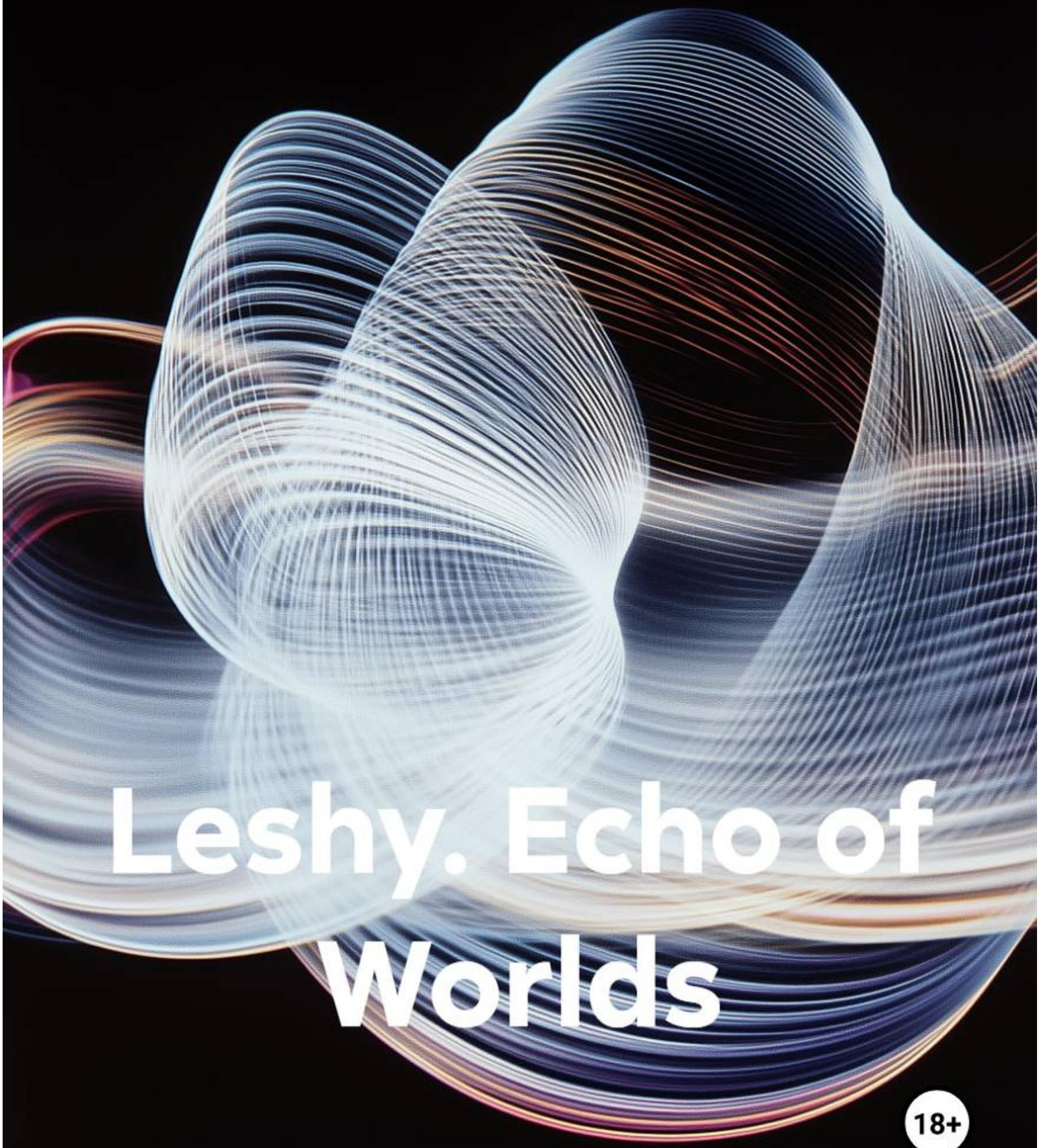
Borland Clause



Leshy. Echo of Worlds

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Borland Clause

Leshy. Echo of Worlds

«Автор»

2026

Clause B.

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Two years of silence. Two years of emptiness in the darkest place in this world — inside his own soul.In losing Vikki, Leshy lost his bearings. The purpose of the journey is forgotten, the Cutter lies there as dead weight. The Zone knows how to grind down those who give in, and Borland was already ready to become a part of it.But Fate has plans of its own.She appears on the threshold of his refuge: a desperate girl searching for her father, who vanished in the depths of the anomalous zones. She can't read space, but she has the one thing Leshy is defenseless against — a chilling resemblance to the one he couldn't save.A stranger's face, so dear to him, makes him take up the Cutter again.Ahead lies a new path across the borders of worlds: new realities with deadly laws, new creatures and old ghosts. Will he find a stranger's father, if he never forgave himself? And who is really following him — a living creature, or a treacherous echo of worlds?

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Borland Clause
Leshy. Echo of Worlds

Prologue. Old and New

The fracture closed behind him without a sound.

Borland lay on his back and looked at the sky. Gray. Alive — with clouds, with that movement of air called wind. The grass under his hand was wet from rain. The smell — that very smell. Ozone, wet earth, the taste of metal at the edge of perception.

We made it out...

The words came on their own and stayed hanging there — empty, like a cartridge case without powder.

His right hand gripped the Cutter. His left was clenched in a fist — around something hard, put there at the last moment before space closed for good.

Somewhere nearby Vint was talking. Then Gaika. The voices came as through thick glass — the words reached him, the meaning didn't. Consciousness was slipping away, and that was his only salvation from what had happened.

They put him on a stretcher. Carried him.

* * *

It was good to be at Viktor's place; nobody forced their company on him, nobody pried. But Borland understood it himself — something was wrong. No mirror. No words from others, for what was happening inside him — nobody could have found the right words. Something inside had shifted and not settled back. All the old priorities and goals had faded. Inside, it was empty.

Not grief. Grief is something alive, it moves, it changes, sometimes it recedes. This was different. Just — empty.

A few days later he packed his things.

The Zone took him in as it always had. Without ceremony. It simply opened up around him — familiar, silent, with that smell that doesn't change in any world.

For the first weeks he walked. With no route. Just — inward, to where people were rarer and anomalies stood thicker. His instinct worked on its own — he skirted the Electras without thinking, picked his direction by the barely perceptible change in the pressure of the air. The body did everything right. The head took no part.

That was how he lived.

He found a place — deep, where ordinary stalkers didn't go without a good reason. Not a cache — more of a foothold. An old, lonely forester's house in the depths of a dark forest. Walls. A roof. Nothing more was needed. The Cutter lay on a shelf and was silent. Borland hardly touched it — no reason to open fractures when there was nowhere to go. The runic knife lay there too, and only the photo in the medallion was always with him — in his breast pocket.

The Zone lived its own life. Anomalies moved, mutants raised new generations, stalkers came and went. Some came back, most didn't.

Borland became part of that landscape.

* * *

The first time he showed himself to people was a couple of months later, when he decided to help a loner.

Not out of kindness — just because he had decided to. Four men were following a lone stalker's trail. He watched their hunt. The hunters — by their movement, by the intervals, by the way they held their weapons. It wasn't the first time they'd had to kill loners and strip the corpses.

Borland didn't wait to see how it would end.

He came out of the fog from behind — soundlessly, as he knew how, as he had been taught. The first one fell without having time to understand what had happened. The second managed to turn around. That was enough to see, but not enough to do anything.

The third and the fourth ran.

Borland caught up with both.

The stalker they had been chasing came out of cover, looked at what was left, and was silent for a long time. Then he raised his eyes to Borland.

Borland was already leaving.

"Hey." His voice trembled. "Who the hell are you."

Borland didn't answer.

* * *

Rumors move fast in the Zone — faster than people, faster than mutants, sometimes faster than anomalies.

Appears out of nowhere. Lives inside, in the very depths — where nobody goes without a dosimeter and a prayer. Sometimes helps — silently, without explanations, without payment. Sometimes kills — and then it would be better to meet a mutant or take a careless step into an anomaly than to meet him. The slaughters he left behind were neat. That was exactly what was terrifying — not the blood, not the scale, but the neatness. Professional, cold, with no anger and no haste. As if it were a job. As if he didn't care.

Here they christened him Leshy, without even knowing that was what he had been called in the past. Those who had seen him themselves said: the eyes are alive, but they look through you. Like a man who has already counted everything there was to count, and the result didn't please him.

He traded rarely. Only when he needed something specific. The price was always firm — no haggling, no discounts. He put on the table what he had brought, took what he had bought, and left. He asked no questions. The questions he didn't like, he didn't answer — he simply looked, and the other person usually decided on his own that the subject was closed.

Two years passed.

* * *

Borland sat by the wall and looked at the Cutter.

The knife lay on the shelf — where it always lay. The blade didn't glow. Didn't reach for fractures. It was silent, the way everything is silent that has long since stopped being called.

Nowhere to go.

The thought came and went — without pain, without regret. Just a fact. One of those you no longer argue with.

Rain fell beyond the wall. Quiet, steady — the kind that in the Zone usually comes before a surge. Borland listened to it and thought that he would have to fix the perimeter. Anomalies shift after a surge. He had long ago built a maze of anomalies around the house, some drawn in by the methods of the tribe from his past life, others created by Khimik's methods.

His hand found the pendant under his clothes — on its own, without the head's involvement. A habitual gesture, down to automatism. He didn't take out the photograph. He just held the pendant in his palm — warm from the body, light.

The rain fell.

Borland sat.

The Zone lived around him — breathing, moving, grinding down those who gave in, and leaving burns on those it couldn't chew through.

Chapter 1. The Research Center

Lika was late.

She flew down the corridor — heels clicking loudly on the floor, folder under her arm, hair streaming behind her — counting the minutes in her head. The meeting had started seven minutes ago. Seven minutes wasn't the end of the world, if she managed to slip in quietly and sit at the edge. The end of the world would come if she was noticed.

She had stayed too long in the archive and lost track of time. Again.

The search for information about her father was complicated by the total chaos in the archive. The old folders resisted — the paper stuck together, some of the records had faded to the state of shadows, some of the documents in the folders were mixed up as if someone had been sorting them in a hurry and abandoned the job halfway. Lika turned page after page, looking for a name, a date, any mention of her father's last assignment — and didn't find it. The archive kept everything under the sun except what she needed.

Her father had disappeared right here. More precisely — he had gone out on an assignment for this institute and never come back. The official version: an accident in an anomalous zone. The details — classified. The personal file — classified. The assignment itself — classified.

Lika had spent four years to end up on this side of the research center's doors.

A university degree in the field, by correspondence, alongside attempts to get a job here. The competition for lab assistant — three attempts, she got through on the third. And now she had been in the anomalous materials research laboratory for two months, cataloguing samples and writing protocols, and spending all her free time in the archive, among folders nobody had ever properly looked after.

The institute was huge, unwieldy, and in that unwieldiness there was an advantage of its own: nobody was watching what exactly she was looking for.

So far — nothing.

But she had only just begun.

A turn. Another corridor. The office door swung open right in front of her.

Lika couldn't brake in time.

* * *

The impact was mutual.

She flew into someone solid, hard — the folder tore loose, papers fanned out, her heel twisted — and they both ended up on the floor. Lika hit her elbow, hissed, tried to get up by reflex.

She got up. The man — tall, close-cropped, with that particular calm in his face that people have when they're used to surprises — rose after her. Slowly, without cursing. As if the fall had been planned and hadn't surprised him much.

"Sorry, I wasn't looking where I was running, I really didn't mean to, please forgive me," the words spilled out on their own as Lika bent for the papers, "it was my fault, completely, I was just late and miscalculated."

She straightened up.

The man was looking at her.

Not the way people look after a collision — with irritation or bewilderment. Differently. He looked at her face and didn't move. At all. As if he had seen something and frozen with it — unable either to look away or to speak.

Lika fell silent.

A second. Another.

Who is that? Why is he looking like that? Is he someone from management? I've only been here two months and already, already...

The tears came unexpectedly — she hadn't wanted them, it was just nerves, just that look that made her uneasy, and the thought that everything would collapse — four years of effort, the attempts to get in here...

"It's all right," said the man. His voice was even. "Be more careful in the future."

But he still hadn't looked away.

* * *

At the noise in the corridor, a woman came out of the office.

Lika had seen her before — in the corridors, at general meetings. Ekaterina Sergeyevna, head of the Department of Fracture Research. One of those people you look at and immediately understand: this person knows what she wants and is used to getting exactly that. Now she stood in the doorway and looked at Lika with an expression Lika couldn't read.

"Vikki?"

Her voice broke — quietly, almost inaudibly, but Lika heard it.

She turned around.

"Lika." A pause. "Do you know me?"

Ekaterina Sergeyevna blinked. Something in her face changed, the emotions went — quickly, professionally — and it became ordinary again.

"I mistook you for someone else." An even voice. "What happened here?"

"Nothing serious," said the man. "I came out of your office too fast and knocked the girl off her feet."

The informal "you" came out naturally — not a slip, just a boundary that had long since been erased between these two. Lika noted it automatically while trying to work out what was going on. She was waiting for a dressing-down. Or a cold "report to your department head." Or just a look of disgust turned aside.

Instead — she was being covered for.

"Which department are you from?" asked Ekaterina Sergeyevna.

"The anomalous materials research laboratory." Lika spoke quickly. "I'm a new employee, an assistant. I'm sorry for making a noise."

Ekaterina Sergeyevna looked at her a second longer than politeness required. Then she said — calmly, as if she had already decided everything and was simply stating a fact:

"I'll request your transfer to my department. A position recently opened up there — lab assistant for cataloguing artifacts that affect space. Go into my office and wait. I'll be back in half an hour — I need to settle the matter with your current supervisor right away."

Lika opened her mouth. Closed it.

Nodded.

She went into the office. Closed the door behind her.

* * *

It was quiet in the corridor.

"You noticed too," said Vint. Not a question — he said it as a statement.

Ekaterina was looking at the closed door.

"Have you ever seen me make decisions about people for the team this fast?"

Vint didn't answer. That in itself was an answer.

"The ears are different," Ekaterina said after a pause. "And there's nothing at the ends of the hair."

"I noticed."

A pause.

"We need to find out who she is," said Vint. "Before we do anything further."

"We will." Ekaterina was already walking down the corridor. "Go. I'm going to Bishof, then I'll come back to her."

Vint remained standing. Looked at the office door for another second.
Then he turned and went the other way.

Chapter 2. Ekaterina Sergeyevna

Ekaterina Sergeyevna's office was exactly what the office of a person who tolerated no excess should be.

No decorative trinkets on the windowsill, no frames with motivational quotes on the walls. Only what worked: a desk, three chairs, a cabinet of folders — labeled evenly, without abbreviations — and a board on the wall that was clearly not used for show. Diagrams on it, graphs, several photographs of anomalous formations with handwritten captions. In the corner, a safe. Over the desk, a lamp on a flexible stalk, the one item that, judging by its chipped base, the owner had carried with her through several workplaces.

On the desk — only the necessary. A laptop. A cup of pens. A folder of current documents, closed. No clutter.

Lika sat across from the empty chair and waited.

She hadn't digested what had happened yet. Everything had gone too fast — the collision, that look, the instant offer of a transfer, the closed door. Now she was sitting in the office of a department head, a place she had never expected to end up under any circumstances, trying to understand what exactly was going on and how it would end for her.

Why she had been taken on here — she didn't understand.

* * *

Ekaterina began the conversation in Bishof's office without preamble.

"Give me that girl."

Bishof looked up from his papers. Heavyset, close to fifty, with that particular solidity in every movement that people have when they're used to making decisions without hurry. Elbows on the desk, fingers laced — the pose of a man who listens and counts at the same time.

"What girl?"

"The new assistant from your laboratory. Anzhelika," Ekaterina didn't sit down. "I need someone for the lab assistant position, my Solovyova is on maternity leave, the work is at a standstill. She'll do."

Bishof was silent for a second. Then:

"Why do you need this one in particular? What did you see in her?"

His eyes were restless — not from emotion, from the habit of calculating. He was clearly searching the situation for what he might have missed. The girl was perfectly ordinary — no connections, no special achievements in her portfolio. Average discipline: a few late arrivals in two months, periodically vanishes who knows where. Nothing remarkable, to be honest.

"I need her, and that's it," Ekaterina cut in. "I'm not obliged to explain my staffing choices."

"Oh, you really are cantankerous," Bishof leaned back, and a slow smile appeared on his face, the smile of a man who had just found where it was to his advantage to agree. "Fine. I'll give her up. But you owe me a favor."

Ekaterina knit her brows.

"Equipment," he said simply. "I want a new installation for the laboratory. It costs a decent amount, approval goes through three levels. Help me push it through."

"What kind of installation?"

He named it. Ekaterina thought for a second — weighed where it overlapped with her own tasks, and realized that it overlapped quite well.

"Agreed. But keep in mind — you won't be the only one playing with it. That installation will be useful to me too."

"It's always a pleasure doing business with you, Ekaterina Sergeyevna," said Bishof, in an intonation that could have meant respect as easily as relief.

Ekaterina left without saying goodbye. Superfluous words weren't her style.

* * *

The office door swung open sharply — Lika flinched.

Ekaterina Sergeyevna walked to the desk, sank into her chair, laced her fingers and rested her chin on them. She looked at Lika for several seconds — studying, unhurried. Then she smiled. Unexpectedly warmly.

"Let's get acquainted properly. Ekaterina Sergeyevna, head of the Department of Fracture Research. You're on my team now. You start your duties tomorrow; today you have nowhere to hurry. Tell me about yourself."

Lika was taken aback by such direct interest in her person. After two months in a laboratory where at best people looked at her as a function — fetch, record, put away — this kind of attention felt unfamiliar.

"Anzhelika Igorevna Svetlova," she spoke quickly, before her thoughts could scatter. "I'm studying by correspondence at the State Institute of Radiology and Physics of Anomalies, in the faculty of radiological research of solid anomalous matter, third year. I work alongside — I've been here two months. Before that, six months remotely at a private research company, processing field data. I have experience with artifacts, mostly classification and primary diagnostics."

Ekaterina listened without interrupting. Occasionally she made a brief note in a notebook.

"Good," she said when Lika fell silent. "Tell me about your parents."

The pause was short, but noticeable.

"My mother is a doctor, a general practitioner at a district clinic," Lika said evenly. "My dad... my dad was a stalker."

"Was?"

"He disappeared. Four years ago." She was looking at the desk, not at Ekaterina. "He worked on contract for this research center. He went out on an assignment and didn't come back. Officially — an accident in an anomalous zone. Everything else is classified."

Silence.

"That's why you're here," said Ekaterina. Without a question's intonation.

Lika raised her eyes. There was no point in denying it.

"Yes. I wanted to find anything at all. What his last assignment was. Where he went. What happened to him."

"What was his name?"

"Svetlov Igor Dmitriyevich." Lika paused. "In the Zone they called him Bely. Because of his hair — he went gray early, at about thirty, his head was completely white."

Ekaterina wrote it down. Put the pen away. Looked at the girl — attentively, without the guardedness she'd had in the corridor.

"I'll look into it. I promise nothing, a lot really is classified. But I'll see what can be found."

Lika nodded. Something tightened in her throat — she hadn't expected such a simple "I'll look into it." She was used to beating against walls of indifference.

"That's all for today. Go home, rest. Tomorrow at nine — come to me, I'll introduce you to your colleagues and bring you up to speed."

Lika stood. At the door she turned around — wanted to say something. To thank her, probably.

Ekaterina was already looking at the laptop.

Lika left.

* * *

A minute after the door closed behind her, Ekaterina reached for the phone.

The first call — to HR. Svetlova Anzhelika Igorevna's transfer to be processed today, backdated, all questions with Bishof already settled. The second — to the archives department. The personnel file of contract employee Svetlov Igor Dmitriyevich, call sign Bely. Everything there was,

including classified materials — she had a certain level of access to documents stamped "secret." Needed by morning.

On the other end they hesitated. She repeated it calmly and without raising her voice — in exactly the tone used by people who are not accustomed to repeating themselves twice. It helped.

Then she opened the messenger. Typed to Vint, briefly:

"The girl from the corridor — Svetlova Anzhelika. Father is a stalker, a center contractor, call sign Bely. Disappeared four years ago. Did you know him?"

Sent it. Closed the phone.

It was getting dark outside. Ekaterina switched on the lamp, opened the folder of current tasks, and looked at it for a while without reading.

Then the phone vibrated briefly. Vint's reply came quickly — which meant he was online, which meant he was thinking about it himself.

She read it. Was silent.

Then she wrote one more message — to a different person this time.

Chapter 3. Bely

For two weeks Vint did the thing he didn't like doing — talking.

Calls, meetings, careful questions to people who might know but didn't necessarily want to tell. Gaika joined in from her side — she had channels Vint didn't, and a persistence that got through where politeness didn't. Two more acquaintances from the old stalker circles — not close, but reliable — sounded out their own contacts.

The picture came together slowly. And the further it went, the less Vint liked what was coming together.

In the official archives — next to nothing. Bely's personal file had been cleaned neatly, with no visible trace of interference; the information simply ended at a certain date, and beyond it was a blank wall stamped "classified." The last assignment — not only no details, not even a direction was left. No coordinates, no handler, no escort group. As if the man had walked into the void of his own free will and nobody was particularly troubled by it.

But people remembered.

Those who were still alive and who agreed to talk.

Bely was one of those stalkers whom the Zone respects quietly — no stories in the bar, no posturing. He walked long, walked deep, came back. The reputation of a man who knows where he's going and doesn't take on what he's not sure of. Several joint runs with different people — always clean, no losses. They said he could read anomalies almost physically, as if he felt them before they showed themselves.

Four years ago he took an assignment from the institute. Alone, without a group — which in itself was strange for a serious run. And he never came back.

The two acquaintances Vint had asked to ask around in their circles turned up three people who knew Bely well. By the time Vint tried to reach them, one was dead — an accident on the way out of the Zone, officially. The second had vanished — simply stopped getting in touch a week ago. The third refused to talk. Briefly, without explanation. Stopped picking up the phone.

It wasn't paranoia. It was a pattern.

Vint sat with that for two days before deciding it was time to talk to the girl.

* * *

Lika liked her new job.

She hadn't expected it herself — she'd thought she would put up with it, as she had in the previous laboratory. But here it was different. Ekaterina Sergeyevna's department worked tightly, without needless fuss — everyone knew their place and their task, nobody wasted time showing off how busy they were. The artifacts that came to her for cataloguing were more interesting than anything she had seen before — some of them affected space in such a way that the measuring instruments behaved unpredictably, and that demanded not just a protocol but a head.

She tried not to ask about her father. Ekaterina Sergeyevna was a person you were better off not reminding — she would call when she had something to say.

Lika waited. And worked. And sometimes, in the lunch break, went into the archive — out of habit, out of inertia.

When the summons to the office came, she understood right away what it was for.

* * *

That man sat by the wall — not at the desk, a little to the side, like someone who had come neither as a guest nor as the host, but as the one who would speak about business.

"Lika, come in, sit down." Ekaterina Sergeyevna nodded at a chair. "You two have already met, in a way. This is Vint — a very good friend of mine and, concurrently, head of the security group during my research in the Zone."

Vint nodded, restrained.

"Hello," said Lika. "Once again, sorry about that incident."

He waved it off briefly — not out of politeness, just closing the subject.

"It happens. A lesson for me — you can't relax within the institute's walls either."

The smirk was brief. Lika didn't manage to work out whether he was joking.

"Lika," Ekaterina put her hands on the desk. "This is about your father."

Her heart gave one heavy beat and sped up. Lika sat upright and tried to keep it from showing.

Ekaterina spoke briefly — about how she had requested archive data, how there were almost no official materials, how most of it was closed at a level above her access. Then she nodded to Vint.

He didn't hurry. He was silent for a second, like a man who had already decided what he would say but was choosing where to begin.

"Bely was a good stalker." Vint's voice was even, without jumps in intonation; it even seemed a little as if he weren't alive. "One of those who don't play the hero in the Zone and for exactly that reason live long. I never got to work with him personally, but the people who did said the same thing: reliable, no showing off, had a good feel for the Zone." A pause. "Four years ago he took an assignment from your institute. Alone, without a group. What exactly it was — nothing remains in the official documents. Literally nothing. As if the assignment never existed."

Lika was silent.

"I got in touch with the people who might know something. Three knew your father well. At the moment I tried to reach them: one is dead — supposedly an accident. The second disappeared a week ago, no contact. The third refused to talk and stopped picking up the phone."

It was quiet in the office. Outside the window the ventilation hummed.

"Listen." Vint leaned forward slightly. "Before we go on — are you sure you want to go to the end? This isn't an attempt to stop you. It's just that you need to understand: the people who were close to your father and to what he was doing — they disappear. Not all of them, not at once. But there's a pattern."

Lika looked at him.

She thought about her father. About four years of searching. About how her mother, every year on the day he disappeared, shut herself in her room and didn't come out until evening, and never explained anything. About how Lika had promised herself — not aloud, she had simply decided one day and that was that — that she would find out.

"I'm sure," she said.

Not right away. But without hesitation.

Vint looked at her for a second. Then leaned back.

"All right. Then listen further. Your father ended up at the center of a game between two structures," said Vint. "On one side — this institute. On the other — a private organization. Who stands behind it, we know only in general terms: some billionaire, the name never surfaced directly. The project was called 'Resonance.'"

Lika didn't interrupt.

"We haven't been able to establish the goals of your father's assignment. But judging by what we've gathered bit by bit — he was hired for reconnaissance. To find out what this project's people were doing in the Zone, what equipment they were bringing in, routes, movements. The usual work of an informant for a man with his skills."

Ekaterina shifted slightly in her chair — took the floor.

"I can add something to that." Her voice was even, without excess intonation. "Several years ago, when I was still an ordinary staff member, very serious funding suddenly appeared for us for projects on spatial bubbles and fractures. Nobody really explained — the money just came, and the work went into an accelerated mode. Now I think it wasn't accidental. Someone needed our groundwork. Hence the rush and the funding — we were being pushed so that they could observe. I think the private

institute wants to repeat what we tried to do — learn to create a spatial bubble in a controlled way." A pause. "What's more. Management hinted to me directly that I should stay out of this story. And part of our research is leaking, even now, somehow. Exactly there, to that private institute."

Lika shifted her gaze from one to the other.

"Half a year ago a private military company appeared in the Zone," Ekaterina continued. "They call themselves 'Apex.' They operate autonomously, don't make contact with the locals, stalkers try to steer clear of them. By all appearances — they're the ones overseeing 'Resonance' in the Zone. And they're also, most likely, covering the tracks." Her voice didn't change. "Possibly your father died precisely because of them."

Silence.

Outside the window the ventilation hummed. Lika sat upright, hands on her knees. She looked at the desk — not because she couldn't look at them, but because she was processing.

When she raised her eyes, they were turned on Vint.

"Help me find him. Or at least exact information that he died." Her voice was even. Almost. "You're an experienced stalker. I can't survive out there alone. And I can't trust the first people who come along — the risk is too great."

Vint shook his head.

"I'll pay. I have savings — my father put something aside from every trip."

Tears began to well up in her eyes. Not for show — just pressure from inside that had become greater than she could hold.

"Listen." Vint spoke without harshness, but firmly. "This is a very dangerous undertaking. Apex isn't local bandits and it isn't mutants. These are professionals with the task of cleaning up. This story isn't for you."

Lika didn't answer.

She simply looked at him. The tears ran — quietly, without sobs, without trying to stop them. Her gaze didn't waver. There was no pleading in it — there was a decision, already made, just waiting to be carried out.

Vint felt uncomfortable.

He caught himself at it — at the discomfort — and smirked inwardly. Earlier he would simply have stood up and left. Something in him had changed over these couple of years. The adventures with Leshy, a long break from his family, too much of everything that leaves a residue — he had gone soft.

Leshy.

The thought came sideways, the way stray thoughts usually come — not head-on, but from the side, while you're thinking about something else.

He hadn't heard of him in half a year already. Where that lost soul had gone — unclear. But that he was alive — Vint for some reason had no doubt. Men like that don't vanish quietly.

"I can't keep you company myself," he said at last. His voice became slightly different — not softer, but different. "But I'll think about who can." He paused. "If you've been gathering information about the Zone all this time, you've surely come across this name at least once. The call sign — Leshy. It's not a tall tale and not a legend. A real man. And I don't know a more experienced stalker."

Ekaterina, who had been silent for the last few minutes, changed sharply in the face.

"Vitya." Her voice became different. "Have you even heard what he's become? I'm not sure he can still talk to people at all without consequences for the latter."

Lika stopped crying. She looked at Vint.

"I thought it was just a tall tale," she said quietly. "I didn't expect he was a real person."

"Real." Vint paused. "Finding him is another question. My deputy will help with that. Gaika. She knows the Zone and has a guess where to look for him." A pause — he was weighing whether to say it or not. He decided. "And one more thing. Leshy isn't from this Zone. He came through a

fracture. And in the place he came from, he had a girlfriend. Outwardly — your exact copy. That's precisely why Ekaterina Sergeyevna and I reacted the way we did at the first meeting."

Lika looked at him. Silently digested it.

Then she shifted her gaze to Ekaterina. She didn't deny it.

Everything fell into place — both the transfer to the department, accepted in a few minutes, and Vint's look in the corridor that had frightened her. Not because she had done anything. Simply because her face — a stranger's face — had at the same time been dear to someone.

"Viktor," said Ekaterina slowly. "You're suggesting him precisely because you think she'll help him come back to himself. Not only because he's the best guide."

Vint raised his eyes. Frowned, but didn't answer.

"Isn't it too much — using her like this?"

"I agree," said Lika.

They both looked at her.

"I agree," she repeated. Evenly, without a stumble. "I help you — you help me. If equipment is needed — I'll pay. The fee of those who will lead me to him — we'll discuss it." She looked at Vint. "Deal?"

Vint looked away from Ekaterina.

"There's no hundred-percent guarantee that he won't turn you down. And that you'll even find him — I don't guarantee that either."

"Fine," Lika nodded.

Something in her had switched over. Four years — and now: information, a team, at least a direction. It was more than everything she had managed to find on her own in all that time.

"When the team's assembled, I'll write. We'll discuss the details then." Vint stood. Looked at Lika for a second — not appraisingly, just noting. Then left.

Ekaterina watched him go. Turned to Lika.

"I think we should both get back to work."

Chapter 4. Calm

The bar was called "Calm" — without irony, just a name. Inside was anything but calm: the hum of voices, smoke, the smell of fried meat and cheap beer, music from speakers that nobody listened to. Tables packed close, lighting dim — just enough to see the person across from you and not see anything extra.

It was a stalker place. Not in the sense that they checked you at the door — the crowd here was simply their own. People with a certain look, a certain way of sitting at a table, a habit of keeping their backs to the wall. Civilians came in too, but not for long — the atmosphere wasn't conducive to relaxing unless you understood that it was normal.

Lika came in and stopped at the entrance — looked around.

Vint sat at a table by the far wall. Next to him — a woman.

* * *

Gaika was one of those people you remember at once and for good — not because of looks, but because of the way they take up space. Compact, collected, with a short haircut and the gaze of someone used to assessing a situation quickly and without sentiment. On the table in front of her lay a tablet, beside it a mug she barely touched.

When Lika approached, Gaika raised her eyes.

A second.

Then — quietly, almost to herself:

"Well, how about that."

Vint was looking off to the side.

"Sit," said Gaika. Her voice was even, professional — she had already pulled herself together. "My name is Gaika. We'll be working together."

Lika sat. Gaika looked at her for another second — not rudely, just noting — then lowered her eyes to the tablet.

"So. Leshy was last seen in the deep Zone, northeastern sector. No exact address — he never had an exact address. But there's a logic to his movements, there are indirect traces, there are a couple of points where he's been seen over the last year." She turned the tablet toward Lika. "An approximate route. Three days there in normal conditions. Anomalous activity along this corridor is moderate, but there are stretches we'll have to go around. That lengthens the trip."

"What does 'normal conditions' mean?" asked Lika.

"It means nobody's shooting and the weather doesn't spring surprises." Gaika gave a slight shake of her head. "In the Zone, normal conditions are already a good thing."

"On gear," Vint cut in. "What do you have?"

Lika took out a notebook. She had been compiling the list for the last two weeks — methodically, from the sources she'd been able to find. Gaika took the notebook, read it. Nodded several times — sparingly, approvingly.

"Not bad for someone with no field experience." She picked up a pen. "We'll add this and this. Expand the first-aid kit, gas-mask filters — double the supply, there's chemicals in that sector sometimes. And the detector — not the one you wrote down, it's outdated, we'll take another."

"Where do I get all this?"

"I'll order it myself. At normal prices, not tourist ones."

From the depths of the bar, from the far table by the counter, three men stood up.

* * *

The first one you saw at once — not because he was trying, it was simply that a man of that size takes up a separate area in any room. Tall, broad in the shoulders, with that particular monumentality of people whose body is a working tool, not a thing to be proud of. He moved lightly, almost

soundlessly — which at his size looked unexpected. On his face — a smile. Open, good-natured, wholly at odds with the biography that could be easily guessed behind the bearing and the gaze.

The second was his opposite — stocky, short, with the face of a man who had long ago seen everything and had long ago grown tired of pretending it didn't irritate him. He moved with a rolling gait, without hurry. Tobacco came off him — stubbornly, thoroughly, as if the smell had become part of his kit. His default expression was displeased, but without aggression. That's just life.

The third walked slightly behind. Medium height, lean — the kind you don't notice right away, until you realize he has already noticed you while you were looking around. His eyes never stopped — they slid over the room continuously, in short quick movements, like a man who can't switch off working mode. Young — noticeably younger than the others. A faint smile stayed on his lips, whose nature was unclear: either he was pleased with life, or his face was simply built that way.

They came up to the table. The big one nodded to Gaika.

"Everyone's here."

"Lika," said Gaika, "this is my team. Get acquainted." A nod at the big man: "Kit." At the stocky one: "Dub." At the young one: "Lis."

Kit smiled wider — warmly, without affectation.

Dub looked at Lika, then at Gaika.

"Has she even been in the Zone?"

"No, she hasn't," Gaika answered evenly.

"Great," said Dub, in the tone of a man who was neither surprised by this in the least nor pleased in the least.

Lis kept studying the room.

* * *

They discussed the gear for about an hour.

Kit spoke little, to the point — clarified the route, asked about the anomalous background on specific stretches. Dub grumbled, but the grumbling was to the point: not the right type of first-aid kit, not the right cartridges for his system, the tool mount needed to be different. Gaika nodded, wrote it down, sometimes argued — briefly and without extra words.

Lis listened, looked around and said nothing. Then he held out his part of the list to Gaika.

Gaika took it. Read it. Raised her eyes.

"Don't get cocky." Her voice was calm, with no raise in tone. "You'll run around with your popgun. But the cartridges you wrote down — rewrite them for the modification of your barrel. These ones will do, cross out the rest."

Lis put the list away without objection. The smile hadn't gone anywhere.

"Mischief not managed." A pause. "But it was worth trying. Luck loves the bold."

Dub looked at him with the expression of a man who is hearing this not for the first time.

"Luck loves the quiet."

"That's just you getting old."

"That's just you being young."

Kit went on smiling. Gaika made a note in the tablet.

* * *

By the end of the evening the details had come together.

Departure — in five days. The route was agreed, the gear assigned person by person, the rest stops marked with backup options. Dub took on the tech and explosives — "just in case, and in the Zone a just-in-case happens often." Kit — fire support. Lis — sniper, in charge of reconnaissance and long-range combat. In the Zone, the danger came not only from mutants and anomalies. People were far more treacherous than the Zone itself.

Gaika led.

"Documents," said Vint. "Ekaterina Sergeyevna will arrange the trip officially. She'll write up the objectives of the outing so that formally everything is clean. No violations on paper."

Gaika nodded — that suited her.

Lika looked at the people around the table. Two weeks ago she hadn't known any of them. In five days they would go with her into the Zone to look for a man who for two years hadn't wanted to be found.

"Questions?" asked Gaika.

There were no questions.

"Then that's all. I expect confirmation on gear from each of you the day after tomorrow."

The company began to disperse. Dub left first — taking a cigarette out as he went, unhurried. Kit said goodbye with a nod, broad and good-natured, like everything about him. Lis disappeared somehow unnoticed — he was there a moment ago, and now he wasn't.

Gaika closed the tablet. Looked at Lika.

"Five days," she said. "Use them well. Get some sleep, stock up, put your affairs in order. In the Zone there won't be time for that."

Lika nodded.

Gaika stood and left.

Lika and Vint remained at the table. The bar hummed around them — voices, the clatter of mugs, smoke.

"Any questions?" asked Vint.

"No."

He nodded. Stood.

"Five days."

Chapter 5. The Perimeter

They met the dawn at the checkpoint.

Officially — a field expedition of the research center, the objectives of the outing spelled out, documents in order, Ekaterina Sergeyevna had seen to it. The border guard at the crossing point leafed through the papers longer than necessary — not because he was looking for violations, he was just used to dragging it out. Dub stood beside him and said nothing, but said nothing in such a way that the guard sped up on his own.

The barrier rose.

"Welcome," said Lis quietly, addressing no one in particular.

Dub glanced at him.

"Shut up."

"I'm just solemnly marking the moment."

"There's nothing to mark. Go ahead."

Lis smiled and went ahead.

* * *

The Zone didn't begin all at once.

First — an ordinary landscape. A field, a windbreak of trees, an old road with broken asphalt, a rusty sign on which nothing could be read anymore. Then the air began to change. Not abruptly — gradually, the way pressure changes before a thunderstorm. The smell became different: denser, with a metallic taste on the tongue, with that particular tang there's nothing to compare to if you haven't smelled it before.

Lika walked third — behind Kit, in front of Dub. Gaika led. Lis had gone ahead to scout.

She felt the first real breath of the Zone at the twentieth minute.

The wind changed direction and brought with it a smell that made something clench in her chest — not from fear, from recognition. As if she already knew this place and just didn't remember from where. Ozone. Wet earth. Something heavy, pressing, like the air in a closed room where candles had burned for a long time. And right after it — a light pressure on the temples, barely perceptible, as if the space around had become a few millimeters denser, creating a sense of uncomfortable tightness

Lika stopped.

Kit looked back.

"First time?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You'll get used to it." A pause. "Or you won't. But it's normal either way."

He walked on. Lika followed him.

She walked and felt the Zone studying her — slowly, unhurriedly, the way you study something unfamiliar when it's still unclear whether it's a threat or not. The sensation was strange. Not hostile. Just — alive. As if the place she was walking through had its own opinion about her presence here and hadn't yet decided what to do about it.

"Keep the detector in your hand, not in your pocket," Gaika threw over her shoulder. "It's quiet here for now, but get used to it right away. You need a reflex, not a thought."

Lika took out the detector.

* * *

Lis came back about twenty minutes later — stepped out of the bushes at the side, soundlessly, as if he had materialized. Took his place beside Lika and immediately started talking.

"Ahead is clear. No anomalies, no fresh tracks, haven't seen any mutants. About three hours to the little village at a normal pace." A short pause, exactly one step long. "You're in the Zone for the first time?"

"Yes."

"It's obvious right away. You walk like you're in a city park. In the Zone you need it different — look at your feet, then at the horizon, then at your feet again. That's the rhythm, it has to become automatic. Otherwise you'll walk into an Electra and not even understand what happened. An Electra, by the way, doesn't hurt. In the sense that there won't be any pain anymore. At all."

"Got it."

"Another piece of advice — don't touch anything with your hands without a command. Nothing at all. Even if it looks pretty. Especially if it looks pretty. In the Zone, pretty kills faster than ugly. That's not a metaphor, that's an observation."

"Got it."

"One more —"

"Lis," said Gaika, without turning around.

"What?"

"Let the person listen to the Zone."

Lis was silent for four seconds.

"I'm instructing. It's useful."

"You're chattering. It's tiring."

"Maybe I'm nervous."

"You're never nervous."

"Maybe I've started."

Dub, walking behind, said nothing. He simply exhaled — slowly, with that particular expression of people who have long since made peace with the inevitable.

The silence held for about ten minutes. Exactly until Lis was beside her again.

"Listen. What's your name? Well, I mean call sign."

"I don't have a call sign."

Lis looked at her from the side — quickly, keenly, the way a man looks whose assessment happens faster than awareness.

"Soika."

"Why?"

"Just because. And because jays are clever birds, they notice everything, remember everything, and they have a sweet voice. It's all exactly about you — you look the right way, not like a tourist, and you have a pleasant voice."

Lika thought for a second.

"Let it be Soika."

"Excellent choice, sis," said Lis. "You agree easily with good ideas in general. That's a valuable quality."

"She just agreed with your idea," Dub said from behind. "Don't generalize."

"Dub, you're just jealous that your call sign is boring."

"I've had my call sign for twelve years."

"Exactly. Twelve years — Dub. No imagination."

"But alive for twelve years."

"That's an argument," Lis agreed.

Kit walked ahead and smiled. Silently.

* * *

The little village appeared toward evening.

A few houses behind a flimsy fence, a tower with a floodlight, the smell of smoke and heated tinned food. A place for breaking in newcomers — the first run, the first night beyond the perimeter, the first real acquaintance with the fact that the Zone has no days off.

Gaika talked with the duty officer — briefly, documents, a nod.

"We spend the night here. Departure at six."

Dub first of all found a spot by the wall, sat down, lit a cigarette. Kit helped with the settling in — silently, methodically, as he did everything. Lis immediately struck up a conversation with someone among the locals, and within five minutes they were both laughing at something Lika couldn't hear.

She sat by the window and looked outside.

Beyond the little village was darkness. Alive — with rare distant lights of anomalies, with that slow movement of air that wasn't wind. The Zone breathed out there in the dark, patiently and evenly. It didn't care who had come or why.

Dad walked like this. Every time he went out there.

Lika closed her eyes for a second. Then took out the notebook and began to write — not because there was anything that needed writing, her hands were simply looking for something to do.

"Can't switch your head off?" Lis sat down next to her, without asking, the way people sit who don't realize it might be inopportune.

"No."

"Normal." He was silent for a moment — a rarity for him, but the pause was real, without any wish to fill it. "On the first night beyond the perimeter your head never switches off. That's the Zone getting acquainted. Looking at who you are."

"And who am I?"

"Don't know yet." He stood. "I'll ask her tomorrow."

Lika looked at his back and thought that she didn't understand this man. Then decided that maybe she didn't need to.

Outside the window the darkness didn't move. It simply was.

Chapter 6. The Zone

The route drifted off on the second day.

Gaika stopped at a fork, checked her handheld, looked ahead. Where according to the old data there should have been an open road to the Marshes, there was something else — the ground heaved up, trees felled at wrong angles, the air over the area trembling finely and badly.

"A surge came through recently. This wasn't here."

"So what now?" asked Lika.

"We go around." Gaika was working her handheld. "A detour of about three hours. But we'll be in one piece."

Dub spat to the side.

"I said we needed a backup route through the plant."

"We're going through the plant."

"I said that back in the bar."

"I remember. Good for you."

Dub looked at her. Understood that continuing was pointless. Lit a cigarette.

"Soika," said Lis, coming up from behind. "See that shimmering in the air over there? Don't go there."

"I wasn't going to."

"Good. Some people do. Out of curiosity. After that they don't plan anything anymore."

"Lis," said Gaika.

"Instructing."

"You're going ahead to scout."

"Already going."

* * *

The cement plant had been dead for a long time — so long that it had managed to become a part of the Zone, not just an object on its territory. Buildings with smashed windows, rusted floor slabs, concrete in cracks from which something gray and stubborn was growing. The silence here was different — not empty, but dense, as if the plant remembered sounds and kept them inside.

There were fewer anomalies than outside, in terms of variety. Gaika explained it as they walked: old industrial sites sometimes work that way — too much metal, too complicated a structure of space, some anomalies, such as Electras, are on the contrary attracted to it, Jelly collects in basements, while all sorts of Gravity Concentrates and sinkholes steer clear of built-up areas.

Lika walked and listened — not to Gaika, to the Zone. Studying its sounds. Somewhere far off something crackled at equal intervals. The wind through the empty windows gave a low, drawn-out hum. Underfoot — concrete crumbs, the sound dry and crisp.

Kit walked slowly. Looked at his feet and around him by turns — the rhythm Lis had talked about.

At a ruined wall he stopped. Bent down. Took something small out of a crevice, examined it, put it in a container. Then found a second one — dimly glowing, irregular in shape.

"Artifacts?" asked Lika.

"Two. This one's rare." He showed the second. "Lucky. The anomaly left after the surge, the artifacts stayed."

"Kit's lucky for us," said Lis, who had appeared from somewhere at the side. "Especially with artifacts. And with trouble, by the way, too. One compensates for the other."

"Is that philosophy?" asked Lika.

"It's an observation of statistics," said Lis. "I'm attentive."

Kit put the container into his rucksack. Didn't comment.

They passed through the central building and came out on the other side.

* * *

There were many of them.

Lika didn't immediately understand what she was seeing — just movement between the ruins, slow, unrhythmic. Then the smell arrived before her brain managed to shape the picture into a word.

Zombies were coming out of the ground.

From collapses in the concrete floor of the plant yard, from pits, from cracks. One, a second, a fifth. Silently — without rasping, without the characteristic sound she had read about in descriptions. They simply walked. Slowly and inexorably, like water through cracks.

"Get ready," said Gaika evenly. "Everyone work. Lika — behind Kit, don't fire without a command."

The next few minutes were noisy.

Kit worked methodically, without fuss — every shot precise, no unnecessary movement. Dub took a position by the wall and held the flank with the expression with which he did everything unpleasant — not angry, just working. Gaika moved fast, chose targets competently, her voice in the communicator even, with no raise in tone.

Lis shot with the ease that comes only when the body knows its business better than the head.

It all ended quickly.

The last zombie fell right at Lika's feet. She stepped back and realized she was gripping her weapon so hard her fingers had turned white. She loosened them. Exhaled.

The silence returned — a different one, the post-battle kind. Ringing.

Dub reloaded. Turned to Lis.

The clip on the back of the head was brief but clear.

"You missed it."

"They came out of the ground," said Lis without offense, rubbing the back of his head. "They weren't there. At all. There were collapses, but around here collapses are knee-deep everywhere."

"Are you a sniper or not?"

"A sniper. But not a geologist and not an X-ray machine. I can't see through concrete."

"Next time check the collapses."

"Next time I'll try not to build a cement plant over their burrow." A pause. "Soika, how are you?"

Lika was looking at what remained of the zombie. Trying to look professionally, as at a fact, not at a picture that would come in her dreams.

"Fine."

"Hands not shaking?"

"No."

Lis nodded.

"Good. For some, they shake after the first time. That's normal if they shake. And normal if they don't. The Zone is different for everyone."

"Lis," said Dub. "Forward."

"Going, going."

* * *

After that they walked at a different rhythm — the Zone pressed more quietly, but more densely. Anomalies turned up regularly. Gaika bypassed them without words, only a gesture — look. Lika looked and memorized.

"This is a 'Flare,'" Lis said, appearing beside her every time Gaika was silent. "See how the air shimmers over it? Like over asphalt in summer, only three times worse. Go around at about five meters." A few steps. "This is a 'Trampoline.' If you step on it — you fly. Beautiful, but inconvenient.

Especially the landing." A few more steps. "And this one don't touch at all. I don't know what it's called. Gaika knows, but I always forget, because the main rule is don't touch, not what it's called."

"Lis," said Gaika.

"Instructing."

"You've already said that word four times today."

"Well, you're not wordy, so I'm making up for four."

The chemical fog began unnoticed — first a light haze near the ground, then denser. They put on gas masks without a command, at Gaika's nod.

In the fog it was quiet. Lika walked and thought that her father had gone through such things. Every time. Alone, without a team, without Gaika and her even voice in his ear. Just himself — with a detector and an instinct he knew how to listen to.

Where are you, Dad?

The fog ended after twenty minutes.

Ahead was a forest.

Dark, dense, with trees that grew too close — the branches intertwined so that there were no gaps between them. Light didn't penetrate there. Just a wall of darkness with trees inside it.

At the edge — a cache. Low, almost grown into the ground, with a metal door and a basement. Above the entrance someone's hand had written in marker: "Farther — on your own."

"Rest stop," said Gaika.

Nobody objected.

Dub inspected the perimeter, nodded — clean. Kit opened the door. Inside it was cramped, it smelled of old wood and damp, but the walls held, and the roof didn't leak.

Lis dropped onto a bunk, stretched out his legs, looked at the ceiling.

"Soika."

"What?"

"The first full day in the Zone. Zombies, chemical fog, anomalies, a detour through a dead plant." A pause. "You did well. Seriously. No jokes."

Lika set down her rucksack. Looked at him.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He closed his eyes. "Tomorrow will be more interesting."

"Is that good or bad?"

"In the Zone those words are the same thing."

Dub, settling in a corner, glanced at Lis. Said nothing — kept silent with that rare expression that appeared on him when he agreed but didn't intend to admit it aloud.

Gaika closed the door.

"Tomorrow we go deeper. Where we're going, there are no tourists, and the stalkers, if any go there, are out of their minds. In short, it'll be even more dangerous. Everyone rest."

Beyond the door was darkness. The Zone breathed outside — evenly, patiently. It was in no hurry.

Lika lay with her eyes open and listened to that darkness. Her father was there, inside it. Somewhere. Alive or not — she didn't know yet. But she was going.

These few weeks of gathering data and preparation had brought her closer to solving the mystery of her father's disappearance than all four years of searching.

Chapter 7. Ambush

The night passed quickly — not because she slept well, but because her body simply switched off from exhaustion and switched on again when Gaika quietly said "up" into the darkness of the cache.

Lika had been lying with her eyes open even before that. Listening to the darkness outside — the Zone breathed there as evenly as in the evening, with no change, as if the night meant nothing to it.

They ate in silence. Military rations — heated right in the package, tasteless, but hot. Dub smoked by the door while the others packed. Kit checked his gear methodically, unhurried — every buckle, every pocket. Lis sat on the bunk and looked at the floor.

Silently.

Lika noticed it at once — something was wrong. The Lis she had known for two days couldn't keep quiet even in his sleep. And this one sat with a straight back and stared at a single point, and there was no smile.

Gaika went out first. The others after her.

* * *

The forest took them in without a sound.

The darkness under the crowns was different from outside — dense, without gaps, with that particular smell of old pine needles and something sour that Lika was beginning to associate with the presence of anomalies nearby. Her feet walked on something soft — moss, rotting leaves, ground that gave springily under her weight. The rhythm — feet, horizon, feet. She was already doing it almost automatically.

Lis went ahead in silence. Didn't even look back.

Lika drew up to Gaika — overtook Kit, took a place beside her.

"What's with Lis?"

Gaika didn't slow down.

"Instinct," she said briefly.

"What does instinct mean?"

"It means — something's going to happen." A pause. "He's like a radio for us. As long as he's broadcasting everything that comes into his head — things will be relatively fine. When he goes quiet — expect trouble. It's a sign. It works."

Lika digested this.

"That's not very reassuring."

"No," Gaika agreed. "But it's honest."

Behind them metal clicked softly — Kit had shifted his automatic for a better grip. Dub, without a word, checked the bolt of his shotgun. Both did it without a command, without discussion — they had simply heard the conversation and reacted the way people react for whom this has long since become reflex.

Lika put her hand on her weapon. Didn't draw it — just put it there, to know where it was.

The Zone breathed around them. Quietly, evenly, without warnings.

* * *

Lis didn't come back for a long time.

Usually he showed up after twenty or thirty minutes — surfacing from the bushes at the side, reporting and immediately starting to talk about something unrelated. Now forty minutes had passed. Then an hour. Then an hour and a half.

Gaika didn't stop the group, but slowed the pace — imperceptibly, without words. Dub walked a little to the side, looking into the depth of the forest. Kit kept closer to Lika than usual.

After two hours Lis came out.

Silently. Without a smile. His face closed, his eyes the same quick ones, but the movement different — not working scanning, but something tense, inward.

"Rest stop," said Gaika.

They stopped. A two-minute pause — Gaika was looking at Lis.

"Talk."

He was silent for a second. It was so unlike him that Lika felt something cold run along her spine.

"There's an ambush ahead." His voice was even, quiet. "About six people. Professionals — they work competently, positions chosen right, sectors covered. At first I spotted one by accident, thought I'd imagined it. Then two more, then I decided not to show myself and lie low, to watch." A pause. "They're acting very competently. I think there are motion sensors in the forest. Possibly tripwires on the flanks."

"Did Apex pick up our trail?" said Dub. Spat to the side.

"Don't know. We've never seen them in the Zone, nothing to compare with." Lis took out his handheld. "But that we can't get around them — that's for sure. They've blocked the only passage in this sector. And if they spot that we spotted them — next time we won't be lucky. They'll draw conclusions."

"Can you take them out?"

"One or two. Until I catch a bullet myself." He turned the handheld toward Gaika. "Look here, here and here. The main positions. I didn't find the flanker — he was there, but changed position while I was watching. That's bad."

Gaika looked at the screen. Was silent for several seconds.

Lika stood and listened to numbers forming in her head that she didn't like. Six professional fighters against their five, of whom she was ballast with a weapon and two days' experience in the Zone.

"A decision," said Dub. Not a question — he stated that a decision was needed.

"We go head-on." Gaika put the handheld away. "There's no other option — going around is impossible, waiting is out, they'll realize we've stopped. Lis, you take a position to the right, take out whoever you see, cover us. Kit — you go first, hold the center. Dub — left flank, there may be the one Lis didn't find." A look at Lika. "Soika, you stay behind Kit, don't fall behind and don't stick your head out without a command. You open fire only if something's flying right at you."

"Got it," said Kit.

"Got it," said Dub.

"Got it," said Lis, already turning toward the forest. Then he stopped for a second. "Soika."

Lika looked at him.

"Head down, feet fast. Everything else is our job."

He went into the forest — soundlessly, as he knew how, only a branch swayed slightly after him and that was all.

* * *

They moved fast.

The forest pressed down — dense, dark, with that silence in which the absence of sounds itself makes a sound. Lika heard her own steps, her breathing, the distant crackling sound of an anomaly somewhere off to the right. Nothing more.

Kit moved in front — big, but almost soundless, with that particular calm that, it seemed, was permanent in him. Lika kept behind him. Not because she was afraid — simply because Gaika had said so, and Gaika she had already learned to trust without question.

The ambush should have been ahead.

They passed the supposed point.

Nobody.

Kit stopped for a second — looked around. Lika looked in all directions, expecting a sound, a movement, anything. Dub went left, vanished for a second in the shadow of the trees, came back — shook his head.

Empty.

"Lis," Gaika said quietly into the communicator. "What do you see?"

"Nothing." His voice was quiet, concentrated. "The positions are empty. Maybe something spooked them or we weren't the target."

A short tap on the microphone. Crackle. Silence.

The connection cut off.

"Lis," Gaika repeated. No answer.

"Lis," once more.

Silence.

"Spread out." Gaika's voice didn't change, but something in it became different — harder, colder. "Kit, cover Soika. Dub — eyes open."

They spread out. Lika pressed against a tree — back to the trunk, weapon in her hands, fingers correct, as she'd been taught. She looked where Lis had gone.

Alive. He must be alive.

She remembered his face in the cache — the way it sometimes was without a smile. And how he had said "head down, feet fast" before leaving. As if he understood that he was going first to meet something he hadn't yet seen.

That jester who had chattered without stopping the whole way, who had given her a call sign and explained about Electras and "don't touch the pretty things" — could be dead now. Because of this assignment. Because of her, in a way.

Something clenched inside and didn't unclench.

Twenty minutes of silence.

Lika counted them — not on purpose, the seconds simply added up on their own, because her mind needed something to hold on to.

* * *

A voice came from the depth of the forest.

Hard. Steely. Without the intonation that invites conversation — just a sound that occupies space and doesn't ask permission.

"So you're just going to stand there like statues? Pants at least dry?"

Lika didn't immediately realize it wasn't a mercenary. She just stood and listened to the voice echo off the trunks.

"Where's Lis?" Gaika shouted. Sharply, without a pause.

"He'd be dead if I hadn't heard your call sign before you managed to walk into this ambush." A pause, short. "Why'd you come, Gaika? Don't tell me you missed me?"

Silence.

Lika saw Gaika freeze — for a fraction of a second, almost imperceptibly. Then something in her face changed.

"Leshy?" Her voice became different. Not softer — just different. "Is that you?"

Nobody lowered their weapon. The barrels pointed to where the voice came from — into the darkness between the trees, where nothing could be seen.

"You bastard," said Gaika. Without anger, just a word. "Come out already. And bring Lis to me — alive."

A pause.

"I have something for you," she added. "A surprise. Only first come out and take a good look at the passenger."

The darkness between the trees did not answer at once.

Lika stood by the trunk, weapon in her hands, and looked where Gaika was looking. The legend of the Zone, a ghost who for two years hadn't wanted to be found.

Somewhere out there, in the darkness, he was.

Chapter 8. The Meeting

Lis came out of the trees alone.

He walked without raising his head — slowly, without the lightness with which he usually moved. Hands free, weapon put away. He stopped a few steps from the group.

No one behind him.

"What does this mean?" Gaika spoke quietly. "Where's Leshy?"

Lis raised his eyes. There was something unfamiliar on his face — not fear, not anger. Just the quiet lostness of a man who had been outplayed so cleanly that he couldn't even manage to be offended.

"He asked me to tell you he doesn't want to see old friends."

Gaika looked at him for a second. Then she raised her eyes to the forest.

"Leshy." Her voice was level. "We have Vikki with us."

Silence.

A bullet went into the ground at Gaika's feet before anyone could react — just a short crack that had suddenly sprung up out of nowhere, and a little fountain of dirt centimeters from the toe of her boot. Then, a fraction of a second later, a crack from the other side — and the bark of the tree beside Kit's temple threw out a splinter.

Two shots. Two positions. Less than a second.

Everyone cleared the lines at once — not on command, the body simply did it by itself, reflex. Kit behind a trunk. Dub to the side. Lika pressed herself to a tree and realized she wasn't breathing.

"Why are you lying to me, Gaika?"

The voice came from the left. Then — a crack, and the same voice, now from the right, from another position:

"Vikki died. There. In that city."

Lika felt something change in the air. The voice was hard — but there was something else in it, under the hardness, something that made her uneasy in a different way than the bullets did.

"Leshy, come out and see for yourself," said Gaika.

The forest was silent.

"Lower your weapons." Gaika spoke evenly, without turning around. "He's already shown he could kill all of us in under a minute. If he wanted to — we'd already be lying down."

Kit and Dub exchanged glances. Lowered their barrels. Slowly, without sudden movements.

Lis just kept standing in the same place — arms at his sides, eyes on the ground. Silent. It was so unlike him that Lika looked at him almost with alarm — more, perhaps, than at the forest the bullets had just come from.

* * *

Borland lay in the roots of an old oak and looked through the scope.

Lis stood like a man who had just been told he wasn't who he thought he was. Borland could have sympathized — but not now. Lis had gone and started the cat-and-mouse game himself, and lost it himself. A good lesson, even if a bitter one.

Borland shifted the scope.

The girl by the trunk.

He looked for a second. Two. Three.

His hand found the pendant under his clothes by itself — he barely noticed doing it. His fingers closed on the metal. Warm. Familiar.

He hadn't opened the pendant in several months. Now he opened it.

The photograph had faded at the edges — he had looked at it so many times that the paper had started to give. The smile. The hair. The flower at the end of the braid.

Back to the scope.

The girl by the tree was looking into the forest — to where, she thought, he might be. Her face open. The hair the same. The ears — no, the ears were different. And at the end of the braid, nothing.

Borland lay there and didn't move.

She isn't Vikki.

The thought came by itself, without pain — just a fact, which he said over inside because it needed to be said. Not Vikki. A completely different person, a completely different place, a completely different story.

But the face.

He closed the pendant. Put it back under his clothes.

Go out and talk. Just talk — and that's it.

It was a bad idea. He understood that. The conversation would lead nowhere — he would say no, they would leave, and everything would go back to how it was. The house. The rain. The Cutter on the shelf. Empty inside.

Borland looked through the scope for another second.

Then he put the rifle away and began to move in their direction.

* * *

Lika heard the voice before she understood that he was right beside her.

"Turn around."

She flinched — sharply, with her whole body. Turned.

He was standing a meter behind her. How he had gotten there she hadn't heard — not a step, not a rustle. There was simply nothing, and now there he was, looking at her.

Lika looked at him.

Young — younger than she had expected from a legend. Twenty-something. Tall, wiry — not monumental like Kit, something else: tightness, economy, not a single wasted movement. Dark hair, short. A closed face, without expression, the kind people get when they stopped showing what they think long ago. Light eyes, cold. They looked straight — not aggressively, just right through her, the way you look at something you need to assess and make a decision about.

A weapon on his shoulder. On his hip, a knife in a sheath, the handle worn, clearly a working one. Plain gear, nothing extra — every item in its place, nothing decorative.

Under his clothes, on a cord — something small. Lika didn't have time to make it out.

He looked at her the way you look at something impossible. Not with admiration — with that particular expression of a brain receiving information and not knowing where to put it.

Then — a quiet whistle through his teeth.

"Gaika." He didn't look around. "Tell me honestly — are you making people out of test tubes at that institute of yours now?"

"No, Leshy." Gaika's voice was level. "So, then — shall we talk? Or are you going to keep devouring her with your eyes?"

Borland, with visible effort, shifted his gaze to Gaika.

"What do you need?"

"We don't need anything. But Soika needs your help."

He was silent for a second. Then he nodded shortly — not agreeing, just taking it under advisement — and raised his palm, stopping Gaika before she could go on.

"Come on. We'll talk somewhere else."

He turned and went into the forest. Without looking back.

* * *

They walked for about three hours.

Lika walked and watched him.

Borland moved differently from everyone she had seen in the Zone these days. Gaika walked competently, economically — a professional with experience. Kit — dependable as a machine, but you could see he sensed anomalies worse than the others. Lis — lightly, with that birdlike attentiveness that never switched off for a second. Dub, just Dub, experienced and that was all.

This one was different.

He didn't look at his feet. Didn't check a handheld or a detector. He simply walked — and the Zone parted before him, as if it knew he was coming. An anomaly on the left he skirted several steps before the detector in Lika's hands chirped. Another — without even slowing, just veered a little to the right, as if there were markings there that only he could see.

Once he stopped. Stood about three seconds — didn't move, just stood and, it seemed, listened to the air. Then went a slightly different way. Two hundred meters on, they saw why: where he had been about to pass, the ground was heaved up by a fresh surge.

Lika didn't understand how he had sensed it.

Lis walked next to her — silently, which was strange in itself. Once he leaned toward her ear:

"I heard he always walks like that. Don't ask how. Nobody knows."

"Has anyone tried walking after him, step for step?"

"Yes." A pause. "One stalker once latched on to him and nearly flew into an Electra. For him the borders of anomalies are like visible ones, so whoever follows can easily make a mistake and step into an anomaly right where Leshy just passed."

Lika looked at Borland again.

He walked ahead and never once turned around. Didn't check whether they were following. He just walked — and they followed, because there was nowhere else to go.

The sky above the forest began to darken. The trees thinned — at first unnoticeably, then more and more plainly. Gaps appeared between the trunks. The smell changed — something else mixed into the smell of the forest, something lived-in.

Lika saw the hut before Borland said anything.

Small, low, almost grown into the ground — the walls dark with time and damp, the roof overgrown with moss, no light in the single window. All around, in several rows — anomalies. Lika felt them before she saw them: the detector began to beep, quietly and unpleasantly, and the air ahead became different, dense, alive, but not the way a forest is simply alive.

Borland stopped.

"We're here."

He turned around. Ran his eyes over the team — and lingered on Lis. Something in his face changed. Almost unnoticeably. Barely.

His hand moved — fast, with no wind-up.

Lis had no time to say anything.

"Aaaah...!"

His voice flew up and to the side — together with Lis himself, whom the Trampoline had caught and thrown into the night sky, somewhere in the direction of the house.

Silence.

Borland looked where Lis had flown. Then he turned his gaze to the others.

"Well, there you go," he said shortly. "The corridor's open. As they say, 'welcome.'"

Everyone was stunned. Leshy turned around and walked down the corridor of anomalies toward the house.

Chapter 9. The Hut

The corridor between the anomalies turned out to be narrow — a meter and a half, no wider. Borland went first, without looking back. Lika's detector was silent: to the right and to the left the anomalies stood tight against the path, the air along the edges dense, pressing, alive — she could already tell this pressure apart, she had learned in two days. Here it came from both sides at once, and she walked exactly down the middle, counting steps, trying not to think about what would happen if she strayed from the line.

* * *

Lis landed about thirty meters off.

The sound was such that for a second Lika's breath caught — a heavy blow against the ground, a rustle, then silence. Then — a quiet, very restrained expression, which Lis, by all appearances, uttered purely for himself.

They came out of the corridor, and Lika ran first.

He lay on his back, looking at the darkening sky. When she ran up and bent over him — he turned his head.

"How are you?"

"In one piece."

One word, and that was all. He sat up — slower than usual, touched his shoulder, winced. Got up on his own. Brushed off his knee, straightened his jacket. Then he raised his eyes to the hut, to Borland at the entrance, to the corridor between the anomalies — and said nothing.

Lika looked at him and waited. Lis was silent. That was the strangest part — Lis, who chattered in the Zone at every step, who gave advice, commented, joked and didn't fall silent even when asked to, was now simply walking to the house. In silence. Whatever had happened between him and Borland in the forest — the Trampoline was the least of it.

* * *

Inside, the hut turned out bigger than it looked from outside. Not by much, but six of them went in without feeling like sardines in a can. One room: a plank bunk by the wall, a table, two chairs, a shelf with things on it. On the shelf lay a knife in a sheath — the handle worn, a working one — and several objects set apart from each other, with gaps between them. Artifacts, judging by the arrangement. In the corner a small stove with no chimney. A steady dry heat came off it.

Lis went in last. Stopped at the threshold. Quickly looked the room over — professionally, as he always did — then his eyes fell on the stove, lingered for three seconds, and Lis asked Dub for a cigarette, got it, and went back outside. The door closed quietly behind him.

Dub looked at the closed door. Then at Kit.

Kit shrugged, barely noticeably.

* * *

"The ambush was clearly meant for you," said Borland. He stood at the window with his back to the room, looking outside. "This new group — Apex, they imagine themselves the local mafia. I cleaned them out carefully before you got there."

Gaika nodded.

"We figured as much. It was empty when we passed through."

Kit sat by the wall, Dub settled at the table — elbows on the tabletop, eyes on Borland. Appraising. Calmly, without pressure, the way people look who know how to wait.

"And Lis?" Lika asked. "Did you find him in the forest?"

Borland shifted his gaze to her.

"He spotted me when I'd already finished and was about to leave. Followed me. Thought I hadn't noticed." Something moved in his face — barely, almost indistinguishably, in the direction opposite to a smile. "But I noticed."

"You outplayed him at cat and mouse?"

"He's a sniper. His vantage point on Apex was good, but he didn't find one more. That one would have put a bullet in his forehead when you got close to the ambush." Leshy fell silent, looking out the window. "Consider that I saved him. And when he decided to track me, I stepped into a Trampoline and ended up behind him. The kid got himself quite a scare. Probably still doesn't understand how I got there."

"Harsh."

"The Zone is harsher." He turned back to the window. "It'll be a lesson to him."

Lika thought that this was, probably, true.

Dub coughed.

"How long can we stay here?"

"Until morning." Borland took a mug from the shelf, set it on the stove. "In an hour it'll be fully dark."

* * *

She was the one who talked about her father.

Borland hadn't asked. He set the tea down, sat at the table — and looked at her in a way that made it clear: you can. She didn't speak the way she had told it to Ekaterina, where everything was by the facts and in order. Here it was different. About the smell of tobacco and machine oil, even though they had never had a car, the smell had simply clung to him and stayed. About how once, when she was eight, he took her into the forest and told her to walk slowly and listen with her feet — not with her ears, not with her eyes, but with her soles. Back then she hadn't understood what her father wanted from her. Now, after two days in the Zone, she was beginning to realize. When she had finished her memories of childhood, she went on to what she knew about his later trips into the Zone.

"Svetlov Igor Dmitriyevich," she said at the end. "Bely. Four years ago he went out on an assignment from the institute and didn't come back. The assignment was called 'Resonance.' I don't know anything more specific."

Borland was silent.

She looked at him and tried to read something from his face. Nothing. He sat evenly, without impatience, without the sideways glance people use to signal they're waiting for it to end. He listened.

"Resonance," he repeated. Aloud, not as a question. Testing the word. "Apex has been in the Zone for half a year. If they've been here much longer, then one thing is linked to the other — the trail can still be found. Not hot, but not entirely cold either."

Lika waited.

"The northern sector changed after the surge. Where you pointed, I was a year ago. What's there now — I don't know. We'll have to go and look."

"Will you go?"

A short pause.

"First I have to teach you to walk. Then I'll decide."

It wasn't yet agreement. But it was no longer refusal either. Lika felt this not with her head — with the same instinct with which she had begun to feel the pressure of the anomalies in the corridor. Maybe her father had been right about the soles.

Borland stood up, took away the mug.

"Sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

He lay down on the bunk and turned to the wall. Dub settled by the stove, putting his jacket under his head. Kit — on the floor, without any extra movement. Lika found the place that was left.

Outside the door, Lis's cigarette smoldered quietly. Lika didn't go out to him.

She lay there. Listened to the hut going quiet. Rustles at first — then breathing, then a silence so complete that she could hear the Zone breathing outside.

Chapter 10. Farewell

Gaika was sitting on the porch with a mug in her hands when Borland came out.

Dawn was only gathering — the sky over the forest gray, the air damp and cold, with that density that in the Zone comes only in the early morning. The anomalies in the labyrinth were almost invisible in this light, only the air above them trembled slightly — and if you knew what you were looking for, you could make it out.

Borland sat down beside her on a step. Was silent a while.

"How's Vint?"

"Living. Working." Gaika took a sip from the mug. "Gone a bit soft."

"Good."

One word, a nod — short, single. The forest stood quiet. Somewhere beyond the perimeter something crackled at even intervals, and neither of them paid it any attention — one of those sounds you stop hearing after a week in the Zone.

"Leshy. I need to tell you something about the Zone."

He waited.

"After the last surge the data doesn't add up. Several anomalies seem to have mutated, changed structure, as if they don't belong to this Zone. One Flare in the third sector started behaving like a Trampoline, our people didn't even understand it at first. The institute still can't explain it. They called it a geyser, the flame bursts out and is carried off in an arc."

Borland looked at the labyrinth.

"I noticed it three weeks ago." His voice was level, with no intonation of news. "I can't say anything more precise yet. It's stronger in the deep, closer to the perimeter maybe you can't even notice. Something is taking shape in the Zone."

"Understood. We'll be careful."

"More careful than usual."

Gaika finished her mug, set it down beside her on the porch plank.

"You've changed."

Borland didn't answer right away. He looked at the labyrinth.

"Everyone changes."

"Not everyone in this direction."

That went unanswered. He didn't get up, didn't close himself off — just sat beside her. For Gaika that was enough.

"Wake yours up," he said. "We'll eat before the road."

They ate breakfast in silence. Tinned food, bread, herbal tea. There wasn't much food.

Lis, from the moment he sat down at the table, had been looking at the stove. Silently, not looking away.

Dub noticed first. Poured himself more tea.

"There's no chimney," Lis said at last. "But there's heat. And no smoke at all."

Borland ate.

"That's physically..." Lis broke off mid-word. Turned slowly. "There's a Flare in there. You stuck a Flare in the stove."

"Lis," said Gaika.

"No, wait. An anomaly. In a stove. He just took it and stuck it in."

Dub sighed. Poured more.

Borland put down his spoon.

"Where I grew up, the Zone was everywhere. The tribe lived inside it — not next to it, inside. They learned to move anomalies, lure them, use them. A Flare holds heat, doesn't smoke, consumption

zero." He stood, took the mugs. "The anomalies here are different, but the principle is the same. Finish up."

Lis stared at his back.

"Dub. He moves anomalies."

"Heard."

"With his hands."

"Not with his hands, he said so himself."

"You're drinking tea calmly."

"That's my superpower," said Dub, and set down his mug.

Kit smiled. Said nothing.

* * *

They left in the middle of the morning.

Borland went out beyond the perimeter first, picked up a cobblestone from the ground — rounded, heavy — and with a short swing threw it at an anomaly at the edge of the corridor. A flash, the smell of ozone, the corridor widened by some two meters. Lis watched this in silence.

A struggle was clearly going on inside him.

"Don't ask," said Dub, passing by.

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking."

Gaika stopped at the passage. Turned around.

"Leshy."

He looked at her.

"Thank you. You know what for. And look after her, maybe..." She didn't finish, nodded toward Soika.

He nodded — once, briefly. They both knew it was enough.

Kit waved a hand at the exit — broadly, in his own way. Dub left without looking back. At the edge of the corridor Lis did turn around after all, held his gaze on Borland, on the hut behind his back. Was silent for a second. Then left.

* * *

Lika stood by the porch and watched them go until their silhouettes dissolved among the trees. Then she turned around.

Borland stood two steps away, looking in the same direction.

"So. You stay. Three days. I'll see what you can do and what you can't. Then I'll decide."

"Decide what, exactly?"

"Whether it's even worth going there with you."

He turned to the hut and went in. The door closed without a slam.

Lika looked at the door.

Three days.

Chapter 11. Three Days

He took out the map in the morning, without preamble.

Large, frayed at the edges. Over the printed base — layers of pencil marks: arrows, numbers, symbols whose meaning Lika didn't understand. Borland spread it on the table, weighed the corners down with mugs. In places the paper had worn clean through at the folds — the map had been folded and unfolded many times.

"Show me."

"What exactly?"

"Everything you know. Bely's last run. Where Apex is, according to the institute's data. In general — whatever there is. And I'll see whether you can read, while I'm at it."

Lika bent over the map.

She could read a map — her father had taught her before school, with the same seriousness with which children are taught to count. "A map is a conversation with a place," he used to say. "The place tells you what's there. You tell the map where you are." She ran her finger over the sheet, named sectors, marked what she remembered from the archive data — fragmentary, incomplete, but data all the same.

Borland listened. Sometimes he looked not at the map but at her — she noticed it from the corner of her eye.

"The last point where he was seen — here." She marked it with a fingernail. "The far north of the sector. After that there's no data."

"Apex?"

"This corridor, according to our data. But that's half a year ago. They show up in different places."

Borland was silent over the map for a long time. His finger passed over the northern edge, not touching the paper. Stopped at an empty spot where there was no data.

"After the surge everything there became different. The old routes don't work." He rolled up the map, put it away. "First I'll see how you walk. We go out in ten minutes."

* * *

The labyrinth around the house she already knew fairly well by eye. Borland led her through it differently.

He walked and stopped. Stood and waited. Said nothing.

The first time she stopped next to him and didn't understand what he was waiting for. Looked around, shrugged.

"What?"

He moved on again.

The second time she felt pressure on the left — the air there was slightly different in density, barely perceptible. She took to the right. Something in his step changed for a fraction of a second.

She caught it.

By noon she began to understand what he was doing. He was teaching her to listen — not to the detector and not to her eyes, but to the thing inside. Borland didn't explain in words. He walked, stopped, waited — whether she felt it or not. More often she felt it. Not always accurately, not always quickly.

Once she felt nothing — just stood and didn't understand. He waited, then picked up a stone and threw it a little ahead and to the left. The air flared quietly: a Flare, almost invisible in daylight, marked itself with a strip of hot air above the ground.

"You can't always hear them." The first words in an hour and a half. "Sometimes look at the insects. They don't fly where an anomaly is."

"Did you come up with that here, or did you know it before?"

"Here. Everywhere I ended up, the anomalies were different — every time I had to learn anew."

Nothing more. He walked on again.

He drove her through the labyrinth for four hours. Without breaks, without assessments, without words. By the end her legs were humming, sweat stung her eyes, her concentration was swimming — but she didn't ask to stop. When he finally turned toward the house, she didn't grasp it at once — she just noticed they had already come out of the ring of anomalies.

"That's all?"

"For today."

When she passed him in the doorway, he didn't step aside. Stood there. She took it as an assessment — silent, but clear.

* * *

Inside it was warm. The Flare in the stove was working evenly.

Lika dropped onto the bunk. Somewhere in her shoulder there was a pull — it seemed that at one of the passages she had veered right a little earlier than needed and grazed something with her edge. Borland sat at the table, making notes on the map. Quietly, without extra movement.

She closed her eyes.

Her thoughts came slowly. She fell into sleep before she could finish thinking.

The creak of a door.

Steps.

Lika opened her eyes. The ceiling. She lay for a second, then got up.

* * *

The summer shower stood around the corner of the hut — a tank on a post, boards underfoot, three walls of slab wood.

Lika went out for water and turned the corner without thinking.

She stopped.

Borland stood with his back to her. Above, only trousers. Water was pouring from the tank.

She should have left. She stayed.

His back was narrow and wiry, though with broad shoulders for all that. On his forearms — scars. Even spirals, from the wrists upward, applied with intent and precision — that doesn't come out by accident, it is done for a long time and most likely painfully. Higher, going up to the shoulders, ran a tattoo: angular signs, each separate and at the same time part of something. In the institute's materials she had seen nothing like it; they also didn't resemble any language she had ever seen.

The water stopped pouring.

Lika stepped back. Not quietly enough.

Borland didn't turn around. His shoulders changed their angle slightly.

She went around the corner, pressed herself to the wall.

Her heart beat fast. She stood.

The spirals — most likely ritual. From that world. And the tattoo is different — applied later.

The sky was darkening beyond the forest.

The hut door creaked.

She waited. Went in after him.

Borland was already lying on the bunk, turned to the wall.

"Tomorrow will be harder. Go to sleep."

She lay down. Closed her eyes.

The spirals stood before her eyes for a long time.

* * *

At this pace a couple of days went by, during the night and day breaks Leshy would leave and come back an hour later. After which the labyrinth became unrecognizable, he moved something and changed its structure and each time it was harder for Lika to get through.

Finally, one evening, he nodded to her approvingly.

"Tomorrow we set out."

Chapter 12. The Departure

They set out at dawn.

Borland went first — habitually, without words. Lika kept behind him, trying to fall into his pattern: not literally into his footprints, that was useless — he moved too unpredictably, too many small course corrections that from outside were almost unreadable. Rather — into the overall rhythm. Where he looks, where he slows, where he shifts the angle of his shoulder a little. In three days in the labyrinth she had learned to read at least that. Badly, so far. But all the same.

The Zone met them differently than the first time, when she had entered it.

Not more aggressively. Denser. The pressure began earlier, even before the detector gave a signal — barely perceptible, at the level of that very inner instinct that Borland had spent three days teaching her not to ignore. She noticed this pressure. Noticed that he noticed it too — he moved a little slower, a little more carefully, with longer pauses on open stretches. Like a man walking on ice who knows the ice is thinner today than yesterday.

Lika kept going and stayed quiet. Here, silence was right.

* * *

By noon they had covered about eight kilometers. By the standards of the deep Zone — decent, Gaika had said that here more than five a day counted as a good pace. They stopped at the ruins of some structure — three walls and a piece of ceiling, enough to give shade. What it had been before was unclear. The Zone had long since ground up everything that could have answered that question.

Borland sat, leaned against the wall. Took out water. Lika lowered herself next to him, stretched out her legs. Her shoulder ached — the very one she had grazed in the labyrinth. She didn't say anything.

They ate in silence. Cold tinned food, bread. Borland ate methodically, without appetite and without disgust — simply a necessary action that had to be carried out.

Lika looked at the ruins opposite. At how something gray and stubborn pushed up through the cracks in the concrete. At how the anomalies around held a perimeter — unseen, but felt.

Then she asked after all.

"Vikki." She didn't look at him. "Can you tell me about her?"

A pause. Long enough for her to regret the question.

"Why."

"I don't know." Honestly. "I just want to understand who exactly I remind you of."

Borland looked aside. For a long time — so long that she had already decided there would be no answer.

"She could listen with her soul." His voice was level, but there was something in it that was not level — like a crack in a wall that you don't see at once, but feel. "Much more human than me. She sensed her surroundings, but she was just as lonely as I am." Borland fell silent for several minutes. "She completed me..."

Silence.

"Is that all?" Lika asked quietly.

"That's enough."

He stood up before she could think of anything to say. Picked up his pack, swung it onto his shoulder.

"Moving out."

He said nothing more. But that was already more than I had expected.

* * *

After noon the Zone began to press more noticeably.

Not dangerously — just more perceptibly. The pressure on her temples became background, almost habitual, but Lika noticed that she was beginning to tire faster than usual. Not her legs — her head. Concentration required effort.

Borland saw it before she understood it herself. He stopped, turned around. Took from the side pocket of his pack a gray-yellow porous piece.

"Open your mouth."

"Why?"

"Just listen to me. The psi-pressure is higher here, closer to the center it will keep growing."

She opened it. He put a piece of something like a sponge in and told her to chew. A metallic, bitter taste. After a few minutes her head became clearer — not completely, but enough to hold the pace.

"Loofah (that's the name — an artifact, not an actual sponge). Nobody found a use for it," he said. "I take it everywhere now, found the effect by accident. Probably nobody else would ever think of chewing a useless artifact in order to stick their head into the very hell of the Zone."

"I'm afraid to find out under what circumstances you started eating artifacts... And before?"

"Before, I just put up with the itch in my head."

They went on. Lika walked and thought that "put up with" in his version probably meant simply kept moving. Didn't complain, didn't slow down, didn't stop. Just went through it, like through everything else.

* * *

They made their night camp in an abandoned pillbox — small, low, with an embrasure instead of a window. There was room for exactly two, if you didn't move unnecessarily. Outside, the walls were knee-deep in moss, inside — bare concrete with rusty traces of brackets. Somebody's old position. Long abandoned.

Borland set the perimeter. A rope with nuts, a few wire loops — simple, no tricks. Then he lay down, closed his eyes.

Lika sat by the embrasure and looked outside.

The Zone in the dark was different. The anomalies glowed faintly — bluish, sparse. Somewhere off to the side something thudded dully, as if underground. Then silence, which she had almost stopped perceiving as silence — here it was always full.

She thought about Vikki. About what it means to feel with the soul.

About whether she was like her in any way, besides the face.

"Sleep," said Borland into the darkness. "Tomorrow will be harder."

She lay down. Closed her eyes. For a long time she couldn't sleep — not from fear, it was just that the Zone outside breathed, and you could hear it, and that kept her from letting go of her thoughts.

Then — she fell through. Without dreams.

Chapter 13. Tracks

They saw the camp from a knoll — or rather, what was left of it.

Borland stopped about two hundred meters short. He stood and looked — for a long time, calmly, without hurry. Lika stopped beside him. She looked in the same direction, trying to see what he saw. Trampled grass along the perimeter — not evenly, but in patches, in several places. Traces of a fire in the center, but small, neat. Several little pillars of earth where the tent posts had stood.

"Do we wait?" she asked quietly.

"No." He moved forward — in a wide arc, approaching from the downwind side. "Two days at least. Maybe three."

She went after him and tried to see what he saw. The traces of the fire — not stalker ones. Heat tablets: a small ring of soot without charcoal, without ash, without smell. The tent pegs were driven in evenly, level, at equal intervals — not hastily, methodically. Someone had worked here for more than a day.

In the middle — a dark patch on the ground. A large one.

Borland crouched. Touched the earth with his fingertips, raised his eyes.

"There was a fight here." His voice quiet, businesslike. "And someone lay here for a long time."

"Apex?"

"The gear is theirs." A nod toward the bushes at the edge of the clearing — in the grass there lay a scrap of tactical belt with a Fastex buckle. Good, brand-name, not cheap goods. "But they left in a hurry. The camp wasn't cleaned up. So they had no time for that."

* * *

Lika walked the perimeter herself — slowly, looking at her feet. Borland didn't stop her, only watched from the corner of his eye. She felt it — not a look, but attention. A different thing.

She found the notebook at the far edge of the clearing, under an overturned plastic ammunition crate. A dark green oilcloth cover, soaked at the edges. The pages inside were intact, small pencil handwriting, hurried but legible.

The call sign on the first page: Skvorets.

Lika leafed through carefully — the pages were swollen with damp, brittle. Entries by date, not all of them — routes, bearings, technical observations, short notes on anomalies. Then her eye caught on a word.

"Bely said the way out is only through the northern node. I don't believe it — the pressure there is such that you can't get through without preparation. But he got through. Which means he knows something we don't."

She stopped. Reread it.

"Leshy."

Borland came over. She held out the notebook, jabbed a finger at the line. He read it. Turned the page. Another. Silently.

"Skvorets," he said at last. "I've heard of him. Experienced, been in the Zone a long time." He handed the notebook back. "Is he one of those Vint was trying to find?"

"The second of the three," said Lika. "Went missing over a week ago." She looked at the notebook. "This is his camp. His things."

Borland was silent.

"There was a fight here," she said. "Skvorets went missing. And most likely Apex had a hand in it. The camp was theirs, most likely Skvorets was killed, and they carried his personal things with them."

"This deep, only the Darks could have attacked well-prepared mercenaries."

She held the notebook in her hands and thought that whoever had written this would never get in touch again. Who are the Darks? She didn't ask herself that question, she was too excited by the find.

"Read on the way," said Borland. "We shouldn't linger here."

* * *

She tucked the notebook inside her jacket, against her body. They went.

Lika read as she walked — in short pieces, when the Zone allowed her to look down at the pages. Skvorets's entries went chaotically, sometimes with dates, sometimes without. Coordinates, names of anomalies, notes on routes. Technical language, dry. But between the lines something else sometimes appeared.

There were four mentions of Bely.

The first — in passing, in a list of people at a meeting in a bar. A name among other names. The second — that line about the northern node that she had already read. The third — short, without explanation: "Bely didn't return to the meeting point. Waited two hours. Left alone." The date stood a few days from the one that the institute's documents recorded as the last note about her father.

The fourth mention was at the end of the notebook. The handwriting there was different — larger, the pressure harder, as if written in the dark or on the move.

"Thinking about Bely. If he made it — then there is a road. If not — then there is no road, and all of this is for nothing."

Lika closed the notebook.

She walked. Looked at Borland's back.

He didn't turn around. But a few minutes later he slowed his step — just slightly, so that she drew level with him. Said nothing. Just walked beside her.

That was enough.

Lika thought about how the Zone is built: it grinds people up and sometimes — very rarely — something of them is left. Entries in a soaked notebook. Notches on a tree that no one reads anymore. Tracks that few know how to read, and one of them was walking beside her now.

She thought about Skvorets, whom she hadn't known. About how he had been looking for a way out of somewhere. About how he believed: if Bely made it — then there is a road.

A road to where. That question she hadn't yet asked aloud.

Chapter 14. The Witness

He lay behind a fallen tree and didn't move.

Borland noticed him first — stopped, raised a hand. Lika halted. Silence. Then in the silence — breathing, quick, ragged, with a wheeze on the exhale.

Alive.

Borland went around the tree from the side — slowly, hands in plain view, not touching his weapon. Lowered himself into a crouch beside him.

A man of about thirty-five. Tactical gear — the patches cut off, but by the cut, by the material, by the system of attachments it was clear at once: Apex. His left leg was bound above the knee with a makeshift tourniquet made from a piece of belt. His face gray, wet. He looked at Borland and didn't move — either he couldn't or he didn't want to, until he understood who this was.

"Water," said Borland. To Lika, not to him.

She handed over a flask. Borland brought it to the wounded man's lips. He drank greedily, choked, coughed, drank again.

"Who are you."

"Not Apex," said Borland. "That's all you need to know for now."

The man looked at him. Then at Lika. Then at Borland again. Something in him let go — not relaxation, just a decision — his last fight was already behind him.

* * *

Borland drew the information out methodically. Not with pressure, not with threats — simply with questions. Short, specific, without the pauses that give time to think and to filter.

Apex had sent out a group three days ago. The task — to find the Object and take it under control. The Object — a man who had come out of a spatial anomaly alive. Apex had been watching this anomaly, and, of course, by the time everything was passed up to the leadership, he had already managed to get away from them.

The group of mercenaries had finally caught up with the guy, he didn't know his way around the Zone and kept doubling back, and that was how they took him. Then they were attacked.

"The Darks," Borland repeated quietly.

"There were about twenty of them, maybe more." The wounded man spoke with effort, in short pieces, saving his breath. "I'd never seen the likes of them. The hands on some of them... different. Some had their faces covered with masks, but under the masks too, something was off. They came out of the deep as if they knew where we were. As if they'd been waiting."

"They have the Object."

"They took him. Alive." A pause, a long one. "He went on his own. Didn't resist. As if he knew them."

Borland was silent.

"Description," he said.

"Young. Twenty-five, maybe less. Light brown hair." The wounded man closed his eyes, remembering. "Dressed not like us, the gear foreign, not from here. Speaks strangely — the words are Russian, but a manner of speech or an accent I couldn't place. And when he came out of the fracture, they reported he had an artifact in his hand. It glowed — evenly, faintly."

Borland nodded. Once, briefly.

Interesting. Whether this artifact is the same as the one Khimik and Prigorshnya once had, before it was reforged into the Cutter, or something else entirely. How does it work?

He set those questions aside in his head.

Lika looked at him. Something in his face had changed — barely noticeably, at the level of what she had already learned to read in him.

* * *

"Can you walk?" Borland asked.

"No."

Borland adjusted the tourniquet on the wounded man's leg — quickly, professionally, without needless explanations. Checked that it was tight enough, loosened it a little where it was pinching.

"Apex will come back for its own. Lie quiet. You'll hold out."

"And you?"

"We're leaving. You know how you people work."

"I do. They'll write me off."

Leshy took his handheld, held it in his hand. Put it back.

Andr's voice sounded in his head. Downloaded the data, many files are encoded, need to work with them.

They left. The wounded man didn't call after them.

* * *

Lika walked and waited. Borland was silent for a long time — longer than usual. It wasn't the silence of having nothing to say. This was something else, he was thinking something over.

"Do you know who that was?" she asked.

"I don't think I know him personally."

He didn't stop. He answered on the move, without turning around.

"From the Zones, people sometimes leave through fractures. It happens in different ways. Sometimes by accident." A pause. "And there are some like me, who can open fractures and pass through them."

Lika digested that. Walked and digested.

"He's from your world."

"Hard to say, I can barely call any of the worlds I've been in my own."

"He came here through a fracture and, judging by what that man said, he was disoriented, does that mean he got here by accident? And the Darks took him, and who are they, anyway?"

"You have too many questions. The Darks — those who will never leave the Zone again. Its permanent residents."

They walked. The Zone pressed evenly, in the background. Lika thought about the man with the accent and the artifact in his hand, and about the Darks. Thought about her father, who was also somewhere here. Thought about whether these stories had much in common — and whether she wanted to know.

"Where are we heading now?" she asked. "To the city of the Darks?"

Borland looked ahead.

"Could be." Leshy answered shortly. "But things between me and them aren't great."

"This man," she said. "Is he important to you?"

Borland didn't answer right away. Walked.

"I don't know him personally. But I'm interested in how he got here." A pause. "His appearance, and the fact that Apex has an interest in fractures, all this leads me to some not very good thoughts."

Lika nodded. For her, her father was important because he was her father. For him, this man was important because they were somehow alike, and he wanted to learn his story.

* * *

At the rest stop Borland took out the map. He looked at it for a long time, tracing something with his finger above the sheet, not touching.

"Skvorets mentioned the northern node," said Lika.

"Yes. I saw."

"Have you been there?"

"Near it." He didn't look up from the map. "Didn't go close. The pressure there is such that without preparation you lose your bearings fast. Your father, judging by Skvorets's notebook, went through there. Either he had preparation, or he knew something others didn't."

"And do the Darks go there?"

"They live nearby, in essence, apart from them you won't meet anyone there." He folded the map. "We'll have to pay them a visit after all."

Lika digested that.

"So, you know their leader?" Lika kept on with her questions.

"I did, yes. Their leader may have changed. Some half a year ago, three of the Darks decided to get cheeky and help themselves in my house. After that, a parcel with three heads of the Darks was found on the outskirts of the city."

Borland fell silent.

"Will they let us in?"

Borland put the map away. Stood up.

"I don't know. But we'll try. Nobody has repealed the law of the Zone, they only have themselves to blame."

Chapter 15. Apex

There were six of them.

Borland saw them before they saw him — stopped, raised a hand. Lika halted beside him and looked where he was looking, until she saw it herself: movement in the tall grass, even, professional. The point man walked fifty meters ahead of the main group. Two on the flanks, at a small distance that allowed them to see the center and at the same time not bunch up, blocking each other's line of fire. The rest between them one after another — tight, but leaving room to maneuver. The intervals were measured.

"Down," quietly. Lika sank into the grass at the same time as he did.

Borland lay on his side, took out a monocular. Watched.

Lika lay next to him and breathed evenly — slowly, from the belly, not the chest. The grass above her was tall. She didn't move.

Apex was a hundred and fifty meters away. They looked in the right direction — but not at the right place. They were looking for tracks on the trail, and Borland hadn't walked on trails for a long time. The point man stopped, crouched, read something on the ground. Raised his eyes and swept them along the horizon — slowly, methodically, with pauses.

At one moment he was looking straight in Lika's direction.

She didn't stir. Counted seconds. One. Two. Three.

He turned away. Gave the group a signal with his hand. They went on.

* * *

They lay there another five minutes — Borland saw them off through the monocular. Then he was the first to raise his head, assess the situation, nod.

They got up. Went in another direction — fast, low, along the edge of the shrubs.

"Were those people from Apex?" Lika asked.

"Looks like it."

"And still — who are they? Military?"

"Former. Or acting under cover." Borland didn't look back. "That level of training doesn't appear in half a year in the Zone. That's years of work in the field — before the Zone."

"How do you know?"

"I watched how they move. How they hold intervals. How the point man read the ground — fast, without fuss." A pause. "And because I saw similar ones here a year ago. I didn't know then what they were called."

Lika digested that.

"Apex was here earlier than the institute said."

"Much earlier. Half a year is when they stopped hiding."

They walked fast. The Zone pressed evenly — without jumps, without warnings. Lika kept the pace and thought that six people with such bearing and such gear — that wasn't a reconnaissance group. That was a search party. With resources. With a task.

* * *

"They're looking for the Object," said Borland after a few minutes. "The one the Darks took from them."

Lika walked and thought about it. About what it means to be part of someone else's story that you didn't choose. About how four years ago her father had gone out on an assignment called "Resonance" and ended up at the center of something incomparably bigger than one man with one assignment.

"What is the northern node? This name is mentioned in Skvorets's diary too," she asked.

Borland was silent for a moment.

"A place where there are more fractures than anywhere else in this Zone. A natural cluster. Unstable." He veered right, without explaining why — she no longer asked in such cases. "If someone wants to control the transitions between worlds, the northern node is the most obvious place for it."

"'Resonance' — apparently, it's a project to control spatial anomalies," said Lika.

"Yes. Looks like it."

They walked a few more minutes in silence. Then Borland stopped at a small ravine, went down, raised a hand — wait. Examined the bottom. Climbed back up, nodded — clear.

They crossed.

"When we get to the Darks," said Lika, when they had climbed out on the other side, "what awaits us?"

"Me, possibly a bullet in the forehead." His voice level. "Maybe we'll be lucky and it'll all go peacefully."

"You're not afraid?"

"Matters of blood don't worry them much, I hope we'll sort it out. I'm not planning to linger there longer than necessary."

Lika nodded. To go quickly in and out of a city of people who carry mutations as a sign of belonging and have held their territory in the Zone for God knows how many years. It sounded simple. It was, of course, entirely different.

* * *

They spent the night in a small building — either a former substation or a pumping station, thick walls, small windows, high up. Borland inspected the perimeter, set a couple of tripwires — habitually, without words. Then he got down to the map, marking something with a pencil.

Lika sat by the wall and looked at him.

"How did you end up here?" she asked. "From the very beginning, how it all was."

Borland didn't look up from the map.

"It's a long story. In my world I lost my parents and was supposed to become an outcast. I wouldn't have survived, then Khimik and Prigorshnya came to us through a fracture." The pencil stopped. "They took me with them. Before they left, the elder of our village made them this knife," Borland pointed to the Cutter on his hip, "with it it became easier to cut the boundaries of space."

"And then?"

"Then we wandered through worlds, settled, I grew up and decided to look for my own path. Met Vikki in one of the worlds and lost..."

Lika looked at him.

He went back to the map. Lika sat and thought that Leshy, evidently, had had no simple fate.

Lika lay down. Closed her eyes. The ceiling in the dark, thick walls, the quiet Zone outside.

Tomorrow — the city of the Darks.

Chapter 16. Deeper

They went deeper into the Zone, and the Zone felt it.

It didn't threaten — it simply thickened. The air grew heavier with every kilometer, not physically, but in some other way: a pressure on the temples that began in the morning as a background and by evening became something that took effort to ignore. Lika's detector beeped more often now — the anomalies stood thicker here, the gaps between them smaller. Borland skirted them as confidently as before, only the pauses on open stretches had grown longer.

"The Darks," said Lika. "Tell me."

Borland walked. He was silent for a while — gathering himself; she already knew this silence.

"They're people who spent too long in the Zone. Or who deliberately chose to live in it — not next to it, but inside." His voice was even. "Mutations build up in everyone who spends a lot of time deep. In most it's slow, almost unnoticeable. Not with the Darks. They sped the process up."

"Why?"

"They say it's how the Zone accepts them fully. Lets them in further than it lets ordinary people. Psi-pressure works on them differently — less. They can live where another man would lose consciousness in an hour. They go places I wouldn't go without preparation. But everything has its price — they can no longer leave the Zone. Two hours at most, and then their bodies start to decay."

Lika looked at his back. At the places where he wouldn't go without preparation. It was something she hadn't expected to hear from him.

So even you aren't all-powerful. You're still different from the Darks.

* * *

"You have a conflict with them," she said. "Haven't you thought about resolving it somehow?"

"There was a conflict." Curtly. "They started it themselves. Got what they had coming."

"And now they're angry at you."

"Very. They have their own system of values about their place in the Zone. I broke it. And you could say I threw down a challenge to them." Borland veered left, going around something invisible. "They'll let us through. But the conversation will be unpleasant."

"You warned me about that."

"Yes." A pause. "Keep quiet there. Whatever happens. If I tell you to leave without me — you leave at once, that's not up for discussion. They'll let you go. Understood?"

Lika didn't answer right away.

"Understood."

They walked on. The Zone pressed down. Borland had given her another portion of loofah half an hour ago — and she was thinking that the conversation ahead would be unpleasant. By his standards. And his standards and hers were different things.

* * *

At the rest stop she took out Skvorets's notebook.

She had already read almost all the entries — on the way, in pieces. Now she reread more slowly, went back, looked for details. Skvorets wrote about the Zone the way people write who live in it: in a habitual way, without extra words, with the brevity that comes when you no longer need to explain to yourself what the Zone is.

About her father — four mentions, she knew them. But now she was reading what lay between them.

Skvorets was looking for something. Not a specific artifact, not a specific place. Something he called the "exit" — and that word appeared in his entries often, always in lowercase, as if it were not about geography but about something else. An exit from what? From the Zone? From a situation?

From whatever he had been dragged into together with her father? An exit from the Resonance project?

She didn't understand. But she put every line away somewhere inside, in the place where things were piling up whose meaning would surface later.

"Found something?" asked Borland.

"Don't know yet."

He nodded. Didn't press.

She looked at Skvorets's last entry — the one in a different handwriting. "If he made it — then there's a road." A road to where. Skvorets hadn't written. Either he knew it was obvious anyway. Or he was afraid to write it — in case strangers found the notebook.

Lika put the notebook away. Stood up. Pack onto her shoulders.

"Let's go," said Borland. He was already standing. Waiting.

They went deeper.

* * *

Toward evening the Zone around them changed once more.

The forest thinned — not because the trees ended, but because those that remained stood differently. Some of the trunks were twisted, as if something had been pulling them in different directions for long years. The branches grew not up but sideways and down. The leaves — or what had been leaves — were dark green, almost black at the edges.

"The psi-field is getting stronger," said Borland.

She already had the artifact ready. But Leshy laid his hand over hers.

"Don't overdo it."

"All right. Are we close?"

"Tomorrow morning we'll reach the edge of the city."

He chose a place for the night — a small hollow under a rock, with an overhang. The Zone smelled different here: to the usual ozone and metal something organic was added, something alive, that she couldn't identify. Not unpleasant — just unfamiliar.

Lika sat by the stone and leafed through the notebook one last time before sleep.

Skvorets wrote about the northern node in three places. Carefully — no coordinates, no names, only "the place where there are many of them." Fractures, he meant, most likely. Or anomalies. Or both.

He was looking for the road there. Bely knew the road. Bely had made it through.

Four years ago.

Lika closed the notebook. Looked at Borland: he lay with his eyes closed, breathing evenly. Whether he was asleep or not — she couldn't guess.

Chapter 17. The City of the Darks

The pressure began abruptly.

It didn't build — at some moment it simply switched. Lika was walking, and suddenly realized she was walking slower. Her legs moved. Obeyed. It was just that each step came a little harder than the last, as if the air had grown denser — not physically, but in some other sense that she couldn't put into words. Her temples were squeezed. Not sharply, but monotonously, with an evenness that is worse than sharp pain, because with it you don't know what to do.

"Leshy."

He was already turning around.

She didn't manage to say anything more. The ground swayed under her feet — or seemed to sway — and she began to sink. Borland caught her under the arms before she fell. She heard his voice — short, one word — but couldn't make it out.

Then for a few seconds there was nothing.

* * *

She came to on her back. Above her — a ceiling. Gray concrete, cracks, in one of them something green pushing through. A window at the side without glass, a piece of sky — light, so not much time had passed.

An unfamiliar place.

Borland was crouching beside her. Looking at her.

"Alive," he said.

"What happened."

"Psi-pressure." He rose, swept the room with a perimeter glance. "Here it starts earlier than it seems. The boundary is blurred — I should have warned you where it roughly is."

Lika tried to sit up. It didn't work right away — her head was heavy, her thoughts moved slowly, as if through something viscous.

"Where are we."

"The edge of the city. The nearest building." A pause. "I carried you here."

She looked at him. He looked aside. The question dropped away on its own.

Borland took a gray-yellow porous piece of loofah out of the side pocket of his pack. Broke off a small bit. Kneaded the mush between his fingers, took out some other herbs, mixed it all into a tight lump.

"Open your mouth."

"You already gave me some today."

"You need more now. Open."

She opened it. He tucked the mush behind her cheek. A metallic bitter taste, familiar by now, but with an aftertaste reminiscent of sage.

"Hold it behind your cheek. Don't swallow. In about twenty minutes you'll feel better."

She felt better in fifteen. Her head didn't clear completely — the pressure hadn't gone anywhere, it had just become a background she could work with. Her thoughts moved faster.

Lika stood up on her own — slowly, holding on to the wall, but on her own. She swayed. Stayed upright.

"How do you know what to mix with what?" she asked. "You said nobody collects loofah in the Zone at all."

"Nobody does. I picked some up once — by accident, about a year and a half ago. Tried experimenting with it out of boredom." He put the remainder in his pocket. "I found these properties by accident. All the properties of artifacts were discovered empirically, and only then confirmed in laboratories."

"And you've carried it ever since, just in case?"

"Yes."

* * *

The city opened up gradually as they walked down the street.

First — the silhouettes of buildings on the horizon, Soviet five-story construction. Then the details: smashed windows in some of the houses, in others — boarded with plywood or polyethylene, here and there real shutters. Some of the roofs were neatly patched — not pretty, but functional. The trash in the streets was pushed aside, not perfectly, but the passages were cleared. People lived here, and had for a long time; the city only looked abandoned.

In a few windows a light was burning. Not electric — dim, yellow, like kerosene. Somewhere smoke in a thin ribbon from a chimney. And a smell — alive, mixed: wood, food, something chemical.

"Do they see us already?" Quietly.

"Since the moment we crossed the line."

Lika looked around without making any sudden movements. From the windows — she didn't see people, but she felt the stares. Several points, constantly. Moving.

"They're not shooting."

"I'm walking with my hands up, in the metaphorical sense." He moved slower than usual, more smoothly. "Don't touch your weapon."

She folded her arms. Walked like that.

The street was empty. Not a single person — only stares from the windows and a feeling that each step of hers was being counted by someone. The Zone pressed from above, the stares pressed from the sides. The metallic aftertaste of loofah in her mouth. Lika walked and thought that her father might have walked down this very street four years ago.

Or never. Maybe he had never been here at all.

But somewhere.

* * *

They passed one block, then another.

No one came out. No one called out. Only the stares from the windows — constant, calm, professional. She was being studied the way you study an unfamiliar animal: without fear and without aggression, just appraising.

"They knew we were coming," Lika said quietly.

"From the moment we crossed the city line." Borland didn't look back. "They have their own system of observation. Not electronic — living."

"People on lookout posts?"

"Anomalies. Some of them react to movement differently than usual — here, in this place. The Darks use that." A pause. "This is their territory. They know every meter of it."

Lika looked at yet another window, covered with polyethylene. Behind the polyethylene something was moving — slowly, unhurried.

She looked away.

"That man, Apex's Object," she said. "If they have him — is he still alive?"

"Most likely. The Darks don't kill without a reason. They need resources, information, people with certain skills. Killing is an expense, not an income."

"That's rather complicated for mutants."

"They're partly human." His voice grew a little sharper. "Remember that in there, inside. Their personalities aren't lost yet, and that's exactly what makes them unpredictable."

Lika nodded.

At the end of the street the Cinema appeared.

Chapter 18. The Bar of the Darks

They were met at the cinema.

The building stood out from the rest not by size or condition — just by the fact that it was plainly being watched over. The façade was cleared of trash. The steps were whole, without potholes — or the potholes had been patched, she couldn't tell. The doors were metal, shut, with hinges that had been oiled: Lika worked that out later, when they were opened — they didn't squeak. An old cinema that someone had given a new life. A different life.

Four came out from around the corner. Calmly, unhurried, the way people come out who feel themselves to be the masters here.

Two wore theater masks. White porcelain, painted features — one mask depicted something like a smile, the other was neutral. The masks covered the face completely: only the eyes were visible in the slits. Lika looked at those eyes and understood that the masks were not decoration. Under them was something that was better not seen by outsiders. Or that their wearers would rather not show.

The other two wore no masks. Each had one normal arm and one hypertrophied: half again as large, muscles and tendons like those of a man who had spent his whole life making one and the same inhuman effort. Living — not a prosthesis, not an exoskeleton, his own. The skin on the big arm was a slightly different shade, the texture different too, but otherwise a man like any man.

Not Izloms yet. But long since not ordinary people.

Borland stopped. So did they.

No one spoke for three, four seconds. Then one of those in masks nodded, briefly. A gesture clear without words: follow us.

* * *

Inside, Lika stopped involuntarily.

The cinema foyer was furnished with the thoroughness of people who are settling in for good and know they are here forever. A counter of old boards and a sheet of steel — even, with shelves behind it. On the shelves bottles, several kinds, some with homemade labels. Tables — homemade, of different heights, but all standing steady. Benches along the walls, one of them with cushions. The light came from kerosene lamps under the ceiling, a dozen and a half of them at different heights, which made the hall bright enough and at the same time strange, with shadows playing not where you expected.

Half-naked girls moved around the hall. Young, with no visible mutations — as far as Lika could make out. They carried mugs and plates to the tables, cleared away the empty ones. They moved habitually, without strain — already used to this place.

Lika looked at them a little longer than she should have.

At the tables sat the Darks — in various degrees of alteration. Some almost ordinary, some in masks, one with something else instead of hair, another with a neck of the wrong length. They talked, drank, ate. An ordinary bar with unordinary patrons.

One of the escorts turned and looked at her. She looked away.

* * *

A staircase up. A corridor — short, three doors, all closed. The far one with a plaque: the letters had almost worn away, but "Director" could be read.

The escort knocked. A pause.

"Come in."

The voice behind the door was unexpected — low, calm, without the hoarseness she for some reason had expected. Just a voice. A human one.

The escort opened the door. Stepped aside.

Borland went in first. Lika — after him.

* * *

The office was small, but lived-in.

A writing desk by the window — heavy, oak, clearly brought from somewhere far away, not original to this building. On the desk several maps weighed down with stones, a stack of papers, two mugs — one full, one empty. A cabinet along the left wall with books — real ones, many, some in battered covers, some clearly homemade bindings. Along the right wall a weapons rack: assault rifles, a shotgun, something older and more imposing in the corner. All clean, all in its place.

On the windowsill stood a flowerpot.

A living plant. Green, watered in moderation. Lika looked at it and didn't at once understand why it was so strange. Then she understood: a living plant in the deep Zone, in a city of mutants.

A man sat behind the desk. About fifty, broad-shouldered, with gray in his short-cropped hair. His face calm, closed — without expression. No visible mutations, unless you counted the eyes: green, cat's eyes.

He was looking at Borland.

Then his gaze shifted to Lika. Lingered. The pupils narrowed, like a cat's before an attack. Lika felt uneasy, goosebumps ran down her spine.

The gaze returned to Borland.

"Leshy," he said. Without intonation. "Long time no see."

"Long time," Borland agreed.

It was quiet in the office. Nothing came through from behind the door — good soundproofing, or else everyone outside had simply gone still.

Lika stood a little behind Borland and waited.

Chapter 19. The Conversation

The armchairs by the wall turned out to be unexpectedly comfortable. Old, leather, with sagging seats. Borland sat in one, Lika in another. The master of the office stayed behind his desk.

He was called Graf, and he considered the Zone his domain, his county — as befits a man called Graf. What he was really called, no one knew.

Graf looked at him calmly. Green cat's eyes — motionless and calm.

"Three heads," Graf said at last. Without intonation. "A fine parcel."

"They came in first."

"I know." A pause. "That doesn't mean you had the right."

"I did. By the law of the Zone, I did. My territory, my perimeter. They violated it."

Graf looked at him. Said nothing for a few seconds. Lika sat nearby and didn't move — a clever girl, she understood that this was not her conversation now.

"You could have come. Talked."

"I could have," Borland agreed. "I didn't. Because a conversation would have taken time, and the parcel explained everything faster." He looked at Graf evenly. "No hard feelings. But it had to serve as a lesson for everyone."

Graf leaned back. A long pause — the kind another man would fill with words. He just sat and thought about something of his own.

Then he nodded. Once, briefly.

"Fine," he said. "Agreed." And at once, with no transition: "Why did you come?"

* * *

Borland spoke briefly. About Apex — what he knew. About the northern node — what he suspected. About the girl beside him — in a single phrase: her father went there four years ago, she is looking for a trail.

Graf listened. Didn't interrupt. When Borland fell silent, he looked at the desk for a few seconds, then raised his eyes.

"We don't like Apex either," he said. "They've been here a long time. Longer than everyone thinks. We watch them — not out of curiosity, it's just that otherwise you don't know what's going on right under your nose."

"What are they doing?"

"We don't know exactly. They bring in equipment. Heavy, specialized. Where to — we haven't managed to track, they change their routes." Graf took a mug from the desk, sipped, set it down. "But we see the results."

"Which ones?"

"Anomalies." He said it curtly, like a diagnosis. "They've become unstable. They shift, change type, appear where they never were. We've lived here a long time — we know how this place breathes. For the last half year it has been breathing differently." A pause. "And mutants. New kinds. I never saw such before. None of us did. Some don't take hold here, but many are super-hunters, stronger than any other kinds. They adapt and hunt everything in sight. So far we manage to regulate their numbers, so they don't come out of the depths of the zone."

Lika exhaled quietly, almost inaudibly. Borland didn't look at her, but he heard.

"The Resonance project. I suspect they're experimenting with fractures and spatial bubbles, and that's why all sorts crawl in here through the holes they've made," he said.

"I don't know what they call it. I know something is happening with space. With fractures." Graf looked at him evenly. "And that worries us. We have nowhere to go."

It was quiet in the office. Outside the window it was quiet too, only a barely audible wind through broken glass somewhere in the corridor.

Borland was thinking.

Apex, who had been here a long time. Unstable anomalies. New mutants. The Resonance project, which took its roots from the institute, but had long since become something else. And somewhere in all of this — Bely, who had gone to the northern node four years ago and not come back.

"The man you took from Apex," said Borland. "Tell me."

"And since when do you care about people? This girl, and now you're interested in a guy too? You're like those super-hunters yourself, there's less human in you than in us," Graf twisted his mouth into a smile.

"Don't dodge the question."

* * *

"Young. Light brown hair. Came out of a fracture — we were just watching an Apex group that was hanging around there." Graf spoke without extra detail, to the point. "Apex noticed him, lost him at first, but then caught up and took him under control. We took him from Apex. He came on his own — didn't try to resist. As if he understood we weren't enemies."

"Or understood he had no choice, you've got uglier mugs than Apex," said Borland.

"Or that." Graf shrugged slightly. "Speaks Russian. But there's something different in him — the words are right, but something behind them isn't. Like a man who learned the language well, but thinks in another."

"Did he tell you anything about himself?"

"Nothing." Something came into Graf's voice, a certain spite. "Keeps quiet. Answers with jokes — black, unpleasant ones. One of ours asked where he's from. He answered: 'From beyond the grave.' Another asked what his name was. He said: 'Dukh.' A call sign, evidently."

Borland looked at him.

"Show me what he had on him."

Graf opened a desk drawer. Took out a small container — metal, with a fixed lid. Set it on the desk, opened it.

Inside lay an artifact.

Small, its shape closer to a sphere. The surface shimmered — not glowing, precisely shimmered, like oil on water, only slower, with depth. The colors changed smoothly: blue into green, green into gold, gold back.

"Seen anything like it?" asked Graf.

Borland took the container. Carefully, with two fingers. Raised it to his eyes.

Something changed at his hip.

The Cutter. The knife lay in its sheath — had lain calmly for two years now, silent. But now — a barely noticeable vibration, light, as if the metal had remembered something. It didn't strain, didn't tear free. It simply — answered.

Borland showed it in no way. Didn't change his posture, didn't lower his gaze.

"An interesting thing," he said evenly. "Haven't come across it before."

Interesting was putting it mildly. The Cutter hadn't reacted to anything for two years. To this artifact — it reacted. Possibly this artifact had properties similar to the one Khimik and Prigorshnya once had, before it was melted down into the Cutter.

He put these thoughts where things piled up that required thinking over later.

He set the container back on the desk.

"Can you bring him in?" Borland asked. "Maybe I can get him talking."

Graf looked at him for a second.

"I'll warn you right now: he broke the noses of two of my men. We had to tie him up." A pause. "Be careful."

"Bring him tied. We'll untie him here."

Graf nodded. Stood, opened the door, said something into the corridor. Returned to his desk.