughed, who began to rummage on a wooden shelf nailed to the wall. “I think she'll lose another finger for that, and then Hort will give her to us.” Here I will show her a real man, he said with a laudatory smile.

After these words, his head split in two. Blood and brains splashed in all directions. It collapsed silently, taking the wooden shelf with it. The other two did not even have time to understand what happened. Athanasius trotted across the barn, knocking out the teeth of the young guy along the way with a blow of his hand. In two jumps, he was next to the third. He tried to remove the sword from its scabbard, but the sharp steel severed his hand and dug deeply to the side, cutting the body to the spine. He let out a shrill cry and immediately fell down dead. Tan turned and walked slowly towards the guy who was on all fours. His whole face was covered in blood. The pupils were dilated, and the eyes were chaotically looking for salvation.

– Where's she? growled Tan.

The guy's jaw was broken and his teeth were knocked out. He explained with difficulty that she was being held in custody at the northern gate of the city.

– How many Soldiers are there?

He showed seven fingers. Then he received another blow to the face, from which he lost consciousness. Tan quickly put on a gray hooded cloak and walked out.

It was raining outside the window ...

– Well, well, well, Hort said affectionately, stroking Unu's head.

Her face was smashed, her clothes were torn and stained with blood. She pressed her hands chained to her chest. On the left, part of the little finger was cut off.

“If you told the truth and my guys bring him here, I promise I won't hurt you anymore. But for cutting one of the guards, I'm afraid I will have to hand you over to the law. However, if you cheated, and he is not there, then I am afraid that this night will seem to you the longest in your life. Here, drink! and he threw a glass of water in Unya's face. “In general, you are very beautiful,” said Hort. Then he thought a little and turned to his guard, who was also in the room and was working on the cut on his leg: – Go out and see that no one comes in, and for one thing, look, why the hell are these mediocrities making so much noise there. He, in turn, obediently got up and hobbled to the door. As the door closed, Hort walked over to the decanter of wine. Without haste, he poured himself a mug, and after draining it in one gulp, he began to unfasten the belt on his pants. “You know, I'll probably do you a favor. For what you have done, you will be put in prison, and for a long time you will not see a man who can please you. But luckily for you, I'm ready to help you with this, he slowly moved towards her, going behind her. “It's in your best interest to be good. After these words, he tore her clothes, exposing the delicate skin on her back.

At that moment the door banged.

“Damn it, I told you not to bother me!

But they continued to knock on the door.

– Well, that's it, someone is going to get it right now! Hort said irritably as he fastened his belt. As soon as he opened the door, he received a crushing blow to the bridge of his nose, from which he threw his hands up and fell flat on his back. He died even before his body touched the floor.

Una looked up, but the picture floated before her eyes. She saw a silhouette approaching her. Suddenly she felt a wet cloth covering her bare back.

– Here are the bastards, said a familiar voice and Una breathed a sigh of relief. Hold on to my neck, Tan said. After that, exhausted, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the exit. The bodies of dead soldiers lay everywhere, but she did not notice it. Una only looked at him.

It was raining outside the window ...

Chapter 4 (Renegade)

The sun blinded her eyes. When she woke up, she caught a cool breath of wind with her nose. Una was riding a horse, leaning her elbows on something solid, and at first did not understand where she was. She jerked violently.

– Hush, Tan muttered, displeased with the disturbance of the calm rhythm of movement. – How do you feel?

She glanced at him, then at the left hand, which had been finished and bandaged. The jaw ached. Dried drops of blood tickled in my nose.

– Things are good! Where are we?

“We're going north,” he said quietly. You are hungry?

– Damn!

– That is great! I also need a little rest. It is very difficult to move in the rain at night.

They turned from a forest path to a small edge, in the center of which a centuries-old tree spread its branches.

“I think this is a great place,” he said with a slight smile. Then he jumped off his horse and helped Una down. Athanasius walked over to the second horse, which was tied behind. He took off a couple of sacks and went with them to the tree. Putting them down, he noticed that Una did not move from her place and guiltily stood there where he had just put her. He exhaled heavily, took a waterskin out of the bag, and walked over to her. – I bet you are thirsty, hold! holding it out to Unya. She took and hugged him to her chest.

– Forgive me! She said.

– For what?

“For telling them where are you?”

– Listen, Tan began, if you were silent, they would continue to cut off your body parts. And in the end, you would still tell them everything. Sooner or later, everyone tells. This is the point, just some people do not have enough intelligence to understand this at the very beginning. But from the way you looked, I can conclude that you held yourself with dignity. He came closer to her. – Trust me, I told a lot. I saw huge and stern men who broke like chips. You are great and you have nothing to apologize for.

She burst into tears as she hugged him. He in turn tried to comfort her and gently ran his hand through her hair.

– And thanks for coming for me!

– Well, that's enough! We don't have much time! I suppose they have already gone after us. Although, we were lucky with the weather and they will not be able to attack the trail. They will have to send many people in different directions to find us. Therefore, we can afford a little rest. So, let's see what the server gate guard so kindly lent us.

Athanasius gathered everything in a hurry, knowing that he would hardly be able to acquire provisions along the way. In addition, he understood that in order to hide his tracks, he would have to go throughout the night. But he still managed to take something useful. From the bag he took out: a piece of bacon, blood sausage, crackers, some vegetables, and a bottle of wine.

To dry his clothes a little and keep warm, Tan decided to light a fire! He collected the fallen dry branches, took out from his bosom a small leather bag, in which lay: a chair, a little flint and dry rags. And after a very short time, they were enjoying the warmth emitted by the burning tree.

– And what is this order? What did you call him? He asked, simultaneously thrusting his dagger into the fire.

– Children of the Midnight Star. It has been calculating since ancient times and is intended for one purpose only.

– What is it?

She looked at him closely. “I have vowed never to divulge ancient knowledge. The only person who can reveal it to you is the master of the order.

– What is his name?

– His name is hidden from outsiders!

“Actually, I was hoping that during these days on the road, you would enlighten me, what the hell is going on here?

– Sorry but no!

– And if I don't want to?

– What don't you want?

“Maybe I don't want to know anything! Maybe I don't need all this!

– Do you want the truth? Raising her voice in irritation, Una asked.

– This is what I want from you!

– Then listen to Athanasius Mirra! I have followed Prince Argos for years. He often demonstrates his superiority. I saw dozens of tournaments in which he participated. Not a single person before you could hold out against him. He destroyed anyone who dared to challenge him in seconds. And then I saw your battle and I couldn't believe my eyes. You were in no way inferior to him, despite his secret!

– What secret?

– His superhuman strength and speed. But as I said, the master will tell you about everything, if you want to.

– Pfff, Tan snorted, picking his dagger in the fire.

– You are special Athanasius!

– Okay, let's take a look at your Master. But before we go, we need to do something.

– What? Una asked in surprise.

Tan took out a red-hot dagger from the fire, – “We must cauterize the wound!”

It was getting dark and on the horizon the lights of the native village already appeared. Rare houses with brown clay roofs stretch across a small lake along the shore. Oil lamps burned in the windows, and smoke from chimneys spread along the slope of the wooded mountains. She smiled involuntarily. But suddenly she realized that her heart was out of place. During these days she became very used to Athanasius. It was calm and reliable with him as with anyone. She enjoyed spending time with Tan. She did not know why the master needed a conversation with him, and this worried her very much.

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