

Vladimir Anderson

# Struggle

*Grip of steel*



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Vladimir Anderson  
**Struggle: Grip of steel**

«Автор»

2023

## **Anderson V.**

Struggle: Grip of steel / V. Anderson — «Автор», 2023

The fifth installment of the Struggle saga. Metropolitan Guzokh, who has declared himself Pope of Arkhan, forms a new wing of the church, eclipsing the majesty of the patriarchate of Nevrokh. Within his shadowy retinue, a cult of belief in the omnipotence of the Black Stone and an all-consuming thirst for mastery over other minds flourishes. Gora, with the help of Cobra, expands his power into two key sectors of the Ekaterinoslav-Kremenchug faction. But a failed assassination attempt on him seems to inflict an indelible wound on his psyche and his understanding of freedom itself. While "Detachment-14" heats up with new strife, Bolotnikov, gathering his Maquis detachment, appeals to those who are ready to shed their blood for the right to live freely. Power, betrayal and revenge take new, unexpected forms. Each character balances their ideals and reality on a knife blade. Witness this epic saga, where even in the darkest corners a light can shine.

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# Vladimir Anderson

## Struggle: Grip of steel

Prefect

The dream lasted a long time. Actually, it was not even a dream, but some other world, where everything around existed in a different way than one was used to seeing it. A world in which Raphael was alive, and his wife and their child were beside him. Already grown up and looking with such lively and full of something new eyes. Something new that his grandfather could give him. A grandfather who is still a prefect.

So many times these thoughts have gone round and round in circles, and they only stopped at the word "prefect". Yes. It is. And no one else can be. No one else is capable of even thinking about being in this place. It was created by him, for him, and for no one else. All others are just parts, cogs in the mechanism in which he is the brain. No organism can live without a brain, and the business of the whole organism is, first of all, the preservation of the brain. If the brain dies, the whole organism will die.

Somewhere outside, Gora felt a light. A slightly different one, not the one that had been there before for this long time before. A simpler light, not capable of opening his eyes, but only to keep his eyes from getting in the way of scrutiny... His eyes began to open. And along with his eyes came his essence. The essence that wouldn't let him lose.

Around him, he immediately recognized the bedroom walls of one of his offices. It was impossible not to recognize those walls – the Deese sector. His cradle. Where he had risen from the ashes to give people freedom and safety. Yes, that was exactly what he'd been thinking when he'd started all this. No one should die by accident. Or at the hands of the plagues. No one.

Then he made the rules. And no one got killed at all. At no one's hands. He remembered it very well... The mortality that had gone before had ceased to exist as a given. People became different very quickly, no longer seeing death. Sometimes they even started fighting each other.

The very people who just yesterday could have been killed for nothing, suddenly suddenly forgot to value their own lives and the lives of those around them. Simply because they stopped seeing death. Gora, in making these new rules, forgot something very important. Something he had realized while he was in the other world, raising the dead.

He turned his head and saw two men from his guard. One of them, seeing the waking prefect, immediately ran out of the room, and then slowly approached him. It was Kolya Lesin, who had once been in his own 381st soma of workers. Gora's personal guards were selected exclusively from there.

– Mr. Prefect... – he said timidly. His eyes showed that he trembled at the mere sight of the living leader of an entire faction.

– Who did your partner run to report to? – The Mountain asked immediately.

– To the doctor. – A little lost, Kolya answered. – To Dr. Kupavsky.

At least as long as things are set up properly. Once upon a time, Hora had ordered their best doctor to be kept as a practitioner for the entire sector, not a personal one for himself. His qualifications were too high for him to treat just one person, rather than several thousand. But times were obviously changing, and he would definitely need his own personal doctor. One who, for obvious reasons, would not be allowed to have contact with other patients.

– Give me your gun.

Kolya looked back at him at first – the TT-33 holstered in his holster was an addition to the main weapon of the security units – the AK-74SU. Even when the units were being formed, there was a choice between what to give them as a supplement. That is, the weapon that, in fact, they would not use, but rather for status. The choice was Makarov (PM), Tokarev (TT) or Stechkin (APS) pistols.

And, although by all accounts the APS was indisputably better than all the others, then personally Gora chose the TT – this gun was legendary, of the times of the Great War, and of the power he considered exemplary for himself. Especially now. When he had survived another assassination attempt.

Retrieving the gun, Gora pulled out the clip, checked the cartridges, then inserted it back in, carefully twisted the bolt, and placed it under his pillow. This was a time when one should especially think about the fact that a gun for his position was far from being a weapon for his position.

Then he pulled his legs out from under the blanket and placed them on the floor. There wasn't much strength in them, but there was some. And he didn't need more than that. Next to it was a drop cloth with a needle stuck in it, which he carefully pulled out and stuck into the mattress.

Getting up, Gora went to the closet that contained his clothes, opened it, selected his tunic with almost no insignia, except for the Self-Government chevron, consisting of a large fang in the middle and crossed working picks. To the tunic the same dark brown pants and black boots.

By the time he had time to put on his boots the second guard and Dr. Kupavsky had returned. Both of them looked dumbfounded, though the doctor tried not to show it:

– Mr. Prefect, you can't move so much at once, we've had several blood transfusions, blood pressure is very unstable after something like this.

– Thank you, Doctor. – The prefect put a boot on his other foot and, whimpering, threw on his tunic. – Now you'll have to study and analyze my health the whole time you're here. Without being distracted by anything or anyone. Consider this your constant and only duty from this moment on.

Gora walked over to his bed, pulled his pistol out from under his pillow, and looked at it – yes, I should get a holster first, it wasn't very respectable to go everywhere with it in my hand:

– Kolya, give me your holster for now. You'll get a new one during the day.

The prefect left the bedroom and found himself in his office: a desk and chair, a closet full of weapons, a nightstand full of documents, and a large canvas with the image of autonomy. It's his. It belongs to him. And no one else will be able to use it.

– How many guards are present outside the door now? – Gora asked Lesin, who was the last of the trio to leave the bedroom.

– Your entire security company. One hundred and twenty men.

– All right, then. Don't let anyone in without my knowledge. And find me Tikhomirov.

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Sitting at his desk, Gora realized the reality that was right for him at the moment. The power he had gained not so long ago was pressing down on him with its weight. And not at all from the outside, as he had expected – all those awkward outside efforts, like trying to break the Inquisitors into the Korska sector from the surface, or firing on the repair team near the Deese sector. It was child's play compared to what was happening in the reality that enveloped him.

This reality of controlling your environment. Near and far. And now, if the inner circle was relatively controlled by the pressure of his well-deserved authority, the outer circle, the people, were very loose. The people knew the Mountain, understood his nature of action and his rigidity in making decisions and enforcing them. But all the advantages ended there. After all, he was not feared, as once the plagues were feared.

Yes, he was the sole owner of the power of several production facilities and even a certain portion of the surface over them. Yes, his orders were unquestionable and the only thing to be obeyed was execution. Yes, everyone was confident in his strategic thinking and firmness of will. Yes, everyone was afraid to interfere or even pretend that they did not like something. But no one was afraid of him anymore. And they weren't afraid of losing him because of it either.

The security the prefect had given them was already taken for granted. A given that could be and would be without him. And it was that message that began to give rise to wrong thoughts.

Wrong thoughts. Dangerous thoughts. The ones that shouldn't have been there by definition, but which were formed because they had to fill the vacuum of fear with something. And since there was no other fear, that vacuum would be filled by thoughtlessness.

Yeah, that's what happens. When people are afraid of something for a long time. That something disappears, stops weighing on them, and they start to think they've done it. By

themselves. And if they did it themselves, they will be able to cope with it again, if it arises. So they relax. This is the very levity that arises in the place of the vacuum where fear used to be.

This is it. Where this and the last assassination attempt came from. None of the people were afraid of losing their leader. They weren't afraid of being left alone to face what the chief used to face. Because they'd come to think of it as nothing. A worthless trifle, handled by a worthless chief, whom nobody fears. It is very common for people to mistake kindness for weakness, and it is this

attitude that causes the need to become a terrible ruthless despot who does not value their lives, their attitudes, or their needs. Because now their needs and their life will become the iron necessity to keep the leader alive. And their attitude will become so insignificant in its importance that it will simply be forgotten.....

Now it's simply not possible to be kind and caring while still alive. Either you have to sacrifice your life or these qualities. And people themselves do not realize how important it is to sacrifice the latter in order to preserve their lives. Nothing requires security as much as the need to preserve life first of all. And nothing demands fear as much as security itself, which without fear is simply not appreciated. They do not see that it is there. They do not want to realize that it is the life they have.

There was a knock at the door. First Lesin came in with a report of Tikhomirov's arrival, and only then did Tikhomirov himself come in after approving his entrance. Something had clearly changed in him, something very deep inside, but this change was more surprising than alarming.

There was no competition for him in this something – it was as if his inner core had changed, which probably made him act differently himself. It was reflected in his eyes, in the way he moved, and even in the way he breathed.

– We have much news, Mr. Prefect," Tikhomirov began at once.

– Have a seat and let's go through this in order. Start with who was it? Who tried to put a knife to my throat?

Tikhomirov sat down on a chair opposite the Mountain. It was obvious that there was neither fear nor doubt in him. Only pre-calibrated steps. There were already a thousand of them in his head.

– We have only theories, Mr. Prefect. He never regained consciousness, and there's nothing to hook him to....

– You don't have to hook it. No need for that. Organize a public execution by hanging.

– Mr. Prefect...

– I know what you want to say. But no. I don't need that, either. Executing him, on the other hand, would be a good idea. Let everyone watch.

– As you command, Mr. Prefect.

Gore was all impressed with the qualities of the man he once looked out of the crowd. He was clearly progressing, and very quickly at that. It was still unclear why this was happening, but his performance was encouraging.

– Here's a look at the new set of laws I'll be distributing this week. – The Mountain handed him a piece of paper on which were handwritten, point by point, the "Rights and Responsibilities of the Self-Governing Territory". – Study it now.

Rights and obligations of the Self-Governing Territory

Everyone is responsible with his life for the life of his boss.

Failure to obey the orders of one's superior is considered an act of sabotage and is punishable at the discretion of the superior up to and including the death penalty, approved only by the prefect

Members of the SMERSH organization shall have the right to search, detain and use any physical restraint, if necessary, against any citizen of the Self-Governing Territory.

The Prefect has the power to reward, pardon and execute any citizen of the Local Government Territory without cause

All efforts and measures taken by the citizens shall be directed solely towards the fulfillment of the will of the prefect

No one has the right to question, even in thought, the correctness of the prefect's actions.

Openly not accepting the will of the prefect is considered an act of sabotage

Tikhomirov continued to hold this piece of paper in his hands, reading it, and didn't even blink an eye when he finished doing so:

– Most of these measures have in fact already been approved by me, Mr. Prefect. There are no superfluous words here, except one. In the last paragraph, the word "open" is still superfluous. If in the previous paragraph we believe that one should not be against it even in thought, then we should also consider sabotage a crime even in thought. Whether we know about it or not, we must consider it a crime.

Gora looked at the paper, then at Tikhomirov, then shook his head slightly affirmatively:

– Yeah. You're right. The word "open" doesn't belong here.

Inquisitor

This cell was even smaller than the one he'd been sitting in a few days ago. This one contained only a bunk and a garbage bucket. It seemed to him that the warders had something special to do with buckets – you couldn't just take them out, or cover them with something, or even fill them with water at first. They are inviolable except when you defecate in them. I guess that's what it looked like in their heads.

It was a punitive isolation cell, where prisoners who violated something flagrantly or repeatedly were sent. The priest had violated several times – he was wearing clothes that were not according to the regulations. He had one button undone on his collar and one on each sleeve, plus his sleeves were rolled up. He was reprimanded the first time, and sent to the detention center the second time.

Of course, he tried to convince them that there was no malice in it. That the button on his collar was undone because otherwise the collar squeezed his throat and it was hard to breathe. And the sleeves don't button up properly at all. And that the whole prison uniform was too small for him. In response, he heard that it was not a problem for him to button up, that he sometimes did so during inspections, that it was the same with the sleeves, and that all these were gross violations of discipline.

And again he tried to say that, indeed, technically he could zip it up, but not for more than a couple of minutes while the inspection was going on. And that he was only doing it so that his actions would not be seen as malicious, which they were not.

He was once again told that there was a malicious intent to return everything back to the wrong position after the inspection had left, and that if he did not understand it in a good way, he would have to understand it in a bad way and sit in the isolation center.

With a garbage can, and two square meters of free space. That's all you can count on, Your Eminence Samoh.....

Not a few hours later, the same mentally ill person, who could shout day and night without tiring, was moved to the cell opposite him. And once again, in addition to the acrid stench of his own feces and urine, the sound accompaniment from the room opposite was added.

On the first such day Samokh did not fall asleep, and spent the whole next day in endless efforts to stay awake, pecking his nose at every minute. From time to time the warden looked into the cell and tapped the bars with his baton, on the one hand insinuating that he could see everything, and if you covered your eyes a little longer than the blinking time, he would immediately report a violation – a prisoner in the SHIZO was sleeping at the wrong time. On the other hand, such attention gave Samokh some confidence – he continued to realize that the whole damn structure of the prison administration was probably designed around him to get something out of him. That realization kept him from extinguishing his sense of self-importance to those around him-so necessary when there were no rights to anything.

This one, too, he fell asleep. There was no strength for anything, and even the shouts from the cell opposite eventually merged into such a background that it ceased to disturb him. He dreamt this time of his drill of unspoken resource and of Rambanhr, who is at the head of it. They had beaten Guzokh to a pulp to begin with, then they had taken out some chums from the BSS and shot them, then they had brought in Ananhr herself and started mocking her, calling her an upstart and a whore working her sweet spot. It was impossible to see her reaction or even her face properly in the dream. At those screams the dream ended, Samoh woke up and heard that they were screams from the cell across the hall. And it was so easy to feel the presence of the Church's combat unit near him...

A day later, the punishment days in the SHIZO were over, and Samokh was taken back to his regular cell, where there was a broken toilet bowl with shit in it and, of course, a swarm of flies over it. This day he was not supposed to leave the cell except for the evening formation and rotation, and if it were not for the constant companion from the cell opposite, who had also been released from the isolation cell and brought back. Apparently, he was treated the same way as the holy bucket in the SHIZO – he could not be touched, changed, paid attention to by the warders, and in general the only thing that could be done with him was to move him from one place to another, and in strict accordance with the location of the Metropolitan. And if the bucket was ordinary for obvious reasons, this unicum was undoubtedly dug out of some other prison and placed in this one, so that a famous person would not be bored.

At the evening inspection, where Samokh, believing that it was not necessary to arouse another hatred of him by unbuttoned buttons, decided to be a little patient and put everything in visible order before the cameras were opened. Of course, he looked like a clown in clothes several sizes smaller than his own. And in spite of the fact that there were no remarks to him during the inspection, fifteen minutes after the inspection, several prison officers broke into the cell in an urgent order, who recorded another malicious systematic violation in the uniform, which entailed, of course, a new transfer to the SHIZO. The second in a row.

Nothing had even had time to change, including, of course, the bucket of slop, which stood in the same place as before. There was no doubt about who would be brought to the chambers opposite in a few minutes. And moreover, if it had not happened, Samoh would have thought that something even more terrible was being prepared. So when the cutthroat appeared, it already calmed him down in a way.

This night I didn't even sleep that badly, though I didn't dream about anything. There was no strength at all, as before, so the process of sleeping was equal in an instant – I closed my eyes and opened them almost immediately. The warden tapped on the bars with his key, a traditional way of getting up in the morning for the isolation ward.

And it was somewhat surprising that Samokh had not been taken to any interrogation or other investigative measures. He was being held here simply to bring him to a certain condition, and, assuming that it had not yet been reached, was waiting for his time.

The second visit to the SHIZO was not so long – only one day. And the Metropolitan was taken back. But this time not to his cell, but to a double cell, where at first there was no one. In addition,

the cell had a heavy steel door with a window that opened to serve food. The toilet worked, too, and it seemed that these conditions were much better than before. Samoh even thought that they had simply had enough of bullying him, and finally gave him a break, so that he could redouble his strength in the new stage. But he was wrong.

Half an hour later, a prisoner was placed with him, who was not only sick, but was radiating bacilli and germs. He went straight to his bunk, even in front of the warder, who did not prevent him from doing so, even though he was only allowed to sit during the day. In a room of two by three meters it was unreal not to be infected by such a neighbor, and already by evening Samokh felt how from inside he began to feel fever, and darkness appeared in his eyes, and everything dimmed.

Close to bedtime, the patient was taken from his cell with a loud notification that he needed hospitalization due to a corona virus – the same one that periodically appeared in one corner of the

Empire or another. In general, the story of the disease seemed to be over, but periodically new outbreaks appeared, which were quickly localized, preventing the spread. And there was no doubt that this patient had been brought by the S.S.C. from a fresh region, where a new strain of the virus had formed.

Samoh began to vomit, and considering that he had eaten practically nothing, nothing came out. Even before lights out, he collapsed on his bunk and fell asleep half-lying. Then in the morning, the inspection burst in on him after his official rise. They had decided to arrange it not at six-thirty in the morning, but an hour and a half earlier, and the guard went around banging on the cell doors with a key, waking up the prisoners. All the doors except Samoh's cell, who didn't wake up. The inspection recorded a new and vicious demonstrative violation of the order of the pre-trial detention center – it was necessary to continue pretending to sleep after the official wake-up, when the warden woke up everyone personally, and when it made no sense, because anyway they would wake up by force not immediately, but in five minutes. It was impossible to think of anything else but the SHIZO, and the Metropolitan went there again. This time he was already sick.

Of course, no one was going to send him to any hospital as the one who had infected him. They said that he would only infect the recovering plagues there. He would only violate all their loyal and understandably written norms, and here he would also cause physical harm to the people around him. Later Samokh learns that the sick man who spent a few hours in the cell with him, lying on his bunk, was convicted of murdering his sister and her friend at their home during a week-long binge – he broke into his sister's house demanding an explanation, and then stuck a knife to her throat and then strangled her friend. For him, the wardens considered it more necessary to take care of his health by hospitalization.

The third visit to the SHIZO differed from the previous two except for the presence of fever in his body and constantly cloudy consciousness. Samokh regularly poked his nose while sitting on his bunk, and his surroundings in the form of his eternal companion yelling and the warden occasionally banging his key on the bars had merged into a single entity that was purposefully trying to tear his mind away from him. Eventually, sometime toward evening, someone tapped him with a baton – first on the shoulder, then on the ribs. Then in the ribs again.

It made him even more nauseous, and the pain played through his temples like a needle, but he got up. He got to his feet and collapsed. He vomited some kind of sludge, probably bile juice.

After that he felt a little better, though not for long. The warder kept demanding to get up, and it was unclear to the metropolitan himself how, but he succeeded. After shouting something directly at him, the SS officer went out and locked the bars behind him.

Samokh fell back into his bunk and, without even trying to make himself comfortable, fell into sleep. He dreamed of Nevrokh. Finally, someone who had given him the right advice, from whom he had learned to defeat his enemies and to weigh his strength before he acted.

– There is a man who is very dangerous to us. – the patriarch told him. – A man, not a plague.

Who is more dangerous to us than anyone else. Don't be a fool like others, don't think that people are weaker than us just because we once defeated them. Don't underestimate your enemy – there is a very high price to pay for that Don't underestimate your enemy. Don't underestimate your enemy....

The last catches swirled in a merry-go-round around Samoh's consciousness. In the middle of the night he woke up remembering that dream. And then he remembered another one, where Bazankhr with general's epaulettes tells him about self-confidence, vanity and bluster. It all comes from misconceptions about his enemy. An enemy who now seeks to break him and make him beg for leniency.

– There will be no leniency. – The Metropolitan whispered aloud. – There will be nothing but one. The fires of the Holy Inquisition, which will make everyone tremble at the mere mention of it.

He felt a fever inside him even greater than the one he'd felt when he'd contracted this virus.

A heat that burned away all the sickness, all the weakness, all the indecision. His eyes seemed to come back to life, and he began to see clearly. At the same time, his hearing began to return to him. And then the screams from the cell across the hall.

Samoh winced. Pain shot through his temples from one to the other, a little nausea and it seemed harder to breathe. His eyes darkened momentarily, but he kept moving anyway. And the sensations of reality took hold stronger than the pain.

It was dark, for at night only a single light bulb at the beginning of the corridor illuminated the passage, but the prisoner in the cell opposite was clearly visible.

The Metropolitan stood up and walked to the door grate, still staring at the screaming madman. Raising one hand and pointing it palm up at him, Samokh said:

– Blessings on your healing, my son..... Only Jah's faith will heal you.....

Bolotnikov

That inane inability of people to become better than they can be. And the anger with which they meet any attempt at change. They see you as the enemy. An even bigger enemy than the person who actually made them live worse and make themselves worse. And weaker. What a hard line those two words have.

Weaker and stronger. If we allow ourselves to change, is it strength to change things, or weakness to allow change? Or conversely, is it strength that leaves us the same, or weakness that prevents us from changing error to truth?

Colonel Bolotnikov had no answers to these questions now. He was simply leading the very ten percent of people who had accepted the new changes, and agreed to be free against the will of the majority. About seven hundred people in all. And how they were still being looked at when they left. They even tried to shout phrases like "weaklings", "broken", and even "damned", the latter even caught on amongst themselves. When Bolotnikov gave them the opportunity to choose a name for the new Maquis unit they were now, they all eventually agreed on the word, and it was now the Cursed Battalion.

And the timing was perfect. They really were the cursed ones who stayed. Who didn't want to leave. Who didn't want to give themselves a chance to be free. And take responsibility for it. This word for Bolotnikov became something like a red rag for a bull. He always took responsibility for himself, as if it were a gift, not a burden to be carried on his back.

It was that word that brought him so close to his entire new squad. And everyone could see that their commander was someone who was just as damned as they were. And who has nowhere to retreat to, who, like them, also has all the bridges burned behind him. Want to even go back, and they'll tear you apart on arrival just for not dying when you were without them. That's the kind of hatred you can't confuse with anything.

When people who have let someone go start wishing hard for the suffering, pain and death of the one they let go. While outwardly saying that this is a pattern – a natural position of the wrong decision that was made about them. And internally realizing that if this person succeeds, it will mean that they themselves are wrong.

And they cannot allow themselves to be wrong, first of all, for themselves. Therefore, any return will be interpreted by them as a victory of their opinion and their way of life, which means that it is necessary to punish those who denied it, resisting it. And this will also mean the complete abolition of any framework of punishment for this, because the punished will be a priori infinitely guilty.

The "Damned" battalion was moving from the "Archa" sector towards Poltava, to then reach Kharkov. There was to be a small base of Detachment-14 there, and Bolotnikov expected to meet some of his own, to at least find out the latest news, and what status he himself was now in: deserter, traitor, or whatever. Frankly speaking, he was not much concerned about what word they could call him, but more about the fate of "Detachment-14" itself, which in his understanding had gone down with Khmel'nitsky's overthrow. And now it remained only to find out where this bottom was, and how his former comrades-in-arms would behave on it.

And how Misha and Natasha were doing was also important. Still, there were almost no close friends left. And the fewer of them there were, the more precious became those who still existed. After all, you can't lose friends indefinitely. You can only keep their memory endlessly....

And especially now he was curious to ask if they were having the same dream as he was. After all, no one among the "damned" had ever had such a dream. He had asked several of them, and then somehow he had asked them at the general meeting in the evening. He had nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of being misunderstood or thought he was crazy. He had long ago passed those boundaries, and the only criterion for him was the practicality of something, not how it looked from the outside.

No one laughed or looked askew – it was just that no one had ever dreamed anything like this. He stood at the edge of a grove and saw that in the middle of the grove, where everything was illuminated by light, stood a girl and a boy in smart white clothes. "Only together with Mary can you discover the secret of the Black Stone," he only heard from their side.

Raven

"He has a man in there who will blow himself up along with everyone else if ordered to do so," those words loomed in Raven's mind as he stood in the corridors outside the main hall in the Diza Sector administration building. Of course, Cobra's men had let him and his escort of 120 fighters through, pointed out the right roads, led him past the mine barriers where necessary, and now all he had to do was press the button for the elevator to take him downstairs.

But he remembered those words of Cobra's at the meeting. Where he'd said that the prefect's authority was different from the authority within the Kiwi units. The miners followed the prefect's orders as if the sword of Damocles hung over every one of them and would cut them in half for the slightest offense.

"Will blow himself up if so ordered," Raven heard within himself again. He couldn't believe that anyone around him had been able to control his subordinates to such a degree. He had worked so hard to keep discipline among his own people. He had been executed for almost nothing, and kept in pits for weeks, and socialized the families of the dead. But to get that kind of discipline...

No. It seems impossible. And yet there's a man alive who organized it right here. A hundred meters underground. If he's still alive, as they say.

But if you agreed to take it, you're alive. It can't be otherwise. Especially alive since he's determined that the meeting can be underground. You can't smoke him out now. If he survived an assassination attempt, you can't smoke him out. Actually, it's not the first assassination attempt.

He organized the past. Even though he knew it wasn't gonna work. And the guy was just a waste of time. He never made it past the entrance. I'm surprised he even got there. He was supposed to be shot on the way in and just report to the prefect about the weirdness. And he even went through the elevator... However, it wasn't too hard for such an unnecessary little thing to get through the elevator....

All we had to do was break up the Mountain and Cobra. It was immediately obvious that they were going to work too closely together. An experienced politician like Raven didn't need this strengthening of Cobra, especially from outside. He knows how important it is to make sure that the spikes are not out of the ordinary, but like everyone else. Which is more than can be said for Cobra. He's out of line. And the incident with the failed assassin didn't help matters much. But it worked pretty well for someone else. I don't know if the prefect is dead or alive.

No, I'm alive, of course. Otherwise they wouldn't have agreed to take me in. They would have found any reason and said that it was not the right time, that they couldn't do it now, and all the other things they usually make up when they are not supposed to give the right answer. So the Mountain is alive and waiting downstairs. After that damn elevator, where his man is like a zombie and everything can go off just on command.

Raven exhaled the air to relax a little. It had been a long time since he'd been so hesitant to do something, especially something he'd already decided to do. This demonic component of the Mountain's power was becoming all-consuming, all-encompassing, pervasive....

Who was it that said the days of the Kiwis were numbered since the Mounties got self-rule?

The Jackal? Yes, yes, the sly shifter we didn't have time to execute in front of the entire Hivi

leadership... But just because he's a traitor doesn't mean he's wrong. There is, indeed, good sense in his words. The power of the Mountain is fundamentally different from that of the Hivi, who do not have their own backbone, the structure of the organization that he has. A subterranean organization, where one can only enter and leave by strict permission. Where they don't see the sun every day, but only when they are allowed. Where the Sun for them is a prefect who does what he wants with them with the permission of the plagues. And, as it turned out, also decides to live or not to live for them as he wants ... No, these are not the Kiwis, who have been rattling their weapons for a hundred years, but cannot seriously agree with each other....

Raven pressed the communication button, and he was immediately answered...

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The plan was to send the first platoon first, then the second, then descend with the third, and leave the fourth on the surface. But the instructions from the prefect went against this understanding. "Only 20 men and no more," it was said from downstairs over the communications, and it was clear that either this would have to be agreed to or just leave. Raven had to agree.

He stood next to the elevator, realizing that this way he would have more control, and perhaps even something to negotiate if something went wrong. Besides, he was genuinely curious about what a man who was always ready to die might feel inside.

– My name is Raven. – He began, realizing that he had to start somewhere when talking to this man. – I'm the Hivi commander. Do you know about us?

The elevator operator was quite neatly dressed; his work clothes were clean, straight, and well-groomed. It looked as if he loved his work, his clothes, and even his own life. There was nothing terrifying about his eyes, except that the depth of thought coming out of them was a little startling, as if he were very old, though he was clearly in his early twenties. And it was no surprise that his left hand was always in his pants pocket, just as Cobra had warned.

– I know. Everybody here knows a hevya.

– Will you tell me your name? You know mine.

– Name? The name I used to have is gone. A ghost has it. I was once called Kiril. But that name means nothing to me now. It's just a shard of the past.

– Why? Isn't driving an elevator a man's job?

– Ooh, so worthy. That's why the past name doesn't matter. And we don't call it an elevator, we call it a cage. I don't know if elevators go that far.

– I understand. It's really deep. I thought it was a few hundred meters.

– More than a kilometer. Our mine is one of the deepest in the world.

Raven shuddered a little. He felt as if he were really going down to the devil, with whom he had started a conversation.

– So you're not a lifter, what are you? A lifter?

– Yes, a cagey one. And now the name Cage suits me. As long as the cage lives, I live. As long as I live, the cage lives. It's a very important position in the mine, because there's no other connection to the outside world. We go in and out only through the cage and no other way. And I am very proud to be entrusted with it...

– Is the coal lifted through the cage, too?

– No, it's a skip. It lifts the coal up, and there are no people inside, just coal. It's run by other people, and I'm not even allowed in there.

Raven was a little surprised that this man always answered his questions in some way. If he were in Gora's place, he would have forbidden his subordinates to communicate with any outsiders, not to mention the structure of anything. And given that the prefect was obviously not a simple man, there must have been some sense in not giving such an order among his own people. But there was nothing to be shy about, and it was almost straightforward to ask.

– Didn't you ever want to go to Maquis or someone else like us if you had the chance? Kirill shook his head slightly negatively, pursing his lips slightly:

– No. There can be no better leader than our prefect. There simply can't be. And I was lucky enough to be born here to be under his command. You know, Crow, sometimes I can't even

believe it. I could have been born anywhere. In any mine. In any industrial sector. But I was born here. In the Deese sector, where the Prefect himself is from...

A shiver ran through the raven slightly. He tried not to show it, but he was sure it was noticeable. The sight of this man was maddening in a way, his eyes, the way he spoke, and the feeling with which he told it all. In front of him stood a fanatic who had apparently willingly sold his soul to the devil and now marveled at it. Where such a thing could come from, and what should be done to people to make them think like that and even worship their commander, was a mystery. But the worst fears seemed to be justified – these men were ready to bravely give their lives not just on command, but perhaps even begging for that command. Maybe not all of them were like that, but if there were some, it was safe to say that in time they would be the majority, and in a year, if not sooner, there would be no other type of people there.

And it is now very clear that why the Mountain does not forbid or talk to anyone. Why should he? Let them talk about their loyalty, they have nothing else in their minds. And no secrets are obviously not to be entrusted to them. It's not a problem to find out about the whole mine.

Nothing's changed there since the 20th century. And when people feel more free, it is much easier to brainwash them – they will consider themselves volunteers, and all the ideas are their own, which just someone voiced for them, wrapped in a verbal form to make their lives easier.

The Jackal warned me. He had warned, albeit with a sort of fateful tone, that this would happen. That the Mountain would only expand its influence over time and draw more and more territories and people under its power like a snowball. And how many idiots turned out to argue with this point of view simply because it was voiced by a traitor. That traitor is probably laughing his ass off now when he sees that we missed it. And his laughter will probably be heard soon when we finally arrive in hell.

– I understand, Cyril, I understand... The Prefect is indeed an outstanding leader. And it's good that we're on the same side.

Kletovoy nodded slightly but quite confidently, while the fire of pride in himself, the mine, and his chief essentially burned in his eyes.

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The checkpoint, and now the iron door in front of the prefect's office, removed all doubt from Raven's mind that the devil himself was sitting here. His group was stopped as soon as they left the cage, and only Raven and one of the others with him were allowed in, both being searched and their weapons confiscated. The others were told to stay at the entrance.

All the people in the mine were as if zombified. They walked down several corridors, then past the main crossroads, which apparently gave access to both the mine face and the underground transportation point. In all this time there was not a single worker who looked at the guests with any interest. They only moved a little to the side, so as not to interfere with the passage, when they saw the Prefect's security men, who were looking at the workers and the guests with all eyes.

At the checkpoint near, apparently, their headquarters, they were searched once more and, having let them through, told to wait at the door of the prefect's office itself. It took almost half an hour to wait by the last door. And Raven was already sure that this was on purpose. That the Mountain was making him wait just to wait. To make it clear that there would be no trading inside – there could only be requests, which the prefect would consider at will. But that wasn't enough – the atmosphere itself seemed so dark and terrifying that one wanted nothing more than to get out of here. No agreements, no understanding of anything, just to be left in one piece.

I wondered if Cobra also left his guards at the entrance, also surrendered his weapons, also waited at the door until called? I guess not. That times were a little different back then. Times when one could get a good place in this arrangement, and Raven would have gotten it, if he hadn't been so arrogant and conceited about his position, treating the Mountain as a temporary and not viable entity.... And that's the price he has to pay for it now....

Finally, he was called inside. He thought that now his assistant would be ordered to stay where he was, but no, he was allowed to enter as well.

Inside stood several men on different sides of the table, another on each side of the front door. Several of them had one arm behind their backs, no doubt holding weapons in a concealed hand. Standing closest to the prefect was a much younger man in camouflage, not black like the rest of them, but a man in a camouflage uniform. Apparently the second face of this autonomy, Tikhomirov. Stamina and cunning, exactly as he was described by informants. Hora himself sat at the table with a very stern expression on his face, which was especially colored by a large poster behind him with a huge fang and two picks crossed under it – the symbol of the Donetsk- Makeyevka Autonomy.

– You can sit in the chair opposite," said the one to the right of the door.

The chair directly across from the prefect's desk looked in some ways like an interrogation room, albeit without the bias. But apparently it was not expected to be otherwise. The man in charge of the whole thing was clearly not going to demonstrate that he was anyone's equal. The chiwi commander sat down in a chair.

– You've kept me waiting, Prefect," Raven began, and then, realizing that it wasn't a good start, continued. – I hope this isn't a sign that you've got a grudge against us for something?

– You've been waiting, Mr. Raven. – The Mountain answered without even blinking, not angrily or menacingly, but like the devil himself, explaining the gist of things to the man who had sold his soul to him. – Because that was my order. No one else's. And you've already realized that nothing is done here without my consent. You wanted to talk to me in person. And now you have that opportunity. I keep my word.

Raven fidgeted in his seat for a moment, then said:

– I'd like to be very frank with you. So I'll ask you right off the bat. Do you consider us friends?  
– You cover our position on the surface. We are extracting raw materials for the Empire. At this point, who we think you are and vice versa is irrelevant. Or do you have a different opinion?

– No, I agree, Mr. Prefect. I completely agree... Then let's get down to business. Business regarding your new acquisitions. The Sappo and Archa sectors.

The prefect didn't blink an eye. No agreement, no inner satisfaction at his own success, no greed, no suspicion. He just sat there with the look of a man who had everything.

Raven continued:

– Right now, Cobra's units are providing cover, as they do here, but he doesn't have enough forces to do so. If a really serious attack were to happen, you, Mr. Prefect, could lose a Sappo or an Arch, simply because there aren't enough forces to cover it. Not to mention the equipment, of which I have far more under my command than Cobra.

The prefect continued to watch calmly, only occasionally rubbing his hand against his arm.

He was clearly not afraid of any possible Maquis attacks, nor of the fact that the chiwi might not have enough strength somewhere. He had enough strength now, and he didn't need this external prikriti, just to keep his own strength up.

Raven was beginning to doubt his own proposal, but he finished anyway:

– Given that we have information about the preparation of a new Maquis attack on the sector "Arha", we propose to replace the perimeter guards with my personal units, and Cobra detachments entirely concentrate on the seven sectors "Donetsk-Makeyevka".

– Will you be leading your units on site in person?

The question was more than surprising. What, in fact, should he care? Does he wish to keep his acquisitions or what? It's clear whose units, and it's clear who's behind them. Why risk his own skin? He wouldn't do it himself... That's why I asked the question. The fox of the dungeons. He knows what he wants. If you refuse, you'll show him it's not that big a deal to lose and gain. And if you say yes, you're no match for him. You must value your life above all else. Otherwise there'll be no one left to rule. That's what he's getting at. And he's made a choice.

– And Cobra's in charge there personally. And to me, it looks stronger than what you're proposing, Mr. Raven. However, if you do decide to go there on your own, I will definitely support you in that.

There was nothing to argue about. He didn't deny anything, he just said that he didn't support the current performance. And with a hint that Cobra himself will decide whether to leave his position or not – "looks stronger". Cobra is really more charismatic than calculating. He will not spare his life if there is a question about his authority, and sometimes such a policy yields results, as it is now.

Standing and looking at his surroundings, Raven decided that he would never be in such a situation again – coming somewhere with offers and being in a position where you could be slapped without an obituary and then tell everyone you weren't even here. He had sort of hoped that Gora would be more vulnerable and weaker after the assassination attempt, fearing for his power and life, but in fact he had only put down stronger roots here, and would only grow stronger, clinging to everything around him.

– It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Prefect," Raven said and left without waiting for a response or any reaction to his movements from the guards watching him, who could easily shoot him if he did. He knew that although he could not do anything, he had to save face – his offer had been rejected, and now he would not offer anything. He would only wait for the time when the offers would come to him. And such times could well be waiting.

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It was fresh and sunny on the surface. Raven had never thought those two factors would be so important to him. He had spent so much time in bunkers and dugouts of all kinds. He had not

seen the sun or the moon for days on end, and it did not seem to him to be some kind of test, just a part of security.

But now, surrounded by his personal guard company near the main administrative building of the Deese sector, he felt like he had climbed out of the underworld, where everything around him was pressing so hard that he wanted to shoot himself just to be free of it. No, this man is definitely very dangerous. A year ago, Hora was only a hint of some role in the Slavic Column, now it looks like it's becoming a force to be reckoned with for the entire Empire.

Koshkina

to

Zhivenko

After the transition, which lasted all night, the entire newly formed Khmelnitsky's unit stopped to camp near the town of Liman, almost 30 kilometers from Severodonetsk. They had to move over quite difficult terrain, and it turned out that not for nothing – scouts sent in different directions reported about the close proximity to them fighting certain units. There was no doubt that these were Hiwis, and that they were gradually slamming the trap created in Severodonetsk.

Khmelnitsky would have done it himself in their place. And he had even said so directly to Zubkov. As much as he did not want to help him, but the detachment-14 that had been gathered for so many years and the goals for which it was gathered were much higher than the importance of the one who would lead it. And yet the calculation was wrong – Zubkov refused to believe that the situation was serious. He said it was too far from the enemy's main supply points, and with winter coming soon, it would be suicidal.

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