

Pain!

That's what I feel—a dull, throbbing pain that throbs in my temples like a drum beaten by unseen hands. I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids are as heavy as the stone slabs on the ancient tombs of my ancestors. Finally I succeed, and the pale light that seeps through the bars burns my retinas.

The air smells of mold, hot iron, and dried sweat.

What happened? I'm trying to remember... I look around. Grace, a prison cell?

I try to get up. Dizziness hits me hard but I don't give in to it. I slowly get up and look around. I'm not in a cell, now I remember...

I was with my father, looking out at the sunset for rabbit traps. The wind smelled of rain, the leaves rustled under our feet, and somewhere far away, an owl hooted. Then, in the clearing, I saw them. A group of armed men, strangers, around a chariot with thick wheels, drawn by two pitch-black horses. On the chariot, an iron cage, like a giant cage. And then I understood: slave hunters.

I didn't have time to run away. A sudden blow, a white flash to the right side of my head — and the world collapsed into nothingness.

Oh, no... How will I escape this cursed place? My thoughts snap like branches in a storm. I must escape! I must warn the villagers—the hunters have never dared to come so close to the village before. What if one of my own is caught? Dad? Mom?... Nooo! A silent cry breaks in my chest, like thin glass under the weight of the wind.

Panic grips me. I pull hard on the cold bars of the cage, trying to break the iron with my bare hands. The metal cuts my skin, the blood burns my fingers, but I don't stop.

"It's in vain," the voice comes from the darkness, soft and deep. Conserve your strength. You'll need it."

I stop abruptly. My heart jumps in my chest. Someone is in the cage next to me. How come I haven't felt it before?

I turn my gaze to the corner where the voice came from. The weak flame of the torch outside caresses the face of a young man. His hair is golden, shoulder-length, and his eyes are clear, a deep blue, like the cloudless summer sky. But... something darkens in them. Pain. A shadow of suffering hides behind that serene gaze, and his pale face bears it like an old wound.

I recognize that look. My mother, the one who heals everyone in the village, has shown me the same face so many times—the face of a man who endures pain without asking for comfort.

I look him up and down. Yes, the wound is there: his right shoulder. It goes lower than his left, and his arm lies motionless, resting on his knee.

"You're hurt," I say with certainty.

The young man looks at me briefly, then looks over his shoulder.

"That's right," he says, without bitterness, just with silent resignation.

I follow the thin stream of blood that flows from his wound. It flows slowly but steadily, gathering near him in a vivid red stain that spreads across the cold floor like a dark flower. The salty smell of blood fills the air, mixing with the stench of the cage and the smoke from the flickering torches outside.

And yet, in the stranger's eyes, where pain meets light, a glimmer of life slips through. A spark.

"No!" I scream inside my mind, but the voice doesn't leave my lips. The instinct, that deeply planted by my mother's hands during the days of practice in the small treatment room at home, rises from the depths like a flame that won't die. I quickly approach the man, but he retreats, like a wounded animal afraid of being touched.

"Wait! I don't want to hurt you. You've lost a lot of blood... if we don't treat the wound, you'll die," I say, and the words burn my throat, like a prayer said too late.

His gaze darkened.

"I know," he says with difficulty. "Perhaps it is better for me to die than to bear the yoke of slavery."

"No," I say, my voice trembling between hope and madness. "We'll get out of here! But now, let me see the wound."

His sigh is deep, almost a stone groan. He lets his body lean forward, his shoulder opening in the reddish light of the torch, and I see the wound. I carefully untie his tunic, stained with clotted blood and dust. The fabric sticks to the flesh, and when it comes off, it leaves a dark mark, like a wound within a wound.

The blood is warm, still alive. Its smell hits me—metallic, bitter, mixed with the cold dampness of the prison. I uncover his shoulder: there, in the flesh, an arrow has been driven in. The tip has been broken off, and the flesh is blackened, the edge swollen.

I tense my fingers. I need to know if any pieces of wood are left. As my mother taught me, I touch the wound carefully, searching with the tip of my fingernail for the place where the deepest pain lies.

The man closes his eyes tightly, his forehead furrows, but he makes no sound. Only his breath breaks in his chest, like a wave against a rock. The torchlight plays on his skin, enveloping his body in a glow of copper and suffering.

The air in the cage becomes thick, almost unbreathable. Inside me, two voices fight: fear and urge. I touch the wound again, deeper this time, and the blood bursts out, red, alive, warm.

I look into his eyes—those eyes of troubled sky, where pain and life still burn together—and for a moment I forget the chains, I forget death. Only the need to heal remains, to not let a man's blood be wasted.

I wipe the blood away with a piece of cloth torn from my shirt. The fabric soaks quickly, and the red color spreads, warm and vivid, over my fingers. The smell of blood mixes with the rusted iron of the cage, with the smoke of the torches flickering beyond the bars.

I tear off another piece of cloth, twist it between my hands, and tie it tightly around the wound. The bandage tightens, the blood stops, and his skin shivers under my touch.

"The wound isn't too deep," I say with a hint of hope in my voice. "I think it'll be fine... if I take care of it for a few days." The words escape me in a whisper, but they contain all the relief in the world.

Slowly, the man opens his eyes. The torchlight reflects on the tears gathering on his eyelashes. His face, white as wax, relaxes for a moment, and a silent gratitude is read in his gaze.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to make you suffer."

"I know... Thank you," he replies slowly.

He raises his left hand and moves it to the wound, touching the bandaged cloth where the warmth of blood still flickers. The gesture is simple, but full of a nobility that no bondage can take away.

All around us, fires crackle and the shadows of hunters move beyond the cage, but for a moment, everything seems to stop. Only two breaths can be heard in the darkness—mine and his—and between them, an unspoken covenant, born of suffering and silence.

"My name is Zyraxes. They shot me with an arrow coated with a sleeping potion. That's how they captured me."

- My name is...

I have barely uttered it, when an angry cry strikes through the night, like a blow from a club.

"Quiet there, I'm trying to sleep!" the voice roars.

From the shadows of the camp rises a deep voice, full of debauchery and cruelty:

— Abraxas! Are the prisoners awake? How good! I say let's have some fun with them. Especially the blond one. He has a stubbornness that must be defeated before we get to the mine. We don't want him to cause us any trouble.

Another voice, more sparkling, responds eagerly:

"That's right, Duras! Bring him to the middle of the camp so we can have some fun. Better bring them both so they know what awaits them."

The torches sparkle brighter at the command. The chains rattle. All around, the hunters' laughter begins to rise, like a black cloud surrounding us. Zyraxes and I look at each other—he with his eyes still wet with pain, I with my heart clenched with terror—and I know that all we can do is stifle our fear and prepare for what comes next.

The one called Abraxas rises from the shadows of the fire—a tall man, broad-shouldered and tense-armed, his skin gleaming in the torchlight, furrowed by old battle scars. A raw lust burns in his eyes, a soulless light. He approaches the cage and, without a word, pulls the heavy latch. The iron creaks, echoing in the night.

Behind him come two others, equally sturdy. Their hands carry chains and ropes, and the smell of wine and sweat precedes their steps.

Without a word of warning, Abraxas grabs my arm with a sudden force and pulls me outside. The cold night air cuts my face, and my bare feet hit the hard ground. He throws me into the arms of one of his companions, a man with bleary eyes and a thick beard, who, without hesitation, ties my hands behind my back.

The rope tightens mercilessly, digging into the thin skin of my wrists until I feel the blood running warm through my fingers. The pain shoots up my arm, sharp, burning. I can't stop a groan—short, torn from deep in my chest.

Duras, the other one, doesn't wait a moment. He grabs Zyraxes by the shoulder and yanks him out of the cage. The blood under the bandage pours out again, and his face contorts in pain, but he says nothing. His hands are tied too, tightly, mercilessly.

They drag us both into the middle of the camp. The ground is cold, trampled by footsteps, covered with ashes and wet straw. Around them, about fifteen people have gathered in a circle. Torches burn in their hands, the flames play on their rough faces, and the shadows break and merge on the ground.

In the center of the circle rises a thick wooden pole, black with soot, driven deep into the ground. Beneath it, embers smolder, ready.

Abraxas runs his tongue over his lips, smiling briefly, with dark pleasure.

"Undress him!" he orders, his voice harsh, like the blow of a hammer.

He strips Zyraxes to the waist; the evening air cuts sharply across his sweat-drenched skin, making him shiver like a leaf in the cold. When his back is turned to me, I see the marks—red, swollen streaks, old whip marks that still gleam in the torchlight. He's been beaten before.

"No!" I say to myself without a voice - I can't let him do this. His back is already broken; I won't stand like this! I must stop them."

I turn him back around, facing the circle. Zyraxes looks at Abraxas with a look that knows no departure: defiance, harsher than fear.

“I will defeat you, slave!” Abraxas shouted, his voice sharp as iron. Then he motioned to his men; two of them grabbed him and tied his hands to the chains hammered into the pillar, so that he could only move by their will.

— Never! Zyraxes replies. At the same moment, it's as if he reads my mind: he turns his head towards me, his eyes meet mine, and he shakes his head, a silent denial — stay out of it. Let them punish him.

But I can't do it... He's too hurt. He won't be able to endure much longer if he's tortured mercilessly.

Abraxas approaches slowly, a dark satisfaction in his eyes. In his hand a whip with three straps gleams in the firelight, and at the end of each hang iron balls, full of short spikes. The sound they make when he moves them is like the hiss of a snake. A cold shiver runs down my spine.

I fear for Zyraxes. That whip doesn't just cut the skin—it tears, it tears, it crushes. The pain will be unbearable.

Abraxas raises his arm. The air cuts with a hiss, and the first blow lands on the prisoner's bare back. The sound is dry, sharp, like an iron slap on living flesh. Zyraxes arches under the blow, a gasp escapes through his teeth, but he doesn't scream.

The second one follows. This time he clenches his fists, his muscles stretch like ropes, and his gaze remains on the ground. He resists. He doesn't want to give her the joy of a cry.

Angry that he doesn't see it broken, Abraxas tenses his arm and strikes again, three times in a row, not giving it time to breathe. Each slap echoes in the night and crashes against the surrounding rocks, until it seems like the entire valley is screaming in pain.

Blood runs down his back in thin, dark streams, trickles over his ribs, and pools in the reddish powder at his feet. His body shakes with spasms, and his breath comes in ragged, deep, heavy sighs.

I look at him and I feel something break inside me. It's not just pity, it's a pain that pierces and burns me. My heart breaks watching him struggle to breathe, how he won't give in.

But what can I do? The chains bite my wrists, the guard laughs, the fires crackle, and he is just a shadow tied to the pillar, whipped by my helplessness.

When I see the whip rising again, ready to strike, I don't think twice. I throw myself forward, body over body, clinging as tightly as I can to the one tied to the pole, so that my skin will be his shield. I feel his breath breaking beneath me, his heart beating wildly, but I don't move.

Behind me, Abraxas bursts into laughter—a thick, inhuman sound. There is the hiss of the whip, and a moment later flames seem to burn my back. The fire spreads through all my limbs, a living fire that bites and does not go out.

A second blow falls, my body shakes from its foundations, and the air fills with bright white light, as if the entire sky had exploded before my eyes.

I have never known such pain. The thorns of the whip tear my shirt and go deep into my flesh; I feel the warm blood running in streams down my spine, down to my waist. Every breath is a wound.

Another blow, then another, swift, cruel. The air goes out of my lungs, my chest tightens, the world spins. I tremble, I want to scream, but I have no voice, no breath.

The torchlight trickles down the edge of my vision and melts into a formless abyss. The earth spins, the noises recede, and darkness embraces me, gentle as a cold hand.

I don't feel anything anymore.

Slowly, I open my eyes. At first there is only darkness and a deep ringing in my ears, then the world begins to take shape. The air smells of rotted earth and smoke.

"Where am I?" the thought echoes in my head, as if someone else had spoken it for me.

At first, I don't remember anything. Everything is steam and cold. But slowly, memories rise like shadows: the hunters, the cage, Abraxas, the torments, Zyraxes...

Oh, no—Zyraxes!

I stand up suddenly. A sharp dizziness hits my temples; I see the world shaking. I close my eyes and wait, holding my breath until the wind in my head dies down. After a while, my vision clears, and the cold air cuts my cheeks.

I look around: I'm still in the cage in the chariot. The wood creaks beneath me, the chains hang, beyond the bars, the sky is still shrouded in night, but to the east a pale streak lights up—the first rays of the sun struggling to break through the mist. That cold light trickles across the ground, over the bars, and then I see it: a golden glow in the far corner of the cage.

I crawl there, my heart pounding, and as I get closer, the light reveals itself to be Zyraxes' hair, caught in the early rays of dawn.

"Zyraxes!" I whisper, barely daring to break the silence. I touch his shoulder, then shake him gently.

"Zyraxes... wake up, please..."

The man lets out a muffled moan, like a sob lost in sleep, but he doesn't wake up. His breathing is heavy, ragged, and his chest rises spasmodically under the dirty fabric.

A shiver of fear runs through me. What if they hurt him worse, after I lost consciousness? What if he didn't survive the torture?

I bite my lips and lean over him. With trembling hands, I begin to search for his unseen wounds, the marks that the darkness hides. The pale morning light penetrates through the bars and plays on his skin, making the clotted blood shine slightly.

I calm down a little when I see that the wound on my shoulder is the only one still bleeding. Carefully, I take a small bucket from the corner of the cage — the water in it is cloudy, with a faint smell of rust. It's all I have. I sigh. It's not clean... but it's water.

With the corner of a torn piece of cloth from my shirt, I clean the dried blood. The water turns red to the touch. My hands tremble, but I don't stop. I wipe his wound gently, so as not to open it again.

I sigh again, almost voiceless. It could get infected... but I can't help it.

I turn him over carefully, without pressing on the wound on his shoulder, and lay him face down. His tunic, torn and dirty, falls down his back, exposing his skin. His body twitches slightly at my touch, then shivers in the cool morning breeze.

Involuntarily, I raise my hand to my mouth. A cold shiver runs through my body as I see the marks of the whip—Zyraxes' skin is torn, torn in wide strips, and the red flesh throbs in the harsh morning light. The thorns of that cursed whip have torn out whole pieces, leaving deep furrows behind, from which blood still flows, slowly, like tears of wounded earth.

Carefully, I take a piece of cloth torn from my shirt and dip it in the bucket of water. The cold liquid stings my fingers, but I don't dare hesitate. I begin to clean the wounds, one by one, with trembling touches, afraid of deepening his suffering.

Zyraxes moans softly, a deep, almost animalistic sound, and instinctively pulls away, trying to escape the pain of the water. His muscles tense under his skin, his breath hitches.

"Sshh... it's okay," I say softly, without stopping moving. My voice is soft, barely a whisper.

"I won't hurt you. I just want to clean the wounds. If I don't, they might get infected."

He turns his head slightly towards me; his eyes, deep and troubled, look at me for a moment. In that look gathers everything he cannot express: pain, gratitude, helplessness. Then he leaves his forehead back, leaning against the log on which he was resting, and calms down.

For a while, the silence is filled only with the rustle of the canvas and the drops falling on the wooden floor of the cage. I clean the cuts until his skin stops bleeding.

When I'm done, I tear off a piece of a dirty blanket I found in a corner of the cage and tear it into wide strips. I wrap them tightly around his back, tying the knots carefully so they don't hurt him. The cloth quickly stains with blood, but the wounds are covered.

The morning light falls on him now, pale and trembling. In that silence, in the midst of suffering, I realize that I have forgotten fear. Only one burning thought remains: to keep him alive.

After I finish bandaging my wounds, I slowly lower myself onto the rough floor of the cage, my back resting against the cold bars. The moldy wood and rusty iron press against my bones. I startle suddenly—a stabbing pain shoots through my back, burning like a flame under my skin. Then I remember: the beating of last night, the whip, the fire that tore through my flesh.

I try to move my shoulders, but every movement is a new punishment. I sigh softly, knowing that there's nothing I can do; the wounds are on my back, where I can't reach, and they can't be cleaned.

I lean my head back and close my eyes. In the darkness of my eyelids, thoughts rise: A day has passed... just a day, since the hunters caught me.

I imagine my mother's face—her tired hands, her eyes full of care. Maybe she's looking for me now, maybe she's crying, thinking I'm lost. My father... he's probably roaming the woods, looking for tracks, calling my name in the wind.

I open my eyes. Beyond the bars, the sun rises slowly in the blue sky, bathing the earth in a warm, gentle light. The smell of morning mingles with the damp steam of the plain. I look at that light and it feels foreign, as if it were a memory from another life.

Will I ever feel the sun on my face again?

Will I ever hear my mother's voice again, gentle and warm, as she caressed my forehead, thinking I was sleeping?

A bitter lump rises in my throat. I know the answer. There is no going back.

The mine awaits me—cold, dark, endless.

Endless hours of hard work, darkness and chains, where the sun doesn't even shine in a dream.

— Wake up!

Abraxas' voice breaks the silence of the morning. I jerk myself from my half-sleep, and the wood of the cage creaks under my movement. I see him rising from the middle of the camp, massive, a shadow among the pale flames of the barely flickering fire. He wakes his men with a commanding voice, and the clank of chains, the clatter of horses, and the clank of armor fill the air.

Soon we will be on the road again. I wonder, silently, how many days separate us from that cursed place, from the mine that everyone speaks of in whispers, as if it were the mouth of hell.

In the camp, the hunters move slowly, but with the skill of those who have lived a life in chains and dust. They gather blankets, tie them to the saddles of the horses, prepare the cart. Some laugh, others spit on the ground. The fire is rekindled, and soon the smell of dried meat and warmed bread spreads through the tents.

The morning air carries the steam of that simple feast, and my stomach tightens with an aching emptiness. I haven't eaten anything since the evening I set the traps with my father... My mouth goes dry.

As if reading my thoughts, Abraxas approaches the cage. He holds a piece of steaming, fatty meat in his hand, smelling of smoke and salt. The firelight plays on the blade of the knife at his belt, and a brief, mocking smile plays on his lips.

"Are you hungry?" he asks, approaching the bars.

I meet his gaze without saying a word. I taste iron on my tongue, I clench my teeth so hard.

Abraxas laughs briefly, without joy.

"You will receive neither food nor water this morning," he says with cold pleasure.

— It's your punishment for what you did last night.

He comes closer, and his breath smells of wine and smoke.

"It was his punishment, not yours. You shouldn't have intervened."

I let the words pass by my ears, but I feel a bitter heat building inside me, a silent fire that neither hunger nor the whip can quench. There is no fear in me anymore. Only determination.

Laughing at the greed of a man who feeds on another's suffering, Abraxas turns to the fire, where the other hunters are sharing meat and bread. Their sounds—rough chewing, laughter, the clink of pots—mingle with the crackling of embers. The smell of burning fat and warm bread wafts through the bars, tempting and raw, a mockery of my empty stomach.

Beside me, Zyraxes grunts softly. He turns his head, half-opens his eyes, and tries to get up, but his body buckles under the weight of the pain. I rush to support him, putting my arm under his.

"I'm sorry..." I whisper, my voice sounding like a sigh.

He blinks slowly, puzzled.

- For what?

I look at him helplessly.

"Now they won't give us any food... or water. And you need it."

A tired but serene expression spreads across his face. A faint smile touches the corner of his lips.

"It's okay," he says quietly. "They'll have to feed us, sooner or later. They can't let us starve. They need us... in good condition to work in the mine."

Zyraxes looks around, blinking rapidly, as if the morning light is blinding him after the long night of torment. He moves his shoulders slightly, then his arms, and seems surprised that the pain doesn't tear through him as he expected. A faint smile forms at the corner of his mouth, a sliver of calm after the storm.

"You took care of my wounds..." he says softly, his voice trembling like a wisp of wind.

"Thank you."

He shifts his body a little harder, trying to find a more comfortable position. At that moment, his movement causes my back to rub against the cold bars of the cage. The pain bursts out in a flash, searing, and before I can control my body, a short moan escapes my chest.

Zyraxes stops immediately. He turns to me, his pale blue eyes filled with concern.

— I'm sorry... I forgot about your injuries.

He approaches slowly, raising his hand to push aside my torn shirt, wanting to see how deep the cuts are. The gesture is gentle, almost sacred, but before the canvas rises, there is a loud sound—the signal to leave.

The horses neigh, the chariot wheels creak, and the whole procession moves. The bars shake, the ground vibrates under the wheels, and the chains tighten.

"We'll have to wait," I say in a low voice, pulling my shirt back over the wounds pulsing under the fabric.

As the cart crawls forward, the sun rises higher and higher in the sky, burning mercilessly across the fields and dusty roads. The air thickens, hot and oppressive, and there is no room to breathe in the cage.

I feel every breath of air burning my throat. My lips are cracking, my tongue is sticking to the roof of my mouth. Thirst has replaced every other pain—neither hunger nor wounds matter anymore. All that remains is the mad desire for a drop of water.

Beside me, Zyraxes also struggles with torment. His eyes, once clear as the sky, have darkened. His skin is pale, furrowed by the marks of the whip and fever. Every now and then, his lips move, uttering words that I can no longer make out. He loses strength with every moment—the loss of blood and the heat have completely exhausted him.

The chariot wheels creak, beating a cursed rhythm. Time melts into the white, shadowless light. I don't know how many hours pass before Abraxas raises his arm and gives the stop signal.

The horses neigh, and the chariot suddenly stops. I stagger, almost losing my balance. Everything spins around me, and the ground seems to move beneath me.

Zyraxes is already unconscious. His body slumps to one side, his head lightly hitting the floor of the cage. I bend over him, but my hands tremble, helpless. His breathing is weak, barely perceptible.

All around, the hunters have re-established their camp. The fire is rekindled, and the smell of roasting meat hangs in the air, mocking. Above, the sky is white and blinding, without a trace of cloud.

Abraxas approaches slowly, his gait heavy. In his thick hand he holds a leather bellows, from which you can clearly hear the water moving. He lifts it up a little, so I can see it, and the sun's rays play on the drops that drip down the edges.