

Chapter One

Kyiv, Ukraine

January 28th, 2023

The victim lay in the vaporous darkness beyond the reach of the Outlander's headlights, guarded by two patrol officers who appeared like ephemeral ghosts from the fog, the reflective yellow stripes on their jacket cuffs flashing as they waved him closer.

Artem parked the SUV and turned on the interior light to find his clipboard notebook on the seat, then turned off the lamp to catch both of the young *politsiyantki* glaring at him through the windshield. They were either irritated by how long they had waited for an investigator, or by the fact that he was the one who had been assigned to respond. He guessed, by their level of disgust, it was the latter.

He could thank the media's latest obsession with Russian ancestry for that. Everyone had family in Russia, but he'd recently been featured on a UA-TV program that traced notable Ukrainians in government positions to notable Russians in any position. His name, rank, and picture had received more screen time than some of the ministers they'd profiled and this was, of course, a problem.

It was no longer fashionable in Kyiv to come from a family of rich and famous Muscovites, even if he was a distant, Ukrainian-born cousin whose inheritance they had stolen long ago. It didn't matter that his dear Russian aunts and uncles went to great pains to declare him an illegitimate heir of unsuitable character who would undoubtedly rob them in their sleep if

he could—a grandiose self-victimization strategy that played well in corrupt Russian property courts and the glittering halls of the elite.

The stain of his association with them, his genetic proximity to their ruthless megalomania, and the war that had become a brutal expression of their particular kind of senseless and remorseless greed had tarnished him more than anything they could have said against him. His greatest deficit, in the minds of those he worked with, was not the accusations leveled against him by his own family, but the fact that he had any connection to them at all.

And so here he was, Artem Kemidov, an unwealthy and unwelcome descendant of Russian nobles and steel magnates, dressed in the same dark blue uniform and black tactical vest he'd worn for the past 36 hours straight, pulling on a pair of blue plastic gloves to commune with the recent dead.

The patrol officers shot a telling look at each other as he exited his vehicle. They were both men in their mid-20s—a decade younger than him but recruited under the same American-designed training program. As graduates, they represented the new wave of law enforcement officers in Ukraine, just one of many expensive measures taken to weed out the corruption of the previous generations and build trust with an uneasy public.

The difference between Ukraine's new police force and their American and EU trainers was the inventive scope of the work, the sudden interruption of routine traffic incidents, and domestic complaints by drone or missile strikes, not to mention the occasional need to take on elements of the Russian Army.

For a violent crime investigator like Artem, the differences were more personal.

“Pan Kemidov,” the taller officer said. “Or is it Russian Prince Kemidov?”

“That’s original,” Artem replied, his tone noncommittal. It was a response he’d given many times recently, more than he cared to remember.

“Don’t worry,” the officer crooned as if to placate him. “Everyone knows you’re a bastard. You don’t have to prove it to us.”

“Gift upon gift.” Artem opened his clipboard notebook and began writing the date, time, and location into the appropriate boxes on his report forms.

“And anyway, you can’t be a corrupt Russian sympathizer if you’ve been shot by Russians, can you? Isn’t that what your extraordinary service medal says?”

Artem ignored this, aware that the reason his ties to influential Russians were ridiculed instead of investigated was largely due to his military service record, and the more recent bullet he took while helping patrol and military units defend Kyiv. Blood was a powerful currency in a country where everyone and everything was at risk.

“How did you find the victim?” he asked the officers.

The tall officer nodded, acknowledging that the time for locker room bullshit had passed. “The grandpa who owns this plot comes out here once a day to make wood carvings he can sell in the market. He has an apartment in the city. He found the body near his shed and almost had a heart attack. There was a third officer here but he drove the old man to the hospital.”

“And do we know who the victim is?”

“We haven’t found any identification. I don’t think we will. She has been staged.”

“She wasn’t killed here,” the shorter officer clarified. “There’s not enough blood.”

Artem nodded, trudging along the path they had set. “Where is the photographer?”

“Who knows?” the tall officer answered.

“Can we expect him tonight?”

“We can expect him as much as we want.”

Artem nodded again, supposing that was true.

He raised his flashlight, its beam moving over the previous tracks in the snow and lifting to the neatly-kept wooden shed at the corner of the small garden lot. The parcel was one of many that together created a well-sized park of tiny summer cabins and landscaped yards for growing vegetables and flowers. During the communist years, these were the pieces of land allocated to the factory managers who lived in the square apartment blocks that still dotted the city skyline, a reward for embracing spartan living quarters and the modest life of a socialist worker.

Today, they still served as a reminder of times past, many of the miniature houses built in the traditional style with pitched roofs built to be covered in hay, porches with ornamental woodcraft railings, and shutters painted with bright folk emblems—a fairytale village at one-quarter scale now shrouded freezing mist.

He saw her hand first, her fingers closed into a loose fist, her skin the color of a white tulip dropped on the snow. Her face was turned away from him, lost in a swath of shining black hair, but he could see the rest of her, bloodless, nude, and intact apart from the slicing wound that had severed most of her neck and a triangle cut into her lower abdomen.

The officers had been right to think that the scene had been staged. Her skin had been washed to marble smoothness and there was none of the confusion—the blood-stained ground or the last desperate movements that left arms and legs akimbo. There was no evidence of struggle or time left alone that had allowed her to turn, crawl, or draw herself into a fetal position to fight the cold before her death.

The woman, young and slender, had been left in a position of deep repose, as if angelic and weightless in a cloud of white, modestly turning her face away from all who would see her.

Artem crouched down beside her, careful not to step in or touch any part of the scene that had not already been contaminated by the owner of the garden or the patrol officers. He focused the beam of his flashlight on her face, seeing nothing but the waxen hint of an expression under the dark strands of her hair.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” he murmured, as he always did. “My name is Artem and I’m here to help.”

It was his ritual to introduce himself and his purpose to the dead, allowing him to start a new investigation with a moment of respect for a person whose privacy he had violated at their first meeting, and whose life and death he would continue to deconstruct to the best of his ability over the coming weeks, months or years.

“Where are the killer’s tracks?” he asked the officers without looking up.

“There were none that we could see,” the short officer offered. “It’s clear, fresh snow all around the body. The old man says there were no additional tracks in when he got here and we couldn’t find any outside of the ones he made, and those don’t go all the way to the body. The old man doesn’t usually walk this far in, and the tracks stop about two meters back when he finally realized what he was looking at. His boot prints are quite clear and distinct, not layered on top of others, and he can’t be the killer if he never made it to the body.”

“She’s on top of the snow,” Artem replied. “The tracks must be here somewhere, or some evidence that they have been obscured. Call in all the units we have available. We need to form a grid and search all of these lots.”

“It will be easier in daylight,” the tall one said.

Artem didn’t reply, his attention distracted by the look of her left hand. Leaning forward, he tilted his flashlight until he saw the filmy object that had been placed under her fingers. It

curled against her palm, milk-white and opaque, its surface textured with patterns of organic grooves and scales.

Reaching out, he touched her fingers, noting the lack of rigor mortis in their tips. The object shifted in her hand, revealing itself to be the head of a molted snake skin, its toothless jaw spread wide, and the clear sockets of its eyes shining in the glow of light.

“What’s that?” the tall officer asked.

Artem withdrew his hand, leaning back on his heels. “A signature.”

“Meaning he left evidence.”

“Meaning that he’s developed rituals, and the discipline to execute them.”

The officer shifted his weight, uneasy with the thought. “You think there are more victims?”

“I think he’s hunted before.”

“A serial killer now. As if the war wasn’t enough. God help us.”

Artem remained focused on the gaping mouth of the snake in the woman’s hand, wondering where God hid himself when men said things like that.

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Artem climbed the dark staircase to his sister’s apartment sometime after 4 in the afternoon, realizing that his hands were still numb from the night’s bitter cold and his vision blurred from lack of sleep. The long shifts and unpredictable hours that came with being an investigator in Kyiv suited him most of the time, but there was a point at which even the simplest tasks ceased to be automatic, and he had to think his way through hallways like a drunk.

The building was old, and beautiful in its way, though its neoclassical façade was regularly tagged with graffiti, and its entrance—once a grand and gleaming space bejeweled with

patterns of white and blue tile and brightly painted ceilings—seemed to now float in perpetual murk. The stairs were worn from years of use, welcoming each shoe with a soft depression in the wood and gentle creak as it accepted weight.

He reached the landing on the third floor and knocked on the tall door to his right, ignoring the anemic spread of afternoon light from the window in the stairwell, its milky panes offering a wintry view of the small park that stretched behind the row of townhouse buildings.

The baby was fussing, and he could hear Mariya through the doorframe, gently admonishing her child as she came closer and unlatched the locks. She swung the door open, balancing his blonde and blue-eyed two-year-old niece on her hip. Both the woman and the baby stared at him in surprise.

“Artusz,” she said, using the same tender tone with him as she used with the toddler. “Where did they send you since Thursday? To the front?”

He shook his head, careful not to let her see the ghost of a crime scene in his eyes. “I brought you the usual things, perhaps more,” he said, raising the paper grocery bags he’d carried with him. “Milk, butter, waffles, honestly, I don’t know what else. Could be anything.”

Mariya let him inside and then locked the door behind him, following as he made his way to the small kitchen and set the bags on the counter. She bounced little Feya in her arms and watched him put several items in the refrigerator and a few boxes on the shelves, waiting until he was done before asking the question they both knew would come next.

“Have you heard anything?”

“No,” he replied, turning on the faucet to wash the dishes in the sink. “I’m sorry.”

“Why won’t they talk to you?”

“It’s difficult.”

“They lost him three months ago. They should be doing more.”

Artem nodded, forcing himself to meet her gaze. “Pavlo’s unit was ambushed in territory that Russia still controls, Masha. There is a limit to what they can do.”

They went through this several times a week during his visits. It was as if she lost her memory within hours of him leaving her apartment and needed to be told—over and over again—that her husband was missing, and what circumstances had led to his disappearance. It occurred to him, at some point, that she just wanted him to lie.

“He could be hiding,” she said, speaking over the splash of water and the sound of him scrubbing an old pot with a sponge. “He could be waiting for the right moment to contact us. Others have done that successfully.”

And here was the opportunity. She had prepared it in advance. *Yes, Masha, he must be hiding with no way to communicate. It’s not safe to use radios or telephones. He must be surviving in a patch of forest between demolished villages, or living with sympathetic locals who have hidden him in a basement and found no way to inform the Ukrainian Army nearby. He must have an injury that prevents him from remembering that he has a name or a family or a home.*

As an investigator, he could not deny that such things were possible, but their likelihood dimmed with each passing day. He supposed that the real hope was that Pavlo, a man he had considered a brother for over 10 years, had been taken prisoner by the Russians or their mercenaries, even if his name did not appear on the lists.

This was, however, the one survival scenario that Mariya couldn’t bring herself to openly consider. Being a prisoner of Russia was a different kind of death. Not the quick obliteration of a mortar shell or the rip of bullets through the skin and bone, but the object of slow torture and desecration by men whose minds had turned to utter madness.

For a second, an image came—the woman lying in the snow, her face turned away from him and her arms outstretched under the sky. There had been no bruising on her wrists or ankles, only underneath where the blood had settled. There were no outward signs that she had been restrained or tortured. Even the wounds to her neck and abdomen were precise, not the work of a psychopath blinded by rage, but an act of reverence reserved for a sacrifice.

The snake skin itself was a symbol of metamorphosis.

Ritual. Religion. Grandiosity.

“Artusz,” Mariya’s voice cut through the thought.

He blinked and looked down at her and the baby, realizing that he had finished the dishes and drifted into an unforgivable silence. Forcing himself back into the moment, he dried his hands and turned toward her, reaching out to gently squeeze her right shoulder. “There is nothing more for now. You have to stay strong. We have to live without knowing for a while.”

She dropped her gaze, trying to hide her pain. Mariya was his opposite in so many ways, fair instead dark, flowing with creativity where he was analytical, warm and emotional where he was observant. Even in terms of physical build, she was short and slight while he was tall and bulked up from the workouts that kept him sane.

“You look so different these days,” she said. “When was the last time you cut your hair? You used to look like a Navy pilot from USA and now you are what? A Samurai? If it gets much longer, you’ll have to put it in a topknot. You can’t just let it do what it wants. Black hair looks severe if it’s not styled right. You need to let me fix it.”

It was a necessary change of subject, one that allowed her to bury her panic in the little mechanisms that kept her reality spinning—like the urge to mother him and anyone else who stood too close, the expression of style through her own artistic lens, and the hope she could one

day return to her work in fashion and costume design. Before Pavlo had been called to serve—leaving her as Feya’s sole caretaker—she had been able to spend 20 hours a week working with a local theater troupe, sewing costumes and playing small parts.

There were at least a half-dozen pictures of her framed in the apartment, playful snapshots taken over a decade that captured her with actors in various roles. In the space between the bookcase and the bedroom door, she was Diana the huntress, dressed in a diaphanous white dress made from layers of opaque fabric, her red curls free around her shoulders.

Above the laundry basket in the bathroom, she was a skinny Hamlet dressed in a yellow tunic, sporting a shining black wig and cringing at a fake skull she held in her hand. In the kitchen, she was a cat with matted plastic fur for ears.

“My hair is fine,” he said, reaching for his niece. The girl came into his arms with a soft sound of protest then wrapped her small hands around his neck and squeezed. She was still clean from her nightly bath and sleepy before bed. “Take some time for yourself,” he told his sister. “We’re going to read a story about evil stepmothers.”

“You’ll both be asleep in five minutes.”

“Yes, hopefully,” he conceded, carrying the child toward her room.

It was a small space, an area barely larger than the toddler’s crib, with paper butterflies adorning pink walls and a window with a view of the darkening sky. Lanterns with unlit candles had been set along the floorboards in anticipation of power blackouts, and there was a bag by the door that had been filled with clothes and blankets in case the air raid sirens began to howl in the middle of the night.

Artem settled into the rocking chair by the bed and felt the nudge of Feya’s nose against his neck and the tug of her hands on his shirt as she found a comfortable position. He held her in

his arms, listening to the halting breaths and frustrated sounds she made before her breathing became even.

Usually, he read or talked softly to her as she drifted off, but he now couldn't find the words. She was warm and trusting, a girl who didn't know how much the world had already taken from her, and how eager it was to take more, how its shadows swam with predators of all types—those who killed with their greed and indifference, and those with knives for teeth.

He stared at the city outside her window as his exhaustion became a dark thing of its own, dimming the world around him until there was nothing left to see.