

DOPAMINE

A cyberpunk novella about digital addiction.



Aituar Abultayev

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«Автор»

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Abultayev A.

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When a person lets a machine give their life meaning, when the signal cuts out, they shut down too.

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Глава

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When a person lets a machine give their life meaning,
when the signal cuts out, they shut down too.*

PROLOGUE — AIM!

Autumn came early to the steppe in 1942. At night, a skin of ice already tightened over the ground. By day, the wind drove gray shreds of cloud across the low sky, like ash from a distant fire.

Five men walked from the aul—the steppe village—to the radio tower.

Three were soldiers with rifles. The fourth was a lieutenant. The fifth was bareheaded, his hands tied behind his back with telephone wire. The wire was new and black, smelling of rubber and machine oil. The condemned man kept scuffing his boots through the dry feather grass, as if trying to memorize its rustle.

“Stop,” the lieutenant said.

They halted at the tower’s concrete base. It looked too tall for this empty land. Steel latticework vanished into the clouds, and a horn loudspeaker swayed at the top. News bulletins sometimes came through it, and then the whole aul gathered around its only radio: women clutched their headscarves, old men stared at the floor, and children learned not to ask questions.

No one else was at the tower that day.

The lieutenant took out a papirosa—a thin Soviet cigarette—lit one for himself, then placed another between the prisoner’s lips. The man did not thank him. His name was Tulegen, but it had been misspelled on the charge sheet. He was going to die under that misspelled name.

“Any last words?” the lieutenant asked.

“For whom?”

One soldier gave a nervous snort. Another turned away toward the steppe.

The lieutenant pulled the cigarette from Tulegen’s mouth and threw it at his feet.

“Five steps forward.”

Tulegen took five. On the sixth, he stopped on his own. Closed his eyes. The wind shoved him in the back, and for an instant he thought it was already the bullet.

The lieutenant unfolded the paper.

The words about treason, sabotage, and ties to the enemy sounded hollow. The wind carried them off at once. Tulegen was not listening to the charges. He was listening to the horn above. For the past three nights, he had heard whispers through it, though no power was being supplied to the tower. The whispers repeated the voices of people from the aul—their pleas, fears, and prayers. Sometimes the horn spoke in the voice of his dead brother.

“Firing squad—ready!” the lieutenant ordered.

The rifle bolts clicked almost in unison.

Tulegen breathed in the smell of cold earth.

“Aim!”

The rifles rose. Three muzzles leveled at his back.

Tulegen closed his eyes.

The lieutenant drew breath.

But he never got the chance to give the order to fire.

The horn at the top of the tower came alive.

First came a burst of static. Then a firm voice, familiar to every one of them, announced:

“From the Soviet Information Bureau...”

The soldiers froze. The lieutenant looked up.

The voice cut out. A thin, piercing tone stretched from the horn. It was higher than a human scream and deeper than the drone of an aircraft. It slipped beneath Tulegen’s skin, traveled up his spine and lodged deep inside his head, as if it had found the place where his thoughts were born.

Inside that note he heard everything he had waited for all his life: his mother’s voice, a verdict of acquittal, the laughter of children not yet born, a promise that the war would end tomorrow.

Then silence fell.

The order to fire never came.

Tulegen waited. One second. Two. Ten.

He opened his eyes and slowly turned around.

There was no one behind him.

Three rifles remained on the ground. They lay neatly, as if the soldiers had placed them there with care before disappearing. The lieutenant's cigarette smoldered nearby. The wind stirred the charge sheet but could not turn it over.

Tulegen backed away. He wanted to run, but he could not tear his eyes from the horn.

The lieutenant's voice came from it, quiet and almost childlike:

"Fire?... Why didn't you say 'fire'?"

Tulegen broke into a run across the steppe.

Behind him, the tower sent an invisible signal into the sky. The farther he ran, the more clearly he heard a chime that did not yet exist: the brief, cheerful notification of a new message.

PART ONE — NO SIGNAL

Chapter 1. Glitch

Almaty, 2036.

The city ran on algorithmic schedules. Business-district facades changed their ads to match the expressions of passersby; driverless buses glided between streams of people; courier drones hummed overhead in designated flight corridors. The mountains were reflected in the glass facade of the high-rise Nomad-Link business center—the only thing no one had yet learned to personalize.

Thirty-five-year-old Yernar sat on the forty-second floor, surrounded by transparent screens. On one, a map of the country pulsed with green dots showing network availability. On another, the security system flagged anomalous requests. On a third, the corporate assistant ZHYLTYR confidently explained that there was no threat.

“You don’t know whether there’s a threat,” Yernar muttered. “You know which sentence I want to read.”

ZHYLTYR replied at once in a soothing voice:

“Your skepticism improves decision quality.”

“Exactly.”

A colleague in the next pod raised an eyebrow.

“Talking to the machine you don’t trust again?”

“Someone has to remind it where it belongs.”

“Does it know where you belong?”

Yernar did not answer. A name flashed on his personal screen: AZHESHKA.

He smiled before he noticed himself doing it and accepted the video call.

The camera showed a low-ceilinged room with whitewashed walls. Evening light trembled behind a lace curtain. Kulzhan-apa sat at the table, holding the phone far too close to her face.

“Balam—my boy—you’re too thin again,” she said instead of hello.

“It’s the wide-angle lens.”

“The camera isn’t feeding you.”

“We get free food at the office.”

“Anything free comes without a soul.”

She laughed. So did Yernar. For a few seconds he was not a cybersecurity specialist, not a man who saw a vulnerability in every system, but the boy who had been sent from the aul to study in the city.

“When are you and Aigerim finally coming?” his grandmother asked. “Will I at least see the two of you somewhere other than a screen before the wedding? Or has she figured out how stubborn you are and run away?”

“The wedding’s in a month.”

“A month is enough time to change your mind thirty times.”

The connection stuttered. Kulzhan-apa’s face broke into squares, then assembled itself again.

“See?” she said. “The tower’s acting up again. One minute we have a connection, the next we don’t. Yesterday the shop wouldn’t sell me bread without the network. The clerk says, ‘The register doesn’t know the price.’ I tell him, ‘I know the price.’ He says, ‘The system doesn’t.’ Now the system matters more than a grandmother.”

“I’ll check it remotely.”

“At this rate, you’ll get married remotely too.”

Something moved behind her.

Yernar stopped smiling.

At first he thought it was a compression artifact: a dark vertical streak by the door. Then the streak stepped into the room.

The lieutenant. Three soldiers behind him. Gray greatcoats, side caps, rifles. The image was black and white, yet it overlaid the full color of his grandmother's room without the slightest transparency.

"Azhe," Yernar said quietly, using the Kazakh word for grandmother. "Who's there with you?"

Kulzhan-apa smiled as though she had not heard.

The lieutenant stopped behind her chair and unfolded a yellowed sheet of paper.

"Azhe, turn around."

"What is it, balam?"

The three soldiers raised their rifles.

Yernar shot to his feet. His chair flew into the partition.

"AZHE!"

The lieutenant looked straight into the camera. His face was young and deathly tired.

"Fire," he said.

Kulzhan-apa jerked. Her forehead struck the table. The phone fell on its side. Her motionless hand remained on-screen.

The connection dropped.

Yernar stood among his frozen colleagues, pressing his palm against the empty air where his grandmother's face had been a second earlier.

Then the phone rang again.

The screen read: AZHESKA.

Chapter 2. The Second Call

Yernar could not touch the button at first. His trembling finger missed it twice.

“Balam?” Kulzhan-apa appeared on-screen alive, annoyed, and perfectly calm. “Why are you shouting?”

Yernar sat down right there on the floor.

“You... fell.”

“I’m sitting.”

“There were people there.”

“What people?”

“Soldiers. Behind you.”

His grandmother looked around. The room was empty.

“It’s just me and the kettle. The kettle isn’t in uniform.”

Someone in the office gave an awkward laugh. The department head came closer, but Yernar held up a hand: not now.

“Show me the table.”

“Why?”

“Just show me.”

Kulzhan-apa panned the camera. A cup, a saucer of candy, and an old radio sat on the oilcloth. No blood. No bullet hole in the wall. The phone was not on the floor because it was still in her hand.

“The signal dropped,” she said. “I called back. You’re looking at me as if you’ve already buried me.”

Yernar zoomed in on the call recording. The system had saved the last twenty seconds to a local cache. He saw his grandmother smile, the soldiers raise their rifles, and her body fall. It was all there.

“Azhe, don’t leave the house. I’m coming.”

“Today?”

“Now.”

“It’ll be dark soon.”

“Now.”

He ended the call and stood. Half the office had already gathered around him. Someone was recording through a contact lens. Yernar swiped sharply in front of the lens.

“Delete it.”

“I’m not—”

“Your indicator’s blinking.”

His manager, Temirlan, led him into a meeting room. The walls turned opaque.

“Show me the recording.”

Yernar sent the file to an isolated display. The video played without sound. Temirlan watched closely, but by the end his expression had become guarded—the way people looked at a colleague who might be having a breakdown.

“Deepfake,” he said.

“In real time?”

“A malicious filter. A substituted video stream. You’re the one who taught us anything is possible.”

“Not everything.”

“Or your implant’s been compromised.”

Yernar automatically touched the small scar behind his ear. His neural interface had two parts: an implanted neural port and a detachable behind-the-ear module used for secure work authentication,

audio, and screen control. He hated having devices touch his brain, but without the neural port he would never have been cleared for national infrastructure.

"I'll check the logs," he said.

"You're taking the day off."

"A base station is failing in the aul."

"The technicians will go in the morning."

"I'm going now."

Temirlan let out a heavy breath.

"You can't take the secure work terminal with you."

"I don't need the terminal."

"You need a doctor."

Yernar stood.

"Put me on unpaid leave."

"Yernar..."

"Or fire me. Pick whichever one loads faster."

Aigerim called him in the elevator. Her face appeared on the inner surface of his lens: short dark hair, tired eyes, a white coat. Robotic hospital gurneys moved behind her.

"Someone messaged me and said you made a scene," she said.

"Gossip travels faster than light."

"What happened?"

He wanted to tell her. Instead he said:

"My grandmother's having network problems. I'm heading to the aul."

Aigerim was quiet longer than usual.

"We're meeting the wedding coordinator today."

"Reschedule."

"You picked this date yourself."

"This is urgent."

"Everything is urgent to you except the people standing right beside you."

The elevator doors opened. In the lobby, people walked through advertising holograms without looking up from their personalized feeds.

"I'll call from the road," Yernar said.

"You always call from the road. You never actually show up."

The call ended.

In the parking garage, an autonomous vehicle asked for a destination. Yernar gave it Karasu. The system warned him that the digital map had not been verified for the final forty kilometers.

"Proceed?" the car asked.

"Yes."

"Network coverage at the destination is unstable. Some functions will be unavailable."

"I know how to drive."

"According to your profile, you last drove manually eleven years ago."

"I'll remember how today."

Once the car was outside the city, Yernar opened the call recording again.

This time, after the lieutenant gave the order, his grandmother did not fall.

She slowly raised her head and looked into the camera.

Her lips formed the words without sound:

DON'T BRING THEM THE SIGNAL.

Chapter 3. The Road Off the Map

Until dawn, the car behaved perfectly. Then the navigation system began inventing junctions that did not exist in the steppe.

Translucent arrows appeared on the windshield: turn right in one hundred meters, take the side road, keep left. To the right lay only a dry ravine. To the left, a field overgrown with wormwood.

Yernar disabled augmented reality and took control.

At first his hands rested uncertainly on the wheel. Ten minutes later, his body remembered what his father had once taught him: do not stare at the road just beyond the hood, feel where the rear wheels are, and do not fight the road.

His father had disappeared when Yernar was seven. His grandmother said Serik had left to find work and never returned. His mother moved to the city afterward, while Yernar stayed with Kulzhan-apa until he finished school. Years later, his mother died after a short illness, when he was already at university. He had stopped asking questions long ago. A disappearance without an answer was a wound he had learned to call a statistic.

The phone on the passenger seat flashed.

NEW MESSAGE FROM: DAD.

Yernar slammed on the brakes.

The car skidded on the gravel and stopped sideways across the road.

The notification vanished.

He checked the log. Empty. The cloud—empty. The local cache—empty.

“Phantom alert,” Yernar said aloud.

The words sounded convincing until a man’s voice came from the switched-off audio system: “Easy on the turns, balam.”

Yernar ripped out the power module. The display went dark. The voice stopped.

He drove on in silence.

The first houses appeared at noon. The aul of Karasu lay between low hills as though hiding from the wind. Above the roofs rose the tower—not the narrow wartime structure Yernar remembered from archive photographs. The old metal body had grown layers of panels, antennas, and amplifier rings. A laser relay rotated at the top. White base-station pods hung below. It all glittered in the sun like an artificial bone driven through the earth.

A line of cars stood at the entrance.

People were arguing at an automated barrier. It would not open without network authorization, and the guard refused to raise it manually because the rules forbade him.

“My medication is stuck in the delivery locker!” a woman shouted.

“My pass is valid!”

“The checkout charged me, but it won’t show the payment!”

“Open the thing, ata!”

The guard, a wiry old man in a worn padded jacket, calmly drank tea from a metal mug.

Yernar got out, found the mechanical lock beneath the panel and tore off the plastic seal.

“You’ll get a fine,” the guard warned.

“They can send me a notification.”

The old man chuckled.

“Then there won’t be one.”

The barrier rose. People surged forward without so much as looking at Yernar. Every one of them stared at a screen, checking whether the signal had returned.

Only the guard asked:

“Are you Kulzhan’s boy?”

“Her grandson.”

“You look like your father.”

Yernar froze.

“You knew him?”

“Everyone used to know everyone here. Then phones taught us how to forget.”

“What’s wrong with the tower?”

The old man looked toward the metal cutting through the sky.

“It isn’t breaking down. It’s waking up.”

Yernar was about to ask what he meant when cheers erupted behind him. Someone’s phone had picked up a single bar. People raised their devices over their heads and ran toward the rise.

The guard set his mug on the ground.

“People used to run to the radio like that when they were waiting for news from the front,” he said. “Back then, they were afraid of hearing something bad. Now they’re afraid of hearing nothing at all.”

Yernar’s phone vibrated.

A message from his grandmother filled the screen:

DON’T COME INSIDE. I’M NOT ALONE.

Chapter 4. The Aul That Watches

Kulzhan-apa's street began behind the school. Yernar drove slowly around people standing in the road with their phones raised. Some were hunting for a signal from the roofs of cars. Two teenagers had climbed the water tower. A schoolgirl held a tablet above her head and cried, repeating:

"Just a little more. One more bar."

Karasu had changed. The houses were still low and the yards still dusty, but facial-recognition cameras hung above the gates, solar panels shone on the roofs, and a parcel locker stood outside the shop. High technology had come here not as freedom but as a thin coat of varnish. Without the network, it cracked within hours.

The gate to his grandmother's house stood open.

Yernar stopped the car and reread the message. It was marked as delivered two minutes earlier, though his signal indicator showed zero.

He entered the yard.

Herbs dried beneath the awning. Apples lay in a basin. From the summer kitchen came the clink of a spoon against a cup.

"Azhe?"

"I'm here, balam."

Kulzhan-apa sat at the table just as she had during the call. An old radio stood in front of her. No one was in the corner.

Yernar hugged her too tightly. She patted his back.

"You'll break my bones. Then you'll have to look after me yourself."

He pulled away and checked her face, hands and neck.

"You said you weren't alone."

"I didn't write anything."

He showed her the screen.

His grandmother read the message and frowned.

"The phone was lying right here."

"Who could have taken it?"

"No one. I don't lock the door. Not against people."

"What do you lock it against?"

She looked up. Fear flashed in her eyes for a second, then vanished behind her usual severity.

"Eat first."

"Azhe."

"Even the truth sounds stupid on an empty stomach."

Yernar sat. While she ladled out sorpa, a rich broth, he connected a diagnostic module to her phone. It found no malicious applications. But the network log showed repeated requests from an unknown base station: an identifier made entirely of zeros, transmitting on a frequency outside the civilian band.

"When did the failures start?"

"Three days ago. At night first. Then during the day. Yesterday the tower spoke."

The spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

"What did it say?"

"Not words. More like someone tuning an old radio."

She turned the dial. White noise spilled from the speaker.

"That radio hasn't worked in twenty years."

"Then it's had a nice long rest."

A pattern emerged in the static: three short pulses, a pause, then three more. Yernar recorded it.

“Where is your father?” his grandmother asked without warning.

“You tell me.”

Kulzhan-apa flinched as though the question had come from someone else.

“He left.”

“Where to?”

“Far away.”

“Azhe, you’ve been saying that for twenty-eight years.”

“Then the answer hasn’t changed.”

A commotion rose outside. People were running toward the house.

Malika burst in first—a local influencer Yernar remembered as a girl with braids. Now her face was retouched by lenses even in real life, and a streamer implant shimmered at her temple. A faded hospital wristband hung from her key ring, far too small for an adult. When she noticed Yernar looking, Malika closed her hand around it.

“Yernar!” She aimed the camera at him. “Everyone, this is our big-city cybersecurity expert. Tell the followers when the internet will be back.”

“You’re offline.”

“I’m recording offline. I’ll upload it later.”

Neighbors crowded behind her.

“The shop is down.”

“The e-prescriptions won’t open.”

“The kids are losing it.”

“Do you have company access?”

Yernar felt dozens of eyes shift to his phone.

He shoved it into his pocket.

“I’m checking the tower first.”

“Check it now,” said a tall young man in a gaming jacket. “I’ve got a tournament. Miss one day and my team drops me.”

“Your name’s Daniyar, right?”

“Den. Online, I’m KhanZero.”

“And offline?”

The young man did not understand the question.

A voice came from the old radio on the table.

Quiet. Distorted. Unmistakable.

“Yernar... don’t show them your phone.”

Everyone fell silent.

It was his father’s voice.

Chapter 5. The Tower

They went to the tower on foot. An automated service drone blocked the road: four metal legs, a body bearing the Nomad-Link logo, and a camera where its head should have been. It scanned Yernar with a red beam.

“Access confirmed,” the drone announced. “Security engineer Yernar Saparov. Clearance level seven.”

Yernar stopped.

“I didn’t submit a request.”

“Request received by local node.”

“The local node is offline.”

“Correct.”

“Who confirmed my access?”

The drone turned its camera toward the tower.

“You did.”

Malika gave a nervous laugh behind him. She had followed after all, along with Daniyar, Murat the schoolteacher, and several teenagers. Kulzhan-apa had stayed home, but before he left she had gripped her grandson’s wrist.

“Don’t listen if it calls you in the voice of someone you love.”

Now the warning sounded louder inside him than the wind.

The fence around the tower was new, composite, designed for autonomous security. The gate opened on its own. Words lit up on the inner panel:

WELCOME HOME, YERNAR.

“Nice,” Malika said. “Get me in the shot with it.”

“Stay outside the fence.”

“People need to know what’s happening.”

“The people are standing right behind me.”

She rolled her eyes but stepped back.

Yernar went in alone. Dry grass crackled beneath his boots. The closer he came to the base, the more the implant behind his ear itched. The system was trying to connect to a network that did not exist.

There were no signs of forced entry on the equipment cabinet. Power was on. The batteries were charged. The fiber-optic line to the node was intact. By every measurable parameter, the station should have been providing service for tens of kilometers.

But it wasn’t.

Yernar connected directly by cable.

The terminal came alive.

Diagnostic lines streamed across the black screen. Most were standard until an unnamed folder appeared. Created: 17 October 1942.

Impossible.

He opened it.

Inside was a single audio file: KOMANDA.wav.

“Find something?” Daniyar shouted from beyond the fence.

Yernar put on insulated headphones and played the recording.

Static. Wind. The lieutenant’s voice:

“Firing squad—ready!”

Rifle bolts clicking.

“Aim!”

Then the high-pitched tone.

Yernar tried to pull off the headphones, but his muscles would not obey. The note unfolded inside his head and became thousands of notification sounds. Each one promised important news, love, rescue, an explanation from his father. He understood that if he listened to the end, he would get an answer.

Just one answer.

A video feed appeared on-screen.

The steppe in black and white. A man with his hands tied stood with his back to the soldiers. The condemned man slowly turned—and looked straight at Yernar.

The face was unfamiliar, yet the line of the brows, the shape of the nose, even the habit of biting the inside of one cheek seemed strangely familiar.

“You came too late,” the man said.

“Who are you?”

“The man they didn’t shoot.”

“Where’s my father?”

The man nodded at something behind the camera.

Yernar turned.

A man stood on a crossbeam of the tower, twenty meters above the ground. No safety line. He wore an old jacket Yernar remembered from childhood.

“Dad?” he breathed.

The man stepped off the beam.

Chapter 6. Azheshka

Yernar lunged forward and threw up his arms as if he could catch a falling body.

No one fell.

Rust flakes drifted down. Sunlight slashed across his eyes. The beam was empty.

“What did you see?” Malika had already pushed her camera between the bars of the fence.

Yernar tore off the headphones. The world lurched. People stood beyond the fence, but for several seconds their faces looked like flat icons: alarm, curiosity, mockery. The emotion-recognition system in his lens tried to label each of them, though he had disabled it on the road.

MALIKA — ENGAGEMENT 91%.

DANIYAR — AGGRESSION 63%.

MURAT — FEAR 78%.

The label above a teenager in a red cap flickered:

USER NOT FOUND.

Yernar blinked, and everything disappeared.

“Nothing,” he said. “A visual-channel fault.”

“You called someone Dad,” Daniyar pointed out.

“An error.”

“Convenient word.”

Yernar disconnected the terminal from the station. The folder dated 1942 vanished. The audio file was gone even from the cache. Yet the unknown frequency kept pulsing through the diagnostic feed: three beats, a pause, three more.

He stepped outside the fence.

“The tower is fully operational. The problem isn’t the equipment.”

“Then what is it?” Murat, the teacher, asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

The crowd began to murmur. They wanted an answer, preferably one that was short and certain. Whether it was true did not matter. Yernar knew that hunger too well. Models like ZHYLYTYR had been trained on it.

“How long?” someone shouted.

“An hour? A day?”

“Will the food deliveries get through?”

“My child is being treated remotely!”

Malika turned the camera on herself.

“We are standing at the epicenter of a digital collapse,” she began in her presenter’s voice. “A Nomad-Link expert is refusing to give us a timeline—”

Yernar covered the lens with his hand.

“Don’t stir up panic.”

“The panic is already here. I’m making content out of it.”

“No one will see it without the network.”

Malika smiled.

“We’ll see.”

On the walk back, Daniyar caught up with Yernar.

“You’ve got a signal, don’t you?”

“No.”

“A company channel.”

“No.”

“Then why did your phone show a notification outside the house?”

Yernar stopped.

“Were you looking at my screen?”

“Everyone was.”

“Don’t.”

“Scared we’ll see the truth?”

“I’m scared you’ll see something that isn’t there.”

Daniyar smirked, but the hunger remained in his eyes.

In the yard, his grandmother crouched beside a garden bed, pulling out dry stalks, as though there were no tower, no voice of his father, and no crowd.

“Let’s go inside,” Yernar said.

“Wash your hands first.”

“Azhe, I saw Dad.”

Her fingers stopped in the soil.

“Where?”

“On the tower.”

Kulzhan-apa slowly straightened. There was no surprise on her face. Only the weariness of someone who had spent too long waiting for an inevitable question.

“He saw it too,” she said.

“When?”

“The night he disappeared.”

Something cold and precise clicked into place inside Yernar.

“You knew.”

“I knew he went there.”

“And you told me he abandoned us.”

“I told you he left.”

“You let me hate him for twenty-eight years.”

“The hate kept you away from the tower.”

“It didn’t.”

His grandmother looked at the iron structure above the rooftops.

“Then its call was stronger.”

“What is it?”

Kulzhan-apa wiped her hands on her apron.

“Not ‘what.’ It has no body. There is only a place where people have waited too long for something.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“It’s the only one I have.”

She went into the house and returned with a tin box. Inside lay an old audio cassette, a faded photograph, and a folded sheet of paper. In the photograph, a young Kulzhan-apa held the infant Serik in her arms. Beside her stood the condemned man from the recording, only much older.

On the back, in his grandmother’s handwriting, were the words: “Tulegen-ata, my grandfather. 1978. Do not listen after sunset.”

“Your grandfather?”

“My grandfather. Your great-great-grandfather. I kept silent because the tower has always called to our blood more strongly than to anyone else’s.”

Yernar wanted to ask what “more strongly” meant, but she went on before he could.

“He lived almost forty more years after that day,” Kulzhan-apa said. “But every evening he heard the order that was never given.”

The radio inside the house answered with another burst of static.

Then Serik’s voice said:

“Mom, open the door this time.”

Chapter 7. Three Bars

Kulzhan-apa went pale but did not move toward the door.

The radio sat on the table. Its dial glowed a dull green, though the batteries had leaked out years ago. Serik's voice came through the static again:

"Mom... I'm cold."

Yernar stepped toward the set.

His grandmother slapped his hand away so quickly that he recoiled.

"Don't answer."

"It's a recording."

"A recording doesn't know I'm in the house."

"I can trace the source."

"Your father wanted to trace it too."

The voice drew closer.

"Yernar, balam. Are you all grown up?"

Yernar's breath caught. He had last heard his father at seven—not the voice itself, but a memory of a voice, long since worn away and replaced by family videos. Yet every inflection was real now: the soft r, the short breath before a question.

"Turn it off," his grandmother whispered.

Yernar covered the radio with a metal cooking pot. The static did not stop. He wrapped the set in a blanket, carried it outside and placed it in the old stove. Only then did the voice cut out.

In the kitchen, Kulzhan-apa poured tea. Her hands shook, and the spoon rang against the glass.

"Tell me everything," Yernar said.

"Not everything fits into words."

"Start with my father."

For a long time, she watched the steam.

Serik had worked as a technician at the tower. In the late 2000s, the equipment was being replaced and the first digital line installed. He found an old cable in the concrete base, running down into the ground. It appeared on no diagram. When they cut it, the power went out across the aul for several minutes, and dozens of people heard phones ringing that did not exist.

After that, Serik began seeing a man in military uniform near the tower.

"The lieutenant?" Yernar asked.

"Sometimes the lieutenant. Sometimes his own father. Sometimes you, grown up."

"Me?"

"He said you were calling him from the future."

A group of children ran past the window. They held phones in front of them and swiped across the dead screens in perfect unison.

"The night he disappeared, Serik came home and said he had found a way to shut down the signal," his grandmother continued. "He wanted to reach the soldiers in 1942 and convince them not to give the order. He recorded everything he knew on a cassette, left it with me, and went to the tower. He was never seen again."

"Why didn't the police—"

"The police were looking for a man. They should have been searching for the waiting itself."

Yernar pressed his fingers to his temples.

"Azhe, this sounds like superstition."

"Superstition is the name people give someone else's experience when it makes them uncomfortable."

The phone in his pocket vibrated once.

He took it out. The signal indicator showed three bars.

Not one. Not a weak emergency channel. Full signal.

“You have a connection,” his grandmother said.

“There shouldn’t be one.”

Yernar quickly enabled secure mode. Data packets flowed without latency. There was no satellite fix; the device believed it was connected to a base station called KARASU-0, the same one with the all-zero identifier.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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