

— FIELD FICTION —

FILTER FISH



— TERRA CONFLICTUS —

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The air at the bottom of the crawl was down around six percent oxygen and thick with old concrete gas, and I want you to understand that I noticed this the way you notice a room is beige. A baseline in that basement would have had about ninety seconds of very bad decisions in them before they lay down and stopped arguing. I lay on my belly in it with my cheek in the dust and waited for my hands to warm up, and thought about how much I hate a building that has already decided how it's going to fall.

That's the build. Tunnel recovery stock, mole rat line, made by a program that wanted a body it could send into a hole that no longer had a floor plan. Blood that carries in air that isn't worth carrying. Lungs that treat dead air as air. Skin loose enough that I can turn around in a space narrower than my shoulders, and a pain response somebody edited with a very light pen, so the acid burn that makes a person's eyes stream and their throat close is, for me, a flavor. They also gave me collagen that tumors have a hard time growing through, which is the line on the spec sheet that decides my whole career, because it means the going rate for putting me in hot ground is lower than the rate for a shielded drone that would quit in the same room. And the trade, the part nobody puts in the sales copy, is that I cannot hold heat. Two hours on cold rubble and my core slides and my fingers go to wood, and my eyes were never much, small

and weak and built for a world lit by other people's lamps. I am thirty-four. I have a lump under my jaw the size of a date that I have not had anyone look at, because the tumor resistance is a resistance and not a wall, and because the only clinic in walking distance trades in HYDRA-CLEAN and antibiotic guesses. So the same paragraph that makes me employable is the paragraph that will file the cause of death. You get used to reading yourself as an inventory item. Some days it's restful.

Where I work, there is nowhere else to work.

Twenty-four years ago fourteen warheads came down across this ground and the governments that owned it stopped existing inside a week. What's left is not a city and not a country. It is a topography. The radiation never spread evenly, so the Zone is a lace of lethal pockets sitting up against ground you can walk on all day, and the difference between the two is not marked, and no satellite reads it, and no bloc has a current map. The Heralds of the Storm have the map. They have it in their feet. Their people walked the safe ground so many thousand times that the safe ground is worn smooth, and that is the whole navigational system of the Forbidden Zone: look for the path that generations of water runners have polished into the dirt, and stay on it, because the hot pocket starts four meters to your left and it does not put up a sign. There are no drones over the Zone. Electronics rot here. There is no traffic and no grid hum, so

the sound of the place is wind coming across rubble and the occasional structural sigh of a building finishing an argument it started in 2042.

And there are the fish. But I'll get to the fish.

The job came to me the way everything comes to me, through Daniyal at the Warrens hire point, sitting behind his stacked corridor maps like a man selling weather. Daniyal deals paper that is honest about being outdated, which in this economy makes him a saint. He had a client he would not name, and the client had a target he described in one sentence: the sealed room in the basement of the old university library, out in the Archive Ruins, and everything in it.

"There's no basement in that building," I said.

"There is now. A floor section dropped last winter." He didn't look up. "It's not on the Herald maps either. That is the interesting part of the sentence, if you want me to be honest with you, and I would rather be honest early than late."

"Fee."

"Four drums of purification chemical, delivered to Grid 7-North against your name, plus a fine-gradient dosimeter you keep after."

I want you to appreciate that offer, because it tells you everything about what kind of money moves in this place. There is currency in the Zone but nobody with sense takes it.

What you take is the stuff that decides whether twelve thousand people drink next season. Grid 7-North is a pre-war purification station that has been kept alive on hand tools and stubbornness for twenty-four years, and its chemical stock has been sliding for a while now, and the Heralds who run the technical side of the plant have not told the survivor communities the number. I knew the number, roughly, the way anyone in the Warrens knows it, which is to say from a maintenance crewman who told his partner. Four drums against my name meant my name would be on a wall in the distribution office for a season, and people would know it, and a body like mine that has no faction, no medical, no extraction and no ticket has to build its future out of exactly that kind of debt. I am dry. I have always been dry. The only bank a dry operator has is the number of people who remember she showed up.

I said yes at the price of the drums. I want that on the record, since the whole thing turns on it.

Priya guided me in. She is a Herald and she works the hire point independently, and she screens her clients now, ever since she took a faction team out to the Archive Ruins and only two of them came back and she started doing arithmetic she can't put down. She walked me east in the dark with no light at all, at the pace of a woman going to a job she has done ten thousand times, and twice she put out a

hand and moved me twenty centimeters to the right for reasons she did not explain.

We passed a Herald sitting cross-legged in the middle of the path, facing us, not blocking, dew already settled on her shoulders. She had been there long enough to be furniture. Priya greeted her by name. The woman looked at me for a while and then went back to looking at nothing, and Priya said nothing about it for four hundred meters, and then said, "She was deciding whether you smell like a person."

That is a real problem for everyone but me. The Heralds can smell an outsider at conversational distance. Three days of chain-fed rations, synthetic kit and faction soap make a signature they read like a name tag, and their night patrols do not challenge, they simply follow you until they have decided. What I smell like is a body that has been metabolizing in the same isotope profile they have, out of the same water, wearing salvage, for six years. My build is close enough to theirs on that one narrow axis that I read as local. It is the single most valuable thing about me in this territory and it is not a skill, it is an accident of who they built me from, and I have never once been able to charge for it directly.

Now the fish.

Everywhere in the Zone that water collects, there are filter-fish, small and pale and unimpressive, and they are the only instrument anybody actually trusts. A dosimeter tells

you about right now. The fish tell you about the last two years. Where they're thick, the pool has been survivable long enough for something to establish, breed, and go on with the family business. Where they're gone, and they were there last month, something has moved, and you do not drink, and you do not wash, and you get off that route. Twelve thousand people organize their water runs around the presence of a fish nobody would look at twice, and the Heralds who could give the survivor communities the corridor updates in one afternoon instead let them keep reading the fish, because a population that reads fish is a population that asks its questions of the water and not of the council. That is the Zone's whole government in one image. Nobody lies to anybody. Nobody tells them anything either. You are simply left with a pool and an animal and the freedom to interpret.

The library is still standing because the blast that flattened its twin next door came in at an angle this one deflected. The bottom two floors are intact. The stacks have been through by Heralds who took what mattered to them and left the shape of their own interest behind, and eleven external teams have been through since, each of them helpfully telling the patrols what the blocs currently believe by which shelf they crowd around.

I found the dropped floor section at the north end, went down it on rope, and got into the crawl.

Nine meters of it, hands and hips, ceiling coming down to about the depth of a body. This is the part of the job I am for. A baseline with a shielded suit is too thick to get through and too loud, and anything on wheels is a joke, and the dead air in a sealed basement pocket is a wall to everybody but me. I could taste the CO₂ like a coin in my mouth. The metallic quality further along was not the CO₂. My borrowed dosimeter, the fine-gradient one Daniyal fronted me, showed me the number I had already decided to live with, and gave me ninety minutes at that number before it stopped being a number I had decided anything about. The margin has drifted here. Everyone knows the margins drift and nobody's map says where.

The door at the end had a bar and a padlock on it, and the bar and the padlock were post-war, and I sat in the dark with them in my hands for longer than the clock could really afford. Herald steel. Hand forged, the way they do it, the ugly good welds.

Nobody missed this room. Somebody locked it.

I cut the bar with a hydraulic spreader and got the door back and put my light in, and inside was a pre-war cold-line cabinet, dead as furniture for twenty-four years, and in the cabinet was a steel sample case the size of a shoebox. Twenty-two glass ampoules in foam. A paper inventory card in a sleeve on the lid, typed, with a program header and a line of designation codes. Physical documents survive here

where electronic storage doesn't, so paper is the whole trade in the Archive Ruins, and I could not read the card, because the languages I have are the ones you pick up in a warren.

My hands had gone. That was the moment the build sent its invoice. Two hours on cold concrete and my core was down and my fingers were doing a passable imitation of somebody else's fingers, and I got the case out of the cabinet and dropped it, and it went down on the corner and I heard glass move inside and I lay on the floor with my face on the case and put my hands inside my shirt against my ribs and counted to two hundred while my ninety minutes ran, and thought about the woman in the Warrens who keeps telling me to take a warm body's job somewhere with a roof.

Then there was a light behind me in the crawl.

She came through the last three meters on her elbows and lay there breathing wrong, and she had a pistol out and her own dosimeter chirping at her the way consumer grade does, in a panic, with no gradient in it, just a threshold and an opinion. Sergeant Nadia Brecht, EO field intelligence, unacknowledged, eleven weeks in a place calibrated for other people's bodies. Her resupply contact stopped answering at week eight. She had been buying corridor access off Daniyal like everybody else, which is how she knew where I was going, and her face in the light off the wall was the color of a filing cabinet.

"Put it down," she said.

"You can't carry it out of here," I said. "You can't get back up that rope. Look at your hands."

She looked at her hands. That was the whole negotiation, right there. She was a professional and she had eleven weeks of numbers in her personal log that she had not reported, and her body had been quietly reading them out to her the entire time, and she had reached the part of the arithmetic where she needed something to be worth it.

"Read the card," I said.

She read the card. She had the languages. She got about six lines in and stopped, and then went back to the top and read it again, and she made a sound I have thought about most nights since.

The Heralds did not build the Gift from nothing. They found it here, in this district, in a pre-war program that had gotten genome-level radiation adaptation to work and then had not fielded it, because the people who ran that program had a rule: no irreversible modification goes into a population. So they built the second half first. The card was the inventory for the second half. Twenty-two ampoules of the antagonist compound, the shut-off, the thing that takes the adaptation back out of a body that did not ask for it. Not a bioweapon. Not a cure for a bioweapon. The off switch for a gift.

And the Heralds knew where it was, because they knew where everything in this district is, and they had put a hand-

forged bar and a hand-forged lock on it and left it in the ground for twenty-four years.

Brecht said, "Their council is split."

"Their council is split," I agreed, and then I understood who my client was, and my hands went colder than the concrete had managed.

There was a fifteen minute stretch after that where the ceiling gave up about a meter of itself onto her legs and I got it off her one piece at a time, in the dark, in six percent air, with a woman shouting at me in three languages about her own dosimeter. My build was the reason both of us came up that rope. There is no version of the story where I feel good about that being true.

Upstairs in the stacks, on the way out, somebody had been working while we were down there. A section of the pre-war program's paper had been lifted, neatly, with the surrounding material left exactly as it sat. Null Collective works like that. They took the protocol pages, the science, the how, and they had not gone down the hole for the glass at all, because the Collective has never once in its existence wanted a cure. They wanted the method. Whoever 7-Green is, they were already a kilometer down a corridor by then, carrying the recipe for both halves out of the Zone in a satchel.

We came out through Section 9 at first light with the case in my pack and Brecht on my shoulder, and the pools along

that stretch were empty of fish. Not thinned. Empty. Two weeks ago they were thick and now the water sat there clean and dead and lovely, and the Heralds had rerouted their runs and mentioned it to nobody, and Priya, waiting at the junction exactly as long as she said she would and not one minute more, looked at the pools and then at my pack and did not ask me a single question, which was its own kind of answer.

The handoff was at the Grid 7-North outer perimeter at 0620, with the distribution queue already three hundred people long behind us in the half dark, everyone carrying more containers than they could comfortably manage. The receiver was a Herald. Unmarked transport, three personnel, four drums coming off the tailgate with the seals still bright, and he took my case and signed nothing, because the deliveries at that gate have never once appeared in the facility manifest.

Nobody said the Elder's name. Nobody had to. The Heralds' council has been arguing for three years about administering their Gift to the whole planet, and one wing of it will not vote yes while the reversal sits in a hole in the Archive Ruins where any bloc with a shovel and a bad idea might dig it up and use it as leverage over a transformed species. Get the shut-off out of the Zone and into a friendly hand, and the last objection in the room stops being an objection. Then you vote. The dispersal is water-soluble. It

always was. It goes into an input channel, and the plant pushes it downstream to twelve thousand people, and the couriers who carry it out of the Zone in their blood have their whole lives to carry it further.

So my fee was four drums of purification chemical, and the plant needed those drums to keep running long enough to push the thing through the pipe, and the chemicals were coming to that gate whether I dug or not. I was not paid for the job. I was the receipt. Twenty-two ampoules for a season of clean water, and both halves of the trade were the same water.

I gave Brecht the protocol pages I had lifted off the floor of the stacks while the Collective's dust was still settling. Her ticket home, if she has one. She went east along a corridor that reads marginal on every map Daniyal sells, in the wrong hour, at a pace that told me she had already read her own log and priced herself accordingly. I do not know if she made the staging point.

Two ampoules are in my boot. That is what a dry operator does with a score she does not understand. You keep back the part of it that somebody will eventually have to come to you for, and you get very good at being alive and findable.

I stopped at the Section 9 pool on the walk back, because I had been in dead air for four hours and my mouth tasted of coin. The fish were back. Overnight, thick as I have ever seen

them in that pool, nosing at the shallow edge in a mass, fat and pale and absolutely certain that whatever came through here two weeks ago has passed and the water is good again.

I knelt down and put my hands in and drank.

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