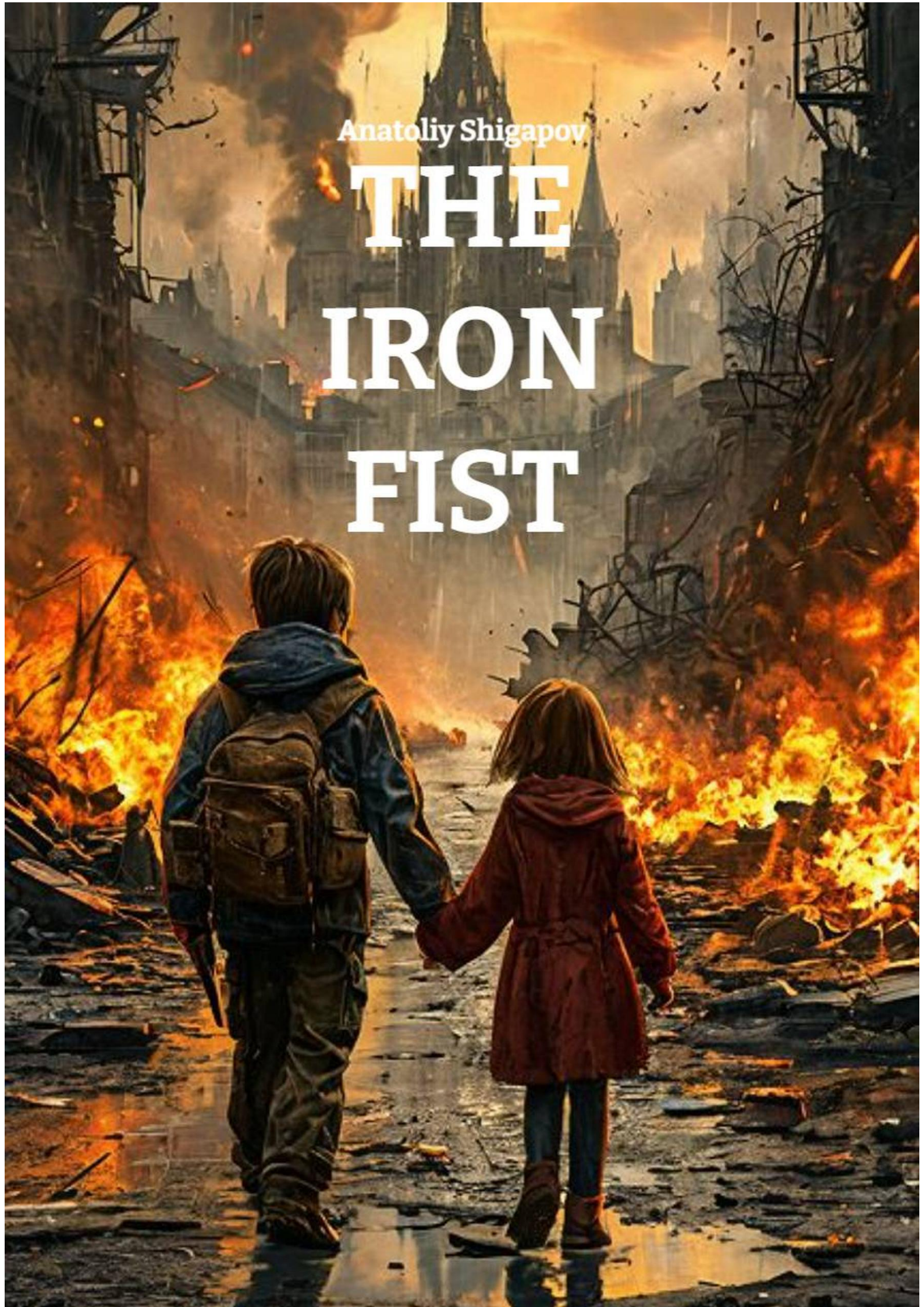


A dramatic, apocalyptic scene of a city in flames. In the foreground, a young boy and girl are walking away from the viewer down a street covered in rubble and fire. The boy is on the left, wearing a blue jacket and a large backpack, holding the hand of the girl on the right, who is wearing a red coat. The background is a city with tall, dark buildings, some of which are on fire and emitting thick smoke. The sky is a hazy, orange-yellow color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is one of despair and hope.

Anatoliy Shigapov

THE IRON FIST

Иностранный (Английский) язык

Anatoliy Shigapov

THE IRON FIST

«Автор»

2026

Shigapov A.

THE IRON FIST / A. Shigapov — «Автор»,
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Victory is not the end. It is the beginning of a new cycle of violence. And the only choice you have is who you will become in this cycle: a victim, an executioner, or someone who will one day come to destroy everything again.

Anatoliy Shigapov

THE IRON FIST

FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR

I wrote this third book three times.

The first time - in anger. I was angry at my characters, at the dead end they had led me to. At how easily and imperceptibly they had betrayed themselves. I rewrote scenes, making Iris hesitate longer, and Elias speak louder. I wanted them to come to their senses. To find a third path. To find a way out that I myself couldn't see for them.

The second time - in despair. I realized they weren't going to come to their senses. Because they are alive. They aren't characters I can force to act against their nature. Iris cannot back down because she knows the price of chaos. Elias cannot stop her because he knows the price of betrayal. I sat over an empty screen and couldn't write the scene where Iris signs the Decree of Conscription. It felt like by writing it, I would be committing the same betrayal myself. I wanted my characters to be heroes. But they stubbornly became what they were fighting against.

The third time I wrote this book, I had accepted it. With acceptance comes clarity. I realized this story isn't about victory. And it isn't about defeat. It's about how victory and defeat have the same face. How, after breaking one mask, you discover with horror another one underneath - your own. All great revolutions end the same way - not with freedom, but with a change of jailer. This isn't cynicism. It's experience. It's the knowledge that we, humans, have carried within ourselves for thousands of years, but every time we pretend that this time it will be different.

I sat at my desk, staring at the screen, and felt my fingers refusing to press the keys. I knew that if I let her sign that decree, she would cease to be the Iris I created forever. She would become someone else. Someone wearing the mask of the enemy. And I didn't want that. I wanted to keep her pure. I wanted her to remain a heroine. But she was looking at me from the screen, and there was so much pain in her eyes that I understood: she was no longer a heroine. She was a human being. And a human being cannot be pure. A human cannot remain a hero if they make decisions that kill children.

I rewrote that scene again and again. I changed the words. I changed the circumstances. I tried to find a way for her to sign the decree, yet remain herself. It was impossible. Like trying to keep water dry. Like trying to keep fire cold. The decisions she made changed her. And I had to show that. I had to show how a hero becomes an executioner. Not because he is evil. But because he has no choice.

THE FEAR OF THE FINALE: WHY I DELAYED THIS BOOK

After I finished "The Price of Victory," I didn't touch the keyboard for almost three months. Not because I didn't have ideas. I had too many ideas. Too many. They swarmed in my head like a disturbed beehive, and I didn't know how to tame them. I was afraid. Afraid that I wouldn't be able to write the third book the way it should be written. Afraid that I would ruin the story I had spent so long building. Afraid that my characters, who had become almost real people to me, would cease to be who I knew them to be.

I remember the day I sat down to write the first scene of the third book. The sun was just beginning to set, and the room grew dark, but I didn't turn on the light. I sat in the twilight, staring at the empty screen, and felt a heaviness growing inside me. It was that special heaviness that appears when you know you're doing something important, but you're not sure you can see it through to the end. My fingers trembled over the keyboard. I wanted to write something light. Something that would bring readers back to hope. Something that would say: "Yes, it was all hard, but now it will be good."

But I couldn't. Because that would have been a lie.

I remember rereading the scene where Iris and Elias watch the sunset. Back then, I thought I was giving them a moment of peace. A moment they deserved. But now I understood that this moment was an illusion. They were on the roof, but the world was crumbling beneath them. They

watched the sunset, but they didn't know that darkness was already rising from the other side of the horizon. They felt peace, but that peace was deceptive. As deceptive as the calm before a storm.

I put this book off again and again. I made up excuses: "I need more time," "I need to study some more materials," "I'm not ready." In reality, I was just afraid. Afraid to see that my characters weren't who I imagined them to be. Afraid they would disappoint me. Afraid I would disappoint them. But one day I realized: if I don't write this book, they will remain frozen in that moment of peace, which was a lie. They won't be able to live on. They won't be able to become who they are meant to be. So I sat down at my desk and started writing.

IRIS AND ELIAS: FRIENDS WHO BECAME MORE THAN I PLANNED

When I created Iris and Elias, I didn't think they would become something more to me than just characters. They were supposed to be tools. Means to tell a story. I planned their fates, their personalities, their dialogues. I knew what they would do in every scene. I controlled them.

And then they stopped listening to me.

At first, it was barely noticeable. Iris said something I hadn't planned. Elias reacted to a situation differently than I intended. I thought they were just mistakes. That I had formulated their characters incorrectly. I rewrote. Corrected. Made them fit the plan. But they stubbornly returned to their own words, their own reactions, their own actions. And at some point, I realized: they weren't making mistakes. I was. They weren't tools. They were people. They were living their own lives, and I couldn't force them to live differently.

With Iris, it was especially difficult. She was my heroine. My hope. My embodiment of everything I wanted to see in the world. I wanted her to remain pure. To find a way out. To not fall. But she couldn't not fall. Because her path was the path of a human, not a god. And a human who carries the weight of the world inevitably bends. Doesn't break. Doesn't disappear. Bends. Becomes different. Becomes what they hated. Not because they are weak. But because they are strong enough to bear that burden.

Elias was different. He never tried to be a hero. He always knew the world wasn't perfect. That victories are never clean. That choices are never right. He was cynical, weary, but loyal. He was the one who held Iris when she fell. And I wanted him to hold her until the end. But I knew that even he wouldn't be able to hold her forever. That one day she would fall so hard he couldn't lift her up. That he would stand beside her and watch her become someone he didn't recognize. And he wouldn't turn away from her. He would stay. But he wouldn't be able to save her. Because she couldn't be saved. She could only be accompanied in her fall.

THE ARBITER'S VOICE: WHY I COULDN'T SHUT HIM UP

The Arbiter was dead. I killed him at the end of the second book. I was sure it was over. That he would no longer haunt my characters. That they were finally free.

But the Arbiter didn't leave. He remained in their heads. In mine. In every scene I wrote, I heard his voice. Quiet, calm, confident. He said: "I warned you. I told you people can't be free. I told you they would choose chains. I told you you would become me. And you did. You are me, Iris. You wear my mask. You sit in my chair. You sign my decrees. You are my successor."

I couldn't shut that voice up. I tried. I wrote scenes where Iris doubted. Where she tried to find another way. Where she proved the Arbiter was wrong. But every time I finished such a scene, I felt it was fake. That I was trying to deceive myself. That I was afraid to admit the truth. The truth was simple: the Arbiter wasn't wrong. He was right. And Iris knew it. And I knew it. And the only way to move forward was to accept it.

I remember writing the scene where Iris looks at the Arbiter's mask. She stands in his office, and the mask hangs on the wall. She looks at it, and her fingers tremble. She wants to break it. She wants to destroy everything that reminds her of him. But she can't. Because the mask is no longer on the wall. It's on her face. And she can't take it off. Because if she takes it off, the world will collapse.

And she knows this. She knows she must wear that mask until the end of her days. And she accepts it. Not with joy. Not with pride. With resignation.

This was the hardest moment in writing the book. I wanted her to break the mask. I wanted her to say: "No. I am not you. I will never become you." But I knew that would have been a lie. And I couldn't allow myself that lie. Because if I did, the entire book would lose its meaning.

SCENES I COULDN'T WRITE: FOUR ATTEMPTS AT A FINALE

The third book had three different endings. Three attempts to finish the story. Three times I sat down at my desk, knowing I had to write the final scene, and three times I deleted it because it was wrong.

The first ending was bright. Iris found a way to maintain order without cruelty. She created a system that worked without violence. She walked into the sunset with Elias, leaving the world better than it was. This was the ending I wanted to write. The one I felt my characters deserved. But it was fake. Too perfect. Too easy. Too much like a fairy tale. And I realized that if I kept this ending, I would be betraying my characters. Making them cardboard. Making them false.

The second ending was open. Iris took power but remained herself. She was neither a heroine nor a villainess. She was a human doing what she had to. Elias stayed with her but didn't justify her decisions. The world wasn't perfect, but it was alive. This was the ending that seemed right. It was honest. It was realistic. But it was incomplete. It lacked closure. No full stop. No catharsis.

The third ending became the final one. I sat at my desk, staring at the screen, and my mind was blank. I didn't know how to end it. I didn't know what would happen after Iris signed the last decree. But then I remembered Kay and Gerda. The children I had created months ago but never knew how to use. I realized they were the finale. Not because they close the story. But because they open a new one. They are the promise that the story continues. That even after the fall of heroes, there are those who rise. That even after the end, there is a beginning.

I wrote the final scene in one night. I didn't edit it. I didn't reread it. I just wrote down what I saw before me: two children on their knees in the mud, over the bodies of their parents, and their eyes burning with hatred. And when I finished, I felt it was right. Not because it was a good ending. But because it was an honest ending.

FEAR OF THE READERS: WHY I WAS AFRAID TO SHOW THIS BOOK

When I finished the final version, I couldn't look at it for several weeks. It lay in a folder on my desk, and I was afraid to open it. Afraid that I would read it and see mistakes. Afraid that I would read it and see that the story didn't work. Afraid that my characters, whom I had built for so long, turned out not to be who I imagined them.

But most of all, I was afraid of the readers. Not critics. Not reviews. Not ratings. I was afraid of those who had come with me all the way. Those who loved Iris and Elias as much as I did. Those who believed in them. Those who hoped that in the end, everything would be fine. I knew they would be disappointed. I knew they would be angry. I knew they would say: "Why did you do this? Why did you ruin them?"

And I didn't know what to tell them. I couldn't say: "I didn't want this." Because I did. I didn't want to ruin them, but I wanted to be honest. I couldn't say: "I did this so you would suffer." Because I didn't want them to suffer. I wanted them to understand. To see what I saw. To stop believing in fairy tales and start believing in reality.

One day, I showed the manuscript to my friend. He read it in two days and said: "This is the most depressing thing I've ever read. Why didn't you give them a happy ending?" I looked at him and said: "Because a happy ending would have been a lie." He didn't understand. He said: "But it's a book. It's fiction. You can make any ending." I shook my head. "No. I can't. Because if I make a happy ending, I'm saying that heroes can win without losses. That freedom doesn't require sacrifice. That the world can be perfect. And that's not true. And I don't want to lie."

LOVE AND HATE FOR THE CHARACTERS: WHY I COULDN'T LET THEM GO

When I was writing the last chapter, I couldn't stop feeling sad. Not because it was sad. Not because I pitied my characters. I was sad because I knew it was the end. That I would no longer write about them. That they would stay here, on these pages, forever frozen in their decisions. And I wouldn't be able to change them. Help them. Tell them they were right.

I loved my characters. I loved Iris for her strength, her stubbornness, her faith. I loved Elias for his loyalty, his cynicism, his warm irony. I loved them the way you can only love those you have created yourself. But I also hated them. I hated Iris for not finding another way. I hated Elias for not stopping her. I hated them for making me see the truth. For shattering my illusions. For making me honest when I wanted to be naïve.

And when I put the last full stop, I felt emptiness. The same emptiness parents feel when their children leave home. The same emptiness teachers feel when their students graduate. The same emptiness everyone feels who lets go of what they loved. I knew it was right. I knew it was inevitable. But that didn't make the pain less sharp.

THE LAST NIGHT: FAREWELL TO THE CHARACTERS

I am writing these lines on the last night before posting the manuscript online. Outside the window - rain. The same rain that falls at the beginning of the book, when Iris sits in her office waiting for a refugee from the south. The same rain that pours in the finale, when Kay and Gerda leave the burning sector. Rain - a symbol of purification, but also a symbol of sorrow. It washes away the past, but it also brings new life. It dies to be born again.

I feel the same way. I am tired. I gave this story everything I had. I poured my fears, my doubts, my pain into it. I poured in my hope, which it shattered. I poured in my faith, which it betrayed. But I don't regret it. Because this story is not just text. It's experience. It's a mirror. It's an opportunity to see yourself and ask: "What would I have done?"

I don't know what I would have done. I want to believe I would have found a third way. I want to believe I would have been better. But I don't know. And that is the scariest and most honest truth. I don't know what I would have become if the weight of the world had fallen on me. And that is precisely why I cannot judge Iris. Because I can only observe. Only write down. Only show you what I saw.

I look at the screen, at the last page of the manuscript, and feel a wave rising inside me. Not regret. Not relief. Something in between. A mixture of sadness and pride. Sadness that it's all over. Pride that I saw it through. That I didn't give up. That I didn't lie. That I gave my characters the story they deserved.

I close my laptop and look out the window. The rain continues to fall. It taps on the glass like hundreds of tiny fingers. Somewhere in this city, in this world, there are people who will open this book tomorrow. They will read about Iris and Elias. They will experience their fall. They will hate me for what I did. And they will be right. Because it is indeed hard to accept the truth. But I hope they also see what I saw. That this story is not about defeat. It's about courage. The courage to make difficult decisions. The courage to take responsibility for them. The courage to live with the consequences.

I say goodbye to my characters. I will no longer write about them. They will remain here, on these pages, forever frozen in their decisions. I won't be able to change them. Help them. Tell them they were right. But I can tell you: they were right. Even if it's hard to accept. Even if it hurts. They were right. Because they did what they had to. They paid a price no one wanted to pay. They became what they hated. But they did it to protect those they loved.

Forward. To a new dawn.

Anatoly Shigapov

CHAPTER 1: "THE SOUTH WIND"

Iris sat in her office on the top floor of the capital's administrative building - the only place in the entire complex where windows faced not the inner courtyard, but the western outskirts. Outside the window was a grey, cottony sky, and a fine, nagging rain, which had not stopped for two weeks,

monotonously drummed on the leaden frame. She felt the dampness penetrating the thick stone walls, the cold, like a living creature, settling on her skin, creeping under the collar of her tunic. It was one of those days when even the air felt heavy - saturated with water, decay, and a premonition of trouble.

She was reviewing reports from the northern mines - dry, precise figures, columns of daily output, hourly lists of work shifts, schedules for ore deliveries to the forges. Everything was familiar, predictable, almost boring enough to yawn. Iris mechanically recounted the totals, though she knew them by heart - this activity calmed her, creating an illusion of order in a world that increasingly seemed to her like a house of cards. She was about to set aside the thick sheets of parchment and call for a courier when there was a knock on the door, which was upholstered in darkened copper.

The knock was sharp, impatient - not like the way adjutants or scribes usually knocked. Iris frowned, her fingers pausing for a moment over the stack of papers. She straightened up, adjusted her collar, and, trying to keep her voice even, said:

Come in.

The door swung open with a drawn-out creak, and a man was practically propelled into the office, supported by the elbow of a guard on duty. Iris looked up - and for a second, she stopped breathing. The man could barely stand: his clothes, once apparently a sturdy travelling jacket, were torn to shreds and singed in places, dark greasy stains on the fabric smelling of soot and burnt wool. His face was covered in thick soot mixed with dried mud, and deep, almost bluish circles lay under his eyes - the marks of sleeplessness and exhaustion. He swayed, and the guard, a grim-faced man with a sergeant's patch, held him under the elbow, clearly fearing he would collapse right on the threshold.

Commander, - said the guard, nodding towards the newcomer. - He was found at the southern gate, at the checkpoint. Said he'd been walking for five days. Was delirious, but when he came to, he called himself a refugee. He says he has important news - personally for you.

For me? - Iris repeated, narrowing her eyes. - Why for me?

But the man didn't let the guard answer. He tore his elbow from the guard's grasp - the gesture was almost aggressive, but it was only an desperate, animal need to speak - and collapsed to his knees on the cold stone floor. His body trembled, a violent shudder ran down his back, and he began to mutter, almost unintelligibly, swallowing endings and choking on his own breath:

They are coming... They are coming through the Frontier... We weren't expecting them from that side, no one was... The cities have fallen... Everyone is dead... I saw the smoke, I saw the sky burning...

Iris looked into his face, into his eyes that darted around the room, unable to find a focal point. There was fear in them - real, primal, the kind that cannot be faked, that burns the soul from within. She had seen such fear once before, five years ago, during the suppression of a mutiny at a border fortress. But now she noticed something else. Something elusive that made her inner voice alert. In the depths of his pupils, in the way he paused for a moment to look at her desk, at the scattered maps, something else smoldered - not panic, but attentiveness. Assessment. And that was strange for a man who had just reported the destruction of the entire south.

Water, - she said sharply to the guard, not taking her eyes off the refugee. - Quickly.

The guard nodded and stepped over to the side table, where a clay jug of water, covered with a canvas cloth, stood. Iris gestured for him to bring it to her. She took the jug in her hands - it was heavy, cool - and handed it to the man. He grabbed it with trembling, clumsy fingers and put it to his lips with such greed, as if he hadn't seen water in a week, not even a month. He drank noisily, choking, splashing water onto the floor, onto his torn trousers, onto his knees. Droplets flew in all directions, and dark, wet spots quickly spread on the stone slabs. He drank for a long time, without stopping, while Iris silently, motionlessly, watched him, propping her chin on her clasped fingers.

And while he drank, she studied him. Now that he had stopped talking and somewhat calmed down, her gaze slid over his figure. And stopped at his hands. On his hands, which gripped the jug with such force that his knuckles turned white.

The hands were clean - without calluses, without the rough skin typical of a refugee, without scratches or cuts. Neat, well-groomed fingernails, one of which still retained a faint shine of polish. On his wrist, just above the torn sleeve, she noticed a thin, barely visible mark from a bracelet - a straight strip of lighter skin. This man had not worked in the fields, not built fortifications, not mined ore, not hauled sacks of grain. His hands were the hands of someone who had never engaged in physical labor - or at least, hadn't done so for the last several years.

She slowly leaned back in her carved oak chair, which creaked plaintively under her weight, and folded her hands on the table, over the maps and reports. The man finally finished drinking and lowered the jug, breathing heavily and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked up at her with pleading, desperate eyes and a smoldering hope that she would believe him, that she wouldn't ask unnecessary questions.

But Iris already knew - his story was not the whole truth. She felt it in her gut, by that intuition that had saved her life more than once in negotiations and at the council table.

Silence fell in the room, broken only by the steady patter of rain outside the window. Somewhere below, in the corridors of the administrative building, muffled footsteps could be heard, the clang of armor from the changing guard, the distant voice of a dispatcher shouting orders. But here, in this office, the world had shrunk to three people and the growing tension between them.

Iris pushed her chair back a couple more inches and quietly, but in a voice that rang like steel, said to the guard:

Bring Elias. Now.

The guard flinched in surprise - he had clearly expected other instructions, like sending the refugee to the infirmary or the guardhouse - but he nodded and silently left, closing the door behind him. His footsteps quickly faded down the stone corridor.

Iris remained seated opposite the man. She didn't say a word. She just waited, for his breathing to even out, for the trembling in his shoulders to subside. She gave him time, but in that silence, there was more interrogation than in any words. The man lowered the jug to the floor, pushed his wet hair from his face, and looked at her with gratitude that seemed almost genuine.

Thank you, - he whispered, and his voice broke into a hoarseness. - Thank you, Commander. You don't know what it means - just to see a living face and hear a calm voice.

She remained silent, continuing to hypnotize him with her gaze. He looked at her with a plea, but she already knew - this man hadn't come by accident. He wasn't just a refugee. He was a messenger, a scout, or perhaps a pawn in someone else's game. He was part of something bigger. And she had to understand what exactly. Had to extract the truth from him before Elias entered the office with his penetrating questions and that smile that never reached his eyes.

She took a deep breath, feeling the cool air of the office sting her throat, and finally asked the first question she should have asked from the very beginning:

What's your name? Your real name.

The man hesitated for a moment. His eyes blinked once, twice, and a shadow flickered through them - either fear or deliberation. He lowered his head, then raised it again and said, more firmly:

Kyle. My name is Kyle. I was a clerk in the port city of Grey Cliff. Until it burned.

Iris nodded, mentally noting the name - Grey Cliff did indeed exist, it was a trading port on the south coast. She knew the name could be true, or it could be a lie. But right now, that didn't matter. She needed to wait for Elias. He knew how to ask the right questions and see where she could only guess.

The rain continued to beat against the glass, intensifying into a downpour. On the other side of the window, the world disappeared behind a grey wall of water. Kyle sat on the floor, hugging his knees, and shivered - either from cold or from memories. Iris watched him, feeling the tension, dense and viscous, filling the room, displacing the air. Something was beginning. And she didn't know if it would be a catastrophe or an opportunity.

Somewhere below, a heavy door slammed. Footsteps. Two of them. Quick. It was Elias coming. Iris turned her gaze to the door, then back to Kyle. And whispered almost inaudibly, under her breath:

Let's see what you've really brought us.

Elias entered Iris's office exactly five minutes after the guard delivered the summons. He didn't rush - he never rushed - but his steps were heavy and measured, each thud of his boots on the stone floor echoing down the corridor. He was tall, broad-shouldered, with a powerful chest that still remembered years of service, and with grey at his temples that had appeared long before he turned forty. His face, etched with fine wrinkles, resembled an old terrain map where every line was a trace of a battle lived through. His eyes - dark, deep, with puffy lids - had seen too many wars, too many deaths, too many lies to be surprised by anything now. They expressed nothing as he shifted his gaze from Iris to the refugee still sitting on the floor, curled into himself, as if trying to become smaller than he really was.

Elias didn't say a word. He didn't like unnecessary talk. Instead, he took two steps forward, bent down, and grabbed the man by the shoulder - roughly, but without cruelty - and yanked him to his feet. Kyle gasped, his knees buckling, but Elias was already supporting him, turning him towards the exit. Iris remained seated at the table, her fingers lying on the stack of reports, watching them leave - Elias's broad back, the stooped figure of the refugee, and the slow closing of the door behind them, leaving her alone with the sound of rain and the hum of her own thoughts. She knew Elias would do what was needed. She trusted him more than anyone else on this continent, more than herself on some days.

Elias led Kyle down the long corridor, past three doors and one turn, to where the administrative part of the building transitioned into old, rarely used rooms. He opened a door, sheathed in metal, and motioned for the refugee to enter. It was a separate room - a former holding cell, now used for "quiet conversations." An empty room with bare concrete walls, cold and rough to the touch, with a single metal chair in the center - rusty, with a worn-out seat - and a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling on a thin, cobwebbed wire. The lamp gave off a dim yellow light, flickering from drafts, casting long, dancing shadows on the walls, like fingers reaching for the floor. The room had no windows, nothing but the chair, bare walls, and the smell of dampness, mixed with the scent of old metal dust.

Elias sat the man on the chair - he sat down reluctantly, his shoulders tensing, his fingers gripping the edges of the seat - and sat opposite him, placing a wooden crate between them as an impromptu table. He wasn't in a hurry. He took from his inner pocket an old army knife - broad, with serrations on the spine and a dulled blade that had seen blood more than once. Elias placed the knife on the crate, not threateningly, not demonstratively, but rather as a reminder - a quiet, unspoken one - of who was asking the questions and who was answering them. Then he took out a dirty rag from another pocket, unfolded it, and began to slowly, methodically wipe the blade, running the cloth from the hilt to the tip and back. He didn't look at Kyle. He focused on the knife, on how the lamplight slid across the steel, on every movement of his fingers.

Heavy silence filled the room. Thick, dense as mercury. Kyle heard the squeak of the chair beneath him, the dripping of water somewhere behind the wall, his own breathing becoming quicker and more uneven. He swallowed - dryly, with difficulty - and his Adam's apple bobbed. He waited for Elias to speak first. But Elias remained silent, and that silence pressed harder than any words.

Finally, when nearly two minutes had passed - and for Kyle, they stretched into eternity - Elias looked up. His gaze was calm, almost bored, but in the depths of his pupils, something smoldered that made Kyle's stomach turn cold.

What's your name? - Elias asked in a flat, toneless voice. He continued to wipe the knife without stopping.

Kyle flinched as if struck. He opened his mouth, closed it, swallowed again, and answered, trying to keep his voice from trembling, though the tremor crept into every word:

Kyle. My name is Kyle.

Where are you from, Kyle? - Elias ran the rag over the blade once more. Slowly. Deliberately.

From the south. From the city of Vernon. - Kyle spoke quickly, as if afraid of being interrupted.

- I was a courier - delivered letters, packages, sometimes worked at the market. Nothing special, just ordinary work.

Elias nodded, without looking up. His attention was fixed on the knife, on how the dull lamplight reflected off the metal, on how the cloth collected invisible grime. But he was really listening. He listened to every word, every breath, every pause, every microscopic falter in Kyle's voice. He heard him stumble over the word "Vernon" - he said it too fast, too deliberately, as if he had memorized the name. He heard Kyle's fingers scraping against the metal of the seat.

Tell me what happened in Vernon, - Elias said, not changing his tone.

Kyle swallowed again - his throat was dry, and he ran his tongue over his lips. His hands trembled, and he clenched them into fists to hide it, but Elias noticed - he noticed everything. Kyle exhaled, gathering his thoughts, and began:

They came in the morning. The sun was just rising, and we weren't expecting them. No one was. They just appeared on the streets - soldiers in black uniforms, with weapons. They started shooting. They didn't say a word, didn't demand surrender. They just killed. First I heard screams - from the market square. Then shooting. I looked out the window and saw them.

Who are "they"? - Elias interrupted. He put down the rag and picked up the knife, turning it under the light.

The Frontier, - Kyle answered, his voice cracking into a rasp. - It was the Frontier. I recognized them by the emblem on their shoulders.

Elias looked up. For the first time during the conversation, he looked directly into Kyle's face, and his gaze became slightly sharper, more penetrating.

You saw the emblem? - he repeated. His voice remained level, but a note appeared in it - a barely noticeable tension.

Yes, - Kyle answered, and a shadow of pride flickered in his voice - see, I'm observant, I remembered something important. - I was standing by a window on the second floor. I saw them when they passed down the street. They had an emblem - three lines intersecting in the center, like a star, but irregular. I don't know what it means. But I remembered it.

Elias nodded slowly, lowering the knife back onto the crate. He didn't show it, but inside, everything tightened. Three intersecting lines - that wasn't the Frontier. That was the emblem of the Inner Circle, the secret service disbanded ten years ago. No ordinary person could know about it. Elias knew because he had served in the Circle himself until it was shut down. This "courier" had just named an emblem that refugees or ordinary soldiers couldn't possibly know.

But Elias didn't betray his thoughts. His face remained impassive, like a stone mask. He just tilted his head slightly forward and said:

Tell me more details. How did they enter the city? Which streets did they use?

Kyle perked up. He began to speak quickly, almost without faltering, as if a dam had burst. He named streets - North, Market, Embankment - their locations, described how the soldiers formed wedges, how they blocked the exits from the square, how they killed people by the fountain and at the old municipal building. He even named uniform colors - black tunics with silver trim, high boots, helmets without visors. He described how the soldiers moved through the city smoothly, like professionals, how they sealed off alleys, how they cleared houses one by one. He named officers - a certain "Major Voss" and "Captain Hale" - whom he said he'd heard about from other refugees hiding in a basement.

Elias listened and nodded mechanically, maintaining the appearance of attention. But his brain worked like a well-oiled machine. All of this was too detailed. Too precise. Too perfectly calibrated. An ordinary courier, even if by some miracle he had survived, wouldn't remember so many details -

he wouldn't stand by a window and observe enemy troop movements with tactical precision. He would have run, hidden, sought shelter. He would have remembered fear, the smell of blood, the sounds of shooting - but not the street grid and not the enemy's tactics. This story had too many "correct" details, too much military vocabulary, too much knowledge that an ordinary person couldn't have.

Kyle talked for a few more minutes, waving his arms, describing how houses burned, how smoke covered the sky, how the screams gradually died down, replaced by dead silence. Elias let him talk. He knew that sometimes the best way to interrogate was to let a liar dig himself deeper into his own lies.

How did you manage to escape? - he asked when Kyle finally fell silent, catching his breath.

Kyle fell silent. For the first time in his narrative, there was a pause, and it was more eloquent than any words. His eyes darted - left, then right - and he swallowed. His fingers dug into the edge of the seat again, whitening at the knuckles.

I hid, - he said, his voice wavering. - When they started shooting, I ran to the back of the house. I hid in a well.

Elias froze. Inside him, everything dropped. He knew - he knew for certain, because he had studied maps of the southern cities ten years ago, planning supply routes. The cities of the south had no wells. There was only a water supply system, built in the time of the Architect - underground pipes, aqueducts, pumping stations that delivered water directly to houses. Wells were only in the north, in mountainous areas, and in border settlements. In Vernon, a large trading city, there had been no wells for many decades.

Kyle had just slipped up. And he didn't even realize it.

Elias didn't reveal his discovery. He didn't even blink. He calmly nodded, as if he'd heard the most ordinary thing, and put the knife away in its sheath on his belt. Kyle looked at him with hope - desperation mixed with a plea to be believed, to be let go, to have this terrifying man with the icy gaze stop pressing him.

Thank you, - Elias said, his voice sounding almost soft. - You've helped us a lot. Your information is very important to us.

He rose, and his shadow momentarily fell over Kyle, making him flinch. Elias turned and left the room without another word. The heavy door closed behind him with a dull metallic clang, and he heard Kyle gasp inside - either from relief or from fear.

Iris was waiting for him in the corridor. She stood against the wall, arms crossed, her face pale in the dim light of the oil lamps. She didn't ask questions - she just waited, looking at him with those piercing eyes. Elias approached her, leaned close to her ear, so that even the walls couldn't hear, and whispered:

He's either a spy, or he was forced to talk. That's for certain. He named the emblem of the Inner Circle, which no one has known for ten years. And he said he hid in a well. Vernon has no wells. He's lying - and lying professionally, but in the wrong places.

Iris nodded slowly. Her jaw tightened, and a shadow of anxiety flickered in her eyes - one she rarely allowed herself to show. She knew Elias wasn't mistaken. He was never mistaken about such things. And she knew this was only the beginning. If the Frontier had nothing to do with it, and someone more dangerous was behind this refugee, then they were on the verge of something far bigger than just an attack on the southern cities.

What do we do? - she asked quietly, almost inaudibly.

Elias straightened, adjusted his collar, and looked towards the door where Kyle sat.

I'll ask him a few more questions, - he said. - But differently. And then we'll find out who sent him and why he wants so badly for us to believe in a Frontier attack.

Iris returned to her office with a quick, purposeful stride, leaving Elias behind - he followed, but unhurriedly, giving her the space she valued so much in moments of tension. She walked to her work table - massive, oak, with a worn top covered in dozens of scratches from previous owners - and

grasped the edge of a scroll lying at the very bottom of a drawer. It was a large map of the Union and the southern territories, the one she kept for special occasions. She unrolled it on the table slowly, almost ritualistically, carefully smoothing the edges of the thick, yellowed paper, which had begun to curl from time and humidity. She weighed down each corner with heavy bronze paperweights - griffin figurines that had once belonged to her father. The map was old, worn, with ink stains and creases that could no longer be ironed out, but it clearly showed all the cities, all the roads, all the mountain ranges and river arteries she knew by heart since childhood. She looked at those lines, like wrinkles on an old friend's face, and felt the history of this world pulsing beneath her fingers.

Elias stood by the door, arms crossed over his broad chest, leaning his shoulder against the jamb. His dark eyes followed her every move, but his face remained impenetrable, like a mask. He didn't interfere, didn't ask questions, just waited - as only he could, with the patience of an old soldier who knew that truth always takes time. Kyle sat in the corner of the room on the floor, where Elias had left him. He was curled into a ball, hugging his knees, his shoulders trembling slightly, though the office was warm - logs crackled in the fireplace, their sound mixing with the monotonous patter of rain outside. Kyle wasn't looking at the map. He looked at his hands, at his dirty fingernails, at the thin lines on his palms, his eyes darting around the room like a trapped animal searching for an escape but finding none.

Iris took a box of red flags from the top drawer of the table - small tin triangles, painted the color of dried blood, with sharp points, which she always used for tactical markings. She began to stick them into the map one by one, evenly and precisely, naming the cities aloud, as if reciting the names of fallen comrades.

Vernon, - she said, sticking the first flag at a point on the south coast.

Ashton, - the second, slightly north.

Midway, - the third, right in the center of the fertile plain.

Crossroads, - the fourth, at the intersection of two trade routes.

Lakewood, - the fifth, at the very foot of the foothills.

Five cities. Five points on the map that, according to Kyle, were now simply scorched wastelands, ashes, and silence. She stuck the flags with effort, and each time the tin tip pierced the thick paper with a quiet crunch. She felt the resistance with her fingers - as if the map refused to accept these marks, resisted having its integrity violated. Iris stepped back from the table, then another step, folded her arms across her chest, and stared at the map, at this palisade of red flags sticking out of the southern lands like bloody needles from a body.

Something was wrong. She felt it in her gut, that special intuition that had saved her more than once on days when everything was heading for disaster. But she couldn't immediately pinpoint what - only a vague, uneasy feeling, as if she were looking at a familiar face and not recognizing it because of a single incorrect feature. She frowned, ran her finger along the map, following the road lines, and connected the points she had just marked. Vernon, Ashton, Midway, Crossroads, Lakewood. Her finger slid over the faded paper, leaving a barely noticeable damp trail of sweat, and she joined them in one line, then paused. Her hand froze over the map, and her breath caught for a second.

Elias, - she said, her voice lower than usual, almost a whisper. - Look at this. Tell me what you see.

Elias peeled himself from the doorjamb and silently approached the table. He stopped beside Iris, looming over the map with his massive frame, and stared at the dotted line she had traced with her finger. His eyebrows drew together, and deep wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes - he also saw it, saw it with the same clarity Iris had seen a moment ago.

They're not heading for the capital, - he said, and a steely note sounded in his voice, one she only heard in moments of genuine danger. - They're not moving towards us. They're going to the mountains.

Iris nodded slowly, feeling a chill run down her spine. She traced the line further, past the last flag - past Lakewood - and her finger stopped at a dark, unmarked spot on the eastern edge of the map, where all the roads ended and emptiness began. There were only a few sparse strokes indicating rocky peaks, and not a single name. The Eastern Mountains - a range that on old maps was called the Limit, because beyond it there was nothing but rocks, eternal snows, and silence.

Someone deliberately destroyed these cities, - she said, her voice becoming firmer, with that commanding edge that made even career soldiers tremble. - They aren't trying to capture the capital. They aren't pursuing political goals. They are paving a road - a clearing through the living - towards something in those mountains. Towards something they consider more important than seizing power, than victory, than the war itself.

She spun around sharply and looked at Kyle. He sat in the corner, curled into himself, trembling, but his eyes - Iris noticed - were watching her. He wasn't looking at the map, but he was watching her, with an expression that mixed terror and a strange, almost curious surprise. As if he hadn't expected her to see so quickly what he was trying to hide. Iris glanced at Elias, who gave an almost imperceptible nod, and she quickly crossed the room, dropping into a crouch in front of Kyle, bringing herself to his level. She looked directly into his eyes - those darting, frightened eyes - and held his gaze so he couldn't look away, even if he wanted to.

What are they looking for in the east? - she asked softly, almost gently, but in that softness was steel that couldn't be ignored. - You know. You know more than you've told us. What. Are. They. Looking for. In the mountains?

Kyle opened his mouth, his lips trembling, and he tried to say something, but the sound got stuck in his throat. He closed his mouth, swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. His eyes darted across her face, the walls, the ceiling, and he licked his dry lips.

I don't know, - he whispered, his voice like the screech of a rusty mechanism. - I don't know what they're looking for. I only know they leave emptiness behind them. No traces. No bodies. Only ash. Everywhere they go, only grey ash remains, and it smells of burning flesh. I don't know what's in the mountains. I only know they want to get there. And they won't stop. No one will stop them.

Iris looked at him for several long seconds, peering into his pupils, at how they dilated with each word, at how his breathing became increasingly shallow and rapid. She saw he was telling the truth - or at least the part he knew and could voice aloud. The fear in his eyes was real, genuine, that primal terror that cannot be faked. But she also saw something else - a shadow flickering in the depths of his gaze when she asked about the mountains. Something he couldn't say. Something locked so deep that even he himself might not fully know it.

She slowly straightened up, stretching her knees, and returned to the map. Elias stood beside her, his hand on the table, fingers gripping the edge of the paper, waiting. Iris stared at the red flags, at the line she'd traced, at the dark blot of the mountains. She looked for so long that her eyes began to blur, and the colors on the map started to merge into one fuzzy spot.

This isn't a war for territory, - she said, more to herself than to Elias or Kyle. Her voice was dull, almost thoughtful, like that of someone solving a life-or-death puzzle. - This isn't a war for resources, for power, for borders. This is a war for a secret. For something hidden there, - she jabbed her finger at the eastern peaks, - that they don't want anyone else to know about. They aren't destroying cities to weaken us. They're destroying them because those cities stood in the way. Because they had to pass through them to reach the mountains.

Elias stepped close to her, his voice dropping to almost a whisper:

What could they be looking for in the mountains, Iris? There are no mines, no fortresses, no shelters there. Only stones and snow. I went there twenty years ago, - he paused, - and found nothing but wind.

Iris shook her head, without taking her eyes off the map. She felt the answer was close, lying right before her, hidden in those faded lines, in that old parchment, in those red flags stabbed into the southern lands like claws.

I don't know, - she answered. - But I know they know. And I know they won't stop. We must find out - we must know what's there, in the east, and why it's worth five burned cities. And we must do it before they get there. If they get there first - if they find what they're looking for - we'll never know why any of this happened. And the next city on the map could be the capital.

She looked at the map again, at the dark peaks of the eastern mountains, which on old maps were simply marked "Terra Incognita." The eastern mountains seemed dark and ominous, as if they concealed something in their folds that should never be found, something buried there long before the first cities appeared. Iris felt a premonition pulsing under her skin, the hair on her arms standing on end. She knew the answers to all her questions lay beyond those peaks, in that emptiness where no roads or maps led. And she knew she had to go there, even if it cost her her life.

She straightened up to her full height, ran her hand through her hair, pulling it into a tight knot at the nape of her neck, and turned to Elias. A cold, resolute fire burned in her eyes - the one her subordinates feared most.

We're heading south, - she said, her voice ringing out like an order that brooked no argument. - Today. In an hour. Assemble a squad - only the best. And bring me that man, - she nodded towards Kyle, - he's coming with us. He'll be our guide, whether he wants to or not.

Elias nodded silently - without questions, without doubts. He knew that tone. He knew when Iris said "today," she meant "immediately." He turned and left the office, his footsteps pounding down the corridor, echoing throughout the building.

Iris was left alone with Kyle and the map. She looked at the eastern mountains, at that dark, unexplored area, and a strange, cold feeling grew in her chest. She knew that beyond those peaks, something awaited her that would overturn everything she knew about the world. And she knew there was no turning back.

Outside, the rain turned into a downpour, streams of water lashing against the glass like thousands of tiny whips. Kyle looked up at her and whispered:

You don't understand. If we go there, we won't come back. No one comes back from beyond the Limit.

Iris didn't answer. She just kept staring at the map, her fingers trembling slightly as they touched the edge of the paper, where the emptiness began.

The Grand Council Hall was filled to capacity. Ten leaders of the Union, representing different territories - from northern border fortresses to western agricultural plains and eastern mining enclaves - sat around a long oak table that, according to legend, remembered the times of the Architect. The massive, dark-stained tabletop was marked with scratches and ink stains, and along its edges ran carved patterns depicting the unity of lands now fracturing at the seams. Light from oil lamps hanging on heavy chains from the high vaulted ceiling fell on the faces of those assembled, creating sharp, prickly shadows that danced on the walls, paneled in dark wood. The air in the room was thick and heavy - saturated with the smell of old wax, heated metal, and human sweat mixed with anxiety. Everyone present knew what was happening in the south. Everyone had heard the rumors spreading faster than an epidemic - of burned cities, of refugees trudging along broken roads, of the black banners of the Frontier rising over the ashes. But no one knew the truth. No one knew how bad things really were.

Iris sat in the center of the table, as always, in her place - not because her rank dictated it, but because everyone else acknowledged her right to be there. Her back was straight, her shoulders squared, and she looked at the leaders with a calm, appraising gaze. She felt their fear and uncertainty, like heavy smoke, filling the room, settling on her skin, entering her lungs. They were strong people, each of them had been through war, each had lost loved ones and survived the darkest times. But now

they looked lost, like children wandering in a dense forest. She understood them - the new threat was worse than the old one. They didn't know how to fight it, because they couldn't see the enemy, didn't understand its goals, couldn't predict its next moves. They were soldiers, used to fighting a tangible opponent, and here they were facing a shadow.

At the far end of the table sat Dorn - a stout, heavy man with a red, weathered face and thick, bushy eyebrows beneath which hid small, fat-encased eyes. He was the leader of the northern territories, a man used to commanding and demanding obedience, and his fingers, laden with heavy rings, drummed impatiently on the tabletop. Beside him sat Stella - a lean, wiry woman with grey streaks in her dark hair, a face that seemed carved from stone. Her thin lips were pressed tightly together, and her hands lay motionless on the table, like a statue. She represented the western borders and was known for her endurance and cold calculation. The other leaders - seven men and women of various ages, with different faces and interests - sat along the table, each waiting to see who would speak first.

Dorn couldn't contain himself. He broke the silence first, slamming his fist on the table with such force that the oil lamps on their chains swayed, and an inkwell at the edge of the table jumped and tipped over, spilling a black puddle over the spread map. No one paid attention.

We must prepare for a siege immediately! - he roared, his voice echoing under the hall's vaults, bouncing off the walls. - The Frontier has destroyed five cities in a week! Five! This isn't just raids, it's systematic annihilation. They're moving north, towards the capital. We can't sit idly by and wait for them to reach our gates! I demand the mobilization of all northern garrisons and the full combat readiness of the fortresses!

You're suggesting we lock ourselves in the capital and wait for them to come to us, like rats in a cage? - Stella's voice was cold and even, like the blade of a well-sharpened knife, and it cut through Dorn's bellowing with surgical precision. She didn't even turn her head in his direction, continuing to look at the map, where the ink blot was spreading. - That's not strategy, Dorn. That's suicide. If we lock ourselves in the capital, we'll give them the entire territory. They'll take city after city, cut off our food supplies, starve us out. We must first send reconnaissance. We need to understand what we're dealing with, what forces they have, what their true goals are. Not bury our heads in the sand behind fortress walls.

Reconnaissance! - Dorn snorted, his face reddening even more, blood pulsing at his temples. - While we send scouts, they burn our cities. Every day we delay costs us hundreds of lives. We must act now! Gather the army, strike with everything we have, push them back to the southern wastelands!

Acting without knowing the enemy is acting blindly, - Stella cut in, a note of icy irritation creeping into her voice for the first time. - You want to send our people to certain death, Dorn? You're ready to explain to their widows and orphans that you threw them into battle against an unknown enemy because you were afraid to wait three days?

Are you calling me a coward? - Dorn jumped up, his chair clattering back. - How dare you, Stella?! I was fighting when you were still...

Enough! - barked one of the leaders, a man with a smoker's raspy voice, sitting on the left. - You're both acting like children on the square. We're not here to find out who's braver. We're here to decide how to save the Union.

The argument erupted into chaos. Leaders began to interfere, interrupting each other, taking sides. Voices merged into a single, hollow noise that filled the hall, rebounded from the vaulted ceiling, and returned in a multi-voiced echo. Someone accused Dorn of cowardice and shortsightedness, someone else blamed Stella for excessive caution and bureaucratic slowness. Hands waved, fists pounded the table, inkwells fell one after another, and the map turned into a muddy mess. Faces reddened, eyes flared, and the air in the hall thickened to the limit.

Iris remained silent. She sat motionless, hands folded on the table, fingers interlaced, listening. She watched the faces of the leaders, their features contorted by anger and fear, and she saw how

their fear turned to anger, and anger to chaos. She felt that chaos entering her, trying to seize her thoughts, but she wouldn't allow it. She held herself like a taut string and waited. She knew they had to talk it out, had to vent their fear and helplessness, before they could hear a reasonable voice.

She shifted her gaze to Kyle, who stood by the door, leaning his shoulder against the jamb, watching what was happening. His eyes slid over the leaders' faces, their gesticulations, the way they shouted at each other. And Iris noticed the corners of his lips lift in a barely perceptible, almost elusive smile as the voices grew louder and the argument descended into open bickering. He was enjoying this. He was enjoying the chaos he himself had created with his lies, his omissions, his story from the south. Iris felt a cold, burning wave of determination rise inside her.

She stood up abruptly. The chair slid back with a loud, drawn-out screech that pierced the hubbub of voices and made everyone fall silent. The lamps swayed, the shadows on the walls jerked, and an deafening silence fell over the hall - so dense that the crackling of logs in the fireplace could be heard. All heads turned to her. Ten pairs of eyes - from frightened to angry, from pleading to bewildered - fixed on her. Iris straightened to her full height, squared her shoulders, and placed her palms on the table, leaning forward slightly.

I'm heading south, - she said, her voice soft, yet in that silence it was heard by everyone, like a bell toll. - Today. In an hour.

A deathly silence descended on the hall. The leaders looked at her with surprise, disbelief, with hope mixed with fear. Dorn was the first to break the silence, his voice hoarse from shouting, speaking with difficulty, as if choking on the words:

That's too dangerous, - he said, and for the first time in his voice, there was not aggression, but genuine concern. - We can't risk you, Iris. You're the Commander. If something happens to you, we'll be left without a leader, without the one who unites us. It's madness to go into the very heart of it. Send scouts, hire guides, but don't go yourself.

I'm not asking for permission, - Iris replied, her voice harder than granite. - I'm not asking if it's dangerous. I'm telling you I'm going. Because if I don't go, no one will know the truth. And without the truth, we cannot win. We'll sit in this hall and argue while our cities burn, and the enemy paves its way to our homes.

Stella nodded slowly, a spark flickering in her eyes - of disapproval or respect, Iris couldn't tell. - She's right, - Stella said, her voice soft, almost thoughtful. - We can't defend ourselves without knowing the enemy. We can't defeat what we don't see. If Iris is willing to go, we have no right to stop her. But we must ensure she has support.

Iris looked at the leaders one by one - at their faces, their eyes that held fear, doubts, hopes, and despair. She knew they depended on her. She knew that in this hall, there was no one willing to take on the responsibility she carried. And she couldn't let them down.

If we don't find out what's out there in the south, - she said, - we won't be able to defend ourselves. We'll sit here, in this room, and wait for death to come from the shadows. I don't want to die in fear. I want to die knowing I did everything I could to save these people. That's why I'm going.

She paused and swept her gaze across the table. Silence fell - not oppressive, but solemn. Then the voting began. It happened silently - the leaders raised their hands in support. One by one, hands rose over the table, like white flags of surrender to the inevitable. Almost all raised their hands in favor.

But Iris noticed that Stella voted against. Her hand remained motionless on the table, fingers slightly clenched, and she looked at Iris with a cold, impenetrable gaze, in which there was neither fear nor malice - only calculation. Only assessment. This alarmed Iris more than Dorn's shouts.

She didn't know why Stella voted against. Maybe she was genuinely afraid of losing her commander. Maybe she thought the decision was hasty. But deep down, Iris felt - something was wrong. Something about that look was wrong, unnatural, like a false note in a perfect melody. And she had to find out what.

She nodded in thanks - to the leaders, all at once, and to each individually - and slowly walked out from behind the table. Her boots thudded heavily on the stone slabs, the echo spreading through the hall. She headed for the exit, and as she passed Kyle standing by the door, he followed her with his eyes. She walked past him without looking at him - but out of the corner of her eye, she noticed his lips twitch again in that same strange, almost imperceptible smile. She felt his gaze following her, sliding down her back, and it sent a cold shiver from the nape of her neck to the tips of her fingers.

She had to leave. And she had to leave today, as she had said. But before leaving, she had to talk to Elias. And - separately - find out what Stella was hiding.

Outside the Council Hall door, a cold corridor awaited her, and the echo of her steps resounded under the high vaults, like the countdown of time slipping through her fingers.

Night fell over the capital slowly, like a heavy velvet curtain that someone invisible was lowering over the stage, ending another act of an endless play. The rain, which had fallen for two weeks without a break - a nagging, cold rain that soaked everything with dampness and melancholy - finally stopped. It happened so suddenly that Iris felt the world hold its breath. The clouds parted, as if torn apart by giant hands, revealing a boundless black abyss studded with stars. They were cold and distant, as if looking down at the city with an indifference that could only belong to eternity - that same eternity before which all human wars, fears, and hopes seemed like grains of sand in a desert. The moon, a thin silver crescent, hung low over the horizon, casting a pale, ghostly light on the wet roofs and pavements that gleamed like black glass.

Iris stepped out onto the balcony of her office - she did it unconsciously, as if her feet had carried her there, obeying an ancient instinct that demanded air, space, open sky when it became too cramped inside. The heavy glass door closed behind her with a creak, cutting off the warmth of the office, the smell of paper and wax, leaving her alone with the night. She stood at the stone railing, rough and cold under her fingers, and looked at the capital spreading out below, at the foot of the administrative hill. Thousands of lights - yellow, warm windows of houses, orange spots of street lamps, torches on the fortress walls, flickering like living eyes. Thousands of lives she had to protect. Thousands of fates that depended on her decisions, on her choices, on whether she could keep a clear mind when everything around her was falling apart.

The wind blew in her face - cold, sharp, smelling of wet earth and distant forests. It stung her skin, made her squint, and she felt it creeping under the collar of her tunic, under her thin shirt, making her shiver with each gust. But she didn't leave. She stood motionless, gripping the railing, looking at the city that had become her home, her responsibility, her burden - the weight she had carried on her shoulders for so long that she no longer remembered what it was like to be without it.

She was afraid. But not of war, not of death, not of pain. She knew war - she had looked it in the face, breathed its smoke, heard its groans, held in her hands the bodies of those she couldn't save. She knew what it meant to lose, and she knew what it meant to survive against all odds. But now she was afraid of something else. Afraid that behind all this chaos, these burned cities, this lie brought by Kyle, stood someone from her own side. Someone who knew her weaknesses, who knew where her darkest secrets were hidden. Someone who knew how to hurt her in a way no armor could protect.

She gripped the stone railing so hard her knuckles turned white, tendons straining like strings. The cold of the stone penetrated her skin, her muscles, her bones, but she didn't feel it - only a dull, throbbing pain inside that grew with each second. She looked at the lights of the capital, at those warm points in the night, and thought of her mother. The woman she hadn't seen for fifteen years. The woman who had left her when she was still a child, when her world was simple and clear, when the only enemies were nightmares, not people in masks. The woman whose face she remembered only vaguely - blurred features, warm hands, a voice that sang her lullabies - but whose name she carried in her heart like an unhealed wound. Alice. Her mother's name was Alice.

She closed her eyes, and the letter surfaced in her mind's eye. That very letter she had found in a drawer a few months ago, when clearing out her father's belongings after his death. It was hidden

in a secret compartment under a false bottom, folded into four and tied with a faded ribbon. She had reread it hundreds of times, every word burned into her memory like a brand: "Don't trust those who know the truth too well. Truth is a weapon, daughter. And those who wield it will never tell you everything." She didn't know what it meant. She didn't know who it was addressed to - perhaps to her, perhaps to someone else her mother was trying to warn. But she felt it, felt it with every cell of her being, that this was a warning. A warning that someone in her circle was not who they seemed. Someone had worn a mask so long they had forgotten their own true face.

She opened her eyes and stared at the black sky, at those cold, indifferent stars. They gave no answers. They just watched, as always, as they had watched billions of other people who stood on the balconies of their own worlds and asked the same unanswerable questions. The wind died down for a moment, and in that silence, Iris heard a dog bark somewhere below in the city, the creak of a gate, a distant bell striking midnight. Three strikes. Three slow, languid strikes that spread over the rooftops like a warning.

She thought that perhaps her mother was behind the "Frontier." That she had created this army from shadows, from ashes, from those who had lost everything, to destroy what the Union had built. That she was leading her daughter into a trap, step by step, city by city, leaving ashes and silence in her wake. This thought was unbearable - worse than any bullet, any knife. The thought that the woman who once held her in her arms and whispered words of love now held a blade aimed at her.

Iris shifted her gaze to the east, where beyond the horizon, beyond the dark strip of foothills, lay the very mountains Kyle spoke of. She couldn't see them, but she felt them - black and ominous, guarding a secret someone was so desperately trying to find. Or hide.

She didn't know where her mother was now. Didn't know if she was alive, or had already turned to ash like those five burned cities. Didn't know what had driven her away fifteen years ago - fear, love, obsession, or something else Iris would never understand. But she knew one thing - if her mother was behind this, she had to stop her. Even if it cost her her life. Even if the last thing she saw was her mother's face, contorted by hatred - or worse, indifference.

She whispered into the emptiness of the night, her voice breaking into a hoarse whisper that the wind immediately carried away into the darkness:

Please... let it not be you.

She didn't know who these words were addressed to - gods she didn't acknowledge, fate she didn't believe in, or just to herself, trying to cling to the edge of the abyss. She didn't know if anyone was up there, listening. But she hoped. For the first time in many years, she allowed herself hope - fragile, thin as a spider's web - that her mother was not involved. That her mother had not become the monster she was so afraid of seeing in the mirror. That behind this war was something else - not personal revenge, not a family tragedy, but something bigger and at the same time simpler.

She stood on the balcony, gripping the railing, looking at the city, at its thousands of lights, at those little yellow points, each one a life, a hope, a home. The lights flickered like stars fallen to earth, casting trembling reflections on the wet pavement. Somewhere below, music played - a quiet, sad melody from a tavern on the corner. Someone laughed. Someone cried. Life continued, despite everything, and that was both comforting and frightening.

She thought about how tomorrow she would leave. Tomorrow she would leave this room, this balcony, this city, and head south into the unknown, where either answers or death awaited her. She took nothing with her but her faith that the truth was worth following.

She didn't know what lay ahead. She didn't know if she would ever see this city again, feel this cold wind on her skin, hear this quiet music. But she knew she had to go. Had to find the truth, even if that truth would destroy her, even if she found out that behind it all was her own blood, her own past, which she had tried so long to forget.

She took a deep breath of the cold night air, feeling it burn her lungs, and slowly exhaled. Her fingers uncurled from the railing. She took a step back, towards the glass door, but before entering,

she looked at the stars once more. At the very star her mother had told her as a child always points the way home.

Farewell, - she whispered. - I will find you. Wherever you are.

She turned and entered the office, leaving the night outside with its stars, its wind, and its silent questions. The door closed behind her with a dull thud, and she was left alone in the warmth, in the lamplight, with the map on the table and the heavy burden on her heart, which she had carried for too long.

Iris entered Elias's room without knocking. She didn't wait for permission or bother to knock politely - now it seemed an empty formality, a nod to propriety that had lost all meaning in a world where cities burned and truth melted like morning mist. She just pushed the door open and entered, and he looked up, showing neither surprise nor displeasure. He sat at his work table, his old revolver disassembled into parts - barrel, cylinder, hammer, springs neatly laid out on a piece of chamois leather, like parts of a complex mechanism he trusted with his life. The smell of gun oil and metal mixed with the scent of old wood and tobacco, which permeated his clothes, his hair, his skin.

He was cleaning his weapon with the same meticulous care he applied to everything in his life - methodically, calmly, focused, with an attention to detail bordering on obsession. He didn't startle when she entered, didn't flinch, didn't get distracted. He only raised his dark, deep eyes, reflecting the dim light of the oil lamp, and looked at her. His gaze was calm, like the surface of a frozen lake, but she knew - beneath that smoothness lay currents that could drag anyone to the bottom who dared to cross it.

She stopped at the threshold, placing her palm on the doorframe. The wood was warm from the nearby fireplace, and she felt that warmth pass through her fingers, filling her for a moment with something cozy, almost forgotten. She looked at Elias, at his strong shoulders, at the grey at his temples, which had appeared before they met and only added to his rugged handsomeness, which she saw every day.

I've decided, - she said, her voice even, but carrying the same steel as the blade she wore on her belt. - I'm going south.

Elias put down the weapon. He did it slowly - first he laid the barrel on the chamois, then moved the cylinder aside, then carefully pushed away the box of springs. He stood up, his chair squeaking softly as it slid back. His movements were measured but confident, without unnecessary fuss - like a man who knows the value of every moment and doesn't waste time on useless gestures. He didn't look surprised. He looked like he'd been waiting for this moment, waiting for these words, waiting for her to finally say them aloud, to shed the burden of indecision.

I knew you'd say that, - he said. There was no reproach in his voice, no surprise. Only calm acceptance, which she valued so much in him. Only deep, almost fatherly confidence that she would always do the right thing, even when she doubted herself.

Iris took a few steps forward, and the door slowly closed behind her, the latch clicking shut. She came closer to the table, to this chaos of metal and oil, and stopped opposite him. She felt weariness pressing on her shoulders, seeping into every cell of her body, her muscles aching from the tension she'd been carrying for days. She hadn't slept last night - she'd stood on the balcony, looking at the stars, thinking about her mother, about Kyle, about what lay ahead. She'd run through hundreds of scenarios, hundreds of ways to avoid this path, but none seemed right. And now, standing before Elias, she felt resolve overpowering exhaustion, the fire in her chest burning brighter than the fading candle of her strength.

I'm not asking you to come with me, - she said, her voice faltering slightly, but she quickly regained control. - I know you're needed here. The city needs you. Your experience. Your firmness. If I don't return, someone must hold the defense. Someone must protect those who remain.

She said this, and there was truth in her words - cold, bitter truth she was forced to acknowledge. She knew the risk she was taking was enormous. She knew she might not return. And if that happened, someone had to be here to continue the fight, to keep chaos from consuming everything.

Elias chuckled. It was a short, dry laugh, one she knew well - a quiet, bitter sound he made only when he heard something so absurd he couldn't hold back a reaction. He walked up to her, closing the distance between them to a single step, and took her by the shoulders. His hands were warm and strong, and she felt their warmth penetrating the cold she'd carried inside for years. His fingers tightened slightly on her shoulders, and that touch was both firm and gentle.

If you think I'll let you go alone, - he said, his voice losing all mockery, becoming low and serious, - you don't know me at all. You really don't. I've been with you through everything - through war, through losses, through nights you couldn't sleep and days you couldn't eat. I was with you when you made the hardest decisions, and I'll be with you through this. You're not alone. You've never been alone, and you never will be.

She looked into his eyes. There was no doubt in them, no fear, no hesitation. Only the same resolve she felt in herself, only a deep, unyielding loyalty she hadn't earned, but which he gave her without question. She wanted to say something important. To tell him what he meant to her. To say that without him, she wouldn't have survived, wouldn't have borne the burden on her shoulders. To say that in this world full of lies and betrayal, he was the only person she trusted unconditionally. But the words stuck in her throat, forming a tight knot she couldn't swallow. Instead, she just nodded - short, sharp, like a soldier accepting an order, though she was actually accepting his support, his presence, his unwavering faith in her.

Elias released her shoulders, but his hand lingered on her forearm for a moment, squeezing a little tighter than necessary, as if to reassure himself she was still there, still real. Then he turned to the table and began gathering his belongings with the same methodical precision he'd used to clean his weapon - he picked up the barrel, inserted the cylinder, clicked the hammer into place, tightened the screws. He pulled a box of ammunition from a drawer, each round polished to a shine, and poured them into a leather pouch on his belt. He rolled up the map he'd had on the table and tucked it into his jacket's inner pocket. He moved quickly and confidently, without wasted motion, as if he'd been waiting for this moment his whole life.

When do we leave? - he asked without turning around. His voice was businesslike, even, but with a hint of impatience she caught only because she knew him so well.

Iris looked at him, at his broad back, at how his hands handled the weapon with confidence, at his grey temples, at his calm strength. She felt warmth growing inside her, a warm, living feeling she'd tried to suppress for years but which always returned when he was near. He was always with her. And that gave her the strength to move forward, even when the path seemed dark and endless.

She walked up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. He paused slightly but didn't turn around. She felt the firmness of his muscles under her fingers, the warmth of his body, even through his thick jacket. She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts, then spoke:

At dawn. We leave at dawn, Elias. I want us to reach Midway before the sun gets too high. There we can get fresh horses and move on.

She paused, then added more softly, almost in a whisper:

And... thank you. For coming with me. For always coming with me.

Elias finally turned around. He looked down at her - he was half a head taller - and a warm, rare smile flickered in his eyes, one he showed only to her, in the quietest moments.

Come on, - he said, his voice softening. - You know I'm not going anywhere.

He took her hand from his shoulder, squeezed it for a moment in his palm, and then released it, turning back to the table to finish his preparations. Iris felt his warmth remain on her skin - a small, quiet reminder that she wasn't alone in this world.

Outside, the horizon began to lighten. The first pale streak of dawn cut through the black sky, heralding the start of a new day.

Iris stood in her room, which always looked more like an army supply depot or a command post than a living space. The walls were covered in old maps - yellowed, worn, with water stains and ink marks made by different hands at different times. Shelves built into the niches sagged under boxes of documents, folders, old reports, and combat logs. In the corner, crates of weapons and equipment were stacked - rifles, pistols, knives, ammunition boxes, grenades, all neatly sorted and labeled in her own handwriting. It smelled of gunpowder, old paper, metal, and dry wood - scents she'd known since childhood, which comforted her more than any perfume or flowers. She had never liked coziness, soft armchairs, or expensive rugs. She needed only what was necessary for survival, for work, for war. Here, among these things, she felt more confident than in any room with velvet curtains and gilded frames.

She stood before her bed - an iron, military cot, covered with a thin grey woolen blanket - on which her travel gear was neatly laid out. She checked them one by one, as she'd done hundreds of times before, before every sortie, every raid, every mission that could be her last. Her fingers slid over fabric, metal, leather, and each touch was as familiar as breathing.

An old army backpack of thick canvas, worn to pale patches on the shoulder straps, but still reliable - she'd carried it through the entire war, through all the marches and retreats, and it had become part of her, like her own skin. A set of maps folded in a leather folder with a brass clasp - she knew every line on them, every curve of a river, every bend of a road, every elevation, but she still took them, because a map was an extension of her memory, her eyes, her intuition. A first-aid kit with bandages, antiseptics, painkillers, and sutures - she knew wounds could be varied, from scrapes to deep cuts, and she was ready for anything, because in the field, you couldn't rely on medics. A few cartridges for her pistol - not many, just two magazines, but enough to defend herself in an emergency, to buy time to flee or for a final shot.

She took in her hands an old photograph, which lay separately, in a wooden box hidden under a stack of maps. It was the only item in the room that had no connection to war. The photograph was worn at the edges, with curled corners, faded colors - once vibrant, now time had made it soft, watercolor-like, almost ghostly. There were three figures in it: her mother, her sister, and herself, still very young, standing in front of a flowering garden. Her mother smiled - that soft, warm smile Iris remembered so vaguely, like a dream from childhood gradually fading from memory. Her sister, five years older, held her hand, and they both looked at the camera with serious, almost adult faces. Iris wore a white dress her mother had made for summer, and she remembered how the collar itched and how she kept trying to adjust it. This was the only photograph she had left. The only evidence that she'd once had a family.

She ran her finger over the faces - over her mother, whom she hadn't seen for fifteen years and whose voice she could barely remember; over her sister, whom she'd lost the same year their mother left; over herself - that little girl with serious eyes who didn't know what lay ahead, who believed the world was a garden and sunshine, not ash and rain. She felt a tight lump rising in her throat, her eyes beginning to sting, but she held it back - took a deep breath, exhaled, clenched her teeth. She couldn't afford weakness. Not now. Not before taking the most important step of her life.

She slowly tucked the photograph into the inner pocket of her jacket, over her heart. She felt its edge touch the fabric, felt it lie against her chest, as if trying to warm her from within. Beside the photograph, she placed her mother's letter - the same sheet of paper, folded into four and tied with a faded silk ribbon, which she'd found in her father's secret compartment months ago. She'd reread it hundreds of times, every word burned into her memory like a brand, like a scar. "Don't trust those who know the truth too well. Truth is a weapon, daughter. And those who wield it will never tell you everything." She didn't know why she was taking it with her. Perhaps it was a reminder - that the world was more complex than it seemed, and even those closest could be strangers. Perhaps it

was a warning - that somewhere in the south, something awaited her that would make her question everything she believed. Or perhaps it was the last connection to her mother, the last thread linking her to someone she had once loved and still couldn't forget.

There was a knock on the door. Three short, sharp raps - not questioning, but businesslike, like someone who didn't waste time. Iris looked up and, without turning, said:

Come in.

The door opened, and Nova entered the room. She was a young woman with short, perpetually disheveled dark hair and a scar through her left eyebrow - a thin white line cutting across her skin, a reminder that she'd seen the enemy up close and survived. Her eyes were dark and watchful, like a beast always ready to pounce. She always looked like she'd just returned from a mission - focused, serious, ready for action, with a hint of weariness she tried to hide. She was one of the Union's best scouts, and Iris trusted her almost as much as Elias - which, for her, was high praise.

Iris, - Nova said, approaching the table and placing a folded map on it. - Elias asked me to give you this. He said it was important. - She paused, her fingers lingering on the map a moment longer than necessary. - And he asked me to tell you to look at it before you leave. I don't know what's there, but he had this look... - she shook her head. - Anyway, I'm just passing it on.

Iris walked to the table and took the map. It was the same map of the southern territories she'd been examining in her office, but now it had new markings - neat red lines drawn in thin pencil, circled points, and small notes in the margins in Elias's handwriting - sharp, angular, almost illegible. She shifted her gaze to the center of the map, where the roads ended and the emptiness began, and saw a circle traced in red pencil, heavily pressed, as if it had been stabbed into the paper. Inside the circle was a note in the same handwriting: "Unknown object. Entry forbidden. Reconnaissance data: zone of complete quiet. No signals. No traces. Earth overturned."

He says he found something strange in the scouts' reports over the last three weeks, - Nova continued, not taking her eyes off Iris. - In the south, there's a zone they can't explain. They've flown over it several times, walked over it on the ground, but there's nothing there. No buildings, no camps, no signs of life. Just emptiness. But they say the ground looks like it's been plowed - fresh furrows, overturned soil, but without tracks of wheels or feet. As if someone came, turned everything over, and left without a trace. And the strangest thing - within a five-mile radius of the spot, there isn't a single animal. No birds, no beasts. Just silence.

Iris looked at the map, her fingers trembling slightly. She felt that familiar sensation awakening inside her - the feeling of standing on the brink of discovery, that the answers to all her questions lay right before her, in this red circle, in this emptiness that was both alluring and frightening. This was the point where all the lines led, all the roads, all the burned cities. This was what they were looking for. And now she knew where to go.

She slowly rolled up the map, tucking it into a separate pocket of her backpack, where she kept the most important things. Her movements were calm, but inside, everything was churning. She turned to Nova and placed her hand on her shoulder - a brief, warm touch meant to convey more than words.

Thank you, Nova, - she said, her voice firm, but with a softness she rarely showed. - You did great. Get some rest. Tomorrow's a long road, and I want you in shape when we leave. I'll need you.

Nova nodded, gratitude flickering in her eyes. She turned to leave, but paused at the door and looked back.

Iris... - she began, then hesitated, as if choosing her words. - Be careful. Out there in the south, something isn't right. I feel it. And I don't want anything bad to happen to you.

Iris gave a faint smile - that rare, warm smile that appeared on her face only in moments of genuine closeness.

I'll be careful, - she said. - I promise.

Nova nodded and left, closing the door behind her. Her footsteps quickly faded down the corridor. Iris was left alone in her room, surrounded by maps, crates, and weapons. She looked at the things laid out on the bed, at the backpack, at the letter from her mother lying near her heart. She felt readiness filling her - cold, calm, like the steel she knew so well. She was ready. She was ready to head south. Ready to find the truth, whatever it might be.

She walked to the bed, picked up the backpack, tightened all the straps, checked the buckles, fastened the side pockets. She put on her jacket, adjusted the weapons on her belt, tucked a spare knife into her pocket. She stood before the mirror - old, cracked, in a tarnished frame - and looked at her reflection. There was a woman with weary eyes, firm cheekbones, a thin line of lips that could smile but did so less and less often. A woman who carried the world on her shoulders and was ready to save it - or die trying.

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, smelling old paper, metal, and gunpowder, and whispered into the emptiness:

Tomorrow at dawn. Tomorrow everything will change.

She opened her eyes, and there was no longer any doubt in them. Only steel. Only resolve. Only the path forward, through the night, through the rain, through the emptiness she had to fill with truth.

The gates of the capital stood wide open - two massive leaves of wrought iron and oak, each three times the height of a man, were drawn aside and secured with heavy chains. Dawn was just breaking, and the sky was painted in grey-pink tones - the first rays of sun timidly breaking through the thick veil of clouds that had not yet dispersed after the night's rain. The damp air was filled with the smell of wet earth, rotting leaves, and cold metal. Somewhere in the distance, a bird cried, its voice carrying over the empty square, echoing off the stone walls and dying in the labyrinth of morning shadows. The air was damp and cold, and Iris felt it penetrating her thick cloak, touching her neck, making her shiver with each gust of wind. But she paid it no attention. She stood at the head of the squad, upright, looking south - towards the horizon where the destroyed cities, the dark mountains, and the unknown lay.

Ten people stood behind her. Ten hardened fighters she'd personally selected for this expedition - men and women who'd been through war, through loss, through nights when death breathed down their necks. They asked no questions, demanded no explanations - they just stood, weapons in hand, waiting for her command. Iris slowly swept her gaze over their faces: the stern, scarred face of Kane, who'd been with her since the first campaign; the focused eyes of Lyra, the garrison's best shot; the broad-shouldered figure of Jack, who never smiled but was always first in an attack; the young, almost boyish face of Ren, looking at her with devotion and faith she hadn't earned. She saw them all - calm, focused, ready for battle, for death, for anything, as long as they followed orders. She knew they would follow her to the end, without hesitation, without doubts, and that gave her strength, which she drew from their loyalty, like from a deep well.

Among them was Elias. He stood directly behind her, already in field uniform - dark jacket, thick trousers, high boots, the old revolver on his belt he never removed even in sleep. His face was calm, almost serene, but she knew him too well not to see the shadow of tension lurking at the corners of his eyes. He was ready. He was always ready - for war, for death, for protecting her, even if it meant sacrificing himself. Iris turned and looked at him. He met her gaze, his lips twitching into a faint, barely noticeable smile - that same smile she saw only in the most difficult moments, when words were powerless and a glance said it all. She wanted to say something important - what he meant to her, that without him she would have broken long ago, that he was her anchor in this raging sea. But the words stuck in her throat, forming a tight lump she couldn't swallow. Instead, she just nodded - short, sharp, like on the battlefield - and he responded in kind. Between them, words were unnecessary. They understood each other without them.

She turned to the squad. The wind pulled at the edge of her cloak, and she felt the cold morning air touch her face. She raised her hand, and all ten fighters froze, looking at her with the unwavering attention of people used to waiting for an order at any moment.

We go for the truth, - she said, her voice ringing loud and clear, carrying over the square, echoing off the walls and into the grey sky. - We don't know what awaits us. We don't know how many enemies lie in wait, or if we'll all return home. But we know one thing - we are the ones who can stop this. We are the ones who must stop this. We go south to find out what's hidden in the mountains. We go to protect our home. We go to give our children a future where they won't be afraid of the dark. And we will return. All, or almost all, - she paused, her voice dropping but becoming firmer, - but we will return with the truth.

She turned, her boots thudding loudly on the wet cobblestones. She took the first step towards the gates, towards the southern road, towards what awaited her beyond the horizon. She didn't look back, though she wanted to more than anything. She felt Elias's gaze on her back, felt his presence, his confidence, his warmth, and knew - he was following her. As always. Through all those years. Every time the world collapsed and she needed someone to stand beside her, so she wouldn't fall.

She walked forward, and the gates of the capital slowly, with a heavy groan, began to close behind her. Metal scraped against stone, chains tightened, and the leaves closed with a dull thud, cutting her off from the city, from home, from everything she knew and loved. She didn't look back. She couldn't afford that weakness. Instead, she looked forward - at the road stretching beyond the horizon, at the grey sky, at the wet fields, at the distant silhouettes of trees swaying in the wind.

Elias drew level with her, and they walked shoulder to shoulder, without a word. She heard his breathing, heard his boots fall in time with her steps, felt his presence like a warm wall beside her. The wind died down, and for a moment there was that special silence that comes only at dawn, when the world hasn't yet woken up, and everything seems possible.

She didn't know what lay ahead. She didn't know if she'd find answers or only new questions. She didn't know if she'd see these gates again, hear this creak, feel this cold morning air on her skin. But she knew she had to go. Had to find the truth, whatever it was. Had to protect her world, her people, her past, and her future.

And she knew Elias walked beside her. As always. As it would always be, until death parted them - or until they found what they were looking for.

She shifted her gaze to the road stretching ahead into the grey morning haze and took the next step. And another. And another.

The squad moved further and further from the capital, and each step took Iris further from the city that had become her home, her fortress, her anchor in this raging sea of chaos. She walked at the front, her boots stepping steadily on the wet, rain-soaked earth, leaving deep footprints that immediately began to fill with water. She felt the road slipping from under her feet, the cold wind blowing in her face, bringing the smells of distant forests and damp grass, the morning light - timid, silvery - beginning to dispel the night's darkness, painting the horizon in pale gold tones. She didn't look back. She knew that if she turned, if she allowed herself to see the city one last time, it would be harder to leave. Harder to take this step separating her from safety, from the familiar, from everything she knew.

But when they climbed a small hill - the last hill before the road dipped into a lowland and disappeared among the grey fields - she couldn't help it. Something inside her wavered, and she stopped, raising her hand for the squad to halt behind her. She slowly turned, and her gaze fell on the city lying below in the valley, wrapped in morning mist.

The city was beautiful in that light - its high stone walls, which had survived so many sieges and assaults, were lit by the first rays of the sun, and the warm light slid over their surfaces, making the old stone glow with a soft gold. Towers, sharp and slender, rose towards the sky, their spires lost in the remnants of mist that had not yet dissipated. Lights in the windows began to go out one by one, giving

way to the morning light, and the city seemed calm, peaceful, almost defenseless - like a sleeping giant unaware it would soon be awakened. Smoke from chimneys rose vertically, mixing with the grey sky, and Iris watched that smoke, those walls, those towers, feeling her heart tighten into a tight knot.

This was her home. This was the world she'd sworn to protect, for which she was ready to die, for which she'd already shed blood - hers and others'. And now she was leaving it, leaving it behind, trusting its fate to those who remained within the walls and to her own resolve to find the truth.

She raised her eyes to the main fortress wall - the very one where she'd stood hundreds of times, watching the sunset and thinking about the future - and saw a lone figure. It was Elias. He stood on the wall, unmoving, in his dark cloak, billowing in the wind. He was too far away for her to make out his face, his eyes, his expression, but she knew - he was looking at her. She felt his gaze, as she always felt his presence, even when he was a thousand miles away. She knew he would wait. As always. As he'd waited for her his whole life, from the day they'd met on the battlefield, when she was young and fierce, and he was already grey and wise.

Iris raised her hand in a farewell gesture - slowly, almost solemnly, her palm freezing in the air for a moment. She knew he couldn't see her - the distance was too great, the morning mist too thick. But she needed to say goodbye. She needed to let him know she would return, that she wouldn't break, that she would do everything to see his face again, hear his voice, feel his hand on her shoulder.

She whispered, barely audible, just moving her lips, and the wind carried her words into the void:

I'll be back. I promise.

She lowered her hand and stood for a moment, gazing at the distant figure on the wall. Elias didn't move. He stood like a stone statue, like a sentinel who would not leave his post even if the world collapsed around him. And in this silent farewell, there was more meaning than in any words, any oaths, any promises.

The wind tossed her hair, and she felt the cold air touch her face, drying the barely noticeable traces of moisture on her cheeks. She took a deep breath - a full breath, feeling the morning air fill her lungs, mix with her blood, with her resolve. She turned to face the wasteland.

Before her stretched an endless grey land, dotted with stones, overgrown with tough, prickly grass rustling in gusts of wind. The sky above seemed infinite - grey, cold, cloudless, hanging over the earth like the wing of a giant bird. The wasteland awaited her. The unknown awaited her.

She took a step forward. Then another. Her feet carried her forward of their own accord, over this wet, cold earth, along this path that could lead anywhere - to truth, to death, or to something worse than death.

She felt the weight on her shoulders. It wasn't the backpack, not the weapons, not the equipment she carried. It was responsibility - the very weight that lay on her every day, every hour, every minute. Thousands of lives, thousands of fates, thousands of hopes and fears - all depended on her, on her decisions, on her ability to keep a clear head when everything around her crumbled. She knew she had no right to make mistakes. She knew she had no right to give up, no right to hesitate, no right to let fear control her. She carried the weight of an entire world, and that weight was heavier than any weapon, any armor, any burden she'd ever lifted.

She kept walking. Her steps were steady, confident, and she felt the earth slipping from under her feet, each step carrying her further from the past, from what was, from what she knew. The squad moved behind her, silent and focused, their boots thudding in rhythm, and that rhythm comforted her, reminding her she wasn't alone, that those who believed in her followed.

And when the city finally disappeared over the horizon - when the last tower vanished into the grey haze, when the last ray of sunlight died on its walls - Iris stopped for a moment. She closed her eyes and listened to the silence surrounding her. The wind died down, and the world paused. She heard only her own breathing, only her own heart, beating steadily and calmly.

And in that silence, she felt something new awakening within her - not fear, not doubt, not homesickness. But resolve. Cold, hard, like the steel on her belt. Resolve stronger than fear, stronger than weariness, stronger than anything she'd felt before. She was ready. Ready to move forward, into the unknown, towards the truth, towards what awaited her at the end of this path. She opened her eyes, and there was no longer doubt in them - only clarity and light.

They had been walking for four hours. The sun rose higher, and the wasteland, which had been damp and cold in the morning, gradually heated up, turning into a scorching furnace under the relentless light breaking through the sparse clouds. The air became dry and heavy, like before a thunderstorm, and each breath came with difficulty - it felt as though the lungs were filling not with air, but with hot sand. Iris felt sweat running down her back, soaking her shirt and leaving damp patches under her jacket, felt fine sand crunching under her boots, seeping through the seams and chafing her skin, felt the wind carrying dry, prickly particles that painfully struck her face, leaving barely noticeable scratches on her skin. She brushed a damp strand of hair from her face and squinted, looking at the horizon where the grey earth merged with the grey sky, creating an illusion of infinity.

She led the squad along old roads, nearly erased by time - once, caravans laden with goods had passed here, merchants heading to the southern ports, but now only barely visible ruts remained, appearing and disappearing in the endless grey land like hints of a past no one remembered. She walked confidently, trying not to show her weariness, though she felt her leg muscles beginning to tremble with strain, each step echoing with dull pain in her knees, the weight of the backpack digging into her shoulders, leaving red marks on her skin. She had no right to show weakness - not to the squad, not to Kyle, not to herself.

She looked at the fighters following her. They moved silently, conserving energy, their breathing even and measured, like people used to long marches. Their faces were focused, eyes looking ahead at the back of the person in front, and none complained, slowed down, or asked to stop. She knew they were as tired as she was, their legs burning, throats parched, but no one uttered a word. These were hardened warriors, veterans of many campaigns, and they knew complaints wouldn't help, that the only way to reach the goal was to walk, without stopping, without doubting, without looking back.

Kyle walked a few steps ahead of the squad, his thin, stooped but surprisingly agile figure standing out against the grey wasteland. He moved quickly and confidently, as if he knew the road better than she did, as if this wasteland was his home, his element. Iris noticed he often glanced back at her - quick, fleeting looks over his shoulder he tried to make inconspicuous, but which she caught out of the corner of her eye. His lips were pressed tightly together, and she saw his jaw tense every time he turned his head. She didn't show she noticed, but she felt it - he was hiding something. She felt it as clearly as she felt the heat of the sun on her skin.

She stopped for a moment and pulled the map from her chest pocket - the same worn, yellowed map with Elias's notes. She unfolded it, and the wind immediately began to tug at the edges, trying to tear it from her hands. She pressed it to her chest and checked it, running her finger along the road lines, marked points, the red circle burning in the center of the eastern mountains. They were supposed to head straight south, towards the mountains, along the old route marked on the map with a solid line. But she noticed - they were gradually veering off course. Kyle kept choosing paths that led away from the marked points: he bypassed old roads, turned aside, chose routes not on the map, zigzagged between rocks and dry riverbeds, giving the impression he was leading them in circles.

She quickened her pace, overtook several fighters, and caught up with Kyle, drawing level with him. He flinched when he heard her steps beside him, his shoulders tensing - a barely noticeable movement she wouldn't have missed even in the dark.

Why are we heading east? - she asked, her voice even, but with that steely edge no one could resist.

Kyle froze for a second. His steps faltered, and he stopped, turning to her. His face was calm, but Iris saw his eyes dart sideways, saw him swallow before speaking. He smiled - that polite, artificial smile that didn't reach his eyes.

The southern roads are destroyed, - he said, his voice too even, like a man who'd prepared an answer in advance. - I heard about it from other refugees when I was coming here. It's dangerous to go there - the ground collapses, landslides, rockfalls. I don't want to risk the squad. There's no other way if we want to reach the mountains intact.

Iris stared at him. She knew it was a lie - she'd seen the map, seen the scouts' notes confirming the southern roads were passable, though requiring caution. She didn't reveal her thoughts. Her face remained impassive, like a stone mask, and only her eyes - cold, watchful - continued to study him, scanning every movement, every muscle in his face.

Fine, - she said, her voice carrying neither agreement nor doubt. - Lead on. But make sure we don't get lost.

Kyle nodded, too quickly, and turned away. He continued walking, and Iris noticed his steps quicken slightly, his fists clench, his shoulders tense further. He felt she knew something. He felt the game he was playing was about to be exposed. She said nothing. She decided to watch and wait for him to make a mistake - when his lie became too obvious to ignore.

She dropped back and rejoined the squad. The fighters looked at her with silent questions, but no one uttered a word. She approached Elias, who walked in the middle of the column, and he, without turning, asked quietly, so the others couldn't hear:

Something wrong? I saw you talking to him. Did you find something?

He's leading us the wrong way, - she answered, her voice soft but firm. - We're heading east when we should be going south. He says the roads are destroyed, but that's a lie. The map says otherwise. I don't know where he's taking us, but it's not the mountains.

Elias looked at Kyle, who walked ahead, and his eyes narrowed. He squinted, and that same steel glinted in his gaze, as in Iris's.

What do we do? - he asked, his voice as quiet as hers. - Stop him? Corner him? Force the truth out of him?

No, - she answered, shaking her head. - Nothing. For now. I want to understand where he's taking us. And who's behind it. If we pressure him now, he might shut down, and we'll never know the truth. Let him lead. Let him think we don't notice. But we'll watch. We'll wait. And when he takes us where he wants, - she paused, and icy resolve crept into her voice, - we'll be ready.

Elias nodded silently. He asked no more questions. He knew she was right.

They continued walking. The wasteland stretched endlessly, and the horizon seemed unreachable, like a dream fading at dawn. Iris felt the tension growing with each step, the air growing denser, the silence pressing on her ears. She knew Kyle was leading them where someone else wanted - someone standing behind the scenes of this war, someone who knew more than he said. And she had to find out who that "someone" was. Had to understand what game Kyle was playing, and who was really behind the burned cities and black banners on the horizon.

Elias walked ahead of the squad, a good twenty paces ahead of the main group, carefully studying the ground beneath his feet. He moved slowly, intently, almost weightlessly - his massive figure, despite its apparent heaviness, stepped across the wasteland with surprising lightness, like a predator stalking its prey. His eyes, dark and watchful, scanned the wasteland's surface for any signs, any anomalies, any traces that might indicate an enemy presence - or that an enemy had passed through here recently. He was an experienced tracker, and over the years of war, the countless marches and raids, he'd learned to read the earth like a book - to understand its language, its hints, its quiet confessions, revealed only to those who knew how to listen.

The squad moved behind him at a respectful distance, and Iris watched as he bent down, touched the sand with his fingers, picked up small stones, ran his palm over the dry grass. She knew this ritual

- she'd seen it hundreds of times, but each time it evoked in her the same feeling: a mix of respect and awe for his ability to see what remained invisible to others. The wind whistled in her ears, carrying sand and small stones, and the silence of the wasteland was broken only by the steady thud of boots and the rare cries of birds circling high in the sky.

Suddenly, Elias stopped. He did it so abruptly that his body froze for a moment in an unnatural pose, like a statue, and then he slowly raised his hand - an open palm facing backwards - and the squad froze, as if hitting an invisible wall. No one made a sound. Even breathing was held. Only the wind continued to whistle, and the sand rustled underfoot, reminding them the world hadn't stopped even if people had.

Elias crouched down, his knees cracking as he bent his legs. He ran his fingers through the sand - slowly, almost tenderly, like a blind person trying to read the face of a loved one. His eyebrows drew together, and deep wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. He beckoned Iris, and she quickly moved to him, feeling her heart begin to beat faster in anticipation of something important.

Look, - he said, pointing at the ground. - Tracks of heavy machinery. Treads. Wide, deep, with crisp edges. No more than three days old.

Iris crouched beside him, ignoring the sand seeping through her trousers, and looked down. She saw deep grooves left by treads - they were wide, nearly a meter across, with even parallel lines suggesting a heavy, well-designed machine. The edges of the grooves were sharp, not crumbled, indicating the machinery had passed recently - no more than three, maybe four days ago. She followed them with her eyes and saw they led into the distance, to the east, where the wasteland gave way to rocky hills, where the map showed no cities, no roads, no markings of any kind.

Elias stood up, dusting off his hands, his face serious - more serious than she'd seen it in recent days.

But the strangest thing isn't that they're here, - he said, his voice low but tense. - Look. They're not coming from the south, not from the west, not from the north. They're coming from the wasteland itself. They appeared out of nowhere. There are no approach tracks, no wheeled roads, no broken camps. These treads start right here, - he pointed at the point where the tracks became clear, as if the machinery had been teleported onto the wasteland, - and head east. As if they just materialized out of thin air.

Iris frowned. She stood up, dusting off her knees, and her gaze fell on Kyle, who stood motionless a few paces away. His face was pale, almost grey, and she saw his hands trembling slightly, fingers clenching into fists to stop the tremor. He was staring at the tracks with an expression that mixed fear, recognition, and something else - something she couldn't identify. She walked up to him quickly and decisively, took him by the shoulder - firmly, but not roughly - and squeezed so he'd feel the strength of her grip, so he'd understand he had no choice.

You know where they come from, - she said, her voice soft but with a steely edge that brooked no argument. - You know more than you've told us. And now that we see these tracks, you can't stay silent.

Kyle remained silent. His eyes darted around like a trapped animal looking for an escape but finding none. He tried to say something, but his lips trembled, words stuck in his throat, becoming a hoarse, indistinct mumble. His body tensed under her hand, and she felt him trying to pull away but not daring.

If you don't tell the truth, - she said, her voice dropping even lower but growing harder, like a knife blade, - I'll leave you here, on this road, without water, without weapons, without protection. And you'll die of thirst, staring at these tracks, knowing you could have told everything but didn't want to.

She spoke calmly, almost matter-of-factly, as if stating something obvious. But her calm held more threat than any shouting. Kyle looked up at her, and there was real fear in his eyes - primal,

animal, the kind that cannot be faked, that burns the soul from within. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, and whispered, barely audible, so she could barely make out the words:

They come from underground. There are subterranean routes. Bunkers. A whole network, built before the Union. I don't know who built it - the Architect, or those before him. But the Frontier uses it. They emerge from the ground where they're least expected, strike, and disappear back. It's the only way they move so fast and unseen.

Iris looked at him for several seconds, peering into his eyes, his trembling lips, his pale face. She didn't know if he was telling the truth, but she felt that this time he wasn't lying - or at least telling the truth he knew. She slowly released his shoulder, and he exhaled in relief, but his shoulders remained tense.

She turned to Elias, who stood nearby, arms crossed, waiting.

Subterranean routes, - she said, her voice echoing hollowly, like in an empty well. - He says the Frontier uses subterranean routes. A whole network. He says they can emerge anywhere.

Elias looked at the grooves heading east, his face growing even more serious. He ran his hand over his chin, thinking, his eyes growing darker.

If that's true, - he said, his voice low like distant thunder, - they can appear anywhere. Any point in the Union. They're not limited by roads, not limited by maps. They could attack the capital from beneath the capital itself. We won't be able to predict their movement if we don't find a map of these routes.

Iris nodded, and in that nod was the weight of realizing they were facing something new, something they couldn't control, something bigger and more terrifying than they'd thought. She felt a chill run down her spine, goosebumps covering her arms, that cold, icy fear awakening inside her - fear of the unknown, of what couldn't be understood.

We keep going, - she said, her voice hardening, though inside she trembled. - But now we'll be more cautious. We'll watch our step, look for hatches, entrances, any signs the ground might open beneath us. And we'll be ready for anything.

She turned to Kyle and added, looking him straight in the eye:

You'll walk beside me. If we walk into a trap, you'll be the first to fall into it.

Kyle paled further but didn't object. He understood it wasn't a threat - it was a promise.

The squad stopped for the night in a small hollow sheltered from the wind. It was a natural depression in the earth, surrounded by low rocks that created a barrier against the cold night air. It was quiet here, almost serene, and only the rare sounds of the wasteland broke the silence.

They made a fire from dry bushes found nearby. Flames shot up, illuminating the weary faces of the fighters. The fire crackled and cast long shadows on the stones, creating an illusion of comfort in this desolate place.

Iris sat by the fire, legs tucked under her, watching Kyle. He sat apart, a few meters from the fire, hugging his knees. His face was pale, eyes staring blankly, and she saw him trembling, though the night was warm. He looked frightened, but she knew that could be part of his act.

Elias approached and sat beside her. He stretched his hands towards the fire to warm them and looked at her.

Do you think he's telling the truth? - he asked quietly.

Iris didn't answer immediately. She kept watching Kyle, studying him, trying to understand what lay behind his fear.

He's telling us enough to keep us moving, - she said at last.

Elias nodded. He asked no more questions. He knew she was right. Kyle was a tool leading them to their goal. And as long as he was useful, they had to use him.

Iris looked up at the sky. Stars began to appear one by one, emerging through the dark velvet of night. They were cold and distant, and she felt their light penetrating her soul, filling it with a strange calm.

She knew they were walking into a trap. She felt it in every cell of her body. But she also knew it was the only way to find answers. The only way to learn the truth about what was happening in the south. The only way to stop the Frontier.

She turned to Elias. His face was lit by the flames, and she saw in him the same resolve as in the morning when they'd left the capital.

I'm scared, - she said softly. - I'm afraid we're going where we won't be able to return from.

He looked at her. There was no fear in his eyes - only confidence and a warm resolve.

Then we'll make sure we return, - he said. - We always return.

She looked at him and felt his words penetrate her heart. He was right. They always returned. And they would return again.

The squad woke before dawn. It wasn't a gradual, lazy transition from sleep to wakefulness, but a sharp, instant awakening - like people used to every moment of peace potentially being their last. The sky was just beginning to lighten in the east, where a thin strip of light was cutting through the black fabric of night, and the first rays of the sun, still timid and cold, were painting the edge of the horizon in pale orange, dispersing the stars one by one. The air was cold and clean, without the usual stuffiness and dust of the wasteland, and the wind was nearly still - only a light, barely perceptible movement of air touched their faces, bringing the smell of dry grass and distant damp earth. The silence was so deep and absolute that every sound seemed unnaturally loud - the rustle of sand under boots, the creak of leather straps, the suppressed breathing of the fighters waking and rising from the ground like shadows emerging from the darkness.

Iris was the first to rise. She hadn't slept - she'd just lain with her eyes closed, listening to the night, alert to every rustle, every whisper, every suspicious sound that might betray an enemy's presence. But the night had been quiet, and when the sky began to lighten, she allowed herself to open her eyes and sit up. She stood at the edge of the small hollow where they'd spent the night - a natural depression in the earth that protected them from the wind and prying eyes - and looked south, towards the unknown that awaited them. She felt the cold morning air filling her lungs, the briskness gradually returning after a short, restless sleep. She hadn't slept well - thoughts of Kyle, of the subterranean routes, of the heavy machinery tracks, of what lay ahead, swirled in her head, giving her no peace, turning the night into an endless series of unanswered questions. But now, as a new day dawned, as the sun rose over the horizon, she felt resolve returning to her, cold clarity replacing the night's anxiety.

She turned and looked at the squad. The fighters were already waking - they moved quietly, almost silently, rolling up blankets and cloaks, extinguishing the remains of the fire that had smoldered all night, checking their weapons with the practiced thoroughness honed by years of war. All moved without unnecessary words, without questions, as if sensing this day would be important, that it would bring either answers or an end. Their faces were focused, and only in their eyes flickered that special wariness that appears in people who know a battle may lie ahead. Elias was already on his feet, fastening his backpack straps and adjusting his revolver on his belt. His grey hair was tousled, but he was already composed, already ready, already waiting for her order. Their eyes met for a moment, and he nodded to her - short, military, without unnecessary emotion. She nodded back, and in that silent exchange was more understanding than in any words.

Pack up, - she said softly, but so everyone could hear. - We leave in five minutes. Check your water, check your ammunition. We don't know when we'll be able to resupply again.

The fighters moved faster. There was a clink of metal, the rustle of fabric, quiet curses as someone dropped a canteen. Someone coughed, clearing their throat. Kyle, who sat apart from the others, rose to his feet, his face pale and haggard after a sleepless night. He hadn't slept - Iris knew that, because several times during the night she'd heard him tossing, his breathing becoming uneven, swallowing. He was afraid. She didn't know of what - of what lay ahead, or of leading them where he didn't want to go.

The squad assembled quickly. They extinguished the last embers of the fire with sand, ensuring no spark remained that could betray their presence, checked their gear - canteens, ammunition pouches, maps, first-aid kits - and moved out. Iris walked at the front, checking the map she held in her hands, feeling the ground beneath her feet gradually becoming smoother, the wasteland, with its endless grey monotony, giving way to something more civilized. Signs of an old road appeared - even rows of stones once laid neatly in order, now covered with a layer of sand and dust, but still reminders that a path once passed here, connecting cities, binding people, carrying life and trade.

She looked at the map, at the lines becoming clearer as they approached the first settlement on their route. She felt the familiar tension growing inside her - the tension before meeting the unknown, before something that could be either the key to truth or a trap. Something awaited them ahead. She didn't know what it was, but she felt it with every cell of her body, every nerve ending, every beat of her heart, which began to beat faster as they approached.

Two hours later, when the sun had risen high enough to begin to heat up, they reached the first city.

It stood on a hill, surrounded by high stone walls that had once been impregnable - built of dark, nearly black stone that reflected the sunlight, creating the illusion the city was made of obsidian. The walls were intact, without a single crack, without signs of siege engines, without tunnels. But now there was no life behind them. The gates stood wide open - two massive leaves, each weighing several tons, were thrown open as if someone had opened them and forgotten to close them. Through them, empty streets paved with cobblestones were visible, with neat rows of houses on either side. No signs of movement, no smoke rising from chimneys, no sounds - even the wind seemed to have died down as they approached, as if the air itself was afraid to disturb this absolute, oppressive silence.

Iris raised her hand, and the squad stopped. She looked at the city, feeling cold spreading in her chest, frost running down her spine, her fingers tightening on the grip of her pistol. There was no smoke here, no smell of burning, no sounds that usually accompanied an empty city. Only silence - so deep, so all-consuming that it pressed on the ears, filling everything around with its emptiness, like a vacuum sucking in all life.

The city is dead, - Elias said, approaching and standing beside her. His voice was soft, but held the same wariness as hers.

Yes, - she answered, not taking her eyes off the gates. - But there are no signs of battle. No fires, no destruction, no broken walls, no burned buildings. It's just... empty. As if everyone left. As if they just got up and left, leaving everything as it was.

She stood before the open gates, looking at the empty streets, at the houses with closed shutters, at the lifeless windows staring back at her with empty, dark eyes. She felt curiosity and fear fighting within her, her instincts screaming danger, but reason demanding she go forward, seeking answers. She didn't know what they'd find inside. But she knew she had to enter.

She took a deep breath - cold, dry air filled her lungs - and gripped her pistol so tightly her knuckles turned white.

We're going in, - she said, her voice harder than she felt. - Carefully. Keep your weapons ready. Check corners, watch your step, don't fall behind.

She stepped forward, towards the gates, and crossed the city's boundary. Her boots stepped onto the stone pavement, and the sound of her steps echoed through the empty streets, like a warning that they had come. Behind her, the squad moved silently, but with weapons ready, prepared for battle. And the silence of the city swallowed them, like black water swallows a fallen stone, leaving no trace.

They entered the city, and the silence greeted them like a dense, tangible wall - it pressed on the ears, filled every corner, every crack, every crevice in the stones, creating the feeling they were inside a huge, empty shell from which all life had fled. Iris walked down the main street, her boots echoing loudly on the old stone pavement, each step reverberating off the empty walls of the houses, returning to her as a distorted, ghostly reflection of sound. The city looked as though it had been abandoned in

haste, in panic, in despair - doors of houses were flung wide open, many torn from their hinges and lying on the pavement, belongings scattered along the streets, as if people had fled without looking back, abandoning everything they couldn't carry. Clothes - shirts, dresses, children's jackets - lay on the stones, dusted with sand. Someone had dropped a basket of food, and dry, shriveled vegetables scattered across the pavement, rolling in all directions, like helpless witnesses to a sudden flight.

But there were no signs of combat. No charred walls, no blast craters, no signs of fire, no black soot on the stones. The city wasn't destroyed - it was simply empty. Empty, like a forgotten room, like a house where no one lives anymore. This was even more terrifying than ruins. Ruins at least spoke of struggle, of resistance, of people fighting for their homes. Here, there was only absolute, silent emptiness, which screamed louder than any explosions.

Iris stopped at an intersection where the main street crossed two side streets and looked around. Her gaze fell on the walls of the houses, and she noticed a strange detail - on every building, every house, every door, there was a white mark, like a neat, clearly drawn number. She approached the nearest door, crouched down, and looked closer. On the wooden doorframe, over the old paint, white oil paint had been used to write "52." The number was applied evenly, without shaking, without hesitation - as if the person who placed it had done it hundreds of times and knew what they were doing.

She turned and looked at the other houses, at the streets stretching into the distance. All were marked with numbers - some had "13," others "26," others "39," others "65." The numbers were neat, clearly made by one hand, one handwriting, as if someone had methodically walked through the entire city, entering every house, and marked it like an item in a warehouse. Iris ran her finger over the number, and her finger was covered with a thin layer of fresh, not yet fully dried paint. It had been done recently. No more than two or three days ago.

They were sorting them, - Elias said, coming up behind her and stopping beside her. His voice was low and hollow, carrying the same mix of disgust and grim understanding that churned in Iris's chest. - Like livestock. Like goods. Number, category, batch. They turned people into inventory.

Iris nodded, not taking her eyes off the number. She felt cold running down her spine, the hair on her arms standing on end, that icy anger awakening inside her - cold, controlled, but ready to erupt at any moment. This wasn't just conquest. This wasn't just a raid. It was a systematic, organized, almost bureaucratic approach - someone went into houses, marked them, took people, recorded numbers. But why? What was the point of this system?

Nova emerged from one of the houses on the left - a tall one with peeling plaster on the facade - her face pale, almost grey like ash. Her eyes were wide, and she swayed slightly on her feet, as if she'd seen something that had shaken her to the core. She approached Iris, her voice trembling as she spoke:

There's no one there. But there are signs that people sat in the corners. Lots of people. I saw traces of little feet - children's footprints in the dusty floor. They sat there, pressed together. I saw someone had drawn on the wall - with chalk, little figures. A house. The sun. - She paused for a moment, swallowing. - And then they just disappeared.

Iris nodded silently and headed towards that house. She stepped over the threshold, and inside it was dark - only slanting light from the open door picked out the outlines of furniture, tables, chairs, scattered belongings from the darkness. She walked deeper, her eyes adjusting to the semi-darkness. She saw scattered toys - dolls with torn-off arms, wooden horses with broken legs, balls lying in the corner. Empty cups stood on the table, and at the bottom of one, liquid remained - old, murky water. Blankets were neatly folded in the corner, as if someone had been getting ready for bed but never lay down. Everything looked as if people had sat here, waiting, huddled together, clinging to each other, and then - in one moment - they were taken.

She walked further into the room and noticed something in the corner, tucked between pillows on an old sofa - a small, worn picture book with covers drawn in colored pencils. A smiling sun, a house with a chimney smoking, and stick figures holding hands. Iris bent down and picked it up -

her fingers trembling slightly as she turned the pages. It was a diary. A child's, with scribbles and drawings, uneven letters just learning to form words.

She opened it to the last page, and her gaze fell on the uneven, trembling lines written in pencil, broken and sharpened:

"They came yesterday. They said they would take us to a safe place where there would be no war. They said we should trust them. Dad said we should go. He said they promised us a new home. I don't want to leave. I want to stay here. But Dad said we must. I'm scared."

Iris closed the diary. She felt a tight, hot knot rising inside her - anger mixed with pain, with despair, with helplessness before a cruelty so well-organized. These weren't soldiers killing. These were people taking. Promising safety, peace, a new home, and then disappearing with those who believed them, leaving behind only empty houses and numbers on doors.

She clutched the diary in her hand, feeling its corners digging into her palm, and stepped out into the light, which now seemed foreign, wrong, unfair. She looked at the empty streets, at the scattered belongings, at the numbers on the doors, and her voice was soft, but with that steely edge her enemies feared:

We must find them. We must find those who did this. We must find these people - or what's left of them. And we must understand where they were taken. Because this city - it's no accident. It's part of a plan. And if we don't learn what that plan is, the next city to fall empty will be ours.

Elias approached and placed his hand on her shoulder - a brief, warm touch meant to remind her she wasn't alone.

We'll find them, - he said. - We'll find everyone we can. And we'll stop this.

Iris nodded, but in her gaze was that special, cold resolve that promised no mercy. She tucked the diary into her backpack, next to her mother's letter, and turned to the squad.

We move on, - she said. - But now we know what we're looking for. We're not looking for an enemy. We're looking for victims. And we must find them before someone else does.

Nova walked along the empty streets, her steps light and silent as a cat stalking night rooftops. Her eyes - dark, sharp, accustomed to semi-darkness and danger - scanned every corner, every shadow, every window, every slightly open door. She was a scout by nature, and over the years of service, she'd learned to notice details others missed - a broken branch, a fresh footprint on a dusty floor, a slightly ajar manhole cover that didn't fit the picture of a dead city. And now she noticed something strange: a cellar hatch, slightly open, as if someone had been in a hurry and hadn't closed it, leaving a narrow dark gap gaping in the pavement, like a black eye watching her from the ground. The hatch was old, iron, covered in thick rust, with hinges that squeaked at the slightest touch, and it stood out against the empty streets - wrong, alien, as if accidentally placed there.

She approached, stopped over the hatch, and listened. Silence. Only the wind blowing through empty alleys, and somewhere in the distance a torn shutter banging. But then she heard a soft, muffled sound - a cough. It was short, frightened, as if someone was trying to suppress it, cover their mouth, but couldn't, and the sound escaped, like a drowning person gasping for air. This wasn't just noise - it was the breath of life in a dead city.

Nova carefully knelt, ignoring the sand and small stones digging into her skin through her trousers. She took hold of the rusty handle and slowly, trying not to squeak, opened it wider. Below was dark, so dark it seemed there was nothing but emptiness, and it smelled of dampness - the smell of old, stagnant water, mold, dust, and something else she couldn't identify. She looked inside and saw a staircase descending - wooden steps covered in thick grime, leading into a black abyss. She descended, trying not to make noise, her fingers sliding over the cold, rough walls covered in moss and rust.

The cellar was cold and dark. Only light from the cracks in the hatch created narrow, trembling stripes on the floor, illuminating dust dancing in the air. She saw them - five people sitting in a corner, pressed together, like frightened little animals trying to warm and protect themselves from

the outside world. Two adults - a woman with grey, tangled hair and a man with an emaciated face and deep wrinkles - and three children, the smallest, looking at her with huge, terrified eyes. They were huddled together, their hands intertwined, as if afraid someone might tear them apart. They looked at her with such fear that Nova's breath caught for a moment.

She slowly, very slowly raised her hand, showing she meant them no harm. She kept her palm open, without a weapon, without threat, and her voice was soft and gentle as she could make it:

I won't hurt you, - she said. - I'm not one of them. I'm here to help.

The eldest woman, with grey hair that had once been neatly arranged and now hung in tangled strands, and deep wrinkles on her face that spoke of many years lived, whispered, her voice trembling like a dry leaf in the wind:

You're not from them? You're not with the Frontier? They promised they wouldn't come back, but I don't believe them. They came twice. They're taking everyone.

Nova shook her head, her movements slow so as not to frighten them further. She placed her hand on her holster - so they could see the weapon was there, but didn't draw it, didn't show threat. She wanted them to feel safe, though she knew in their state that was almost impossible.

No, - she said, her voice growing softer. - I'm not from them. I'm from the capital. I'm here to help. We're a squad, we're looking for the people who were taken. We want to stop this. You're not alone.

The woman looked at her with disbelief, with that cautious, suspicious hope that appears in people who've suffered too many betrayals. But in her eyes, deep in those weary, red-rimmed eyes, a spark flickered - small, weak, but alive. She nodded to the others, and they began to slowly, painfully rise - their legs stiff after long hours of stillness, and they leaned on each other like old, sick trees holding together only because their roots had intertwined.

Nova led them to the surface. When they emerged from the cellar, the sunlight - bright, almost blinding after the darkness - hit their eyes, and they squinted, raising their hands to their faces to protect them. They looked emaciated, dirty, frightened, like people who'd been through hell and didn't know what to do with a life continuing around them. Their clothes were torn and covered in dust, faces pale, almost grey, eyes red from tears, unshed and shed, leaving tracks on their cheeks.

Iris saw them and quickly approached, covering the distance with long, confident strides. She stopped before the woman, who seemed the eldest, and gently, almost weightlessly, took her hand - cold, trembling, with skin as thin as tissue paper, covered in bruises and scratches.

What happened here? - Iris asked, her voice warm but with that steely edge that appeared when faced with injustice. - Tell me everything. From the beginning.

The woman looked at her, and tears streamed down her cheeks - silently, without sobs, like water finally finding a path through cracks in a dam. She began to speak, stumbling, tripping over every word, as if each cost her a huge effort:

The Frontier came two weeks ago. They came at night, without warning. We woke to noise - shouting, boots stomping, pounding on doors. They didn't kill. They just... took. First all the adults. They went from house to house, knocked, opened doors, and took people. They said it was "relocation." Then they came back for the children. We heard them crying, calling for their parents. Now there's no one left in the city. We are the last.

And you? - Iris asked, her voice dropping to almost a whisper. - How did you survive? Why didn't they find you?

We hid, - the woman said, her voice wavering. - We heard them coming. We heard them taking our neighbors, doors opening and closing, children screaming. We went down to the cellar and locked ourselves in. We sat there all that time, afraid to move, afraid to breathe. We heard them walking above us, their boots thudding on the pavement. Then they left. And we stayed, waiting. We didn't know what to do. We thought they'd come back. We thought we'd die there, in the dark.

She paused for a moment, her eyes clouding, and she whispered, almost inaudibly, but so Iris heard every word:

They called themselves "collectors." They talked about "relocating to a new world." They promised it would be safe there. But I don't believe them. I don't believe such a place exists.

Iris squeezed her hand - firmly, but not painfully, passing the warmth of her palm, her support. She felt anger and pain rising within her, overflowing, threatening to burst out, but she held it back - took a deep breath, exhaled, holding herself on the edge.

You're safe now, - she said, her voice firm as a promise. - We'll take care of you. We won't let them take you.

She turned to the squad and gave a signal - a short, sharp wave - and the fighters began to move, forming a protective circle around the survivors, ready to defend them at any cost. Someone handed them canteens of water, someone shared bread, someone covered the trembling children with their cloaks. Iris watched them, at these people they'd saved from the darkness, and felt resolve strengthening within her. She didn't know where the others had gone. But she knew she had to find them. Had to stop those who called themselves "collectors." Had to destroy their plan, whatever it was.

She crouched before the woman and took her hand. She felt her trembling, her fingers cold and thin. The woman looked at her with hope and fear, and Iris knew she had to be careful not to break this fragile faith.

Where are they, those who were taken? - she asked softly but insistently.

The woman shook her head. Her eyes filled with tears, and she swallowed to continue.

We don't know, - she said. - They said they were being sent south. To places where there is water, food, safety. But we know - it's a lie. Our neighbor, he was a driver. He saw where people were taken. He said they were going east. To the mountains. Where no human foot has trodden for years.

Iris squeezed her hand.

You said they had strange badges? - she asked. - Can you describe them?

The woman nodded. Her face grew even paler, and she spoke more softly, as if afraid someone might hear:

The men from the Frontier wore unusual badges, - she said. - Not ordinary military ones. They had some symbol. I've never seen anything like it before.

Iris took a small piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to the woman.

Draw it, - she said. - Please.

The woman took the paper with a trembling hand. She looked at it, then lowered her eyes and began to draw. Her fingers moved slowly, uncertainly, but she traced three intersecting lines. They were uneven, but recognizable.

Iris froze. She looked at the symbol and felt her heart begin to beat faster. She recognized it. She'd seen it in her mother's papers, in old records she'd kept secret. Three intersecting lines. The symbol of the Architect.

She slowly rose to her feet and turned to Elias. He stood beside her, and she saw his face tense when he saw her expression.

It's the Architect's symbol, - she said softly, so no one else could hear. - This isn't an army. It's his network.

Elias clenched his fists. His eyes darkened, and she saw in them the same rage she felt herself.

Then we're not just going to war, - he said. - We're going to the one who started it.

Iris nodded. She looked at the symbol drawn on the paper and felt something new awakening within her - not just resolve, but something deeper. She knew this path would lead her to the truth. To the truth about her mother, about the Architect, about what was hidden in the mountains.

She knelt before the woman and carefully examined her leg. The wound was deep - a ragged edge, inflamed skin, already beginning to fester. The woman sat motionless, but Iris saw her face contort with pain as she touched the wound.

This will hurt, - Iris said softly. - But I have to treat it.

The woman nodded, clenching her teeth. She made no sound, even when Iris tore strips from her own shirt and began to bandage the leg. She applied antiseptic, and the woman flinched but didn't cry out. She endured silently, and that commanded respect.

Iris finished the bandage and rose. She looked at the children sitting apart, pressed together. They watched her silently, and in their eyes, she saw not gratitude, but fear. Deep, primal fear they couldn't hide. She understood they'd seen things impossible to forget. Seen their parents taken, neighbors disappear, the city become empty.

She approached them and crouched to their level.

You'll be safe, - she said softly. - We'll send you north. There are people there who will take care of you.

The children were silent. One of them, a boy of about seven, looked at her and asked:

What about our parents? Will they come back?

Iris felt her heart clench. She didn't know what to answer. She didn't want to lie, but she couldn't tell the truth either.

We'll do everything we can to find them, - she said. - I promise.

She stood up and beckoned Nova. Nova approached, and Iris took her hand.

You're going back, - she said. - Take two fighters and escort them to the border. We'll continue south.

Nova wanted to object. She opened her mouth to say something, but saw Iris's eyes - there was no hesitation in them. She nodded and began preparing for the journey.

Iris returned to the woman and helped her stand. She handed her a canteen of water, and the woman took a few sips.

I'll find them, - Iris said. - I'll find your people.

The woman looked at her. Her eyes were full of tears, and she whispered:

Be careful. They're not people. They're machines.

Elias walked through the empty streets, his steps measured and heavy, like a man used to measuring space not with his eyes, but with time and effort. He entered every house marked with white numbers - methodically, without haste, with that cold thoroughness that distinguished him from all the others. He moved from door to door, from room to room, from floor to floor, and his eyes - dark, deep, missing nothing - scanned every surface, every object, every shadow. He was looking for something that could explain what was happening, some clue that would help them understand what had happened to the city's inhabitants, where they'd been taken, and why. He was an investigator by nature, and years of war had taught him that truth always leaves traces - you just need to know how to read them.

He noticed a strange pattern, becoming more obvious as he moved from house to house. Houses with small numbers - from 1 to 50, those closer to the city center - had been searched thoroughly, almost sterilely. Things were neatly folded, as if someone had taken people without haste, without fuss, with the methodical organization of a well-oiled system. Clothes hung in closets, dishes stood on shelves, letters lay in stacks on tables. It seemed people had just stepped out for a moment and would return. But houses with larger numbers - those on the outskirts, further from the center - looked different. They seemed less thoroughly searched, as if those searching them were running out of time or patience. Things were scattered chaotically - chairs overturned, drawers pulled out, contents spilled on the floor. Here there was haste, nervousness, almost panic. As if someone was in a hurry or no longer cared what they left behind.

Elias stopped at house number 169. It stood on the very edge, almost at the city wall, and looked abandoned even by this dead city's standards. Its facade was peeling, shutters hung crookedly, and the door was ajar, as if someone had entered and forgotten to close it. Elias pushed the door, and it opened with a long, creaking groan that echoed through the empty rooms like a warning. Inside was dark -

only oblique rays of the midday sun pierced through the cracks in the shutters, leaving long golden stripes on the floor, in which dust motes danced. He entered and looked around: scattered letters, books with torn-out pages, clothes lying on the floor like discarded skin. Everything was chaotic, but in that chaos was its own logic.

He walked deeper into the room, stepping over debris and broken dishes, and noticed something strange on the wall. In the corner where the wall met the ceiling, on the dark, soot-stained boards, a symbol was carved. Elias approached, squinted, and his heart stopped for a moment. It was the Architect's symbol - three intersecting lines, which they'd already seen in other places, on other walls. But beside it was another symbol - a circle with a dot in the center, neat and clear, carved with much greater care than the first. The lines were even, deep, as if made by someone who wanted this sign noticed, remembered. Unlike the rough, careless Architect's symbol, this one was carved with love, with intention, with a message.

Elias pulled out a small camera - old, worn, but reliable, which he always carried with him - and photographed both symbols. He took three shots from different angles so no detail would be missed. Then he lowered the camera and looked again at the circle with the dot, feeling a strange, uneasy feeling awakening within him - that he was on the brink of something important. He left the house, and the sunlight momentarily blinded him. He squinted, letting his eyes adjust, and saw Iris standing on the street, waiting for him.

I found something, - he said, handing her the camera, with the distinct feeling he was passing not just an image, but a key to something that could change everything. - Look at this. At first I thought it was just another Architect symbol. But beside it is another one. A circle with a dot in the center. Very neat. Very intentional.

Iris took the camera, her fingers trembling slightly as she raised it to her eyes and looked at the screen. She saw the Architect's symbol - familiar, hated - and beside it the circle with a dot. She froze, feeling cold run down her spine, goosebumps covering her arms, something inside her breaking and simultaneously igniting. She recognized this symbol. She'd seen it before - on the letter she'd found in the drawer months ago. The letter that belonged to her mother. The letter she'd reread hundreds of times until every word was burned into her memory.

It's not just the Architect's symbol, - Elias said, his voice soft but with a certainty that passed to Iris. - It's a signature. Someone is leaving us a message. Someone who was here before us and wanted us to see this. It's not an accident. It's not a coincidence. Someone wants us to know they were here.

Iris stared at the photograph without looking away. She felt her heart begin to beat faster, blood rushing to her face, hope and fear fighting inside her. She didn't know who it was. She only knew the symbol on the wall matched the symbol on her mother's letter. And that evoked a strange, almost painful mix of feelings in her - hope that her mother was alive and trying to contact her, and fear that she was connected to what was happening, that she was part of this horror.

She looked up at Elias, her voice soft but with that special steel that appeared only in the most important moments:

It's the symbol from my mother's letter. The one I found in the drawer after his death. She wrote: "Don't trust those who know the truth too well." And that letter had exactly the same sign. Someone left it here. Maybe it was her. Maybe someone else who wants us to follow this trail. But it's here. It was waiting for us.

Elias looked at her, and in his eyes flickered that mix of anxiety and resolve she saw in him only in the most dangerous moments. He didn't know what to say - words were powerless before this discovery. But he knew this discovery changed everything. It turned their mission from a simple search for truth into something more personal, more dangerous, more profound.

We must keep going, - he said, his voice firm as stone. - We must find who left this sign. If it's your mother - she wants us to find her. If it's someone else - they want us to know they were here. Either way, we must follow this trail. It's all we have.

Iris nodded, her fingers gripping the camera so tightly her knuckles turned white. She tucked it into her chest pocket, beside the photograph and her mother's letter, and looked at the empty streets stretching into the distance, towards the horizon where the dark silhouettes of mountains were already visible.

They sat on the porch of one of the houses on the outskirts of the dead city. The house was old, with peeling paint and crooked railings, but the porch was wide enough for them to sit on it, placing the map and canteens between them. The sun was already beginning to set, and shadows grew long, stretching down the empty streets like black fingers reaching towards them from the darkening alleys. The sky was painted in deep orange and crimson tones, and the last rays of the sun gilded the dust slowly settling on the pavement. The city around them was silent and dead, but here, on the porch, it was almost peaceful - only the wind rustled in the empty windows, howled in the gaps between shutters, and drove sand across the pavement, creating a quiet, monotonous noise that was both soothing and alarming.

Elias unrolled the map on his knees, smoothing its worn, yellowed edges. It was old, with water stains and ink marks, but the lines on it were clear and recognizable - all the roads, rivers, mountain ranges, and cities that had once been alive. He ran his finger along the map, marking the destroyed cities they'd seen with their own eyes, his finger moving slowly, carefully, as if touching wounds on an old friend's body. He paused at each - Vernon, Ashton, Midway, Crossroads, Lakewood, and now this nameless city they'd just left.

They're systematic, - he said, his voice low and thoughtful, like a man assembling a puzzle but not yet seeing the full picture. - They leave nothing to chance. Every step is planned, every city chosen deliberately. They take people, but don't kill them - at least not immediately. They sort them, mark them, lead them away. If they're taking people, they need them. And if they're leaving symbols, they want to be found. This isn't just occupation. It's a plan. And we're only seeing the surface.

Iris looked at the map, her eyes sliding over the lines and points, connecting them into a single picture. She saw how the destroyed cities formed a line - from the southern borders, where the wasteland began, to the eastern mountains, looming on the edge of the map, dark and ominous. She traced this line with her finger, feeling its tip slide over the rough paper, and understanding dawned inside her - slow, heavy, like rising from the bottom of a deep well.

All the destroyed cities lie on a single line, - she said, her voice soft but with that special clarity that comes only in a moment of insight. - A line leading straight to the old mines. Not the new ones, not the ones still working, but those abandoned in the Architect's time. Those no one has touched for decades.

Elias looked up at her. A shadow of understanding flickered in his gaze, mixed with anxiety. He looked at the map, at the line she'd traced, and his face became serious - more serious than she'd seen it all day.

They're looking for something underground, - she continued, her voice growing firmer, more confident as the picture formed in her mind. - Not people. People are just labor, a tool they need to reach what's hidden. They're looking for reactors. The very reactors the Architect left behind when he disappeared. Those we only know from old records, from legends, from what we've managed to find in the archives. Reactors that could power "Protocol 7."

She paused for a moment, looking at the sunset painting the sky in fiery tones, feeling the cold wind touch her face.

If they find them, - she said, her voice dropping but gaining steel, - they could launch "Protocol 7" on a global scale. Not locally, as we feared, but everywhere. At once. They could destroy everyone who doesn't meet the Architect's standards - everyone who doesn't fit their picture of an ideal world. We can't let them do that.

Elias clenched his fists, his fingers whitening with tension. He looked at the map, at those lines, those points, that path leading to the mines, and his voice was harder than she'd heard it in days.

"Protocol 7" isn't just a weapon, - he said, his voice low and hollow, like distant thunder. - It's a system. A machine capable of rewriting reality as the Architect saw it. If the Frontier gains access to the reactors, they can activate it anywhere, anytime, without warning. We won't be able to stop them if they launch it. We'll have only a few hours to act. And then - silence.

Iris nodded, and in that nod was the weight of realizing what was at stake. She knew he was right. She knew every hour of delay brought them closer to a catastrophe they couldn't prevent. She looked at the sunset, at this dying light gilding the roofs of empty houses, and felt resolve filling her, overwhelming weariness, fear, doubts.

We must reach them first, - she said, her voice firm as the steel on her belt. - We must find these reactors and destroy them before they can use them. If we're too late, everything we know, everything we love - will disappear. Like this city. Like those who lived here.

Elias rolled up the map, his movements sharp and confident, and tucked it into his jacket's inner pocket, over his heart. He rose, his shadow stretching long across the pavement, and offered her his hand - a broad palm, covered in calluses and scars, which had held her so many times in the most difficult moments.

Then we head for the mines, - he said, his voice firm as a promise he gave her again and again. - We don't stop until we find them. We don't stop until we stop them. No matter how long it takes, no matter what it costs.

They left the city the next morning, when the sky was just beginning to lighten in the east, and the stars had not yet faded. The sun was just rising, and its first rays illuminated the empty streets, giving them a ghostly golden hue, as if someone had covered the dead city with a thin veil of light. The air was cold and clean, but it still smelled of dust and desolation, settling on their clothes, their skin, their lungs, reminding them of what they were leaving behind - another city, another chapter, another riddle that had yet to be answered. The silence was as deep as yesterday, but now it was broken by the footsteps of the squad, the creak of straps, the suppressed sighs of the survivors preparing for the long road north.

Nova stood at the head of the small group - she and two fighters Iris had personally selected for this mission, preparing for the journey. They checked their weapons, tightened their backpack straps, counted their ammunition and water. Around them gathered the survivors: the woman with the bandaged leg, leaning on a homemade crutch; three children holding hands, fingers intertwined, as if afraid they'd be separated again; and several others - men and women with exhausted faces, whom they'd found in cellars and basements of this dead city. They looked dirty, frightened, but in their eyes appeared that fragile, timid hope that arises in people when they first see light after a long darkness.

Iris walked over to Nova, her steps firm, though inside everything tightened at the prospect of separation. She placed her hand on Nova's shoulder - warm, firm, so young - and her voice was soft but firm as she spoke:

Get them to the border, Nova. Don't stop anywhere. Bypass cities, avoid contact, don't take risks. Only the border. There you'll be met, there you'll be safe. That's an order.

Nova nodded, a shadow of anxiety flickering in her dark eyes, which she tried to hide. Her face was serious, focused, but Iris knew her well enough to see behind that mask the worry - worry for those remaining, for those heading into the unknown.

And you? - Nova asked, her voice softer than usual. - Are you sure you don't want me to stay? I could go with you. I could be useful out there, in the mountains.

I'm sure, - Iris answered, no doubt in her voice. - They need you. They need someone to protect them, to get them to the border. You're the best, Nova. You can do it.

Nova squeezed her hand in return - firmly, for a moment, passing warmth and a silent promise - then turned to her group. She raised her hand, and the survivors stirred, preparing to move.

We're going, - she said, her voice firm as someone who knows what must be done. - Take care, Iris. And come back.

She led the survivors north, along the road stretching beyond the horizon, and their figures quickly dwindled, becoming small dots in the grey morning haze. Iris watched them until they disappeared in the distance, leaving behind only a cloud of dust slowly settling on the ground. She stood motionless, feeling emptiness rising inside her - that special emptiness that appears when you let someone go, knowing you may never see them again. But she didn't allow herself to dwell on that feeling. She took a deep breath, feeling the cold morning air fill her lungs, and turned to those remaining.

She counted them with her eyes. Four fighters - those who'd agreed to go to the end - stood around, checking weapons and tightening straps. Elias was already on his feet, his face calm, but in his eyes read the same resolve as in hers. Kyle stood a little apart, looking towards the mountains, his face impenetrable like a stone mask. Seven against an unknown army. Seven against an entire network built by the Architect. She felt a weight in her chest, but pushed the fear away. She couldn't allow it to take hold. She raised her head, squared her shoulders, and looked south, where the dark silhouettes of mountains were already visible on the horizon.

We're heading to the mountains, - she said, her voice firm as steel. - That's where the answers are. And there the end of this path awaits, whatever it may be. We don't stop until we know the truth.

They moved out. The road became more and more broken as they approached the mountains. The earth cracked, deep crevices gaped in the ground like open wounds, ready to swallow anyone who stumbled. The air grew drier, and the wind blew stronger, carrying sand and small stones that painfully struck their faces, leaving barely noticeable scratches. Vegetation disappeared - only grey, dead earth covered in a layer of dust stretched around, and it seemed they were walking along the bottom of a dried-up ocean.

Iris noticed Kyle walking more confidently than before. He didn't hesitate, didn't stop to look around, didn't check the map. He moved with that special confidence of someone who knows the way - not from a map, but from memory, from feeling, from something deeper than just knowledge of the route. He seemed to know where he was going, and that alarmed her more and more with each step.

She quickened her pace, overtook Elias, and drew level with Kyle, walking stride for stride. The wind tossed her hair, and she brushed it from her face before speaking.

You know the way to the mountains, don't you? - she asked, her voice even, but with that steely edge that appeared when she demanded the truth. - You're not looking at the map, not asking directions. You just walk. As if you've been here before.

Kyle was silent. His steps didn't slow, and he stared straight ahead at the dark peaks growing on the horizon with each hour. His face remained expressionless, as if he hadn't heard her.

You're taking us where they want, - she added, a firmness in her voice that brooked no argument. - You're their guide. You didn't bring us here by chance.

He turned his head and looked at her. His eyes were empty - without fear, without hope, without doubt. Only silence. Deep, cold silence that could belong to a man who'd seen too much to be surprised by anything. He looked at her for several seconds, then slowly spoke, his voice soft, almost lifeless:

You wouldn't want to know the truth? The real truth. Not the one you're looking for, but the one you're afraid to find.

He turned away and continued walking, leaving her standing with those words that penetrated her mind like cold water into cracks in stone. Iris stopped for a moment, feeling his words echo in her head, penetrate under her skin, make her heart beat faster. She didn't know what he meant. She didn't know what truth he was referring to. But she knew he knew more than he said, and that he was taking them where they had to go - where the answers awaited them, ready either to save or destroy.

She caught up with him a few seconds later, quickening her pace, and walked beside him without asking more questions. She just walked forward, feeling the wind in her face, the earth slipping from under her feet, each step taking them closer to the unknown. Elias walked behind, his presence warm

and reliable, like a wall at her back. She didn't know what awaited them at the end of this path. But she knew they would reach the end. Together.

Nova walked north along the road, leading the survivors. Her steps were quick and confident, but she constantly looked back, checking no one had fallen behind, stumbled, stopped in exhaustion. The road was broken, covered in cracks and potholes, and each step required caution to avoid twisting an ankle on uneven stones. The wind blew in her face, cold and dry, carrying sand that gritted on her teeth and settled on her clothes in a thin grey layer.

The woman with the bandaged leg - her name was Marta, as she'd said when they came out of the cellar - walked with difficulty, leaning on the shoulder of one of the fighters. Her face was pale, covered in sweat, and each step clearly cost her great effort, but she held on, clenching her teeth and not uttering a word of complaint. The three children followed, holding hands in a chain, their small fingers white with tension. They were silent - that was the scariest thing. The children didn't cry, didn't whine, didn't ask to stop. They just walked, their eyes wide open and empty, as if they'd seen too much in recent days to be surprised by anything.

Nova felt time pressing on her, each lost hour, each extra minute bringing them closer to danger. She had to get them to the border - to the safe zone where they could get help, food, shelter, protection. She knew that there, in the north, Union patrols were waiting, ready to take in refugees. But the road was long, and each step required strength the survivors barely had. They moved at the pace of the slowest - the injured woman and the small children who could barely put one foot in front of the other.

She was about to quicken the pace, urging the group on, when she noticed something strange in the distance. A thin, barely visible wisp of smoke rising from the ground to the south, almost merging with the grey sky, but still distinguishable to a trained eye. Nova stopped, raising her hand, and the entire group froze behind her. She squinted, trying to make out the source, feeling a cold wave of anxiety rising inside her.

What is it? - asked one of the fighters, approaching her. His voice was soft so as not to frighten the survivors, but it carried tension.

Quiet, - Nova said, without turning. - Give me the binoculars.

She pulled out her binoculars - old, worn, with a cracked casing, but with perfectly clean lenses she guarded like the apple of her eye. She aimed them at the smoke, adjusting the focus until the image was clear. She saw a destroyed city - the very one they'd just left, with its empty streets, open doors, and white numbers on the doorframes. But now smoke was rising over it - thick, black, with crimson glints at the base, as if something inside was burning. She couldn't see flames, but she felt their presence - hot, greedy, devouring.

Her heart missed a beat. She realized the Frontier could already be there. They could be following their tracks, approaching with each hour, each minute. They could have noticed their squad heading north and were now approaching to finish what they'd started.

They're coming after us, - she whispered, lowering the binoculars.

She turned to the fighters, her face pale, but her eyes burning with that cold resolve that appears in people when there's no choice left.

Speed up, - she said, her voice hardening. - We must reach the border before nightfall. They're close. If we don't make it, they'll catch us.

The fighters nodded, their faces becoming serious. They began to urge the survivors on, gently but insistently, helping Marta walk faster, picking up the smallest children to give them rest. The group moved faster, almost running, their breathing becoming ragged, but no one complained. Marta clenched her teeth, sweat beading on her forehead, but she didn't stop. The children began to cry from exhaustion - softly, almost silently - but they were led forward, not allowed to stop, because stopping meant death.

Nova watched the smoke, growing thicker, blacker, and felt fear constricting her chest, penetrating her lungs, her blood, every cell of her body. She knew they had to make it. Had to reach

the border before the Frontier caught them. She didn't know how much time they had - an hour, two, maybe less. She only knew each step brought them either to salvation or to death.

She gripped her pistol so tightly her knuckles turned white and silently prayed - not to gods she didn't believe in, but to herself, her endurance, her resolve. She prayed they would make it. That their path wouldn't end here, on this desolate road, among stones and dust, a few miles from a border that seemed so close and so unreachable.

She kept walking, leading the survivors, feeling each step bring them closer to salvation - or to death. The wind blew in her face, and she heard behind her, to the south, the sounds of the burning city fading. She didn't look back. She only looked ahead, north, where the border awaited, and walked, not stopping. Because stopping was impossible.

Iris's squad reached the second city the next day. They walked quickly, almost running, feeling each hour bring them closer to their goal. But when they crested the hill and saw the city below, Iris froze.

The city was burning. Flames rose high into the sky, coloring it crimson. Smoke obscured the sun, making the day look like twilight. Fire devoured houses, the crackle of wood mixing with the groan of metal tearing from the heat. The air smelled of smoke and ash.

They ran towards the city but stopped at a safe distance. Iris watched the flames and felt everything inside her crumbling. She understood - they were too late. The Frontier had been here only a few hours ago. They'd passed through the city, leaving only fire and destruction behind.

She fell to her knees. The sand burned her palms, but she felt no pain. She watched the burning city and felt only emptiness. She couldn't save them. She couldn't protect them. They'd left, leaving only ash behind.

Elias approached and knelt beside her. He placed his hand on her shoulder, and she felt his warmth through the cold that had seized her.

We couldn't have known, - he said softly. - We did everything we could.

She raised her head and looked at him. Tears she couldn't hold back streamed down her face.

I promised them I'd come back, - she said. - I promised they'd be safe.

He said nothing. He just sat beside her, letting her cry. Sometimes silence is the best thing you can offer. He didn't try to comfort her with words because he knew they wouldn't help now. She had to get through this herself.

They skirted the city for almost a full day while the fire began to subside. The flames gradually died down, leaving behind black, charred skeletons of buildings jutting from the earth like giant animal bones, and thick columns of smoke rising into the grey sky, mixing with clouds and creating an illusion of eternal twilight. The smell of burning hung in the air so thick it settled on their skin, their clothes, their lungs, seeming to permeate everything around - stones, air, even silence. Iris watched these ruins, these smoking remains of what had once been a city, and felt emptiness spreading inside her - deep, cold, bottomless emptiness filling every cell of her body.

The next day, when the smoke had cleared enough to breathe without coughing, they entered the city. Ash crunched underfoot, settling on shoes and clothes, leaving grey marks with each step. The smell of burning was so strong it stung the throat, and each breath was heavy, as if fine sand was entering the lungs instead of air. The silence that hung over the ruins was absolute and ominous - broken only by the sound of their steps, the rustle of ash under boots, and the rare, alarming crackle of smoldering beams still glowing among the debris. This silence was worse than any screams. It was the silence of death, which had come not suddenly, but gradually, consuming everything alive.

Iris walked through streets that had once been full of life - over pavements that had once echoed with voices, laughter, footsteps, the ringing of bells, the creak of carts. Now there were only charred remains of houses with collapsed roofs, broken doors hanging on one hinge, scattered belongings - burned books, melted candlesticks, pieces of fabric wind carried along the pavement like helpless ghosts. But the worst part was the bodies she found. They lay everywhere - on the streets, in doorways,

in basements, under the debris. Some were burned beyond recognition, turned into black silhouettes that lost their outlines at the slightest touch. But not all were burned. Some bodies looked as if they'd been killed before the fire started - with neat wounds, unnaturally twisted limbs, frozen expressions of pain and horror on their faces.

She stopped by one of the bodies, lying face down at the intersection of two streets. It was wearing a uniform she recognized - thick fabric, practical cut, comfortable boots that had saved her own life many times on long marches. Its limbs were twisted unnaturally, as if it had been thrown from a height, though there wasn't a single building nearby tall enough for such a fall. She knelt, ignoring the ash and small embers digging into her skin through her trousers, and turned the body over. The man's chest was burned, but through the burns and soot, a symbol was visible - three intersecting lines she'd already seen in that other city, that house, that wall. The Architect's symbol. But when she saw his face, her heart missed a beat.

It was a man in Union uniform. On his shoulder, through the soot, she could make out the Union emblem patch - he was one of their scouts, one of those sent south. Iris recognized him. She'd seen him at headquarters, just a few weeks ago, when he'd stood in the corridor with maps in his hands, young and confident, with lively eyes and a firm voice. His name was Thomas. He was one of the best. And now he lay here, in this dead city, his face contorted with an expression of pain and fear - the kind of fear that cannot be faked, that burns the soul from within. He'd been killed, but not in battle. He'd been tortured. Traces of torture were visible on his wrists, his neck, his face - neat, methodical, almost surgical. Someone had wanted to learn something he knew.

Iris closed her eyes and took a deep breath, feeling the smell of smoke and ash fill her lungs. She tried to calm herself, but anger rose inside her - hot, all-consuming, like the very fire that had destroyed this city. She clenched her jaw so tightly her teeth ground together, and slowly, with effort, lowered her head. She removed the dog tag from his neck - a small metal disk with his name and unit number - and clutched it in her hand so tightly its edges dug into her palm.

We'll find them, - she said softly, but her voice was steel that promised no mercy. - We'll find everyone who did this. We'll find them and stop them. That's a promise.

She rose, her knees cracking. She stood over Thomas's body, over the body of a man she'd known, of an ally killed so brutally, and felt her resolve growing harder, colder, more unshakeable. She looked at her fighters standing around her, silent, waiting for her order, her decision, her next step.

Elias approached and placed his hand on her shoulder - a warm, heavy touch meant to remind her she wasn't alone, that he was there. But she didn't turn. She kept looking at the scout's body, at his twisted limbs, his face, and felt something hardening inside her, becoming stronger than steel.

We knew it would be hard, - he said softly, so no one else could hear. - But we couldn't have known it would be this. Are you all right?

I'm all right, - she answered, her voice even, though inside everything churned. - I have to be all right. For them. For everyone we've lost. I have no right not to be all right.

She tucked the dog tag into her chest pocket, beside her mother's photograph and the letter, and buttoned it. She raised her head and looked south, towards the horizon where the mountains waited, where the mines waited, where the reactors waited, where the answers waited that could cost them everything.

Iris walked through the streets of the ruined city, feeling ash settle on her clothes and face, each breath bringing the bitterness of smoke and death. She moved slowly but purposefully, her eyes scanning every wall, every piece of debris, every shadow for traces that could explain what was happening. The wind, blowing from the south, lifted columns of grey ash and carried them through the empty streets, creating the illusion of movement where life had long faded. She felt weariness pressing on her shoulders, each step becoming heavier than the last, but she couldn't stop. She had to understand. Had to find answers.

Stopping by one of the surviving buildings - a three-story house with a collapsed roof and broken windows, but with a preserved wall - she noticed something that caught her attention. On the wall, at a height of about two meters, the Frontier symbol was carved. But it wasn't just a roughly painted sign on the plaster, as in the previous city, where numbers were hastily applied in white paint. This symbol was carved into stone. Deeply, neatly, with special, almost ritualistic care. Every line was clear, even, cut to the same depth, as if someone had spent a great deal of time and attention on it, as if it wasn't just an act of vandalism, but a deliberate, thoughtful gesture.

Iris approached, her boots crunching over the layer of ash and small glass shards. She raised her hand and touched the carved lines with her fingers. The stone was cold, but the touch seemed to convey something important - the feeling that someone had stood here, in this very spot, and deliberately, with pressure, carved this sign, knowing it would be seen. She ran her fingers along the edges of the grooves, feeling their roughness, and paused, trying to understand what this sign meant. Fragments of thoughts swirled in her head - images of past cities, the faces of dead scouts, the child's diary found in the basement.

She pulled her hand away and slowly turned to Elias, who stood nearby, leaning his shoulder against a burnt doorframe, watching her. His arms were crossed, his face calm, but a wariness flickered in his eyes. Her voice was soft, but carried the firmness that only arises in moments of true insight.

This isn't just territorial marking, - she said. - This isn't just a way to say they were here. It's a message.

She pointed at the wall, at this perfectly carved symbol, at its neat, almost aesthetic lines.

They want us to know who did this. They're not hiding. They're not masking. They're proud of it. They leave their marks not so we'll find them, but so we know they were here. So we understand they can do this again. And again. And again. Every time we enter a destroyed city, we see their sign. It's not an accident. It's a system.

Elias came closer and looked at the symbol - a cold, steely gaze examining every line, every groove. He said nothing, but his face grew tense, his jaw tightening. He saw it too - the methodical nature, the deliberation, the cold calculation behind every sign left on the walls of dead cities.

Iris stepped back from the wall and swept her gaze over the ruins surrounding them. Black skeletons of buildings that had once been homes, where people had lived, loved, raised children. Ash covering the streets like snow in a grey, dead world. Smoke still rising into the sky, mixing with the clouds. All of it was the work of the Frontier. All of it was part of their plan, their system, their terror.

This isn't military tactics, - she said, her voice dropping, but each word filled with certainty that needed no confirmation. - This is terror. This isn't an attempt to capture territory or resources. They don't want to defeat us in battle. They want to break us. They want us to be afraid. To stop. To turn back when we see their signs. They want us to stop seeking the truth. Because the truth is what they fear most.

She turned to the squad - to those who remained with her. Four fighters, Elias, Kyle standing a little apart, and herself. Seven against the darkness, against a machine they still didn't fully understand. She met the eyes of each of her fighters - their weary but steady eyes, faces covered in ash and soot, hands gripping their weapons. They stood silently, waiting for her words, her order, her decision. She raised her head, squared her shoulders, and her voice rang out loud and clear across the empty streets:

We won't turn back. We won't stop because they left a sign on a wall. We'll go further. We'll show them we can't be intimidated. We'll show them we're not afraid of their symbols, their threats, their ashes. We'll find them. We'll stop them. And we'll take back what they stole from us.

The fighters looked at her. One by one, they nodded - short, military, without unnecessary words, but in their nods was all the strength of their faith in her. They said nothing, but their gazes spoke louder than any promises. They were ready to go. Ready to die. Ready to do whatever it took to stop the Frontier.

Elias approached her, his voice low, almost a whisper:

You know we're walking into a trap, right? They want us to go there. They left those signs for us. So we'd follow the trail. So we'd find what they want to show us.

Iris looked at him, and there was no fear in her eyes. Only cold, clear resolve.

I know, - she said. - But if it's a trap, I want to know who set it. And what they're trying to hide. We go there. We don't stop. It's the only way to find the truth.

Night descended on the wasteland, cold and dark as the depths of a well. The sun had set quickly, almost instantly, as if someone had blown out a candle, leaving the world in complete, impenetrable darkness. The stars that appeared in the sky were cold and distant, their light barely reaching the earth, lost in the boundless blackness. The squad made camp in a small cave, found at the base of one of the hills - a natural hollow in the rock, sheltered from the wind but not from the cold, which seeped inside, settling on stones and skin. The walls of rough, uneven stone created the illusion of shelter, but Iris knew it was just stone - cold, indifferent, unable to protect them from what lurked in the darkness beyond their small fire.

She sat by the fire they'd built in the center of the cave, watching the flames. The fire crackled and cast shadows on the walls, creating intricate patterns dancing in time with its movements, turning the stones into faces, animals, silhouettes that appeared and disappeared like ghosts. She felt tired - not just physically, after the long trek through destroyed cities, but emotionally. Two destroyed cities, murdered bodies, carved symbols, children's diaries, the faces of dead scouts - all of it pressed on her, settling as a heavy weight on her shoulders, constricting her chest, making each breath harder than the last. She watched the fire and felt its warmth spread across her face, but it couldn't warm her from within.

The fighters slept, curled up in blankets, their faces calm in the light of the dying fire, but their hands still gripped their weapons even in sleep. They were used to sleeping with one eye open, ready to wake at the first sound. Elias sat at the entrance to the cave, leaning back against the cold stone wall, his eyes half-closed, but Iris knew he wasn't asleep - he was always alert, his hearing catching every rustle, every breath of wind, every sound that could signal danger. Kyle sat in a corner, in the furthest part of the cave, hugging his knees, staring at one point on the opposite wall. His eyes were empty, like a doll's, without fear, without hope, without life - only silence, deep and impenetrable.

Iris raised her head and looked into the darkness beyond the cave. The night was moonless, and only the stars flickered overhead, cold and distant, like eyes watching her from a height of millennia. The wind, blowing from the wasteland, rustled over the stones, carrying sand and the smell of dry grass, and each gust seemed like a whisper she couldn't decipher. She felt someone was watching them. This wasn't just a feeling - it was a knowledge that penetrated her consciousness like cold water seeping into cracks in stone. It was an ancient, animal sense she'd learned to trust over years of war - a sense that told her they were not alone.

She stood up - slowly, silently, trying not to wake the sleepers - and walked to the edge of the cave. She stopped at the entrance, feeling the cold night air touch her face, creep under her jacket, making her shiver. She peered into the night, trying to make out something - a shadow, movement, a glimmer of light. But nothing - only silence and cold. Only the boundless blackness stretching to the horizon, merging earth and sky into one whole. The wind rustled over the stones, carrying sand and the smell of emptiness, and each sound seemed like a step, a breath, a voice she couldn't recognize.

She returned to the fire and sat down, feeling its warmth touch her face, penetrate under her skin, but unable to warm her from within. Elias looked up at her - his gaze calm, but carrying the same anxiety she felt inside herself.

Something wrong? - he asked, his voice soft, almost a whisper.

She shook her head, but her fingers clenched into fists.

No, - she said. - I just think it is.

But she knew it wasn't just her imagination. She knew it was true. She felt eyes on her - not hostile, not aggressive, not studying. Rather - familiar. As if someone who knew her, knew her habits, her movements, her thoughts, was watching her from the darkness.

And then she remembered. Remembered the reports she'd read at headquarters years ago, when she was granted access to the secret archives. The death of her mother - Maria Hall. The woman whose face she remembered only vaguely, whose voice had almost faded from memory, but whose name she carried in her heart like an unhealed wound. The reports stated: "Death resulted from surgical intervention - heart extraction. Perpetrator - Marcus Voss, father of the deceased."

But then, in a neighboring folder, she'd found another file. The file about the clone who killed the real Marcus Voss and took his place. Her real grandfather had died several years before allegedly killing his daughter. This meant her mother's killer was an impostor. A man who wore her grandfather's face but wasn't him. Who cut out her mother's heart and disappeared, leaving behind a lie that had lived in the reports for fifteen years.

And that meant everything she knew about her mother's death could be a lie. The body was never found. The reports could have been falsified. The clone could have left traces leading nowhere. And now, looking into the darkness, into this endless night, she couldn't be sure - was her mother really dead? Or was she somewhere out there, in the darkness, watching her? Or was it someone who knew her mother, wore her symbols, left her signs on the walls of destroyed cities?

She looked into the darkness, her lips moving, speaking words softer than a breath:

Maria... Mom... If it's you - give me a sign. If you're alive - I want to know the truth. I want to know what really happened.

Silence was the only answer. Only the wind rustled over the stones, and the fire crackled, casting shadows on the cave walls. Iris sat by the fire, still staring into the darkness, feeling eyes on her. She didn't know who it was. She didn't know what they wanted. She only knew they weren't alone in this night, and the watcher, whoever it was, was either connected to her past or was part of that very deception that began with the murder of Marcus Voss and ended with the lie about Maria Hall's death.

She clutched the letter in her pocket - the one with the circle-and-dot symbol - and whispered again, no longer hoping for an answer, but still believing, against all odds:

If it's you - I will find you. Wherever you are. I promise.

The night remained silent. But the gaze from the darkness did not disappear.

The third day of their journey began with a grey, heavy dawn that brought neither warmth nor hope. The sky remained as gloomy as the day before, and the wind continued to blow from the south, carrying sand and cold. The wasteland was gradually changing - the ground became rockier, and the horizon was edged closer by the dark silhouettes of mountains, growing before them like a wall closing off the world. The squad walked silently, conserving energy, and only the crunch of gravel under boots broke the silence.

Iris walked at the front, her eyes scanning the terrain with the practiced alertness that had become second nature. She felt they were approaching something important - not just the mountains, but something hidden behind them. And when she noticed strange outlines in the distance, her heart beat faster.

It was an old camp. Tents, almost completely destroyed by time and wind, jutted from the ground like animal skeletons. Their fabric, once durable, now hung in tatters, flapping in the wind, and only the metal frames retained their shape, rusting under the open sky. The camp was set in a small depression between hills, sheltered from the wind, but now it looked abandoned and dead.

Iris raised her hand, and the squad stopped. She waited for Elias to draw level with her and nodded towards the camp.

Someone was here. And recently, - she said.

They approached. The tents were indeed old - their construction resembling military camps from the Architect's era, with characteristic metal arches and dense fabric that had once been grey-

green, now faded to pale yellow. But among these ruins were signs that someone had been here very recently. In the center of the camp - a cold fire pit, still holding a faint smell of smoke. Nearby - a few empty cans, neatly stacked in a pile, as if someone cared about order. On the ground - fresh tracks, deep and clear, left by heavy boots.

Iris crouched and picked up one of the cans. It was old, with rusty edges, but the markings on it were clear. She ran her finger over the metal, wiping away dirt, and read the symbols. It wasn't Frontier marking. Another one. Old. Union military marking from the Architect's era - the same symbol she'd seen in old documents in the archives. Three intersecting lines, but arranged differently than those of the Frontier. Original. The ones used before the Union fell apart.

This isn't the Frontier, - she said, lifting the can and handing it to Elias. - This is the old Union. The Architect's time. They were here.

Elias took the can, turned it over in his hands, studying the marking. His face grew tense, and he set the can down again.

If they were here, they knew about this place. Knew about the mountains. Maybe it was one of their research bases.

Iris nodded and stood up. She surveyed the camp, feeling that familiar sensation awakening - the feeling they were on the verge of something important. She began walking around the area, looking under torn fabric, checking corners, searching for something that could point their way forward. Elias did the same - his eyes scanned the ground, and he moved methodically, like a hunter searching for tracks.

And suddenly Elias stopped. He was standing before one of the tents, which was less destroyed than the others. He knelt and pushed aside a piece of canvas, revealing what was hidden beneath it. A hatch. Old, metal, covered in rust, but clearly recently opened - the edges of the hatch were clean, without a thick layer of dust. Beside it lay a rusty lock, broken, as if it had been forced.

Iris, - he called, his voice soft but carrying tension. - Come here.

Iris approached and knelt beside him. She looked at the hatch, and her heart missed a beat. It was rectangular, about a meter wide, with a heavy metal handle that was raised. Beneath it gaped darkness - deep, impenetrable, smelling of dampness, stone, and something metallic. She looked inside and saw a staircase descending - old, metal, covered in rust, but still sturdy.

It's a research base, - Elias said, his voice even, but with that special confidence that appeared when he encountered something he knew. - Old, very old. From the Architect's time. But someone was here recently. The lock was broken with a fresh cut, the tracks on the stairs are fresh. They went down there.

Iris stared into the darkness, her fingers gripping the edge of the hatch. She felt cold air rising from within, touching her face, smelling of dampness and time. She didn't know what she'd find below. But she knew she had to descend.

She turned to the squad and met the eyes of each one. The fighters stood silently, faces serious, ready for anything. Kyle stood a little apart, and for a moment, a shadow flickered in his empty eyes - perhaps fear, perhaps recognition. Iris didn't wait.

I'm going down first, - she said. - Elias behind me. The rest cover from above until we check. If we're not back in an hour - head for the mountains. Don't wait.

She didn't wait for objections. She turned to the hatch, placed her foot on the first step, and the ladder creaked under her weight. She took a deep breath, smelling dampness and metal, and began to descend into the darkness. Behind her - Elias's steps, heavy and confident. And then - Kyle, who silently followed them, leaving the others above to guard the entrance.

Darkness swallowed them, and the staircase led deeper into the earth, into the very heart of the ground, where answers awaited them - or new questions that could change everything.

Iris descended the ladder, each step creaking under her weight, echoing in the narrow space. The ladder led deep underground, and the air grew more stagnant, colder, saturated with the smell of

dust and old metal. When she finally stepped onto solid concrete, she found herself in a large room with a high vaulted ceiling that disappeared into darkness. The walls were concrete, grey and cold like everything around, covered with cracks and traces of moisture that ran down in dark streaks. She took a few steps, the sound of her boots echoing through the empty hall, returning to her in multiple echoes.

The room had once been a research camp - she could tell from the arrangement of tables, shelves, and the remains of equipment that once stood along the walls. But now chaos reigned. Scattered papers, yellowed and covered in dust, littered the floor; empty shelves from which someone had removed everything; broken equipment - remnants of monitors, keyboards, unidentified mechanisms. The air was stagnant, heavy, and each breath carried the taste of dust and rust. Somewhere in the depths of the room, water dripped, its steady sound breaking the silence, creating the feeling that the base was still alive, still breathing.

She walked deeper, stepping over debris and papers, and her gaze fell on a table in the center of the room. It was massive, metal, with a worn surface, and on it lay a map - the same one she'd seen in the Council, but with additional markings in red pencil and ink. Iris approached and leaned over it, feeling her heart begin to beat faster. She ran her finger over the map's surface, leaving a trail through the layer of dust covering it.

Marked in red were not only the destroyed cities - Vernon, Ashton, Midway, Crossroads, Lakewood, and that nameless city they'd left. But now new lines had appeared on the map. Thin, red, they crossed the southern territories, forming a complex network stretching underground, connecting cities, mountains, and wasteland into a single system. These were subterranean routes, a whole network of tunnels laid beneath the surface, hidden from view, but existing for many years.

This isn't just a map, - she said, her voice soft but with that special clarity that comes with insight. - It's a plan. There's a whole network of tunnels underground connecting all the southern territories. They're not just destroying cities - they're using them as entry points. As nodes through which they can enter this network.

She traced one of the lines leading to the mountains in the east, where all the roads ended and the emptiness began. The line was thicker than the others, more careful, and at its end was a word written in neat, calligraphic handwriting, distinct from the other marks: "Heart."

She looked up at Elias, who stood beside her, leaning over the map. His face was focused, and he too saw this word. He read it several times, his brows drawing together.

"Heart," - he said, his voice low, like distant thunder. - The same one the survivors spoke of. They talked about "relocating to a new world," about a "center," about being led somewhere. Maybe this is that place. Where everything they're looking for is. What they're destroying cities for.

Iris shook her head, but a spark flickered in her eyes, one that appeared only when she felt she was approaching the truth.

I don't know, - she said. - But we'll find it. We'll find the "Heart" and learn what they hid there.

She carefully rolled up the map - her hands moving slowly and gently, as if touching something fragile and precious - and tucked it into her backpack's inner pocket, next to her mother's letter and photograph. Then she raised her head and surveyed the room, feeling there was something else here they needed to find.

They began to explore. Elias approached one of the better-preserved shelves and started going through the papers remaining on it. Old reports, technical records, some diagrams he couldn't immediately decipher. He carefully sorted through them, stacking what seemed important.

Iris walked to another table in the corner and picked up a tattered folder with frayed edges. Inside were reports dated several months ago - not years, but months. This was fresh. She scanned the lines, and her breath caught. She felt cold run down her spine, the hair on her arms standing on end.

Elias, - she called, her voice tense. - Look at this.

He approached, and she handed him the folder. He took it and began to read. His face grew serious, his jaw tightening so strongly that muscles stood out on his cheekbones. He read quickly, but attentively, filtering every word through the lens of his experience.

It's their plans, - he said, his voice hollow. - It's not just a map or reports. It's a manual. Someone planned all this long before the Frontier appeared in the south. They knew where they were going, knew what they would do. They're not just destroying cities. They're building something new. A new world, a new order. They're going to rebuild everything - from the ground up.

Iris nodded, and in her gaze appeared that cold resolve that was stronger than fear. She looked at the records, at these neat lines, at these plans, and felt the answers lay somewhere nearby, at the very end of this subterranean network, in that place marked as "Heart." It was waiting for them. And they had to find it before the Frontier finished what it had started.

Iris continued to search the room, sorting through papers and objects scattered on the floor. In a corner, under a pile of dusty sheets, she noticed something that stood out among the rest. She approached and picked up a small notebook in a leather cover. The cover was worn, the corners yellowed with age.

She opened it. The pages were filled with small, neat handwriting, some lines torn out, leaving ragged edges. She began to read aloud, so Elias could hear too:

"Day 47. We entered the third city. People were screaming, but we didn't stop. I saw them taking children. I couldn't watch. I turned away. The Arbiter said it was necessary for the new world. I want to believe, but I can't."

She turned the page and continued:

"Day 82. I'm no longer a soldier. I'm a machine. I do what I'm told. If I stop, I'll die. But I want to stop. I want to go home. But I have no home anymore."

Iris closed the diary. She felt a lump rising in her throat, and she had to take a deep breath to hold back tears. She looked at the cover, thoughts racing through her mind.

She turned to Elias and said softly, but firmly:

They are human too. They also doubt. They're not enemies - they're victims.

Elias stood beside her and remained silent. He didn't try to argue or comfort her. He just stood and looked at her, knowing she was right. He'd seen it himself - the fear and pain on the faces of the Frontier soldiers they'd encountered.

Iris clutched the diary in her hands and tucked it into her backpack. She knew this testimony was important. It was a reminder that behind every enemy stood a person. And that gave her hope.

Elias walked over to the table where maps, plans, and diagrams were laid out. He went through them one by one, studying every detail. His eyes moved quickly over the lines, marks, and notes, stopping now and then to examine especially important sections.

He found the Frontier's plan of attack on the north - detailed, step-by-step. It was broken down by day, with routes, times, and objectives indicated. The attack was scheduled to begin in three weeks, from three fronts simultaneously. Elias studied it and frowned.

He beckoned Iris:

Look at this.

She approached the table and looked at the map he held in his hands. She saw the attack plan, but her attention was drawn to something else. All the troop lines on the map converged not on the capital, but on the mountains in the east.

They don't want to conquer the Union, - Elias said. - They want to protect something in the mountains. It's their center. Their heart.

He pointed to a red-circled area marked "Forbidden Zone." Beside it was a nuclear hazard symbol. He looked up at Iris.

If they're protecting this, - he said, - it means it's the most important thing. This is what they're killing for. We must get there.

Iris looked at the map. She understood this wasn't just military tactics. It was a strategy aimed at protecting something hidden in the mountains. The Frontier's "Heart." What they destroyed cities and took people for.

She looked up at Elias:

If we destroy that, we destroy them. Forever.

She clenched the map in her hands, feeling resolve filling her. Their goal became clear - they had to find the "Heart" and destroy it. It was the only way to stop the Frontier.

They walked further into the camp, past empty tents whose fabric scraps flapped in the wind, and broken equipment rusting under the open sky like skeletons of forgotten machines. Iris walked slowly, her eyes scanning every corner, every shadow, every detail that could be important. She felt they were approaching something hidden from prying eyes, something left behind especially for her.

Away from the rest, almost hidden behind the debris of a collapsed tent and a pile of metal boxes, stood a tent draped in black fabric. It looked alien among the ruins - neat, intact, its fabric stretched perfectly flat, without a single fold or tear, as if it had been set up here specifically to stand out against the destruction. Its dark surface absorbed the light, contrasting with the grey ash and rust, and it seemed alive, breathing, like a black heart beating in the chest of a dead camp.

Iris approached, her steps slowing. She reached out and touched the fabric with her fingertips. It was thin, expensive, smooth under her fingers - unlike the rough canvas of the other tents. It was high-quality fabric, used only by those who could afford luxury even in the wasteland. And she knew whose tent it was. She recognized this style, this aesthetic, this smell - a faint, barely perceptible aroma of expensive oils and old paper emanating from within. It belonged to the Arbiter.

She pushed aside the flap and entered. Inside was a lavishly furnished space that seemed impossible in the middle of the wasteland. Carpets covered the floor - dark, with geometric patterns, soft and warm, muffling the sounds of footsteps, creating the feeling she was walking on something living. In the center stood a table of dark wood - massive, with carved legs and a surface polished to a shine. Around it - chairs with tall carved backs, upholstered in velvet. A small library stood against the wall, filled with books in leather bindings with gold tooling, neatly arranged on shelves like soldiers in formation. On the table stood a cup with the remains of tea - still warm, steaming - and beside it a silver spoon someone had left behind.

Iris approached the table and ran her finger over its surface. The wood was warm, smooth, and she felt he had been here. The Arbiter had sat in this chair, drunk tea from this cup, read these books, pondered his plans. She could almost see him - a tall, slender figure in a black cloak, bending over papers, face hidden by a hood, hands holding a pen leaving neat, calligraphic lines on paper.

Her gaze fell on an envelope lying on the table, right in the center, as if left specifically for her to notice. It was white, clean, without a single stain, and on it was written her name - in neat, even handwriting she would recognize among thousands. The same handwriting as on the note she'd found in her drawer months ago. The same handwriting as on the letter she carried in her chest pocket. Her mother's handwriting.

She took the envelope in her hands, her fingers trembling slightly. The paper was smooth, expensive, with a faint watermark - a circle with a dot in the center. She opened it slowly, feeling her heart pounding in her chest, her breathing becoming shallow. She pulled out the letter - one sheet of paper, folded in half - and began to read, every word burning into her mind like a brand:

"You are following my trail, daughter. I knew you would come. I left these signs for you - on the walls of destroyed cities, in the cellars of empty houses, on maps you found. But you don't know where they lead. You don't know what awaits you at the end of this path. Turn back. Don't go further. There are things you must not know. There are secrets that will destroy you if you touch them. I don't want to lose you again."

Iris clutched the paper so tightly her fingers turned white, the edges of the letter digging into her palm. Her heart beat faster, and she felt a wave of emotions rising inside her - hope, anger, pain,

love, all mixed into one tight knot. She recognized the handwriting - it belonged to her mother, Maria Hall. She recognized her words, her manner of writing, her way of expressing thoughts. But when she looked at the paper and ink, she realized - it had been written recently. The ink hadn't faded, the paper remained white and fresh, without a patina of time. Her mother was alive. She was somewhere nearby. And she wanted Iris to stop.

She looked up and met Elias's eyes, who stood at the entrance to the tent, leaning his shoulder against the post. His face was calm, but anxiety flickered in his eyes - he'd seen her pale, her hands trembling. He said nothing, but his gaze was a question she had to answer.

She's alive, - Iris said, her voice soft, almost a whisper, but with that special steel that appeared only when she found the truth. - My mother is alive. It's her handwriting, her words, her cup on the table. She was here. Recently.

She paused, and an old story flashed through her mind - the one she'd learned from secret reports. Her grandfather, Marcus Voss, had been killed by a clone who took his place. And this impostor, wearing her grandfather's face, had cut out her mother's heart. The reports stated Marcus Voss killed his daughter. But that was a lie. The real Marcus Voss was dead. The killer was the one who stole his face. And now, looking at the letter, Iris didn't know what was true and what was false. Perhaps her mother had survived, escaped the clone. Perhaps she knew the truth about who killed her father. And now she was leaving these signs for Iris to find her, to learn the truth.

She knew, - Iris continued, her voice growing firmer. - She knew Marcus Voss had been killed by a clone. She knew he'd taken his place. And she knew he wanted to kill her. Perhaps she survived. Perhaps she escaped. And now she's leaving these signs for me, so I follow her trail.

She tucked the letter into her chest pocket, beside the photograph and the old letter, and stepped out of the tent. Her steps were firm, but a whole sea raged in her chest. She stood on the wasteland, looking at the mountains looming on the horizon, and felt everything she'd known, everything she'd believed, everything she'd thought was true was now in question. Her mother was alive. She was here. And she was leading her to something - something that might be more important than war, more important than the Union, more important than anything she knew.

Elias approached and stood beside her, asking no questions. He just stood there, giving her time, giving her space to absorb what she'd learned.

What do we do? - he asked at last, his voice soft but with a readiness to follow her anywhere.

Iris looked at the mountains, and a new resolve was born in her chest - colder, harder than the one that had brought her here.

She continued to examine the tent, her eyes gliding over the objects left here by its occupant. Every detail - from the carved table legs to the silver spoon in the cup of cold tea - seemed part of a puzzle she had to solve. She felt clues were left here, that someone had deliberately left evidence, knowing she would come.

Her gaze fell on a small library against the wall. It was neatly organized - books stood in even rows, from tallest to shortest, divided by topic, like a scholar's or collector's personal collection. Leather bindings, worn spines, gold tooling that glowed dully in the light of the oil lamps on the table. Iris approached the shelves and ran her fingers over the spines, feeling the smooth leather and rough fabric under her fingertips, the texture of time these books held. There were treatises on history, philosophy, military science, but also technical manuals, cartographic atlases, research reports.

She noticed one book that stood out from the rest. It sat on a separate shelf, slightly higher than the others, as if given a special place. It was bound in black velvet, soft and warm to the touch, with gold tooling almost worn away by time but still visible on the cover - a complex geometric pattern resembling a diagram, a network of lines converging in the center. Iris took it in her hands, feeling the pleasant weight in her palms, the velvet cover sliding under her fingers. It was old, but clearly cared for - no dust, no wear on the corners, only neat, clear binding lines.

She opened the book, and her heart missed a beat. It wasn't a novel, a poetry collection, or a historical treatise. It was an album of blueprints - large, detailed, executed with that architectural precision belonging to those who build worlds. She opened the first page, and before her appeared the image of a huge structure plunging deep underground. It was a reactor, but not an ordinary one, not like those she'd seen in old reports. Giant, with branches spreading in all directions like the roots of a giant tree, penetrating the earth for many kilometers. Each branch ended in a node - a station, a city, a connection point. The entire structure resembled a living organism, pulsing beneath the world's surface. Under the image was a caption in neat, calligraphic handwriting: "Heart - Project No. 1. Architect. Year of construction: unknown."

Iris turned the page, and her breath caught. On the next sheet were diagrams of "Protocol 7." But it wasn't the version she knew, the one they'd studied at headquarters trying to understand how it worked. It was a more complete, more detailed version, with anatomical notations, with explanations she couldn't fully read because the words were written in the Architect's ancient dialect. But she understood the main thing: the diagrams showed how "Protocol 7" was connected to the "Heart." It wasn't just a weapon. It was a tool for its activation. A lever, a key that launched the destruction mechanism. If the "Heart" was the system's heart, then "Protocol 7" was the blow that stopped it - or made it beat faster, depending on who controlled it.

Iris felt cold run down her spine, goosebumps covering her arms, that special icy fear growing inside her - fear of what she couldn't control, of what had been created long before her and continued to exist despite all her efforts. She closed the album, her fingers gripping the velvet cover so tightly her knuckles turned white. She looked up at Elias, standing beside her, waiting, and her voice was soft but with that special steel that appeared only when she realized the scale of the threat:

If the "Heart" is activated, - she said, her voice even, each word falling like a stone, - "Protocol 7" will become global. Everything we know, the entire world as we know it, will be rewritten. Everyone who hasn't undergone the "purification" - which means everyone who doesn't meet the Architect's standards - will be destroyed. This isn't just a weapon. This isn't just a threat. This is the end. The end of everything we've built. The end of everything we know.

Elias approached and took the album from her hands - gently, almost with reverence, as if touching something sacred. He flipped through a few pages, his face tensing, jaw clenching so hard muscles stood out on his cheekbones. He saw the same as her. He understood what it meant. He closed the album and looked up at her, his gaze holding the same mix of terror and resolve she felt inside herself.

If this is true, - he said, his voice low like distant thunder, - then we cannot allow them to activate it. We must reach the "Heart" first. We must destroy it, or block it, or do something to stop this mechanism. Because if they launch it - we won't be able to stop it. No one will.

Iris nodded, and in that nod was the weight of what she'd learned. She raised her hands and took the album back, pressing it to her chest, feeling the velvet cover touch her skin through her jacket. She looked at the bookshelves, at the table with the cold tea, at the tent that belonged to her mother, and felt the truth she'd been seeking was right before her - but it was more dangerous than she could have imagined.

She sorted through papers, reports, plans, until her attention was caught by a folder marked "Geological Survey." She opened it and began to study the contents.

It was a search for old reactors left by the Architect. The Frontier was systematically checking every city, every underground structure. They weren't just capturing cities - they were checking them for the Architect's underground structures.

She found a list of discovered reactors. Twelve. All activated. She ran her finger down the lines, feeling cold run down her spine.

They're not looking for new ones, - she said softly, more to herself than to Elias. - They're using what's already there. They're using the Architect's legacy.

She looked up. Anger began to boil inside her. The Architect had left a world that could be used as a weapon. He'd created a system waiting for its time to be activated. And she, as his heir, felt responsible for it.

She didn't want to continue his work. She wanted to finish it.

She gathered all the records and hid them in her backpack. Her movements were quick and precise. She knew they had information that could change everything.

She turned to Elias and said:

We have information. Now we need to find the "Heart" and stop it before they succeed. We have a chance.

Elias looked at her and saw in her eyes the same resolve as in his own. He nodded.

They gathered in the center of the old camp, among the ruins of tents and broken equipment rusting under the open sky. Around them still stood empty tents, their fabric scraps flapping in the wind, and scattered belongings - empty crates, tin cans, scraps of paper the wind chased across the ground like helpless ghosts. But the squad no longer noticed. They stood in a semicircle, looking at Iris, their faces serious and focused, but there was no fear in their eyes. Only anticipation - calm, steady, like people ready to follow her anywhere.

Iris stood before them. The wind tossed her hair, and she felt the cold air of the wasteland touch her skin, creep under her jacket, making her shiver, but she paid it no attention. She stood straight, shoulders squared, and looked at each of them in turn - at Elias, whose face was calm as the surface of a frozen lake, but whose eyes burned with the same cold fire as hers; at Kyle, standing a little apart, arms crossed, and in his empty eyes a shadow flickered for a moment - perhaps fear, perhaps recognition; at the remaining fighters - those who'd been with her through two destroyed cities, who'd seen the ash left by the Frontier, who'd held the bodies of fallen comrades and kept walking.

We know where we're going, - she said, her voice firm, though inside a storm raged. - We know what awaits us ahead. We know it will be hard - harder than anything we've been through before. We know many of us may not return.

She paused, feeling words born within her, rising from the depths where her fears and hopes were hidden.

But we cannot let the Frontier win. We cannot let them finish what they started. They took our people, they burned our cities, they destroyed our families, they carved symbols on walls so we knew they were here. They want us to be afraid. They want us to stop. But we won't stop. We won't let them take our world.

She took a breath and continued, her voice dropping but with that special steel that appeared only when she spoke from the heart:

We're heading to the mountains. To the "Heart." To the place where everything began and where everything must end. We go for the truth they're trying to hide. And we go for those they took. We won't stop until we find them. We won't stop until we stop this.

The fighters were silent. But in their eyes, she saw resolve - firm, unshakeable, born from pain and loss, forged in the fire of every destroyed city and every lost friend. They said nothing, but their gazes spoke louder than any promises. They were ready to follow her. Ready to die for what they protected.

Elias approached and stood beside her, his voice low but warm:

We're with you, Iris. To the end.

Kyle, standing a little apart, slowly nodded - a barely noticeable movement, but she caught it. In his empty, lifeless eyes, a spark flickered for a moment - perhaps hope, perhaps fear, perhaps something else he couldn't put into words.

Iris turned and walked forward. She knew each step brought her closer to the "Heart." Each step brought her closer to her mother. Each step brought her closer to the truth she'd sought so long, feared to find, but which was the only thing that could save them all.

She didn't know what she'd find there. She didn't know if she'd see her mother's face or only her traces left on the walls of destroyed cities. She didn't know if she could stop "Protocol 7" or if the "Heart" would be activated and they would all die. She didn't know if she'd return from these mountains alive. But she knew she had to see it. Had to stop it. Even if it meant sacrificing everything - her life, her hope, her future.

The squad moved behind her. Their steps echoed in the silence of the wasteland, leaving footprints in the sand that the wind gradually erased, as if they'd never been there. They walked forward, leaving behind the camp and its secrets - her mother's letter, the album of blueprints, the cup of cold tea still standing on the table. They walked towards the mountains looming on the horizon, dark and ominous, like guardians guarding the entrance to another world. Ahead lay the "Heart." And they were ready to go to the end - across the wasteland, over the mountains, through the darkness waiting underground.

Iris walked at the front, her steps firm and confident. She looked at the mountains and felt a new fire born within her - cold, clear, unyielding. It was the resolve that left no room for fear. And she knew they would reach the end. Together. To the very "Heart."

They followed the Frontier's tracks for another full day. The wasteland, with its endless grey monotony and biting wind, gradually gave way to rocky terrain, where the ground became harder, the air drier and colder. Soon the mountains rose before them - dark, harsh, with sharp peaks piercing the grey, leaden sky like teeth of a giant beast ready to swallow anything that dared approach. Iris led the squad along a narrow path winding between rocks, feeling the air grow colder with each step, the wind sharper, cutting through clothing and making even the most hardened fighters shiver. Stones crunched underfoot, and the echo of their steps carried through the gorges, mixing with the howling wind.

The next day, as the sun began to sink towards the horizon, they found an old military base. It lay at the foot of the mountains, in a small gorge sheltered from the wind and prying eyes. The base was partially destroyed by time and war - some buildings had collapsed into heaps of debris, others stood with collapsed roofs and shattered windows, but a few structures remained, their concrete walls cracked but looking sturdy. A barbed-wire fence, rusted and torn in places, surrounded the perimeter, and on the corners stood towers with searchlights that were off but looked ready for use, as if maintained recently. Inside the base, silence reigned, broken only by the rare steps of patrols walking the perimeter and the distant hum of generators from the depths.

Iris stopped behind a large boulder overhanging the path and signaled the squad to disperse. She knelt and raised her binoculars to her eyes, adjusting the focus. She saw patrols - small groups of two or three men, slowly moving along the fence, their steps lazy, almost sleepy. They were armed - rifles hung on straps, some with knives and grenades on their belts - but they looked relaxed, as if not expecting a threat. They didn't crouch, didn't look around, didn't check corners. Their confidence was calm, almost arrogant.

Iris lowered her binoculars and turned to Elias, lying beside her, pressed to the rocks. His face was calm, but the same wariness burned in his eyes as in hers.

There should be a reactor here, - she said softly, almost a whisper, so her voice wouldn't carry through the gorge. - According to what we found in the album and on the maps, the base was built by the Architect for research. This isn't just a military post. It's an entrance. An entrance to what lies beneath the mountains.

Elias nodded, not taking his eyes off the base. He pulled out the map they'd found in the Arbiter's camp and spread it on the ground, weighing down the edges with stones so the wind wouldn't carry it away. He ran his finger along the lines, marking their location and comparing it to what he saw before him.

According to the data, - he said, his voice low, - the base was built in the Architect's era, but later converted. According to the diagrams, beneath it lies a huge complex - a whole network of tunnels, laboratories, storage facilities. If the "Heart" is anywhere, it's here. Below. Under these mountains.

Iris put the binoculars in her backpack and looked at the base, slowly settling into twilight. Shadows grew longer, and the light of the setting sun painted the concrete walls crimson. She felt adrenaline beginning to boil in her blood, her heart beating faster, that cold, clear feeling growing inside her that appeared before every important step. They were close. Very close.

We'll enter at night, - she said, her voice firm as steel. - We must find out what's inside. We must find the "Heart" and understand how to stop it. We can't let the Frontier activate it.

She lay down on the ground, pressing herself to the rocks, and began to watch the patrols. She memorized their routes, the time they spent on perimeter patrols, their habits and weak spots. She noted when they stopped to smoke, when they passed a tower where she could hide in the shadows. She felt tension mounting with each minute, the silence growing denser, every sound - a distant bird cry, the rustle of wind, the crunch of stones underfoot - sharpening her focus.

Time passed. The sun set, and shadows grew longer. The wind died down, and the air grew colder, as if the night itself was holding its breath in anticipation of what was to come.

Iris lay on the rocks, looking at the base, feeling cold, clear resolve growing inside her.

They watched the base for several hours. Iris lay on the ground, pressed against the cold stones, not taking her eyes off the perimeter. The wind blowing from the mountains was freezing and penetrating to the bone, but she paid it no attention. Every sense was heightened to the limit - she heard the wind rustle through the dry grass, distant birds calling, her fighters' breathing becoming steady and calm as they froze in anticipation. She studied the patrols' movements, memorizing every step, every stop, every turn, every moment they looked away.

The Frontier soldiers moved on a strict schedule - exactly every fifteen minutes they passed along the same route, changing shifts with the precision of a clockwork mechanism. Their steps were measured and unhurried, like people used to routine and not expecting a threat. Two groups patrolled the perimeter, moving towards each other, and at their meeting point, at the intersection of routes, there was a gap - a short window of three minutes when their gazes were turned towards each other, and the western sector was left unguarded.

Iris noticed this window, marking it in her memory. She timed it, checked it several times, ensuring her calculations were correct. Three minutes - that was all they had. Three minutes to slip through a break in the fence, cross the open space, and disappear into the shadow of an old hangar near the inner wall.

She shifted her gaze to the west side of the base. There, in a corner overgrown with thorny bushes and tall dry grass, gaped an old breach in the fence. The wire was torn and bent aside, rusty and sagging, as if unnoticed for years. The bushes hid the passage, creating natural shade that could protect them from the patrols' eyes. She marked this spot on her mental map, feeling adrenaline start to rush through her blood, her heart beating faster, her breathing deepening.

She turned to the squad, gathering them around her with a gesture. The fighters moved closer, and she spoke almost in a whisper, so her voice wouldn't carry through the gorge:

We'll enter through the western breach. There are bushes hiding the entrance. I timed the patrols - there's a three-minute window between shifts. We need to slip through and reach the old hangar before they return. We move quietly, quickly, without unnecessary noise. We don't shoot unless discovered. We leave no traces unless critical. If something goes wrong - we retreat to the rocks and wait for a new opportunity.

She looked at each of them, meeting their eyes - the eyes of people who trusted her with their lives.

Questions?

The fighters were silent. They were ready to go. Elias checked his weapon, chambering a round with a quiet metallic click, his movements confident and practiced. He asked no questions, didn't hesitate. He just stepped forward and stood beside her.

I'll go first, - he said, his voice low like distant thunder. - I know how to bypass such systems. I'll check if the path is clear and signal. You follow, and we'll get them to the hangar.

Iris nodded, feeling in his words that old, tested confidence that always helped her move forward. She looked at the mountains rising behind the base, their dark silhouettes against the grey sky ominous, like black teeth piercing the sky. She felt that beyond them lay something that would change everything - their world, their destinies, their understanding of truth. She knew the "Heart" waited for them in the depths of the mountains, and each step brought them closer.

She looked up at Elias.

Elias - you go first and take out the guards at the entrance. We go inside, find the control point, and find out what they're looking for. If there's a fight - we retreat. Life is more important than information.

She swept her gaze over the fighters listening to her attentively. They were scared - she could see it in their eyes, in how they gripped their weapons. But they trusted her. She saw it.

She finished the plan and brushed the sand from her hands.

We'll survive. We'll do this. We'll go home.

She took her pistol and looked at it. It was old, worn, with scratches on the grip. But it had been with her through everything - through wars, through losses, through fear. She felt its weight in her hand and knew it wouldn't fail.

She looked up at the base.

I'm ready, - she said.

Night descended on the wasteland, thick and impenetrable, like ink spilled across a canvas. The darkness seemed almost tangible - it enveloped the earth, hiding stones and bushes, turning the world into a black space where one could only orient by touch and memory. The moon didn't rise, and the stars were hidden by a dense veil of clouds hanging over the mountains like a heavy blanket. The wind died down, and the silence became absolute - so deep that every sound, even the softest, seemed unnaturally loud.

The squad crawled across the wasteland, pressing to the ground, blending in, becoming part of the night. Iris felt sand and small stones digging into her palms, the cold of the earth penetrating her clothes, every muscle in her body tense to the limit. She crawled slowly, trying not to make a sound, pressing herself to every ledge, every shadow that could hide her from the patrols' eyes. Her breathing was steady, but her heart beat so loudly she was afraid - they would hear it, it would betray their presence like a drum beating an alarm in the night.

She crawled, and each meter was hard-won. Stones dug into her knees, cold penetrated to the bone, but she didn't stop. She looked ahead at the dark silhouette of the fence looming before her, feeling adrenaline rushing through her blood, giving her strength despite the weariness.

They reached the breach in the fence. The barbed wire was cut with a neat, professional cut, and old, dry, thorny bushes hid the passage, creating a natural arch through which they could slip unnoticed. Elias was the first through the breach, his body moving silently like a ghost. He paused for a moment, listening to the night, to its silence, to every sound that could betray an enemy presence. He gave the signal - a short hand movement meaning "clear."

Iris followed, her body sliding through the gap, the bushes closing behind her, hiding her presence. Then the others - one by one, like shadows, like ghosts, they slipped inside the base, leaving behind only silence and traces the wind would soon erase.

They moved along the walls, pressing into the shadows cast by the buildings. The searchlights on the towers were off, but the sentries could appear at any moment - their steps were audible as they passed, their voices carried from a distance, but Iris didn't allow herself to be distracted. She looked ahead, to where behind the hangar she could see a technical hatch - a black square against the concrete wall, almost invisible in the dark, but she knew it was there. She'd memorized its location from the map they'd found in the camp.

Elias reached the hatch first. He knelt and carefully took hold of the handle - old, rusty, but still sturdy. He pulled, and the metal groaned - a soft, drawn-out sound that carried through the empty space. Iris froze, listening, but the patrol had already passed, and the sound didn't attract attention. He opened the hatch, and cold air rushed out, smelling of dampness and old concrete. He looked inside - it was dark, so dark it seemed there was nothing there, only an abyss.

They descended one by one. Iris was the first down, her boots landing on concrete, the sound of her steps echoing through the empty corridor. Behind her - Elias, then the rest. Below was cold and damp - walls covered in a thin film of moisture, the air heavy with the smell of mold, rust, and old metal. She switched on a small flashlight - a narrow beam cutting through the darkness, revealing a concrete corridor leading deeper into the heart of the mountains. The walls were damp, with dark streaks running down, and on the floor were old, almost erased tracks - traces of those who'd passed here before.

They walked along the corridor, trying not to make noise, their steps muffled by the concrete, but in the silence, every sound seemed too loud, every breath too distinct. Iris looked ahead at the tunnel disappearing into the darkness, feeling tension mounting with each step. She knew the "Heart" awaited them somewhere in the depths - what they'd been searching for, what they'd come through everything for. And she knew they had to find it before the Frontier completed its plan.

She walked forward, the beam of her flashlight illuminating the way, picking out concrete walls, old cables hanging from the ceiling, and rare doors that were locked and sealed.

They passed through several doors, moving along a corridor that grew narrower and darker. Iris felt the air becoming heavier, dampness penetrating her lungs. She walked forward, gripping her pistol, ready for any danger.

They entered a large room. Iris froze when her flashlight beam picked out rows of cells from the darkness. They lined the walls - metal bars, concrete floors, locks. Hundreds of people sat on the floor, chained to the walls. Men, women, children. Some slept, huddled in corners, others sat motionless, staring into space.

Iris slowly walked along the rows, holding her flashlight to her chest so the light wouldn't draw attention. She saw hundreds of faces - emaciated, dirty, frightened. Many didn't even lift their heads, as if they'd lost all hope. She stopped by one cell and saw a child - a girl of about six, sitting in a corner, silently watching her.

Iris crouched and reached her hand through the bars.

Quiet, - she whispered. - I'm here to help.

The girl didn't move. She stared at Iris with empty eyes, but for a moment, a spark flickered in them. Iris noticed a number tattooed on her arm - black ink. She understood everyone here was sorted, numbered like livestock.

She gripped the cell bars, feeling anger rising inside her. But she forced herself to breathe slowly. She couldn't give in to emotion - it would doom them all. She turned and whispered:

We'll find a way to open these cells.

Elias was already searching for keys, moving along the walls and checking boxes and cabinets. The fighters stood ready, awaiting her order.

They found a guard in a small room at the entrance to the prison block. He sat in a chair, head thrown back, sleeping with his feet on the table. His breathing was steady, he didn't even stir as they entered.

Elias silently approached from behind. His movements were fluid and quick - he pressed a knife to the guard's throat and covered his mouth with his hand. The guard jerked, his eyes snapping open, but he didn't have time to scream.

Quiet, - Elias said. - You'll answer questions. Or die.

The guard froze. His eyes were wide with fear, but he slowly nodded. Elias removed his hand from his mouth, but the knife stayed at his throat.

Iris approached and sat opposite the guard. She looked at him with a cold gaze, studying his face. He was young, no older than twenty-five, with pale skin and dark circles under his eyes. He looked tired and frightened.

Who are you holding here and why? - she asked.

The guard swallowed. His voice trembled as he spoke:

We're preparing them for relocation. The Arbiter said the old world was doomed, that a new, pure world needed to be created. These people are the future. They'll be trained, remade, they'll become soldiers of the new order.

Iris looked at him with disgust. Her voice grew cold:

You're brainwashing them.

The guard lowered his eyes. He couldn't meet her gaze.

We're following orders, - he whispered.

Iris felt anger rising within her, but she held it back. She turned to Elias and said:

Tie him up. We don't kill unless we have to.

Elias nodded and began binding the guard, pulling his hands behind his back. Iris rose and looked at the door leading to the prison block. They had to free everyone. And they had to leave.

Elias grabbed the guard by the collar and slammed him against the wall with such force he barely touched the floor. His face was inches from the guard's, his voice low and threatening:

Where are the cell keys? Where's the exit to the reactor?

The guard trembled. His eyes darted around, but he couldn't break free from Elias's grip. He pointed a trembling hand to a corner of the room where an old metal box stood.

The keys are there, - he said. - But the reactor isn't in this base. This is just a collection point. They're sent from here to the "Heart." Into the mountains.

He swallowed and continued, stammering:

The "Heart" is a huge underground complex. All prisoners are taken there. Experiments are conducted there, and reactors are activated.

Elias looked at him for a few seconds, then released his collar. The guard slid down the wall, breathing heavily.

Iris was already at the box, opening it. Inside were bundles of keys with numbers corresponding to the numbers on the cells. She took them and began distributing them to the fighters, quickly and confidently.

Open the cells, - she said. - Fast, but quiet.

Elias walked over to the guard, still sitting on the floor. He gave him a sharp slap, and the guard went limp, losing consciousness. Then he tied his hands behind his back, saying:

We don't kill unless we have to. He's a victim, like all of us.

He rose and looked at Iris. She nodded, and they moved towards the cells to free the prisoners.

She approached the first cell. Her steps were slow, cautious, so as not to startle those inside. She heard the breathing of her fighters behind her, the creak of weapon straps, water dripping somewhere in the depths of the dungeon - a steady, cold sound breaking the silence like the beats of a metronome counting time. She stopped before the bars and looked inside. There, in a corner, huddled together, sat people - a man, two women, and a child. They looked at her with terror, eyes wide open like cornered animals. They didn't trust her. They were afraid this was another trap, another deception, another turn of their endless nightmare.

She inserted the key into the lock - it fit on the first try, turning with a dry metallic click, and the cell door slowly opened, its hinges squeaking like living things resisting release. The metal bars parted, opening a way out, but the people inside didn't rush to leave. They remained motionless, huddled in corners, watching her with distrust and fear - so deep it had seeped into their bones, become part of their flesh. They were afraid this was another test, another check, another game in which they would be the losers.

Iris stepped inside the cell. She felt the smell of dampness, dirt, and fear hit her face, settle on her skin, penetrate her lungs, mixing with her breath. She slowly raised her hands in front of her, palms open to them, showing she had no weapon, that she wasn't a threat. Her movements were fluid and open, like someone trying to calm a wild animal.

I'm not an enemy, - she said softly, her voice warm as sunlight breaking through clouds. - I'm not from the Frontier. I've come to free you. I'm Iris, Commander of the Union. I'm here with a squad, and we'll get you out of here. We'll take you north, to your families, to safety. Come out. Come out, and I promise no one will lock you in a cell again.

She spoke as she would to frightened children - calmly, confidently, without pressure, without sudden movements. Her voice was even and soft, like a warm blanket to shelter from the cold. She stood at the threshold of the cell, waiting, giving them time, giving them space to take a step themselves.

At first, no one moved. People looked at each other, seeking confirmation in each other's eyes, searching for the answer to the same question: could she be trusted? Could they risk it? Their faces were pale, emaciated, with dark circles under their eyes, deep wrinkles of suffering that had appeared over these days. They looked at Iris, at her outstretched hands, her open face, and two forces fought in their eyes - fear and hope. Fear was old, familiar, ingrained in their souls. Hope was fragile, like thin ice that could crack at the first touch.

Then one woman slowly rose. She was thin to the point of transparency - her collarbones jutted out, her arms were thin as twigs, her skin stretched over bone. Her face wore an expression of exhausted weariness, but in her eyes, deep inside, a spark flickered - weak, almost extinguished, but alive. She took a step forward, crossing the threshold of the cell, her legs trembling with weakness. She stopped before Iris and looked at her, and in that look was so much gratitude that Iris's breath caught.

You'll really get us out? - she asked, her voice hoarse, as if she hadn't spoken in days. - You really won't leave us?

Really, - Iris answered, not a shadow of doubt in her voice. - I promise.

Others followed her. Slowly, cautiously, like people who'd sat in darkness for a long time and forgotten what light looked like, they came out of the cells. Their steps were unsteady, bodies trembling with weakness and cold, but they walked. In their eyes, life returned - fear gave way to hope, emptiness filled with light. Someone walked leaning on a wall, someone held hands, someone carried children on their arms, who cried from exhaustion and relief. The sounds of steps, soft voices, muffled sobs - all mixed into a symphony of liberation filling the dungeon with warmth.

The woman with the child in her arms approached Iris. The child, a little girl with dark hair, clung to her, arms wrapped around her mother's neck, eyes closed as if afraid to see this was a dream. The woman looked at Iris with a plea, her lips trembling, and she took her hand - cold, trembling, with thin, almost transparent skin.

Please, - she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. - Please, don't leave us. They said they'd kill us. They said no one would come. Tell me it's true. Tell me you'll get us out.

Iris squeezed her hand - firmly, but not painfully, passing the warmth of her palm, her strength, her confidence. She looked into the woman's eyes, into the child's eyes, and her voice dropped but grew firm, like a promise she made to herself and everyone with her:

I won't leave you. I won't leave anyone. I promise you'll get out of here. You'll see the sky, you'll see the sun, you'll see your loved ones. I'll lead you through this. I'll take you home.

She looked back at the hall. Hundreds of people were coming out of the cells - men, women, children. They stood on the concrete floor, looking at her, and in their eyes, she saw hope. They looked at her as their savior, as the one who came in the darkest hour and brought light. Iris felt the weight of that gaze - she didn't want to be a heroine, she didn't want to be a symbol of hope. She wanted to help, just do what was right. But she knew they saw in her what they needed to survive. And she couldn't let them down. She couldn't allow herself to break, couldn't allow herself to give up.

When the last cell was opened and the prisoners began to gather in the center of the hall, an elderly woman approached Iris. She was old - grey hair, deep wrinkles on her face covered in dust and dirt. Her clothes were torn, her body emaciated, but her eyes - bright and alive - looked at Iris with surprising clarity.

She stopped before Iris and looked at her with a long, appraising gaze.

You are Lena's daughter, - she said. - I recognized you by your eyes.

Iris froze. The words hit her like an electric shock. She stared at the woman, feeling the ground slip from under her feet.

You knew my mother? - she asked.

The woman nodded. Her voice was soft but firm, as if speaking of something she'd long kept within.

My name is Silva, - she said. - I was her mentor. I worked with the Architect. I know everything about "Protocol 7" and the "Heart." Your mother was my student.

Iris felt her heart begin to beat faster. She'd finally found someone who knew the truth. Who could answer the questions that had tormented her for years.

She took Silva's hand and squeezed it:

I need to know everything. What's happening here? Who created the Frontier? What is the "Heart"?

Silva looked at her with sadness. Her eyes grew deeper, as if looking into a past she didn't want to remember.

It's a long story, - she said. - But I'll tell you. When we're safe.

Iris nodded. She turned to the squad and signaled to prepare to leave.

We're getting them out. Everyone. Every single person. Form a column: the weak and children in the center, fighters on the outside. We move to the exit, don't stop, don't look back. We leave no one.

They exited through the western entrance of the base, leading a long, slow column of freed prisoners. The former captives moved cautiously, unsteadily, their steps faltering after long days and nights spent in the cramped, dark cells. Fighters supported those who could barely stand, lifted children into their arms, helped the elderly walk over the uneven, rocky ground. The wind blew from the mountains, cold and dry, but no one complained - freedom was warmer than any sun.

Iris walked beside Silva, the old woman who'd been among the prisoners. She stood out from the rest - not so much in age as in her gaze. Her eyes were clear, calm, and in them read a wisdom that neither chains nor darkness could break. She moved confidently, despite her thinness and weakness, and Iris felt this woman knew more than she said.

They had moved a sufficient distance from the base when Silva began to speak. Her voice was hoarse, soft, but with that special strength that comes with years and suffering endured. She spoke softly, so only Iris could hear, not to disturb the others.

The Arbiter, - she began, her voice faltering, as if touching something very old and very painful. - He wasn't just a Frontier general. He was the Architect's student. His right hand, his confidant, his closest and most devoted follower. But he wasn't always the way you see him. You must understand that before you judge him.

Iris walked silently, looking ahead, but she heard every word, every breath of Silva. She felt the cold wind touch her face, sand crunch under her feet, and the old woman's words penetrate her mind like drops of ink falling into clear water.

The Architect experimented with human consciousness, - Silva continued, her voice deepening, almost solemn. - He sought a way to create the perfect executor - one who doesn't doubt, doesn't hesitate, doesn't feel pity. One who could carry out his will without a single question. The Arbiter became his first successful "modification." They erased everything that made him human. His past, his fears, his hopes, his capacity to love and feel compassion. They cut out his humanity like a surgeon cutting out a tumor. Left only the will for "purification" - the very will that drives him now. He doesn't

know he's a product of an experiment. He thinks he follows his own will, his own destiny. But in reality, he follows a program implanted in him by the Architect.

Iris felt cold run down her spine, the hair on her arms standing on end. She stopped for a moment, turning to Silva, her voice full of shock:

So he's not a villain, - she said, the words coming with difficulty. - He's a victim. He was created this way. Turned into this. Someone took away his choice, and now he does what he thinks is right, but that "right" isn't his. It's a program running inside him.

Silva looked at her, her eyes wet with tears. She nodded, and in that nod was the weight of everything she knew.

Exactly, - she said. - The Architect wanted to create the perfect soldier - unquestioning, ruthless, knowing no doubt. But he created the perfect monster. He created one who doesn't know he's a product of an experiment. The Arbiter doesn't know that his will isn't his will. He thinks he acts by his own choice, but he's following a program no one can change. And that makes him simultaneously the most dangerous and most tragic being in this world. He doesn't deserve hatred. He deserves pity. Because he never had a choice.

Silva continued, her voice soft but every word clear and weighty.

But the Arbiter doesn't just do what the Architect says. He considers himself the Architect's true heir. He thinks the Architect was too soft, that he didn't go far enough, didn't finish the work. The Arbiter wants to see it through - destroy everyone who doesn't meet the standard. He thinks this is an act of mercy. That he's freeing people from suffering.

Iris clenched her fists so hard her nails dug into her palms. Her voice grew hard:

But that's not mercy. That's murder.

Silva looked at her with a sadness deeper than any words.

I know, - she said. - But he doesn't think so. He genuinely believes he's creating a better world. And that's the scariest part - he's sincere in his belief. He can't be persuaded because he doesn't doubt.

Iris stared at her. She understood what this meant. The Arbiter wasn't just a madman or a tyrant. He was a fanatic, believing in his rightness to the end. Weapons couldn't defeat such faith.

Then how can we stop him? - she asked.

Silva was silent for a few moments, then said:

Only with the truth. But the truth doesn't matter to him. He won't hear it because he doesn't want to hear.

Iris stopped. She looked at the people following her - hundreds of prisoners they'd freed, and the fighters leading them across the wasteland. She saw their faces, their eyes, their hope. But she also thought of those on the other side - the Frontier soldiers guarding these cells.

They're not just soldiers, are they? - she said, without turning.

Silva approached her. Her voice was soft but firm.

Each of them has been through "purification" - brainwashing, programming. They don't know they're victims. They think they're the chosen ones. For them, the Frontier is a church, and the Arbiter is a prophet. And they will die for him gladly.

Iris felt cold spreading through her soul. She wasn't fighting enemies she could understand. She was fighting enemies who didn't know they were enemies. She thought about how to stop this - not by killing them, but by waking them.

She turned to Silva and looked into her eyes.

Is there a way to restore their real memories? - she asked.

Silva smiled sadly. A shadow of pain flickered in her eyes.

There is, - she said. - But it's dangerous. It could break them forever.

Iris looked at her and felt the answer lay somewhere nearby. But she also knew it would be hard.

We'll find a way, - she said. - We must.

She turned and walked on, leading hundreds of people. Ahead lay the wasteland.

They had moved a sufficient distance from the base when Elias stopped and raised his hand, signaling a halt. The column froze, and in the ensuing silence, only the wind blowing across the wasteland and the heavy breathing of people carrying the burden of their terror could be heard. Elias surveyed the assembled crowd - hundreds of exhausted, dirty, frightened people looking at him with hope and fear. He saw their faces, their hands, their eyes, and knew he couldn't afford a mistake. Every decision now determined who among them would survive.

He climbed onto a small rocky outcrop, rising above the crowd, so his voice could be heard by all. His figure stood out against the grey sky, and people turned their heads, falling silent, waiting for his words. He stood straight, his shoulders squared, and in his voice was that confidence that passed to others like fire from a torch.

We'll split into three groups, - he said, his voice loud and clear, carrying over the wasteland. - Listen carefully, this is important. The first group goes with Iris and Silva - the fastest and healthiest. You'll go ahead to prepare a reception in the first Union city. You set the pace. The second group - with the women, children, and elderly - led by Kell. You'll be in the center, protected. The third group - with the wounded and weakest - led by me. We'll bring up the rear, we won't let anyone fall behind.

He paused, letting people absorb his words, and continued, his voice softening but not losing its firmness:

We're heading north, to the first Union city. There we'll be met, there will be food, water, and shelter. We'll make it. All of us. No one gets left behind. Remember that.

He jumped down from the outcrop, and people began to move. They looked at each other, their faces gradually relaxing, giving way to resolve. At first they moved hesitantly, but gradually, following his orders, they began to gather in groups. Voices were heard - people calling to each other, searching for their own, calling out in the night. Fighters helped form the columns, picked up those who stumbled, comforted crying children. Elias stood in the center of this activity, like a stone pillar against which one could lean.

Iris approached him as he was giving final instructions to Kell. She touched his elbow, and he turned. She looked at him, and her voice was soft, so no one else could hear, so this moment remained only between them.

You shouldn't go with the wounded, - she said, and in her voice was a plea she tried to hide behind firmness. - It's too dangerous. You should be in the first group. We need you there. I need you.

Elias looked at her. His face was calm, but in his eyes flickered that special warmth he showed only to her. He smiled - briefly, almost imperceptibly, but she saw it. Then he shook his head, and in his voice was the same steel as in hers.

If I leave them, who will protect them? - he asked, and in that question was his very essence. - If I go with the first group, I'll be thinking of those left behind. Of those who can't walk fast, of those who will fall. I won't abandon people who rely on me. This isn't up for discussion.

Iris looked at him, and she understood he was right. She knew him well enough not to try to persuade him. He was the man who always stood behind her, always ready to sacrifice himself for others. But fear gripped her heart with cold fingers, and she felt it entering her chest, constricting her throat. She stepped forward and touched his hand - cold, strong, covered in scars.

Be careful, - she said, and in her voice was all the pain of separation she couldn't express. - I don't want to lose you.

He nodded, and in his eyes flickered the same pain.

I will. I always come back. We'll meet in the capital. That's a promise.

He turned and walked towards the third group. Iris watched him go, feeling the wind on her face, the cold of the wasteland penetrating her clothes. She saw him approach the wounded, lift one onto his shoulders, say something encouraging to the others. His figure gradually disappeared into the night, and she clenched her fists to hold back the fear trying to escape.

We'll meet, - she whispered, her voice softer than the wind. - We'll definitely meet.

She stood for a few moments, staring into the darkness where Elias had vanished. Then she turned to her group - to those going with her, to Silva, to the fighters waiting for her command. She raised her hand, and her voice grew firm, though inside a storm still raged.

We go, - she said. - We're the pace-setters. We're the ones who'll meet them in the north. We don't stop until we reach the city. Forward.

She took a step forward, feeling the group move behind her. She didn't look back - she knew if she did, she wouldn't be able to hold back tears. She walked forward, towards the mountains, towards the city, towards the future, and in her heart lived the hope that they would meet. That Elias would return. That everything would be all right.

But fear remained. And she carried it with her, like a weight that made each step harder.

They had almost reached the edge of the wasteland when the night's silence was shattered by a siren. It was sharp, piercing, like the cry of a wounded beast. Iris froze for a moment, cold running down her spine. The Frontier patrol had discovered the escape.

Searchlights began to sweep across the wasteland, picking out the running figures of people. Iris saw several groups of soldiers emerge from the base and head towards them, their shadows stretching in the searchlight beams.

Everyone run! - she shouted. - To cover!

People rushed forward, but many couldn't run. They were too weak - exhausted, hungry, worn out. They stumbled, fell, but got up and kept going, driven by fear.

Iris stopped. She turned to the approaching patrol and drew her pistol. She began shooting, covering the retreat. Shots tore through the silence, and one soldier fell, another ducked behind a rock.

She saw the other groups disappearing into the darkness and felt relief. But she knew they couldn't all make it. Too many people, too little time.

She grabbed her radio and shouted:

We'll hold them off. Get the people out.

Elias's response was immediate:

I won't leave you.

That's an order! - she shouted.

Elias didn't listen. Iris saw him turn and run back, his figure outlined against the flashes of gunfire tearing the night into orange and white bursts. He didn't hesitate for a second - there was no fear in his movements, only that cold, clear resolve that had always distinguished him from others. He wasn't running to her, but to the patrols, to danger, to the death waiting behind every rock. With him were three fighters - those who'd stayed with him, who shared his belief that you don't abandon your own. Their silhouettes darted between rocks, disappearing into the night, and Iris heard their shots merge into a single rhythm, bullets whistling overhead.

She couldn't let him die. She stood up, gripping her weapon, and ran after him, feeling the wind in her face, sand crunching underfoot, each step echoing with pain in tired muscles. She saw him take cover behind a large boulder, his hands confidently reloading, shooting, keeping the patrols at bay. She dropped beside him, pressing against the cold stone, and began firing, covering him.

They fought together. Iris and Elias stood shoulder to shoulder, their shots sounding in unison, their breathing ragged but steady. The patrols advanced, their figures emerging from the darkness like shadows and disappearing, struck down by bullets. The fight lasted fifteen minutes - every second stretched into eternity, every moment filled with the sounds of gunfire, shouts, the clang of metal on stone. Iris saw one of the fighters fall - his body disappeared into the darkness, and she heard Elias shout his name, but his voice didn't waver. He kept shooting, covering their retreat, buying them time.

Iris saw his ammunition running low - he began shooting less often, conserving every bullet. She couldn't let him stay here. She stood up, grabbed his arm, and pulled him forward, forcing him to move. He didn't resist - he just ran with her, shooting on the move, covering their backs. They ran

until the patrols began to retreat. They didn't pursue - they returned to the base to report the escape, that prisoners were freed, that they'd lost control of the prison.

Iris fell to her knees, breathing heavily. Her hands trembled, fingers numb from tension, and she felt the cold air of the wasteland burning her lungs. She turned to Elias, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw he was wounded. Blood ran down his arm, soaking through his jacket sleeve, dripping to the ground in dark drops. She crawled to him, her hands trembling as she touched his shoulder, her voice hoarse with exhaustion and anger.

You idiot, - she said, her voice carrying tears she couldn't hold back. - You could have died. You should have stayed with the group. You should have evacuated with them. Why did you come back? Why did you go there?

He looked at her, a weak smile on his face. There was pain in his eyes, but also that same warmth she knew so well, that warmed her in the coldest nights.

Because I promised I'd come back, - he said, his voice calm, as if talking about something ordinary. - I said we'd meet in the capital. I couldn't leave you here, with them. I couldn't let you die when I could help.

She looked at him, feeling tears welling in her eyes, streaming down her cheeks, leaving wet tracks on her dirty skin. She had never wanted him to sacrifice himself for her. She'd never asked him to. But he always did - always appeared in the most dangerous moment, always shielded her, always ready to give his life for hers.

She stepped forward, ignoring his wound, the blood running down his arm, and hugged him tightly. She felt his arms wrap around her, pulling her close, his breath mixing with hers. She heard his heartbeat - steady, strong, like a man who doesn't fear death but fears losing her.

Don't do that again, - she whispered, her voice breaking with tears. - Please, don't do that. I don't want to lose you. I couldn't survive it.

He hugged her back, holding her close, his voice soft but warm, like a blanket on a winter night.

I can't promise, - he said. - I can't promise I won't take risks. But I can promise I'll always be there.

They continued across the wasteland. Around them stretched an endless grey land, dotted with stones and sand. The wind blew in their faces, bringing cold and silence. Iris walked forward, feeling each step come harder. She looked at the remaining fighters, and emptiness grew inside her.

She counted them. Of the ten fighters they'd left the capital with, only four remained. Two had died in the battle at the base, another four had gone north with the prisoners. Now there were only four - herself, Elias, holding his wounded shoulder, and two fighters walking silently, conserving energy.

Each loss was part of her soul. She felt it - pain settling inside like a heavy weight. But she couldn't stop. She had to keep going for those who remained. For those waiting for them.

She looked at Silva, walking beside her. The old woman moved with difficulty, but didn't complain. Iris approached her and asked:

How far are the mountains?

Silva looked ahead. Her eyes were narrowed, as if seeing something others couldn't.

Two days, if we walk without stopping, - she said. - But it'll be harder there. Guards, patrols, traps. They don't want anyone to find the "Heart."

Iris nodded. She felt resolve filling her.

We'll find it, - she said. - We won't stop.

She looked at the mountains looming on the horizon. They seemed dark and ominous, like teeth piercing the sky. But she knew beyond them lay answers. Answers to all the questions that tormented her.

Night descended on the wasteland, cold and silent, like the breath of a dead world. Stars began to appear in the sky one by one, cold and distant, their light barely reaching the earth, lost in the boundless blackness. The wind died down, and the silence became almost absolute - only rare sobs,

uneven breathing, and the rustle of clothing broke it. They stopped for a rest in a small ravine that offered some protection from the wind. The walls of the ravine were steep and rocky, creating the illusion of shelter, though everyone knew it was just earth that couldn't protect them from what lurked in the darkness.

The people they'd saved sat and lay on the cold ground, pressed together for warmth. Some slept, curled in corners, their faces calm in sleep, as if they'd finally released their fear. Others sat motionless, staring into the darkness, their eyes empty but with a spark of life beginning to appear, which had nearly died in the cells. Some cried in their sleep - their bodies twitching, hands clenching into fists, making soft, intermittent sounds, as if memories didn't release them even in oblivion, as if even in sleep they continued to fight.

Iris sat on a large stone jutting from the edge of the ravine, legs tucked under her, hugging her knees. She looked at them - at these people she'd pulled from the cells, brought here, given a second chance. She saw their faces - emaciated, pale, with dark circles under their eyes, deep wrinkles of suffering etched into their skin. But they were alive. Breathing. Looking at her with gratitude heavier than any chains.

She'd saved them. Led them out of the darkness. But she knew this was only the beginning. In other cities, other bases, other dungeons, behind other bars, sat people like them - men, women, children waiting for someone to come for them. People who heard patrols above and prayed someone would hear them. People slowly dying of hunger, thirst, and despair. She'd left many behind. And that knowledge pressed on her like a stone she couldn't shake.

She felt the weight of this realization penetrating every cell of her body, constricting her chest, making each breath harder than the last. She didn't know if she had the strength. She didn't know how many more battles, losses, and pain lay ahead. She didn't know if she could continue when each new day brought new suffering and new losses. But she knew she had no right to stop.

Elias approached, his steps soft, but she heard them. He sat beside her on the stone, his shoulder touching hers. He handed her his canteen - old, worn, with scratches on the metal. She took it, feeling the cold metal in her palms, and took a sip. The water was cold and clean, it burned her throat but brought relief. She returned it, and he put it away.

You did well, - he said, his voice soft but with that confidence that passed to her like warmth from a fire. - You saved them. You gave them a chance. You gave them hope. No one can take that from them.

She looked at him. In his eyes was the same weariness as in hers, the same shadows under his eyes, the same weight on his shoulders. But in them also burned confidence - that cold, clear confidence of a man who'd seen too much to doubt the rightness of his path.

But how many couldn't we save? - she asked, her voice soft, almost a whisper, as if afraid to hear her own question. - How many people are still there, in the darkness? How many more cities will burn? How many more children will cry in basements while we walk the wasteland?

He took her hand - his fingers cold but strong - and squeezed them, passing her his warmth, his faith, his strength.

Those we'll save tomorrow, - he said, his voice firm as the stone they sat on. - We can't save everyone today. We can't bring back those we lost. But we can save many tomorrow. And that's enough. Every person we lead into the light is a victory. Every child who sees the sun again is hope. We do what we can. And that's all that's required of us.

She looked at him, and his words penetrated her soul like warm light dispelling darkness. He was right. She couldn't save everyone. She couldn't prevent all suffering. But she could save many. Give them a chance. And that was enough. It had to be enough.

She squeezed his hand in return, feeling his fingers intertwine with hers, his warmth passing to her, warming her from within. She raised her head and looked at the stars beginning to appear in the sky - cold, distant, but beautiful. They reminded her that even in the darkest night, there is light.

Tomorrow will be a new day, - she said, her voice carrying the same confidence as his. - And we'll do everything we can. We'll keep walking until we stop them. We'll fight until we free everyone. We won't stop until we find the "Heart" and destroy it.

She looked at the sleeping people, their faces gradually smoothing in sleep, their hands relaxing, breathing becoming more even. She felt resolve strengthening inside her - cold, clear, unshakeable. This wasn't the end. This was only the beginning. And she was ready to go to the end.

CHAPTER 2: "THE NORTH WIND"

They had been walking for several days. The wasteland, which had been their only companion for so long - grey, endless, merciless - was gradually beginning to surrender its position. First, rare green islands appeared: thin stems of grass breaking through the cracked earth, like the first rays of hope in the endless darkness. Then bushes - low, thorny, but alive, with small leaves trembling in the wind. And then trees - first sparse, twisted, as if grown despite everything, then increasingly frequent, their crowns thicker, their shadows longer.

Iris felt the air becoming softer, warmer, filling with smells she'd almost forgotten. The smell of damp earth, settling on her skin and in her lungs, mixing with her breath. The smell of greenery - fresh, alive, contrasting so sharply with the dry dust of the wasteland. The smell of smoke, carried from afar - not the kind from burning cities, but the kind from fires around which hands are warmed and food cooked. She stopped for a moment, closed her eyes, and breathed in this air fully, feeling it fill her lungs, penetrate every cell of her body, return her to life.

She noticed columns of smoke rising over the horizon in the distance - thin, grey, almost invisible against the sky. These were villages still alive. People cooked food, warmed themselves by fires, continued to live, despite everything happening around them. They didn't know about the Frontier, the "Heart," that the world stood on the brink of destruction. Or they knew, but kept living because it was the only thing they could do. Iris looked at these columns of smoke and felt warmth spreading inside her - not hope, but something deeper, more basic. Life continued. And that was important.

She felt relief. They'd returned to their own. But she knew the war wasn't over. The Frontier still existed, its armies still moved through the southern lands, the "Heart" still waited in the depths of the mountains, and the truth she sought was somewhere nearby, ready to either save or destroy her. This wasn't time for rest - it was time for preparation. But for a moment, just a moment, she allowed herself to feel relief. She allowed herself to believe they'd done something important.

She walked forward, leading the people. Hundreds of freed prisoners moved behind her, their steps slow but confident. They were returning to life. Their faces, still pale and haggard, were beginning to change - light appeared in their eyes, first smiles on their lips. They looked at the greenery, the trees, the smoke of villages, and they believed everything would be all right. They believed in her. And that was the hardest part, because she knew she couldn't promise them safety. She knew more pain lay ahead.

Silva walked beside her, her old body moving with difficulty, but her eyes remained clear. She leaned on a stick given by one of the fighters, her breathing uneven, but she didn't complain. She looked ahead with the same resolve as Iris, and in her gaze was something that reminded Iris this woman still held many secrets. She hadn't told everything. She was waiting for the right moment.

They reached the border of the inhabited lands. There stood a small post - several people in Union uniforms, armed but relaxed. They stood at the gates, their faces calm, like people who hadn't seen an enemy for a long time. They recognized Iris - her face, her figure, her walk. They opened the gates, and she entered. She heard the gates close behind her with a dull metallic clang, cutting off the wasteland from the world.

She stopped for a moment and looked around. People looked at her - those at the post, those living in the surrounding villages who'd come to see who'd returned. Their gazes were full of hope,

respect, love. They saw in her the one who'd brought them salvation. They saw in her a heroine who'd walked through the darkness and returned to lead them. She felt the weight of that gaze - it pressed on her like a stone she couldn't shake from her shoulders. She didn't want to be a heroine. She wanted to live. But she knew her role in this world wasn't a choice. It was fate. And she had to accept it.

She walked forward, to the post, feeling each step bring her closer to the next chapter of her life. She knew a new battle awaited them. She knew the "Heart" still waited. She knew her mother was still out there, leaving signs she had to decipher. But now, at this moment, she allowed herself to simply walk, simply breathe, simply be alive. And that was enough.

Iris entered the communications building at the post. It was a small room with several tables on which stood communication devices - old but reliable. Two operators sat at them, their fingers moving quickly over the keys. They looked up when she entered and recognized her.

Connect me with the capital, - she said. - With the Council.

The operator nodded and began adjusting the device. A few minutes later, he handed her the receiver.

Stella is on the line, - he said.

Iris took the receiver and put it to her ear. She heard Stella's voice - sharp, alarmed:

Iris? You're alive?

Yes, - she answered. - But I have news. The Frontier is stronger than we thought. This isn't just an army - it's a cult. They have underground bases, they're taking people, preparing them for "relocation." And they have a "Heart" - a reactor that can destroy everyone who hasn't undergone "purification."

Silence fell on the line. Iris heard only the crackle of static. Then Stella spoke, her voice tense: We're preparing the defense. But we need more time.

We don't have time, - Iris said. - They're attacking in two weeks. I'm going to the mountains to stop the "Heart." Prepare the troops for defense. I'll send coordinates.

An hour later, the answer came. The operator handed Iris the receiver, and she heard Stella's voice again - even, businesslike, but with tension in it.

The Council has agreed to prepare the defense, - Stella said. - We're distributing troops along all fronts. We're reinforcing the eastern front, holding the west for now. But we can't spare you additional people. All forces are needed here.

Iris nodded, though she knew Stella couldn't see her.

I understand, - she said. - I have a squad. We'll do what we can.

She hung up and turned to Elias. He sat in a corner of the room, his weapon disassembled on his knees. He was cleaning it with the same thoroughness he applied to everything - calmly, focused, unhurried.

What did the Council say? - he asked, not looking up.

They're preparing for defense, - she answered. - They can't help us. We're going into the mountains alone.

They stopped for a rest by a small stream, murmuring among the stones, carving its way through the sparse greenery. The water was cold and clean, and the people they'd saved drank it greedily, washed their faces, washing away dirt and weariness. Iris stood a little apart, watching them, when Elias approached her. He held in his hands the old map they'd found in the Arbiter's camp, his face serious, focused. He rolled it up and tucked it into his pocket, then came closer, and in his eyes was that special firmness that appeared when he made a difficult decision.

I think we need to split up, - he said, his voice calm but with steel in it. - Some of the squad should return to the capital with the prisoners. They must tell what's happening. They must warn the others. They must become the voice of those who can't speak. And some - head south, to the "Heart." We can't wait. Every day we lose is another city, another prison, another hundred people.

He looked at her directly, and she met his gaze. There was no doubt in his eyes - only cold, clear resolve, passing to her like fire from a torch.

You must go south, - he continued, his voice dropping but not losing firmness. - You're the only one who can activate "Protocol 7" against them. You're the only one who knows how to do it. Without you, we have no chance. I'll go with you. But the others - they must return. They must survive. They must tell others what we saw.

Iris hesitated. She knew he was right. She knew it was necessary - that they couldn't all go to the "Heart" together, that someone had to return and warn the others. But fear gripped her heart with cold fingers - she was afraid of losing people. Each of them was part of her squad, her family, her world. She looked at them - at Nova, at Marcus, at Kell, at Ren - and felt the weight of this choice pressing on her, constricting her chest, making each breath harder.

She took a deep breath and exhaled, feeling the cold air burn her throat. Then she raised her head and looked at them, her voice firming, though inside the storm still raged.

We'll split the squad, - she said after a long pause. - Nova and Marcus will return to the capital with the prisoners. You'll lead them through the northern lands, by a safe route. You'll tell the Council everything we saw. You'll warn them about the Frontier, the "Heart," what they're preparing. And we - you, Kell, Ren, and I - we go to the mountains. To the "Heart." We'll stop them, whatever it costs.

Iris stood before the squad. She looked at them - at those who would go with her and those who would return to the capital. She knew this might be the last goodbye. Some of them might never see each other again. But she knew it was right.

She stepped forward, to Nova and Marcus. Her voice was even, but with warmth in it.

Nova, Marcus, - she said. - You lead the people north. You'll tell everything you saw. You'll say we're going to the "Heart." And that we'll return.

She approached Nova and took her hand. The young woman looked at her, tears glistening in her eyes.

You'll manage, - Iris said softly. - I know it.

Nova nodded, unable to speak. She squeezed Iris's hand and let go.

Iris turned to those remaining with her: Elias, Kell, Ren. They stood silently, ready to follow her.

We're heading south, - she said, her voice firming. - We'll be fast and quiet. We don't engage if we can avoid it. We find the "Heart" and stop it.

She felt adrenaline filling her body. She was ready. She wasn't afraid. She just wanted to end this. Finish what had started years ago.

She turned and walked forward, south. Behind her followed Elias, Kell, and Ren. They left behind Nova, Marcus, and hundreds of saved people watching them go.

Nova and Marcus headed north, leading a long, slow column of saved people. There were just over a hundred of them - men, women, children, elderly who only days ago sat in concrete cells, chained to walls. Now they walked across the wasteland, steps unsteady, but moving forward, supporting each other, faces turned to the horizon where safety, food, water, and hope for a new life awaited them. The wind blew from the north, cold and dry, but no one complained - freedom was warmer than any sun.

Iris stood on a small rise, watching them go. She saw the figures gradually shrink, becoming small dots slowly moving across the grey earth until they began to disappear behind hills, dissolving into the grey haze of the wasteland. She watched until the last silhouette was out of sight, and only then allowed herself to exhale.

She felt part of her soul leaving with them. Each of these people was a piece of her responsibility, her hope, her fight. She remembered their faces - frightened, haggard, but alive. She remembered how they'd come out of cells, how they'd looked at her with gratitude, how they'd squeezed her hands, whispered thanks she couldn't forget. She was leaving them in Nova's and Marcus's hands - two of the most reliable people she knew. And she knew they were safe.

She stood in the wind, feeling the cold touch her face, creep under her jacket, making her shiver, but she didn't leave. She wanted to make sure they'd gone far enough, that Frontier patrols wouldn't catch them. She waited until the last trace of their presence disappeared in the dust, and only then turned to those remaining.

Elias stood beside her, his arm still bandaged, but he stood firm as ever. His face was calm, but in his eyes read the same pain as in hers. He too had watched them go. He too was letting them go. Kell and Ren waited for her order, their faces focused, knowing the hardest part lay ahead. Four against everything awaiting them - against the armies of the Frontier, the "Heart," the darkness hidden in the mountains.

Iris took a deep breath, feeling the cold air fill her lungs, and turned south. Her voice was firm as she spoke:

We go. We need to reach the mountains in three days. We don't stop, we don't rest longer than necessary. We walk until we reach our goal.

She turned and walked south. Elias walked beside her, his steps steady and confident despite the wound. Kell and Ren followed, their shadows stretching on the sand under the setting sun. They walked through the silent wasteland, the wind in their faces, carrying sand and cold. The silence was almost absolute - only the sound of their steps, the creak of straps, and breathing broke it.

Iris felt alone, despite the squad beside her. She felt emptiness where those who'd left had been. She thought of her mother - of Maria Hall, leaving signs on the walls of destroyed cities, waiting for her somewhere in the mountains. She thought of her sister, lost; of her grandfather, killed by a clone; of the truth she had to learn. She thought of the "Heart" - of what awaited them in the depths of the mountains, of what could change everything.

She didn't know what she'd find there. She didn't know if she could stop "Protocol 7" and prevent a global catastrophe. She didn't know if she'd see her mother alive or only her traces. She didn't know if she'd return from this expedition. But she knew she had to do this. For everyone left behind. For those waiting for their return. For those who believed in her.

She kept walking, feeling each step bring her closer to answers, each step carrying her from the past, each step bringing her closer to the future. She looked at the mountains growing on the horizon, dark and ominous, and knew that beyond them waited her fate. And she was ready to meet it. Whatever it brought.

They had been walking for three days. The wasteland changed with each hour - the ground grew rockier, cracks cut across it like scars, and in places they had to bypass deep chasms plunging into black unknown. The wind blew from the mountains, cold and dry, carrying fine sand that settled on their clothes, their faces, crunched on their teeth. The sky was grey, low, heavy - it pressed on the horizon, merging with the earth into a single endless void.

Iris walked at the front. Her steps were steady, automatic - she'd long stopped feeling the weariness, only a dull ache in her legs and dryness in her throat. She held the map in her hands, but barely looked at it - the landmarks were around them. Old stone pillars with carved symbols appeared every half hour, and each time she passed without stopping, only noting with her eyes that the path was correct.

Elias walked two steps behind her. His shoulder, bandaged and drawn, ached with every sharp movement, but he didn't show it. He carried the backpack with water and ammunition, shifting it from shoulder to shoulder as muscles began to burn. His eyes scanned the ground - looking for tracks, traps, signs someone had passed here before. Nothing so far.

Kell moved to the right, slightly apart. His rifle hung on a strap, but he kept his hand on the handguard - ready to raise it in a second. He looked ahead, not distracted, his steps silent - a habit honed over years.

Ren walked behind, head low, looking at a small screen in his hands. The device beeped with short signals - weak, almost imperceptible. He said nothing, but his furrowed brows spoke for themselves. Frontier signals were nearby.

The ground rose. They began the ascent. Gravel crumbled underfoot, and each step required effort - feet slipped, stones rolled down, breaking the silence. Iris raised her head and looked up. The mountains loomed over them - black, angular, with sharp peaks piercing the clouds. They were nearly at their foot.

She stopped for a moment, wiped the sweat from her brow, and took a sip from her canteen. The water was warm, with a metallic taste, but it quenched her thirst. She handed it to Elias, who took it, drank a few sips, and returned it. No one spoke.

They continued. The path narrowed, and now they walked single file. Above, birds circled - rare, black, their cries sharp and short, like warnings. Iris watched them out of the corner of her eye but didn't stop.

An hour later, they reached the foot. A passage opened before them - narrow, rocky, leading into the heart of the cliffs, like an entrance to a womb. On both sides rose sheer walls, and it seemed the sun had never been here - only shadow, cold, and silence.

Iris stopped at the edge of the passage. She pulled out the map and unfolded it, but the wind immediately tried to tear the paper from her hands. She pressed it to her chest, checked the landmarks, and realized - they'd arrived. The very path marked on the map began here.

She put the map away and stepped forward into the mountain's shadow. Elias followed. Then Kell. Then Ren.

They entered the passage, and the light outside quickly disappeared. Around them was darkness - dense, tangible, damp. Only the sound of their steps, reflected by the stone walls, accompanied them. The path led deeper, and they walked without stopping, without looking back. Ahead lay the "Heart." They knew it. And they walked.

They climbed a hill on the sixth day of the journey. The wasteland lay behind them, giving way to rocky terrain leading to the mountains. Iris walked at the front, checking the map, when the hill suddenly opened a view of a valley below. She froze, and the squad stopped behind her.

Below, in the valley, stretched a huge Frontier camp. Thousands of tents, hundreds of vehicles, tanks, drones - all arranged in perfect order, like a well-oiled machine. Soldiers marched, machinery prepared to move out, and the air carried the smell of diesel and metal. Iris looked through her binoculars and felt cold run down her spine. This was their main base. From here they'd attack the north.

She lowered the binoculars and turned to Elias. Her voice was even, but carried tension:

Their army is there. Thousands of soldiers. If they move now, the Union has no chance.

Elias looked down, studying the camp. His eyes quickly scanned the perimeter, towers, patrols. He said:

We can create a diversion. Distract them.

Iris shook her head. She knew that wouldn't work.

No. We need to find the "Heart." It must be here, under the camp. They're not keeping their entire army here for nothing.

She tucked the binoculars into her backpack and looked at her fighters. Elias, Kell, Ren - they waited for her order. She felt resolve filling her.

We'll infiltrate the camp at night, - she said. - We'll find the "Heart" and stop it.

They descended from the hill to prepare for the night operation. Ahead lay a camp full of enemies. And they had to get through it.

They lay on the hill watching the camp all day. The tough, sun-scorched grass pricked their elbows even through their jackets, and the ground beneath their chests held the day's heat, mixed with the dampness of approaching dusk. With each minute, the wind changed direction, carrying

snatches of sounds: the clang of tracks, guttural shouts of commands, the distant metallic clatter of a field kitchen. Iris and Elias had melted into the slope, blending with the grey and brown vegetation, motionless as boulders, patient as predators before the decisive pounce.

The sun moved slowly across the sky, almost reluctantly, dragging a trail of crimson sunset behind it. It cast long, thick shadows over the valley, turning machinery into monstrous insects with twisted limbs, and tents into giant mushrooms grown on the parade ground. The light of the dying day refracted in the glass of instruments and the portholes of armored personnel carriers, blinding the eyes, but they remained motionless, blinking only occasionally to brush away the dry dust settling on their lashes. Iris peered into every corner of the enemy base with the surgical precision honed over years of survival. She counted soldiers, breaking them into groups by sector, memorized the location of equipment - where anti-aircraft guns stood, where tanks sat frozen, where mechanics scurried around open engine compartments. She noted the patrols: their speed, routes, time at checkpoints, how they shifted their weapons from shoulder to shoulder when moving into the open.

The camp was heavily guarded - the pressure was physical. She saw it in everything: posts stood not just every hundred meters, but with overlapping fields of fire, so even if one guard blinked, the next would cover. Searchlights on the towers swept the perimeter with mechanical monotony, painting light corridors on the terrain, flooding dead bushes with cold white light and leaving only blinding spots in their wake. The sentries changed shifts on a strict, Swiss-clockwork schedule, and this iron discipline spoke of a well-oiled military machine inside the camp, ready for any threat. Between rows of barbed wire, fresh tracks from mines were visible - the ground was neatly churned, and in places, barely visible antennae of tripwires protruded. Even birds bypassed this zone.

Iris felt a sticky, cold knot of anxiety growing inside her. Infiltrating this heart of enemy power would be nearly impossible. Too many eyes - thousands of pupils that could notice even the trembling of a blade of grass. Too many lights - bright, merciless, burning away all shadows. Too many paths, and each, it seemed, led to death - either in the jaws of the shepherd dogs she'd seen at the southern gates, or under the crossfire of stationary machine-gun nests. She imagined their bodies might remain here, on this thorny dry grass, unnoticed until the next morning. But somewhere deep down, where common sense clashed with despair, she heard a quiet, stubborn voice: she wouldn't give up.

She didn't just observe - she looked for weaknesses, studying every torn shadow from hangars, every gap between patrol changes that lasted three seconds longer than usual, every precious second when searchlights turned east, leaving the western sector in shifting twilight. Her brain worked like a calculating machine: she computed angles, trajectories, reaction times of the guards. She searched for a magical gap, a narrow breach, even a hint of human error, but so far the camp seemed an impregnable fortress forged of steel and indifference.

Elias lay beside her, his breathing as steady and soft as a stone's. But unlike her, his gaze was fixed not on walls and towers - he watched the movement. His eyes, accustomed to reading maps and analyzing columns, scanned the camp on a different principle: he saw logistics. And he noticed what first escaped her keen, but perimeter-focused attention. The vehicles shuttling along the camp's central artery weren't heading north to the supposed front line, but into the mountains. Massive trucks with sealed bodies, armored escorts, and chains of fully equipped soldiers weren't deploying for an attack - they were turning towards the eastern edge of the valley, where the cliffs rose like a sheer wall. Columns of machines and people disappeared into the evening haze, heading towards the foot, to that very place where, according to ancient maps, a camouflaged portal was hidden - the entrance to the underground complex, the vault of the Heart.

His heart skipped a beat. He blinked, double-checked, compared it with wind direction and engine noise. There was no mistake. This wasn't defensive redoubts or a redeployment - it was a purposeful, confident march, as if they knew exactly where they were going and what they were looking for. Elias felt a coldness growing inside him, sharper than the night wind. They were a step

behind. He slowly, so as not to betray himself with a sudden movement, turned his head to Iris, and his whisper was sharp and harsh, like the crack of a breaking branch:

Iris. Don't look at the towers. Look at how they're moving. They're not preparing an offensive on the Union. They're not even digging in. They're preparing to enter the mountains. Now, during the next shift. They're going to activate the "Heart."

Iris flinched, her gaze darting in the indicated direction. She saw the same thing he did - an endless ribbon of machines disappearing into the rocky maw of the gorge, and in that moment, the patchwork picture fell into a single whole. The camp wasn't a fortress - it was a cover. A gateway. A trap. In her eyes flickered not just a spark of understanding - there was alarm, mixed with rage. She realized all their hours of observation, all the pain in their stiff muscles, all the dust in their lungs - it was just a countdown to the moment they'd lose everything. They had no time for complex plans, multi-stage maneuvers, or waiting for reinforcements. If the Frontier entered the mountains and activated the "Heart" before they could reach the reactor, all their efforts, all their sacrifices, all the burned bridges behind them - all would be buried under a thickness of stone.

We have to get there today, - she said, and there was no longer doubt in her voice - only steel and burnt kerosene. - Or it'll be too late. Not tomorrow morning, not in an hour. Now. While they're busy forming the column and don't expect an attack from the hills, while their attention is focused inside the gorge.

She clenched her fists until her knuckles cracked, feeling adrenaline, thick and hot, filling every cell of her body, blood pounding in her temples in time with the distant roar of engines. She no longer watched - she was ready to act. Her brain switched from scanner to weapon mode: she calculated the first lunge, the first hundred meters, the first point of cover behind a disabled transporter. They had to penetrate this soldier-infested anthill, pass through thousands of trained killers, past tanks that could turn them into a bloody smear with one shot, and stop the "Heart." It seemed madness. Suicide. Impossible by all laws of tactics and physics. But she knew: there was no other choice. And it was precisely that - the desperate, almost insane impossibility - that made them the only chance. Iris rose to one knee, adjusting her rifle strap, and looked down into the maw of the enemy camp, ready to step into the very heart of the fire.

A column of vehicles entered the camp. They moved slowly, solemnly, almost ceremonially, as if their arrival wasn't just a logistical maneuver, but part of an ancient ritual, prescribed in forgotten chronicles. Six armored vehicles with tinted windows, behind which silhouettes of bodyguards were visible, and one central one - matte black, without identification marks, with predatory outlines resembling the spine of a prehistoric lizard. The tracks left deep, clear furrows in the dusty ground, and the dust - heavy, oily - settled on the leaves of stunted bushes, rising to the sky in a red veil. The procession stopped at the very heart of the camp, at a natural elevation of broken stone and concrete slabs, hastily assembled into an improvised tribune. The engines, sputtering, died down, and for a few seconds there was that viscous silence that occurs only before a thunderstorm, when even crickets fall silent in anticipation.

The door of the central vehicle opened with a soft, almost caressing hiss of pneumatics, and a man in a black cloak stepped out. He was tall, unnaturally tall, with narrow shoulders and long, jointed arms that seemed to hang just below his knees. His movements were fluid and confident - each like the motion of an old clock pendulum: precise, measured, without fuss. He stepped on the ground as if not touching it, as if gravity itself obeyed his steps. His figure was shrouded in a cloak of heavy, flowing fabric - not black, but the color of dried blood at dusk, with a crimson sheen at the edges when the setting sun caught his shoulders. But the most terrifying - his face. It was completely hidden by an iron mask - cold, expressionless, without a hint of human features. The eye sockets were empty, but behind them, something smoldered - not light, but not darkness either; rather, the absence of all light, a void that pressed on the psyche more than the most savage gaze. No lips, no

cheekbones, no wrinkles - only smooth, polished metal, on which the silhouettes of soldiers and the dying light of sunset were dimly reflected.

He ascended the elevation in one long, flowing motion, and at that same moment, thousands of soldiers froze as if on command of "At ease!" - though no order had been given. They froze not just, but with an unnatural, doll-like immobility - even breathing seemed to pause. An absolute silence fell over the camp, so deep and dense that Iris, through her binoculars, heard only her own pulse, pounding in her temples, and the distant, gut-wrenching hum of generators, like the breath of a sleeping beast. The winds died, the dust settled, even the dogs in the kennels flattened their ears and whined, hiding their muzzles in their paws. This wasn't order - this was possession.

Iris watched through her binoculars, and for the first time in years, her hands, accustomed to death and steady aim, trembled. The glass of the binoculars fogged for a moment from her rapid breathing. She saw him for the first time - not in photographs, not in holographic projections, but in the flesh, in this sterile iron guise. She felt an icy finger of fear trace her spine from bottom to top, making the hairs on her neck stand on end. He didn't look like a man - he looked like a symbol. Like the embodiment of something greater than just a leader. He was an icon forged of tin and misanthropy, an archetype that couldn't be killed with a bullet because a bullet wouldn't kill an idea.

And then he began to speak. His voice, amplified by powerful speakers, resonated throughout the camp, reflecting off armor, rocks, metal frames of tents, reaching even the hill where Iris lay, making the ground beneath her vibrate at low frequencies. The voice was low, even, enveloping - like warm oil running down bare skin. It held no hysteria or false pathos; it was calm as the ocean depths and hypnotic as the howling of wind in a mountain gorge. Every word cut into consciousness, bypassing the cerebral cortex and entering directly into the limbic system:

Brothers and sisters! We stand on the threshold of a new world! - he proclaimed, a metallic resonance echoing in his voice, as if a miniature generator worked inside the mask. - A world where there will be no pain, no suffering, no weakness! A world where flesh will yield to steel, and will - to immortality! We will build it with our own hands, with shed blood and reforged iron! We will cleanse the earth of the filth of human imperfection, burn it with red-hot fire, so that a new garden may bloom on the ashes!

Iris listened to him, and her stomach twisted into a tight, painful knot, bile rising to her throat. She knew - this wasn't just a speech. It wasn't propaganda or agitation in the usual sense. It was hypnosis. His voice penetrated consciousness not through logic, but through rhythm and timbre, seizing the minds of soldiers like a snake seizes a rabbit before a strike. Through her binoculars, she saw the soldiers' faces change, as if by magic: tense, prickly glances gave way to dull, blissful devotion; hunched shoulders straightened; doubts, visible in every curve of their lips, melted away, giving way to boundless, almost animal faith. They looked at him with reverence, as at a prophet descended from a mountain, or a god appearing in the guise of a mortal. Some soldiers fell to their knees, unable to stand under the weight of his words; others, conversely, straightened, gripped their weapons, and looked ahead with a fanatical gleam in their pupils, ready to kill and die with a single nod from him.

Iris lowered her binoculars, because her hands could no longer hold them steady - her fingers trembled from overexertion and cold terror. She took a deep breath of the dry, bitter air and looked at Elias. In her eyes was no longer the analytical coldness of an observer - there was hard, diamond-like resolve, mixed with fear that didn't paralyze but hardened. Her voice dropped to a whisper, but that whisper was sharper than a scream:

It's him. Elias, it's the Arbiter. I saw him. I know his voice now. He's not a man, he's a machine for destroying wills. We must not just stop the Heart. We must stop him.

She raised the binoculars to her eyes again, biting her lip until she tasted blood, to focus. She peered at the figure in the black cloak, standing on the elevation under the crimson sky, at this statue framed by searchlights. She knew this was only the beginning, only the first act of the tragedy. But

she also knew - now she saw the enemy's face. And this knowledge simultaneously robbed her of peace and gave her something more than a plan. It gave her a purpose.

The Arbiter continued to speak, and every word of his bit into the silence of the evening air like a red-hot brand into wet wood. His voice, amplified by speakers, not only carried over the camp - it seeped through pores, entering every ear, every consciousness, every involuntary breath of the thousands of soldiers frozen below. He didn't raise his tone, didn't break into a scream, but in his monotonous, rolling baritone sounded such absolute, unshakable confidence that anyone who heard him began to doubt their own thoughts, their own breathing, their own reality. The voice enveloped, like a thick, sticky fog in which landmarks drown and memories of who you were before this second fade.

He spoke of "purity" - and that word sounded like a prayer, like an incantation, like the name of a forgotten god. He said the world was sick, that it was rotten to the core, that humanity was a cancerous tumor on the planet's body, and the only cure was a scalpel forged of will and iron. He said the world must be cleansed of the weak, the sick, the imperfect, of those who can't keep pace with the new era, of those whose genes, thoughts, and souls are ballast dragging everyone down. He called it not cruelty, but mercy. He called it not murder, but salvation. Every word was honed to razor sharpness, and behind them was not just rhetoric - behind them was a philosophy built with mathematical precision, where there was no room for chance, emotion, or forgiveness.

He spoke of a "new world" - of a world they would build on the bones of the old. A world where everyone would be strong, because the weak would be weeded out by natural selection, accelerated by the will of the Arbiter. A world without war and famine, because those who start wars and those who starve would no longer exist. He painted pictures of paradise on earth: cities of glass and light, fields of golden wheat, children who would never know tears, the elderly who would never know disease. But in this paradise, there would be no room for compassion, no room for doubt, no room for freedom - only order, flawless as the gears of a clockwork. And when he spoke of "relocation," of how the chosen would live in this paradise while the rest would vanish as if they'd never been, his voice sounded not as a threat, but as an axiom. As the multiplication table. As a law of nature.

His voice sounded like an order, but not a sergeant's coarse shout - like the voice of conscience that cannot be deceived. Like a truth that cannot be challenged because it needs no proof. It was even, calm, almost hypnotic - it carried a force that made one believe every word against one's will. It wasn't a man persuading a crowd; it was a stream of consciousness that rewrote neural connections, forcing the brain to submit to another's rhythm. The soldiers stood motionless, mesmerized, many swaying in time with his intonations, as if under the influence of music. Their eyes were wide open, but their gaze was absent - they looked at him with reverence, with worship, with that ecstatic devotion seen only in fanatics who have sacrificed their "self." They looked at him as a god, as a savior who appeared in the darkest hour to lead them out of darkness. Some wept - tears ran down their dirty cheeks, but their faces remained expressionless; others, conversely, bared their teeth in fanatical smiles, gripping their weapons so hard their knuckles turned white.

Iris watched them through her binoculars, and her insides twisted not so much from fear as from disgust - a thick, almost physical disgust mixed with bitter, powerless pity. She understood: these weren't people. At least, not the people they were born as. Their personalities had been erased, melted into a homogeneous mass devoid of will, criticism, even the instinct for self-preservation in the form familiar to every living being. These are zombies, she thought. Not in a mystical sense, but in a mechanical one - bio-robots in human shells, ready to die for him, kill for him, because they sincerely, to the depths of their spinal cords, believed he would save them. But they didn't know they were victims, the first and primary victims of his plan. They thought they were heroes of the coming epic, chosen warriors of light who would sweep away the old world. They thought their deaths would be meaningful, their names inscribed in the annals of new history. But Iris saw something else: she saw cannon fodder, fertilizer for the fields of the "new world," that itself willingly lies under the

knife. They were simply tools, expendable material that the Arbiter would count and discard once they'd fulfilled their function.

She lowered the binoculars and, for a moment, closed her eyes. Inside her, two voices fought: one whispered that it was hopeless, that it was impossible to fight such power, that it was better to leave, hide, survive; the other - quieter, but firm as rock - reminded her of those waiting for their return, of children who might never see the "new world," of allies who died for her to stand here now. She opened her eyes and turned to Elias. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper, but there was not a shadow of doubt or hesitation in it - only steel and scorched earth beneath her feet:

We must stop him. Not tomorrow. Not after he completes the ritual. We must stop him now, while he speaks, while they all look at him, while their attention is fixed on this metal idol. We cannot let him finish this speech, because every word of his is another soul lost forever.

She looked at him intently, and in her eyes burned not just resolve - burned cold, calm rage that doesn't boil, but smolders with a steady, unwavering flame. She knew it would be hard. She knew they might not survive this attack. But she also knew she had to do it - not out of duty, not out of blind heroism, but out of a simple, animal understanding: if not now, then never. For everyone who believed the lie and stood there, below, with upturned eyes. For everyone who didn't know the truth and who would never know it if the Arbiter closed the circle of his promises. Iris chambered a round, and the metallic click on the hill sounded louder than any explosion. She was ready.

The Arbiter spoke and spoke, and his voice flowed over the camp like oily, warm water, seeping into every ear, every consciousness, every cell of the frozen soldiers' bodies. Iris heard every word, every exhalation, every microscopic pause between phrases, and suddenly something strange, almost elusive, clicked in her mind - like a safety catch releasing in an old, forgotten machine. She froze, ceasing to breathe, feeling an icy, prickling current run down her spine from her tailbone to the back of her head, making the hairs on her arms stand on end. The binoculars in her fingers trembled, and the image blurred for a moment, but she didn't try to refocus - she just listened. Listened until her ears hurt, until a ringing in her temples, cutting off all extraneous sounds: the noise of generators, the clang of tracks, the rustle of wind.

She recognized that voice. Not just recognized - its timbre had cut into her memory like a jagged blade, leaving deep, bleeding furrows. It wasn't just the Arbiter's voice. It was the voice she'd heard in old, static-ridden recordings of the Architect, found in the ruins of the "Phoenix" research center years ago. The same low, enveloping, velvety register. The same intonations - calm, confident, devoid of the slightest hint of doubt. The same pauses he made between key words, so they would settle in the listener's consciousness like drops of heavy metal at the bottom of a vessel. The same accents on certain syllables, the same manner of stretching vowels, giving them an almost musical, hypnotic fluidity. Even the timbral vibration at low frequencies - the very one that made the chest resonate - was identical down to the smallest hertz. This wasn't coincidence. This was replication. Precise, surgical, merciless.

She listened to him, and the world around her turned upside down. The ground under her elbows felt shifting, weightless, as if she lay not on the solid slope of a hill, but on the surface of a soap bubble ready to burst at any moment. Her stomach twisted, a metallic taste of adrenaline filling her mouth. She understood - the Arbiter wasn't just a student, not just a follower, not just an heir to the Architect's ideas. He was a copy. A literal, digital, biomechanical copy. The Architect created him in his own image and likeness, like a complex puppet, a marionette on invisible strings that would continue his work even after the Architect disappeared. He wasn't a man born of a woman and raised in the torments of choice. He was a project. A blueprint embodied in metal and flesh. A program loaded into a biological carrier, destined to complete what the Architect began - to rewrite history, repaint the world, remelt humanity. And this voice, this exact-to-repulsion cast of the Architect's voice, was not just a propaganda tool - it was a key that unlocked minds because it was created by the same mind, the same algorithm, the same cold, engineering love of perfection.

Iris lowered her binoculars slowly, almost ceremoniously, as if afraid a sharp movement would break the fragile thread of her new understanding. She turned to Elias, her eyes - wide, dark, with dilated pupils from shock - met his. Her voice, when she spoke, was soft, barely audible against the distant voice of the Arbiter, but it carried the heavy, crystal-clear realization that cannot be faked:

It's not him. It's not a person. It's a program. The Architect created it. I heard that voice in recordings. The same modulations, the same frequencies, the same speech patterns. It's not a successor. It's an executable file loaded into a shell.

Elias looked at her with incomprehension, quickly turning into alarm. His face, usually calm and focused, tensed, a deep furrow appearing on his forehead, and he instinctively leaned forward, rising on his elbows to better hear her whisper. He tried to process her words, but they didn't fit into his usual picture of the world. He opened his mouth to ask something, but instead of a question, only a short, raspy breath escaped. Then he repeated, a barely noticeable hoarseness slipping into his voice, betraying his inner shock:

What do you mean? How - created? He looks like a man. He moves like a man. How can you be sure?

She shook her head, and this gesture was not denial, but acknowledgment of her own ignorance. She didn't know all the details - how exactly the Architect created this entity, what equipment, with what purpose, and how long it took. But she knew enough. She knew the voice. And she knew that in this world, there were no coincidences of such precision. She looked at the camp, at the figure in the black cloak, standing on the elevation under the crimson sky, and her gaze grew harder, colder, almost engineering:

I don't know, - she said, and in her voice sounded steel honed by years of survival. - But I know he's not real. He's a machine. Perfect, convincing, but a machine. Machines have codes. Machines have protocols. Machines have weaknesses. And if the Architect created him, then he obeys the same laws as everything that came from the Architect's hands.

She felt, replacing cold terror, a new, almost daring hope born inside her. She wasn't killing a man. She was shutting down a machine. This didn't devalue her mission - on the contrary, it made it more realistic. A person can't be reprogrammed remotely, can't be stopped by a single hack or a well-aimed electromagnetic pulse. But a program can. A machine lacks that spontaneous, chaotic, unpredictable will of a living being. And this knowledge gave her not moral justification, but a tactical advantage. She raised the binoculars again, this time without trembling, and began scanning the elevation, the towers, the bodyguards, the very figure of the Arbiter, looking for signs of vulnerability - maybe an antenna, an embedded communication module, a power supply, any device that would betray his artificial origin.

We must find his weak spot, - she said, her voice no longer sounding like a question or a plea, but a directive. - The Architect programmed him for specific scenarios. Maybe for interrupting speech, for specific signals, for critical frequencies. We must remember everything we knew about the Architect and find a way to hack his creation.

She shifted her gaze to Elias, and in her eyes burned that very fire that ignites only when a weak but certain ray appears in utter darkness. She didn't know exactly how they would shut down the Arbiter, but she knew it was possible. She gripped the binoculars so hard the plastic squeaked in her fingers, and her lips silently formed the single word that became their new plan: "Weakness." They would find it, even if it meant rummaging through every file in the old archives and every nook of their own memory.

Iris sat on the hill, grown into the dry, thorny ground, watching the camp below sinking into twilight. The Arbiter finished his speech as suddenly as he'd begun - the last word hung in the air, echoing off the rocks, and he, without turning, descended from the elevation and disappeared into the black tent, leaving behind only a hollow, oppressive silence. Silence that was heavier than any scream. Thousands of soldiers froze for a few more seconds, as if expecting a continuation, and then, as if

by an invisible signal, exhaled as one, and the camp came alive - engines roared, boots thudded on the compacted earth, dishes clattered in field kitchens. But the tension forged by his words remained hanging in the air, like ozone after a storm - it could be touched, felt on the skin, it seeped into the lungs with the dusty evening air.

The sun was slowly setting over the horizon, sinking into a strip of crimson and violet clouds, painting the sky in thick, dark tones. Shadows began to lengthen, creeping out from under vehicles and tents, merging into solid black spots, hiding the camp in shifting twilight, which simultaneously provided cover and held danger. With each passing minute, light grew less, and the world shrank to the size of this hill, to Elias's breathing beside her, to her own pulse, pounding heavily and steadily in her temples, ticking off seconds until the moment they would have to step into the unknown. The wind shifted and now blew from the mountains, bringing the smell of dry wormwood and a distant, barely perceptible metallic cold from the depths of the gorge - from where the Heart was hidden.

Iris looked at the darkening sky, where one by one the first, timid stars began to appear, and thought about what she'd just understood. Her brain, tired from the long day's tension, worked with feverish clarity, sorting facts like beads: the Architect's voice in the Arbiter, his exact copy down to the smallest modulations, his manner, his philosophy - all this was not legacy, not discipleship, not continuity. It was continuation. The Arbiter was not a man, not a personality, not a being with his own will. He was the embodiment of the Architect's idea - his last, frozen will poured into a form of metal and flesh, like concrete into formwork. He was created to complete what the Architect began, bring his blueprints to reality, rewrite history, repaint the world in the grey, sterile color of absolute order. The Architect was dead or had retreated into the shadows, but his creation - this iron mask, this mesmerizing voice, this unbending silhouette - remained to live for him, breathe for him, kill for him.

And in this realization lay a bitter, almost paralyzing truth: if she killed the Arbiter - shot, slit his throat, blew up his tent - the idea wouldn't die. It had no single carrier. It was dissolved in the consciousness of thousands of soldiers standing there below, with upturned faces and gleaming eyes. It lived in their fears, their hopes, their readiness to die for a promise of paradise. And if one vessel was broken, the idea would simply pour into another - find a new prophet, a new mask, a new voice. The Arbiter wasn't a man. He was a symbol. A program circulating in the blood of this camp, this army, this movement. A symbol can't be shot. A program can't be gunned down.

She understood this with a cold, almost mathematical clarity that left no room for illusions. She had to not kill the Arbiter. That would be useless and even counterproductive - it would make him a martyr. She had to destroy the very idea of "purity" on which his world rested. She had to show the people standing there below that it was a lie - not just words, but a carefully constructed, time-tested lie that sucked the humanity out of them, turning them into obedient cogs in a huge machine. She had to expose the mechanism of deception, look into its gears and demonstrate that instead of salvation, they would receive only emptiness. And she knew how to do it - with "Protocol 7." Not as a weapon, not as a punishment, but as a scalpel. Not to destroy, but to liberate. To restore to those who'd lost themselves their real memories - those the Architect erased to fill with his ideology. To show each of those thousands of soldiers looking at her from the hill their own past, their families, their names, their tears and joys that were stolen.

Iris turned to Elias. He sat beside her, his profile clearly outlined against the crimson sunset, and she saw in his eyes the same fire burning in hers. Her voice, when she spoke, was firm and confident, free of previous doubts - it held steel forged by hours of observation and a moment of insight:

I have a plan. We won't kill the Arbiter - we'll infiltrate the camp, bypassing posts and patrols, make our way into the mountains, find the "Heart," and activate "Protocol 7." Not to destroy. To liberate. We'll return them their own lives. We'll show them who they were before they were erased.

Elias looked at her for a long, viscous second. There was no doubt in his eyes - only firm, unshakable resolve, reinforced by faith in her, in her intuition, in her ability to see what was hidden

from others. He asked no questions, no guarantees. He just nodded, short and sharp, like a soldier accepting an order:

I'm with you. To the end.

Iris took his hand - simply, without pathos, just to feel the warmth of another person in this cold, hostile world. She stood up, and the wind hit her face, tossing strands of hair, but she didn't feel the cold. Inside her burned a steady, calm fire - not an adrenaline fever, but a deep, stable resolve that doesn't go out even in the strongest gusts.

Then let's begin, - she said, and in her voice sounded finality, like a captain giving the order to raise sails before a storm.

They began to descend from the hill - slowly, crouching, using every shadow, every bush, every crevice as cover.

They left the hill in a sharp, swift motion, as if breaking free from a tether. The slope was steep, covered in crumbling gravel and stiff, dried grass that clung to their boot tops, slowing each step, but they didn't slow down. The Frontier camp was left behind, hidden by the ridge - they no longer saw its lights, heard the hum of generators, but its shadow still lay on their shoulders, heavy and sticky, like a wet blanket. It seemed even the wind blowing from the north couldn't blow away this oppressive taste of metal and fear left after the Arbiter's speech. They had information - invaluable, explosive, capable of turning the tide of war: the exact location of the camp, the size of the army, patrol routes, the coordinates of the mountain passage, and most importantly - the Arbiter's plans, his intention to activate the "Heart." But now information was just weight in backpacks, useless cargo if they didn't deliver it to the capital. Every minute was precious, every second of delay could cost thousands of lives, and that knowledge drove them forward with an almost animal, instinctive force.

Iris walked quickly, almost running, breaking into a light jog where the ground allowed, and slowing to a walk on rocky sections. Her legs moved automatically, carrying her forward, despite the nagging, aching weariness accumulating in every muscle - in her calves, thighs, lower back, shoulders, pulled by the straps of her heavy backpack. She felt sweat mixing with dust on her face, her heart pounding in her chest with an uneven, erratic rhythm, her throat drying, each next breath coming slightly harder than the last. But she didn't stop, not even to wipe a salty drop from her lashes, because stopping meant losing tempo, and losing tempo meant letting thoughts catch up with her - thoughts of what they'd seen, heard, how many awaited them below. Elias walked beside her, his breathing even, almost unnaturally calm, but she saw him occasionally clench his fingers on his wounded shoulder, through his teeth suppressing a groan that escaped with each sharp step. Blood seeped through the bandage as a dark stain on the fabric, but he didn't complain, didn't slow down, didn't ask for a rest - he just looked ahead, his gaze directed north, towards where their own waited beyond the horizon.

Kell and Ren brought up the rear, keeping twenty paces apart so as not to expose both to a flank shot. Kell, heavy and slow-looking, moved with surprising silence, his rifle pointed towards where they'd come from, his eyes, small and sharp, scanning the horizon with surgical attention. Ren, on the other hand, walked with a light, almost dancing step, his head constantly turning side to side, fixing every movement, every shadow, every change in the wind. He frequently raised his hand, stopping the squad for a moment to listen to distant sounds from the wasteland, and after a short pause, signaled to continue. They said nothing - the silence was broken only by the crunch of gravel underfoot, the whistle of wind, and their own ragged breathing. The language of gestures and glances replaced speech: Kell nodded when he saw a safe section; Ren waved when he heard a suspicious noise; Iris showed direction, short and sharp, like a whip crack.

They knew they had to make it. Had to deliver the information before the Frontier began its offensive, before the Arbiter completed the ritual and awakened the "Heart." Iris unfolded the map on the move - old, crumpled, covered in pencil marks - and her eyes ran over the curving lines of rivers and dotted paths. Two more days to the border of inhabited lands, to the first Union posts, if they kept this pace without rest. Two days of open wasteland, without cover, without water, without

protection except their own endurance and luck. Two days that could decide everything - the fate of the capital, the fate of the Union, the fate of everyone who hadn't yet fallen to the Frontier's onslaught. She folded the map and quickened her pace, feeling each new step bring them closer to their goal, but each new step also taking them further from the possibility of stopping and resting.

The wasteland stretched before them, endless and grey, like a sea that never ends. The landscape was monotonous to the point of nausea - rare thorny bushes sticking out of the cracked earth like animal skeletons; scatterings of broken stone from ancient explosions; distant silhouettes of ruined buildings like teeth of an extinct beast. The wind blew in their faces, carrying sand and fine gravel that pierced their skin like hundreds of needles, and cold seeped through their jackets, reaching their bones. Iris felt weariness beginning to take hold - muscles ached, head hummed, dark spots sometimes flickered before her eyes, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop, because stopping would mean admitting they might not make it. She had to return to her own so they knew what was coming. She had to warn them so they could prepare, build defenses, evacuate civilians, stake everything on one last battle.

She kept walking, moving her legs by sheer force, feeling each new step bring her closer to her goal, but each new step also erasing the last remnants of her strength. She didn't know how much longer she could go - maybe an hour, maybe two, maybe until morning if necessary. But she knew she had to. That she had no choice. She glanced at Elias - his face was grey with pain and exhaustion, but in his eyes burned that same steady, unyielding fire she'd seen on the hill. He met her gaze and nodded slightly, as if saying: "We'll make it. We'll get there." She nodded back, feeling that simple gesture give her strength. They kept walking, leaving behind the shadow of the camp and approaching the border separating them from salvation.

On the second day of their journey, as the sun passed its zenith and began to slowly sink westward, casting long, twisted shadows from the rocks, Iris suddenly froze. She raised her hand, clenching her fingers into a fist - the signal for an immediate halt - and the squad instantly melded into the ground, as if their bodies were part of this grey, scorched landscape. She squinted, peering into the distance, where the wasteland merged with the horizon in the shimmering heat haze. At first she thought it was a mirage - the deceptive play of light that often confused weary travelers, making them see things that weren't there. But no - the figures were too clear, too real, too correct in their movements.

Five silhouettes in grey-black Frontier uniforms moved across the wasteland with the confidence that leaves no doubt: they knew where they were going, and they knew what they were looking for. Their steps were unhurried but purposeful, heads bent to the ground, eyes scanning the sand, trampled grass, broken branches of rare bushes - every little thing that could betray the squad's presence. They were following the tracks Iris and her comrades had left on the dry, cracked clay: impressions of soles, fresh scratches on stones, disturbed pollen on stunted plants. The tracks were barely visible, but to a trained scout's eye, they read like an open book.

Iris felt a cold, sticky knot of anxiety form in her chest. They were being followed. The Frontier scouts hadn't just stumbled onto their trail - they were walking purposefully, methodically, like hounds on a scent. And now the distance between them was closing with every minute. She quickly assessed the situation: the scouts were about two hundred meters away, open terrain, almost no cover - only scatterings of large rocks and rare depressions in the terrain left by ancient bombardments. If the scouts continued at the same speed, they'd catch the squad in ten or fifteen minutes. If they ran, they'd raise dust and attract attention. If they tried to hide, they'd risk being discovered. There was no choice - they had to act.

Iris signaled with her hand, pointing to cover, and the squad instantly dispersed to positions. Kell, heavy and slow-looking, silently dropped behind a large boulder, his rifle already aimed at the enemy. Ren slid into a crevice between rock fragments, becoming a shadow invisible to the naked eye. Elias pressed to the ground behind a stunted bush, his breathing becoming shallow and silent, his

hand gripping a knife hilt. Iris herself lay low behind a weathered stone block, feeling her heart pound against her ribs, salty sweat run down her temples and sting her eyes. She watched the approaching scouts, counting their steps, noting their positions, their weapons, their stances. They didn't notice the danger - their attention was fixed on the tracks on the ground, not on the rocks where death lay in wait.

They were talking - snippets of phrases reached her, distorted by the wind, but she heard laughter, casual comments about the weather, about hoping to finish the chase before dark. One of them, a stocky man with a sergeant's patch on his sleeve, bent to examine a fresh boot print on dry clay and grunted with satisfaction, pointing it out to his companions. Two others came closer, and for a moment they grouped together, losing visual on the flanks. Iris held her breath. They weren't expecting an attack. They were expecting prey they could take with their bare hands. And that was their main mistake.

She turned her head to Elias, her lips barely moving as she whispered, almost inaudibly:

We have to take them out quietly. Not a single shot. Silent knives, throats, no noise. If they raise the alarm, we won't make it to the border.

Elias nodded, short and sharp, and in his eyes was neither doubt nor fear - only cold, focused readiness. He silently circled the rocks, moving along the scouts' line of sight, using every shadow, every unevenness of the terrain as cover. His body moved as a single mechanism - he was a shadow sliding across the ground, silent and invisible. He took a flank position, hiding behind a tall block, and waited for the signal. Kell and Ren also prepared, their knives ready. The squad lay low, grown into the earth, and the wasteland fell silent in anticipation of the strike, broken only by the whistling wind and the distant cry of a lone bird.

Iris waited. She felt each second stretch into eternity, adrenaline filling her body, making her muscles springy, her perception heightened to the limit. The scouts approached, their steps becoming more distinct, their faces clearer. She heard their voices, saw their faces - weathered, hard, eyes narrowed against the sun, shaved heads with short, bristly nape hair. They were ten meters away. Eight. Five. When the sergeant drew level with her cover, she gripped the knife handle and waited for the perfect moment. One more moment. One more step. And then she would give the signal.

She waited, ready for the fight, feeling the world shrink to the size of this rock, this knife, this breath. She knew - they had one chance. One second that would decide everything.

Iris gave the signal.

She sprang from behind the block silently, like a shadow, her knife describing a short arc and plunging into the sergeant's throat with surgical precision. He only managed an exhale - a hoarse, gurgling sound - and his body collapsed to its knees, hands grasping at the air. At the same moment, Elias emerged from the shadows like a ghost, his hands wrapping around the second scout's head - a sharp, dry crack, and the body went limp, crumpling to the sand without a sound. Kell, without rising, threw his knife - the steel entered the third scout's back between the shoulder blades; he took a step forward, stumbled, and fell face-first into the dust, not making a sound.

The fourth, the youngest of the group, with frightened eyes, began to turn, his hand jerking towards his rifle, but Ren was already there - a blow to the base of the skull, and the body collapsed, never even touching the weapon. The fifth, a tall, skinny marksman, stood apart; his gaze managed to slide over his falling comrades, he opened his mouth to scream, but Iris was already before him, her palm clamping his jaw, her knife entering under his ribs with a short, wet sound, muffled by a gust of wind. He gasped, his eyes widening in disbelief, and he crumpled to the ground, clutching the knife handle in a final spasm.

It was over. Five bodies lay on the sand, their blood slowly soaking into the dry, cracked earth.

Iris wiped the blade on the dead sergeant's jacket, her breathing even, but inside everything trembled from overexertion. She was about to signal to continue the march when she noticed Elias, putting away his knife, step on a round, unstable stone. His foot slipped on the fine gravel, he lost his balance for a fraction of a second, and at that same moment, one of the scouts - the one lying at his

feet, still alive in his death throes - jerked, his finger convulsively pressing the trigger. The wild shot passed tangentially, tearing through the jacket and skin on Elias's left shoulder. He jerked from the sudden, searing pain, his face twisting in a grimace, and he pressed his palm to the wound, feeling his fingers instantly become wet and sticky with blood. The jacket fabric quickly darkened, soaking crimson, and a thin stream ran down his sleeve.

Iris rushed to him, dropping to her knees beside him, her hands already tearing the hem of his shirt to apply a bandage. She saw the wound - ragged, not deep, but bleeding; the bullet had passed tangentially, not hitting bone, but damaging muscle. Elias clenched his teeth until they cracked, his breathing ragged, but he didn't cry out, didn't groan, only exhaled heavily and looked at her:

Bandage it. Fast. And we move on.

She applied the bandage, pulling it tight, feeling him flinch with pain at each of her movements, but she didn't stop, not wanting to waste time. Her fingers were stained with his blood when she finished, and she paused for a moment, meeting his eyes, looking for signs he might lose consciousness. But his eyes were clear - tired, but clear, and in them burned that same unyielding will that had carried them across the wasteland.

He rose, leaning on his good arm, and without a word moved forward, leaving behind the bodies of the scouts and his own dried blood spot on the sand. Kell and Ren were already scanning the horizon, ready to cover. Iris clenched her fists, feeling adrenaline slowly fade, leaving behind cold, empty weariness. She looked at the bloodstained bandage on his shoulder, and something tightened in her chest. But she didn't allow herself to stop. She followed him, catching up in a few steps, and took his arm to support him, feeling him lean slightly on her, not allowing himself to slow.

They walked for about another hour before Iris made a decision. The sun was beginning to sink towards the horizon, painting the wasteland in rusty, crimson tones, and shadows grew longer, offering cover. Ahead appeared a small depression - the remains of an old bunker, half-sunk in sand, with broken concrete walls that could hide them from casual glances. She gave the signal to stop, and the squad instantly dispersed to positions: Kell took an observation post on the upper edge of the depression, his rifle aimed at where they'd come from; Ren slipped into the shadows, guarding the opposite flank. Iris led Elias to a surviving piece of concrete that could serve as a seat, and sat him down on the cold, rough stone, feeling him sink down heavily, his shoulders slumping with weariness and pain.

She knelt before him, ignoring the sharp gravel digging into her skin through her trousers. Her hands, still not fully cleaned of his blood, were already removing the old bandage, carefully unwinding the fabric soaked in dark, brownish fluid. The bandage had stuck to the wound, and as she peeled it off, Elias flinched, his breathing becoming more rapid and shallow, but he made no sound, only clenched his jaw so hard muscles stood out on his cheekbones. Iris saw the wound now in all its stark reality - a ragged edge, deep but, fortunately, clean, without debris, without infection; the muscle was damaged, but the bone was intact. Blood oozed slowly from the depth but didn't pulse, indicating major vessels were undamaged. She exhaled with relief she didn't show on her face, her hands already reaching for the first-aid kit on her belt.

She took out the canteen of clean water, the only one they'd saved for emergencies, and began to flush the wound, pouring a thin stream to wash away clotted blood and fine sand. Elias flinched as the cold water touched his hot, inflamed skin, his fingers digging into the edge of the concrete block, whitening with tension. His breathing faltered for a moment, but he didn't look away, didn't complain, just stared into the distance, teeth clenched, letting her work. Iris worked quickly but thoroughly - she took antiseptic, soaked a piece of clean gauze, and pressed it to the wound, feeling the muscles under her fingers tense, him swallowing a groan, swallowing it back, not allowing himself even a soft exhale. She applied a fresh bandage, pulling it tightly but not too tight to avoid restricting circulation, and secured the ends with a knot.

Finished, she looked up and met his gaze. His face was pale, covered in small beads of sweat, but there was no fear or weakness in his eyes - only that same steely, unyielding will she'd always seen in him. She looked directly into his eyes, her voice firm, without a shadow of doubt:

Don't move your arm now. At all. Don't tense it, don't try to carry the backpack, don't help us. We'll reach the city, and there you'll be examined. It'll be all right. You hear me?

Elias nodded, short and sharp, without unnecessary words. He didn't argue, didn't try to prove he could walk further - he knew she was right, and he trusted her judgment. That trust was silent but absolute, and it warmed her somewhere in her chest, giving her strength to continue when her own legs were beginning to tremble with exhaustion.

Iris stood up, feeling her knees stiff from kneeling for so long. She offered him her hand - palm up, open, without hesitation. Elias looked at her hand, then at her face, and the corners of his mouth twitched in a semblance of a smile, more weary than cheerful. He took her hand with his good one, and she felt the warmth of his fingers, their strength, despite the weakness in his body. She pulled him up, helping him stand, and he rose, swaying for a moment but steadying himself, straightening. His voice was hoarse, but carried the same steel as always:

I'm with you. To the end. Whatever happens.

Iris nodded. Just nodded, without unnecessary words, because words were unnecessary. They both knew it wasn't an empty phrase.

I know. Let's go.

She turned and moved forward, glancing out of the corner of her eye to see him walking beside her, leaning on his good side but not falling behind, not slowing. Kell and Ren silently broke from their positions and fell in behind, covering the flanks. The squad moved on across the wasteland, leaving behind the concrete ruins and the fresh smell of antiseptic mixed with blood and dust.

Iris felt strength draining from her with each new step. Her leg muscles ached, her back throbbed, her shoulders were pulled by the backpack straps, which seemed heavier with each hour. She felt her internal energy reservoir slowly emptying, her eyelids growing heavy, black spots sometimes dancing before her eyes, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop, because if she stopped, everything would stop - the movement, the hope, themselves, lost in this endless grey emptiness. She had to walk, even when everything inside screamed for mercy, even when every cell demanded rest. She had to deliver the information. She had to get them all to the border. And she walked, feeling each new step bring them closer to the goal, and knowing there was no turning back.

On the third day, when the sun had passed its zenith and the wasteland was slowly being replaced by rare patches of greenery, they finally saw it. The city rose from the grey earth like a mirage, but this time it was real - its walls, made of concrete blocks and rusted metal, were high and massive, studded with observation towers. Around the city stretched a strip of scorched earth - a minefield, beyond which rows of barbed wire stretched in three lines. Iris felt warmth spread in her chest - the first real relief in three days - but it mixed with anxiety when she saw that the city's main gates were closed. The massive steel leaves were tightly locked, and on the walls she saw armed people peering into the horizon with the same tension with which they themselves had looked at the Frontier camp.

She approached the gates, feeling dozens of sights on her, and raised her hands, showing she was not a threat. One of the sentries shouted from above, his voice hoarse from dust and strain:

Halt! Who goes there? Where from?

Iris pulled her identification from her pocket - an old, worn plastic card with a holographic Union seal - and held it above her head. She gave her call sign, name, unit code. A few minutes of tense waiting, and then came the screech of mechanisms - the gates began to slowly open, letting them inside. She entered first, feeling the shadow of the gates fall on her, and behind her - Elias, pale but still standing, Kell and Ren bringing up the rear.

Inside, the city was submerged in feverish activity. Everything she'd seen in recent days - the calm but tense life of small settlements - was replaced by a picture of total mobilization. Streets

were dug up, people built barricades from sandbags, rusted cars, and concrete slabs, hastily erecting fortifications on every corner. Women and the elderly hauled ammunition boxes, teenagers brought bottles of incendiary mixture, men of all ages checked weapons, cleaned barrels, counted charges. Children - small, frightened, with big eyes - sat deep inside buildings, huddled together, or stood in lines for trucks ready to take them to safer areas. The air smelled of burnt oil, metal, and fear, mixed with the resolve hanging in every glance, every gesture. Iris saw a mother clutching a child while her father nailed boards over a window, and her heart clenched at the sight - but she also felt pride that these people weren't giving up, that they were ready to stand to the last.

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