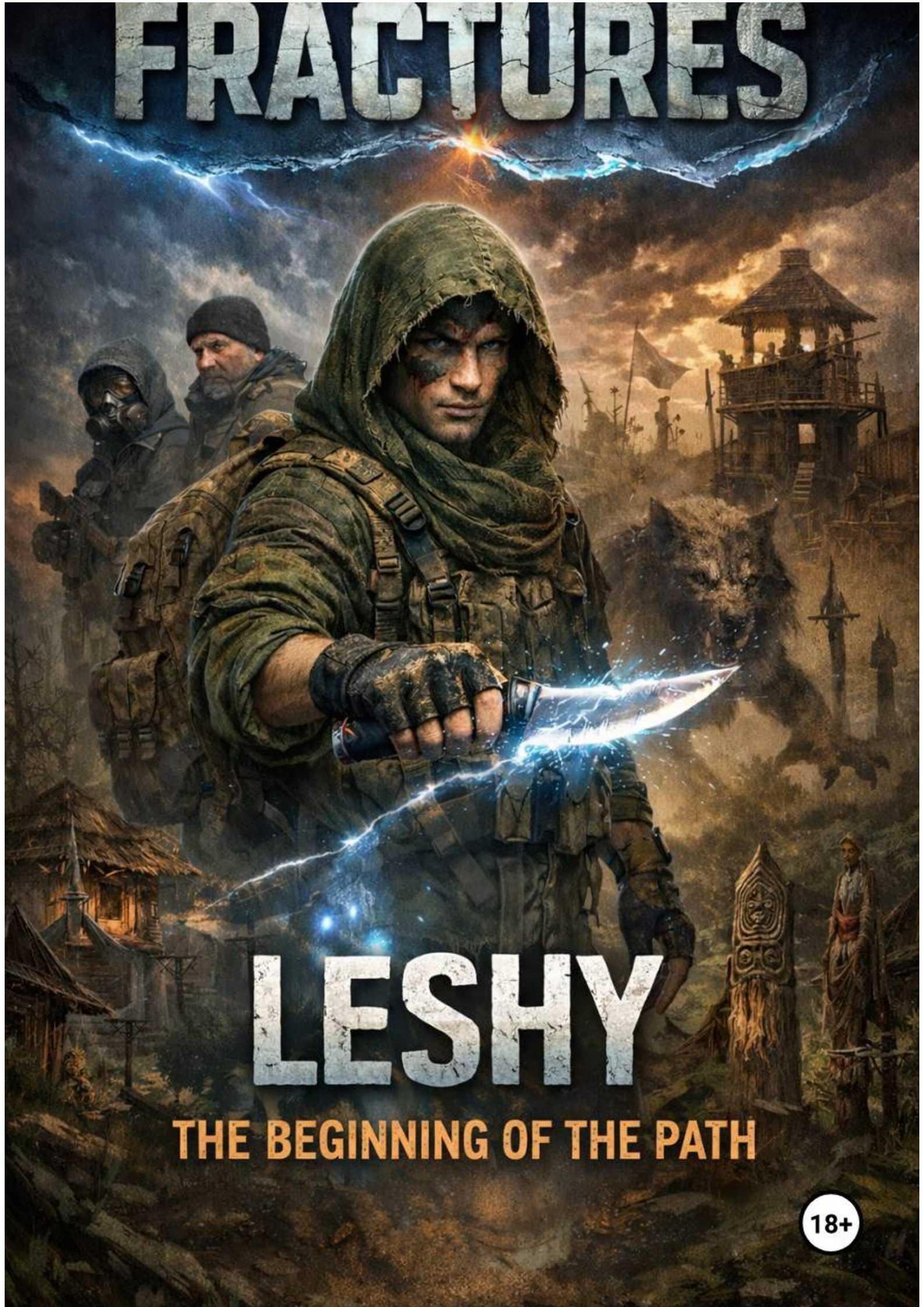
FRACTURES
LESHY
THE BEGINNING OF THE PATH
18+

Fracturesa

Borland Clause

Leshy. The Beginning of the Path

«Автор»

2026

Clause B.

Leshy. The Beginning of the Path / B. Clause — «Автор», 2026 — (Fracturesa)

The Zone... A distorted reality, a world where alien laws govern, and death can come from nowhere. Only those who have learned to live on the edge — and can no longer do otherwise — survive here.Eight years ago, a boy from a savage tribe living in harmony with anomalies lost everything. By the harsh laws of his world, he should have been cast out — but instead, he was taken in by two stalkers: Khimik and Prigorshnya. He lost one home and gained another.Now he is twenty.He senses anomalies before others do.Having grown up, he sets out to find his lost world. But the Fractures are not merely passages: they are boundaries where realities intertwine and collide, giving rise to new threats. Everything Khimik and Prigorshnya learned is now concentrated within him. Here his path begins.In his hands — the "Cutter," an artifact capable of slicing through the very fabric of reality, opens the doors of these Fractures. But not all doors lead where you wish to go...

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Leshy. The Beginning of the Path

Prologue. A Debt for a Debt

The Zone forgives no weakness. But sometimes it gives strange gifts — the kind that burn the soul more fiercely than any anomaly.

* * *

For three days they had been moving through the fractures.

Khimik had long since stopped counting worlds. After the fifth crossing they began to blur into one confused mess — different skies, different smells, different deaths. The artifact known as "Soul," bound to his chest with an old bandage, pulsed steadily and dully, like a toothache. Each tear in the fabric of space cost him more than the last — not physically, no. Physically, Andrei could have walked for a long time yet. But something inside him, at a level he had never found a name for, fractured slightly with each passage. As if he himself bore the same scars he left in the tissue of reality.

Behind them lay a scorched bubble where the very air had tried to devour a man alive. There was nowhere to return to.

"Hey," said Prigorshnya, adjusting his rifle strap, "I've been thinking."

"That's a bad start," answered Khimik, not lifting his eyes from the detector.

"No, seriously. We've been crawling through these bubbles for three days now. There's something nasty everywhere, something always wants to eat us. But this world..." Nikita fell silent, looking around. "It breathes differently. Do you feel it?"

Khimik raised his head. The forest began abruptly — dense, dark, with trees whose trunks bent against all visible logic, as if reaching toward invisible currents. The leaves glowed pale blue whenever the "Soul" sent a light ripple outward. The air was heavy, damp, saturated with ozone and the smell of wet earth after an old storm.

The detector was silent. There were anomalies, but far away. And — oddly — they weren't moving.

"I feel it," said Khimik.

A path revealed itself on its own — barely visible, but well-worn. Someone had walked here regularly and for a long time. They followed it, because the alternative was to push through luminous bushes, and Khimik had once stuck his hand into one such bush in the third bubble. The memory was vivid and instructive.

They heard the drums when the forest began to thin.

A low, rhythmic rumble came from the earth — or seemed to come from the earth. Prigorshnya instinctively raised his rifle. Khimik touched his shoulder and shook his head: not now.

The village appeared all at once, without warning. It stood in a hollow, surrounded by a ring of anomalies — not random ones, but arranged, brought to some non-obvious order. The "Carousels" spun at precise intervals. Between them burned signs — spirals scorched into the earth that Khimik couldn't read but felt: this was no decoration. It was a map. A schematic one could follow.

The tribespeople met them at the boundary of the ring.

Tall, lean, with pale skin. Ritual scars ran from their wrists upward, over their shoulders, to their necks — spirals resembling those burned into the earth. Their spears were in hand but pointed downward. Khimik noticed that none of them were looking at him or Prigorshnya — they were looking at the "Soul." At the faint glow the artifact gave off through his jacket.

An old man stepped out from behind the warriors.

Ancient. So old that age had ceased to have meaning. One eye — dark, alive, attentive. The other — white, sightless, yet somehow it seemed that this one saw more. He approached Khimik without stopping until less than a meter remained between them, and stared for a long time at his chest — where the "Soul" pulsed beneath his jacket.

"You have come in the hour of blood," he said at last. The language was broken, with hard consonants, but understandable. "The Surge is coming. A great Surge."

"We weren't looking for trouble," said Khimik.

"The Surge doesn't ask who was looking for it." The elder turned his head slightly. "But the one-who-walks-through-tears has come at the right time. Perhaps that is not coincidence either."

Prigorshnya gave a quiet whistle. Khimik would have done the same, if that had been his style.

* * *

The Surge began at sunset.

First — silence. The birds fell quiet all at once, as if cut off. The detector screamed and died — the anomalous background spiked beyond the scale. Then the earth trembled with a fine vibration, and from the fractures at the forest's edge came a flood.

Pseudodogs led the first wave — fast, with burning eyes, in packs of twenty to thirty. Behind them came armored boars, huge as small armored vehicles, foaming at the mouth. And behind them — something Khimik had no name for. Long, many-legged, nearly soundless, they moved like water, flowing around obstacles, and wherever they passed, the grass turned black.

"What the hell is that?" asked Prigorshnya, racking his weapon.

"Don't know," said Khimik. "Shoot for center mass until we figure it out."

They stood shoulder to shoulder with the village warriors. The tribespeople fought differently — silently, without shouts, cleanly and terribly. They knew where the wave would pass. They knew which anomaly would trigger on its own, and which needed a push. Their spears, smeared with sap from certain plants, entered the boars' armor plating exactly where it wasn't — at the joints, beneath the throat, behind the ear. This was not courage. This was knowledge.

The "Soul" on Khimik's chest flared. He hadn't planned to use it — but the long many-legged creatures were heading straight for children the tribespeople hadn't managed to shelter. Andrei cut the space diagonally, opening a brief corridor into the void between bubbles. The creatures were sucked in along with their silence. The cut sealed.

"Beautiful!" shouted Prigorshnya from behind an overturned cart where he'd taken cover. "Got more of those?"

"Two times, maybe three. After that — you're on your own."

"Fine, I'll manage."

He did manage. Prigorshnya was frightening in battle in his own way — not through skill, though he had enough, but through a kind of cheerful fearlessness. He cursed, moved, shot from his knee, from the hip, in motion, and somehow never took a hit. Khimik had once told him this wasn't luck but some hidden instinct. Prigorshnya said it was cowboy karma, and the subject was never raised again.

They drove the village back.

But there was a price.

* * *

Two warriors died in the final wave when an armored boar broke through the line. They stood in front of the children. One died immediately. The second — a woman — fought on furiously until the very end, as the battle was already finishing. She lay beside a dead mutant. The sky was frozen in her eyes forever.

Their child stepped out from the crowd of children in silence, his gaze passing over his parents. Twelve years old. Thin, wiry, with dark eyes and ritual spiral scars on his forearms — fresh ones, not yet fully healed. He didn't cry. He looked at the bodies with an expression as if something inside him had already switched over and was working differently now. Not broken. Just — differently.

The elder approached the newly orphaned child. He spoke — in a hard, metallic voice, without pause, without sympathy. Like a sentence being read aloud.

Khimik understood the first words — language came quickly to him, one of the few talents he never boasted about. The orphan was to go into the forest. Alone. The law of the tribe. An old law, with its own logic — the weak should not drag the community down in a world where survival is costly. Khimik understood this logic. He had grown up in a world where it was much the same.

Prigorshnya didn't understand it. Or didn't want to.

"No," he said.

Just "no." Without preamble, without pause. He stepped between the elder and the boy, crossed his arms on his chest — big, ungainly, with soot from the battle still on his cheek.

"This kid isn't at fault that his parents went down for all of us. We may be the reason they stepped forward. Maybe not. Maybe they would have either way. But I won't let this kid die in the forest. He's coming with us."

The elder looked at him for a long time. Then — at Khimik.

Khimik was silent. He could be silent in a way that read as an answer. Yes. I agree. Draw your own conclusions.

Something tightened inside — old, uncomfortable. He himself had once been just like this: alone, without a name, without a place, against everything.

"You helped us," said the elder at last. "A debt for a debt. The boy may leave with you." He paused. "But our world will not release him easily. It knows how to hold those it raised."

* * *

In the evening, as the village buried its dead, the elder approached Khimik and held out his hand. Khimik gave up the "Soul" without words — though something inside him resisted. The artifact rested in the old man's palms, glowing quietly, like a smoldering coal. The elder carried it into his home and closed the door.

The air above the house began to thicken. Slowly, almost imperceptibly — like before a storm, but without wind. Prigorshnya stepped back — he felt these things not with his mind but with his skin, a soldier's instinct: something is about to happen. The boy Borland stood nearby and didn't retreat. He stared at the closed door without blinking, as if he could see through it.

When it was over and the air above the house cleared again, the door opened. The elder stepped out, holding a knife in his hands.

A blade two palms long. A hilt of dark, dense wood wrapped in thin strips of leather. The blade was different. It didn't reflect light — it absorbed it. The edges seemed blurred, as if the boundary between metal and air could not quite decide. Looking straight at it, you seemed to see shadows drifting slowly within the blade itself.

"Now it obeys the hand," said the elder. "No need to carry it at your heart. One stroke will open a path where the worlds touch each other." He raised his eyes to Khimik. "But remember: every cut leaves a scar. On the world — and on the one who cuts."

Khimik took the knife. Weighed it. It was light — almost surprisingly so.

"A beauty," said Prigorshnya, peering over his shoulder. "Does it have a name?"

"Your choice," said Khimik.

Nikita took the knife, turned it in his fingers, looked at the blade with the expression one uses for good weapons — with respect and a slight envy for whoever would carry it.

"Cutter," he said. "Simple and to the point."

Borland watched all of this in silence. He didn't yet understand everything — the language, the meaning of the ritual, where they would go and why. But he understood the main thing: his world had just been cut in two. Just as the new knife cut space — without pain, almost without sound, but forever.

* * *

They left through the fracture at dawn.

The elder walked with them to the edge of the anomaly ring. In farewell, he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder — not gently, but firmly, like stamping a seal.

"You will carry our world inside you," he said in his own language, and Borland understood. "This is not a curse. It is a tool. Use it."

Then they stepped into the fracture, and the glowing trees were left behind.

And in the "quiet" world they found after many more crossings, eight years passed.

And the boy they had called Borland grew up. He became a stalker they called Leshy. And one day he wanted to find his way home.

Chapter 1. Farewell

Morning in the "quiet" world smelled of resin and cold embers.

Borland stood at the window, holding his mug with both hands. The tea had gone cold long ago — he'd forgotten about it while packing his bag and never remembered it again. Outside stretched a familiar landscape: low hills, sparse forest, and somewhere beyond the third hill — the faint shimmer of the anomalous zone, visible on clear days even from here. Pale, nearly transparent. Peaceful, if you didn't know what it was.

He knew.

The pack stood by the door — assembled, buckled, heavy exactly as much as it needed to be. No more. Excess weight doesn't kill immediately, but it kills. He had learned this in his first forays, when Khimik drove him through the anomalous strips of the "quiet" world with a load on his back and a stopwatch in hand. It had seemed like cruelty then. Now — he understood.

The Cutter hung on his right hip. The sheath Prigorshnya had made himself — slowly, stubbornly, with curses and three reworkings. It had turned out well. The leather had darkened from time and handling, molded to the shape as if cast. Borland had long since stopped noticing the weight of the knife — it was simply there, like a part of his body. Three and a half years of forays do their work.

A floorboard creaked behind him.

"The tea's cold," said Khimik.

Borland didn't turn around.

"I know."

Andrei walked to the table, sat, set his own mug down before him. Stayed quiet. He could be quiet for a long time and without awkwardness — Borland remembered this from childhood, from the first days, when he didn't yet understand half the words but already understood the pauses.

"Did you plan your route?" Khimik asked at last.

"Through the eastern strip. The fractures are weaker there, I can probe without risk."

"The eastern route is longer."

"I know."

Khimik nodded. Didn't say whether this was right or wrong. Simply noted it. Borland set his mug on the windowsill and finally turned. Andrei sat in his usual pose — elbows on the table, gaze somewhere in the middle of space. Thinking. Or had already thought and was just waiting now.

"You want to talk me out of it?" asked Borland.

"No."

"Then why did you get up so early?"

Khimik raised his eyes. Looked at him — calmly, without excess.

"To see you off," he said simply.

Borland was quiet. Something tightened inside — not painfully, just firmly, like before a jump into a fracture. He nodded and turned back to the window.

* * *

Prigorshnya appeared half an hour later — loudly, as always. He threw open the door, let in the cold morning air, and set a frying pan of eggs on the table — which he had apparently carried across the whole yard.

"Breakfast," he announced. "A proper one. Not up for discussion."

Borland smiled.

"Nikita, I'm leaving, not dying."

"Same thing until you come back." Prigorshnya sat across from him, propped his chin on his fist, and looked at him with the expression one uses for something one is trying to memorize. "Eat."

They ate in silence. The eggs were oversalted — Prigorshnya always seasoned by eye and never got it right. Borland ate everything.

Over breakfast, Khimik unfolded a worn map on the table — not of this particular world, no, it was a composite one, with margin notes, fracture schematics, transition arrows. Eight years of work. He pressed a finger to the eastern sector.

"Here, see — two bubbles are touching closely. The Cutter will take it without effort, one motion. But don't rush. Let it feel where the boundary is."

"I know how the Cutter works."

"You know how it works in these zones. Out there it may be different."

Borland looked at the map. Then — at Khimik.

"You're trying to talk me out of it after all."

"I'm trying to make sure you come back," said Andrei. "Those are different things."

* * *

They went out to see him off to the edge of the hill — both of them, in silence, without unnecessary words. The morning had already brightened, the sky was clear, and the shimmer over the eastern zone had grown slightly stronger — activity. Borland had felt it back in the house but said nothing. No point.

At the top of the hill he stopped and turned.

Prigorshnya stood with his hands in his pockets. Looking to the side — pretending to study the horizon. Khimik stood straight, arms at his sides. Looking at Borland.

"Will you find what you were looking for?" asked Prigorshnya, not turning.

Borland thought.

"I don't know. But not finding it is worse."

Nikita finally turned. Gave a grunt.

"Philosopher." He stepped forward, hugged him briefly, firmly, and clapped his shoulder. "Come back. I'll oversalt something else."

Borland smiled. Then turned to Khimik.

Andrei didn't do embraces. They both knew this. He held out his hand, Borland shook it. The handshake was firm and brief — like a period at the end of a sentence.

"Listen to the Cutter," said Khimik. "Don't rush it. It feels the boundaries better than you."

"I know."

"Now you know." A pause. "Go."

Borland turned and walked down the slope — toward the shimmer, toward the eastern strip, toward the first fracture. The Cutter grew slightly warm against his hip — or he imagined it. He didn't look back.

But he heard Prigorshnya say quietly behind him:

"He's grown up, hasn't he?"

And how Khimik said nothing.

That was enough.

Chapter 2. The Perimeter

The checkpoint on the eastern perimeter looked the way all checkpoints look in "quiet" worlds — slightly sleepy and slightly resigned. A striped barrier, an iron-painted booth, a faded sign reading "Restricted Zone. Entry Prohibited." The sign had once been red. Now — pink, almost tender.

Borland approached unhurriedly.

From the booth a soldier leaned out — young, about twenty, with a mug in his hand and the look of someone pulled away from something important. He took in Borland, assessed the pack, the detector on his belt, the Cutter on his hip. His expression shifted from official to normal.

"Ah, Leshy." He nodded and took a sip. "Back into the zone?"

"Back," confirmed Borland.

"The sergeant said you were planning on being gone a while."

"He did."

The soldier looked at him with a light envy — the kind that comes from standing on one side of a fence and looking at the other.

"There's been activity since morning," he said, nodding toward the zone. "The background is jumping. Yesterday nothing, today the duty officer checked his instruments three times, thought they were broken."

"They weren't broken?"

"They weren't." A pause. "Good luck, then."

The barrier rose. Borland nodded and walked through.

* * *

Beyond the perimeter began a different silence.

Not the kind found in a forest or a field — alive, full of birds and wind. This silence was thick, like cotton. It didn't press, didn't frighten, it simply — was there. Borland knew it well. Three and a half years of forays — that's not a long time, but it's enough to learn when the zone is quiet and settled, and when it has gone still in hiding.

Today it hadn't gone still.

It was breathing.

That was the first thing he felt — before the detector beeped and showed anomalous activity three notches above normal. The air was slightly warmer than it should have been in the morning. The grass beneath his feet — softer. The sparse trees at the zone's edge glowed faintly in shadow, barely noticeable, pale blue — like those he remembered from childhood, from another world, from another life.

Borland stopped. Placed his hand on the Cutter — not to draw it, just like that. A habit.

The zone hummed. Low, almost at the threshold of hearing. Something had changed — not here, not in this particular spot, but deeper, where anomalies gathered more densely and fractures came closer to the surface. He couldn't put it into words — it was the kind of knowledge that doesn't explain itself, it simply lives in the body, in the hands, in that very instinct the elder had called a tool.

Something had shifted. Something was preparing.

He stood there for a minute, maybe two. Then the zone did a strange thing.

Wind came from nowhere — brief, warm, almost gentle. It passed through the grass, rustled the branches, touched his face. And left just as quickly as it had come. As if someone had exhaled.

Borland was not inclined toward lyric. Khimik had cured him of it in his teenage years — practically and without sentiment. But now he caught himself thinking: this is like a farewell. The zone was seeing him off. In its own way, in its own language, which he understood better than he cared to admit.

"Likewise," he said aloud, quietly.

And took out the map.

* * *

The eastern route ran straight — through sparse forest, past two "Carousels" he knew by heart, to the fracture at the old riverbed. Four hours' walk, if he didn't rush. Where the worlds touched each other, the Cutter would open the passage without effort. He felt this.

But the detector beeped again. Borland looked at the screen, then east. The shimmer over the zone was thicker than in the morning. Not a random fluctuation, not a surge — this was restructuring. The zone was changing something inside, and where he had planned to go might now be entirely different from what he had seen last time.

He folded the map. Thought.

To the north, about seven kilometers away, was a stalker base — old, established before Khimik and Prigorshnya had settled in this world. They knew the zone better than the perimeter soldiers. Fresh data was always available there — who had gone in, what they had seen, what had changed. It was a detour. Unplanned, an extra hour and a half.

But walking into a changed zone without information wasn't bravery. It was stupidity. Khimik said it more concisely: "Reconnaissance is not cowardice. Cowardice is not coming back."

Borland adjusted his pack and headed north.

Chapter 3. The Base

Seven kilometers along the edge of the zone — that's not a distance. That's time to think.

Borland walked steadily, the detector at his belt ticking quietly in the background, the Cutter warming his hip through the sheath. The zone on this side was familiar — sparse forest, old anomalous patches he skirted automatically without slowing. Three times over three years he had walked this route. He knew every turn.

So the Tushkans surprised him.

They burst from the bushes to his left — a pack, dense and panicking. The small creatures ran in complete silence, which was itself a bad sign: Tushkans scream when they run from something familiar. When silent — they're running from something they themselves don't understand.

Borland shifted aside, letting the pack through. Moved his rifle.

The Tushkans rushed past — and flew into a Flare.

He saw it out of the corner of his eye a second before they hit it. The Flare was new — it hadn't been here before, he was certain. It had settled in a hollow between two rocks, nearly invisible, faintly shimmering. The Tushkans disappeared into it without a sound. The zone had taken its due.

Borland stopped. Looked around. Whatever the pack had been fleeing never appeared — no sound, no movement in the bushes, no trace. That was more unpleasant than if it had shown itself. A visible threat is an understandable threat.

He waited two minutes. Silence.

Then he looked at the Flare. The anomaly was already discharging — quickly, the energy spent on the Tushkans. Something glinted in the cooling shimmer. He took out his extraction tool — a telescoping rod with a hook on the end, Khimik had made it in the first year — and carefully snagged it.

A small sphere settled in his palm. Warm, dense, with a deep orange glow inside, like coals under ash. The local stalkers called these "Earth's Flame." Not rare, but not junk either — in cold worlds that fractures sometimes led to, an artifact like this was worth more than any equipment. It heated from within, steadily and for a long time, without burns.

Borland turned it in his hand and pocketed it in a container.

"Seeing me off, are you," he said quietly, to no one in particular.

He noted it mentally: a new Flare, Tushkans fleeing something, the pursuer never appeared. All of this — for the bar. They'd appreciate it there.

* * *

The base stood at the edge of the sparse forest — a few timber and metal buildings enclosed by a low fence with motion sensors on the perimeter. No fuss, no signage. Those who needed to knew where it was. Those who didn't — never made it this far.

Borland nodded to the camera at the gate. After a few seconds the bolt clicked.

Inside it smelled of diesel, food, and a little — ozone. The smell of all stalker bases in all the worlds he had managed to see. Khimik had once said it was the smell of people who live on the edge. Prigorshnya had corrected him: the smell of people who are more comfortable on the edge than in the middle.

The bar occupied the central building. Borland pushed the door open.

* * *

It was busy inside — by base standards, meaning about fifteen people. A few stalkers in a corner playing cards. Two at the counter. And a separate group at the far table — four people in matching jackets with patches, plus two soldiers in field uniform nearby. They kept to themselves, talking quietly. The newly arrived Borland got a glance and nothing more.

The bartender — a broad man of about fifty, with a scar across his entire left cheek — raised his head from the counter.

"Leshy." Not a question, just a statement. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Three months," said Borland, sitting on a stool. "Any tea?"

"We'll find some." The bartender turned to the stove. "Into the zone?"

"Into the zone. That's why I'm here. What's the activity like?"

"Wait, Skvoznyak can tell you better." The bartender nodded toward the corner, where a lean, wiry man with perpetually squinting eyes sat playing cards. "He came back from deep yesterday. Two days early."

Borland took his mug and turned.

Skvoznyak was already looking at him. He set down his cards, stood, and approached the counter — unhurriedly, with the economy of movement belonging to those who have learned not to waste anything.

"Leshy." He sat down. "Going far?"

"Eastern route. To the fracture at the old riverbed."

Skvoznyak winced.

"Bad idea."

"I heard. The background is jumping. What's going on?"

"Not the background." Skvoznyak took his mug, paused a moment. "The zone is moving, Leshy. Not the anomalies — the structure itself. Three Carousels on the eastern sector have shifted. One of them was by the path you know — now it's right on the path. I almost walked into it."

"How far did they shift?"

"Twenty, thirty meters. In one night. I was there the evening before last — everything was as usual. Morning came — different picture."

Borland took a sip of tea. Set his mug down.

"Did you see a new Flare? By the rocks, about three kilometers south of here?"

Skvoznyak raised his eyebrows slightly.

"No Flare there."

"There was. Today. Fresh, took some Tushkans." A pause. "And gave me Earth's Flame as a parting gift."

"Gave you, you say." Skvoznyak smiled. "Looks like the zone likes you."

"Looks like I'll need to take a detour on my route."

"Or change it entirely." Skvoznyak turned his mug in his hands. "The northern passage is cleaner. The anomalies there are old, settled, not going anywhere. Longer to your riverbed, but you'll get there."

Borland nodded. He took out the map and spread it on the counter. Skvoznyak leaned over and pressed a finger to it.

"Here. Stay west of that ridge — there's a Jelly there, watch out for it. Further on — clear. You'll reach the riverbed from the north, it's an extra two hours but no surprises."

"Understood."

The bartender silently refilled his tea. Skvoznyak returned to his cards.

* * *

Borland was studying the corrections on the map when someone sat down beside him.

He looked up. A man of about forty, in a jacket with a patch — from that group at the far table. Calm, attentive face. Not a stalker — the movements were wrong, the gaze evaluating, but not the way one looks at the zone. Scientist. Or a soldier in civilian clothes. Borland didn't guess further.

"Leshy?" the man asked.

"Depends who's asking."

"Kolesnikov." He held out his hand. "Scientific expedition, military contract. Anomalous structures of the eastern sector, fracture mapping." A pause. "We need a guide."

Borland looked at him. Then — at the far wall table, where three others waited with the look of people accustomed to waiting while someone else negotiated.

"Where to?"

"The fracture at the old riverbed. We were told you know it."

"I do," said Borland. "And I'm heading there anyway." He folded the map. "But the route has changed. Northern detour, two extra hours. If that works — I can take you."

Kolesnikov didn't hesitate.

"That works. When do we leave?"

"Half an hour." Borland finished his tea, set down his mug. "And one condition up front: in the zone you listen to me. No discussion, no vote. I say stop — you stop. I say run — you run and don't ask where."

Kolesnikov nodded.

"We were told to expect those conditions."

"Who told you?"

"The sergeant at the perimeter." A slight pause. "He said: Leshydoesn't charge much, but he brings you back alive."

Borland was quiet for a moment. Stood, shouldered his pack.

"Half an hour," he repeated. "Check your gear. No extra weight."

* * *

Skvoznyak followed him with his eyes from the counter. When Borland passed by, he said quietly, not looking up from his cards:

"Taking scientists into the zone — you know what that means."

"I know," said Borland.

"Good luck, Leshy."

"Same to you."

The door closed behind him. Outside was quiet, the shimmer over the zone trembling slightly to the north. Half an hour — assemble the group, check equipment, rethink the route with Skvoznyak's correction.

The zone was waiting. It knew how to wait.

Chapter 4. Path to the Riverbed

Borland arrived at the base gates five minutes before the appointed time.

The group was already mostly assembled. Kolesnikov stood with a map folded in quarters, next to him a second scientist — stocky, in glasses, with a pack clearly stuffed beyond reason. Two in civilian clothes stood slightly apart, calm, habitual — their military bearing evident in how they stood, how they scanned their surroundings. Not tourists.

And two stalkers.

Borland knew Krot. Short, wiry, with the perpetually thoughtful look of a man who has just read something interesting and hasn't digested it yet. Equipment solid, worn. In the zone Krot was reliable — cautious, attentive, without excess boldness. He liked going out with scientists, could talk their language, and on breaks might drop something about quantum fluctuations or spatial topology in a way that left half the group silent, unsure how to respond. That's why they called him Krot — the Mole.

The second was unfamiliar.

Borland assessed him in one glance — quickly, the way one assesses in the zone: not by the face, but by the details. Expensive equipment, nearly new. Good weapon, well-maintained, but he carried it differently from those accustomed to the zone. Slightly wrong. Gaze — calm, almost indifferent, with that cold evaluating quality found in people accustomed to viewing others as variables in an equation.

Not a stalker. A mercenary.

Borland said nothing. Noted it — and stored it in the part of his mind that held things requiring attention.

The seventh was a young woman.

Young, about twenty-five, in a neat field jacket with an expedition patch. Small pack — an assistant's, with a notebook and tablet in the side pockets. She stood by Kolesnikov and looked at Borland with the expression one uses for something one has heard a lot about but is seeing for the first time.

Borland scanned the group. Silently sighed.

Aloud — nothing. He waved his hand.

"Let's go."

* * *

The zone accepted them in silence.

The first half kilometer went through familiar sparse forest — Borland in front, pace steady, not fast. The detector ticked quietly. The group held — the soldiers walked well, Krot easily, the scientists tried to keep up. The unfamiliar stalker moved at the rear, slightly to the side. On his own, without being told. Borland didn't like that.

"What's your name?" he asked without turning.

"Vint," came from behind, briefly.

"Vint. In the zone we don't spread out. Stay in sight."

A pause.

"Understood."

The tone was flat. Neither irritation nor agreement — just a word, tossed as a formality. Borland said nothing again. Noted it.

* * *

The unpleasant feeling came about twenty minutes in.

Not danger — just the sensation of being watched. Someone was moving parallel, slightly behind and to the left, in the denser part of the forest. Borland stopped twice on the pretext of checking the detector — looked, listened. Nothing. No sound, no movement, no trace on the detector.

But the feeling wouldn't leave.

The instinct he had nurtured in his home world and sharpened over three years of forays was working at full capacity. Something was moving alongside. Something that didn't want to be seen.

He adjusted the route a few degrees — swung right, toward open ground. In an open field an unknown pursuer would lose its advantage. The group followed without questions — only Krot shot him a brief glance and raised an eyebrow slightly. Borland gave the faintest shake of his head. Later.

The feeling didn't pass. But it didn't intensify either. Whatever it was — it kept its distance.

* * *

They found the Jelly an hour or so in.

Or rather — found the place where it had been.

Borland halted the group with a gesture — abruptly, without warning. The soldiers reacted instantly, stopped. The scientists slowed with a second's delay. Krot — immediately.

Ahead, between two moss-covered boulders, was emptiness.

Not just the absence of an anomaly — real emptiness. The Jelly had stood here for years — a grey gelatinous mass, slowly pulsating, harmless if you didn't enter it. Borland had skirted it so many times he knew its shape by heart. Now in its place was a dry hollow in the earth, nearly perfectly round, like the trace of a small pond that had evaporated overnight. The earth at the bottom was dark, compacted, without grass.

And something lay at the bottom.

Borland approached the edge slowly. Crouched.

The artifact was about the size of a fist. Black — not just dark, genuinely black, the kind where your gaze seems to slide off it, finding nothing to grip. Dense in appearance, almost liquid, though it held its shape. It pulsed slowly and barely perceptibly, like something alive and very calm. The local stalkers called these "Blot." Borland had heard of them but never seen one.

He reached a hand toward it.

His fingers tingled — softly, without pain. Just a tingling, like a weak current. Borland froze. The tingling didn't pass — it pulsed in time with the artifact. His body was responding. Not to a threat — to something else. Recognition, almost.

He couldn't explain it. But in the zone, explanations came after action.

He took out a container, stored the Blot.

"That's a Blot," said Krot from behind, with genuine surprise. "What do you want with it? Even the scientists can't quite..."

"Later," said Borland.

He took a small bag of metal pellets from his pocket — tiny, heavy, the kind that wouldn't blow away in wind. He marked the path from the edge of the hollow — three pellets in a triangle, indicating the spot. A habit from his first forays: what the zone shows once, it sometimes shows again. Worth knowing where to look.

"What are you doing?" came from nearby.

Borland turned. The assistant stood right behind him — close, tablet at the ready.

"Why the pellets? Is that some navigational method? And the Blot — are you really going to carry it? I've read the reports, they say there's no practical application for it..."

"Let's move," said Borland.

"But if you could explain the logic—"

"Let's move."

She fell silent. Krot gave a quiet snort from the side.

* * *

They smelled the boars before they saw them.

First — the scent. Sharp, musky, mixed with something chemical that the zone gave to those who lived in it long enough. Then — sound: heavy breathing and the crack of deadwood, too loud for cautious movement. They weren't hiding.

Borland raised his fist.

The group stopped. The soldiers drew their weapons without a command — good. Krot stepped slightly to the side, clearing a sector. Vint disappeared behind a tree — silently, Borland didn't hear him move. Professional. He noted that too.

Three boars emerged from the sparse forest to the right.

Zone ones, veteran — their bone plates on neck and sides had yellowed with age, had fused with the skin permanently. Small, reddish eyes. They spotted the group seconds before breaking into the open and didn't stop — just accelerated slightly. The decision had been made before the people even saw them.

"Hold," said Borland quietly — for his own people, not for the boars.

The first was coming straight at him.

Borland didn't retreat. He knew boars — they bluff if there's somewhere to go. If not — they charge. Here was open ground, the group was bunched together, falling back meant scattering.

He fired twice — at the joint in the plates by the front leg, where the armor didn't reach. The boar stumbled, squealed, veered off. Didn't go down — but broke off the charge.

Vint took the second — one shot, precisely behind the ear. Professionally and without waste. The boar dropped immediately.

The third slowed, saw the two down, spun in place with the grunting roar zone creatures use to express anger and confusion simultaneously, and retreated into the sparse forest. The sound of cracking wood faded quickly.

Silence returned.

"Everyone all right?" asked Borland.

Silent nods. The assistant stood pale, tablet pressed to her chest with both hands, but on her feet — holding herself together.

Krot exhaled.

"That's exactly why I always go with a guide," he said quietly, to no one in particular.

Borland was already looking at the forest — the direction the boars had come from. Something stirred again at the edge of his perception — the same sensation of being watched that had accompanied him since the start. The boars had come from that direction. The boars had been fleeing from something.

And again — no one.

"Let's go," he said. "The riverbed is close."

Chapter 5. Rest Stop

After the boars, the zone seemed to exhale.

The anomalous background dropped to normal, the detector ticked quietly with no warnings, the path ran smooth. The feeling of being watched went nowhere — it sat somewhere between his shoulder blades, quiet and constant, like a splinter — but nothing else happened. The group walked in silence, at pace. Even the assistant had gone quiet.

Borland didn't relax. In the zone, silence after noise is not calm. It's a pause.

But an hour passed quietly. Then another half.

Krot came alongside him on an open stretch and nodded at the detector.

"Clear?"

"So far."

"An hour to the riverbed, maybe a bit more." Krot paused. "If the weather doesn't have its say."

Borland looked at the sky.

The sky was already speaking.

* * *

It darkened quickly — not gradually, the way an ordinary cloud comes, but all at once, as if someone had dropped a lid over the horizon. Wind rose from nowhere — damp, gusty, smelling of ozone and wet earth. The grass lay down in waves. The trees started up.

Borland stopped the group.

"We stop."

He looked at the sky, the forest, the detector. The background wasn't jumping — this was just rain, ordinary weather, nothing anomalous. Just badly timed.

Alone he would have kept going. In rain, anomalies became more visible — they didn't like water, they reacted to it, glowed brighter, gave off more heat. An experienced stalker in a downpour could see the zone better than on a clear day. But a group was a different matter. Seven people, two of whom had never been into the zone beyond the perimeter, narrow paths, limited visibility. One person lost from view — and go find them among the Carousels.

The risks were growing. That was arithmetic, not cowardice.

"Krot," he said.

"Already thinking." Krot stood alongside, squinting at the horizon. "There's an old village around here. Abandoned, been so for a long time. I was there about two years ago with another group. There's a house on the edge — dry basement, solid. We can wait it out."

"How far?"

"About twenty minutes northwest." A pause. "Maybe twenty-five."

Borland unfolded the map. Krot leaned over and pressed a finger to it. Borland found the mark — the village was indicated in dotted lines, as all uninhabited objects were. North and west. A detour from the route.

The first drops fell on the map.

"Let's go," said Borland, folding it.

* * *

Twenty-five minutes stretched out.

The rain started before they arrived. Not a downpour — not yet, but dense, cold, driven by wind that struck the face and confused the direction of sound. The forest darkened. The grass turned slippery. Borland walked in front, checking his compass every few minutes, and felt the route stretch and stretch — longer than it should have been.

He didn't like this.

Not the rain, not the delay — he didn't like when the path grew longer than planned due to reasons that couldn't have been predicted. Every extra meter in an unfamiliar direction was a new variable. A new variable in the zone was a risk.

And all this time — eyes on his back.

He changed position twice — briefly, on the pretext of checking the rear, stepped to the side of the group, let the others go ahead. Looked into the forest. Listened.

Rain drummed. Wind bent branches. The detector was silent.

Nothing.

But — it was there. He felt it just as clearly as he felt Earth's Flame in his pocket, as clearly as he felt the Cutter on his hip. Something there. Intelligent. Patient. It didn't attack, didn't come closer, didn't leave. It simply — moved alongside. At its own distance.

Krot came alongside him when the group entered the sparse forest near the village.

"How long have you been noticing it?" he asked quietly, not looking around.

Borland looked at him. Krot walked straight, looking ahead — asking as if between other things.

"Since the start of the route."

"Me too." A pause. "Detector's clear."

"I know."

* * *

The village appeared from the rain suddenly — first the silhouette of a leaning fence, then the dark hollows of windows, then the houses themselves. Four or five buildings, all in varying states of disrepair. Roofs had caved in at two of them. A third had tilted, as if tired of standing straight and decided to rest.

Krot went confidently to the corner house — squat, with thick logs, a roof that still held. Found the door, pulled — it creaked but opened. He nodded.

"Here."

The basement was exactly as Krot had described — dry, low, smelling of old wood and earth. No windows. No surprises. Borland took it in within a few seconds — corner, entry point, ceiling beams. Everything holding. One way out. He took up position by the ladder.

The group settled in — some sat on the earthen floor, someone found an old crate. Kolesnikov opened a map, the second scientist took out a notebook. The soldiers stood by the wall without a sound — professionals, they knew how to wait without excess movement. The assistant shook water from her jacket and looked around.

"Long?"

"Until it passes," said Borland.

"What if it's three hours?"

"Then three hours."

She opened her mouth, closed it. Something in his tone made it clear that pursuing this line of conversation would lead nowhere.

Vint stood apart from everyone. Looking at the ceiling. Borland watched him from the side — not demonstratively, just noting. The mercenary wasn't restless, wasn't talking, wasn't asking questions. That was professional. And it was uncomfortable — a man you can't read is a man you can't automatically trust to cover your back.

From above — a rumble — the rain had intensified, drumming on the roof steadily and densely.

Borland climbed three rungs up the ladder, stopped in the darkness, and examined the room through the doorway. Rain lashed through the windows that had long since lost their glass. The village was quiet.

The eyes were still there.

He stood up there, listening to the rain, and thought that whatever was watching them was out there now. In the village. Or at its edge. Patiently waiting for them to come out.

"Leshy," Krot called from below. "Tea — I'll pour some from the thermos if you want."
"Pour it," said Borland, without turning.
The rain drummed. The zone waited.
And something waited alongside it.

Chapter 6. The Trap

The decision to stay the night was made without much argument — the weather left no choice.

The rain kept going. Not intensifying, not weakening — just falling, monotonously and with no intention of stopping. Borland had looked at the sky for the fourth time in an hour, put away his compass, and said what everyone already understood:

"We sleep here."

Kolesnikov nodded. The soldiers — no reaction, they were already figuring out where to lie down. The assistant wrote something in her notebook — why, Borland didn't understand, but he didn't stop her. People deal with anxiety differently.

They ate what was available — canned goods, bread, the thermos of tea Krot had been saving since the base. Krot, it turned out, had been going out with scientists long enough to know they always had something decent in their packs. The second scientist produced a flask and offered it around. The soldiers declined. Borland declined. Krot did not.

* * *

Before lying down, Borland went outside.

The night was damp and dark — no moon, clouds holding the sky completely shut. The rain had eased slightly, turned to drizzle. Borland stood on the porch, listening to the village.

The village was silent. Not with the living silence of a forest — but empty, the way an abandoned place falls silent when everything has left, including the echo.

He set traps methodically — around the perimeter, at the approaches to the house, on the path between buildings. Nothing complex, nothing military — simple signal ones: thin wire, a tin can with a few pebbles inside. If someone passed — you'd hear it. Enough to wake up.

Finishing, he stopped at the corner of the far house and looked for a long time into the darkness.

Something was there. He felt it — just as clearly as he had felt it since morning. It stood somewhere beyond the edge of visibility, in the place where the drizzle gave way to darkness. Not moving. Not coming closer. Just — was there.

Borland looked. Nothing appeared.

He went back down.

* * *

The basement had a certain coziness — insofar as an old earthen basement under an abandoned house in the zone could be cozy.

Krot sat between two scientists and was explaining something about spatial pockets and the theory of nested bubbles. Kolesnikov listened attentively, the second scientist argued — quietly, but with the eagerness of a man who'd finally found something to engage him. The flask passed between them in strict rotation.

The soldiers lay by the wall. Both of them. Eyes closed, breathing even. Borland wasn't sure if they were actually asleep, but he didn't disturb them. Good habit — use rest time while you have it.

Vint sat slightly apart from the general circle.

Borland noticed it as soon as he came down. The mercenary had chosen a spot against the wall — back to stone, face to the basement. From there you could see the entrance, the ladder, and everyone else at once. A convenient position if you need to react quickly to anyone present. Not to an external threat — to someone among your own.

Either Vint had a serious past, or there was someone in this group he was watching. Or — which was the most uncomfortable thought — Vint himself was the one worth watching.

He pushed that thought to later. Tomorrow.

The assistant sat against the opposite wall and was looking at him.

Borland didn't notice at first — she looked quietly, without display, but when he turned, their gazes met for a second longer than accidental. Her eyes held interest — alive, not professional. And a faint flush that neither the drizzle nor exhaustion could explain.

"How old are you, Leshy?" read that gaze. "You're so young."

Borland looked away. What are you dreaming about, sweetheart. Not the right time.

Krot said something clever, the second scientist disagreed, voices rose slightly then fell again. The flask made another round. Borland lay down by the ladder, closed his eyes.

The night passed quickly.

* * *

He woke before everyone else.

Not to a sound — to a sensation. It was here, in the basement, it had filled the air while they slept. Not a smell, not a sound — something with no name, that sat in every cell of his body like an alarm signal. Borland lay with his eyes closed for ten seconds, listening inward. Then opened them.

The basement looked the same. People were sleeping. The detector at his belt was silent.

But something was wrong. Stronger than yesterday. Much stronger.

Krot woke next — sat up, rubbed his face, looked at Borland with the expression of a man trying to determine: is this a head pounding from the flask, or is the unease real.

"Is that just me," he said quietly, "or..."

"Not just you," said Borland.

Krot was quiet for a moment.

"That's bad."

* * *

They ate in silence.

Borland hadn't given an order to be quiet — it just happened. Even the assistant wasn't asking questions. She sat with her mug, looking at the wall, and there was just enough anxiety in her eyes to understand: she felt it too. Something undefined, unnamed — but she felt it.

That was the worst part.

One thing when the anxiety is felt by those who have walked the zone for years. They know this background, they can read it, they can separate signal from noise. Another thing when it's felt by people who've been in the zone for two days. Those who haven't yet learned to hear its language.

That meant the signal was loud. Very.

"Let's move," he said when everyone had finished.

* * *

He didn't want to go up.

Borland caught that feeling and was surprised by it — not fear, no. Something more animal, instinctive. His body knew something his head hadn't formulated yet. He climbed the ladder, pushed the door.

Came out.

Looked around.

Came back down. Sat on a rung. Was quiet.

The group looked at him. All of them — even the soldiers, even Vint.

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

Borland didn't answer immediately. He was trying to put what he had seen into words, because it didn't fit in his head.

"Anomalies," he said at last. "Everywhere."

"What do you mean — everywhere?" Krot frowned.

"I mean — the whole settlement." A pause. "After the rain. Like mushrooms after a storm. Where it was clear yesterday."

Silence.

"That's impossible," said the second scientist. "Anomalies don't form that quickly. For an anomalous structure to develop, you need—"

"I know what you need," said Borland. "And yet."

Krot stood, climbed two rungs, looked through the doorway. Came back. His face had the look of a man whose reality has diverged from what he thought was possible.

"The detector is silent," he said.

"Silent."

"Then how are you—"

"I feel it."

Krot looked at him. Then nodded — slowly, accepting this as given. After three years of outings with scientists, he had seen enough not to argue with what couldn't be explained but worked.

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

"What does this mean practically? Are we trapped?"

"For now — yes."

"And how long?"

Borland didn't answer immediately. He was thinking. Trying to remember — something from Khimik's stories, from those rare evenings when Khimik had talked about things he'd seen in other worlds.

"Saw a field once that moved. Not anomalies — the field itself. It followed a group, like a shadow. I told myself I was imagining it."

Khimik never said he was imagining things.

"Krot," said Borland. "Have you ever heard of an anomalous field that moves?"

Krot slowly turned to face him.

"Heard of it. A theory. Considered unconfirmed."

"Was considered."

Krot looked at him for a moment. Then sat back down on the crate and said quietly, without flourish:

"Well, I'll be damned."

Beyond the basement walls, the village was silent. The anomalies didn't glow in daylight — but Borland knew they were there. Waiting.

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

Chapter 7. Field of Wonders

"Krot. Vint. With me."

Krot stood immediately. Vint — a moment later, without questions, simply rose and approached. Borland spread the map on the crate.

"I need an exact schematic of the settlement. Every house, every opening, distances between buildings. As well as you remember."

Krot began drawing — confidently, from memory, with the habit of a man who knows how to put space into lines. Borland watched, correcting where he knew better.

Vint was silent for a minute. Then took a pencil and began adding details.

Borland watched how he worked — fast, precise, without hesitation. The fence at the north house — three sections, the middle one fallen. The well — further right than it seemed. Distance from the porch to the corner — ten steps, no more. The mercenary's eye worked like an instrument. In rain, in darkness, in passing — he had clocked everything.

A serious past. A very serious one.

The map came out dense. It took an hour.

"Wait here," said Borland, taking the sheets.

"I'll go with you," said Krot.

"No. I need you here." Borland looked at him. "If I don't return in four hours — lead the group out yourself. If we both die out there, it will end badly for the group."

Krot didn't argue. Nodded.

* * *

Outside it was grey and damp. The rain had turned to fine mist — not drops, just humid air settling on skin and clothing.

Borland stepped onto the street and stopped.

The settlement looked normal. Empty houses, wet grass, washed-out ruts. The detector was silent. A person without instinct would walk right through and notice nothing — until they stepped into the first anomaly.

Borland stood and listened to the space.

They were everywhere. He felt them like temperature spots — not heat and not cold, something else, with no analogue in ordinary sensation. Here, here, there — dense, dangerous. Over there — weaker, but also present. Between the houses — a corridor, nearly clear, but with pressure from the edges.

He took out a pencil and began marking crosses.

* * *

For three hours he walked the settlement.

Slowly, with stops. A step, a stop, listen. Step right — better. Another step — worse, there's something spinning over there, don't go. He talked with the field in silence — not with words, with instinct, with that very instrument the elder had called a gift and Khimik had described practically: "Your advantage. Don't waste it."

Several Flares were blocking the passageway. He discharged them — methodically, with the extraction tool, deflecting the energy to the side where there were no other anomalies. Two Vortexes blocked the only comfortable exit — he spent half an hour on them, found a way to drain one through the other, clearing the corridor.

By noon the route was ready.

Borland stood at the exit from the settlement and looked at it — forty meters that they had walked in a minute yesterday. Now the same stretch would take forty minutes. Maybe more. Every step exactly in the right place, no stopping in the middle, no hesitation where he would indicate move

fast. Timing — everything. Anomalies after discharge are unstable, there's a window, and the window doesn't wait.

Forty minutes. We'll manage.

He turned and walked back.

* * *

He noticed it almost immediately — and stopped.

Somewhere in the middle of the settlement the air was behaving differently. Not an anomaly — he would have felt that. Something else. Borland looked straight — nothing. Shifted his gaze slightly to the side, caught it peripherally.

There.

Several layers of the same space, overlaid on one another with displacement. As if someone had taken the same landscape, broken it into pieces, and reassembled it — almost right, almost, but not quite. Formless fragments hanging in the air without support, without logic, in three dimensions at once.

Look straight — gone. Only peripheral vision caught it.

Borland made a detour.

Approached carefully, reading the space underfoot. Ten meters out, his fingers tingled. Familiar — like with the Blot, but stronger. The Cutter warmed on his hip. Then began to vibrate — barely perceptibly, in time with something Borland couldn't hear but felt.

He stopped.

A tear. Right here, in the center of the anomalous field. The space was parting along an invisible seam — not open, not dangerous yet, but there. Waiting.

Borland stood looking at it — or rather, past it, with peripheral vision, because you couldn't see it head-on. Thinking.

The group's final destination — an hour and a half, maybe two. Krot knew the way, he'd manage. The soldiers would cover them. They'd reach the stalker base without him.

And here — a tear. Possibly the very type that would take him where he needed to go. Or not there. The zone gives no guarantees.

He made his decision.

First — get the group out. Then come back.

* * *

He felt eyes on the back of his neck.

Borland turned slowly, without rushing.

Vint stood about twenty meters away — at the corner of a house, in shadow, nearly indistinguishable. Looking at him. At the Cutter, which was still vibrating slightly. At the spot where the tear hung.

All this time. While Borland was walking the field, mapping the route, standing at the tear — Vint had been here. Watching. Carefully, professionally, not coming within unnecessary range.

And Borland had only felt it now.

They looked at each other for a moment. Two moments. Vint didn't move. Borland didn't either.

Then he turned and walked back to the house.

* * *

In the basement he spread the map on the crate and let everyone approach.

The assistant leaned over the sheet — and froze. She studied the web of lines, crosses, arrows, and time marks. Borland saw how she read the map — quickly, professionally, with the expression one uses for reading not text but a language. Then she took out her notebook and began copying — quickly, barely glancing at the pencil.

Borland watched her for a moment. A map like this normally cost money — good money. Stalkers don't hand out zone information for free.

But he was leaving this world. What use did he have for the money.

Let her. Maybe she'll write a dissertation. Study moving fields, become a famous scientist. A good fate for a map.

"Listen carefully," he said, and the talking died down. "I've walked the route. Forty minutes, maybe more. My pace. Where I say stop — you stop. Where I say run — you run without questions and you don't stop." He scanned the group. "Anomalies after discharge are unstable. The window is small. Anyone who hesitates drags everyone down."

Silence. Nods.

"Krot, soldiers — up front. Not as cannon fodder." He caught Krot's eye. "I'll be at the rear, I'll see the whole route. If something shifts — I'll correct it."

"Understood," said Krot.

"Move out."

* * *

The first twenty minutes went well.

Borland led the group by voice — brief, without explanation: step left, stop, three steps forward, right, fast. People obeyed — even the scientists, even theassistant, who at any other time would certainly have asked why. Fear makes people compliant. Sometimes that saves lives.

The settlement spread around them — the same houses, the same twenty meters they had walked through casually yesterday. Now each one was a separate decision, a separate step, a separate exhale.

They were all sweating — Borland saw it in their backs. Not from exertion, from tension. That's how fear works when you keep it inside and don't let it out.

Ten meters to the exit remained.

* * *

The second scientist's pack clipped the Vortex at the edge — Borland saw it before he felt it.

"Stop!"

But a fraction of a second too late.

The Vortex grabbed the pack and pulled — not sharply, smoothly, like a current catching something. The scientist lurched, lost his balance. One of the soldiers reacted instantly — grabbed the straps, braced, pulled. The second soldier came in from the side, steadied him. Together they yanked — the scientist flew forward, found his footing.

The Vortex was left without its prey.

And began to spin up.

Borland felt this before he saw it — building pressure in the air, like before a storm, only faster. The Vortex was accelerating. In a few seconds it would hit the neighboring anomalies — and from there it would go chain reaction, one after another, and the whole maze would become one large minefield detonating without pause.

Krot froze. Stared at the Vortex.

"Krot!" shouted Borland. "Run! Everyone — run! The exit is right there!"

And turned himself.

Chapter 8. The Tear

Krot ran without looking back.

Borland watched him check the map on the move — one glance, a second — and go along the route confidently, without hesitation. The soldiers behind, step for step, as in training. The scientists after them — worse, you could see the body wasn't cooperating as well as desired, but they weren't veering to the sides, holding the line.

Borland was already turning toward the Vortex when he caught — the assistant wasn't moving.

She stood in the middle of the corridor between anomalies, staring at the spinning Vortex. Face white. Legs giving way — he saw it in how she had slightly sunk, as if her knees had decided that was enough.

Nerves had given out. Body had switched off.

The thought of stopping the chain went with the wind.

Borland turned and was beside her in three steps. Grabbed her by the collar — not roughly, but without ceremony — and dragged her along the corridor. She didn't resist, just dragged along, legs working on autopilot.

Behind, something popped. First anomaly in the chain.

Faster.

The corridor was narrowing — two anomalies had shifted where the scientists had just been. Further dragging her wouldn't work. Borland stopped, looked around — a second, no more.

A Trampoline.

Young, small, nearly invisible in the grass. He felt it slightly before he saw it — a light upward push in the air, impatient, like a compressed spring. Small — meaning it wouldn't kill. A slight girl without heavy equipment — it would toss her. If the angle was right, she'd fly in an arc. If she had time to tuck — she'd land.

She had to have time.

Borland took her by the collar — the way you hold a bowling ball, a swing — and threw her into the center of the anomaly with force, calculating the angle on the go, not thinking, just feeling where to let go.

The Trampoline smacked — satisfyingly, contentedly.

The assistant went into an arc.

She yelped — high, distinct.

Good. Consciousness is back. She'll tuck in time.

* * *

Behind him it was already really thundering.

He turned — one quick look, fix the picture. Anomalies detonating in a chain, one after another, the settlement turning into a jumble of overlays, pops, light flashes and sound that wasn't sound but pressure on the ears. Beautiful and terrible, as everything in the zone.

And there, in the middle of it — the tear.

The chain reaction hadn't reached it yet. The space there was still trembling to its own rhythm, not a foreign one. The window was there. Small, and narrowing with every second.

Borland ran.

He ran straight, not by route — the route no longer existed, the field was collapsing. He read the space underfoot in real time: here, jump, left, straight, don't stop. Once he felt the edge of his boot catch a Vortex — pushed off hard, went sideways, didn't fall.

The tear was ahead.

The Cutter came to his hand on its own — he didn't remember reaching for the sheath. It was simply already in his palm, warm, pulsing — not with anxiety, but almost joyfully, with the feeling of the right tool at the right moment. The space around the tear trembled larger, faster.

Borland didn't stop.

One stroke — the blade entered the air gently, like into water. The space parted. Not flung open — exactly parted, like fabric along a seam, quiet and inevitable.

Something boomed close behind — very close.

He dove into the tear.

* * *

Krot was the first out of the field.

He stopped. Turned.

Soldiers — here. Scientists — here. Kolesnikov gasping, bent over, hands on knees. The second scientist standing straight, looking at the field with the expression of someone in whose head something is happening that can't find words.

The field was detonating. Looking that way was like watching several realities simultaneously — anomalies overlaying each other, space mixing, losing form. Nothing could be seen through that wall.

Two people were missing.

Krot was counting — automatically, the way you always count after a battle, from a habit you can't break. Seven minus two. Leshy. And Vint — that one had disappeared somewhere between the basement and the exit, Krot hadn't noticed when.

A little to one side something whistled through split air, and on the grass about twenty meters away the assistant landed.

She landed not badly — covered her head, shoulder took the main impact, she rolled. Krot was already running toward her.

"Alive?"

She raised her head. Looked at him. Her eyes held that particular emptiness that comes after the body has been somewhere the mind didn't quite get to.

"Alive," she said. And started to cry.

* * *

They sat on the grass about fifty meters from the field's edge.

The field was still detonating — more slowly now, winding down, but no one stopped watching it. In the soldiers' eyes was the anger that comes to professionals when a situation slips out of control and someone gets left inside. Kolesnikov was silent, looking at the ground. The second scientist was smoking.

The assistant sat beside Kolesnikov, face in his load-bearing vest. Shoulders shaking. Then she calmed, raised her head, wiped her face and started talking — quickly, disconnectedly, the way you talk when you need to release what's pushing from inside.

She described how she'd frozen. How Leshy had appeared from nowhere and dragged her along a corridor she couldn't see but he could. How he'd thrown her into an anomaly — she thought it was the end, but it turned out to be salvation. How in mid-flight she understood she needed to tuck, and managed it.

"He saved me, but he cut himself off from every way out," she said. "He died because of me."

No one answered.

Krot was smoking, looking at the field. Something was lying inside him that he had no name for — heavy and uncomfortable, like a stone in a pocket. He was angry at Leshy — for sending him forward, like a fodder. Trust me, go ahead, I'll be behind. And stayed himself.

But the anger wasn't working well.

Because Krot knew why Leshy had stayed at the back. Not for tactics — to see everyone. So if someone stumbled, he could react. He stayed at the back for them. And when the girl froze — he made it.

Not for nothing they called him Leshy. This stalker went where a wandering bear was afraid to go. Krot had seen such people — rarely, but he had. Those who had the zone in their blood, who walked it like their own yard, felt every centimeter. Borland was one of those. Young — hell, how young, Krot only now truly realized — and walked as if he'd been born in the zone.

Maybe that's exactly what happened.

He threw away his cigarette, slapped his knees, and stood.

"Time to move."

Everyone looked at him.

"Leshy and Vint won't come out." He said this evenly, without inflection. "Not from here and not now." A pause. "If by some miracle they managed to survive — we'll meet them at the final point. Leshy knew the route better than any of us. If there's even one way out — he'll find it."

He wasn't certain of this. But what the group needed now wasn't certainty — it needed movement.

"Up. Let's move."

Kolesnikov was first to stand. The soldiers followed. The assistant wiped her face one more time, put away her notebook, and got up.

Krot looked one last time at the field.

The detonation was dying down. The settlement sank into silence and overlays that hadn't yet dispersed.

Somewhere in there — a tear that Leshy had found. And Leshy, who had dived into it.

Survive, Leshy. You still owe me an explanation of what a moving anomalous field is. In plain language, without your "I feel it."

He turned and walked.

Chapter 9. A New World

Borland tumbled from the tear sideways, rolled twice, and was already on one knee with his rifle up.

Silence.

He quickly read the space before him: low hilly terrain, sparse shrubs, pale sky with heavy clouds. Smell — damp, with a tinge of something unfamiliar, not dangerous. The detector beeped and quieted — there was a background, but weak, ambient. Not a zone, just a world.

A living world.

Borland turned.

Where the tear had been — nothing. No trace, no glow, no hint of that barely perceptible trembling in the air he could only see peripherally. The anomalous collapse in the field had shut everything — the fabric of the world had closed, the old boundaries of the tear had vanished, as if they'd never been. Clean.

On the spot where the tear had just been stood Vint.

Surprised — yes. Lost — no. The same composed gaze, the same slight tension in the shoulders that in him, it seemed, never went away. While Borland had been reading the space before him, Vint had been watching what remained behind. They were covering different directions — automatically, without agreeing to.

Borland stared at him.

Only now — here, in the silence of a new world, with the adrenaline starting to recede — did the picture come together. The whole path through the anomalous field. The moment at the tear. The gaze from the corner of the house. And what he hadn't noticed then, in the stress, in the movement — Vint had been following all along. Quietly, precisely, dissolving into the space when he didn't want to be noticed, and materializing again when he decided it was appropriate. Not like a mercenary covering a group. Like a shadow with its own agenda.

Vint looked back. Then looked away — not evasively, just took in the surroundings, getting used to the new environment. Rolled his shoulders. Then nodded somewhere to the side — there, about ten meters away, two old stumps stood side by side.

Borland nodded.

They sat.

* * *

Silence hung for a minute. Borland looked at the horizon, Vint at his hands. Somewhere far away a bird cried out, unfamiliar, with a low guttural sound. The world breathed calmly.

"I can't get you back," said Borland at last. "The tear is closed permanently. Finding another point of contact between these same worlds is problematic. Not impossible, but you shouldn't count on it."

Vint listened without interrupting.

"On the subject of tears — it can't be explained in two words." Borland paused, choosing his words. "I'm not from that world and not from this one. Khimik and Prigorshnya — I assume you've heard of them — took me as a child. In my world I was facing death, they gave me a different way out. After that we spent a long time moving between worlds, until we settled in the one we just came from."

He took the Cutter from his hip and laid it on his knee — not threateningly, just showing it.

"In my home world there was an artifact called 'Soul' — with it, Khimik and Prigorshnya traveled between worlds, between the spatial bubbles. The elder of my tribe reworked it. Turned it into this. The Cutter cuts space where the matter of different worlds lies close together. You saw it all yourself — I think the explanations are few."

He put the knife back.

Vint was silent for a few more seconds. Looking somewhere toward the hill. Then he spoke.

* * *

"Actually, I'm not from that world either."

He said it evenly, without particular inflection — the way you speak of a fact you've long since accepted, but which still carries weight.

"After what you've said, the picture in my head becomes clearer." A pause. "About six months ago I ended up in the world we just came from. By accident. During an anomalous experiment by our scientists — not Kolesnikov's group, others. From my world."

Borland listened in silence.

"They found a spatial bubble. I was a mercenary, I accompanied them on expeditions — we had our own zones too. Similar to yours, but not quite. There were no stalkers. There were those who lived inside permanently — we called them the Darks. They almost never made contact, often fought us. They considered the zone their home and us — uninvited guests."

He paused slightly.

"Basically, our brains overloaded the bubble with some kind of pulse installations. It collapsed. Me and a couple of others got pulled into a spatial hole. A moment — and I'm lying in unfamiliar terrain. Haven't found my people. Six months, no trace of them — alive or dead."

Borland nodded — not commenting, just indicating: he was listening.

"While looking for information about them, I came across strange mentions. About you. About your adoptive fathers. That you weren't the same kind of stalkers as all the rest, kept to yourselves, few witnesses to your oddities, but they existed. As soon as I found out you were going to lead our group — I didn't take my eyes off you. Watched and absorbed everything." A small pause. "You don't have to be afraid of me."

He looked at Borland — directly, without excess.

"Let's be partners for a while. You clearly have more experience. We'll find the locals, sort out the situation. Then we'll figure out where to go from there."

He fell silent. Then added — more quietly, without the composure that had been in his voice all the rest of the time:

"I'd like to return to my world. To my family."

And that was it. No more words.

Borland looked at him. From Vint the whole time it had been unusual to hear this many words in a row — and especially these ones. The last phrase came not as a complaint and not as a request. Simply — a fact. Quiet, heavy, one of those that require no answer.

Borland knew that feeling.

He looked at the unfamiliar horizon — hills, unfamiliar shrubs, a foreign sky — and thought that he too had a world he wanted to return to. Only he didn't know how it looked now. Or whether it still existed.

"Accepted," he said at last. "Partners."

He stood, shouldered his pack.

"We need to find landmarks. Understand where we've ended up, whether there are people here, how active the zone is." He took out the detector, looked at the readings. "The background is weak, but it's there. Meaning anomalies are somewhere. Meaning there are also those who live with them."

Vint stood alongside — silently, without questions. Again composed, again that professional gaze reading the space like text.

"That way," said Borland, nodding northeast, where the hills lowered slightly. "Lowlands always make it easier to find water. Where there's water — there are people."

They walked.

* * *

The new world accepted them quietly. Without threat, without greeting — it simply opened around them, unfamiliar and calm, the way it is at the start of a journey when you don't yet know what's ahead.

Borland walked and thought about Krot — had he made it, had he brought the group through. About where Khimik and Prigorshnya were right now and whether they knew he was already in another world. About the tear in the center of the anomalous field, which seemed to have been waiting for him.

Not all doors lead where you wish to go.

The elder had said something similar. Just in different words.

Vint walked alongside — quiet, slightly behind and to the right, his usual distance. But now it read differently. Not surveillance. Cover.

Ahead there were many questions and few answers.

Borland smiled. In the zone it was always that way.

Chapter 10. Frankenstein

They walked the valley between the hills all day — steady, without hurrying, without incident.

That itself was strange.

Borland was used to a new world greeting you immediately — with an anomaly, a mutant, at least the smell of a zone that you couldn't confuse with anything else. Here — nothing. Just the valley, grass, hills on either side, and a sky that was slightly the wrong shade — not grey and not blue, but somewhere between, as if it couldn't quite decide.

"Strange, all of this," said Borland when the sun began to lean toward the horizon. "Fractures usually lead into another zone. But here it's as if there's no zone at all."

Vint shrugged. That conversation on the stumps seemed to have taken his word supply for several days ahead — and something else too, beyond words. Something from memory had risen and was now lying inside, quiet and heavy.

Borland didn't push. He understood.

He walked and listened.

That was the thing — he was listening, and there was nothing there. At all. No birds, no insects, no wind in the grass. The grass stood motionless, though there was air. The sky — empty. Not a single sound besides their footsteps.

Borland stopped.

Not even insects.

He stood thinking about this. In any living world — even the deepest zone — there are insects. Mutated, strange, dangerous — but they exist. They live wherever there is life at all. Their absence meant one thing: all living things had hidden. Gone underground, under rocks, into burrows.

All living things hide when they know something is coming.

His back went cold — sharply, without warning. Borland knew this feeling. The body reacted before the head, as always.

A surge.

He didn't know if surges happened in this world. Didn't know how they looked here or how dangerous they were. But the logic was universal — if all living things are hiding, they know something he doesn't feel yet.

"We need shelter," he said. "Now."

Vint didn't ask why. Just started looking around.

* * *

They found the crevice at the base of a hill — inconspicuous, nearly invisible behind scrubby bushes. Borland squeezed in first, Vint followed.

Inside turned out to be a grotto.

Small, low, with walls of dense rock. Smelled of earth and stone, dry without dampness. The ceiling disappeared into darkness — rock up there, then more rock. Deep. Deep enough.

Borland exhaled. If there was a surge — somewhere to wait it out.

Vint didn't sit. He walked the grotto — methodically, along the walls, examining every corner, every crack. Borland watched him: no rushing, no hurrying, moving with that same economical precision as always. Something had caught his attention — what exactly, he didn't say. He reached the far wall, paused a moment. Came back.

Sat down in silence.

They ate in silence too — canned goods, bread leftovers. Borland thought about the surge, about what kind of world this was where all living things hid, but the danger didn't register on the detector. Then stopped thinking — exhaustion took its due.

They arranged watches. Vint was to wake him in four hours.

* * *

Borland had slept about two hours.

He woke not to a sound — to a sudden spike of anxiety, sharp and abrupt, like a blow below the ribs. He sat up, his hand reaching for his rifle, but stopped.

Vint lay on the ground, clutching his head. His face — not good. Tense, clenched, the way it gets from sharp pain or from something pressing from inside.

A creature was crawling into the grotto.

A large cat — resembling a lynx, but larger, with long limbs and a tail far too long, twice the body length. The tail dragged on rock, at its end something like a flower, glowing blue. The light pulsed, sometimes flickered, rhythmically — like breathing.

Borland looked at it.

The cat moved with difficulty. Each step cost him — Borland saw it in how the cat shifted his weight, how he leaned slightly to the left side. He moved from the entrance inward, slowly, not looking at the people. Went far enough — and collapsed.

Just lay on its side and didn't move anymore.

Vint immediately felt better — Borland saw the tension leave his face. A psionic. When the cat had been conscious and under stress, he had pressed on everything around it. Borland barely felt it — something in him, from his home world, from those years of living alongside anomalies, created something like a natural screen. But Vint — different. Without the habit.

Borland looked down at his rifle. Realized he'd never picked it up.

That's why it didn't attack.

"Vint," he said quietly. "You all right?"

The other propped himself on his elbow, rubbed his temple.

"Fine." A pause. "What was that."

"A psionic." Borland looked at the cat. "Don't even think about the weapon."

"It's wounded."

"I see." He stood. "It was running to safety. Something is happening outside. Your readiness to shoot wasn't giving it a chance to make contact with us — psionics feel that." A pause. "They're intelligent. I think once it's rested it'll leave. Or it might help us."

Vint looked at him with the expression one uses for a person who says strange things but somehow you believe them.

"I'll examine its wounds," said Borland. "Rest. Now probably no one else will crawl in here — if it's here, the place is safe. We can both sleep."

* * *

He approached the cat slowly, without sharp movements.

Crouched. He took out a lantern, directed it to the side, so as not to blind it. And began to examine.

Wounds were everywhere — along the sides, on the limbs, along the back. Many wounds. But not what comes from teeth or claws. Borland looked closer.

Cuts. Thin, clean, with perfectly clean edges. Too clean for a living creature — as if something had cut with constant, unchanging force. The pattern formed a kind of grid — parallel lines in two directions, intersecting at right angles.

Borland remembered. This kind of thing isn't left by a mutant or a weapon. An anomaly. There are anomalies here of their own, and one of them cuts exactly like this.

He took out a needle — the largest from the first aid kit — and thread.

The cat opened one eye. Looked at him — long, with that calm inhuman attention found in creatures who can read intentions directly. Then closed it.

It let out a very heavy sigh.

Borland started to sew.

* * *

The work took about an hour.

He cursed quietly — under his breath, without anger, simply because the needle was too large and his fingers were tiring, and several times he pricked himself. The cat lay motionless. Sometimes he trembled when he touched a particularly deep cut, but didn't move, didn't growl. He endured.

At the end Borland leaned back, worked his fingers.

"Phew." He looked at his handiwork — neat stitches along all the main cuts. "I'll call you Frankenstein. Rest. I hope I was wrong and you won't eat us."

He took Earth's Flame from his container — the warm orange sphere lay in his palm, glowing quietly. Borland looked at it for a moment, then at the cat. Why — he couldn't have explained. Something inside just said: necessary.

He bound the artifact with a bandage to the cat's chest, where the ribs were — so the warmth would go steadily, from inside out.

Maybe it'll help. Maybe not. But it won't be worse.

He lay down in his place.

From the corner of his eye he noticed: Vint, who had been lying with his eyes closed all this time, had finally relaxed. Genuinely — shoulders dropped, breathing evened. The body released the tension it had been holding all this time while Borland quietly cursed and stitched up the cat.

Professional to the core. Even in sleep — on guard.

Borland closed his eyes.

The grotto was quiet. Earth's Flame gave off a barely perceptible warmth. Somewhere nearby, Frankenstein breathed steadily.

Whatever was outside — it could wait until morning.

Chapter 11. World of Psionics

Borland woke with a feeling he hadn't remembered for a very long time.

As if he'd slept at home. In a proper bed, under a proper blanket, and there was nowhere he needed to be.

He lay for a second, listening to this feeling — unfamiliar, almost suspicious. Then looked at Frankenstein.

The cat lay where he had fallen. Hadn't stirred. Only the tail lived its own separate life — slowly sliding along the ground, rising, descending, as if observing the grotto independently of the cat himself. The blue flower at the end barely shimmered.

So that's it. Went through my head. Thank you for the blanket, Frank.

Vint was still asleep — even, deep, without the tension in his shoulders that had been there yesterday. His sleep had also been under control.

Borland stood, went to the cat. Crouched — carefully, without sharp movements. Removed the bandage, took back Earth's Flame, put it in the container. Examined the stitches — holding, edges not inflamed. Good.

* * *

Not much light entered the grotto — through the crevice, diffused, almost milky. But enough to see.

Borland looked at Frankenstein and thought that at night, in the dark and stress, he hadn't had a proper chance to see who he was dealing with.

Body — about two meters in length. Paws with wide soft pads, like a lion's — for silent movement on any surface. But the build was more like a lynx's: stocky, flexible, with a short neck and broad shoulders. Ear tufts — and at the tips of the ear tufts too something blue, pulsing in the same rhythm as the tail. Fur charcoal-grey, shimmering in the faint light.

A nocturnal hunter. In daylight it would be conspicuous. But at night — in moonlight you couldn't find it even knowing where to look.

He was about to pull his hand back when the tail moved.

Slowly, without threat — it simply reached toward him. The flower at the end opened slightly, the blue glow became brighter.

Borland froze.

Contact?

Something tickled inside his head — light, almost like a scratch, as when you try to remember a word on the tip of your tongue. Not psionic pressure — something different. A question, almost.

Borland brought his hand toward the flower.

It opened fully — and thin threads reached for his palm. Touched it.

What came next he saw from the outside.

* * *

His body lowered itself to the floor, sat down cross-legged. His eyes rolled back. Borland watched this from somewhere above and to the side simultaneously — and at the same time was no longer watching, because images covered him and carried him away.

Darkness. Fear — alien, deep, animal. Not his fear — Frankenstein's.

Then the darkness became more vivid — not brighter, but richer, as if the darkness had acquired saturation. And in this saturated darkness appeared ribbons.

Yellow, white, red — they stretched in all directions, intersecting, pulsing. Borland looked at them and understood: these were smells. Alien traces. Mental imprints. Everything a human doesn't perceive at all was here visible, almost tangible — like threads in space, like a map written in a language he didn't know but somehow read.

And in this map — fear.

Very deep. Deeper than self-preservation.

Frankenstein was running. Borland felt it with his body — the rhythm of paws, the swaying of the tail, air hitting the muzzle. Ahead red shimmer with threads — they hung in space like a web, motionless, dense. An anomaly. Small, but to go around it meant losing seconds, and behind something was coming, something from which this whole world hid, buried its insects underground and removed its birds from the sky.

The cat chose straight.

Flash — like a stun grenade from inside the skull. Pain — not physical, something deeper. Borland almost cried out in another creature's voice.

Then the pain receded. And something else came.

* * *

New images — calm, saturated. A different time, a different mood.

Hunting. A night forest full of ribbon-traces, crossing and disappearing into the dark. Prey — Borland didn't understand what exactly, the image was blurred — but the excitement was understandable without translation.

Then — different. People.

Borland looked at them carefully. Strange. Big heads — he involuntarily thought of controllers, — but the faces were human, without signs of mutation, without rot. Pointed ears, long, like an elf from old books. Movements smooth, calm. They weren't afraid of the forest, or the ribbon-traces in the air, or Frankenstein himself.

Locals. Aborigines.

Then Leshy thought about what Khimik had told him about the brain-burner and its field, and compared it with the local surge — and from that thought the cat's consciousness flinched. It darted aside, like a flame from wind. Then settled.

"Ah. So I can also show you films."

The images began to fade — one after another, like lights going out. Apparently the night's wounds and such a volume of transmitted information were taking their toll. The last thing Borland saw — again those people with pointed ears. Calm, accustomed to this world. Living in it as part of it.

Like my tribe once did.

The tail gently unhooked from his hand and coiled around the cat's body.

* * *

Borland came to himself and sat for a while.

His head was like after a hard night of drinking — heavy, slightly foggy, thoughts moving slower than usual. He stood — and his stomach lurched somewhere sideways. Borland swallowed, stopped, waited it out. Held himself.

He went to Vint and sat beside him. It got a little better.

Vint was silent. Looking — at him, at the cat, back at him. Somewhere in the middle of the contact he had woken — Borland had caught from the edge how the other had jolted awake as if surfacing, how his hand had jerked toward his weapon and been pulled back. Instincts had worked correctly: weapons have nothing to do with this.

While Borland came to his senses, Vint had checked the provisions and put on water — quietly, without extra movement. Found something to do. Knew how to wait.

Now he was looking and waiting for a story.

Borland paused another second. Then began.

"It's a psionic. A strong one." He rubbed his temple. "Last night there was a surge outside — most likely a psi-wave, if everything here works through the mental field. It was running from it, hit an anomaly — hence the cuts — and made it to us."

A pause.

"It just showed me what happened outside. Through its eyes." Borland paused, choosing words. "This world is different. Everything here works through the mental field: tracks, smells, communication. The anomalies look like a web of threads — red, dense. Small, but it cuts cleanly." He remembered the pattern on the cat's fur. "Like those cuts."

Vint listened without interrupting.

"And more. There are people here." Borland looked at Frankenstein. "Big heads, pointed ears. Not mutants — just different. They live here normally, without fear. They know this world."

He paused.

"We need to find them."

Frankenstein lay motionless. The tail moved slowly across the earth — living its own life, observing. The blue flower barely glowed.

Borland looked at it.

"And I think," he said, "that it will lead us there."

Chapter 12. Back on the Road

They ate quickly — leftover canned goods, tea from the thermos. Rearranged their things, tightened the straps. Borland checked the Cutter, the detector, the first aid kit. Everything in place.

Frankenstein still wasn't waking.

Borland went to him, crouched. The cat was breathing evenly — deep, slow, the way you sleep after a major blood loss. The tail lay motionless, the flower at the end barely glowing — dim, at minimum.

Borland took the tail in his hand — carefully, as you take something fragile — and tossed an image into his head. Those very people with pointed ears. Big-headed, calm, the ones he'd seen in alien memories.

In response came a little — two or three blurred images, almost without detail. Forest. A direction. Something resembling a landmark — a dark cliff or overhang, Borland couldn't make it out clearly.

He nodded to himself. An approximate bearing — already something.

Let go of the tail. He patted the cat on the back of his neck — lightly, the way you pat a house cat, though this killing machine probably weighed as much as two adults.

"When you've recovered — catch up. Maybe we'll hunt together."

He stood. Nodded to Vint.

They set off.

* * *

The valley met them with morning fog.

It lay low, almost at the grass — not thick, just a light haze that made the horizon soft and indistinct. The hills on either side were the same as before — smooth, without sharp shapes, as if someone had sculpted this world unhurriedly and with pleasure. The grass here grew differently from familiar zones — long, almost knee-high, dark green, with thin stems that bent from any movement and swayed long in the wake.

The same silence as yesterday. No birds, no wind, no insects. But now it was perceived differently — not anxiously, as part of this place. As if the world had simply grown accustomed to existing without extra sounds.

Somewhere to the east, beyond the far hill, the sky was slightly lighter — there the fog was dispersing faster, and in that diffused light something glinted. Water or dew on rocks — Borland couldn't make it out, but he noted the direction.

They had walked about half a kilometer.

Vint suddenly broke the silence.

"Listen. Is there anything you have to stop it pressing on my head so much. With your words, we're heading toward the big-heads, if they get to me a few more times the way the cat did — I'll be in bad shape. Still sick from your cat."

Borland walked on a few more steps.

"Nothing on me. Alcohol might dull the effect. Do you have any?"

"Yes. But I usually keep it as a last resort. Don't drink in the zone."

"And a last resort means when things get really dire. So bad you won't have time for a bullet to the head either."

Vint gave a grunt.

"Something like that."

Borland looked ahead, at the valley, at where the fog was starting to thin at the foot of the distant hills.

"This is a world of psionics. I think the anomalies here can also hide from them — to feed on living flesh. Which means near such anomalies there should be an artifact with similar properties. Most likely something that dampens the mental background."

Vint heard him out. Said nothing. His word quota was clearly used up.

* * *

Borland led them through the valley for another half hour or so.

The terrain changed slowly, almost imperceptibly. The grass became denser, the hills slightly higher, with steeper slopes. Here and there stones protruded from the ground — grey, rounded, as if pushed up from below. Between them grew something resembling moss, but with a bluish tinge, and Borland skirted those patches — no telling what.

The detector was silent. The background was even, nearly zero — not dead, but clean, the kind found in places where the zone hasn't yet built up strength, or has long since reached equilibrium.

But the air here was different.

Borland caught this only now — something in it was denser than usual. It didn't press, didn't interfere with breathing, it simply — was there. As if the air carried something invisible. Information, perhaps. In a world of psionics, that wasn't strange.

Then he saw the forest.

Dark, dense, it began at the base of one of the hills — sharply, almost without transition, as if someone had drawn a boundary. The trees were unfamiliar — tall, with smooth dark grey bark, and crowns that closed so densely that almost no light penetrated inside. From below, the forest looked like a solid shadow.

A good place for anomalies.

If after the surge the whole zone had been seeded with fresh artifacts — here, the chances of finding something interesting were higher than in the open valley. A surge always shakes the zone from within, pushes to the surface what had previously lain deep.

"Rest stop," said Borland, when they reached the edge of the forest.

They sat at the outermost trees. Borland took out a thermos — Khimik's tea, made from zone herbs the man had been collecting and blending for years. Strong, with a slight bitterness, with some herbal smell impossible to describe precisely. It invigorated well — better than any coffee.

Provisions were low. A couple of days, if they didn't overdo it.

Vint silently took a mug, sipped. Looked at the forest.

Borland also looked at the forest and thought that Khimik had probably gone through enough different herbs from enough different worlds over his life that at some point this blend was bound to produce something completely unexpected. So far, thankfully, only good tea.

* * *

Vint stood up, nodded toward the trees — to step away.

Borland nodded in return, finished his tea.

Two minutes later he heard a shout.

Sharp. Not words — just a sound, the kind that comes when the body understands before the head does. Borland jumped up and rushed toward the sound, simultaneously glancing at the detector.

The detector was silent.

He ran out onto a small clearing beyond the outermost trees — and saw Vint.

He lay on the ground in a strange position — arms spread, body tense, like a person falling from great height and trying to grab something. Eyes open. The shout had already ended — the adrenaline had passed, leaving only this tense silence and white knuckles gripping the grass.

Visually — nothing. A man just lying in a clearing.

Borland stopped. The detector is silent. A psi-anomaly — sensors don't pick those up.

Then he looked closer.

The grass around Vint lay flat — like duckweed on water. And Vint himself was slightly below its level. By a centimeter. By two. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, like a clock hand — he was going down.

Quicksand. Apparently psionic. Kills with fear of falling — while in your head you're plummeting from enormous height, your body quietly sinks into the ground. Slowly. Terribly. Without a trace.

That was Borland's assessment, having sized up the anomaly.

Borland didn't deliberate long.

He took out the extraction tool — the same one he'd earlier used to pick up artifacts. Approached the anomaly's edge — the pellets showed it quickly, he scattered a few around and watched how they sank into the ground, marking the boundaries. Lay flat on the ground beyond the edge, stretched out, reached for Vint.

He hooked the collar with the tool — fabric pulled taut, it held, but the tool wasn't designed for that weight. Slowly, smoothly, he pulled.

Vint tipped sideways. His right arm sank into the earth up to the shoulder — the grass above it didn't even stir, just covered from above, as duckweed covers.

Borland dropped the tool, crawled forward along the anomaly's edge, reached for the arm — fingers found a wrist. He grabbed.

Began to crawl backward. Slowly. The earth under Vint released reluctantly — as if alive, as if it understood the prey was being taken.

Then let go.

* * *

They lay side by side on the grass, getting their breath.

"Not light, are you, brother," thought Borland.

"What was that," said Vint. Not a question — just words that needed to be spoken.

"Nauseous?"

"Sick. Like after the cat."

"Congratulations. Psi-anomaly. Let's call it psi-quicksand." Borland sat up, rubbed his palms on the grass. "Seems to induce fear of falling from great height. While you're flying in your head — it quietly sucks you in. Sensors are silent."

"Felt like I dropped forty floors, never saw the bottom," said Vint.

Then he looked at his right hand.

Something was in it.

A formless pale lump — if you looked carefully, resembling a root of parsley, only slightly lighter and more dense. He'd been holding it, not knowing — his hand had gripped it down there, inside the anomaly, and hadn't let go.

Vint carefully placed it before him on the grass.

The nausea came on harder — sharply, noticeably, Borland saw it in his face. Vint picked the artifact back up. It eased.

Borland looked at him. Then at the artifact. Then back at Vint.

"Hm." He smirked. "A real cowboy. Didn't soil your pants and grabbed an artifact too."

This joke he'd picked up from Prigorshnya, without noticing it. Like a few others.

Vint gave a crooked smile. Said nothing.

* * *

They returned to their things. Borland took out a container, Vint carefully placed the artifact inside. The container closed with a soft click.

"It's not hot," said Borland. "But nobody knows its properties. Keep your 'parsley' in the container for now — don't push your luck."

Vint nodded.

Borland looked at the forest — dark, dense, indifferent. Somewhere in its depths, anomalies of their own. Their own artifacts. Their own logic.

He shouldered his pack.

"Let's go."

Ch

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