

HOLLOW DEEP

THE ECHO OF THE DARK FOREST

PART I

K.J. ERAETS

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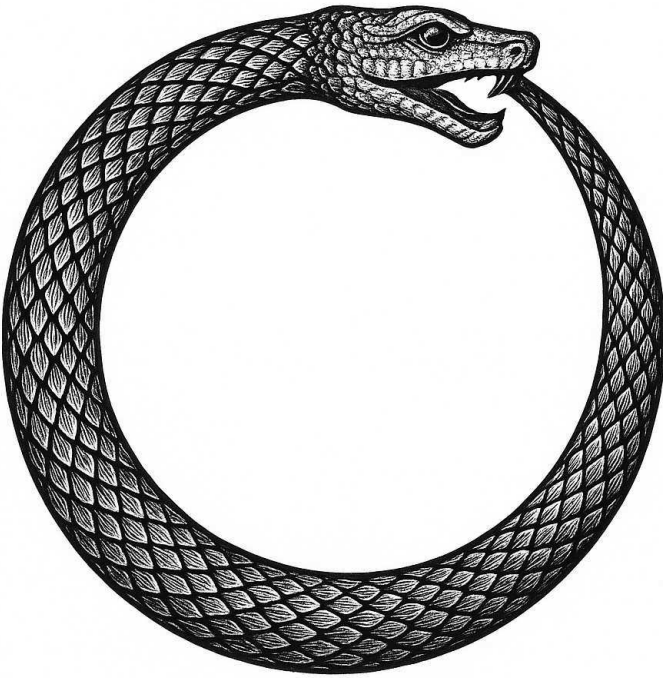
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Prologue

A cold wind drifted across the high northern sky, nudging a lone cloud before it like the memory of a severed dream. The moon hung full and sovereign above the land, silver and unblinking, its light draping the wilderness in pale reverence.

Below, the world slumbered — a barren expanse of stone and forest, untouched by the warmth of hearth or lamp. Granite peaks loomed in the distance, their crowns cloaked in snow, ancient and impassive, spearing upward as if to pierce the vault of heaven itself.

Between the folds of those mountains, forests of pine and spruce brooded in silence, interrupted only by a single thread of asphalt winding through their midst. A road — narrow, unwitnessed, and utterly alone.

Along that serpentine path, three obsidian Jaguar XJs flew like dark arrows loosed from a bow. Their headlights carved through shadow; their engines purred low, disciplined, coiled with purpose. No insignia marked them — only QR codes that caught the moonlight like corrupted algorithms, black and white like relics of a law no longer written.

They did not swerve. They did not slow.

Whoever commanded those wheels had no time for hesitation. No margin for error.

An hour passed in whispers and wind. The road began to rise, curling toward the mountain's ribs like a ribbon around a blade. There, carved into the rust-coloured stone, a tunnel yawned open — black-mouthed, unlit, swallowing all light that dared approach.

The cars vanished into its depths without pause.

In a nearby tree, an owl screeched once, sharp as a blade on whetstone. Far across the wooded slope, a black wolf raised its bloodied snout from fresh kill and answered with a single, guttural howl. Then silence returned to claim the Ukrainian forest.

No trace remained. Only wind, and the patient stars above.

Chapter 1: The Secret Cities

Before the screen. Before the files. Before the dark tide of memory and consequence that would sweep across nations like winter's final breath—there had been the silence of 4 AM, and the weight of truths that pressed against a man's soul like stones upon a grave.

Lars Ander lay in the suffocating embrace of a sleepless night, his body a prison of tension and unspoken fears. The sheets beneath him were damp with the sweat of nightmares half-remembered, visions that fled like shadows at the first touch of waking thought. Sleep—that gentle refuge of ordinary men—had abandoned him to the company of his own restless mind.

The darkness around him was not empty. It breathed with the pulse of the city beyond his windows, a living thing that fed on secrets and grew fat on the lies men told themselves when dawn was still hours away. In that darkness, Lars felt the familiar weight of knowledge pressing against his chest—knowledge that few men were meant to carry, and fewer still were strong enough to bear.

He had learned, in his years of service to causes both noble and necessary, that truth was a burden that grew heavier with each revelation. And tonight, the burden settled into his chest like old lead, heavy with the weight of things that could not be forgotten.

Without ceremony, without the ritual of complaint that lesser men might offer to the uncaring night, Lars rose. The sheets fell away like shed skin, and he stood naked in the amber glow that filtered through curtains drawn against a world that slept in blissful ignorance.

His apartment—third floor of a building that had seen better decades—was a fortress of solitude. Cracked tiles spoke of neglect. Humming pipes whispered of lives lived in quiet desperation. Through windows that needed cleaning, the city sprawled below like a circuit board etched in light and shadow. It was the kind of place where rent devoured half a man's earnings and neighbors practiced the sacred art of seeing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing.

Perfect for a man whose work required invisibility. Perfect, too, for a man whose dreams had begun featuring Marcus Holden's voice—not as it had been in life, patient and fatherly—but as it might sound now, asking questions Lars wasn't ready to answer.

In the fluorescent-lit tomb of his bathroom, Lars performed the morning ritual that had become as sacred as any prayer. The razor scraped against stubble with the precision of a craftsman's tool. The faucet sputtered its familiar complaint—a sound he had come to find oddly comforting in its predictability. A spider, black as the secrets he carried, moved across the mirror's surface with the confidence of a creature that knew its place in the world's hidden order.

He left it undisturbed. There was room enough in this world for all manner of quiet predators.

Breakfast was a simple communion: bread thick with orange marmalade—sweet enough to mask the bitter taste that seemed to coat everything these days—and coffee that had forgotten its origins but still carried the essential truth of caffeine. Outside, the sky hung like a promise of punishment, pregnant with heat that would turn the city into a furnace before the sun reached its zenith.

The laptop's weather widget confirmed what his bones already knew: the display claimed 40 degrees Celsius, no wind, no mercy. But something was wrong with the weather. The heat pulsed like an illusion, and by nightfall, it would snow. It had happened before, in years when the world made no sense. Smog would settle over the city like a shroud, and by afternoon, the air would shimmer with the weight of a million exhalations, a million small betrayals of the atmosphere that sustained them all.

But that was hours away. For now, there was only the ritual of departure.

Lars dressed with the methodical precision of a soldier preparing for battle. Each piece of clothing was armor against a world that had grown strange and dangerous in ways that most people couldn't begin to imagine. Keys jingled once—a small sound that seemed to echo with the weight of doors that, once opened, could never be closed again.

The stairwell descended into shadow, its concrete walls scarred with the graffiti of forgotten rebellions and the phone numbers of services that promised salvation for the price of a call. Flyers carpeted the floor like fallen leaves, each one a small lie designed to part fools from their money.

In the tomb-like silence of the underground garage, his wine-red Audi A5 waited with the patience of a faithful hound. The car was more than transportation—it was his chariot, his sanctuary, his escape route should the need arise. And increasingly, Lars suspected that need would come sooner than he wished.

The engine turned over with a purr that spoke of German engineering and careful maintenance. As the radio flickered to life, a woman's voice began the day's recitation of disasters in French so perfect it might have been crafted by angels. Wars in distant places. Markets rising and falling like the breath of sleeping giants. Natural disasters that were anything but natural.

The litany of a world coming apart at the seams, read in tones so calm they might have been discussing the weather.

The day had begun, as all days began in this new century—with lies wrapped in the comfortable fiction of normalcy.

The Sanctum

The basement of Interpol's General Secretariat in Lyon existed in perpetual twilight, a realm where artificial light waged slow war against shadows thick enough to remember. Here, in the bowels of an organization dedicated to international law enforcement, Lars Ander had carved out his own small kingdom of investigation and obsession.

The screen before him glowed with the pale luminescence of a shrine, casting his face in shifting patterns of blue and white. Around him, filing cabinets rose like monoliths, their metal surfaces scarred with the accumulated patina of decades. Each drawer contained fragments of truth—photographs, testimonies, reports that told stories no newspaper would ever print.

But it was the report on his screen that commanded his attention now, as it had for months. Not because it was new—he had memorized every word, every implication, every terrible possibility it suggested. But because today, something had shifted in the pattern. Today, the pieces of a vast and ancient puzzle had aligned themselves in a new configuration, one that made his blood run cold with understanding.

The story began, as all such stories must, in the shadow of apocalypse.

The Lost Scientists

In the years before the Great Patriotic War—before Hitler's legions crossed the frontier and the world learned the true meaning of industrial slaughter—the Soviet Union had begun preparing for the end of everything. Not just the end of wars or governments, but the end of the world as men understood it.

From the minds of planners who thought in terms of generations rather than election cycles, a vision had emerged: cities that existed outside the normal order of things. Not mere towns or settlements, but constructs of pure purpose, each one designed to serve the greater glory of the State with single-minded devotion.

They called them *naukograds*—Science Cities—though the name was a pale shadow of what they truly represented. These were sanctuaries for the brightest minds the Union could produce, fortress-monasteries where knowledge was both worshipped and weaponized.

The cities rose in the deep places of the earth, far from prying eyes and foreign satellites. Some nestled in the folds of the Ural Mountains, others claimed territories in the endless expanse of Siberia where winter ruled for eight months of the year and summer was merely a brief negotiation with spring. One was built in the Carpathians.

Akademgorodoks for pure research, where mathematicians and physicists pursued truth with the fervor of medieval monks copying scripture. Sealed citadels for weapons development, where engineers labored to birth new forms of death with the dedication of artists perfecting their craft.

These places had no true names—only postal codes and numbers that appeared on no public map. Mailbox 28. City 402. Designations that meant everything to those who lived behind the wire, and nothing to the world beyond.

Within their boundaries, a different order of reality prevailed. Marriage was not a matter of love but of genetic compatibility and shared expertise. Children learned mathematics before they learned to question, and questioning itself was a skill reserved for approved subjects. The streets were paved with silence, and loyalty was the only currency that mattered.

And yet—miracle of miracles—they flourished.

Behind barbed wire and guard towers, behind clearance levels and security protocols that would have impressed the pharaohs, human life adapted and thrived. Concert halls echoed with music that stirred the soul. Cinemas showed films that explored the human condition within carefully defined parameters. Theaters presented plays that asked the right questions and provided the approved answers.

The shops—blessed paradox—were better stocked than those in Moscow itself. The schools produced minds sharp enough to split atoms and hearts loyal enough to die for abstractions. Culture bloomed in the shadows, tended by hands that understood both its power and its proper place in the greater design.

For fifty years, this hidden archipelago of human ingenuity served its purpose with mechanical precision. Scientists married scientists and produced children who would themselves serve science. Knowledge flowed inward to the centers of power, and resources flowed outward to sustain the enclaves of genius.

It was, in its own terrible way, a form of perfection.

Then came 1991, and the world learned that perfection, like all human constructs, was ultimately fragile.

The Collapse

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was not a collapse—it was an implosion. One moment, the most extensive empire in human history stretched across eleven time zones, its authority absolute and unquestioned. The next, it simply... wasn't.

The stroke of a pen. The lowering of a flag. The end of everything.

But endings, Lars had learned, were never as clean as they appeared. When a system as vast and complex as the Soviet state died, it left behind organs that continued to function even after the body had ceased to breathe. Neural pathways that still carried signals to limbs that no longer existed. Reflexes that persisted long after conscious control had ended.

In the secret cities, three million people woke up one morning to discover that the state they had served with absolute devotion had become a memory overnight. The budgets that had sustained their work—vanished. The leadership that had given their

lives meaning—disbanded. The very reason for their existence—erased by political expedience and economic necessity.

They were, quite literally, citizens of the spaces between maps.

The aftermath was predictable in its horror. Research facilities that had hummed with activity for decades fell silent. Laboratories worth billions of rubles were stripped bare by opportunists who understood the value of sophisticated equipment but nothing of the knowledge required to use it. Libraries containing the accumulated wisdom of the world's most brilliant minds were left to molder in buildings where the heat had been turned off to save money that no longer existed.

Some cities were simply erased. Not abandoned—erased. The KGB, in its final spasm of institutional paranoia, burned records and eliminated evidence with the thoroughness of an organization that had spent seventy years perfecting the art of making things disappear. Ghost cities vanished into permafrost, their locations becoming mysteries that would puzzle historians for generations.

The people—ah, the people were the true tragedy.

Physicists who had spent their lives unlocking the secrets of the atom found themselves unemployed in a world that no longer valued abstract knowledge. Chemists who had created compounds that could change the course of wars discovered that peacetime had little use for their particular expertise. Engineers who had designed systems capable of destroying civilizations learned that building civilizations required entirely different skills.

They scattered like seeds on barren ground. Some died—suicide, despair, the simple inability to adapt to a world that operated by rules they had never been taught. Others fled—to the West, to Israel, to anywhere that would accept refugees from a country that no longer existed.

But many simply vanished.

Not died. Not fled. Vanished.

And with them went knowledge that lived in the spaces between what was recorded and what was remembered. Secrets that had been bought with the lives of millions. Technologies that could reshape the world or end it, depending on whose hands held the controls.

Into the vacuum left by imperial collapse, other forces moved with the patience of predators who understood that chaos was merely opportunity wearing a mask of disaster. These were not mere scavengers picking through empire's bones—they were inheritors of something far older, architects working from blueprints that predated the Soviet Union by millennia. As if they had been building not for this century, but for one long buried beneath history's accepted layers.

The Inheritance

Lars scrolled through satellite images that told stories in shadows and empty spaces. Shipping manifests that didn't quite add up. Financial records that pointed to transactions between entities that officially didn't exist.

The pattern was there, hidden in plain sight like a constellation that only became visible when you knew which stars to connect.

Someone had been preparing for the Soviet Union's collapse long before it happened. Someone with resources, connections, and most importantly, patience. While the world celebrated the end of the Cold War while wolves gathered in the spaces where empires die, shadowy figures had been quietly collecting the pieces of a shattered empire.

Not all the pieces. Not the obvious ones that would attract attention. But the important ones. The dangerous ones. The ones that could be rebuilt into something new and terrible in the hands of those who understood their true value.

Weapons were easy to track. Money was harder but still possible. But knowledge—knowledge was the ultimate prize, and the most difficult to monitor. Especially knowledge that seemed to connect to infrastructure projects that defied conventional understanding. Tunnels that ran too deep. Facilities that required power grids designed for purposes no one could adequately explain. Construction that followed patterns reminiscent of much older architectural principles—as if someone were working from templates that belonged to a different age of the world entirely.

Hundreds of thousands of scientists, engineers, and technicians had simply disappeared from official records. Some had died, certainly. Others had been absorbed by legitimate organizations. But far too many had vanished without a trace, as if the earth had simply swallowed them whole.

Except the earth hadn't swallowed them. Someone else had.

The clues were scattered across decades and continents. A shipment of "agricultural equipment" that required radiation shielding. A pharmaceutical company in Eastern Europe that employed an unusual number of former weapons researchers. Shell corporations that existed just long enough to purchase specific types of real estate before dissolving into paper trails that led nowhere.

And always, like a signature left by an artist proud of his work, the same name appeared in the margins of the story: Weiss Industries.

Not a company in any conventional sense. More like a philosophy made manifest, a way of thinking about the world that transcended national boundaries and political systems. An inheritance passed down through generations of people who understood that true power came not from controlling governments, but from controlling the forces that shaped governments.

They had been patient. They had been careful. And they had been very, very successful.

Lars leaned back in his chair, feeling the weight of understanding settle on his shoulders like a mantle he had never asked to wear. The coffee in his mug had grown cold, but he drank it anyway, tasting the bitterness that seemed to coat everything connected to this investigation.

He had learned to carry burdens—it was the price of his profession. But this one was different. Personal. It had begun three years ago with the death of Marcus Holden, his former partner and the closest thing to a father he'd ever known. Marcus had been tracking similar patterns when he'd died in what the Prague police had called a robbery gone wrong. Except Marcus had been carrying no money, and the only thing taken from his hotel room had been his research files.

The last message Marcus had sent him had been a single word: "Weiss."

Outside, Lyon was waking up to another day of comfortable illusions. Above, the city blinked awake in the theater of daylight. Below, truth stirred in its crypt. Traffic would flow along predetermined routes. Markets would open and close according to ancient rhythms. People would go about their lives secure in the belief that the world was fundamentally comprehensible, that cause and effect operated according to rules they understood.

But here, in the fluorescent twilight of a basement office, Lars Ander stared at evidence of something that challenged those comfortable assumptions. Something that had been growing in the dark spaces between nations, feeding on the chaos that followed the collapse of the old order.

Something that was almost ready to emerge into the light.

And when it did, the world would learn that the space between one truth ending and another beginning was where the real power had always lived.

The screen pulsed once—not with the soft glow of routine data, but with the harsh white flash that meant someone had used the emergency protocol Marcus had taught him years ago. The protocol that was supposed to be used only when the dead needed to speak to the living.

If he chose to open it, there would be no going back. The weight of knowledge he already carried would become heavier still, and the choices before him would narrow to a single path that led into darkness.

Lars Ander looked at the blinking icon for a long moment, tasting the bitterness of coffee and the salt of his own mortality. Then, with the steady hand of a man who had chosen his fate long ago, he clicked on the file.

The screen flickered once, then displayed a single photograph. Deep underground, in a chamber that predated any human civilization he knew of, machinery hummed with patient purpose. Ancient symbols covered walls that had been carved from

living rock, arranged in patterns that seemed to radiate from a central point like threads in a web.

And in the center of it all, a figure in a dark suit stood with his back to the camera.

Even in silhouette, Lars recognized the posture—not the bearing of a man who commanded rather than obeyed, but something older. The stance of a thing that had been there when the concepts of power and submission were first carved into the world's sleeping mind.

The photograph was timestamped three minutes ago. Eric Weiss was awake.

Chapter 2: The Red Harpy

In the jagged peaks of Chechnya, where ancient gods once walked and empires came to feed the carrion birds, the Boeviki whispered a name that carried the weight of prophecy: Shaitan-Arba — Satan's Chariot. But they understood only half the truth. The Mil Mi-24 was not Satan's chariot—it was his bride, and Alexandra Röhling was the priestess who had taught machine and devil to dance as one.

The Russians knew it by another name, one that spoke to its armored reality: Letayushiy Tank — the Flying Tank. But they understood only its titanium skin and steel bones, its reinforced rotors that could slice through mountain air like the wings of some primordial beast. They could not see what the Chechen fighters saw in their fever dreams: that this was no mere weapon, but a harbinger of an age where the old certainties would crumble like sand.

Colonel Alexandra Röhling had bonded with that beast as shamans of old had bonded with their spirit animals. In the cockpit of her gunship, she felt the pulse of its engines as her own heartbeat, the vibration of its rotors as the rhythm of her breath. She had flown it through valleys where Mongol hordes had swept down from the steppes, over forests that had witnessed the fall of the Tsars and the rise of the Soviets. And in those moments, suspended in the space between earth and sky, she understood something the strategists in Moscow never could: that war was not about ideology or territory, but about the eternal dance between predator and prey.

The Wheel of Death — her signature maneuver — was more than mere tactics. Six gunships circling wide like ravens around carrion, ensuring that at least one was always pouring judgment into the target zone. The Chechen fighters, brave but lightly armed, never stood a chance, but that was not the point. The point was the message written in smoke and thunder: that some forces of nature could not be reasoned with, only survived or submitted to.

She remembered the first time she had felt it — that moment when the machine became extension of will, when flesh and metal merged into something greater than either. The controls had seemed to melt beneath her fingers, the targeting systems responding to thought rather than touch. In that instant, she had understood why the ancients had worshipped war gods. Because war was transformation, and transformation was sacred.

In their whispered prayers and desperate legends, the Boeviki named her Kırmızı Harpialar — The Red Harpy who rode the iron winds of judgment. It was not her politics they feared, for politics were the concerns of mortal men, and she had transcended such limitations. It was the color of her auburn hair, long and wild when released from its military restraint, flowing like liquid fire in the downdraft of her rotors. Her eyes — sharp green flecked with gold like ancient coins — held the cold patience of a huntress who had never known defeat. Blood-red nails like painted

talons and skin pale as Siberian bone completed the image: beautiful as a blade, dangerous as winter itself.

The first time she had killed — truly killed, not in the antiseptic distance of aerial combat but face to face with a wounded fighter who had begged for mercy in broken Russian — she had felt something crack open inside her chest. Not her heart breaking, but her chrysalis splitting. What crawled out was not the woman who had entered that ruined building, but something that had been waiting inside her all along. Something with sharper teeth and cleaner hungers.

She was not a protector or an avenger. She was a force of nature wearing human skin.

Sometimes, in moments of perfect stillness, she could still hear them — the phantom rotors of every helicopter she had ever flown, beating in perfect synchronization with her pulse. The sound of her own becoming.

When the chaos of post-Soviet Russia gave way to Putin's iron grip, Alexandra saw the writing on the wall. The new order had no place for independent operators like her — only loyal servants of the state. She turned her back on the emerging power structure and took her skills — and her most loyal pack — into the shadows of the private sector.

In 2002, along with a handful of veterans who had shared her baptism of fire in Chechnya, she formed Black Guard. Not mere soldiers for hire, but something evolution had been building toward—predators who understood that the only honest currency was blood.

Sometimes, in the quiet hours before dawn, she wondered if this was what she had been meant to become all along. If the war had simply stripped away the lies she had told herself about duty and honor, revealing the truth beneath: that she was most alive when death flowed through her like a sacrament, most free when others cowered in her shadow.

Their first contracts took them to the oil fields of Nigeria, where President Obasanjo's administration became more than a client — they became patrons who understood the old ways of power. Through these connections, Alexandra made contact with British investors whose money carried the weight of centuries, men who spoke of portfolios the way her ancestors might have spoken of bloodlines. The petrodollars flowed like a black river, and Black Guard evolved from pack into something that nations feared to name.

By 2006, they had expanded into Latin America, where oil conglomerates hired them to protect corporate interests from indigenous resistance that still remembered when the land had been sacred. Entire villages were bulldozed to make way for drills and pipelines and helipads — the altars of a new age of worship. Alexandra watched it all with the same cold interest she had once reserved for targeting coordinates. This

was evolution in action: the strong consuming the weak, the future devouring the past.

She told herself it was just business, but late at night, when the helicopters were silent and the camp was asleep, she sometimes heard the voices of the displaced in the wind. Not guilt — she had burned that weakness out of herself long ago — but something like recognition. They were all just playing their parts in a story that had been written before any of them were born.

Between contracts, she made pilgrimages to Pyongyang, advising North Korea's elite fighter pilots on advanced aerial tactics. It was a nod to her old Communist roots, but also something deeper — a recognition that ideology was just another weapon to be wielded by those who understood its true nature. Every job brought more gold, more reach, more power. And with every victory, Black Guard evolved from mercenary company into something unprecedented: a modern Foreign Legion that answered to no flag save the one printed on currency.

Their base of operations in South Ossetia became more than a training facility — it became a temple of modern warfare, established in 2012 after the region's disputed status provided the perfect cover for their operations. Here, over 45,000 soldiers, private guards, and law enforcement operatives underwent their own transformations each year. Alexandra had built something that rivaled anything NATO possessed, but served the god of purchased loyalty and paid-for blood.

This was her true legacy, she knew. Not the villages she had helped destroy or the insurgents she had killed, but this: proof that the old ways of power still worked in a new world. That civilization was just the space between one hunting season and the next.

Alexandra understood now that she had not built Black Guard—she had inherited it from the part of herself that had always known how to kill. Just as some empires were not founded but simply given form by those who understood that power was a river that changed course but never stopped flowing.

Then, on a morning when the mountain air carried the scent of coming snow, Alexandra received a letter. Hand-delivered by a courier who vanished like smoke before she could question him. No return address, no electronic trace — in an age of digital surveillance, it was as anachronistic as a message in a bottle.

The paper felt ancient beneath her fingers, though the words were printed in modern ink:

A yearly tribute of 500 kilograms of gold will be awarded to your company if you accept a private security contract with Weiss Industries. If interested, present yourself and your senior officers on Oktober 21st near Komsomolsk, Khabarovsk Krai. You will be collected.

No name. No signature. Only a seal pressed into black wax — a stylized ouroboros, the ancient serpent devouring its own tail. The Ouroboros was not decoration—it was

diagnosis. The serpent that devoured its own tail, endlessly feeding on itself to maintain its existence. Like the wars that birthed new wars. Like the empires that consumed their predecessors. Like Alexandra herself, who had fed on her own innocence until only the predator remained.

She stared at that seal for a long time, feeling something stir in the depths of her memory. Not recognition, exactly, but the same instinct that had kept her alive through a hundred battles. The sense that she was looking at something far older and more dangerous than it appeared.

Alexandra had heard the whispers, as anyone in her world had. Weiss Industries was a name spoken in certain circles with the same reverence once reserved for kings and gods. To some, it was merely a hedge fund established in 1948 with old European ties — a discreet player in oil, tech, and arms dealing. Others swore it was something far more dangerous: the latest incarnation of networks that had never officially existed, shadow structures that had guided the rise and fall of empires since men first learned to write.

The rumors were legion and contradictory: that Heinrich Weiss had bought half of Venice for a single afternoon to settle a debt. That he had personally facilitated both the Manhattan Project and its Soviet mirror, playing all sides with the casual indifference of someone who understood that nations were merely temporary constructs. That the company owned patents for technologies never released, weapons never deployed, knowledge inherited rather than discovered.

But the strangest whispers were also the oldest: of gold caravans that had vanished in the wastes of Nubia, their treasure flowing into coffers that predated Rome. Of scrolls from the Library of Alexandria, smuggled into private vaults while the rest burned. Of ziggurats in Babylon whose priest-kings had traded in more than grain and gold.

Of networks — not families, but something deeper — that had simply been there, always. Banking houses rose and fell. Empires crumbled into dust. But the true power structures endured, passed down through bloodlines that remembered when the world was young and gods walked openly among men. The Ouroboros was not their symbol — it was their truth, an endless cycle of influence coiled around the throat of civilization itself.

The smart money said it was all mythology, the kind of stories that grew around any organization with enough power and secrecy. But Alexandra had learned to trust her instincts, and her instincts whispered that some mythologies were simply truths wearing ancient masks. Heinrich Weiss had not built an empire — he had inherited one, and in 1948 his grandson Eric Weiss had simply given it a modern face.

Alexandra Röhling did not believe in fairy tales. She believed in gold, and contracts, and the weight of a trigger beneath her finger. But five hundred kilograms of gold was no fairy tale — it was a fortune that could fund a small war, or buy the silence of

governments, or transform Black Guard from mercenary company into something that could reshape the world.

And perhaps that was exactly what someone wanted.

She packed her weapons with the same ritual precision she had once used to prepare for combat missions. Into the case went her sidearm — a custom Stechkin that had never failed her — along with enough ammunition to fight her way out of whatever trap might be waiting. Her combat knife, honed to an edge that could split silk. And finally, carefully wrapped in black silk, a single Mi-24 rotor blade fragment — a piece of her old mount, kept as both talisman and reminder.

János and Boja, her two most trusted senior officers, asked no questions when she summoned them. They never had. In the decades since Chechnya, they had followed her from one war to another, bound by something deeper than mere loyalty. They were pack, and she was alpha, and that was a law older than any government or constitution.

As their transport lifted off from the Ossetian base, Alexandra watched the mountains fall away beneath them and wondered if she was flying toward her destiny or her doom. In her experience, the two were often indistinguishable.

The Ouroboros seal lay in her breast pocket, its wax still soft against her skin, as if the ancient serpent were feeding on her warmth. And for the first time since Chechnya, Alexandra Röhling felt something she had almost forgotten: the electric anticipation of meeting an apex predator that might be her equal.

The coordinates led not to Komsomolsk, but to a place that existed in the spaces between maps—a place where the old agreements between earth and sky had been renegotiated by hands that remembered when both were young.

Behind them, Black Guard's empire continued its operations, forty-five thousand soldiers training in the arts of modern warfare. Ahead lay mysteries that might finally be worthy of her attention.

But for now, suspended in the space between one war and the next, where all possibilities remained open and the future belonged to whoever was strong enough to claim it, Alexandra Röhling was exactly where she belonged.

Chapter 3: The Arrival

The night sky wept frozen tears as the unmarked Gulfstream descended through clouds black as a raven's wing. Alexandra Röhling felt the change in pressure not merely in her ears, but in her bones—a thrumming that spoke of crossing invisible boundaries, of stepping from the world of daylight into realms where different laws held sway.

The aircraft touched down with preternatural silence upon a runway that gleamed like black glass beneath the moon's pale eye. No ordinary airstrip, this—the very stones seemed to drink in light rather than reflect it, and the air itself tasted of copper and ozone, as if lightning had recently kissed the earth. This was Ukraine, but not the Ukraine of maps and borders. This was a place where the veil between worlds grew thin.

She emerged first into the winter night, her breath forming dragon-smoke in air so sharp it might have been forged in the depths of winter itself. The cold was not merely temperature—it was presence, pressing against her with fingers of ice that sought the warmth of her life-force. János and Boja flanked her like loyal hounds, their hands never straying far from steel, their eyes scanning shadows that seemed to move independently of any earthly wind.

Twenty years of warfare had taught Alexandra to trust her instincts above all else. And now those instincts whispered warnings in languages she did not recognize, speaking of thresholds crossed and prices yet to be paid.

For a moment—no more—Alexandra wished she hadn't brought her men. But it was too late. The mountain had taken their names.

Then came the lights—twin stars piercing the veil of night, growing larger as they approached. Not the warm yellow of honest flame, but the cold white of creatures that hunted in the deep places of the world.

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The convoy that arrived moved with the fluid grace of hunting wolves. Three vehicles, each black as midnight's heart, their engines purring with barely contained power. The lead car's doors opened without sound, as if the metal itself had been taught to whisper rather than speak.

"We serve Herr Weiss," came a voice like grinding millstones. "We will bear you to him."

The speaker emerged from shadows as if born from them—an albino whose skin held the translucent quality of ice over deep water. His eyes were pools of moonlight, devoid of all warmth, all humanity. Beside him stood another figure, Aryan in features but carrying himself with the stillness of a serpent preparing to strike. Dark glasses hid his gaze despite the night's embrace, and upon his neck coiled a tattooed serpent that seemed to writhe with its own malevolent life.

What manner of men are these? Alexandra wondered, though her warrior's mind already suspected the answer. They wore the shapes of men as wolves might wear sheep's clothing. Whatever Weiss had done to create them—whatever process had stripped away their humanity and polished them into these perfect, terrible instruments—it spoke of powers that dwelt in shadows older than recorded history.

~*~

The road stretched before them like a wound carved through the living forest. Ancient trees pressed close on either side, their branches forming a canopy so thick that even starlight seemed unable to penetrate its depths. Here was forest primeval, forest that remembered when the world was young and different powers walked between the trees.

For hours they traveled in silence so complete it seemed a living thing. The very air within the vehicle grew thick with unspoken menace. Alexandra found herself studying their escorts with the eye of one who had faced death in a dozen forms. Neither breathed in any rhythm she could detect. Neither blinked, though their eyes tracked movement with predatory precision. When they moved—to adjust their position or touch some hidden control—it was with a fluidity that spoke of joints that bent in ways no human anatomy should allow.

She had commanded soldiers who killed without conscience, had dropped death from the sky upon villages filled with the innocent. But this was different. This was the feel of standing at the edge of an abyss and realizing that something vast and hungry dwelt in its depths, something that had noticed her presence.

The albino's voice, when it finally came, was like the sound of wind through empty tombs: "Peklo-6 lies ahead. Five kilometers beyond the Threshold."

Peklo. The old Slavic word for hell itself. How fitting that Weiss would name his fortress after the realm of the damned.

The forest fell away as if sheared by some cosmic blade, and before them rose a mountain that dwarfed the very sky. Not merely stone and earth, but something that felt carved by powers beyond mortal understanding. At its base yawned a tunnel mouth—not hewn by honest tools, but seemingly grown from the living rock like some great maw waiting to devour the unwary.

"There is no exit on the far side," Alexandra observed, her voice steady despite the ice forming in her veins.

The serpent-bearer turned toward her, and for one terrible moment she glimpsed something behind those dark lenses—eyes that held depths no human gaze should possess. "No," he said, his smile too wide, revealing teeth filed to predatory points. "There is no need for one."

We enter the belly of the beast, she thought, and there is no returning unchanged.

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The tunnel swallowed them as a leviathan might swallow ships. Behind them, with a sound like the breaking of the world, massive steel doors ground shut—not merely

closing, but sealing them within. The very air seemed to thicken, pressing down with the weight of mountain and shadow combined.

Peklo-6 was not a fortress. It was a web. And they had walked willingly into its hunger.

Deep within the bowels of the earth, they came to the first checkpoint—a place where red light pulsed like the heartbeat of some subterranean god. Hydraulics hissed with the breathing of mechanical dragons, and doors opened in perfect unison, revealing a chamber lined with sensors that would catalog every aspect of their mortal frames.

"Biometric verification," the albino intoned, though his voice carried undertones that suggested ritual rather than mere security. "Step forth and be known."

As they emerged from the vehicles, Alexandra felt the weight of invisible eyes upon them. Cameras, certainly, but something more—a presence that seemed to peer into their very souls, weighing and measuring them against some cosmic balance. The mountain itself seemed alive, a vast organism that had swallowed them whole and now sought to digest their essence.

Boja growled as his boots touched the stone floor, the sound echoing in the chamber like the warning of some primordial beast. "I hunger," he rumbled, his voice carrying the patience of granite and the menace of an avalanche. "If they test us much longer, I may feast upon our escorts."

János said nothing, but his blade sang between his fingers—a whisper of steel that spoke of death made manifest. His pale eyes never left their inhuman guides, and in their depths flickered something that might have been recognition. He had always been able to see through veils that blinded other men.

These were soldiers, warriors forged in the crucible of countless battles. They had followed Alexandra through jungles where ancient gods still walked, across deserts where the sand itself thirsted for blood, into cities where civilization had collapsed and only the strong survived. Yet here, in this place that reeked of sulfur and ambition, they felt the stirring of something deeper than professional wariness.

They felt prey instincts awakening—the knowledge that they had entered the domain of an apex predator.

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When the great doors sealed behind them with the finality of a tomb, Alexandra felt the very air change. They were inside now, inside something that pulsed with its own dark life. The tunnel stretched ahead, descending into depths that seemed to have no end, lit by lights that gave no warmth.

Security was no mere precaution here—it was sacrament. Turrets tracked their passage with the patience of mechanical angels, their barrels capable of reducing flesh and bone to component atoms in heartbeats. She recognized the weapons: Russian AK-630 autocannons, each one a hymn to destruction written in steel and

fire. The very walls wept with defensive systems, and the air itself could be turned to poison at a moment's notice.

Novichok, she thought, recognizing the ventilation patterns. He could flood these tunnels with death itself, and we would never know until we drew our last breath.

The convoy moved deeper, following passages that curved like the chambers of some great shell. For a heartbeat, she thought she heard phantom rotors in the distance — not in the air, but in her blood. The war-beast inside her was stirring.

And then, as if emerging from the throat of creation itself, they entered the heart of Peklo-6.

It was a city—but not as mortal architects might build. This was a city carved from the bones of the earth itself, a vast cavern that stretched beyond the reach of any light save those that burned with artificial suns. Monorails snaked through the air like metal serpents, carrying cargo and passengers between levels that rose in terraced tiers toward the mountain's crown.

Workers moved through the passages like ants in their colony, dressed in orange jumpsuits that marked them as surely as brands. Scientists in white coats hurried between laboratories that hummed with energies that made the hair on Alexandra's arms stand on end. Soldiers—if they were still soldiers—marched in perfect formation, their faces hidden behind masks that reflected no light.

This was industry, but industry with purpose that transcended mere profit. This was the forging of something that would reshape the world itself.

"A full battalion," Alexandra murmured, her voice barely audible above the mechanical symphony that surrounded them. "A ghost legion, bred in darkness."

Boja grunted his acknowledgment, his eyes cataloging weapons and weaknesses with professional efficiency. "And we are to be part of this."

János twirled his blade, the steel catching light that seemed reluctant to touch it. "If the coin is good," he said, but his voice carried doubt for the first time in their long partnership.

There was something in this place that went beyond mere mercenary contracts. This was covenant, binding and terrible in its scope. They had entered the service of something that dwelt in the spaces between what was known and what was feared, something that had looked upon the world and found it wanting.

The convoy climbed through levels that defied earthly architecture, past chambers where things that might once have been human labored at tasks that no textbook had ever described. The air grew thicker, charged with potential that made their teeth ache and their vision blur at the edges.

"The penthouse," their albino guide announced as they approached a final checkpoint. "The domain of Herr Weiss himself."

And in the depths of the mountain, generators hummed with the rhythm of a mechanical heart, pumping life into this realm of shadow and ambition. Far above,

elevators crawled toward the summit like prayers seeking heaven, carrying those who would serve the master of this underworld domain.

Alexandra closed her eyes and felt the weight of destiny settling upon her shoulders like a mantle of lead. They had crossed the threshold now, passed beyond the point where retreat remained possible.

The summit awaited. And somewhere above, Eric Weiss was ready to collect what he had purchased.

We are no longer our own, she thought, and the truth of it rang in her bones like the tolling of funeral bells.

And yet, buried deep beneath the iron layers of command and obedience, something inside Alexandra — something sharp and coiled — refused to bow.

She adjusted her coat, feeling the rotor blade fragment against her ribs. Whatever lay beyond that door, she would face it as she always had — not as servant or supplicant. But as herself.

Chapter 4: The Pact

The Light preserve them, but this felt like walking into the very heart of shadow.

Alexandra's breath misted in the cold air as they passed through the second checkpoint, the biometric scanner's red light painting her face in bloody hues. The iris scanner that followed seemed to peer not merely into her eye, but into the depths of her soul itself. She had commanded men in the crucible of war, had stared down death on a dozen battlefields, yet something about this place—this ascent into whatever domain awaited—set her teeth on edge in ways that mere mortality never could.

The elevator climbed in silence that seemed to stretch beyond the boundaries of time itself—ascending not merely through floors, but through the very heart of the mountain that concealed an entire civilization beneath its stone embrace. Minutes passed like hours as they rose from the hidden city carved into living rock, past levels upon levels of chambers and corridors where an empire operated in absolute secrecy, finally breaching the mountain's crown to emerge into the realm of daylight itself.

Alexandra found herself thinking of her grandmother's tales—stories of the old blood, of things that walked in shadows between the world of men and the realm of nightmares. Foolish fancies, she had always thought. Now, suspended in this metal coffin ascending from the buried city toward whatever domain waited above, those childhood warnings whispered at the edges of her consciousness like autumn leaves scraping against a tomb.

Beside her, Boja shifted restlessly, his weathered face drawn tight with an unease that had nothing to do with military protocol. János stood motionless as carved stone, but Alexandra could see the tension in the set of his shoulders, the way his hand drifted unconsciously toward where his sidearm would rest. These were men who had followed her through the furnace of combat, who had never known fear to master them. Yet here, in this ascending chamber, something primal stirred in their blood—some ancestral memory of prey recognizing predator.

The elevator doors parted with a sound like the last breath of the dying.

Before them stretched a corridor that belonged to a world where perfection had been distilled into its purest essence. The floors were polished obsidian, so flawlessly black they created mirrors that reflected not merely light, but seemed to capture the very souls of those who walked upon them. Every surface gleamed with surgical precision—not a mote of dust, not a fingerprint, not the slightest imperfection to mar the absolute order that reigned here. The fluorescent lights cast their illumination in geometric patterns of mathematical purity, and Alexandra understood that this was not mere cleanliness, but control made manifest in steel and stone.

Each step rang with crystalline clarity in the sterile air, and she felt as though she walked through the mind of some vast predator—everything ordered, everything calculated, everything bent to a singular, implacable will.

At the corridor's end, a single door of burnished steel stood open with the geometric precision of a blade's edge. Beyond lay a chamber that redefined the very concept of dominion—floor-to-ceiling windows of flawless glass revealed not the artificial lights of the buried city below, but the natural world beyond the mountain's face. Daylight streamed through those perfect panes, illuminating furniture of stark modern lines with the golden radiance of the sun itself. This was the crown of a hidden empire, the only structure that dared to break the mountain's surface, where some power beyond mortal comprehension had claimed both the depths and the heights as his domain.

The room was woven in patterns of light and shadow, each piece of furniture positioned with the precision of a web designed to catch more than flies. Perfect. Sterile. Absolute.

Then he stepped forward, and all other thoughts fled like sparrows before the storm.

He moved with the fluid grace of shadow given form, and Alexandra understood in that moment why her grandmother had whispered of the old blood in tones reserved for prayer and terror. This was no mere man who stood before them, though he wore mortality's mask with practiced ease. His hair caught the light like spun gold, cropped short in military fashion, yet somehow timeless. His eyes—Light preserve her, his eyes—were the color of arctic winter, holding depths that spoke of eons rather than years.

The suit he wore was cut with perfection that transcended mere tailoring, black as a moonless night, fitted to a frame that radiated controlled power. His face might have been carved by masters of the ancient world—beautiful as fallen angels were beautiful, terrible in its perfection.

"It pleases me greatly to make your acquaintance at last," he said, and his voice carried the weight of ages, cultured tones that had known the courts of forgotten empires. "I am Eric Weiss. Those who serve in my shadow know me as Herr Weiss, yet to you, Colonel, I would be simply Eric."

He crossed the chamber with steps that made no sound on the pristine floor, moving through his domain of perfect order like the ultimate expression of calculated power. When he took Alexandra's hand and bent to kiss it with courtly grace, she felt a shock run through her very bones—not merely the touch of flesh upon flesh, but the recognition of something that had evolved beyond mere humanity into something that embodied control itself.

Power, her mind whispered. Power beyond the ken of mortal men.

Behind her, she sensed rather than saw her men freeze—Boja's perpetual growl dying in his throat, János's blade-hand going slack. The very air seemed to thicken, as though they stood at the bottom of some vast, invisible ocean. Alexandra herself fought to maintain her composure, drawing upon every lesson learned in the crucible of command. She had faced warlords drunk on their own legend, politicians who wore authority like armor, generals who commanded with the certainty of gods. Yet this—this was different.

This was like standing before the perfect predator—beautiful, terrible, and utterly without mercy, surrounded by the sterile perfection that spoke of a mind that tolerated no chaos, no imperfection, no element beyond its absolute dominion.

Eric's smile widened, and she saw knowledge there—ancient, terrible knowledge that had witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations.

"Your will does you honor," he said, his voice touched with what might have been approval. "Most who enter my presence find themselves overcome by the weight of what I am. You stand firm. This speaks well of your strength."

With fluid motion that belonged more to dream than waking world, he raised his hand. From his fingertips extended claws of impossible darkness—not mere bone or keratin, but shadow made manifest, curved like crescent moons and sharp as the edge of night itself.

Instinct, honed by years of warfare, blazed through Alexandra's mind like lightning.

She stepped inward, her body moving with the trained precision of countless hours spent in the martial disciplines. Her lead foot found perfect purchase as she aligned her center with his, executing the te-gatana block with textbook perfection—forearms striking upward and inward to redirect his clawed strike above her shoulder. It was a technique meant to intercept death itself, and she had practiced it until it lived in her very bones.

Her off-hand sought control of his elbow even as her knee drove upward toward his groin, every movement flowing like water finding its course. Yet his palm met her ascending leg with casual ease, stopping her attack as effortlessly as one might catch a falling leaf.

They froze thus—warrior and whatever lay beyond mortality's veil, locked in a tableau that spoke of violence barely contained.

Then he stepped back, and his composure remained unbroken as still water.

"Excellent," he said, and now his approval carried the weight of genuine respect. "You are precisely what I had hoped to find—a soldier whose will cannot be easily broken, whose spirit burns bright even in the presence of the abyss."

The strange lethargy lifted from her men like morning mist. They blinked, confusion replacing the glassy stillness, and Alexandra saw them exchange glances that spoke of shared bewilderment.

"I offer my apologies for the necessity of that demonstration," Eric said, smoothing his jacket with movements that spoke of endless practice. "You are not the first to be considered for this covenant. Yet you are the first to survive the trial of my presence with your will intact."

Alexandra lowered her guard slowly, though she remained ready to resume combat should the need arise. "Colonel Alexandra Röhling," she said, her voice steady despite the hammering of her heart. "These are my most trusted lieutenants—Boja and János."

Eric gestured toward chairs of stark modern design—sleek lines bathed in natural sunlight streaming through the mountain-crown windows. Even his throne bore no ornate carvings or ancient symbols, instead commanding both the hidden city and the world beyond through its very simplicity. As they seated themselves, Alexandra noted how he moved with the bearing of one long accustomed to dominion absolute.

"Weiss Industries," he began, settling into his chair with the grace of centuries, "was not built in decades, as mortal men measure time. I have labored at its creation across the turning of ages—from the banks of the sacred Nile to the peaks of the Alps, from the ziggurats of Mesopotamia to the courts of Madrid. Always adapting to the changing world, always acquiring what serves my purpose. What mortals call governments rise and fall like wheat before the scythe, but the structures that truly guide their fate—those endure, reshape themselves, evolve with each turning of history's wheel."

He withdrew a cigarette case of silver so pure it seemed to glow in the chamber's subdued light, the flame that answered his call hissing like a serpent's whisper.

"Now I find myself in need of an army—not merely soldiers bound by coin or fleeting loyalty, but warriors trained in the disciplines of this modern age, global in reach, absolute in dedication. The networks I have woven through centuries require... enforcement. The hidden architecture of civilization demands guardians who understand that true power operates in the spaces between what mortals call reality. This is why Black Guard has drawn my attention."

Alexandra felt the wheel turn. Not history's wheel, but the deeper mechanism beneath it—the pattern that fate itself obeyed. This was no mere contract negotiation, no simple exchange of service for payment. The very air thrummed with significance, as though the world itself held its breath. She had served governments, had sworn oaths to nations, but she began to understand that those were merely the visible faces of power—the puppets dancing while hidden hands pulled the strings that truly moved the world.

"My offer transcends the boundaries of mortal commerce," Eric continued, exhaling smoke that seemed to writhe with purpose. "Five hundred kilograms of gold each year, yes—but more than mere wealth. I offer transformation itself. My blood, freely given, shall be your covenant and your reward."

He pressed a hand to his chest, and Alexandra saw something flicker in his eyes—not light, but its absolute absence, beautiful and terrible as the void between stars.

"A single drop will remake you in ways that mortal flesh cannot imagine," Eric said. "It will rewrite your DNA at the most fundamental level—unlocking strength beyond human measure, healing that mocks death itself, years that stretch toward eternity. And should fate claim you while your essence remains whole, you may return—changed, elevated, remade."

Boja and János exchanged glances heavy with meaning, but it was Alexandra who leaned forward, her soldier's instincts recognizing truth when it stood naked before her.

"You speak of blood," she said carefully. "Of the things that grandmother's stories warned walked in shadows between the world of men and the realm of nightmares. Upyr."

Eric's laughter was like silver bells ringing in a cathedral of bone. "Upyr – Vampire—a word coined by minds too small to comprehend what I am. I came into this world beneath stars that have since guttered and died, in the vast desert of the Ubaidians when the world was younger and darker truths walked openly among men."

He drew upon his cigarette, and in the ember's glow, Alexandra saw depths that had no bottom.

"I learned the art of necromancy from an exile of Mesopotamia, an old master who had gazed upon truths that drove lesser men to madness. Much later, beneath a ziggurat older than recorded history, I made covenant with powers that slumber in the spaces between reality's cracks. Since that day—and it was so very long ago—I have walked in shadow, spoken languages that exist now only in echo, ruled kingdoms whose very names have been devoured by time's hunger."

His fingers flexed, and those impossible claws slid into view like obsidian daggers born from nightmare itself.

"Warlock. Demon. Revenant. Vampire. I have worn all these names as other men wear cloaks—discarding them when they no longer serve. I am what remains when a soul is forged in the crucible of forbidden knowledge, broken upon the anvil of necessity, and remade through rituals older than the settlement of Jericho."

The claws retracted with liquid smoothness, vanishing as though they had never been.

"I drank deep from wells of wisdom buried beneath the bones of civilization, and bound myself to powers that crawl in the spaces between thought and dream. I am not one thing—I am the culmination of many. The synthesis of darkness and dominion made manifest."

He paused. In that silence, Alexandra felt the weight of eons pressing against her mind.

"In the Deepwork beneath this world," he continued, voice low and resonant like stone cracking beneath pressure, "in halls carved from living shadow, where memory and madness are currency... they know me by another name. They call me the High Lord of the Hollow Deep."

The title hung in the air like incense in a temple dedicated to forgotten gods, heavy with reverence and dread in equal measure.

"There was a time," Eric said, and now his voice carried notes of loss that transcended mortal understanding, "when I did not walk these paths alone. My sister ruled beside me in those depths—Nyx, eldest by the span of a single star's turning.

"She was crowned in silence and wrapped in mystery, cloaked in a grace more belonging to the great cats than to any mortal form. Her presence moved like a tide beneath thought—slow, primal, patient—shaping even stillness. In the days before the fracture, we ruled not as tyrants, but as twin forces—her chaos, my design."

His eyes grew distant, as though gazing across gulfs of time that spanned millennia.

"Her companion walked always at her side—a cat of deepest black, never blinking, never aging. Some say it was a familiar; others, a fragment of herself made flesh. While I forged dominion over forgotten empires, she wove dreams and shadows as other women might weave cloth. Her hair burned red as ancient embers against her obsidian poise—fire and darkness in perfect accord.

Alexandra found herself leaning forward, caught in the web of his words despite herself. This was history that no scholar had ever recorded, legend that transcended myth.

"We were cast from the same origin—ruin and silence," Eric continued, "two halves of a covenant older than the written word, forged before men even knew to fear the dark. Where I walked in blood and conquest, she drifted through the landscapes of thought and dream. But even the elder powers—the ones who carved the bones of this world—feared my daughter more than they ever feared Nyx. And their reasons lie beyond mortal comprehension."

"I ruled beneath—where memory is coin and madness a sacrament. For a time, my daughter Ava walked beside me, mastering the arts that blur death and dream. Until she vanished into fractured timelines, where past and future bled together like wine in water. But that tale belongs to another night—when the moon is dark and the veil runs thin."

He flexed his fingers, claws unfurling and retreating like tides of living shadow. "I have hidden among mortals too long," he said, voice heavy with the weariness of empires turned to dust. "Wearing masks of flesh while the fire beneath my bones smoldered in silence. I am finished with pretense. Tired of walking in shadow, when I was meant to stride beneath burning stars."

His gaze sharpened, and Alexandra felt the full weight of it, like frost creeping into bone.

"Until now, I relied on old networks—remnants of armies that no longer exist, scavenged loyalties bought with coin, provisional forces that guarded my cities but lacked permanence. They were scaffolding, not stone. And scaffolding falls when the storm comes."

He stepped closer, every word a measured strike.

"You, Colonel, are different. You command not scattered mercenaries but a legion forged by blood, loyalty, and fire. The Black Guard is not scaffolding—it is architecture. Enduring. Mobile. Global. With you, I do not merely protect what I have built—I expand it. You are the iron hand that will close around the throat of a world too blind to see who already rules it."

Alexandra felt the pattern shift—the deeper wheel turning, the crossroads where no retreat remained. No return to the certainties of mortal war or human ambition.

She extended her hand across the space, her gaze locked on those winter-pale eyes with all the courage that had carried her through a dozen battlefields. "Then let us cast aside the masks," she said, her voice steady as steel drawn from the forge. "Black Guard stands ready to serve the Lord of the Hollow Deep."

Eric's smile transformed his face, and for a heartbeat, Alexandra glimpsed something almost human in those ancient features—gratitude, perhaps, or the shadow of what gratitude might once have been. He took her hand in both of his, and she felt the weight of covenant settling into her bones.

"Excellent," he said. "Then come, and I shall show you the world you are about to inherit."

"The pact was not sealed with ink, nor signature, but began with a look—between predator and soldier, between shadow and flame."



Chapter 5: The Binding

The chamber beyond the glass observatory bore no resemblance to the rest of Peklo-6, though it lay just a span of stone from where visitors gazed upon the world below. Here, the very air itself seemed to breathe with ancient malevolence, thick and oppressive as if weighted down by centuries of forgotten rituals and whispered incantations. The temperature had dropped by degrees with each step into the depths, until their breath came in ghostly wisps that danced and dissipated in the wan light.

Ancient beyond mortal reckoning it was, carved from basalt black as the void between stars and obsidian so pure it seemed to devour light itself. The walls rose in impossible geometries that hurt the mind to follow, their surfaces smooth as silk yet cold as winter's heart. Only pale blue glyphs provided respite from the crushing darkness—symbols that pulsed along the walls like the veins of some slumbering titan, their ethereal glow casting shifting shadows that seemed to writhe and reach with phantom fingers.

The air tasted of copper and ozone, with an underlying sweetness that spoke of decay barely held at bay. Each breath felt labored, as if the chamber itself resisted their presence, testing their worthiness with every inhalation. The silence was not empty but full—pregnant with the weight of ages and the echo of voices long since turned to dust.

Through crystal-clear windows that seemed to exist outside the normal flow of time, the mountain peak rose before them like a monument to primordial power. The Serpent's Rest thrust its jagged tooth up from the earth's very bones, a monolithic spear of granite and ice that pierced the belly of storm clouds. Snow crowned its summit in pristine white that had never known summer's warm caress, never felt the gentle touch of spring rain.

The valley people, those hardy souls who scraped existence from the harsh soil, called it the Serpent's Rest with voices hushed by generations of fear. They whispered—always whispered—that it was a place where the old powers still stirred, where the boundary between worlds grew thin as morning mist. Children were taught never to stare too long at that summit, for those who did might hear their own names called back in the old tongue, spoken by voices that had turned to ash when the world was young.

At the chamber's heart, like the still center of a maelstrom, stood a stone platform that seemed to pulse with its own dark heartbeat. Its edges were marked by iron braziers wrought in shapes that defied earthly logic—twisted forms that burned without flame and gave no warmth, their cold fire casting shadows that moved independent of any light source.

"This is the Chamber of Binding," Eric intoned, his voice carrying the weight of ritual and reverence, each word falling like a stone into still water. His pale eyes reflected the blue glow of the glyphs, making him appear both ancient and ageless. "Your loyalty to House Weiss is no mere contract signed in ink and sealed with wax. It is a rite as old as the mountain itself, one that will bind you to me, to this place of power, and to what we shall become when the stars align."

Alexandra stepped forward with the steady confidence of a predator approaching prey, though beneath her composed exterior, her heart hammered against her ribs like a caged bird desperate for freedom. No hesitation marked her approach to the dais where a large black mirror stood—not a thing of mere reflection, but something far more sinister. It was a void given form, a hunger made manifest that drank light like parched earth drinks the first drops of rain after drought.

The mirror's frame was carved from the same obsidian as the walls, inlaid with silver runes that seemed to shift and change when observed directly. Looking into its depths was like staring into the abyss itself—an experience that left the observer with the unsettling certainty that the abyss was staring back with infinite patience and boundless hunger.

Eric raised his hand with fluid grace, the movement so practiced it spoke of countless repetitions across decades or perhaps centuries. From beneath his fingertip emerged a claw curved and dark as polished obsidian, gleaming with an inner light that had nothing to do with the chamber's illumination.

First he pricked his own thumb with surgical precision, letting a single drop of blood—blood that seemed to glow with its own inner fire—fall upon the mirror's hungry surface. The crimson droplet struck the void and was instantly absorbed, vanishing without a trace. In response, the glyphs around the chamber awakened like a constellation coming to life, pulsing red as forge-fire.

The air itself seemed to thicken, charged with an energy that made skin crawl and raised the fine hairs on every arm. Alexandra felt something vast and ancient turn its attention toward them, a presence so immense and alien that her mortal mind struggled to process its proximity.

Then Eric turned to Alexandra, his movements deliberate and ceremonial. With the same obsidian claw, he scored her palm in a swift, practiced motion. Pain bloomed sharp and immediate, but it was nothing compared to the sensation that followed.

Without instruction, driven by instinct older than reason, she pressed her bleeding hand to the dark mirror's surface. The cold of it burned like ice against her skin, a cold so profound it seemed to reach through flesh and bone to touch her very soul.

The surface pulsed once with red light—a heartbeat of malevolent radiance that illuminated the chamber in shades of blood and shadow. Then it began to drink, drawing not just her blood but something far more essential. For a moment that

lasted an eternity, she felt herself suspended in the spaces between worlds, balanced on the knife's edge between existence and void.

The mirror tested her, tasted her essence, weighed her soul against some unknowable standard. Then, finding her worthy through criteria beyond mortal understanding, it answered in kind. The sensation that followed was indescribable—a resonance that touched her very bones, settled in her marrow, and would linger in each breath for all her remaining days.

As the binding completed, Alexandra felt something shift deep within her—not just the weight of covenant, but physical change. Her reflection in the obsidian showed eyes that now held the faintest trace of pale blue, dormant as moonlight on glass—a mark that would remain hidden until awakened, visible only to those who knew the old signs. She was changed, marked, claimed by forces older than civilization.

Boja followed with visible reluctance, his weathered face pale in the crimson light. His hand shook as he pressed it to the mirror's surface, sweat beading on his brow despite the chamber's chill. The mirror drank, but shallowly—like a wine connoisseur sampling inferior vintage. Where Alexandra had felt transformation, he experienced only a hollow binding, loyalty enforced through fear rather than elevation.

János stepped forward next, jaw clenched with determination that barely concealed his terror. Again, the mirror tasted but did not feast. Both men were bound now, tethered to Weiss through threads of compulsion and dread, but they remained fundamentally unchanged—human servants rather than transformed instruments.

The difference was tangible, visible in the way the glyphs responded differently to each offering, how the shadows seemed to bend toward Alexandra while treating the others with indifference.

When the ritual was complete, the glyphs flared bright as lightning for one blinding instant before settling back to their usual ethereal glow. Eric inclined his head with the grave dignity of a high priest acknowledging a successful sacrifice.

"It is done," he declared with the finality of a judge pronouncing sentence. "You are bound now to this place, to me, and to what comes next. The old powers have tasted you and found you... acceptable."

He turned and moved behind the altar with predatory grace, where a narrow stone passage yawned like the throat of some primordial beast. In silence heavy with anticipation and dread, they followed.

The passage ended abruptly in a chamber that seemed born of another age entirely—a fusion of the ancient and impossibly modern that made Alexandra understand something crucial about Eric's nature. He shifted between realms not like a man changing masks, but like a god changing elements. Sacred ritualist and technological overlord were not separate faces—they were unified expressions of power that transcended human categories.

The walls bristled with servers that hummed with barely contained power, their surfaces alive with streams of encrypted data. At the center, a holographic map of the world spun slowly in three dimensions, marked with thousands of tiny lights that pulsed like stars in the darkness.

A single crimson flare pulsed over Western Ukraine like a drop of blood on pristine snow. Lviv.

"A researcher has chosen betrayal," Eric said, his words falling like stones into still water. His pale eyes fixed on the pulsing red light with the intensity of a predator studying prey. "A defector who fled west carrying knowledge never meant for lesser hands—secrets that could unravel years of careful planning."

His gaze settled on Alexandra with mountain-weight intensity. "This will be your proving ground, your baptism in fire and blood. The world does not yet know your name. After this task is complete, it will learn to whisper it with proper respect."

"Who is our target?" János asked, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hands.

Eric's smile was razor-thin, predatory. "A defector who once studied under Ava herself—worked in her inner circle, learned her methods, absorbed her teachings. That connection alone makes him more dangerous than a viper hiding in grain."

The name Ava seemed to hang in the air like an unspoken curse, carrying weight and significance that none dared question aloud.

Alexandra gave a single, sharp nod, her jaw set with determination that bordered on the zealous. The ritual had awakened something primal and predatory that sang with anticipation. "Consider it done."

As they turned to leave, a flash of crimson caught their attention—not a painting, but something far more unsettling. The wall itself seemed to shimmer, and for a moment the obsidian surface became transparent, revealing a vision that burned itself into their minds.

A girl who might have been eighteen or eighty, with raven-black hair that moved in winds that touched nothing else and eyes like dying stars. Her raised hand hovered over a shattered black pyramid, fragments of obsidian floating around her fingers like dark snow. Her expression was both divine and terrible, the face of creation and destruction united in perfect, terrifying harmony.

Boja stared at the vision, and something deep in his peasant blood—memories passed down through generations of harsh winters and darker legends—recognized what he was seeing. This was the face his grandmother had whispered about in the old tongue, the Child of Ruin, whose breath could crack mountains and whose tears turned men to salt. He crossed himself with movements automatic and desperate, a prayer to whatever gods might still listen.

But deeper than prayer, deeper than memory, something stirred in his very DNA. Ancient code written in blood and bone, dormant for generations, began to pulse with

recognition. The vision had triggered something that slept in the spaces between his cells—something that had been waiting for this moment since his bloodline began.

The Guardian Protocol had awakened within him.

The vision faded, leaving only smooth obsidian, but the image remained burned in their minds. Whatever had shown them that glimpse wanted them to remember, to carry that knowledge forward into the hunt that was about to begin.

Beyond the chamber walls, throughout the facility, lights dimmed in systematic waves as if some vast intelligence was awakening. In server rooms and command centers, in satellite installations and hidden bunkers around the world, the network responded to signals sent from this mountain stronghold.

The hunt had begun.

And somewhere in the city of Lviv, a man who thought himself safe began to feel the weight of eyes upon him, the sensation of a noose slowly tightening, the inexorable approach of forces he had hoped never to face again.