

Site-Zero: The Breach

A novel by Andriy Karamazov (started in February 2026)

When an abnormal explosion and total communications blackout cut off the A.E.G.I.S. Institute, a Kerzhovian special-operations unit is dispatched into the sealed exclusion zone to recover sensitive research and uncover the cause of the breach. But the area around the Institute has become something far worse than contaminated ground: a fear-reactive anomalous environment that turns buried memories, private shame, and unresolved guilt into instruments of psychological destruction. As the mission collapses into paranoia and moral disintegration, the fighters realize that the greatest threat may not be the Institute at all, but the parts of themselves the zone refuses to let them hide. Some will try to correct the past. None will leave it unchanged.

© 2026 Andriy Karamazov. All rights reserved. Texts may not be reproduced without permission.

Chapter 1 - October 8th, dawn, Kerzhovian Armed Forces Military Base at Novograd-2

A transport helicopter plowed through the grey dawn, approaching Novograd-2 from the southeast. At first, it was only a black speck in the remnants of a cold October night. Then it grew to the size of a hornet, the low thrum of its engine finally cutting through the silence.

“Sapsan One to Ground Control. Do you copy? Landing in 4 minutes. Are we all set on site?” - Chopper's pilot broke the radio silence announcing their approach to the military base.

“Ground Control to Sapsan One, copy. Clearing you for the landing. We are all set” - followed immediately after.

Sapsan banked west by a few degrees to avoid crossing a no-fly zone over the town. The military base lights were still on, their rays cutting through the bleakness of another autumn morning. The town below was still much asleep, beautiful in its calm. The helicopter crew and most of its passengers - eight Kerzhovian spetsnaz fighters - studied the surroundings through the windows. Young motionless faces against cold glass.

The chopper descended. Boroda glanced again through the nearest window. The quiet windless morning clashed with the thrashing of the grass below the chopper. A moment later he touched the door and swung it wide open. Rotor wash bathed his face in the stingy gusts of the cold morning air. Fifty or so meters away stood a lonely group of people, frozen under the porch roof of one of the admin buildings at the base.

“Three soldiers and a civilian” - Boroda noted to himself. “There’s our passenger. Let’s make it quick”.

Boroda ducked and covered the distance to the awaiting party alone. The wet piles of rotting leaves dotted the yard. Far in the distance the concrete residential blocks of Novograd-2 clawed at the autumn sky. His black boots were wet and shining from the morning dew when Boroda reached the building.

“Major, good morning” - Boroda saluted the higher rank officer in front of him, then checked the rest of the group.

“Good morning, Captain” - the Major, tall and thin, looked past forty. His lifeless, bored reply drowned in Sapsan’s roar. “You are well updated by the HQ on the state of affairs, I heard. Good so - you can continue to the deployment area ASAP. Not that we are not hospitable here” - the major squeezed out a sleazy smile - “but the matters are pressing”.

“Yes sir” - Boroda had to almost shout in the Major's face.

“Here is your guest - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich dedicated the best years of his life to the Institute. Retired just 2 years ago. A distinguished scientist, one of the faces of the Institute, and exceptionally informed in everything regarding the facility and around. His expertise will be mandatory for the success of your endeavors on site”.

Boroda’s blue eyes jumped over to the Institute scientist. Hovering somewhere around 70 years old, Viacheslav Dmitriyevich was of medium stature, almost bald and with a sizable belly under his autumn jacket. He wore a pair of old city shoes which were once upon a time black - now they and their owner perfectly fit the color palette of the worn-out October dawn. The years of sitting at the desk and the lack of physical exercise hunched the scientist’s back a bit and put thick glasses on his nose, but Boroda’s audit did not fail to notice the deep, attentive eyes of Viacheslav Dmitriyevich. They had a kind of warm, calm aura to them, they were still young but already experienced at the same time; curious eyes which probably saw a lot over the years but still kept that youth flame burning in them. For a split second Boroda felt as if his late father watched over him. The feeling disturbed the Captain and made him feel like a kid, but the chill of the morning and the noise of Sapsan’s engine brought Boroda quickly back.

“Zdravstvuyte, Captain” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich's voice was so mellow it vanished somewhere halfway to Boroda’s ears, like a breeze chased away by the chopper’s rotor wash. “I will be honest with you, I am so thrilled they let me assist you in your mission at the Institute! Frankly speaking, the pension... it did not sit well with me... I still dream of the research and colleagues...” - the old scientist started to open up in a bit of a staggered, awkward way while smiling disarmingly. “It is...”

“Good morning, Sir! Glad to have you here - the boys and I count on you.” - Boroda shouted almost in the scientist’s face, cutting short his revelations. “You are staying at the Outer Perimeter and will help guide the troop remotely?”

“Correct, Captain” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich nodded.

“Clear. Proceed to the chopper with your possessions - we take off immediately” - Boroda barked out the last sentence with a note of impatience, half turned and almost grabbed the scientist by the arm to pull him along to Sapsan.

“Of course, of course, let us go to the Blockpost then” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich was all politeness.

“Major?” - Boroda made the last visual contact with the officer.

“Good luck on site, Captain. It is not in our jurisdiction to offer you any assistance, but I am confident your boys will not need any” - Major was somewhat slow and lazy with his words, his eyes as if grinning mockingly.

The entire exchange at the porch had not lasted even two minutes before the chopper’s belly swallowed Boroda and the old scientist. Sapsan slowly took to the sky. The sun was rising.

Chapter 2 - October 8th, 6:50 am, on the way to the Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter

The rays of the incoming day hit the windows of the low flying helicopter, raking across the cabin and creating all sorts of engaging patterns. Viacheslav Dmitriyevich studied that for a while to entertain himself. Every time the old scientist followed the sun rays he could see the clouds of dust particles slowly dancing in the cabin’s air. The chopper’s interior filled his nose with a weird smell cocktail of stale living room, old leather and sweat with a hint of burnt kerosene. The reality of the situation did not allow Boroda to properly introduce the veteran Institute researcher to the rest of the group and Viacheslav Dmitriyevich felt for some time like a late, unknown guest to the party - to the one to which he was invited at the last minute and only because of a tragical necessity. Now and then he studied the young faces of the spetsnaz fighters lining the chopper’s walls around him while trying not to stare much. Nobody was paying him any attention, not even when he said his usual ‘Good Morning’ while boarding Sapsan. It was way too loud to talk and not much else to do; the fighters’ eyes betrayed their minds wandering somewhere else.

“My Institute...” - the eyes of Viacheslav Dmitriyevich ran off in the direction of AREA NG-2X1 which spread out somewhere in front of the thumping chopper. *“Who could have imagined our paths would cross again... I was so young when you called me. I sacrificed my best years to make*

our country safe and happy but failed to do that to my two closest people at home... You gave me the purpose but took my wife and son... How I wish I could walk your hallways again... What happened to you now? Was that us in the end?..”

The eyes of the scientist were tracing the road below the chopper. He knew every meter of it; every tree lining its sides seemed to welcome him back, sending him solemn greetings up in the sky. The road was empty of any life as far as his sight would reach.

“Today's guests of yours will be wearing grey-blue camo and black bulletproof vests instead of white doctors' gowns; they will carry assault rifles instead of pens and all that gear unknown to me, strapped now in the pile in the middle of the chopper's belly... What happened to you?.. Where have the years gone...”. In one slow, unconscious movement the old scientist raised his arm and, all while scanning the forest below, slightly touched his right temple. He took a deep breath and turned away.

The sentimental flow of Viacheslav Dmitriyevich was a heavy contrast to the grim reality he found himself confined to. One of the fighters in front of him closed his eyes. The fingers of his right hand drummed against the VAL assault rifle. Others seemed to half-nap clenching their weapons. The scientist turned left and tried to make eye contact with Boroda. But like the rest of his troop the Captain seemed to be somewhere else, his gaze frozen in eternity. *“I feel as if I know him from somewhere”* - concluded Viacheslav Dmitriyevich after his thoughts suddenly took another direction. *“Maybe I saw him on the state TV? Was that the hostage crisis in the capital four years ago? I should ask when the favorable moment presents itself”.*

The chopper was humming its way to the Outpost. Boroda woke up from his trance and checked the watch, then he circled his troop with a quick glance. Concentrated or detached, the squad was silent and motionless like tombstones on the graveyard.

A heavy feeling had been eating at Boroda's heart for the last two days, though he could not find a correct word to name it. He was an experienced soldier in his late thirties and had war years and several hostage crises behind him. He never believed in intuition - only into the flawless execution of the plan. This time it was different though. To him, it seemed a reckless gamble to steer a young group of fighters with little battle exposure in a reconnaissance operation over a radio link when his intel on the target object and the area of responsibility was so dangerously

thin. But the deployment order for the field inquiry into the A.E.G.I.S. Institute within the fenced-off Area NG-2X1 was handed over to him by a representative of the State Committee of Advanced Defence. To Boroda's surprise, it already included the crew list for the intended legwork.

Captain's attention darted back to his fighters. For a split second he imagined he was taking a group of schoolboys and their teacher to a hike in the forest. Boroda pressed out a faint smile, then chased the intrusive thought away.

"Out there they will have Papa and Bes with them. At least I can fully rely on those ones" - the musings gave him little consolation though. *"And how much can go wrong in one building in less than 24 hours... A lot, Andrey, a lot can go wrong... You probably know it better than anyone else in this chopper. Everything can go to hell in a blink of an eye..."* Boroda glanced at his watch again and turned to the pilot:

"When exactly is the planned landing?"

"Seven a.m., Captain." - came a plain, indifferent answer.

Boroda pulled out his tablet, zoomed in into something on the dusty screen smeared with the countless fatty fingerprints, then jerked his head towards the nearest window.

"We are ahead of schedule. Let us circle around the Area along the Outer Perimeter! I want to get a visual on the area of responsibility before sending in the squad!" - Although a chance of Sapsan's pilot cooperation on this one was minimal, Boroda still tried his luck. "Negative, Captain!" - followed firmly through the headphones from the cockpit. "We were ordered not to cross the zone's Outer Perimeter under any circumstances after what happened to the spy drones."

"All of them burned down way further up, between the 3rd and 1st kilometers!" - Boroda kept insisting, though he knew the pilot would not yield.

"Our order was to take you guys and Professor to the road Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter. You surely have the video footage from the drones before they dived. We are not crossing into the zone, Captain" - was the last Boroda heard through the chopper's hum.

Viacheslav Dmitriyevich happened to be an unwitting witness of this brief exchange. His heartbeat jumped upon hearing about a possibility to circle around the facility he yearned to see once again. For a moment he intended to join in and try to convince the pilot but immediately felt that such a turn would be rather inconsiderate of him. Mixed feelings of confusion, remorse and guilt washed over the old scientist. Viacheslav Dmitriyevich pressed his lips and turned away to the window.

“There goes your visual, Cap” - the chopper’s pilot broke the radio silence all of a sudden with a hint of emotion in his voice. “Look north”.

Sapsan’s pace dropped to a crawl. Down on the left it was passing the railway tracks which were connecting Novograd-2 and the Institute. Only three days ago trains were still shuttling passengers and cargo there. Now the schlagbaums - rusty red and white pipes - were lowered over the barricaded tracks. An abandoned checkpoint with an attached watchtower and an old, empty platform stood at the edge of a green, thick sea of pines and fir trees as a couple of lonely witnesses to the recent developments.

“The last ones standing” - crossed Boroda’s mind. *“Is this checkpoint not guarded?! Where are the soldiers?!”*

The Area NG-2X1 spread out right behind the railway checkpoint and stretched for ten kilometers to the north in an almost perfect rectangle. A field road for the army patrols ran along the Outer Perimeter’s zone fence, making almost a perfect circle around it. Boroda started scanning the vivid landscape below for potential threats, now and then shifting his eyes to the tablet screen. Viacheslav Dmitriyevich pressed himself again to the window. From above, the fenced-off zone reminded him of a cozy blanket covering a still dreamy earth. The woodland mesmerized him; it gently played on the strings of the feelings deep inside, touching the memories of the days long gone, conceiving the pictures of hikes with friends and happy picnics.

Further north, in the heart of the forest sea, the brutalist concrete of the Institute ripped through the green fabric. The five-story T-shaped facility loomed in the cold autumn sun, its grey wings dominating the clearing. Foreign, man-made monument, injected right in the middle of the green waves of wild forest - Boroda found their mission destination to be a bizarre and disturbing sight. The facility gaped from among the coniferous carpet like a festering sore on a healthy body.

“What an eye catcher!” - the pilot’s laughter filled the headphones. “Landing at the Checkpoint in one minute!”

“*The Institute!*” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich got so agitated that he lost himself for a moment and glued his face to the window like a stunned boy on a school bus trip, the feelings of sublime overwhelming him.

“The Institute...” - muttered Boroda under his breath, flexing both of his fists in one fast, unconscious movement.

The fighters grabbed their gear - the procedure rehearsed so many times that it took bare seconds for the pile in the middle to dissolve. Sapsan softly touched the ground in front of the road checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter. With his backpacks in one hand and VAL in another, Boroda was the first to jump out of the chopper.

Chapter 3 - October 6th, 8:45 am, Office of the General Secretary of the Kerzhovia State Committee of Advanced Defense (SCAD)

“... completely failed, old fool!” - someone spat out an attack, the voice sounding strangled and furious.

The words cut Andrey’s ears like a knife when he pulled on the heavy door. He halted for a moment to let the comment die in the stuffy office air, then entered the room.

A spacious governmental office with two tall windows on the opposite wall greeted him. Heavy drapes shut out the daylight; a couple of dim table lamps casted a thin glow across the dark room filled with clouds of cigar smoke. The red and gold Kerzhovian flag and the Coat of Arms decorated the wall space between the windows. Below them stood a massive wooden table; its owner, the General Secretary of SCAD, drew deep, heavy breaths, his eyes burning. Four other strangers sat rigid in wide leather armchairs.

“*Three army officers, a civilian paper pusher. Scientist? Politician?*” - Andrey closed the door and remained standing - the atmosphere was so strained that he could cut it with the

knife. "Gentlemen, I am Captain Andrey Lebedev, State Committee on Counterintelligence and Anti-Terrorism. You wanted to see me" - he addressed the group of five in front of him while looking at the General Secretary reaching out for a cognac bottle and a glass.

"Captain Lebedev," - one of the army officers turned in his armchair - a General-Major judging from the insignia - "come closer." He held a thin paper folder in his hands. "There is an urgent state matter which involves one of our vanguard research facilities. It requires your immediate involvement in the field. Get yourself acquainted with this report first".

Andrey took two more steps and reached out for the folder. A red, strictly confidential sign stamped in a rectangle with the wavy outer sides marked its cover just below the Kerzhovian coat of arms. Inside he found a couple of rough sheets of bluish paper, all of them with faint dents along the edges.

With a sweeping movement the General Secretary emptied the glass contents into his throat and swallowed loudly. He lit a cigar, then hissed through half closed, tensed lips:

"Sssuka... I find that egghead scum I'll make him eat shit for life. Pid-dar-as, bliat..." - The empty glass slammed against the table.

Andrey delved into the report.

Ref: SCAD-NG2X1-05/10

To Mr. Gavrilko Todorovich

The General Secretary of the Kerzhovia State Committee of Advanced Defence

From Nikolay Zorianych

Colonel of the 2nd Novograd Infantry Brigade

Kerzhovia Armed Forces

October 5th, 8:47 pm

Strictly confidential

An inquiry into the accident at the A.E.G.I.S. Institute in AREA NG2X1
(*Advanced Evolutionary Genetics & Integrated Systems Institute*)

Summary

This report provides a detailed account of the events of October 5th at the A.E.G.I.S. Institute located in the high security Area NG2X1 northeast from Novograd-2.

At 5:38 am on October 5th an explosion of unknown nature and origin happened at the A.E.G.I.S. Institute. Source: Witness statements from the survived Watchtowers personnel, Outer Perimeter. According to the entry card scan logs there were two hundred and six people, civilian and military, at the Institute premises at the time of the explosion.

The accident was described as a bright short flash of light inside the facility radiating from the ground up. It was followed by one suppressed but still audible thumping sound and a massive circular electrowave radiating away from its epicenter at the Institute (Site-Zero) in all directions. The wave moved with a lightning-fast velocity and covered the area in the three to five kilometer radius. No video surveillance was collected due to the Inner Perimeter cameras outage. Probable cause of outage: electro- and thermal overload of internal circuitry. Two minutes before the accident our field sensors at the Institute recorded a spike in the electromagnetic activity, ambient gamma-radiation and the air temperature level. All sensors malfunctioned and went offline at the time of the explosion.

A telephone and radio connection to the institute was instantly lost and failed to be established again. No incoming communication attempts were recorded. Both reconnaissance missions throughout the day failed to clarify the situation. Those inquiries included the patrol troop of five KAF soldiers from the road Military Outpost at the Outer Perimeter and an airborne emergency response platoon from the KAF Military Base at Novograd-2. Personnel of both inquiries are categorized as Missed In Action; zero trace recovery or signal pings detected post the 1000 m mark. Subsequently, a total loss of five aerial reconnaissance hardware

items was sustained within the 3000 m - 1000 m corridor. Probable cause of termination: thermal overload of internal circuitry.

The video footage from the above-mentioned reconnaissance drones was still obtained and secured. Its analysis did not identify any biological signatures in or around the Institute within the electrowave impact zone. Thermal imaging indicated zero heat-output from the facility, consistent with a total cessation of metabolic activity. Aerial reconnaissance also showed no structural damage to the Institute. The closest observations were taken from the around the 1000 meter mark.

The AREA's NG2X1 movement and noise sensors - those still operating at the functioning watchtowers along the Outer Perimeter - remain silent since the moment of explosion - no records whatsoever.

Site-Zero and the entire AREA NG2X1 were designated 'Non-Permissive Environment' for conventional infantry elements of the Kerzhovian Armed Forces. Current KAF status: Containment (Perimeter Cordon only).

No more reconnaissance or rescue attempts were undertaken.

The Event Log

5:00 AM - last successful contact with the Institute (Inner Perimeter Main Gate Checkpoint).

5:36 AM - electromagnetic, radiation and temperature sensors triggered.

5:38 AM - explosion at the Institute.

5:39 AM - first accident reports came in.

5:39 AM - failed communication attempt with the Institute on-duty SCAD officer.

5:39 AM - failed communication attempt with the Inner Perimeter Main Gate Checkpoint.

5:40 AM - total loss of communication with Site NG-2X1 confirmed.

5:40 AM - accident reported to the 2nd Novograd KAF Infantry Brigade HQ

5:42 AM - failed communication attempt from the HQ

5:45 AM - airborne emergency response platoon from the KAF Military Base at Novograd-2 deployed to the Site-Zero.

5:51 AM - visual and telemetry blackout with the AERP after the 1000 meter mark.

6:02 AM - an Outer Perimeter patrol troop of five KAF soldiers sent to the Main Gate of the Institute.

6:07 AM - telemetry blackout with the patrol troop just before the 1000 meter mark.

6:15 AM - the accident was reported to the State Committee of Advanced Defence.

Threat Assessment

Internal or external sabotage or an act of terrorism cannot be excluded. However, the absence of the aggressors' exit demands indicates a non-standard event. Origin of the explosion and the resulting wave remain unverified. No entity has claimed responsibility for the accident so far. No tactical human elements withdrawal from Site-Zero was detected.

Recommended operational countermeasures

Immediate deployment of a SCAD-authorized Special Operations Force (spetsnaz) is advised. Conventional KAF forces are insufficient for the current threat profile. Mission Objective: Secure Site NG2X1, recover

AEGIS operational data, and determine the status of the A.E.G.I.S. functional units.

Signed:

Nikolay Zorianych

Colonel of the 2nd Novograd Infantry Brigade

Kerzhovia Armed Forces

Novograd-2

As he finished studying the report, Captain's face betrayed no emotions, but his head was swarming with questions. Andrey raised his eyes at the General-Major. The old KAF officer was taking a drag on a cigarette, staring vacantly past his colleague in an opposite chair. Feeling Captain's gaze on him, the officer turned his head, then cocked it to the right while looking at Andrey and then raised his left eye brow as if wondering.

"A mission order with the roster lies in there as well, Captain" - another drag on the cigarette. "Take a closer look. And be fast - time is a scarce commodity today". The General-Major slowly exhaled through the nose.

Attached to the report Andrey found an order appointing him to lead the suggested recon operation to AREA NG2X1. He ran his eyes over another sheet of plain bureaucratic text. Much to his amazement the order also appointed the rest of the mission crew as well. Two names stood out from the bullet point list and instantly caught Andrey's attention. "*Bes and Papa got the gig as well*". The rest of the personnel were unknown to him. A fat, sloppy signature of Todorovich sealed the document.

The first question was already at the tip of Andrey's tongue but the General-Major intercepted Captain's intent.

"The report of Zorianych gives you all the necessary intel to be successful in the field, Captain Lebedev. You will guide a troop of seven Special Operations officers. You are joining them later today at the closest KAF Military Base. There you will also find all the

gear assigned to you by SCAD to conduct this ...” - the right word seemed to slip the officer’s mind - “data harvest”.

“*Data harvest?*... SIR! With all respect...” - but Andrey was cut off again.

“You and a radio communications expert will stay at the Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter and lead your subordinates... remotely. You will have all necessary communication tools at your disposal, plus a number of drones and other toys. The squad will report to you... well, everything. Even if they find one half dead lab mouse, you will inform us about every single fart it takes.” - the old officer’s pace was measured and the voice sounded lazy. “Your mission is to reach the site, investigate the cause of the explosion and secure all A.E.G.I.S. research data which might have survived the event. As for the biological signatures you may come across...” - General-Major paused to light another cigarette - “well, your lads will have to seize and contain them. I guess”.

“Sir, I have every reason to believe SCCA is not in a better position than KAF to deal with such a threat profile. We know little to nothing of what we are dealing with here. If I may ask...”

“WE ARE ASKING THE QUESTIONS HERE, LEBEDEV - AND YOU ARE EXECUTING THE ORDERS!” - Todorovic jumped up and exploded from behind the heavy polished desk, his piercing gaze as if eating through Captain’s flesh. Andrey noticed how the General Secretary’s scream sounded muffled within the walls of the office and died off as if drowned in the heavy clouds of cigarette smoke. Not a single muscle moved on his face - Andrey was too intimately familiar with the Kerzhovian apparatchiks and let the words pass him by like the wind.

“Lebedev.” - The General-Major shifted closer to a marbled ash tray at the table and put out his cigarette. - “Remember the last hostage crisis? Four years ago, that wretched theater in the capital?” - Andrey kept silent. - “Do you recall it, Lebedev? KGS remembers. Now it gives you a chance to wash off your sins. A.E.G.I.S. is your purgatory. It is one big pain in the ass now and KGS wants answers - fast. We give you two days, Lebedev, to meet the squad and figure out all the details. Your deployment starts at night on October 8th and will last 24 hours. You can keep the report.”

"I understand, Sir." - The Captain made himself sound confident.

"The Party counts on you. Don't disappoint us, Lebedev." - His head turning to the cognac bottle, General-Major pronounced the last sentence while his right hand was reaching out for a glass. With another one he waved Captain to leave.

Already at the door, Andrey heard his name called out by the old officer once again.

"By the way, Lebedev. To speed up the things on site, SCAD sends a veteran scientist from the Institute with you. One of those nerdy eggheads who knows everything there. We believe he can be a valuable addition to your efforts in the field."

Andrey nodded in the sign of acknowledgement, then turned to finally leave. "*SCAD, you scumbags, what have you been up to this time...*"

"Good harvesting, Bo-ro-da" - General-Major's smirk saw Andrey out of the office.

Chapter 4 - October 8th, 7:00 am, Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter

"Granit! Line up everyone in 5 min for the briefing!" - Boroda shouted over the chopper's roar to the Lieutenant who followed right after him from Sapsan. - "Sokol, Hirurg! Help our Professor out and take him to the Checkpoint - tell him to wait for me inside!"

"Yes, Sir!" - came instantly back, loud and sharp.

Pasha 'Sokol' and Alex 'Hirurg' grabbed the Institute veteran on each side under the arms and dragged him out of the helicopter depths like a huge sack of potatoes. The face of Viacheslav Dmitriyevich got red from strain. Feeling the land under his feet, he tried to stretch his legs, but the two fighters hauled the scientist away from the chopper, catching up with the rest of the troop on the cracked asphalt road in front of the checkpoint.

Boroda dropped his gear near one of the outpost walls and, leaving only VAL hanging over his back, returned to the center of the road.

"Extraction scheduled for tomorrow at 7 am, Captain! This very place" - was the last thing Boroda heard from the pilot.

“Copy that.”

He waved off to the pilots and followed the military chopper away, then took a slow, deep breath; with both hands on his waist the Captain turned around to survey the scene of what would be his base of operations for the next twenty-four hours.

Silence. With the last notes of the Sapsan's engine dying away in the distance, silence crawled on the exclusion perimeter. Boroda's glance followed the dirty concrete blocks of the cordon fence running west- and eastwards from him. The three meter high grey wall was crowned with heavy rolls of barbed wire. Some two, maybe two and a half kilometers away he spotted a watchtower at the railway Perimeter crossing; plain in appearance, its green steel carcass fit naturally in the lush woodland landscape. A field road littered with potholes traced the fence as far as the Captain could see. *“The KAF Patrol road. But where are the patrols?”*

Silence. The sky in the west was turning darker. A sharp contrast to the cold sun made it look like a bruise to Boroda. The fresh morning air filled his lungs with a pleasant chill. It smelled of pine with wet, even damp, aftertones. The scent was omnipresent and so intensive it was almost surreal - as if mixed with the chemicals used to sterilize a hospital floor.

The Captain took three slow steps in the direction of the Perimeter. His fighters already stashed the gear away and took a minute break. The KAF soldiers manning the Outpost looked at the newcomers with an obvious distrust written on their faces. Nobody left their posts or undertook anything, and their commander was still nowhere to be seen.

Two machine gun nests loomed over the road on each of its sides - right there where it was spilling over the AREA NG2X1 boundary and running off into the foreboding site. *“Both MGs are turned toward the zone,”* Boroda noted, the realization hitting him like a cold draft. *“They are not guarding the entrance”.*

“Guarding the exit, boys?!” - he grinned at the MG operator on his left. No answer came back.

Silence. Boroda approached the lowered schlagbaum, leaned on it and peered into the distance. Cold rusted steel felt like sandpaper on his fingertips. Far away - somewhere at the vanishing

point of the ribbon of wet mud covering the needle-straight road - a lonely projector was sending a trembling ray of light towards the outer world. A dense coniferous forest was creeping close to the once asphalt lanes, trying to absorb them, to devour them, all while stretching into the eternity of northern Kerzhovia. Boroda gave a crooked salute to one of the lads in an MG nest, turned around, and marched back towards the outpost building.

His fighters were lined up along the road, waiting.

“Sir, the squad is prepared and at your command!” - Granit reported while saluting the Captain.

Boroda faced his fighters.

“Lads, it is 7:05 am. I give you one hour and 25 minutes to rest and prepare yourself for the 5 km march down that very road” - he sharply pointed to his left with a fully stretched arm and went on: “Site-Zero lies right at the end of your hike. More on that later. Go inside now, pick up the best room, rest, prepare, check the weapons and hardware - you know the protocol. At 8:30 am I want to see you in front of the schlagbaum fully equipped. All free to go. Bazar, you stay”.

Boroda waited till he and the Junior Sergeant Vitalik ‘Bazar’, the youngest squad member, remained alone and it was safe to talk.

“Sir?” - Bazar crossed his arms on his back to hide a slight twitch.

“Is all your equipment intact? Will you be on time with your setup?”

“Yes, Sir.” - the junior sergeant sounded confident.

“You know the situation, Bazar. We at the Perimeter Command have double duty: the interior entry team depends on us and the SCAD assholes expect the updates nearly in real time. The threat profile... Let’s say the situation we are dealing with is ambiguous. You’ll gotta do a lot of eavesdropping in the next 24 hours, lad.”

“No problem, Captain. That’s what I was trained for.” He adjusted his glasses, then added: “Sir, may I suggest occupying and setting up a listening post on the upper floor? From there I can fix the Yagi and Log-Periodic antennas on the roof.”

Boroda hesitantly moved his head to the left and studied the outpost. From the looks of the building, it was impossible to exactly guess its age. It was a two-storey box of an ashy color with a flat roof, shabby and weather beaten. The plaster on its outer walls was crumbling. Boroda noticed a few swallows' nests under the eaves. On the farther corner of the outpost, from the field side, somebody planted marigolds.

"Positive. I give you the green light to take the biggest room with roof access." - Boroda's attention returned to his young fighter. "Before the march starts, I expect you to be fully deployed."

"Yes, Sir."

"If you need manpower to move or connect your gear, take Leshiy or Sokol. Don't take or ask for any help from the outpost soldiers. I am gonna find their officer now and order not to interfere."

"Got it, Captain."

"I'll join you upstairs".

As Bazar started walking away to his pile of equipment, Boroda glanced one last time down the Institute road and moved on. Next moment he froze mid-step not realizing what hit him. Something was wrong. His eyes swept the Perimeter and the treeline. Then Boroda locked his gaze on the road into the zone, eyes narrowing - the Institute light projector down the road was... dark. Then it lit up for a split second, went dark, and then lit up again but this time for a full two seconds. "No way..." Another two longer flashes followed. Dark. "*Son of a bitch...*" - Three fast flashes ended the sequence. Andrey felt his skin crawl.

Chapter 5 - October 8th, 7:20 am, Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter

"Have you seen it too?! Did you see it?!" - Boroda grabbed the private who was manning one of the MG nests up on a tower almost by the collar, dragged him towards himself and screamed in his face. In the stillness of the morning his shouts rolled like thunder over the Perimeter fence before being swallowed by the thick evergreen forest of the Exclusion Area. He could not say if it was terror or fury possessing him; his body was burning cold as if plunged into ice water.

"What?... Have I seen... what?" - The MG operator seemed to lose all his wits.

"The S.O.S. signal! From the light source at the end of the road! Have YOU seen it? Who is manning the projector?!" - Boroda lost control of his voice. The private's stench hit him - unwashed uniform, stale sweat and vodka. He was almost shaking the soldier as if trying to thrash out the desired answer from him. The private with the machine gun barely tried to defend. Boroda noticed his greasy face and glassy, absent eyes. At first the soldier looked at the Captain, then tried meekly to free himself, all by avoiding Boroda's heavy stare.

"No... Sir... Which signal?... The big light? it's the Main Gate, Sir. The patrol... they used to man it. Before the... Before the explosion... before everything" - Then he made another weak attempt to pull back.

"At the Inner Perimeter?"

"Yes."

"It was confirmed the explosion wiped out all life in and around the Institute!"

The private at the tower could not find any answer and just looked back at Boroda like a scared, beaten puppy. He was almost shaking:

"It was the Institute... Captain... The Institute took them... Like all those shipped in Spez-Wagons by rail..."

"What? Are you drunk, private?"

Boroda's train of thought started to overwhelm him. *"So, the facility is still connected to the grid. How did that survive the explosion? And why did Zorianych leave this crucial detail out?"* - He let the soldier out of his grip. *"Have I really seen the flashing?? Yes, YES! The signal; it was clear!"*

The interrogation of another MG operator at the sister-tower across the road ran according to the same script. Boroda, getting no intel and boiling with anger, rushed to the checkpoint. Half way through he rapidly turned, his eyes searching for the projector - the beam was faint but steady. *"Motherfucker"*.

“Bazar! It’s Boroda - do you copy?”

“Loud and clear, Cap! I am halfway through here” - the Comm Tech reported back.

“Urgent! Send out a recon drone to the Institute - now! I need a visual on the light projector in front of it! Follow the road, don’t get lower than 120 meters. Use a thermal camera - report on any sign of life immediately!” - Boroda got at some point so furious that he almost bit his radio.

“Copy that, Cap! Sending a bird out. Over”. - Bazar disappeared as fast as he answered.

The Comm Tech took what seemed like eternity to Boroda though no more than half a minute passed and a sharp buzzing sound ripped through the air. The drone darted out of the window on the first floor, quickly gained height and zipped towards the Institute.

On his way inside the building Boroda ran upon the checkpoint commander. The officer in charge was waiting for him outside, propping up the main entry door frame with his arms crisscrossed on the chest. Upon Captain’s approach he took an effort to straighten up and saluted:

“Sergeant Borovskiy, Checkpoint Commander”. - The Sergeant reeked of a strong vodka hangover.

“Captain Lebedev, SCCA. By the authority granted to me by SCAD I am taking over the command at this outpost for the next 24 hours. I expect full cooperation from you and your soldiers.” - Though a lie, Boroda was not expecting any resistance. “I need to go over several matters with you before my team enters the Area - is there any place where we will not be interrupted?”

The Sergeant, all while trying to stay straight, nodded in the direction of the last room in the hallway. Boroda followed.

The corridor was short and dirty - and felt so familiar to the Captain. Its once white walls were smeared black here and there. Halfway through, Boroda spotted ‘Hui’ scratched to his left on the eye level. A strip of old dark green paint ran along the baseboard.

“Here, Captain” - Borovskiy was barely audible. He closed the door behind them and almost collapsed on a low messy sofa.

"I missed that moment when KAF started giving its soldiers vodka along with their dry rations" - Boroda fixed his piercing gaze on the Outpost commander. The Sergeant made a visible effort to conjure up an answer but seemed to be unable to produce any worthy output and just stayed silent, avoiding looking at the Captain. Boroda took a chair and sat across from him. "Sergeant, what is your situation report? Remain seated. You can skip the formalities."

Although Boroda's inquiry was a formal military ritual on all similar occasions, Borovski's face betrayed he was not prepared for such a turn of events. The Sergeant took a while to focus, then held his breath for a moment:

"We took the watch three days ago, on October 5th at 6 pm. No incidents to report. All ten personnel are at their posts and performing the duties as scheduled. Weapons and equipment at the Checkpoint are... ready... well, fully operational. We maintain the observation in standard mode. So far no unauthorized personnel or suspicious activities across the Perimeter were detected." Borovski made a longer break suddenly as if trying to recall something which slipped his mind. "Report complete."

Boroda followed the Sergeant's monotonous recitation while thinking if he should report the officer for being drunk on duty. *"Is he serious now or bullshitting me?"*

"I saw 4 soldiers. Where are the other six?"

"Resting from the night watch, in the barracks room." The Sergeant slightly paused again and added: "We put out more people... when it is dark".

"We?"

"Aah, hm... We... I mean... the soldiers here, at the outpost. They prefer to stick together... after dark".

At this point in the conversation the checkpoint commander looked like his head was about to split in two. He was red, gulping water and massaging both of his temples. But Boroda had no intention of letting him off the hook.

"Why?"

"We guessed... it would be safer so... after the disappearance... of everyone" - the Sergeant was stuttering but Boroda was not sure at this point if vodka was the reason.

"You mean the accident at the Institute three days ago." - At the word "Institute", Borovskiy somehow shuddered and awkwardly shifted on the sofa, but kept his appearance. - "Three days ago right here - what happened? You were taking a briefing here three days ago from the outgoing duty officer" - Boroda already realized that the report of Zorianych was just a sterile pile of crap, an account of events known to everyone because everyone in the Institute vicinity was witness to them. The Colonel produced the paper solely for the Committee to cover his own KAF-ass and wash his hands off the matter. Boroda kept pursuing his line of questioning, trying to get anything worthwhile straight from the field.

"We-ee... I... There was no handover. Captain." - The Sergeant raised his head and looked straight into Boroda's eyes - maybe for the first time during the entire exchange. - "We arrived... to the empty checkpoint".

Boroda's left eyebrow crawled up on his forehead - a subconscious reaction he could often not control. - *"I will check the logbook later. If I find any"*. The pause did not land well with the Sergeant, and the next moment he poured out the rest on his own:

"We were dispatched here, in a hurry, twelve soldiers, they did not tell us anything - just that the Checkpoint needs the off-schedule personnel, the reinforcements. We arrived, nobody here... I heard during the shuttle... the outpost patrol... They disappeared in the forest, on the way to the Institute, after the explosion. Those who stayed behind... lads say the Institute called them... and they went..." - The Sergeant's face was white as the walls of the checkpoint once, he was shaking. Boroda noticed that Borovskiy's forearms were crawling with goosebumps.

"Twelve people??"

"Pashka and Slava... They manned the MG nests on the first night... Both ran off to the forest around half past two at night... Never returned."

Everything Boroda had observed clicked into place now. *"Nobody has any idea of what is happening at this place. It is just panic and fear..."*.

"That's why you shifted the MGs to face in the zone and that is why there are no patrols along the Perimeter - am I right, Sergeant?"

Borovskiy nodded and went on:

"The soldiers here, they are... they feel uneasy so close to that cursed building. All of them come from the nearby villages. Regular army recruits. Already their parents hated the Institute and the eggheads there. Nobody knew what exactly they were up to there... People used to say... I mean... There were many rumours... they torture convicts, they try to change their nature or something with the brain, to make them special. People were disappearing... sometimes. Parents told their kids the Institute had been claiming its sacrifices... And it was often hungry... When it exploded, our friends, colleagues from many Perimeter watchtowers, vanished without a trace... The Institute took them" - Borovskiy was going on and on, his speech speeding up and then breaking suddenly, his hands constantly moving as if washing themselves.

Heavy thoughts collided in Boroda's head. The Sergeant was drunk, but his revelations echoed the MG operator's comments. And they even - kind of - made sense. Under the current circumstances. *"They all are terrified of this place. Fear paralyses them. And the weakest crumble under the stress."*

"Are you monitoring the airwaves? Have there been any contact attempts from or with the Institute, Sergeant?"

"Nnno... It is dea... It is silence, Captain; for three days".

"I see. We'll take care of the Institute from now on, Sergeant. If you have nothing to add, I order you to lock yourself here and sleep" - Boroda was heading to the door. *"I need to find the Professor and fast"*.

"Take care of the Institute? And you think you're special because you're SCCA, Captain?" - Borovskiy's fear turned into spite. - "We've been sitting in this piss-stinking hole for three days listening to the forest grow. We aren't 'monitoring' anything. You and us... we're just the meat they put in front of the gate to see if it gets eaten!"

"The boy is not wrong there. Good that I did not mention the SOS signal". Boroda left the room.

Chapter 6 - October 8th, 7:45 am, Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter

- The Canteen

... Dave Mustaine, pissed off as always, was hissing from a cheap loudspeaker - the music coming from the common room. "*Bes tuning himself in*" - thought Boroda and peeked in when passing by - Sokol was assembling his Vintorez, Hirurg and Leshiy were loading the SP-6 cartridges into their VAL magazines. Papa was sleeping on his bags, holding an unlit cigarette in his mouth. The room was cramped, overflowing with gear and men. The air was heavy.

"How are you doing, lads?"

"All good, Cap!" - Granit answered for everyone showing thumbs up.

"Where is our Professor?"

"Canteen. I heard him asking for tea, Cap."

"Cheers, Granit".

Boroda left the building and stopped in the middle of the road. Dark clouds from the West spilled like ink across the sky, chasing away the sun. "*The forecast was dry though last time I checked*". With his feet planted shoulder width apart and hands on his hips, he faced the zone and peered in the distance. "*Not blinking anymore?*" He waited for about half a minute and strode back to the checkpoint. All of a sudden a wave of burned ozone washed over Boroda - the sensation so fleeting that it was gone before he could even comprehend it. Then his radio crackled to life and Boroda heard a familiar nerdy voice coming through the static:

"Cap, do you copy? It's Bazar".

"Boroda here. What have you seen?" - for a split second he was not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Nothing, Cap. It's cold and empty. No sign of life in the recon area." - Bazar reported as if a judge read out a verdict in court.

"Is your bird back?"

"Yes! With the recording. It's of awful quality. No idea why. But the thermals came through, Cap, and they don't lie."

"Have you seen anything at all? Any... life?" - Boroda emphasized the word 'any' by dropping his voice.

“No, Cap. It’s dead air, pines and that ugly block of concrete among them.”

“Copy that. Over”.

Boroda spat in the grass. *“Son of a bitch. Piece of shit SCAD report on the left, superstitious peasants on the right. You’d better have the answers ready, Professor”*.

The canteen was on the ground floor, the last room on the right facing the field. It lacked the door; Boroda slowed down his pace and floated in unnoticed. A young private was rinsing a steel cup in a sink on the left wall. He jumped, spilling water across the yellow linoleum as his peripheral vision caught a stranger in the room.

“Capitan...” - the private saluted.

“Lebedev, SCCA. Leave us, private”.

The canteen was a spacious room about six by six meters, with two windows facing the fields and a ceiling lamp. A large mold stain bloomed in the far corner. Against the right wall, an old 'Zorya' fridge hummed. Boroda moved deeper into the room, his boots clanking against the grease-slicked linoleum. The table in the middle caught his attention for a moment - the polyethylene tablecloth with rose motifs covering it was riddled with tears. It looked more like a mockery than a cover - through its holes Boroda could see the greasy wood. One of the chairs was turned in such a way that its occupant could have a good view through the windows. Boroda’s nostrils instantly recognized such a familiar cocktail of mold, grease, canned tuna and vodka hanging in the air.

Viacheslav Dmitriyevich stood near the furthest wall studying one of the many Kerzhovian state propaganda posters decorating the room: a young mother with a boy and flowers in her hands was waving to a marching, smiling soldier. Bold red letters above them shouted: “Eternal glory to our warriors - defenders! KAF - our only hope!”. Boroda sneered at the sight of it.

“Ah, Captain!” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich steadied himself upon hearing Boroda’s approach. “I am sorry I still do not know your patronymic. It makes me feel very impolite, mhm, intrusive to call you only by the first name”.

The scientist was still dressed in all his clothes and held a steel army cup full of steaming tea. Its handle was wrapped in a red and blue handkerchief so as not to burn the fingers.

“Valeriyevich. Andrey Valeriyevich” - Boroda held the Professor’s gaze, his answer like a closing door.

“And-rey Va-le-ri-ye-vich...” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich savored the name, as if trying a new exotic food.. “You have a beautiful name. It sounds very ... educated. Are your parents teachers or scientists by any chance?”

“No. We are not here to dig into the family trees, Professor.” - Boroda dismissed the question. “Take a seat”.

With a measured movement, Viacheslav Dmitriyevich put his cup of tea down and sank on the chair, leaving his hands resting on his knees. Boroda took a place opposite him and leaned his elbows heavily on the dirty tablecloth.

“You are not very familiar with the military, are you, Professor?” - the Captain tried to press out a smile. “Although it was all around you at A.E.G.I.S.”.

“Yes, it is so, Andrey Valeriyevich. The common room was a bit too cramped and loud for me, unfortunately. I need to make sure that I save my strength - I understand we are going to spend a night here.” - The voice of Viacheslav Dmitriyevich was soft but steady. “By the way, where will we sleep? Do you know that by any chance?”

Boroda put in a short tactical pause, then said:

“Whether we are going to sleep at all does not depend on me alone.” - He paused again, hoping that what was said had gotten through to the Professor.

“Do you and your troop plan to...” - the scientist searched for a proper word - “... work through the night?”

“You mean do ‘WE’ plan to work through the night?” - Boroda corrected him, putting emphasis on ‘we’. “This will depend a lot on how successful our cooperation will prove to be, Professor. But I can assure you we will not have to tend to any Spez-Wagons tonight”.

The scientist gasped, his torso inched upward. His right hand twitched, as if caught in a moment of hesitation while protesting something. In the end Viacheslav Dmitriyevich said nothing, lowered his gaze and reached out for his tea.

“The light source at the Institute is beaming so strong I can see it here. How did the building and the electrical grid survive the explosion, Professor?”

The question brought the scientist back to reality.

“Did it? That’s... That’s absolutely incredible! It’s..” - The Professor got agitated and stuttered. “I don’t know what to say! You really mean he is unharmed? It! Sorry, of course - it. It is... still... in one piece?”

“The last intel. My Comm Tech reported it about 10 minutes ago. How is this possible, Professor?”

“I honestly don’t know, Andrey Valeriyevich! This... This... It contradicts all laws of physics, I see. What happened here... That’s of enormous scientific importance! I was only told by your friends in the Party there was a huge explosion at the Institute three days ago” - his eyes wandered to the right and stayed fixed at some invisible point on the floor - “with no survivors...”. The scientist slowly ran his right hand over his left. “Now you say everything is intact? Your intel... did it... just maybe... have you already found anyone?” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich struggled to keep his speech straight. Boroda sensed that the Professor was not a fake as expected.

“No.” - the Captain replied like a knife cut. “The report on the accident mentioned this detail too - you must have forgotten that?”

“Which report? I only got a call from your friends in the Party. They said they were calling on behalf of the General Secretary of Advanced Defence and told me that I was urgently needed to help out at the Institute again. That there was an explosion. No survivors. I got so worried, you know! I thought the place got wiped out! So much effort, years and years of research, of findings, of progress - all down the drain. I...”

Boroda leaned back on the chair. *"Is this all a bad joke? He is too real to be acting. Did SCAD seriously give me this grandpa, blessed in his ignorance, to assist on site?"*. He found his right hand frozen on the Glock 17 pressing into his right hip and felt an urge to use it. *"Guns are useless here"*.

"... the best years of my life. We strived for the common good, to protect our Fatherland!"
- the scientist rambled on and on, getting more emotional with every word.

"The eye-witness reports said the explosion was a massive electrical wave - a wave radiating outward from the Institute."

"A radiating wave of electrical nature?" - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich repeated after Boroda weighing every word. "These reports - do they mention any other detail, Captain?"

"Indeed. They tell about a bright light flash just a second before the explosion, coming from within the facility. From the ground up. Two minutes before that the ground sensors recorded the spikes in the electromagnetic activity, ambient radiation and temperature." - Boroda recited from the report of Zoranych.

"I see." - The Professor's answer carried a note of resolve in it.

Boroda got tense and continued in a lower voice.

"You say Fatherland, Professor? The research is lost?" - The corners of the Captain's mouth curled down. - "There were over two hundred people on site at the time of the explosion. Half of them were military men like me. All gone in a second without a trace." - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich raised his cup for a sip of tea but left it hanging in the air. A faint steam flow danced above it. - "The army sent in a helicopter - vanished without a trace. This very Checkpoint sent a patrol in - vanished without a trace. When the twelve soldiers of the current KAF shift arrived at the Checkpoint, it was abandoned - all personnel vanished without a trace. Now they are ten. Care to know what happened to a pair of them who had the gate duty on the first night?" - Boroda paused although the question was obviously a rhetorical one. He stood hovering over the old scientist. - "Ran away into the forest. Their drunk Sergeant is scared to death and thinks that your Institute..."

“... called them.” - Viacheslav Dmitriyevich finished the sentence instead of Boroda, his eyes staring somewhere past the Captain into nowhere. He then took off his glasses and buried his face into the palms of his hands.

Silence filled the room. Boroda pushed his chair back and approached the window. The bruise in the sky grew to menacing proportions. Out in the field a pair of crows fought for a piece of food. A hawk made circles hunting for prey high above. Boroda put his hands on the cold windowsill. The tips of his fingers dug into the thick layer of dust and turned white; his forehead was almost touching the unwashed glass.

“Viacheslav Dmitriyevich.” - Boroda returned to the table and towered over the Professor. Outside, the hawk finally dived. Muffled Megadeth leaked through the wall from the common room accompanied by the funeral dirge of the humming ‘Zorya’. - “What was the A.E.G.I.S. research program?”

Chapter 7 - October 8th, 8:30 am, Military Checkpoint at the Outer Perimeter - The Final Briefing

Boroda surveyed the young faces in front of him. Six spetsnaz fighters - his Institute Entry Team - formed a crescent around their Captain and waited for the final briefing before marching out. It was still dry outside and almost windless. “*Guns are useless here.*” The checkpoint building seemed tiny now beneath the thick forest looming over it. “*Should I go? Against the order? What would that bring?*”. Granit stepped out and saluted:

“Captain! The team is lined up and ready to move out!”

“Thank you, Granit.”

In his left hand Boroda clenched a bluish sheet of paper, densely covered with text.

...

Subject: Vladimir (Vova) Mileninov. **Rank:** Lieutenant. **Callsign:** GRANIT.
Role: Interior Assault Team Leader. **Note:** High-level tactical training;

specialized in urban combat. Limited field experience. **Psychological status:** Stable; high sense of duty.

...

Sokol was the only one holding his weapon in his hands, the barrel of his Vintorez resting on the left forearm. The rest of the troop held their hands behind their backs, eyes fixed on Boroda. *“And if I abort, we’ll all end up at the military tribunal for treason.”*. The Captain once again assessed his grey-blue camo troop, his head sweeping from face to face.

Boroda pressed his lips, then addressed the troop in a commanding voice:

“Gentlemen! We are five kilometers south of Site-Zero - the Institute. The first part of our mission is to reach the building and secure its surroundings. If the entry is safe, we’ll proceed to the second part - the entry to the facility.” - Boroda paused. His heart was racing and the beats were so loud that he was sure the entire outpost could hear them in the stillness of the morning. *“Last time I had that was in the trenches on the eastern front...”*. - “The facility has above-ground and underground sections. Your task is to search both for the survivors, retrieve the institute research data from the server room -” - Boroda stopped his monologue again for a moment. “ - and return alive. By 07:00 tomorrow. All the coordinates are on your maps. Questions about this part?”

Papa shifted from one foot to another:

...

Subject: Dmitriy (Dima) Baskayev. **Rank:** Staff Sergeant. **Callsign:** PAPA. **Role:** Team Sergeant / Tactical Execution. **Note:** Veteran of multiple hostage crises; primary advisor to Team Leader. History of collaboration with Subject: BORODA. **Psychological status:** Extremely high stress threshold.

...

“How are we to reach the facility, Boroda?”

“You’ll march on foot. Two previous vehicle intrusions proved unsuccessful”.

“And what if the entry is NOT safe?” - Leshiy challenged with no edge in his voice. Only a quiet wonder.

...

Subject: Roman (Roma) Severianinov. **Rank:** Junior Sergeant. **Callsign:** LESHYIY. **Role:** Tech & Tactical Comms / Data Extraction. **Note:** Specialist in electronic intrusion. **Psychological status:** High intellectual aptitude; technical obsession; stable.

...

“I was going to address that, Leshiy.” - Boroda hesitated though. He knew he had omitted that obvious detail on purpose. “*We must get in*”. - “You must report to me upon the approach to the facility. If your initial recon on site shows the building is compromised, we’ll act according to the circumstances.” - The Captain let that sink and continued: “However, the recon drone from Bazar did not show signs of biological life on the way to the Institute and in the facility itself. More questions?”

Silence. “*They just walk down the road to the building, they see it empty, they get the data and get the hell out of there*”. Boroda continued:

“You will go to the Institute in a staggered column. Granit and Leshiy on the left, fifteen meters apart. Papa, Hirurg and Bes on the right, ten meters apart. You will report everything you see. Hear me? Everything. Bazar’s drones will watch over you and the area.”

Boroda then turned to the sniper and added:

“Sokol, you are our eyes. You will move out first. In about three hundred meters the forest gives way to a clearing in the West. There you will see the rail tracks approaching the road. The tracks run along a high embankment and parallel to the road all the way to the Institute. About one hundred fifty meters separating them. The clearing stretches for the next two kilometers. Your task is to take a high position on the embankment. Give us eyes on the approach. Stay on that line three to four hundred meters out. Keep that distance to

the rest steady. Report everything you see. Any movement - you report. Don't shoot, don't check, stay low. Clear?"

Sokol nodded.

...

Subject: Pavel (Pasha) Sokolov. **Rank:** Junior Sergeant. **Callsign:** SOKOL. **Role:** Marksman/Reconnaissance. **Note:** Proficiency with VSS Vintorez, undercover field operations expert. **Psychological status:** Stable.

...

Boroda noticed how the sniper's right hand tightened around the Vintorez handle.

"At around the three kilometer mark the forest wedge will again separate the tracks from the road. That's where you will rejoin the group for the next two-kilometer march. All clear, Sokol?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Move out now. The rest will follow in ten minutes".

Sokol turned around and jogged over the Perimeter. On the other side of the concrete fence he cut left and quickly blended into the tree line. At the schlagbaum, a choir of VAL bolts clattered around, mixed with crackling Geiger counters. Hirurg crouched down and untied the laces on his left boot, then tightened them again.

...

Subject: Alexandr (Sasha / Alex) Troitskiy. **Rank:** Sergeant. **Callsign:** HIRURG. **Role:** Special Operations Medic. **Note:** Certified in field surgery in compromised environments. **Psychological status:** Extremely stable.

...

Papa put a Marlboro in his mouth but left it unlit. Boroda approached Bes. The Sergeant stood in front of the schlagbaum, silent and motionless, his eyes fixed at something in the distance.

...

Subject: Mihail (Misha) Yascherov. **Rank:** Sergeant. **Callsign:** BES. **Role:** Demolitions / Structural Breach. **Note:** Specialist in GM-94 thermobaric deployment and C-4 placement. History of collaboration with Subject: BORODA. **Psychological status:** Aggressive.

...

“You see it too. Don’t you?” - the guttural voice of Bes felt like gurgling in the throat. There was a tone of resignation to it. He raised his VAL. “You do see it”. Boroda glanced at the frozen face of the Sergeant. “The air distortion. Like a summer heat mirage. Wandering. About 2.5 km down the road. Left. The birch tree.”

The Captain narrowed his eyes. The silence was deafening.

“Just yes.” - The Sergeant did not move an inch. - “Or no”.

Four other fighters were already on the other side of the Perimeter. A cold spasm shot through Boroda. He turned back to Bes and looked at his motionless face.

“Never mind” - Bes crossed the Perimeter.
