

THE ZONE

Series Pitch

by

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WHAT IS "THE ZONE?"

"**The Zone**" is a science fiction series inspired by the Strugatsky brothers' novel Roadside Picnic (1972). Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film "Stalker" was very loosely based on the book (images presented here are from that film).

The Concept. "The Zone" takes place in the near future, in Savannah, Georgia, where ten years earlier aliens "camped" for one night, using the Earth as a kind of "rest stop" on their journey to parts unknown.

The aliens--or whatever they were--came and went over a single night, never to return, but their presence still vibrates in six "zones" spread over the globe.

Before "The Visit," the Zone was an industrial district on the outskirts of Savannah, incorporating factories, warehouses, and rolling stock. It was populated by the poor and working class. Overnight, the area was transformed into a ghost town. No one is sure what exactly happened that night: many people vanished; others were incinerated or "grinded into atoms"; the few survivors "went blind from the first hellish thunder-clap."

A decade later, The Zone remains haunted by "The Visit." The terrain is poisoned. Strange forces permeate the area. The abandoned warehouses and factories and apartments are littered with alien "junk"--mysterious and often dangerous artifacts abandoned by the aliens during their "roadside picnic." It is a ghost-ridden landscape.

The ruling **UN government**, military and police, were quick to wall off the zones, while the politicians, scientists, and bureaucrats deliberated what to do. A new agency was established to research the Visit and control the Zones--**UNICEC**, The UN International Commission on Extraterrestrial Cultures.

Naturally, attracted by the treasures left behind in the aliens' wake, a new breed of scavengers arose. "**Stalkers**" are desperate men, bold and hardy pack-rats, who brave the zones to retrieve alien artifacts. They sell this "swag" on the black market.

Stalking is a suicidal avocation. There are few veterans. Anyone caught inside The Zone or with "swag" will go to prison. The police patrolling the perimeter do not hesitate

to shoot on sight. Military Intelligence has made it a high priority to put Stalkers out of business through a network of spooks and double-dealers.

And then there are **the dangers of the Zone itself**. The area is riddled with unheard-of environmental phenomena that no one really understands: the gravity eddies and whirlpools, the "bug-traps," the burning pools of "hell-slime," the white-hot wind-shears.

Mystery pervades the place: there is the building that never stops shaking; lights and shadows that don't comply with the laws of physics; "burning fuzz" that can kill on contact; and the invisible, enigmatic, murderous "grinder." Even among veteran Stalkers, the Zone inspires awe, fear, and panic--and exhilaration on surviving it. The Visit seems to have imbued the district with a kind of malevolent intelligence. Stalkers know better than any that "The Zone is alive."

Then there are the effects on the Stalkers themselves: the fits of hallucination and delirium, and the slow-motion collapse of their bodies.

And, finally, the effects on their children, mutants who are "no longer human," born with physical defects and untapped powers...

THE STORY



Background. Despite the science fiction elements, *The Zone* is a story of human beings, not of technological wonders. The lead characters are not scientific wunderkind, elite commanders, or comic book super heroes; they are common men, driven to feed their families.

The series takes place roughly ten years from now. The future is not all that different from today. Except for a few technological advances, the population has been largely untouched by *The Visit*. People still live, love, work, and die as they always have.

The United Nations of America. The one major change from today is that the United States, like the majority of western nations, has surrendered its sovereignty and become just another state under the flag of The United Nations.

Outwardly, this change barely registers--except for a catastrophic rise in joblessness and poverty. The government is a socialist federation of states run by petty bureaucrats. Constitutional Rights have been replaced by Universal Human Rights, which encourage hive behavior and suppress individualism.

Although society is not yet suffering under an oppressive tyranny, there is a creeping sense among many of being a slave to the state. Individual liberty has been choked off in the interest of the greater good. Freedom has become just another "F" word.

Particularly in Savannah, which has been under "temporary" martial law since the Visit.

RED



Our hero is **Red Schuhart** (30). Red is that rare thing: a veteran Stalker. A rebel by nature, a fierce individualist, a survivor, Red is driven to plunder the Zone to feed his family. The life of a Stalker also gives him a sense of freedom and self-determination he needs. He hates being a slave to any man.

Red **dreams** of making a big score--the fabled "Golden Sphere," possibly--and moving his family away, perhaps to an island in the Caribbean or the South Pacific, where a few sovereign nations still exist, free from the hive and scrutiny of our overlords. For a price.

Red was born and raised in the Zone, before the Visit, in a neighborhood now known as The Plague Quarter. He knows the area well. He was lucky enough to flee to safety the night

of the Visit; his father and sister were among the many souls lost. Of course, he has not been home since.

At the start of the series, Red has recently returned from a six month stint in prison for possessing alien contraband. He keeps his head down as a bartender at his friend **Ernest's** bar on the periphery of the Zone.

Servitude. As much as he hates the work, hates being a servant, Red has promised his wife **Cleo** that he would give up stalking. Besides all the other dangers imposed by the Zone, if caught again, Red will be sentenced to a mandatory two years in prison.

And now, after several miscarriages, Cleo is pregnant...

Another mouth to feed. Red breaks his promise and goes into the Zone under cover of night. Time and again, often with another Stalker (it's never wise to be alone in the Zone), he braves the bizarre perils of the place to retrieve artifacts that allow him to quit his job.

With each successful raid, Red's reputation as a Stalker grows. Even as his body, zapped by exposure to the Zone, deteriorates. Even as his brain begins to melt.



Swag. Red sells the swag to his friend **Kirill**, who works as an analyst at **UNICEC**, the UN agency that researches and manages the Zones. Kirill, whose interest in alien objects is entirely scientific, supplies Red with information about

the Zone--satellite images and maps--and procures for him government passes into the district.

Or to **Raspy**, a well-fed, dissolute, cut-throat fencer, who sells the artifacts on the black market. He would sell **Red** too if the price were right.

The purpose of most alien artifacts is entirely unknown. For instance, the ubiquitous "empties"--two metal discs the size of saucers fixed in place, twelve inches apart, by an unknown force. No one has any idea what they are. Nevertheless they fetch thousands on the black market. A "full empty" goes for much more.

Then there are "the shriekers," "the dead eyes," "the pocket universe," "the perpetual batteries," "the ever-spins," "the folded space," "the black sparks," "the panacea rings," "the quantum grenades"--and dozens of other catalogued insanities.

A few objects, like "The Death Lamp," are **legendary**. Their exact locations in the Zone are closely guarded secrets; their purpose is clouded in myth. These unique items could potentially advance scientific knowledge hundreds of years in a single bound. With one such treasure in hand, a Stalker could easily retire.

Spooks. As more and more contraband begins to show up on the market, the order comes down to put the Stalkers out of business. Military Intelligence, under **Colonel Lemchen**, begins to track the Stalkers. A network of informants is established. Many of Red's comrades are arrested. Some are killed. Others wind up working both sides. *Trust no one.*



A Father. Red's daughter, Monkey, is outwardly a perfectly normal sweet little girl. At least for the first few years of her life. Like many children of Stalkers, she is a mutant. The doctors are speechless to learn she was born with four hearts. For the first years of her life, the girl appears nearly normal--except for her powers of telekinesis.

But gradually she goes lame and mute. The other kids taunt her mercilessly. Red has to bribe the neighborhood children to play with her. As she grows, the girl begins to change drastically--slipping into a kind of uncanny valley; her powers grow; by the time she is nearing puberty, the doctors can no longer say that she is human.

A Son. Then one night in the Zone, Red comes upon his old home. Even after more than a decade, it still looks clean and freshly painted (nothing seems to decay in the Zone). And there he discovers his father, or the old man's corpse, pattering blindly around the place...

What is the Zone? What did the aliens want? Most intellectuals have come to the conclusion that the aliens didn't want anything. The zones just happen to be where they stopped on their journey overnight, and that the artifacts are nothing more than garbage they left behind. The men and women and children who died were just ants crushed underfoot...

...But there is **another line of thinking**, one the Stalkers sense to be true in their bones: the Zones are traps, baited with treasures. And that it is through the Stalkers' children, their twisted genes, that the aliens will one day return...



Get out! Red catches wind of a government plan to seize the the children of Stalkers. To cart them off to research labs. To put them in cages. To put them under a microscope. To extinguish them.

Red decides to get his family out. Even if he has to kill himself in the Zone, hunting down the legendary Golden Sphere. Even if he knows, in his heart, that the government is right...

CHARACTERS

Red Schuhart. 30. A Master Stalker. A common man who wants only to feed his family without submitting himself to "slavery." A fierce individual with contempt for the bureaucrats and police and generals who try to keep him chained. Recklessly brave--even so, The Zone leaves him trembling with fear. Bare-bones education, he spits at scientists and intellectuals; but he's no dummy: his mind is a sharp raw blade. An alcoholic--occupational hazard. A loving husband and father despite himself.

Cleo. 25. Red's wife. A woman whose marriage is slowly destroyed by her husband's refusal to give up Stalking. Cleo is ultimately broken by their daughter's gradual mutation into something not human.

Monkey. 8. Their daughter. A mute, lame, mutant with the power of telekinesis.

Frederick. 60 and dead. Red's father.

"Vulture" Burbidge. 50. A Master Stalker. An untrustworthy bastard who trained Red. He once left Red to die in the Zone. Vulture's career comes to an end when he steps into a pool of hell-slime and his legs turn to goo. Where is he getting all that money now? Has he turned informant? Not one to be trusted, ever.

Dina. His daughter. 18. A mutant, a doll too perfect to be human. Her sexual lure is other-worldly.

Gopher. His son. 16. A half-mutant who wants to be trained by Red.

Kirill. 35. Red's friend. A researcher at UNICEC and novice Stalker (in the interest of scientific research). He dies one night in the Zone after a single wisp of "burning fur" lands on his arm.

The Butcher. 45. A disgraced surgeon who treats stalkers and their children. Fatally addicted to opioids. God help you.

Raspy. 40. A Black Marketeer. He will sell anything to anybody, including his own soul, but especially yours.

Colonel Lemchen. 50. "The Bastard Lemchen." UN Military Commander. Lemchen's main concern is to shut down the Stalkers trade.

Goneril. (30). Red's friend. A part-time stalker.

Richard Noonan. 40. Red's friend. An analyst at UNICEC who supplies Red with maps and satellite images of the Zone. Richard is also working undercover as an informant for **Colonel Lemchen** to help rid the Zone of Stalkers. Or possibly Lemchen only thinks Richard is working for him.

Dr. Valentine. 60. Nobel Laureate in physics. Chief scientist at UNICEC.

Ernest. 40. Owner of The Zona bar, a rough place within sight of the Zone. Red's friend since childhood and his sometime employer. He is also a small-time black marketeer.

QUICK AND DIRTY OUTLINE OF A PROJECTED PILOT

TV DOCUMENTARY

A government-approved TV documentary on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of The Visit.

Dr. Valentine, a Noble Laureate and chief of UNICEC, is interviewed about The Visit and The Zones. Dr. Valentine is cagey in his responses. The take-away is that UNICEC is tight-lipped about what they really know.

The doc fills the viewer in on the situation: that 10 years earlier something unknown visited the earth for one day in six zones across the globe.

Grainy cell cam footage of the night of the Visit plays out: the initial hellish blinding "thunder-blast," the screams, the cries, the gaunt stalking shadows...

One such "Zone" is an industrial area near Savannah. Very little is known about The Visit. The Zones are now restricted areas under UN military control.

Roll film: distant, hazy shots of the zones. The perimeter fence patrolled by the military. The Zone is quiet. Peaceful. Dead.

Only UNICEC researchers are allowed into the Zones to retrieve the artifacts left behind. It is such dangerous work that official investigations have been suspended.

To the consternation of the government, many of these potentially dangerous artifacts are beginning to show up on the black market. "Stalkers" are fool-hardy men who enter the Zone under cover of night to rob it of artifacts--if they survive.

General Lemchen, Military Commander of the Savannah Zone comments: "Stalkers are dangerous criminals. They are narcissists with no respect for their own lives, or for that of their loved ones, or for that of the hive..."

THE ZONA BAR

The documentary is playing on a TV in The Zona--a working class bar within sight of the Savannah Zone. The bar is frequented by Stalkers as well as the police that patrol the perimeter.

The barman, our hero, **Red Schuart**, switches the doc off with curse for **General Lemchen**.

A few policemen at the bar take offense at his contempt for the General. Red never hesitates to speak his mind. He calls **Lemchen** a murderer and then taunts the police about shooting Stalkers and leaving them to die in the Zone.

The bar owner, **Ernest**, an old friend doing Red a favor by employing him, is not happy with Red's belligerence toward paying customers. Red holds his tongue and does what he must to get by.



Red speaks with a **salesman** at the bar who is selling (illegally) citizenships to a private island in the Caribbean. Founded by a billionaire, the island is a sovereign nation, one of the few outside the reach of the global hive. It is also outside of Red's means.

Red's friend **Kirill** drops by for a drink. Kirill works as an analyst at UNICEC. Kirill tries to talk Red into doing "another job." Kirill shows him an enlarged satellite image of the Zone where a blue object can be detected. It is a rare "full empty"--an "empty" alien container "full" of blue liquid. The object would fetch a healthy sum on the black market and Kirill, whose only real interest is scientific research, would love to get his hands on one.

Red reminds Kirill that he has just gotten out of prison

and has no intention of going back. He has promised his wife, Cleo, that he would give up Stalking.

After closing time, Red's friends **Goneril** and **Richard Noonan** drop by with "**Vulture**" **Burbidge**--a master stalker who Red hates. Vulture and Richard are wild with excitement. They have just returned from the Zone. Red is clearly envious of their "high"--a feeling he knows well. Vulture lays his swag out in a back room to sell to **Ernest** and Red's eyes sparkle at the goods.

RED'S HOUSEBOAT

At the end of the night, **Red returns home** to his leaky houseboat on the river. It is cold and dank. There is no heat.

He socks away the few poor coins from his nightly tips and regards a few artifacts from the Zone he has stashed away.

He gets under the covers and lies next to Cleo, asleep. He can see their breath in the cold moonlight.

A distant gunshot alarms him. He peers out where he can see the Zone. The police patrols along the perimeter are taking potshots at some poor bastard.

The next morning, Red is working again on the boat's motor, but it is hopeless. **Cleo** argues that now that Red is working again, maybe they could afford an apartment. Especially with a child on the way. Red would like to move for the sake of Cleo and the baby, but they can't afford it and the wait for a government-subsidized apartment is two years. What if they sold the boat? Red won't speak of it. Although the boat is not sea-worthy, it means everything to him. It means freedom.

Red listens to the baby in Cleo's belly. He is surprised to think he hears two heart-beats.

Red takes Cleo to **The Butcher**, a disgraced surgeon, an opioid addict. The Butcher surprises them with the news that there are not two, but four heart-beats. Quadruplets? The Butcher ominously doesn't respond...

THE ZONA BAR

Red meets with Kirill to plan their raid at midnight. Red agrees to let Tender, a young man, join them to learn the ropes. Red's rules are simply that he is to be obeyed at all times without question.

THE ZONE

Midnight. The three men enter the Zone through an abandoned apartment; a back door leads into an alley where there is a gap in the wall around the Zone.



They scurry through the alleys and streets, evading the police patrols.

As Red insists, once they enter the Zone, there is no deviating from his path.

They enter the Zone proper--**the Plague Quarter**. Inside buildings, blue flames--the glow from hell-slime in the basements--give off a pale light.

They move slowly. Red throws steel bolts ahead of them to detect "bug traps" or "gravity shears." This takes time.

Red detects something lying on the ground nearby and picks it up--a kind of small ampoule: "**black sparks**." He pockets it.

A bolt bounces unnaturally off an unseen obstacle ahead. It is a **bug-trap** that they have to go around.

An **eerie breeze** of super-heated air rumbles past, disturbing the air like like heat-waves.

They pass by the ruins of a **UNICEC helicopter**, crashed years before when an attempt was made to air-lift artifacts from the Zone.

Red is concerned about the **unnatural shadows** of a truck up ahead--although a decade old, the truck is still brand-new in appearance. Light and shadows in the Zone do not comply with natural physics.

They pass by the **corpse** of another Stalker, a friend of Red's. His body has been crushed as if by a mega-ton weight.

The **shadow of a young woman** is seen moving in the distance. She stumbles like she is blind and disappears down an alley.

Tender, the young apprentice, begins to babble nervously. Who is she? What is she doing here?

Red refuses to discuss it. Shut up. Pay attention. The Zone is alive and can sense fear.

Tender begins to **panic**. Hysterical, he starts to retreat. Kirill stops him and Red has to slap some sense into the young man.



At last they reach an apartment courtyard. A strange wind rattles the dead fronds of the trees. They can see the "full empty" lying near a wall. It burns blue. A few trash cans glow from hell-slime.

Red is concerned about some strange silver "**cobwebs**" hanging from the tree fronds. He is unsure what it is, but cautions Kirill to be careful. Red and Kirill retrieve the "full empty." It is very heavy and requires both men to carry it.

Red is horrified when Kirill stumbles into a "cob-web." He distinctly hears the cob-webs tearing from flesh.

Red examines Kirill, but finds nothing. He looks up to find the cobwebs--but doesn't see them any longer. A false alarm? A hallucination? Red is not sure there were any "cobwebs."

The Zone also is a liar.

THE ZONA BAR

The three men return to the bar for a celebration. Their elation is stratospheric. They have walked away from the precipice. Red's friends Goneril and Richard Noonan show up and the drinks flow.

In a quiet moment, Red locks himself in the bathroom and, still trembling, sobs openly at the rush of emotions.

He then uses the urinal and cringes in pain. He is alarmed to see the bowl red with blood.

The men get drunk. Ernest offers to buy the "full empty " for two thousand dollars after Kirill has examined it.

The men mock and taunt the police who stop by for a drink after their patrols.

They are like ecstatic comrades, a band of brothers who have survived the trenches together.

When Kirill suddenly drops dead.

And Red hears again in his head the "cobwebs tearing from flesh."

THE ZONE PERIMETER

At the end of the night, Goneril drives Red home. Red is too drunk to walk. As they pass by the perimeter fence, Goneril stops the car and Red gets out. He furiously throws the "black sparks" back over the fence where it explodes in a fury of "black sparks."

A police patrol accosts him and Red drunkenly tries to fight them. Goneril pulls Red away before he is arrested.

TV DOCUMENTARY CONCLUSION

The TV documentary returns with an interview with **Dr. Valentine** regarding the offspring of those who brave the Zone. There have been reports of an unusually high number of **miscarriages** among the wives and girlfriends of researchers who have entered the Zone. In fact, isn't that the main reason why investigations into the Zone have been suspended? No one has any idea what we are dealing with.

And what of the children of Stalkers? Information is difficult to come by because Stalkers are criminals who live in the shadows.

But is there any truth to the stories we hear? That their children suffer from terrible birth defects? And that some even demonstrate strange paranormal talents? That they may, in fact, be some kind of mutants...?

While in their new apartment, Red has his head pressed to Cleo's huge belly, listening to the heartbeats.

CAVEATS AND COMMENTS

Needless to say, we do not own the rights to the Strugatsky novel. We are not aware of who does own the rights. This is beyond our reach.

Of derived works, the best known is Tarkovsky's "Stalker." It is a masterpiece of poetic cinema, but it incorporates almost nothing of the original "Roadside Picnic" beyond the general concept.

Many people may be aware of the movie and novel through a series of popular video games ("S.T.A.L.K.E.R."). These games do not in the least touch on the story. Nevertheless, their popularity may help boost interest in a projected series.

There have been other adaptations of the novel, including a Soviet-era Czech TV miniseries, which was destroyed by censors.

A pilot for a "Stalker" series was developed by Alan Taylor by WGN America, but did not proceed.

The Wikipedia entry for the novel has a good synopsis and information. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roadside Picnic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roadside_Picnic)

END PITCH