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Krot. A Stalker's Story

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Some people go into the Zone for money. Some have nowhere else to go. And some go — because they hope.Mikhail Sergeyevich Zemtsov — engineer-physicist, a man of neat handwriting who planned his life years ahead — was never supposed to end up in the Zone. But when illness took his daughter's health and medicine ran out of answers, he did what desperate people do: believed in something he shouldn't have. In a miracle. In an artifact that could heal.He found the Zone — and the Zone found him.Over the years, he became someone else. Masha kept getting sicker; the artifact was never found. She died on a day when he was out on another run — she couldn't wait for him any longer.Other stalkers gave him the callsign Krot — Mole — for digging through the whole Zone in search of happiness. He dug through all of it, and found nothing.This is a story about a man losing everything he had. And going on — because there's no reason left to stop, and nowhere left to go back to.

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Prologue. The Point of No Return

He understood it on the day he came back to base empty-handed for the third time running.

Three trips. Three weeks. Feet rubbed raw, two containers of samples that Kolyan the fence took with a sour face and paid half of what they'd agreed — because "market's like that, brother, nobody wants this crap right now." He got it. Nodded. Took the money. Sat down on the bench by the barracks and stared at the mud under his feet for a long time.

In his pocket was a letter from Irina. Paper — she wrote on paper as a matter of principle, said "so you can hold something in your hands, since you're not holding me." He didn't open it for two days. He knew what was in it. Didn't want to know more precisely.

"Masha hasn't slept in three nights. Her temperature was thirty-eight. The doctor came, said the same thing he always says. I don't understand what you're looking for out there, Misha. We're waiting for you. Masha is waiting. Do you hear me — waiting."

He heard her.

He heard every word of every letter. Read them, reread them, folded them into a plastic bag inside his rucksack — carefully, without a single crease. That was his anchor.

Only the artifact never turned up.

Not "eternal flame" — supposedly a cure for genetic mutations, and worth enough money to buy half their hometown. Not "night star" — a legend people whispered about around campfires, and no one could confirm they'd seen it with their own eyes. Other things turned up: "fireball" — good, but not it. "medusa" — rare, but not it. "crystal bubble" — beautiful, useless. Not it. Never it.

Stalkers around the fire told stories about a veteran named Begemot, who'd found something "genuinely medicinal" and sold it to some professor for a six-figure sum. He listened. Asked questions. Begemot had died three years back — walked into a carousel in the northern sector, going solo.

The stories ended differently, every time. The Zone never ended at all.

He opened the letter.

Read it to the end. Sat quietly — a minute, maybe two. Then stood, shouldered his rucksack, and went to get clearance for the next run. In the morning.

That was when he understood it.

Not in words. It never came out right in words — whenever he tried to put it into a sentence, it came out either too frightening or too trite. Something just clicked — the way a safety clicks when it's taken off. Quiet. No going back.

He wasn't leaving. Not anymore.

Not because there was nothing left to lose. Just the opposite — there was still plenty to lose. A wife. A daughter. An apartment overlooking a park where they used to walk every Sunday, back when Masha was healthy. Coworkers who still invited him to the odd office party. A life waiting for him on the other side of the perimeter — a decent, comprehensible, warm life.

He wasn't leaving. Because there was something in there, inside the Zone. He felt it — not with his mind, not with instruments. With something that had no name but worked all the same. Something was waiting for him. Lying somewhere deep, beneath layers of anomalous filth and animal trails and other people's routes, waiting for him to finally come and take it.

That's how it felt to him.

It felt that way because the Zone knew how to draw people in, wrap around them, and never let go again.

* * *

He sat on the bench until it got dark. At first — just sat. Then he started thinking. Methodically, the way he always thought when a problem needed breaking down.

Three years. He'd been walking the Zone for three years. Counting the first run — twenty-eight routes, twelve of them longer than three days. He knew the northern sector better than he knew his own rented apartment back in the city. Knew where the water pooled after rain, where the detector started lying because of interference, which grid square had more carousels than the old notes on his handheld showed. That knowledge had piled up on its own — no intention, no plan. It just accumulated, because he walked and watched and listened.

Outside, he no longer had that. Nothing like it.

Out there he had a rented room with a window overlooking a parking lot. A job he hadn't formally quit — took vacation days, sick leave, whatever he could — but which was already starting to look at him like a man about to quit on his own. Irina — with her paper letters and a patience that had a limit. Masha — with her serious look and her question, "Dad, when will I get better?"

He'd answer: soon.

Soon never came.

But the Zone was there. Every time he crossed the perimeter, something inside him stopped hurting. Not because it was safe here — just the opposite. Because here things were clear. Here every decision had direct consequences. Here there was nothing to wait for — not "soon," not anything else. You just had to walk, watch, listen.

He understood something else too, sitting on that bench.

He was searching for an artifact for Masha. That much was true. But somewhere — deep, below that truth — he was searching for something else too. Something with no name. The very thing that made him walk not toward the perimeter, once the route was finished, but further. One more grid square. One more hour. More.

The Zone held him — not by force. By a promise.

Not a specific one: not "you'll find the artifact," not "you'll understand something important." Just — the promise that there was something more out there.

That was the point of no return. Not the moment leaving became impossible. The moment he stopped wanting to — before he'd even fully realized it.

He got up from the bench. Went inside. Lay down.

The Zone stayed silent beyond the barrack walls — dark, nocturnal, patient. It knew how to wait.

Chapter 1. The Scientist's Son

His father explained the Zone through equations.

Mikhail remembered sitting in the study as a child — a narrow window, heavy dark cabinets, the smell of paper and old tobacco that had soaked into the wallpaper so deeply it had become part of the air itself. His father stood at the blackboard he'd hung right there in the apartment — his wife grumbled but gave up fighting it — and wrote. The chalk squeaked. Formulas branched from the upper corner downward and to the right, filling the whole space.

— Right here, Misha, — his father would say, — a quantum field. See? It doesn't just exist — it interacts. Every interaction changes the state. A change in state gives rise to a new interaction. Understand?

— Not really, — Misha would say honestly.

— Fine. Then the time will come and you will.

His father laughed — his own particular laugh, quiet and inward, one he only allowed himself at home. At work he was different: reserved, precise, with the kind of professional calm Misha later learned to tell apart from the real thing.

Sergei Alekseyevich Zemtsov had worked in quantum physics for thirty years. Wrote papers published in journals with long, unpronounceable names. Traveled to conferences in Moscow, and once to Berlin, where he brought Misha back a small folding knife and a book in German that Misha could never read but kept for years. Worked at an institute where everyone knew him by his name and patronymic and stepped aside for him at the coffee machine.

And then the Zone expanded.

Not in an explosion — that would have been understandable. An explosion has a specific point, a specific cause, a specific radius. The Zone expanded differently: slowly, unevenly, with anomalies that obeyed none of the known models of spread. One day the perimeter had to be pushed back three kilometers to the west. A week later — another kilometer and a half to the north. And that's when people started asking questions that had no answers.

His father left for the research center when Misha was twelve.

Not for good — not at first. A posting, three months. Then three months became six, six became a year. Then he came home on weekends, then on holidays, then — less and less. His mother explained it as the importance of the work. Misha didn't argue. He understood it himself — by the gleam in his father's eyes, which his father no longer bothered to hide: out there, by the Zone, he'd found what ordinary physics never gave him. A mystery with no solution. A phenomenon that fit none of the equations on his blackboard.

It was stronger than family. Misha understood that later. Much later.

On his last visit home — Misha was fifteen, it was summer, hot — his father took several sheets covered in small handwriting out of a worn briefcase and spread them on the kitchen table.

— Look, — he said. — These aren't just anomalies. They're fields. Quasi-fields — we haven't come up with a better word yet. They behave like classical fields only as a first approximation. In reality — they're adaptive. Every interaction with a person changes the field's behavior. Understand?

Misha looked at the pages. He understood — not all of it, but a lot. His father taught well.

— And artifacts? — he asked.

— Artifacts are interaction nodes. Points where the quasi-field fixed a change and crystallized it. — His father paused briefly. — Some of them contain information. Not in the digital sense — in the physical one. They change the state of the objects they come into contact with. Tissue, cells, molecules. We're only starting to understand the mechanism.

— Do they heal?

His father looked at him — a long look, with the expression Misha later learned to read as "good question, complicated answer."

— Some of them — yes. In a certain sense. But the Zone isn't a pharmacy, Misha. Remember that. It wasn't made to help people. It simply is. What we take from it — that's our interpretation. Our need.

Misha nodded.

He remembered it.

Two years later, his father died. A heart attack — right there in the lab, at night, working alone. They found him in the morning. On the desk lay calculations he hadn't finished.

Misha was seventeen. He enrolled at the polytechnic in "Engineering Physics" — not out of romance, not in memory of his father. He simply knew how to calculate and understood complex mathematical models — his father's doing. Back then, that seemed useful.

* * *

Twenty-two years old — his first job. The design department of a closed research institute on the edge of the city. Shielding, electromagnetic protection, field calculations. Dull and ordinary. Salary a bit above average, an older staff, a boss with a habit of showing up late to meetings while demanding punctuality from everyone under him.

Misha fit in fast. Worked carefully, didn't argue, did what was needed.

He got married at twenty-four. Irina taught at a school — mathematics, which Misha liked right away: a person who explains formulas to children can always make herself understood in plain language, without the feminine mystery Misha never understood. She was direct, no wasted words, with a light irony that never turned into anger. Misha liked that. He was the same way himself — or tried to be.

Masha was born when he was twenty-seven.

Small, with dark hair that later lightened, with a serious look that only grew more serious with age. She watched the world with that astonished attention children have when something is already inside them — something that just needs time to grow into.

Ten years flew by like a single moment. Daughter, wife, work, Saturdays at the dacha, Sundays in the park. The normal life of a normal man. As for how normal it really was, in a time when the Zone kept quietly expanding and rumors about artifacts moved through the markets like exchange rates — he didn't think about that. He caught snatches of news about the Zone. At work, colleagues sometimes discussed projects studying artifact properties. That was somewhere far away. Not his.

* * *

Masha was ten when she got sick.

Not a cold, not the flu — something else, something the doctors couldn't name for a long time. Her fever ran for weeks, then dropped, then climbed again. Her tests came back with anomalies that didn't fit any standard diagnosis. The child grew weaker. Ate poorly. Slept poorly. She'd look at Misha with serious eyes and ask:

— Dad, when will I get better?

He'd say: soon.

The doctors had no answers.

The third specialist — paid, at a good clinic — gave a preliminary diagnosis. A rare syndrome, autoimmune, with a neurological component. Treatment — symptomatic. Prognosis — cautious and vague.

— What does that mean? — Irina asked.

— It means we can manage the symptoms. But cure it — no. Not now. Maybe in the future.

In the future...

Misha rode home on the metro, staring into the dark glass. Across from him — an ad: "Take the Next Step." A picture — mountains, a man gazing into the distance. He almost smiled.

That evening he went to a stalker forum. Not for the first time — he'd read them occasionally, with a professional's interest in descriptions of anomalies. Now he was looking for something else.

"Artifacts with healing properties — real, or just campfire stories?"

The thread turned out to be an old one, with hundreds of replies. Misha read until three in the morning.

Chapter 2. The First Time

Preparation took six months.

He didn't rush it. Not because he wanted to drag it out — he simply understood: an unprepared man in the Zone lives exactly as long as it takes to make his first mistake. He'd read that on the same forum, and it matched what his father used to say.

He found an instructor — a former walker who taught "safety techniques in anomalously contaminated territories" for money. Officially. Over three months he went through six lessons: basic topography, working with a detector, recognizing anomalies by indirect signs, first aid for radiation exposure. The instructor's name was Palych. He was past sixty, wore his coveralls even indoors, and smelled of something Misha didn't place right away — later he realized it was the smell of anomalous dust, the kind that works into fabric and never washes out.

— You an engineer? — Palych asked at the first lesson.

— Physicist. Engineer-physicist.

— That's good. Means you won't go poking a finger at an "electra" and then wonder where your finger went. What's bad is you think you'll be able to understand how it works. You won't. Nobody does. Remember that and don't fool yourself.

Misha remembered.

He assembled his gear methodically. Not the most expensive — he didn't have money for that — but reliable. A coveralls suit with second-tier radiation protection. An "Echo" detector — a Chinese copy of the German "Analyzer," worked worse than the original but cost half as much. A knife. A medkit. A flashlight with two spare batteries. A compass — mechanical, no electronics. A military-surplus rucksack he bought at the market from a man with an unremarkable face.

For a weapon — an old Makarov. Not because he couldn't afford better. Because he thought: I'm going a short distance, not deep, not for long. I won't need more.

That was a mistake. The first of many.

* * *

He crossed the perimeter in the third grid square, northern sector.

March. The ground still frozen, the air sharp, with a chemical edge Palych called "anomalous exhaust." The detector chirped quietly — background, just background. Misha walked the beaten path he'd been shown during his training: "safe," in quotes, because nothing in the Zone is safe, but a path walked often enough all the same.

The first forty minutes — nothing.

A forest like any forest. A little quieter than usual — fewer birds, the wind behaving strangely, as if it didn't dare go past a certain mark. The ground a shade darker. The smell — that same chemical one, more distinct now.

Then — the first anomaly.

He saw it by the way the air trembled — exactly as Palych had taught: not head-on, at the edge of his sight, a turn, a stop, an assessment. About seven meters off, a little left of the path — a carousel, small, young. The grass around it clipped in a circle, as if traced with a compass. At the center — a faint glow, almost invisible in daylight.

His heart pounded. Not from fear — from recognition.

He'd seen this in photographs, in descriptions, in the training materials his father used to bring home. But a photograph wasn't the same. This was alive. Real. The Zone was real — not an abstraction on a forum, not a calculated model on a blackboard.

Misha went around the anomaly in a wide arc — five meters, as he'd been taught. Scanned the area — no artifacts. Moved on.

The detector chirped at two "fireballs" an hour later — one dull, worthless, the other decent, but not what he needed. He took the second. Went back to the perimeter.

His head didn't ache. His hands didn't shake. His coveralls were clean, apart from the mud on his boots.

Misha stood at the edge of the perimeter and looked back.

The Zone stayed silent.

* * *

He went out on his second run two weeks later.

Same route — northern sector, third grid square, the same path. He already knew it by heart: where the ground went soft, where the detector started lying because of a nearby "electra," where it was better not to cut through the brush. He walked with more confidence.

On the third hour, just as he was about to turn back, he heard it.

At first — just a rustle. Not wind, not a branch. Something heavy, alive, moving with the wrong rhythm. The detector stayed silent — mutants gave off no anomalous signal, he knew that from theory. In practice, theory ran into reality just like that, without warning.

Pseudoflesh came out of the bushes fifteen meters off.

An ugly thing — he'd seen photographs, they never conveyed the smell. Sour, heavy, alive. Three hundred kilos of deformed flesh on four legs with joints bent wrong. Small eyes stared with no expression — not vicious, not hunting. Just staring.

Then it moved.

Not running — walking. Heavy, swaying, with that characteristic squelch of hooves on frozen ground that would haunt his dreams for months afterward. Misha yanked out the Makarov. Fired twice — hit both times, he could shoot. The pseudoflesh didn't even slow down. A nine-millimeter round against a carcass like that — like throwing peas at a wall.

He understood that a second before it halved the distance between them.

Running — the path was too narrow, it would catch him. Shooting — useless. There was one option left: sideways.

Misha jumped into the bushes to the right of the path, fell, rolled, stood. The pseudoflesh went past him — carried by its own momentum, it hadn't managed to turn in time. But it was already turning back.

Then — a different kind of squelch. Sharp. Like something breaking in the air.

The pseudoflesh had caught the jelly — an anomaly Misha hadn't seen, because he didn't know what it looked like from the outside, because he hadn't spotted it in time, because this was only his second time here and he still didn't really know anything yet. The jelly held the creature for about five seconds while it struggled — long enough for Misha to get away.

He didn't look back. Just walked.

Past the perimeter, he stopped. Leaned his back against a tree. Breathed.

The Makarov was still in his hand. His knuckles white from gripping it.

If not for the jelly. If the anomaly had sat a meter to the right. If the pseudoflesh hadn't clipped its edge. The Makarov isn't a weapon. It's the illusion of a weapon. I need something serious.

That same evening he posted on the forum: "Recommend an AKS for the Zone, budget up to eight thousand."

Twenty-three replies came in.

* * *

He drove home. On the way he called Irina — "everything's fine, I'll be back for dinner." Sold the fireball to the dealer, got pennies for it. Stopped at the pharmacy, bought Masha some vitamins. Had dinner. Watched his daughter sleep.

That night he lay with his eyes open, thinking about the Zone. About the jelly. About how he'd been five steps from death and never noticed the anomaly that saved him.

Chapter 3. Krot

The second run came two weeks later. The third — one week after that.

By summer he was going once a month, by autumn — once every three weeks, by the following spring — a steady twice a month. Masha kept getting sick — sometimes she'd feel a little better, but more often she felt bad, as if the illness stood still in one place while the doctors still had no clear answers about treatment.

Misha searched.

On forums, in talks with dealers, in bars by the perimeter — everywhere he was let in. The stalker community accepted outsiders cautiously: watching, sizing up, keeping their distance. But Misha didn't pester people with questions, didn't brag, didn't whine. He listened. Helped out now and then — could plan a route, fix electronics, explain anomalies to research-center assistants from a physicist's angle none of the stalkers knew at that level. That bought him access.

Gradually, people started to recognize him.

Not by a callsign — he didn't have one yet. Just "the physicist," sometimes "four-eyes" — he wore glasses, though he switched to contacts in the Zone. Neither nickname stuck. He wasn't colorful enough for one.

At one of the rest stops — late autumn, a frozen November, a fire of three logs, six walkers none of whom had known each other more than a week — he first heard about "Stardust."

It was Gorbaty talking — a veteran, about fifty, with a nose that had healed crooked after a break, which was where his callsign came from.

— I saw it once, — Gorbaty said, staring into the fire. — Didn't take it, didn't find it — saw it, is what I mean. Lying in a crevice, three kilometers from Dead City. Glowing blue, even, no pulse to it. Doesn't look like an artifact at all — more like a crystal with flecks in it, like you're looking at a night sky, perfect shape, edges almost exact.

— And? — someone at the fire asked.

— Didn't take it. Wasn't alone, had a client. Client got held up at a springboard, I went back. When I came back — empty. Somebody got there first, or the anomaly swallowed it back up, detector showed nothing.

— What's it do, does it heal?

— So they say. — Gorbaty shrugged. — Say if you keep it on your body all the time, something changes at the cellular level. Regeneration speeds up, immunity spikes. The scientists pay well for it. Very well. Though who'd hand a thing like that over to scientists, and it's rare besides.

Misha drank his tea and said nothing. Just remembered.

"Stardust." The Dead City area.

* * *

Dead City sat in the western sector, seven kilometers from the nearest entry point. Closed to loners — not because it was forbidden, but because only a handful of first-timers ever came out alive. A dense anomalous field, mutants seen nowhere else. Old military presence, abandoned in a hurry, with gear and equipment rusting exactly where it had been dropped.

Misha didn't go there that year. Or the next.

He knew his level. That was one of the lessons Palych had given him, and one Misha accepted without argument: overestimate yourself in the Zone, and you don't come back. He walked, gained experience, sold artifacts, saved money. In small pieces.

By the third year — things got better. Not with Masha. With him.

He learned to read the Zone.

Not the way you read a book — not through the eyes. Through the feet, through the skin, through something his father used to call "a stalker's intuition" — a feeling that comes from living

long enough in a space governed by nonlinear laws. The detector started to feel unnecessary. Not because it wasn't needed — it was, as insurance. But Misha started to predict anomalies before the signal ever beeped.

That scared him at first.

Then he got used to it.

* * *

The callsign Krot came in his fourth year.

He was crossing a sector with two other walkers — Rvany and Kleshch, both familiar, both experienced. The job was simple: collecting in an area where, according to the scientists' recon, dummies had gathered after the last emission. Small money, but safe.

They found the dummies. Rvany filled his container and stopped — enough. Kleshch too. Misha asked for one more hour.

— What are you even looking for out there? — Rvany asked.

— There should be a "night star" here. I saw a distinctive mark on the ground — just need to search a three-hundred-meter radius around it.

— You've already gone around in circles twice and found nothing, — Kleshch said. — Like a mole, I swear. Digging and digging — no result.

Misha didn't answer. Went.

He found — not the "night star." Another rare first-category artifact. Good money. Not what he needed, but better than coming back empty.

At the base, Rvany greeted him with: "Oh, look, Krot's back."

By the end of the week, it had stuck.

Krot. He didn't object at first, then stopped noticing, then accepted it. Callsigns in the Zone are like skin: uncomfortable to wear until you get used to it. After that, you don't even think about it.

* * *

The fifth year brought the first serious talk with Irina.

Not a fight — Irina wasn't the type to make scenes. Just a conversation at the table, in the evening, while Masha slept. Irina poured tea, set it in front of him, sat across from him, and said:

— Misha, I want to understand. Are you still going out there because you believe you'll find something for Masha? Or is it a different reason now?

He didn't answer right away.

— I don't know, — he said finally. — Both, probably.

— That's honest. — She was quiet a moment. — Then one more question. If Masha got better tomorrow — on her own, no artifacts — would you stop going?

A long pause.

— I don't know, — he said again.

Irina nodded. Stood, cleared the cups. Before leaving the kitchen, she stopped.

— I thought you'd say "yes." Or at least "probably." — A pause. — Goodnight, Misha.

He sat at the empty table and looked at the cold tea.

It was the first time he understood something Irina had understood earlier.

Chapter 4. Deeper

After that talk with Irina, he went to Dead City.

Not alone — with a group of four. Two veterans: Slon and Prut — an odd pair. Slon was hulking and slow, living up to his callsign to a fault. Prut — thin and jittery, twitchy to look at, but in the Zone that vanished somewhere: he moved quietly, read the terrain well, reacted fast. The fourth — young, Vorobey, two years of experience, going into the western sector for the first time.

Krot was going for the first time too — but didn't say so.

Professional caution: don't announce your ignorance ahead of time. Better to listen and watch.

* * *

Dead City lived up to its name.

Not through beauty — no, "beautiful" wasn't the word. Through the sheer scale of its emptiness. They entered from the eastern outskirts — through an old industrial quarter, along concrete fences topped with rusted barbed wire that no one had bothered to cut, and which had long since stopped keeping anyone out. Beyond the fences — workshops. Collapsed roofs, broken window frames, machines still standing where they'd never been hauled away. Or never wanted to be. One of the shops was sealed — the doors welded shut, and on those doors someone had once painted a skull in white. The paint had flaked. The skull remained.

The residential blocks started half a kilometer on.

A housing district — or what was left of one. Five-story buildings, a few taller panel blocks that had held up decently — the concrete had lasted. But no living foot had clearly set in them for a long time — not just human, even mutants gave certain streets a wide berth. Why — unclear. The detector showed a moderate background, nothing critical. But something in the air pressed down — not radiation, not chemistry. The pressure of a space that had gotten used to being empty and wanted nothing else.

Slon called it "cursed patches."

— Every place in the Zone that's been empty a long time starts wanting to stay empty, — he said, as they walked down the central avenue, past rusted buses and leaning lampposts. — It's not mysticism. It's the fields. An anomalous field stabilizes around absence. Around emptiness. When you walk in — you disrupt the stabilization. The field pushes you back out.

— That's why it presses like this? — young Vorobey asked.

— That's why. You'll get used to it. Or you won't.

Krot walked and listened and thought: there it is. The very thing his father used to talk about — adaptive quasi-fields reacting to presence. Not hostile, not friendly — just reacting. The way a liquid reacts to a solid body. Simply trying to returnto equilibrium.

He looked at windows with nothing behind them. At cars fused into the asphalt — one stood right in the middle of an intersection, door open, as if the driver had stepped out and would be right back. Coming back any decade now.

In Dead City, time had stopped. Not metaphorically — literally: he felt it through his feet, through that same nameless sense that had taken three years to develop. The field here was different — not active, not aggressive. Frozen. Like resin that had long since hardened and no longer flowed, but would never disappear either.

* * *

On the third hour of the route, Vorobey asked to stop.

— There, — he said, nodding to the side. — Detector's spiking. Might be something.

Slon looked where Vorobey had nodded. A five-story building, a side entrance, a breach in the first-floor wall — neat, as if cut out. Not an anomaly — an old explosion. Dark inside.

— No, — Slon said.

— Why? Good signal.

— Because dark rooms in Dead City — no. — Slon said it flat, just a fact. — There's "burners" in the corridors. Invisible. Lost a man in there three years back.

Vorobey looked at the breach.

— Understood, — he said. — Not going.

They moved on.

Krot remembered that moment — the way Vorobey nodded and looked away. Calmly. No resentment. A good sign. The young ones who get angry at being told no live shorter lives than the young ones who listen.

Then everything went wrong.

Prut found something — not an artifact, just an old military rucksack by a wall, right on the ground, barely decayed. Nothing valuable inside, but he pulled it out, looked it over. Vorobey came to look. They stood three meters from the wall, talking.

Krot, at that moment, was at the corner — checking the alley next over. Slon — across the street, back to them.

The wall came down without a sound.

Not an explosion. It just — settled. The top floor started sliding first, then the second, then the whole thing went down with that long low sound Krot would hear in his dreams afterward. Prut reacted — jumped clear, rolled, stood. Vorobey didn't make it.

Not because he was slow. Just — didn't make it. Half a second, maybe less.

The dust settled after a minute.

Slon stood at the edge of the rubble and looked. Didn't shout, didn't call out — just looked. Then turned.

— Let's go, — he said.

— Vorobey's in there, — Prut said.

— I know.

— We need to—

— Let's go, — Slon repeated. Same tone. — He's under the third slab. Can't reach him. Trying means bringing down the next one.

Prut said nothing.

Krot looked at the rubble. Thought about how Vorobey had been coming to Dead City for the first time. How he'd had two years of experience and the makings of a good stalker.

The Zone didn't consider that enough to survive.

— Let's go, — Krot said.

They walked.

* * *

They never found "Stardust."

They found something else: "shimmering dawn" — a rare artifact, neutral in effect, valuable to collectors. Found some "meat chunks" — a few, good quality. Krot took a couple for himself — good to sell, but the main thing was, in one specimen he made out a structure he hadn't seen before. Inside — something like a crystal lattice, regular, almost symmetrical. He held the artifact in his gloved hand and looked at it too long — until Slon called out.

— Krot. Time.

— Coming.

He looked another second and put it away.

It wasn't "Stardust." But something told him — the principle was the same. Same structure, only simpler, a lower degree of crystallization. Like he'd found ordinary salt where he'd been looking for a diamond, and realized: same geology, same process, just different conditions.

They walked back in silence.

Prut didn't say a word until the perimeter. Neither did Slon. Krot said nothing either — because there was nothing to say, and empty words in the Zone sound worse than silence.

Vorobey stayed in Dead City.

Dead City took him as its due — no mourning, no ceremony. Just took him. One more quiet place in a quiet city.

Krot went back four more times over the following six months. Every time, he walked past that rubble. Never stopped.

* * *

The sixth year brought a loss.

Not death — not yet. A different kind of loss: Irina said she was tired of waiting.

Not suddenly, not all at once. It built up slowly — every run, every "I'll be back in a week, Ira, this is important," every dinner where he stared at the table and thought about Dead City. She held out a long time — longer than anyone else in her place would have, Krot understood later. Irina was the kind of person who endures on principle: as long as there's any chance to change things, you give that chance a shot.

The chance never came.

— I'm not asking you to choose between me and the Zone, — she said. — You already chose, a long time ago. I'm just telling you I accept that choice. For you. And I'm making my own.

— Ira...

— Masha stays with me. Not because you're a bad father — you're a good one, when you're here. It's just that you're rarely here.

He didn't argue. There was nothing to argue with.

The divorce went through quietly, no court battle — Mikhail gave everything to Irina and their daughter, no scenes. Krot rented a room five minutes from the old apartment — to be close to Masha when he came around. Irina didn't stop him from seeing his daughter. That was the best that could have come out of all that bitterness.

Masha would ask: "Dad, why do you live there now?"

— That's just how it worked out, sweetheart.

— Will you still come?

— Of course.

— Every day?

A pause.

— When I can.

Masha nodded. A serious look. She was sixteen already — her illness had cost her so much of her youth.

— Fine, — she said. — Just come.

He came. Not every day — no. But he came.

Chapter 5. The Price of the Search

A year after the divorce, he became the man Borland would later see sitting at a table in the Barkeep's bar.

Good gear, well-worn — not the kind you go out in to make an impression, but the kind that works and that you trust. He'd replaced his detector three times before finding one he liked — the "Veles," expensive, but precise, calibrated for the anomalous fields of the western and northern sectors. He'd swapped his weapon after his very first run — an AKSU, then in his third year a plain AK with a proper stock, because sometimes the stock did the work too.

His biography had gathered details he never told anyone, but you could see them: the correct way his feet fell on unfamiliar ground. The habit of stopping before a turn — not out of fear, but to listen. The ability to read a map while moving, without slowing down.

He liked the Zone.

That was a truth he finally let himself say out loud — not to anyone else, to himself. Sitting alone by a fire in an abandoned house, eating canned food, thinking that in three days there'd be a checkpoint, an exit, a bus into the city, Masha — and realizing he didn't want to.

Not that he didn't want to see Masha. Not that he didn't want to leave.

Just — he wanted to stay here a little longer. In this silence, in this space that presses and lives and says not a single word, yet always lets you know it's there.

He was better off here than out there.

That was bad news.

* * *

He found "Stardust" at the end of the year he and Irina divorced.

Not in Dead City — in its outskirts, in a half-buried culvert he'd climbed into following someone's old map marked "check this." The mark was three years old; whoever made it had, by all appearances, died. Krot found the entrance, waded two hundred meters through knee-deep water, found a narrow tunnel, and in the tunnel — a crack in the wall, and in the crack — a blue glow.

Even. No pulse to it.

"Stardust." Exactly as Gorbaty had described.

He stood in front of it a long time. Three minutes, maybe five. The detector showed a strong anomalous effect, but not a dangerous one — more like a strong field that pressed but didn't burn. Krot looked at the blue light and thought about his father. About what his father used to call "crystallization points." About Masha.

He took it carefully — a fourth-class container, double walls, protective lining. Closed it. Climbed out of the culvert. Stood on the surface a minute in the wind.

Two days later he was home.

He took out the container. Sat at the table. Set it in front of him — just to look at it again, to check it hadn't been a hallucination. The blue light came through the container's lid — faint, even.

He picked up the phone. Called Irina.

— Ira. I found "Stardust."

A pause.

— And?

— It's the one. Matches every description. I want to give it to Masha — she'll get better.

A longer pause. Irina didn't answer right away. Then she did. Her voice was quiet — not the tired kind of quiet. Different.

— Masha died last night. A sudden decline. Her heart.

* * *

Krot sat with the phone in his hand after she hung up. The blue light came through the container. Steady. No pulse.

He didn't cry — not right away. Just sat, looking in the direction he'd come from. The Zone was out there, past the perimeter. Calm, as always. Guilty of nothing.

He thought back to his last conversation with Masha. Two weeks ago — she'd asked him not to go. Laughed at his stories. Her laugh had been good — light, unforced. Real.

Krot closed his eyes.

Then opened them.

* * *

He came to the funeral. Stood beside Irina, who stared at one point and held her hands folded in front of her. Irina never blamed him for anything. Not then, not later. She was smarter than that.

After the funeral they sat in the kitchen of the old apartment. He drank tea. Irina drank tea. The neighbors and relatives had gone home.

— I didn't make it in time, — he said.

Irina said nothing.

— I searched. Searched so long.

— I know.

— She died while I was out there.

— Yes. — A pause. — But you died before she did. She didn't have enough of you.

He looked at the mug. The tea was cold — he hadn't noticed while drinking it.

— Are you going back to the Zone? — Irina asked. Not with judgment. Just asking.

A long silence.

— Yes, — he said.

She nodded. Stood, cleared the mugs.

— I thought so. — A pause at the sink. — Not because you're a bad man, Misha. You're just someone else now.

* * *

He sold "Stardust" to the research center for good money — very good money. Gave part of it to Irina. The rest went into gear.

Three weeks later, he went back into the Zone.

Not because he needed to — he had enough money, no jobs lined up. Just because that was the only mode of existing left that still worked. In the city he walked his rented rooms from one to the next and ran into silence — too much of it, too dense, the kind with no room left in it for him.

In the Zone, the silence was different. It was alive. Something happened inside it — something moved, shifted, breathed. The Zone's silence didn't press on the ears. It spoke.

He walked, and the Zone talked to him through the rustle of leaves and the detector's beeping, through the smell of anomalous exhaust and the crunch of frozen ground underfoot. Not about Masha — about nothing in particular. Just about itself.

That was enough.

Chapter 6. Fine

Krot existed here. Now. In the Zone.

Other stalkers knew him. Not as a legend — as a reliable man you could bring into a group without worrying he'd wander off, panic, or do something reckless. He knew how to walk with scientists — that was his particular skill, a niche talent people valued. Nobody liked bringing scientists into the Zone: they asked questions, slowed the pace, reached for anomalies with measuring instruments when they should have been keeping their distance.

Krot knew how to talk to them in their own language. Explain the Zone through physics they understood. Keep them in line without offending them. It was a skill that had formed without him noticing — somewhere at the intersection of his father's legacy and his own experience.

That paid a little more. And jobs with research groups took priority.

* * *

— How are you holding up, Krot? — Slon asked once, when they sat by a fire.

Late already, the group asleep, only the two of them still awake — by some unspoken agreement that had formed on its own, because both knew: someone had to listen to the night, and it was easier to do that by a fire than from inside a sleeping bag.

— In what sense? — Krot asked.

— Well. — Slon shrugged. — Heard about your daughter. Sorry. You know how it is, the base is a village, everyone knows.

Krot was quiet for a while.

— Fine, — he said finally.

— No, it's not fine. — Slon said it without judgment, just stating it. — But you're managing. That's clear.

— Managing.

— You ever think about... going back? Getting out for good?

Krot looked at the fire.

— Nowhere to go, — he said.

— There's always somewhere.

— Not always.

Slon thought about it, then nodded.

— I get it, — he said. — I'm the same. Different reason, though.

They sat quietly. The fire burned.

— How long have you been walking? — Krot asked.

— Going on seventeen years.

That was a long time. Slon wasn't a legend — legends, as a rule, die young, dramatically, and for a reason. Slon just walked. Methodically, carefully, no heroics, no wasted moves. Seventeen years of that was, in itself, something serious.

— And it's fine? — Krot asked.

Slon smiled — not happily, more the way a man smiles when he knows something the other doesn't yet, and isn't sure whether it's worth telling.

— It's fine, — he said. — If you don't count that my normal life ended exactly seventeen years ago.

* * *

Krot thought about that for a long while, after Slon had curled up by the fire.

A normal life — that was what Mikhail Zemtsov had had. Engineer-physicist, model family man, an apartment overlooking a park. Tea on Sundays, Saturdays at the dacha, Masha with her serious look, asking about anomalies. That had been normal. That had been good.

That no longer existed.

Krot didn't have a normal life. He had a different one — complicated, dangerous, strange. But his own. Truly his own — not inherited from Mikhail Zemtsov, not built on someone else's blueprint. Earned. Suffered for. Here, every scuff on his boots was honest, every artifact in the container was deserved, every silence by the fire was real.

Maybe that's what "fine" meant.

Krot took the bundle of Irina's letters from the bottom of his rucksack. Put them in the fire, saying goodbye to his old self. Cutting off every road back for Mikhail.

* * *

A few months later, there was another night — also late, also by a fire, just a different group, a different place. Northern sector, grid eight, a cache by a stream that dried up in summer and flooded in spring.

A young walker — first year, name forgotten — asked:

— Krot. Why are you here? You're smart, educated. Could work in the city. Teach.

Krot looked at the fire.

— Because it's clear here, — he said.

— What's clear?

— Everything. — A pause. — Out there, there's a lot that isn't clear. A lot you don't control. Here — you don't control it either. But here, at least, you know where the threat's coming from.

The young man thought about it.

— That's strange logic, — he said.

— Maybe, — Krot agreed. — But it's honest.

He didn't add the main thing: that out there was the place where Masha died, and he hadn't been there. That out there was Irina, with her cold tea and her line about him being someone else now. That out there was an apartment with a view of a park that held nothing of his — no scent, no trace, no meaning.

The Zone was his.

That was enough — to stay.

* * *

Slon drifted out of Krot's life slowly — not physically, just less often crossing paths. Different routes, different jobs. Sometimes they met at the base — briefly, a nod, a couple of words. Sometimes they ate at the same table. Rarely — talked.

The last real conversation was in winter. Slon said he was thinking of leaving. For good. Buying something outside the city, somewhere quiet.

— That's the right call, — Krot said.

— Easy for you to say.

— Because it's true.

— And you?

— Nowhere for me to go.

Slon looked at him for a long time. Then said:

— "Nowhere" isn't an answer. "Nowhere" just means you haven't found it yet.

Krot didn't answer.

Slon left the following spring. Bought a plot of land — far from the perimeter, in another region. Wrote sometimes. Short: "alive, garden, quiet." Krot answered just as short: "alive, zone, fine."

That was their language. It suited them.

Chapter 7. The Day Before

The research center opened a new department for studying anomalous phenomena, with expanded funding. They were recruiting guides for long-term expeditions — two, three months, in the western and northern sectors. Good pay. Requirements: five years of experience, knowledge of topography, a medical license (a basic survival course counted).

Krot put in an application.

He went through the interview. Sat down across from a man in his mid-forties, a white coat thrown carelessly over his shoulders, with the tired eyes of a man asking the same question for the twentieth time that week.

— Seven years of experience. Zone — western, northern, central sectors. Western — good, central — adequate. — The man flipped through a printout. — Education — engineering physics. That explains the note, "knows the scientists' language." — He looked up. — Why do you want this assignment?

— Money.

The man was quiet.

— Don't lie to me, please, — he said. — I don't care what the real reason is. But lying at an interview is a sign of instability.

Krot looked at him.

— Habit, — he said. — I've got nothing to do out there. A long expedition beats short runs with gaps in between.

The man looked at him again — no judgment, just assessing.

— Fair enough, — he said finally. — You're in.

* * *

The first long expedition ran three months. Then a second. Then a third. The scientists rotated — Kolesnikov showed up somewhere around the fourth expedition, and Krot liked him right away: not stupid, no snobbery, listened to what he was told, didn't argue with the guide out on the route. The perfect client.

Krot had gone out with Kolesnikov five times by now.

He set money aside — mechanically, with no specific goal. Kept his gear in good shape. Collected artifacts, turned them in — it had become routine, like filing a work report. Sold a few rare specimens. Published three articles anonymously on the forum — on quasi-fields in the western sector, on carousel behavior at low temperatures, on emission precursors. The last one got reprinted in the center's internal journal — no name, just "your text was used."

He'd stopped looking for miracle artifacts.

Not out of disillusionment. Just — no reason to anymore. An artifact without a purpose is just a piece of crystallized field. Pretty, and pointless.

Masha was gone. Irina was living her own life — met someone, Krot had heard in passing, hadn't asked for details. That was right. Irina deserved a normal life. That wasn't his story anymore.

His story happened here.

* * *

The Barkeep's bar was a place Krot had known for a long time.

Not the coziest place — a barrack hastily converted, with wooden benches that creaked under any weight, a single lamp on a post outside, swaying in the draft from the front door so the shadows on the floor never sat still. But reliable. The Barkeep was one of those men who lived neither in the Zone nor outside it, but in that in-between space people called the base — territorially beyond the perimeter, but still an antechamber, not the Zone itself. He knew everyone. Informed on no one. Kept his own counsel, could get information for a fee, and the price was always fair.

Krot came in when he needed to wait something out, or listen.

That day he came because a message had arrived — short, over the shared channel: "Job. Trip to the eastern sector. Kolesnikov's science group. Guide needed. Standard pay, departure day after tomorrow. Report to the Barkeep's."

The eastern sector — Krot had gone there a few times on solo runs, but not too deep. He knew the route on a basic level, no more. Which meant they'd need a second man — someone who knew it deeper, or who could cover ground where the map ran out.

He walked into the bar, took a spot by the wall, ordered tea — the Barkeep brewed a decent tea, which was rare. Started waiting.

Kolesnikov didn't keep him waiting long.

* * *

There were four of them. Kolesnikov — in his usual jacket with the expedition patch, a map already half-unfolded, with that focused look he always had at the start, before things settled into a working rhythm. Beside him — the second scientist: stocky, bespectacled, a rucksack clearly packed well past reason, with a habit of keeping a notebook under his arm even indoors. He was the kind of researcher who wrote everything down — just in case it came in useful later. Krot had crossed paths with him once before, same lineup: quiet, stubborn, didn't get in the way out in the field, but loved arguing about the nature of anomalies at rest stops, with the air of a man who'd already made up his mind on the matter.

Two men in civilian clothes stood a little apart — calm, at ease, with the kind of bearing that settles into a body and doesn't leave, even when the man's wearing a field jacket with no rank insignia. Not tourists, not random people. Soldiers, assigned to the group because the Zone wasn't a place for a stroll.

They discussed the route and the group — besides the ones Krot could see, Kolesnikov's group had two more: an assistant and another stalker.

Then Kolesnikov said the thing Krot himself had been about to propose:

— We need a second guide. The eastern sector's deeper than I'd want to go without backup.

— I know, — Krot said. — Already thought about it.

They didn't discuss candidates — Kolesnikov clearly already had someone in mind. But he wasn't saying who yet.

* * *

Half an hour later, Leshy walked in.

Krot had seen a lot of stalkers.

All kinds — old and young, skilled and mediocre, those who went into the Zone for money, and those who went because there was nowhere else. Those who feared it and overcame that fear every time, and those who didn't fear it anymore — because they'd stopped feeling the risk, which was dangerous in itself.

Leshy was different.

Young — twenty, no more. Thin, in gear that fit him like a second skin — not new, clearly worn in, every piece fitted to that particular body. Moved quietly. Not the way people move when they're trying to be quiet — the way something moves for which quiet is simply a way of being. Not an effort. A nature.

He sat down across from Skvoznyak. A short exchange. Skvoznyak slid something over — a map, probably, Krot couldn't see. Leshy looked at it in silence, never nodded once, never asked to repeat anything. Just looked — and Krot understood he was memorizing it. Not studying it, not analyzing out loud — just filing it away in his head, the way you file something into a container.

Then he looked up.

At Krot.

For a second. Calm. No challenge, no wariness — just a look, a registration, filed away in the part of the head where useful things are kept.

Krot nodded.

Leshy nodded back.

They knew of each other, but had never worked together. Kolesnikov noticed the eye contact — asked Krot about the stalker. And the moment he heard the callsign, decided without a shadow of a doubt that he'd found his second guide. All that was left was to work out the details.

The moment Leshy finished talking with Skvoznyak, Kolesnikov didn't waste time — walked straight to his table.

The conversation was short. Krot watched from a distance — not eavesdropping, just tracking the movements: Kolesnikov talked, Leshy listened, clarified something once, then nodded. That was it.

A short while later Kolesnikov came back, glowing about as much as he ever did, and managed only to tell Krot:

— We leave in half an hour.

* * *

Krot stood, heading for the door. Leshy fell in step with their table just then — they were heading the same way, toward the door, and since they'd be walking together anyway, no point putting off the introductions.

— Krot, — Krot said.

— I know, — Leshy said. — Saw you with Kolesnikov on the last expedition. Northern sector, September.

— Don't remember you there.

— Wasn't in the group. Walked parallel.

Krot looked at him more closely. A parallel route in the northern sector — that meant either a very experienced loner, or someone with a specific job. September in the north — cold, the field unstable after the summer's activity. Not a place you walk for practice.

— Your own business? — Krot asked.

— My own business.

Short. No explanation. Krot didn't push — stalker rules: don't ask about someone else's job.

— At the base gates? — he asked instead.

— Yes.

— What do you know about the route?

— Enough. — A pause. — Kolesnikov needs to get to the old riverbed, three observation points there. From there — east, to the industrial zone. Back the same way, or through the village, if there's trouble.

— I think there will be, — Krot said. — After the last emission, the northern edge of the eastern sector shifted. About a kilometer.

Leshy looked at him — again, brief, appraising.

— Skvoznyak said the same thing. You know this route?

— Walked it four times over the last two years.

— Good, — Leshy said.

And that was it. The conversation ended — not because it ran dry, but because exactly as much had been said as needed. Krot appreciated that. Plenty of walkers talked too much — from nerves, from wanting to show off experience, from a habit of filling silence. This one stayed quiet the right way: because the silence didn't need filling.

Krot slowed a little.

Thought: interesting man. Very young, but something in him — adult. Not by age. As if someone older lived inside, looking out through young eyes.

He nodded to the Barkeep and went out to get ready.

Chapter 8. The Way to the Riverbed

The group gathered at the base gates ahead of the scheduled time.

Krot arrived early — a habit. Stood a little apart, watching the others arrive. Kolesnikov — already familiar, good-natured, map folded in quarters. The second scientist — Krot didn't remember his name, sturdy, bespectacled, with the look of a man used to arguing, rucksack clearly heavier than it should be. He'd lighten that rucksack the moment he found a chance. Not now, later. A man with an overloaded pack in a critical moment was an extra risk for the whole group.

Two soldiers in plainclothes stood a little apart — competently, with good sector coverage, not deliberately arranged, just habitual. Krot nodded to them. They nodded back. That was enough — people who understood.

And the girl.

A young assistant, about twenty-five. Jacket with an expedition patch, a neat rucksack, nothing extra. Krot took note — not of her gear, but of how she held herself: not scared, not putting on courage either. Just waiting, watching everything with the attentive calm of someone well-prepared in theory and not yet tested in practice. First time in the Zone — that much was obvious. Not a bad thing. Just a fact.

And the mercenary.

Krot had seen him back at the bar, but hadn't looked closely — no reason to. Now — he looked. Expensive gear, almost new. Good weapon, well-kept, but carried slightly wrong — not critically, just held differently than most people in the Zone held theirs. The way people carry it when a weapon is a tool of the trade, not part of the space they work in. A subtle difference, but there.

A calm gaze, almost indifferent. Assessing.

Not a walker, but experienced. A mercenary. And a good one, by the look of it.

Leshy showed up last — five minutes before the appointed hour. Stood at the gate, ran his eyes over the group.

Krot watched the way Leshy looked at people. Not studying them — assessing: fast, brief, no display. Took in the whole group in one sweep of the eyes — quick, quiet, so quiet that half of them probably never noticed they'd been sized up. An interesting way to look — not at faces, at details. How they stood, how they held their gear, whether they had a feel for space or not. The unfamiliar mercenary got a particular look, longer, more attentive. The assistant — an instant assessment, neutral. The soldiers — calm, the way you look at something that requires no concern.

Then Leshy waved a hand.

— Let's move.

That was it.

No instructions at the gate, no safety speeches. Just — sized everyone up, weighed their field experience by the way they carried themselves, didn't waste words at the base. Words are for the field, where every one of them has to mean something.

* * *

The Zone took them in without a word.

Krot walked in his usual spot — middle of the group, a little left of the axis. From there he could see everyone: those ahead, those behind, everything happening on the flanks. The detector worked quietly — background even, nothing alarming. He didn't rely on it alone. A detector registers what's already there. Feet and skin — what's only just arriving.

The soldiers moved competently — silent, good rhythm, no wasted motion. The scientists held their pace — the second one was already starting to puff under his rucksack, but didn't fall behind. The assistant walked steady, writing something in her notebook as she went, somehow managing not to stumble.

The mercenary moved as rearguard — on his own, unbidden, a little off the group's axis.

Now that's interesting.

Not a bad thing in itself. Rearguard off to the side is flank cover. But in someone else's group, on a first outing, a call like that gets made either by the very experienced, who've already assessed the situation and decided, or by people used to working their own way regardless of context. An important difference.

Krot didn't yet know which kind this was. He kept watching Leshy.

Leshy walked ahead and never looked back — but Krot understood very quickly that this didn't mean "not watching." Leshy knew where each of them was without turning his head. It showed in how he adjusted his pace: slowing exactly when one of the scientists started to fall behind. Speeding up when the group bunched together and the gap closed to a dangerous distance.

Without a word.

Just — holding the group, the way you hold a space: not physically, with attention.

Krot thought of his father. Sergei Alekseyevich used to say: "A real physicist feels the field without measuring it."

Maybe a real stalker does too.

* * *

The feeling of unease came about twenty minutes in.

Krot felt it as a light chill down his back. Like someone standing behind you, and you don't know it yet.

He looked around twice. Nothing — no sound, no movement. The detector stayed silent.

Then he noticed Leshy had adjusted the route — angled right, toward open ground. No explanation, no stopping, just — a little to the right. The group followed automatically.

Krot understood. Threw a brief glance at Leshy.

He gave a barely visible shake of the head.

Later.

So — he saw it. Felt it too. Good.

Krot kept walking, but tried not to focus his eyes directly, tried to catch details around him with peripheral vision instead. In the open ground it felt a little calmer, but the feeling never fully left. Whatever it was — it kept its distance, didn't attack. Just moved alongside.

Interesting. And unpleasant.

* * *

They found the jelly an hour in — or rather, found the place where it had been.

Leshy stopped the group with a gesture — sharp, no warning. Krot reacted at once: stopped, assessed. The soldiers too — good. The scientists slowed a beat late — normal, for scientists.

Ahead, between two boulders, was an empty hollow. The jelly had stood here a long time — a gray, gelatinous mass, slowly pulsing, Krot had gone around it before. Now — emptiness. A dry bottom, dark earth, a perfectly round mark.

And something lay at the bottom.

Leshy walked to the edge, crouched. Krot stood just behind his shoulder, a little to the side — close enough to see, far enough not to get in the way.

A blot.

He'd seen descriptions, but this was his first time seeing one in the flesh. Black, truly black, the kind the eye slid off. Pulsing slowly, almost imperceptibly. A rare artifact — the scientists still didn't really understand what to do with it, no practical use established.

Leshy reached toward it. Went still for a second. Then took out a container and put it away.

Krot watched.

Why? What did he feel in it?

— That's a blot, — he said. — What do you need it for? Even the scientists don't really...

— Later, — Leshy said.

Krot fell silent. Fine. Later, then.

He watched as Leshy took out a pouch of metal pellets — small, heavy — and marked the spot. Three pellets in a triangle at the edge of the hollow.

Trust your eyes, but check them too. Smart.

Krot double-checked places like this himself — where an anomaly used to be and wasn't anymore — just with different markers. Practical. The Zone doesn't like being trusted blindly.

The assistant was already at Leshy's shoulder with her tablet, peppering him with questions — why the pellets, why the blot, all for the reports. Leshy answered "let's move" twice, flat, no inflection. Even.

Krot snorted quietly to himself, off to the side.

First time out. She'll remember this.

* * *

He smelled the boars before he heard them.

The scent came first — sharp, musky, with that chemical zone-note that develops in creatures that have lived long enough in the field. Krot knew that smell. A bad sign — zone boars in open ground don't hide. They either pass by, or they come at you.

Leshy raised a fist before the smell became obvious to anyone else.

Caught it before I did. Good.

The group stopped. The soldiers raised their weapons without being told — Krot noted it, not for the first time today — good men. He stepped a little to the side himself, clearing the field of fire. The mercenary vanished behind a tree — silently. Krot didn't hear him move. At all.

Now that's professional.

Three boars came out of the sparse forest to the right. Seasoned, bone plates on their necks yellowed with age. They spotted the group three seconds before breaking into the open — and didn't stop. Sped up.

Krot held his weapon but didn't fire — waited. Not out of fear. Because Leshy was ahead, and he was curious to see how he worked.

Leshy didn't retreat.

Krot knew — boars bluff, you can't back off, the group scatters. But knowing and doing were different things. Leshy just stood there. Calm, unhurried, the way people stand when they're not making a decision — because the decision's already been made.

He fired twice — into the joint of the plates at the foreleg. The first boar stumbled, veered off, didn't go down, but broke off the attack.

Vint took the second. One shot, precisely under the ear. The boar dropped at once.

Good shot. Very good.

The third slowed — saw the two down, spun with a grunting roar, and retreated back into the sparse forest. The cracking of deadfall faded fast.

Silence returned.

Krot exhaled slowly. Looked around — everyone on their feet. The assistant stood pale, tablet clutched to her chest with both arms, but holding steady. Good.

* * *

He looked at Leshy.

Leshy had already turned toward the forest — toward where the boars had come from. Stood quietly, watching. Krot looked that way too. Nothing. Forest. Silence.

But the boars had been running from something.

The adrenaline faded, and the same feeling came back — a presence, something or someone — stirring again at the edge of perception.

Leshy felt the same thing. Krot was sure of it.

Someone's leading us. Or following. No intent to attack — not yet. Just watching. Studying.

That wasn't good.

— Let's move, — Leshy said. — The riverbed's close.

Krot nodded. Took his place in the group.

The space around them stayed quiet — quiet enough to seem calm. And quiet enough that anyone who knew how to listen understood: this wasn't silence. This was a pause.

Chapter 9. The Rest Stop

After the boars, the Zone seemed to exhale.

The anomalous background dropped to normal, the detector ticked quietly with no warnings, the trail ran even. The unpleasant feeling hadn't gone anywhere — it sat somewhere between his shoulder blades, quiet and constant, like a splinter — but nothing else happened. The group walked in silence, at pace.

Krot stayed on guard; only Leshy and Vint seemed to notice how much.

But an hour passed calmly. Then another half hour.

He drew level with Leshy on an open stretch — the man walked ahead, detector in hand, eyes moving over the surroundings. Quiet. Even. Krot nodded at the readings.

— Clean?

— So far, — Leshy said.

— Hour to the riverbed, maybe a bit more. — Krot was quiet a moment. — If the weather doesn't have its say.

* * *

The sky darkened fast — not gradually, the way an ordinary cloud does, but all at once, as if someone had clapped a lid over the horizon. Wind rose from nowhere — damp, gusting, smelling of ozone and wet earth. The grass laid over in waves. The trees rustled.

Leshy stopped the group.

Krot stopped at once — no command needed. He simply felt, by the way Leshy went still, that this wasn't a pause to check the detector. A stop with a purpose.

Leshy looked at the sky. At the forest. At the detector. Then thought — briefly, silently, with no visible hesitation.

Krot was thinking the same thing Leshy clearly was: alone, you could keep going. In the rain, anomalies show up brighter, more noticeable. For an experienced walker, rain isn't an obstacle — more of an advantage. But seven people were a different matter. One person lost from sight in a downpour, among the carousels — and then you go looking.

— Krot, — Leshy said.

— Already thinking. — Krot squinted at the horizon, remembering. — There's an old village around here somewhere. Abandoned, a long time back. I was there a couple of years ago with another group. There's a house on the edge — cellar's dry, sturdy. We could wait it out.

— Far?

— Twenty minutes northwest. — A pause. — Maybe twenty-five.

Leshy unfolded the map. Krot leaned over it, tapped a finger — found it fast, remembered the place well. The village was marked as a dotted outline, uninhabited. A detour off the route, but a small one.

The first drops hit the map.

— Let's go, — Leshy said, folding it.

* * *

The twenty-five minutes stretched.

The rain started before they arrived. Not a downpour — not yet — but heavy, cold, with a wind that struck their faces and scrambled the direction of sound. The forest darkened. The grass turned slick.

Krot walked, thinking that he'd already been to this house. Knew the cellar held, that the beams were sound, that the water never got in. That was a pleasant thing to know — a rarity in the Zone, knowing exactly what waited ahead. But something still wouldn't let him rest easy.

The feeling of being watched from behind hadn't gone anywhere.

He tried to catch it — twice slowed on purpose, let the group pass ahead, dropped to the back for a few minutes. Watched the forest. Listened. The rain roared, the wind bent the branches, the detector stayed silent.

Nothing.

But — it was there. He was as sure of that as he was of the reliability of his own rucksack. Not fear, not hallucination. A presence. Intelligent. It wasn't trying to attack, wasn't coming closer. Just moving alongside — at its own distance, its own pace.

That was what worried him most. A random mutant doesn't behave like that. A random mutant either attacks or leaves. This one was watching.

Leshy, by all appearances, was thinking the same thing.

When the group entered the sparse forest by the village, Krot drew level with him — quietly, not for the others:

— Noticed it long?

Leshy glanced at him sideways.

— Since the start of the route.

— Me too. — A pause. — Detector's clean.

— I know.

Neither said anything more. That was enough — both had seen the same thing, both were holding it in mind. Not panic, not theories, just a fact that needed to stay open.

* * *

The village emerged from the rain suddenly.

First — the silhouette of a leaning fence, then the dark hollows of windows, then the houses themselves. Krot recognized it at once — the same one from two years back. The same crooked cabin at the center, the same house with the caved-in roof by the well. And the same house on the edge — squat, thick-logged, with a roof that held.

He walked ahead, found the door, pulled it — it creaked, opened. Nodded to the others.

— Here.

The cellar was exactly as he remembered it — dry, low, smelling of old wood and earth. Krot went down first, looked around. Everything in place, nothing extra. The ceiling beams holding. One exit. Fine.

The group settled in — some on the floor, some on a crate. The soldiers took up position against the wall without a word, professionally. Kolesnikov unfolded his map, the second scientist pulled out a notebook — and then, by the look of it, remembered his flask. The assistant shook the water off her jacket, looked around. Asked Leshy:

— How long?

— Until it passes.

— And if it's three hours?

— Then three hours.

She went quiet. Krot took note — Leshy hadn't spoken roughly or gently, just made clear the conversation wasn't going anywhere. The right tone.

He sat down between the scientists himself — his usual spot. Kolesnikov was already reaching for him with questions about the route, the second scientist was getting out his flask. This was their working mode: a pause meant it was fine to think out loud.

Krot took out his thermos.

— Leshy, — he called. — Tea, if I pour it from the thermos?

Leshy stood on the stairs — three steps up, looking out the doorway at the village.

— Pour it, — Leshy said, without turning.

Krot poured. Set it on the step beside him.

The rain drummed on the roof — steady, heavy. The village stayed silent outside.

The feeling of being watched was still there.

Krot felt it even here, in the cellar. Not as sharp as out on the route — the walls and earth gave some kind of shielding, or maybe it was just distance. But — it was there. Something outside was waiting. Patiently, the way only something with nowhere to hurry to can wait.

He poured himself tea. Sat down.

The second scientist passed the flask around.

Krot took it.

* * *

The scientists' conversation ran long — surprisingly substantial for people who'd just gotten soaked through and were sitting in a dirt cellar. Kolesnikov asked a question about anomalous fields and spatial pockets, the second scientist disagreed with the basic premise, and after that it carried itself.

Krot talked — explaining, answering questions, arguing where there was something to argue. This was his niche skill: talking to scientists so they'd listen, and to walkers so they'd understand. A bridge between two languages describing the same thing from different sides.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the others.

The soldiers lay against the wall. Eyes closed. Breathing even. They knew how to use a pause — that was right, that was professional.

The assistant sat against the opposite wall. Watching Leshy — quietly, not aggressively, just with the kind of interest a person has looking at something not quite understood. Leshy seemed to notice and looked away without a word. Krot smirked to himself.

Young. But he did the right thing.

Vint sat a little apart. Back to the wall, facing the cellar — so he could see everyone and the stairs at once. Krot knew that position. He sat that way himself sometimes, in unfamiliar company.

Either the man had a habit he couldn't switch off. Or — he was watching someone. Or expected to be watched himself.

Interesting question. No answer yet.

The flask made another round. Krot took it — the last time for today.

The village stayed silent.

Chapter 10. The Trap

He woke before Leshy.

Almost before. When he opened his eyes, Leshy was already sitting by the stairs, looking at the ceiling. Or thinking. Hard to tell with him.

Krot rubbed his face. His head felt clear — not from rest, not from the flask. Something in the cellar's air had changed overnight. Not a smell, not a sound — that same nameless feeling built up over years. Something had grown. Denser.

— Is this me, — he said quietly, — or...

— Not you, — Leshy said.

Silence.

— Bad.

Leshy nodded. Added nothing — there was no need to.

* * *

They ate breakfast in silence.

That in itself was telling. Kolesnikov ate mechanically — he always talked while eating, that was his norm, unbreakable. Now — he stayed quiet. Stared into his mug. The second scientist didn't argue — with anyone, about anything. The assistant held her mug with both hands and stared at the wall.

Krot watched this and thought: bad sign. When walkers feel the unease, it's a working situation. When scientists feel it — people who'd been in the Zone two days and hadn't developed any instinct yet — that meant the signal was loud. Very loud. Loud enough that even an unprepared person picked it up — the way you catch infrasound, not with your ears but with your skin.

That wasn't good.

Leshy stood first — no words, up the stairs, into the house. Wasn't gone long. Came back down. Sat on the step.

The group watched him. All of them.

— Leshy, — Krot said carefully. — What's out there?

— Anomalies, — Leshy said. — Everywhere.

— Meaning — everywhere?

— Meaning — the whole village. — A pause. — After the rain. Grew like mushrooms. Where it was clean yesterday.

Silence.

The second scientist opened his mouth: — That's not possible. Anomalies don't form that fast. Forming an anomalous structure requires—

— I know what it requires, — Leshy said. — And yet.

Krot stood, climbed two steps, looked through the doorway.

The village outside looked like a village. Morning light, wet grass, dark log walls. Nothing visible.

But he felt it. Where yesterday there'd been ordinary space, now there was a field. Not local, not a single point — continuous, like fog after a night. It had come with the rain, or behind the rain, or used it as cover. Anomalies didn't form this fast — that was true. It contradicted everything he knew about how the Zone worked.

But the detector was silent. And the field was there.

Krot went back. Sat on the crate.

— Detector's silent, — he said.

— Silent.

— Then how do you—

— I feel it.

Krot looked at Leshy. He looked back — even, no explanation. Just a fact.

Krot nodded. Slowly, accepting it. Instinct wasn't mysticism — it was accumulated experience, processed faster than the conscious mind could put it into words. Leshy felt the field, and that was that. Arguing with it made about as much sense as arguing with the fact that the ground was wet after rain.

Kolesnikov raised a hand — the gesture of a man used to meetings.

— What does this mean practically? Are we trapped?

— For now — yes.

— And how long?

Leshy didn't answer right away. He was thinking. Krot watched him and tried to guess what exactly he was calculating. Escape routes? The field's behavior? Time to discharge?

— Krot, — Leshy said finally. — You ever hear of an anomalous field that moves?

Krot turned toward him slowly.

He'd heard of it. Of course he had. Zonnikov's theory — a working name, the author already dead. Mobile fields, not tied to a fixed point in space, moving by some logic of their own. His father had mentioned it in passing — as a hypothesis he found interesting but unconfirmed.

— Heard of it, — Krot said. — A theory. Considered unconfirmed.

— Considered, — Leshy said.

Krot looked at him for a second.

A mobile field. That was what he'd felt all of yesterday. Not a mutant, not some random observer's presence — the field itself, moving alongside them, and at night it had rolled over the village while they slept.

That explained everything. And it made the situation considerably worse than just "a lot of anomalies."

— Well I'll be, — Krot said quietly.

Not from fear. From the kind of surprise you get when something you always considered a theory turns out to be standing right in front of you — real, tangible.

His father would have been thrilled.

Krot himself — not thrilled. But that was a separate matter.

Beyond the cellar walls, the village stayed silent. The field sat outside — dense, invisible, patient.

Not just a field. Something else could be felt inside it.

Krot didn't say that out loud. Too soon for that.

They needed to get out. The only question was how.

Chapter 11. Field of Wonders

— Krot. Vint. With me.

Krot got up at once. Leshy spread the map on the crate — no question, no explanation of why, just spread it out and started talking.

— I need an exact layout of the village. Every house, every gap, the distances between buildings. As best you remember.

Krot took a pencil and started drawing — confidently, from memory. He knew the terrain. The space sat clear in his head: there was the main street, there the leaning house by the well, there the distance from porch to corner — ten paces, no more.

Leshy watched, corrected where he saw more precisely.

Then Vint took the pencil.

Krot watched him work. The mercenary added detail without a word, without hesitation — the fence at the north house, three sections, the middle one collapsed. The well further right than it seemed. The gate at the outermost cabin — open, unlocked; in the rain, in the dark, in passing, he'd still surveyed the whole perimeter.

A serious man.

The map came out dense. It took an hour.

— Wait here, — Leshy said, gathering the sheets.

— I'll go with you, — Krot said.

— No. I need you here. — A pause. — If I'm not back in four hours, you try to get the group out yourself. If both of us die in there, the outcome for the group is bad.

Krot didn't argue. The logic was sound. He nodded.

Leshy took the map and went out.

* * *

Four hours was a lot and a little at the same time.

A lot — because sitting in the cellar waiting while one man dealt with whatever had covered the whole village was a nerve-racking way to spend the time. A little — because Krot couldn't imagine how what Leshy had taken on could possibly be done in four hours at all.

Walk the whole village by hand. Find a route through an anomalous field the detector couldn't see. No instruments, just instinct.

Krot sat and thought about that.

He could feel a field himself. He'd developed that over seven years — slowly, unevenly, without ever quite noticing when it started. Just, at some point, he'd stopped fully trusting the detector and started trusting instinct more. But what Leshy was doing out there now was a different level. Not just a stalker's sense. More like reading the field the way you'd read a map.

Where a twenty-year-old kid got that from — unclear.

The scientists talked quietly by the wall. The soldiers stayed silent — one asleep, the other watching the stairs. The assistant was writing something down. Vint sat in his usual spot — back to the wall, face to the cellar.

Krot caught his eye.

Vint wasn't looking at him — at the stairs. With the expression people get when there's a separate conversation running in their head, unconnected to what's happening around them.

Then he stood, climbed the stairs without a word, and went out.

Krot watched him go for a second.

Went out after Leshy. Unnoticed — so quietly that no one below seemed to register it.

Interesting.

* * *

Leshy came back three and a half hours later; Vint not long before him.

Krot heard the footsteps before he saw him — heavier than usual, fatigue in every step, but even, unhurried. He came into the cellar. Sat on the crate. Spread out the map.

The sheet was a web of lines, crosses, arrows. Anomalies — marked with crosses. The route — a straight line between them, with notes: stop, fast, left, three steps. Timing marked in some spots — pencil numbers.

Krot looked at the map and understood: this was three and a half hours of solo work, no instruments, in a space the detector couldn't see. It was a map he himself could never have drawn — not from lack of skill, but because he didn't have this particular skill.

The assistant leaned over the sheet — and went still. Then took out her notebook and started copying it. Fast, barely glancing at her pencil.

Leshy looked at her. Said nothing.

Krot caught that look. There was no irritation in it — more something like: let her. Doesn't matter either way.

An interesting reaction from a man who'd just spent three hours making this map and who knew exactly what information like this was worth in the Zone.

— Listen carefully, — Leshy said, and the talking died down. — I walked the route. Forty minutes, maybe more. My pace. Where I say stand, you stand. Where I say run, you run without questions and don't stop. — He swept his eyes over the group. — Anomalies are unstable after discharge. The window's small. Whoever hesitates puts everyone at risk.

Silence. Nods.

— Krot, soldiers up front. Not as canaries. — A look at Krot — quick, direct. — I'll be at the back, I'll see the whole route. If something shifts, I'll correct it.

— Understood, — Krot said.

He'd put himself at the back. Which meant — ready to react to anyone. Meant he didn't consider anyone expendable, scientists included.

— Moving out.

* * *

The first twenty minutes went well.

Leshy led by voice — short, no explanations. Step left. Stop. Three steps forward. Right. Fast. Krot walked first in the group and passed the commands on with his body — not words, movement: a stop meant stop, a turn meant turn. People picked it up.

The village around them looked like a village.

That was the worst part. No visible anomalies, no glow — just wet grass, dark logs, gray sky. An ordinary abandoned place. And at the same time Krot could feel the field on every side — dense, jittery after the rain. He walked through the invisible corridor Leshy had cut through that field, and tried not to think about what would happen if the corridor shifted.

The soldiers kept pace well. The scientists — worse, but held on. The assistant walked steady, watching her feet.

Ten meters left to the exit.

* * *

Krot felt it before he saw it.

Not the impact itself — a change in the air. The pressure swayed sideways. Behind him — a pop, light, like a cork, and then a rising hum.

He turned.

The second scientist's rucksack — the overloaded one, the one he'd meant to lighten and never had — had clipped a funnel at the edge. The soldiers reacted instantly, yanked him free. The scientist stayed on his feet.

The funnel started spinning up.

— Stop! — Leshy shouted.

And immediately, a second later:

— Krot! Run! Everyone — run! Not far to the exit!

Krot bolted.

He'd memorized the map, but checked it on the move anyway — one glance, a second — and took the route confidently, without hesitation. Exit straight ahead, a little left of the last house, don't stop. The soldiers followed, step for step — good, correct. The scientists behind them — slower, but holding the line.

At the edge of his sight — the assistant.

Standing still.

In the middle of the corridor, staring at the funnel. Her legs weren't holding her — he could see it in how she sagged, as if her knees had decided that was enough.

Krot thought about turning back — and stopped.

Leshy was closer.

Three strides and he was beside her, grabbed her, dragged her down the corridor. Krot saw it out of the corner of his eye, already running — how Leshy hauled her along, how the ground behind them was starting to really roar now, a chain, one after another.

He ran the last stretch. Broke out of the field.

Stood, caught his breath. Turned. Started counting everyone.

Chapter 12. The Run Through the "Minefield"

The soldiers — here. Both. The scientists — here. Kolesnikov gasping, doubled over, hands on his knees. The second scientist stood straight, staring at the field with the look of a man whose head didn't have enough words for what he was seeing.

Two were missing.

Leshy. And Vint — he'd vanished somewhere between the cellar and the exit. Krot hadn't noticed when. He'd been in the cellar, then he wasn't. Quiet, the way only he could manage.

The field was detonating. Anomalies layering over each other, space losing its shape — pops, flashes, a pressure on the ears that wasn't sound, that the word "sound" didn't quite fit. Looking that way was like looking at several realities at once.

Then something whistled through the air — sharp, in an arc — and the assistant dropped onto the grass some twenty meters off.

She landed decently. Covered her head, took the impact on her shoulder, rolled. Krot was already running.

— Alive?

She lifted her head. Looked at him.

— Alive, — she said.

And burst into tears.

* * *

They sat on the grass some fifty meters from the edge of the field.

The detonations were dying down — slowly, with pauses. The village was sinking into a silence still tangled with overlaps that hadn't yet unraveled.

No one spoke.

The soldiers watched the field with the professional anger people get when a situation slips out of control and someone's left inside. They didn't fuss, didn't shout — just stood and watched. Kolesnikov stared at the ground. The second scientist lit a cigarette.

Krot lit one too. Stood a little apart from the others, looking at the field.

The second scientist's rucksack. He'd meant to lighten it back on the route — saw it was overloaded, decided: later. Later never happened. If he'd lightened it, the rucksack wouldn't have clipped the funnel. The funnel wouldn't have spun up. There'd have been no chain.

He didn't say that out loud. Not out of fear — just no reason to. The past couldn't be fixed, and the group didn't need his confession right now.

The assistant talked — fast, disjointed, the way people talk when something needs to come out. She described how she'd frozen. How Leshy had appeared and dragged her through a corridor she couldn't see. How he'd thrown her into an anomaly — she'd thought it was the end. How, mid-flight, she'd understood she needed to tuck in.

— He saved me and cut off his own way out, — she said. — Because of me, he's dead.

No one answered.

Krot took a drag, watching the field.

He was angry at Leshy — that was honest, he didn't try to hide it from himself. Sent him ahead, said go, I'm behind you. And then stayed behind. And Vint too. Two professionals inside, six outside. An unfair ratio.

But the anger wasn't sticking.

Because he'd seen it. Seen how Leshy walked at the back so he could see everyone. Seen how he'd covered the distance to the assistant in three strides — before Krot himself had even managed to react. Seen him dragging her through a corridor that was already falling apart.

That wasn't a mistake. That was a choice.

Krot knew people like that. He'd seen them rarely — not many in the Zone have it in their blood, walk it like their own backyard. Borland was one of them. Young — and only now, sitting on the wet grass, did Krot truly register how young. Twenty. Maybe less. And he walked as if he'd known the Zone since birth.

Maybe he had.

He dropped his cigarette butt.

— Time to move.

Everyone looked at him.

— Leshy and Vint aren't coming out. — He said it evenly, no inflection. — Not from here, not now. — A pause. — If by some miracle they made it, we'll meet them at the endpoint. Leshy knew this route better than any of us. If there's a way out, he'll find it.

He wasn't sure of that. But that wasn't for himself — it was for them.

— On your feet. Moving out.

Kolesnikov stood first. The soldiers followed. The assistant wiped her face, put away her notebook, got up.

Krot took one last look at the field.

Live, Leshy. You still owe me an explanation of what a mobile anomalous field is. In plain terms, without all your "I feel it."

He turned and walked.

C

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