

GORZHAK STANISLAV

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THE BEAR

OF THE NORTH

Stanislav Gorzhak

The Bear of the North

«Издательские решения»

Gorzhak S.

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In a land scarred by war, famine, and the shadow of the Church, Gavel Waldeck fights to restore his family's ruined name and build a future from the ashes. But the Waldeck blood carries secrets older than their enemies know. As Gavel transforms a dying borderland into a thriving domain, an ancient enemy awakens — and sets its sights on his children.

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THE BEAR OF THE NORTH

Chapter One — The Night When War Is Told

Snow had been falling for three days without a break — not the light, lace-like dusting that makes the land beautiful for a holiday, but a heavy, relentless curtain such as the low skies of the Jizera foothills could pour down for weeks, burying roads, fences, and even the memory that beneath the drifts, fields had still been green in autumn.

Waldeck Castle — low-built, made of rough-hewn sandstone darkened by rain and time — seemed the only warm spot for miles around: a small fortress rooted into a rocky ledge above the river, with a single square keep and a low wall behind which the roofs of the outbuildings barely showed. Castles like it — small strongholds hastily raised on lands granted for service — had sprung up in those years along the northern borders of the Kingdom of Bohemia, where until recently there had been little more than watch posts and scattered villages of forest beekeepers. Waldeck was no different from a dozen such brothers along the frontier, except perhaps for the stubbornness with which its master refused to regard poverty as a cause for shame.

Inside Waldeck, life went on even in such weather, as though the blizzard cared nothing for what weighed upon the hearts of men. Horses snorted in the stable, now and then striking the wooden partitions with their hooves; in the kitchen, servants watched a pot of thin porridge to which they added a little lard or dried turnip; the storeroom smelled of smoked meat, onions, mould, and grain. In the cellar, behind an oak door, stood barrels of ale and wine, sacks of oats, dried apples, and several hams meant to see the household through the winter — a modest but honestly earned plenty, nothing like the wealth spoken of in the castles of southern lords. Waldeck lived off the land, and the land forgave no waste: when the harvest was poor, the lord's table became scarcely richer than the peasants'; when a horse fell ill, it was a disaster that could last the year; when a cart broke, they repaired it themselves, because there was no one else to do it. Iron was carefully conserved, leather was patched, clothes were turned and remade, and old swords passed from father to son — not merely as weapons, but as promises.

Beyond the narrow arrow slits, sealed with oiled animal bladder, the wind howled, whipping the courtyard torches and driving snow across the iced stones of the gatehouse. And if the old tales were to be believed, there was something more in that howl than the voice of the storm. At the foot of the rock lay the forest, dense with spruce — the very forest Bohemian peasants had long called the place where man's law ended and the law of the beast began. On nights like this, Bohemia seemed a land of ghosts — or so old Dragomira, Gavel's nursemaid, claimed as she wrapped him in bear skins before bed and tucked in his blankets with the solemn care of someone trying to tame not a child, but the storm itself.

The nursemaid was named Dragomira — a small, stooped woman whose face was furrowed like bark and whose hands had been hardened by half a century of washing, cooking, and spinning. She had come to the Waldeck household while the late Lady Jitka was still alive, had raised her only surviving child, and ever since had considered it her duty to protect the boy from every danger — those that could be seen and struck with a sword, and those that could not be seen and had to be guarded against with prayer, as though neither could truly protect him without the other.

«Sleep, little falcon,» she murmured, straightening the heavy blanket that smelled of smoke and wild animal. «The blizzard is wicked tonight. All the forest spirits have crawled out of their holes; they're circling the walls and howling. But you needn't be afraid. So long as there's a cross on the gate and holy water in the cup, no forest demon will come into your chamber.»

Gavel was six years old, and he feared neither forest demons nor the spirits his nursemaid so eagerly described. He feared only one thing: that his father would not come to wish him good night, as he had failed to do once the previous winter, when Gavel had spent three days burning with fever after falling from a horse. But his father had come. He almost always did, regardless of blizzard, exhaustion, or the watered wine he drank at the meagre lord's supper. He came with such stubborn regularity that it seemed the last habit of his old, pre-war life he had not yet forgotten how to keep.

Konrad von Waldeck — a short but broad-shouldered man of about thirty-five, with a close-cropped beard touched with grey and a heavy face that seemed carved from stone — pushed open the low oak door with his shoulder and stopped on the threshold, shaking snow from his cloak. Firelight cast harsh, broken shadows across his face, making him look older than a man his age ought to look: dark half-moons lay beneath his eyes, and between his brows sat a crease that seemed never to smooth, even in sleep. He was dressed simply, as a man would be at home: a long dark-blue woollen tunic belted with a broad leather strap, from which hung the knife in its worn sheath — the same dagger Konrad never removed, even in his own house. Soft boots of roughly cured leather covered his feet; over the tunic he wore a heavy wolf-lined cloak. There was no luxury in his dress. The Waldeck lands were poor, and the silver once granted by the king for his crusade had long since been spent on the castle itself, on horses and weapons, and on ransoming several peasant captives from a neighbouring lord.

«You're still awake,» Konrad said. There was no reproach in his voice, only the tired tenderness even the most exhausted man can preserve when it comes to his son.

«I was waiting for you,» Gavel replied, propping himself up on one elbow among the furs.

Dragomira bowed to her master and quietly slipped out, pulling the door closed behind her. Konrad went to the window, checked the shutter, and only then sat on the edge of the bed. His fingers, twisted by old scars from sword and rope, instinctively settled on the hilt of his dagger, as though seeking the familiar reassurance it offered. Above the hearth hung a shield, small and darkened by soot and time: a blue field, a silver cross, and beneath it a horseshoe. Though Gavel knew the story by heart, he asked his father to tell him about the coat of arms again, because some stories are worth hearing not for their novelty, but for the sound of the storyteller's voice.

Konrad gazed at the shield with the long, distant look of a man staring not at an object, but through it, into the past.

«The cross is for the journey to the Holy Sepulchre,» he said at last, then paused before adding, «Men who crossed the sea to fight in the Holy Land wore such crosses on their cloaks. The horseshoe is for the fact that I made that journey on horseback.»

«Why did you go?»

The question caught him off guard. Gavel had never asked it before. Usually the stories of distant cities, knights, and battles were enough for him. But now the boy looked straight into his father's eyes, and something in that direct, unwavering gaze told Konrad that one day he would have to tell him everything. Better, then, to do it now, while his son was still young enough to accept the truth as a story rather than a sentence.

«Because I had nothing then,» he said at last.

How Konrad Became a Crusader

In his youth, Konrad was not a wealthy man. His father served as a minor knight at court and owned a scrap of land barely large enough to feed the family. The castle where Konrad grew up was more a fortified manor than a true fortress: in spring, melting snow flooded it through; in winter, wind moved freely through the cracks in its walls, just as it now swept through Waldeck's arrow slits. From childhood, Konrad knew that the eldest son would inherit the land, while he would inherit only a sword and a road. So he learned early to ride, shoot a bow, and handle weapons. Yet a man could become a true knight only with a patron, money, and the means to maintain a horse, weapons, and men — and Konrad had none of these.

At eighteen he left home for the first time. For several years he served as a hired squire, then as an armed retainer to one of the Bohemian lords: escorting caravans, guarding roads, taking part in petty feuds, collecting debts. Once he spent almost a year in a garrison on a troubled frontier, where he saw men kill one another over a clearing in the woods, a mill, or a few cartloads of grain. Little by little, he grew accustomed to the thought that his own life was worth scarcely more.

The crusades of that age attracted not only devout pilgrims, but countless younger sons and landless warriors for whom the promised remission of sins meant less than the chance to return home a man of different standing — or not to return at all, which sometimes seemed not the worst outcome.

Everything changed after his father's death. The family was in debt to a neighbouring feudal lord, the land had to be surrendered, and Konrad was left with virtually no inheritance. It was then that preachers came to Bohemia speaking of the Holy Land, the Holy Sepulchre, cities taken from the infidels, knights promised remission of sins, and the riches of the East. In the square of a small town, Konrad heard for the first time a preacher in a grey monastic robe who spoke for hours about duty and sin, about how a man might spend his whole life fighting over tiny scraps of land — or raise the cross once and journey to where the fate of Christendom was being decided. Konrad listened in silence. He was not especially devout, but the monk's words found the place where he hurt most — and he had nothing left to lose.

That very night Konrad sold his only good horse, bought a cheaper one, and spent the remaining money on weapons and travel gear. A few weeks later he stitched a red cross onto his cloak. That was how he became a crusader — not because he was holier than other men, not because he dreamed of glory, and not even solely for land and money, but because he wanted the right to return as a man whom no one could ever again call a nobody.

The journey east was nothing like the preachers had described. The columns moved slowly; roads were broken, horses went lame, and men fell ill. In rainy weather, leather armour swelled with moisture, while woollen cloaks grew heavy as wet hides. At night the knights slept on the ground when the weather allowed it — the wealthier men pitched tents, while common soldiers sheltered beneath wagons or wrapped themselves in their cloaks. They ate bread, cheese, salt meat, dried fish, and porridge; if they found a village, they bought chickens, goats, and grain. If the village had been abandoned, they had to make do with whatever little remained in the baggage train. The greatest treasure on that road was water: a waterskin was guarded almost as carefully as a sack of silver. In the East, Konrad learned for the first time that war could kill a man even when no enemy stood nearby. Sun, thirst, disease, and dust killed slowly; an arrow killed quickly. The difference seemed the only mercy that land had to offer.

The Siege

«Tell me about the battles,» Gavel asked.

Konrad closed his eyes.

«The battles?»

«Yes. How you took the cities.»

He stared into the fire for a long time before answering.

«All right,» he said, and began.

Acre greeted them with heat. The city stood by the sea, surrounded by massive walls, towers rising above the roofs and the defenders' banners visible between the stones of the fortifications. It was the first true great city Konrad had ever seen, and he remembered it above all by its smell: the sea mingled with smoke, horse dung, human sweat, blood, and rotting provisions into a stench unlike anything he had ever known, the smell of a long siege.

The crusaders made camp around the city, and days became weeks, weeks became months. Every morning began the same way: one man sharpened his sword, another checked a girth, another patched his mail. Smiths worked almost without stopping, because an arrow that struck a shield might shatter, but its iron head could be pulled free and used again. Leather was conserved, ropes were

conserved, even good nails were sometimes pulled from old structures and hammered into new ones. Something was always being built in the camp — shelters, palisades, siege engines, ladders, screens to protect the sappers. Carpenters hammered until dark, archers trained, infantry practised keeping formation, and knights exercised on horseback while their horses still had enough strength to remain standing despite hunger.

At night the camp became another world. Fires burned, stories were told around them, some men prayed, some played dice, some drank, and some wept quietly as they remembered home. No one considered any of it shameful, because by morning any one of them might never wake again.

Konrad remembered one such night especially well. He sat by the fire with three men from his company: an old Frank, a young German scarcely more than a boy, and a third man from somewhere in the northern lands who spoke the common tongue poorly. The three argued about what they would do after the war. The old Frank wanted to buy a vineyard. The young German planned to marry. The third was silent for a while, then said only:

«I want to see snow again.»

A few weeks later, all three were dead, and Konrad never understood why that simple sentence about snow remained in his memory more firmly than the others. Perhaps because, of the three wishes, it was the only one that required nothing except that a man remain alive.

Assaults began without warning. Trumpets sounded, drums beat, men rose from the ground and seized their weapons. Knights pulled on their helmets, raised shields and cloaks over their mail, and beneath the sun the metal grew so hot that breathing under a helmet became difficult before the first blow was struck. As the army moved toward the walls, the air filled with the hiss of arrows; shields rang, stones struck wood, someone fell, and the others stepped over him without stopping.

Konrad soon understood one thing: in a real battle, a man rarely sees the whole heroic picture. He sees the boots in front of him, a section of wall, blood on his hand, an enemy blade, his own breath — and fear. Above all, fear. Even the bravest were afraid. The difference was simply that some men could keep moving forward despite it.

The siege of Acre exhausted everyone. Food grew scarce; disease carried men away almost as quickly as enemy arrows. The stench of filth was sometimes so strong that eating became impossible, and the dead were buried so shallowly that after rain the earth often sank and exposed hands and feet. But in the end the city fell — and only then, as Konrad would later understand when he looked back, did the real war begin for him.

The Temple

After the city fell, the crusaders poured into the streets. What happened next Konrad never once dared call a victory, not even in the privacy of his own thoughts. Looters smashed doors, tore down ornaments, carried away cloth, vessels, and weapons. Houses burned, and cries echoed between the walls until it was impossible to tell whether a voice belonged to victor or vanquished.

Konrad tried to stop his own men. He seized them by the shoulders and shouted at them, but once he was struck in the face, and another warrior put a knife to his throat and said:

«Do not interfere with the victors, knight.»

Konrad stepped back — not out of fear, but from the clear knowledge that he could change nothing — and walked away through the alleys until the noise behind him faded.

That was how he found the temple.

It was small and utterly unlike the Christian churches Konrad knew. Stone columns were decorated with carved images whose meaning he could not understand, and the air was heavy with incense — resin, saffron, bitter herbs — nothing like the scent of frankincense.

The doors were closed. Konrad approached with dried blood on his armour and a sword in his hand. He pushed at the heavy door; it would not move. Then, without the slightest effort from him, it suddenly swung open. He froze on the threshold, staring into the darkness within, before finally stepping across it.

The doors closed behind him of their own accord, and one by one, as though at the command of some unseen will, small oil lamps came to life — one, then another, then a third — until moments later the entire temple was filled with trembling golden light.

And then he saw her.

A girl stood beside the farthest column — too young, it seemed, for the ancient silence surrounding her, and yet somehow older than the temple itself. Her hair was very fair, almost white, falling to her waist and appearing silver rather than golden in the lamplight. A few strands lay across her shoulders; the rest flowed freely down her back.

Her face was pale — not with sickness, but with the pallor of someone who had spent too long away from the sun — with high cheekbones, fine brows, and large eyes of a colour Konrad could not name at first: grey, perhaps, or green, or simply reflecting the flames of the lamps. A light fabric covered part of her body, leaving her shoulders and arms bare. Thin metal bracelets hung from her wrists, and at her throat was a small ornament of dark stone.

She looked neither frightened nor surprised. It was as though she had been waiting specifically for him, and that expectation made Konrad colder than any enemy's blade.

«Who are you?» he asked, raising his sword.

The girl did not answer. She simply looked into his eyes, and for the first time in many months Konrad felt not the fear of death, but the fear of the unknown — a fear he discovered was far heavier than the first.

She approached slowly, so silently that he heard no footsteps, and held out her hand. Konrad tried to step back, but could not.

Her fingers touched his wrist. Her palm was cool — too cool for a living person — and the sword slipped from his hand and struck the stone with a deep clang that echoed beneath the vaults.

The girl led him deeper into the temple. He tried to resist, but his body no longer obeyed him. The lamps began to blur, the walls seemed to recede, the air grew thick, and Konrad heard music — faint, like the sound of a single string touched by the wind.

Then white light flared.

After that there was only pain, cold, unfamiliar voices, hooded shadows — and the girl, appearing again and again before him, sometimes close enough to touch, sometimes at the far end of a long hall. At times he thought even her face was changing before his eyes.

He could not tell dream from waking, nor how much time had passed — twenty minutes, a day, a week, an eternity — and then everything vanished at once.

After the Crusade

Konrad awoke beneath the open sky. The sand was cold, stars shone overhead, and he lay in his armour with his sword beside him, as though someone had carefully placed it within reach.

For a long time he could not understand where he was until he saw the familiar crosses of the camp in the distance. He rose, took several steps, fell, rose again, and little by little made his way back to his own people.

They told him he had been missing for twenty days.

For twenty days Konrad had been gone. Some thought he had died; others assumed he had gone off with women. No one would have believed his story of the temple had he told it.

So Konrad kept silent.

He continued the crusade — fighting, eating with the others, sleeping beside the fires, repairing weapons, taking new wounds — but something inside him had changed forever. He stopped believing in simple words like «good,» «evil,» «victory,» or «God's will.» They were all too small for what he had seen behind the closed doors of that foreign temple.

When the crusade ended, Konrad returned home a different man and told no one about the temple — not his comrades, not a priest, not even the woman who would become his wife.

Sometimes he woke at night and felt the cold of another's hand on his wrist. Sometimes he thought he heard that same music. Once, in winter, he woke to the smell of saffron, though there was not a single spice in the house. He went outside and found no one — only snow.

After that, Konrad prayed more often, but he prayed less to God than against the thing he feared, unable to name it aloud even in prayer.

The Oak and Its Roots

The return was almost as hard as the crusade itself. Konrad had thought that after the war he would be free, only to discover that his old life no longer existed.

People wanted stories of glory; they wanted to hear about battles, the riches of the East, great victories. But he remembered the smell of burning houses, the screams, the sand, and the girl in the temple.

The Crown, however, valued his service differently from his neighbours. His knighthood was confirmed by a special charter, he was granted lands on Bohemia's harsh northern frontier, and a handful of silver — enough to establish an estate, but not enough to rival the great houses.

Konrad settled among stone and pine trees.

During the first years he barely lived in the castle — he built it. He chose the site for the walls, inspected the stone, decided where the well should go, and while the workers hauled stone in summer, felled timber in autumn, and raised the walls from within during winter, he slept where they slept, ate the same porridge, and drank the same ale.

He knew the value of every board, every iron nail, every horse in the way only a man who had paid for them with his own labour, rather than another man's silver, could know.

At first Waldeck was not a castle at all, but a stout house with a tower. Little by little Konrad learned to live again, though the war never truly released him. At night he dreamed of Acre's walls, the temple, and white hair vanishing into the darkness of sleep before he could see it clearly.

Several years later, a neighbouring lord offered Konrad a favourable marriage. His daughter was named Jitka — short, dark-haired, with quick, warm eyes.

But the first thing Konrad noticed about her was her hands. Small marks of work showed on her fingers, because she was not a girl raised only for dances and feasts. She could spin, sew, cook, preserve meat for winter, dry herbs, and tell by smell when milk had begun to spoil.

She laughed easily and sang while working at the spinning wheel. To Konrad, accustomed to the clang of weapons, screams, and prayers before battle, her voice seemed almost impossible — a woman who could sing simply because the day was sunny.

He married her first for the alliance, and later because he truly came to love her.

For three years they lived without children, and secretly Konrad was almost glad. Part of him feared that something had happened to him in the temple that should never be passed through blood. But he told no one of that fear, not even Jitka.

In the third year she conceived, and for a time joy proved stronger than fear.

Pregnancy was hard on her. Jitka grew thinner where she ought to have grown fuller; she became pale and short of breath, and her bright voice grew quiet. Healers gave her bitter draughts, the parish priest read prayers, and Konrad did everything in his power.

For the first time since the Holy Land, he truly prayed again — not for victory or wealth, but simply that his wife might live.

But God did not answer him as he had hoped.

The birth came at the end of winter. A blizzard raged beyond the walls, almost every hearth in the castle was burning, servants hurried through the corridors, and Jitka's chamber smelled of hot water, herbs, and wax.

At last a baby's cry rang out — a strong boy with a remarkably healthy voice for a newborn.

Konrad wept for the first time in many years, but the joy did not last.

Jitka was too weak. She managed to hold her son only once, studying his face for a long time as though trying to memorize it for a journey she was about to make without him.

«Promise me,» she whispered, and Konrad bent close to her lips. «Whatever happens — protect him. Raise him. Do not let the darkness you carry inside you touch him.»

Konrad flinched so sharply that for a moment he forgot to breathe. It seemed to him that she knew — knew about the temple, the girl, the twenty days, everything he had hidden so carefully even from himself.

«How do you know...» he began, but Jitka only smiled, very faintly.

«I am your wife, Konrad.»

She closed her eyes and never opened them again.

That was how Gavel von Waldeck entered the world — beneath the howl of the blizzard beyond the walls and the silence of a dying mother.

Konrad held his newborn son all night and allowed neither nursemaid nor priest near the cradle, as though he feared that the moment he loosened his arms, the same unknown thing that had once stolen twenty days of his life would take the boy as well.

Outside, the blizzard howled and snow settled over the land of Bohemia. Far across the sea, in the city Konrad had tried with all his strength to forget, remained the memory of the temple, the white-haired girl, the cold palm — and the knowledge that sometimes a war does not end when a man returns home.

Sometimes that is when it begins.

Gavel did not know it yet.

But one day he would.

And then, for the first time, people would call him the Bear of the North.

End of Chapter One.

Chapter Two — The Inheritance of Ashes

Years passed over Waldeck Castle as slowly as the river flowed beneath its walls — peaceful on the surface, yet relentless underneath. Winter gave way to a short, rainy spring; spring to a sultry summer filled with horseflies, when peasants went out to reap barley from narrow fields wrested from the forest; and autumn laid the countryside beneath the first hard frost.

The boy who had once been too weak to survive his first spring without his nursemaid's remedies grew tall and broad. By fourteen he towered over most of his companions, and by seventeen there were few grown men in the garrison who could look down on him.

He had his mother's dark hair, but his father's heavy jaw and the same furrow between the brows that appeared whenever he considered matters not meant for other ears. By seventeen his voice had deepened, and his movements had acquired a peculiar, almost animal grace which the castle folk first took for nothing more than a young warrior's natural agility.

The Jizera Mountains still held their snow until May. White patches lingered in shaded ravines while grass was already green beside the river and wildthorn had begun to flower. The forest surrounding Waldeck on three sides changed its voice with the seasons: birds and dripping snow in spring; the dry crackle of grasshoppers and the hum of bees in summer; the rustle of fallen leaves beneath a deer's feet in autumn; and, in winter, a heavy, almost guttural silence broken only by the creak of frozen trunks and the distant howl that made even the bravest hounds raise the hair along their necks.

Adolescence

The castle yard where Gavel trained was a patch of earth between the keep and the stable, trampled so hard that it had become almost as solid as stone and enclosed by a low wattle fence. In the mornings, while dew still clung to the dead autumn grass — or, in winter, before frost had frozen the ground solid — Gavel practiced with wooden swords and then with real steel under the watchful eye of the old armorer, Jost.

Jost was short and powerfully built, his hands marked by old burns from the forge and one eye narrowed by an ancient wound. It did not prevent him from seeing every mistake his pupil made before the boy himself realized it. He always wore the same leather jerkin over a coarse linen shirt, as though he had never owned another set of clothes, and at his belt he carried not a sword but a hammer — the very hammer with which he straightened blades upon the anvil.

Gavel's day began long before sunrise. First came cold water from a barrel in the yard, which he poured over himself regardless of the season because his father had once told him that a body accustomed to cold feared pain less. Then came a short prayer in the household chapel, poor and cramped, where the shield with the cross and horseshoe still hung upon the wall. Breakfast was a bowl of thin porridge with dried apples in a good harvest year, or simply bread and onions when the year had been stingy.

Then came the yard, the wooden sword, sweat, and more sweat, until his shirt clung to his back even in bitter cold.

Near noon, Jost exchanged the sword for a hunting bow or boar spear. Sometimes they went into the forest with Konrad as well, while the older man still had the strength to mount a horse. It was not sport. The castle table needed game, and the forest in the foothills rewarded those who knew how to listen to it.

Gavel learned to read tracks before he learned to read letters: flattened grass, a fresh scrape in the bark, a scent that the human nose barely noticed but that he seemed to catch with an ease almost insulting to the pride of the other hunters.

He killed his first boar at fourteen.

It was an old, heavy animal with yellowed tusks. It burst from a hazel thicket with a grunt and the pounding of its hooves, and the boy met it with his spear as calmly as if he had done so a hundred times.

Jost stared at the carcass for a long while.

Then he said only:

«Some men do not meet a beast like that at forty the way you met it at fourteen.»

Gavel remembered the words for years.

Father Oswald taught him to read, partly from duty and partly out of respect for the memory of Lady Jitka, who, according to Dragomira, had once been more interested in books than in her spinning wheel. Gavel learned enough Latin letters to read a prayer book and a few of the charters kept in his father's chest — land grants, rent rolls, and the king's old letter thanking Konrad for his service on Crusade, yellowed and fragile as the wing of a dead butterfly.

He grew up among the castle's common people as naturally as among its household. There had scarcely been another hierarchy in his childhood. Václav, the blacksmith's son, was his companion in games and his first rival in wrestling on the dusty yard. The quiet red-haired daughter of the cattle keeper brought him milk in the mornings and, after once finding him with a split lip from falling off an unbroken colt, wrapped the wound with a clean cloth without saying a word, as though she had done it many times before.

Waldeck was small, poor, and isolated among the forests, but that very poverty and isolation bound its people together more tightly than blood alone could have done.

The sword had behaved strangely in Gavel's hands from the beginning.

One day, after a particularly sharp thrust knocked Jost's wooden practice blade aside, the old armorer stepped back, rubbing his aching wrist, and crossed himself without thinking.

«Your father fought well at your age,» he muttered, studying the boy as though seeing him for the first time. «But not like that.»

«How did he fight?»

«Calculated. Solid.»

Jost paused.

«There is something in you, lad. Your strength does not come only from your shoulder, or from the lessons I have given you. It comes from somewhere deeper. From inside.»

Gavel dismissed the remark as nothing more than an old man's suspicious fussiness.

He did not yet know that the strength sleeping in his blood had not come entirely from his father's training.

By sixteen he had surpassed every fighting man in the garrison, Jost included — not through strength alone, but through a peculiar instinct for an opponent's movement. Experienced fighters called it a gift. The superstitious called it a sign.

He went to sleep later than the others and woke with greater energy. A cut across his forearm from a blunted training blade healed in a week where another man's might have taken a month. The kitchen maids whispered about it behind his back, crossing themselves, but no one said anything openly. The young lord was kind to the servants, and a kind lord was not the sort of man people discussed too loudly over ale.

His father's shadow

Meanwhile, Konrad was wasting away before their eyes, as though something inside him were being drained by the same ladle with which he had once drawn wine from the barrels.

Jitka's death had never released him.

He had long since abandoned the training yard and rarely mounted a horse except for matters of the estate. Yet in all weather — rain, snow, or exhausting summer heat — he still walked to the little parish church: a wooden building raised on his own land during the first years after Waldeck was founded, with a single bell cast from the meager donations of the surrounding peasants.

There he spent hours on his knees before a roughly carved crucifix, moving his lips in a silent confession he seemed never able to finish.

Father Oswald, the parish priest, was a man of about fifty, stooped, with a tonsure that had long since been shaved unevenly by an aging, trembling hand. At first he regarded Konrad's visits as evidence of the piety expected of a worthy knight. He listened patiently, nodded, and murmured words of absolution.

But as the years passed, the confessions grew more confused and feverish — stories of the temple across the sea, of the girl, of flashes of white light.

Oswald began to listen differently.

Not as a confessor, but as a man who could hear beneath the words of a penitent something that sounded less like sin than possession.

«My son,» he said one day, unable to bear it any longer, placing a dry old hand upon the kneeling knight's shoulder, «what you describe is not a sin requiring absolution. It is a wound requiring another kind of treatment. Perhaps you should seek learned brothers in Prague, men familiar with such matters...»

«No one is familiar with such matters, Father,» Konrad answered hoarsely without raising his head. «No one but me. And I do not know how to live with it.»

Gavel barely noticed these visits. He had his own war — first the training-yard war, then the real one.

He saw only what any son would see: his father aging before his time, speaking less than he once had, sometimes going outside in the middle of the night without a cloak and staring at the stars as though searching them for an answer to a question he did not dare ask in daylight.

Gavel never again asked about the cross on the shield. Something in his father's face whenever the Holy Land was mentioned was enough to silence his curiosity.

The messenger from Prague

In the Kingdom of Bohemia, as throughout medieval Europe, military service remained both a right and an obligation of the nobility. A knight who received land from the Crown was expected to appear beneath the royal banner at the first summons, with weapons, horse, and, according to his means, a small retinue. Refusal meant dishonor and could threaten the very grant for which blood had once been spilled on foreign soil.

The news of war reached Waldeck in early autumn, when the first rust of decay had touched the forest and cold mist hung over the river each morning.

The messenger was named Ota, a young royal herald already darkened by long roads. His blue cloak was worn at the seams, and a horn hung from his shoulder. Before reading the royal charter at every new gate, he blew it three times.

He arrived at Waldeck with only two armed companions. The times were troubled, and the Crown could spare no larger escort for the northern border. The guard recognized him by the royal arms on his cloak.

A neighboring kingdom had broken an old peace treaty, and the Crown was summoning everyone capable of bearing arms, especially the sons of noble houses bound by the blood-debt of service.

Ota read the charter aloud in the castle yard, standing on an overturned tub so that his voice could be heard from the stable, the kitchen, and the armory. He named the lands from which the army was gathering, the date by which men were to appear, and the place of assembly: Hodkov, three days' ride to the south, where two rivers met and the old trade road to Prague began.

Gavel was barely eighteen.

Konrad received the news in silence.

He did not try to dissuade his son. Nor did he bless him aloud.

The evening before the departure, he came to the armory, a cramped stone addition hung with blades, mail shirts, and bracers. Gavel was making his final preparations, packing a whetstone, spare straps, and an oiled cloth for cleaning steel.

Konrad stood in the doorway for a long time.

«Keep your blade lower than Jost taught you,» he said at last. «An enemy aims for the throat. Let him aim at empty air.»

«Father, will you go to church tomorrow while I am gone?»

«I will.»

Konrad turned toward the narrow window.

«Someone must pray for both of us.»

He did not tell his son what he was really praying for.

Gavel would not learn that for a long time.

The next morning a small force left Waldeck: Gavel on a bay gelding, two of his father's older men-at-arms, and a squire from a neighboring village.

Konrad stood on the wall watching until the riders disappeared around the bend in the forest road.

Dragomira stood beside him and secretly crossed herself three times as the party departed — once for the safety of the body, once for the safety of the soul, and once, as she later whispered, «just in case. Who knows what sort of wickedness has taken to the roads these days.»

The gathering at Hodkov

The road to Hodkov took three days, just as Ota had promised. Rain had turned the autumn tracks to mud. The woods thinned into harvested fields, where peasants hurried to bring the last of the grain under cover before the ground became impassable.

By the third evening Gavel saw the glow of countless campfires long before the city walls came into view. The army had already been gathering for weeks, and the fields beyond the walls had become a temporary town of tents, wagons, hitching posts, and rough shelters for armorers.

The camp smelled of everything at once: fire smoke, horse sweat, leather, tar, fresh bread from field ovens, and — almost from the first day — the particular mixture of waste and rot that inevitably accumulated where thousands of people and animals crowded together.

Gavel, accustomed to the silence and restraint of Waldeck, saw for the first time what a real army looked like before battle.

Tents of noble houses displayed their coats of arms. Poorer levies were easy to distinguish by the size and color of their canvas. Open-air forges worked day and night. Horses whinnied without pause.

The Waldeck men were placed under the command of Sir Siegfried von Teschen, a heavysset, aging knight with a face marked by old scars and a reputation for protecting his own men while showing little mercy to anyone else.

Von Teschen accepted Gavel with open skepticism.

He looked the young man up and down like someone who had seen too many beardless heroes fail to survive their first skirmish.

«Konrad von Waldeck's son,» he said, studying the cross, horseshoe, and blue field on Gavel's shield. «I've heard of your father. A good crusader, they say. We shall see what the son is made of.»

«I am ready to serve, my lord.»

«They all say that.»

The old knight's smile contained no warmth.

«Readiness is proved without words.»

For the first week Gavel was assigned to mounted patrol — the dullest and, for a newcomer, one of the most useful duties: riding around the camp, checking the roads, and reporting any unfamiliar force on the horizon.

There, among cold misty mornings over the Hodkov fields, he became close to the men with whom he would share cauldrons and blankets for the coming year.

There was Indřich, a grim archer who had lost two fingers from his left hand in the previous war and, according to everyone, had become a better shot because of it.

There was Bohuslav, a young squire Gavel's own age, cheerful beyond reason and perpetually hungry.

And there was Radek, an old sergeant and veteran of three campaigns. He alone did not seem surprised by how quickly Gavel mastered a horse and weapons.

«I've seen it before,» Radek said one day as he watched the young man settle a difficult horse with hardly any effort.

«Sometimes the blood knows what to do before the head has learned it.»

The first snow of war

Military campaigns of that age rarely resembled the swift tales sung by minstrels. Months disappeared into marches, camps, minor clashes over crossings and supply wagons, and only occasionally a great battle decided the fate of an entire campaign.

Hunger, disease, and cold killed as many men as an enemy blade — and sometimes more.

War met Gavel without disguise: endless autumn mud, hunger when the supply train fell a day or two behind, sleepless night marches, and fields where, after a battle, there were more crows than grass.

Von Teschen's army moved north in late autumn, when rain had turned to wet snow and the roads had become black mire that swallowed wagon wheels almost to the hubs.

The first real clash came at a ford across a nameless stream, where an enemy party tried to intercept a supply train.

The fight was short, vicious, and chaotic — not the magnificent battle Konrad had once described beside the hearth, but a confusion of shouts, freezing water, and blows delivered almost blindly in the gathering dusk.

Gavel killed his first man that day.

It was not in a fair duel. He struck upward without looking when an enemy rider slipped on the wet stones and tried to spear him.

The man's body was carried away by the current before the fight ended.

Gavel never saw his face.

That night Bohuslav sat beside him at the fire, unsuccessfully trying to dry the same wet footcloth over the flames.

«Hard?» he asked without looking at Gavel.

«I don't know,» Gavel answered honestly. «I expected it to be harder.»

«Then you were lucky.»

Bohuslav shrugged with the easy indifference to death possessed only by those who had not yet met it closely.

«Maybe it will catch up with you. It happens differently to everyone.»

Many of the men who had ridden from home beside Gavel did not survive the first month. Some fell to enemy steel. Others died of fever from wounds that should have been treated but were not.

One of the two men-at-arms from Waldeck, an old cripple named Yaroslav Kulkhavy, died three weeks after the ford from a festering wound in his thigh. At first it had looked harmless. Then the flesh blackened and swelled.

Gavel spent the man's final night beside him, listening to the fevered talk of a home and a wife who had been dead for ten years but whom the dying man called as though she were standing beside him.

The bridge at Stag Ford

It was during those first weeks, while the memory of the ford was still fresh, that Gavel learned a lesson he would later value more than any lesson in swordsmanship.

His small company — Gavel, Bohuslav, Indřich, and seven other inexperienced young men — was ordered to hold a narrow wooden bridge over a nameless tributary until the main army had passed toward a more important crossing.

The duty was supposed to be simple.

They were to remain hidden behind freshly thrown branches, let an enemy patrol pass if one appeared, and under no circumstances begin a fight without necessity.

The order came from Držimal, a seasoned soldier who rode away to inspect the neighboring post.

Gavel was left in command.

When an enemy patrol appeared on the opposite bank, Gavel felt the familiar impatience already awakening in his chest.

Six riders.

Tired.

Careless.

Clearly not expecting anyone.

Six against ten, and with the advantage of surprise from the bridge.

The superiority seemed so obvious that he could not imagine why they should not use it.

He did not think that the advantage meant one thing to him and something entirely different to the nine young men beside him, who possessed neither his strength nor his extraordinary luck.

«Now,» he said. «Before they see us. We take them before they can raise the alarm.»

Indřich hesitated. The order had clearly forbidden such a fight.

But Gavel insisted.

His recent reputation as the hero of the ford made his confidence persuasive.

The ten crossed the bridge before the patrol realized they were there.

The fight became nothing like Gavel had imagined.

The six riders were not careless travelers. They were the advance guard of a much larger force camped less than a quarter mile down the road.

The noise of the clash brought reinforcements.

The enemy soon outnumbered Gavel's little band two to one, then three to one.

Gavel fought as he always had since the night at the ford — without feeling fatigue where any ordinary man should have felt it.

But this time his strength could not protect everyone.

Držimal returned to the post at dusk and found not a quiet bridge, but three fresh graves and a company missing three men.

He did not shout.

He simply stared at Gavel for a long time.

«You're alive because, apparently, the Devil himself protects you, boy. They were protected only by the order you chose not to obey.»

Gavel had no answer.

Standing above the fresh earth covering Ginek, he finally understood what neither Jost's training nor his father's lessons had taught him completely:

The strength inside his own body was a measure for him alone.

It was not a measure for the men fighting beside him.

He could afford risks for which others paid with their lives.

That night, for the first time during the campaign, Gavel could not sleep — not because of pain or the hunger in his chest, but because of something much simpler and much more human.

Bohuslav, the only man willing to speak to him beside the dying fire, neither comforted nor blamed him.

«Držimal was only half right,» he said quietly. «It isn't the Devil protecting you. But neither is an order the only thing protecting the rest of us.

You know something now that you didn't know yesterday.

Many men die without ever learning it.»

From that day onward Gavel never again confused his own invulnerability with the safety of those who fought beside him.

Years later, when he commanded not ten men but entire companies, he would first ask not what he himself could endure, but what ordinary men under his command could survive.

He would never again send men into an assault merely because he could survive it himself.

By midwinter von Teschen's army went into winter quarters in a ruined border town whose name Gavel never properly remembered. Too many such towns looked alike: half-collapsed palisades, burned roofs, and inhabitants who watched a foreign army with the peculiar mixture of fear and exhausted submission.

For the first time in months, Gavel had enough time not merely to fight and survive, but to think.

He wrote to his father twice that winter — short letters dictated to a military clerk because Gavel's own writing remained uncertain and his sword-weary hands did not obey the pen well.

No answer came.

He assumed the letters had been lost. Wartime correspondence was unreliable.

He did not know the truth.

Spring brought the war back in full force.

There were marches, skirmishes over crossings, and a siege of a small border fortress that lasted two miserable months of hunger, lice, and rain.

Gavel took part in three assaults.

During the last, when the walls finally fell, he commanded a small group of young warriors rather than fighting only for himself.

Von Teschen had begun to notice something besides the young man's strength.

He noticed his calm.

«You are no madman,» the old knight told him after one battle, wiping his blade on the edge of a dead man's cloak.

«You are not a boy charging forward for the sake of a minstrel's song.

That is rare.

There may be something in you after all.»

Thus passed Gavel's first year of war.

He had left Waldeck a beardless young man.

He returned from that year as a warrior whose name was beginning to travel beyond his own small company.

The real fame — and with it the real danger — was still ahead.

The Night Visitor

The first attempt on his life came a year later, in a frontier camp, on the night after a brief lull in the fighting. The camp stood on the bank of a shallow, stony river among scattered pines, its rough canvas tents smelling of smoke and sweat and crowded in rows along a hastily dug ditch.

Gavel woke not to a sound, but to a shadow — to the slight disturbance of air above his face, caught by senses far sharper than any ordinary man's a heartbeat before the blow. He rolled aside, and the dagger aimed at his throat tore only through the edge of the bedroll stuffed with dry grass.

The struggle was brief and filthy, fought in the darkness of the tent among tangled straps and overturned campware: a metal cup, a wooden bowl, a saddlebag. Gavel overcame the attacker with

his bare hands, breaking his wrist and pinning him to the ground with a knee before his companions came running with torches.

The assassin was a wiry man dressed in plain dark clothes without any identifying mark. They questioned him until dawn. He was tough and silent, but not tough enough to withstand everything men experienced in questioning prisoners knew how to do to a man whose attempt had nearly killed a noble knight. Near morning he gave the name of an intermediary — a merchant known for doing business with church landholders — and then, before he could say more, he suddenly sagged and died without regaining consciousness, as though something inside him had simply snapped.

Gavel stood over the body for a long time, unable to decide what disturbed him more: the attempt itself, or the ease with which someone's will had reached even into the interrogation pit to silence a hired killer.

He had no time to solve the mystery. Three days later, a letter arrived that changed everything.

A House Without a Master

The messenger found him after a short truce — a weary man covered in road dust, wearing a battered cloak bearing the arms of the local judge. The news was dry, almost burned into the paper: Sir Konrad von Waldeck had died, and all his property — lands, castle, livestock, servants — was to pass into the possession of the Church under a deed of gift he had drawn up himself.

The first thing Gavel felt was not grief, but shock: an inner silence, as though the world around him had stopped making a sound. He read the deed three times, tracing the lines with one finger as though the letters might rearrange themselves into something else if he looked again. The messenger, receiving neither question nor answer, shifted awkwardly and cleared his throat, saying he would carry back a reply if there was one. Gavel said nothing. He stared at the judge's seal at the bottom of the page as though that lump of wax were the only thing left of his father.

Grief came later, in the saddle, two hours into the journey home. It came suddenly and whole, crashing over him so hard that he nearly dropped the reins. He remembered not his father's final years, when the man had seemed dimmed and withdrawn, but the years before: a warm hand on his shoulder after his first successful sword stroke, the smell of smoke and wine clinging to his father's cloak when he was a child, the voice that had read aloud a story about a hero who fought a serpent to save a maiden.

He remembered that, as a boy, he had feared only one thing: that his father might fail to come and wish him good night. Now his father would never come again, and the simple finality of that thought stopped Gavel's breath as sharply as a blow beneath the ribs.

He begged his commander for a short leave and rode home for three days without stopping, changing horses at every posting inn and allowing himself no more sleep than horse and rider required to keep from collapsing. The road wound through forests already turning yellow, past villages where children shrank back against fences at the sight of a rider hurrying along in a travel cloak. With every mile, the heavy, inexplicable dread in Gavel's chest grew thicker.

He saw the castle from a distance — and did not recognize it. The gates stood wide open, something he had never seen even in broad daylight. The granaries gaped empty, as though they had been gutted from within. In the courtyard, where training swords had once rung, strangers in dark ecclesiastical robes moved about methodically, recording what remained of the household's possessions on wax tablets for removal.

There were at least a dozen of them — scribes and servants of the bishop's chancery in plain robes. At their head, seated in the middle of the yard on a carved stool apparently brought from the lord's hall, sat a man Gavel had never seen. He was middle-aged and heavy, clean-shaven, with a ring on one plump hand. He later introduced himself as Brother Gunther, the diocesan steward, sent to «put in order and take possession of the lands bequeathed to Holy Mother Church by the late Sir Konrad von Waldeck of his own free will and for the salvation of his soul.» Beside him stood a younger scribe reading aloud an inventory: «family shield, darkened, one; mail shirt, old and repaired,

one; swords, two, one blunt and unserviceable; chest of linens, one; empty chest...» His voice was flat and bored, as though he were reading an ordinary market register rather than the last possessions of another man's life.

Gavel dismounted at the gate and walked slowly into the yard. The first thing he felt was not yet rage, but the same numbness that had seized him when he read the judge's letter. It did not last long.

«What is happening here?»

His voice was quieter than he intended, but in the silence it carried across the whole courtyard.

Brother Gunther looked up without surprise, as though he had been expecting the young Waldeck and had prepared himself for the meeting.

«Ah,» he said with the particular polite boredom of a well-fed man speaking to someone whose grief could not touch him. «So you are the young Waldeck. We are taking an inventory of property transferred to the Church under the lawful deed of your late father. Everything is being done according to the rules, young man. You need not worry.»

«This is my father's house.» Gavel did not move, but steel had entered his voice. «My house.»

«It was your father's house,» one of the scribes corrected mildly without raising his eyes from the tablet. «It is now, according to the deed signed and sealed by Sir Konrad himself before witnesses, the property of the diocese.»

«Show me the deed.»

Brother Gunther sighed like a man for whom such scenes had long ago become an exhausting but unavoidable part of his work, and waved to the younger scribe. The man handed over the scroll. Gavel unrolled it with fingers trembling from restrained fury and saw his father's signature, uneven and hurried, nothing like the firm hand with which Konrad had once signed household accounts.

«This is not his hand,» Gavel said quietly, though somewhere inside he already knew he was wrong. The writing had been distorted not by forgery, but by illness — the trembling that had seized his father during his final, terrible days.

«Witnesses will confirm the signature in any ecclesiastical court, young man,» Brother Gunther said, rising from his stool and brushing his robes. «I would not advise you to challenge the will of the dead, particularly when the deed was made for the salvation of his soul. A pious and commendable act. Many sons in your position would be grateful that their father cared for his fate in the next world rather than leaving everything to worldly disputes.»

«Pious,» Gavel repeated. Something in his voice made the nearest scribes glance up. «You call this pious? Taking inventory of a dead man's last shirt while his son has not even learned where his body was buried?»

Something shifted in the courtyard. The scribes exchanged looks. Someone looked away. For the first time Brother Gunther did not answer at once, choosing his words more carefully.

«You should ask the parish priest about the burial,» he said at last. There was a note in his voice Gavel could not yet fully identify — something between discomfort and warning.

Gavel stepped forward, and his hand settled of its own accord on the hilt of his sword — not yet to strike, but plainly enough that the two armed servants accompanying the Church commission shifted their halberds into a more ready grip.

«Young master,» came a familiar voice behind him. «Not here. Not like this.»

The Steward's Truth

Old Mirek, the village headman, was a man of about sixty, his face cut by wrinkles and his hands hardened by fieldwork. He was the only one who recognized Gavel without looking away. He drew the young man aside, beyond the hearing of the strangers, around the corner of the empty stable, gripping his elbow almost painfully until they were far enough from the Church men.

«Don't give them a reason,» he whispered urgently. «Not here. Here they have the law and the deed. You have only a sword and anger, and that is not enough against the Church. Believe an old man.»

«Mirek,» Gavel said, forcing his voice lower, «where is my father? Where did they bury him?»

Mirek was silent for a long time, twisting an old hare-fur cap in his hands. The silence told Gavel more than any answer could have.

«Your father...» Mirek began at last, struggling for the words. «In the final month he lost his reason almost completely. Every day he went to Father Oswald, and later he began going to the square as well. He shouted that Satan himself had tempted him in the Holy Land, that an evil spirit had entered him through some pagan temple and had never let him go. And then — forgive me, master — he said the same mark was upon you. That the Devil had marked you too, through his blood.»

Gavel stood motionless, as though all the air had been drained from him. He heard the headman's words, but they reached him as though through deep water — distant, muffled, stripped of the sharpness they should have carried.

«To save your soul, that is what he said publicly, he gave everything he owned to the Church. He signed the deed before witnesses. And then...»

Mirek stopped. He did not need to finish. Gavel could already see the answer in his face.

«Tell me,» Gavel forced out. His voice sounded strange, as though someone else were speaking through his mouth. «Tell me everything, Mirek. I have to know.»

«He drove a sword into his own chest. In front of everyone. They took the body from the square before noon.»

Mirek crossed himself before continuing, as though the words themselves might bring danger upon him.

«Father Oswald refused him a Christian burial. A suicide, he said. The Devil had touched him, and such a man could not be laid in consecrated ground. They took the body beyond the town wall, past the old ditch where they bury hangmen's victims and unbaptized infants. No service. No cross. No stone to remember him by.»

Something happened inside Gavel then — not like a blow, but like a collapse, slow and irreversible, as though the ground beneath his whole life had opened.

He understood with terrifying clarity that he could not visit his father's grave, because in the ordinary sense there was no grave. He could not order a memorial service, because no priest in the district would pray for a soul declared damned. He could not even set up a simple wooden cross, because that nameless ditch beyond the wall was meant to accept nothing but oblivion.

He remembered all the years his father had knelt in the little wooden church, moving his lips in the silent confession he had never been able to finish. Now Gavel understood what that confession had been about. He understood the burden his father had carried alone for two decades — and how, in the end, that burden had crushed him, while the Church, instead of offering comfort, answered with a refusal even to grant him a final resting place.

«The lands belong to the Church now, master,» Mirek continued more quietly. «Anyone who tried to object was branded a heretic. Two men were burned at the stake before your father's blood had even dried. Old Jost nearly suffered the same fate. He was the only one brave enough to call the deed extortion in public, but the whole garrison stood behind him, and the Churchmen did not dare challenge fifty armed men at once. They merely drove him beyond the gates without a penny.»

In those centuries, heresy was an astonishingly flexible weapon. It could be used not only against open dissent, but against the simple refusal to obey a powerful ecclesiastical landholder. Burning a condemned heretic was formally a matter for secular authorities under canon law — a distinction that offered little comfort to those who died at the stake.

Gavel remained silent, staring at the empty windows of the castle where his father had once told him stories of the Crusades and checked that the shutters were barred against the winter wind. He did not weep. Something warm and human inside him seemed to freeze forever in those minutes, giving way to something harder and colder.

He felt as though he stood on the edge of an abyss. He could fall into despair, madness, into the same oblivion to which the Church had already consigned his father by denying him even the right to be remembered. The only thing holding him back was neither faith nor hope, but a blunt, animal stubbornness — the strength that Jost had once said came not from training, but from somewhere deeper inside.

«What am I supposed to do now, Mirek?» he asked at last, not so much of the headman as of the emptiness around them.

«Run, master. Run east, to distant lands where the Church's hand is short. Or become stronger than it. But in all my years, I have never seen a man do that.»

Gavel stared for a long time at the ruined courtyard — the strangers in robes methodically finishing their inventory, Brother Gunther settling again onto the carved stool with the air of a man whose day was nearly done and who had only to seal the papers.

Something in Gavel's gaze froze at last into something hard as his father's blade, tempered in cold water.

«To run would mean admitting they are right,» he said quietly. «That my father truly was cursed. That his blood bears the Devil's mark, rather than the blood of a man who carried too heavy a secret for too long. I will not run, Mirek. I will not give them that victory as well — not after the house, not after his final resting place.»

Gavel gave a tired smile without humor.

«Then I will be the first man who proved stronger.»

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