

“S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Northern Passage”

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S.T.A.L.K.E.R.

NORTHERN PASSAGE

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

Honor (hon•or [on-er])

noun

1. honesty, fairness, or integrity in one's beliefs and actions
2. a source of credit or distinction
3. high respect, as for worth, merit, or rank
4. such respect manifested
5. high public esteem; fame; glory.

Prologue

May 2012

Dark Valley —Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Ukraine

Seen from an airliner flying at the safe altitude of ten thousand meters, the Exclusion Zone doesn't differ much from the lush fields and forests of the vast Ukrainian plains. Only a closer look out of the windows reveals the signs of abnormal features on the ground: forest roads leading nowhere, clearings where none should be, brown patches in the green fields.

Patrolling over the Zone at a much lower altitude, the pilots of the Mi-24 attack helicopters can make out small buildings at the end of the paths. Weirdly gnarled, leafless trees in the clearings. Clusters of vehicle wrecks.

Soldiers in the gunships know that the small buildings are abandoned villages and factories, the weird trees the only natural objects remaining amidst fields of physical anomalies, the wrecked vehicles helicopters, trucks and armored personnel carriers massed together to contain the radioactivity their rusty shells emit, even though they were contaminated back in 1986.

All avoid the center of the Zone: commercial airplanes, helicopters and military patrols alike. It is not to enshrine the memory of the thousands to have lost their lives in the wake of the Chernobyl accident, neither to leave the ghosts of the Dead City of Pripyat in peace, but for the fear of being hit by another emission of destructive energy that has turned the Exclusion Zone into a lethal wasteland of decay.

The Dark Valley has been named in a way reflecting the creepy nature of the Exclusion Zone. The irradiated marsh to its southern reaches would make good for its name alone and the sinister industrial buildings in the north even more so. Nothing reveals the true heart of darkness hidden beneath the abandoned factory on its eastern edge. Not even the crane standing in its courtyard covered with moss and vines that hang down like curtains from its rusty structure, slowly moving in the chilly wind, making it appear like ghosts in the mist. The dark factory hall holding ominous containers is nothing particular in the Zone. Neither are the bodies strewn around on the floor beyond, or the eerie glow of the emergency light over the staircase leading down to the factory vaults. Although still seeping from the gunshot wounds of one more body in the passageway where stairs lead, blood on debris-littered concrete floor is also a sight as common in the Zone as are mutants and anomalies.

It is the fear in the face of the man sitting on the floor at the dead end of the passageway that tells all about the darkness ruling over the Valley, even though he is a fearful appearance himself in his fatigue—half hazmat suit, half body-armor, tailored in a way that resembles the pressure suits of fighter pilots. Close to the hood to be within easy reach, a gas mask is fastened to his shoulders. His martial appearance is reinforced by the Beretta pistol holstered on his right limb and the shotgun fastened to his belt pushed to the side. Fear and determination blend on his face as he carves a small notch into the stock of his SGI-5k assault rifle with his combat knife, adding one more to the fifteen notches already there.

In the Exclusion Zone, anyone wearing such armor is called Stalker and a Stalker with fear on his face when approaching one of the Zone's underground vaults would be called a sane man. Sane men do fear, but have the willpower to overcome their terror and turn it into a state of constant alertness.

The dark eyes of this Stalker, set in a pale face under a receding headline and a sharp nose between them, reflect this kind of determination. Controlled fear is written all over his face as he finishes carving and reflects over the Bandits he has killed while penetrating their base in this abandoned factory. Of all his victims, now only remembered by a notch in his rifle stock, he knows only one by name: Borov.

Peeking over to the door that is the source of all his fears, the Stalker takes a deep breath. Killing more than a dozen Bandits had been a roadside picnic compared to what is waiting for him beyond the steel door, the key of which he had taken a few minutes ago from Borov's dead body.

The door has a warning sign on it.

"Oh well," the Stalker says to himself. "High voltage is probably not the only thing that's dangerous to life here."

Using the combination written on Borov's key card, he opens the code-locked door.

He peeks inside the vault, holding the assault rifle at aim and ready to shoot. He himself wouldn't know what memory or instinct makes him move like a battle-hardened commando. Right now, his failing memory is no concern. All the Stalker cares about is that no imminent danger appears in the dark corridors behind the door.

The damp vault smells like rotten earth. His Geiger counter crackles lowly.

He checks out the corridor to his right. Barely visible in the dim, orange glow of an emergency light, a dead Stalker lies between two green metal lockers. The moldy corpse is still held together by an armored suit of the same variety he is wearing, but the face under the hood betrays that this man had been dead for months.

This doesn't bid well, he thinks.

Turning back, he enters a chamber with a control board and a skeleton with its skull missing.

See, old buddy? This happens to people coming to the vaults and losing their head.

With a bitter smile on his face, he moves to the staircase leading below. As soon as he takes the first flight of steps, an echo bellows beneath like someone or something, hitting a huge metal object. A wave of ice runs down his spine. He freezes, and for a moment holds his weapon at aim, ready to shoot. Nothing moves. With cautious steps, he moves down the staircase.

His anomaly detector emits a single beep. Then his Geiger counter starts crackling. It is not the radiation warning that makes him freeze once more, but the sight of two wooden crates in the hall opening from the staircase.

Normally, no Stalker would be scared of two musty wooden boxes. But these are moving, as if lifted by an invisible hand.

Suddenly, two crates come hurtling towards him. One box hits the door frame and scatters but the other one flies directly to his head. If it weren't be for his quick reflexes causing him to bend over at the last second, his head would be in shambles now.

Damned poltergeist playing its gravity tricks. I'll give you such hell if I see you!

But poltergeists are invisible and it is with extreme caution that he enters the room. To his right, he sees a toilet—probably this must have been a resting or changing room for the scientists who had once pursued their shadowy business here. He steps inside, guided more by the subconscious desire of hiding than the hope of finding anything useful there. Water is trickling down the walls covered with green ceramic plates into the rotting toilet caps built into the floor.

How old is this place? Even in the USSR, people were using sitting toilet caps from the Nineties on.

A mirror is still hanging over the broken sink, too opaque to reflect much else than the light of his headlamp.

It's left to my imagination to judge if I look cool in this armored suit... probably I do.

A massive rectangular column is standing in the middle of the room. Judging by the brown sliding doors on one side, it must hold an elevator shaft inside. The Stalker peeks out from behind its corner and can barely pull his head back to cover when he sees another box rising from the floor. It is smashed against the elevator shaft. He glances around. The floor is

empty, save for a few fragments of concrete that have loosened themselves from the wall.

On the wall opposite to the elevator's doors he finds a steel door with a combination lock. It is tightly shut, with no chance to open it unless with the correct code—if it is still working after decades of decay.

He perks his ears as he hears a thumping noise coming from a far corner of the dark maze of corridors and laboratory rooms. It sounds as if an extremely heavy creature is walking in circles, and faintly but recognizable, the noise of intense fire burning. After a second, the sound of fire recedes. He is about to give a relieved sigh when his ears detect the flames again.

Oh no—Burner anomalies. I didn't expect a bed of roses here but Burners blocking my way is just not damn fair.

His only comfort is that where there's an alive pseudogiant, and the thumping noise must come from the heaviest mutant in the Zone, there are usually no humans around. Mutants are another thing. Some attack each other, mostly those who still have a trace of the original animal instincts inside their distorted brains – blind dogs hunting flesh, boars smashing blind dogs. The more sinister abominations are a different matter. Only a chimera would mercilessly kill any other mutant, but chimeras are as silent as they are deadly.

No. This must be a lonely pseudogiant.

He mentally curses the trader at the 100 Rads, the Stalker bar where he received this mission, for not having a better close-range weapon in his stock than a TOZ-66 with barrels sawn off and the stock removed. Slinging his assault rifle on his shoulder, he takes the shotgun. It is a woefully inaccurate weapon and reloading it takes time, but in the confined spaces of the undergrounds it is an adequate weapon against mutants.

Let's hope I don't run into a squad of Spetsnaz like I did in the Agroprom tunnels... I'd do more damage by looking angrily at them than shooting with this crap.

The Stalker knows that on the body of a dead scientist, hidden somewhere in an obscure corner where he hid from whatever had put an end to the experiments, there is the card with the code needed to open the metal door. Looking up the corridors opening from the elevator room, he chooses the one which has at least an orange emergency light still on.

Cautiously, he peeks ahead. His headlight is too weak to reveal any danger that might lie in the dark space.

Taking one more cautious step, he enters the room ahead. To his right, a container holds something that looks like a green, boiling liquid. He puts on the gas mask hanging on his shoulder. The green liquid emits a weird

glow and thick bubbles are rising from its surface. His anomaly detector remains quiet. He scans the walls, here also covered by green tiles and long, rusty pipes running along them. Reaching the light sphere of the next emergency light, he finds a few cylindrical containers with the hazmat sign painted on them. His Geiger counter starts crackling more intensely. Stepping back, he looks around but sees nothing of interest apart from an anomalous apparition in front of the containers. It looks like heat emanated by an unseen, flameless source, blurring the dark corner behind.

Okay... Nothing here.

Once back to the elevator room, he decides to try the next room to his right. The blue painting is crumbling from the walls and the brown floor tiles are covered with debris. On the ceiling, another emergency light casts its dim light behind a grill.

At least no snork will jump at me through those grills.

A sign on the wall reads, *Sanitary area ahead. Entry forbidden.* The small room ahead seems to hold nothing of interest, save for another half-dozen pipes behind an opening in the wall behind chicken wire. The Stalker is about to leave the room when he sees another corridor appear.

From an opening to the right, the strong light of intense fire falls on the faded blue wall. Further down the corridor, another column of flameless heat blurs whatever lies beyond in the darkness. It is no stranger than the fire to the right. Fire casts light, normally, but this light on the wall is moving – as if the fire casting the light is moving in circles.

The anomaly detector starts beeping. Opening the display, the Stalker sees a green circle about a few meters ahead. A dot signals an artifact right at his foot, next to a wooden crate. Without the detector, he would have stepped on it. Eagerly, he bends down, looks closer and carefully picks up the artifact that glows with fiery red light as soon as he touches it.

Stone Blood. There must be a Whirligig nearby. Shit. Why do the most dangerous anomalies create worthless artifacts?

Studying the ugly object made out of pressed together and curiously bent polymerized remnants of plants, soil, and bones, he shakes his head. The artifact is as much beneficial as harmful, speeding up his metabolism but also making his body more susceptible to any wound. It is not even precious, and all the trouble of carrying and selling it at the value of a few boxes of ammunition doesn't appear worth the effort.

Besides, my artifact containers are full—I already have two Stone Flowers and a Slime, together with a Fireball to neutralize the radiation they emit.

He puts the artifact back on the ground and is about to peer inside the room with the fire when a growl comes from the far end of the corridor. It could have been emitted from a human imitating a mutant but from a

mutant that was once human as well. Behind the blurry column, a creature appears. It is walking, or rather leaping, on all fours with the remains of a gas mask dangling from its head.

Snorks! This shotgun better not jam!

Not perceiving imminent danger from the fire room, the Stalker decides to turn the presence of an anomaly ahead to his advantage. He reaches into a container on his belt and fishes out a bolt.

“Hey! Snorky!” he taunts the mutants. “Dinner time!”

The Zone might have given snorks the ability to perform incredible leaps, and sharp teeth that could tear any human opponent into pieces once they manage to kick him off his feet with their strong legs, but left them with barely any intellect. Following only the instinct to hunt the lonely human down, they move to leap over the crates blocking their way.

The Stalker quickly throws it ahead. The column of heat immediately bursts into a jet of fire, burning the first mutant to death. The second one is luckier, though. The Stalker quickly fires both barrels of his shotgun but the mutant has already torn its claws into his armor. Sharp pain bites into his limbs. He recoils, frantically reloading the shotgun. After receiving two more buckshot shells fired from point-blank range, the snork still jolts for a second, then dies with a last growl.

The Stalker is panting now, his heart beating in his ears, and knows that with each heartbeat, more poison from the snork’s infested claws might get into his bloodstream. He reaches for the first aid kit on his belt, tears it open and applies antiseptics on his wound from where blood is trickling.

Shit! Bandage, bandage—

Moaning with pain, he quickly presses a bandage over his wound. The pain starts receding as the antiseptics’ effect kicks in and in a minute, the bandage has at least stabilized the wound.

Nothing moves in the corridor, only the fire burning in the room nearby. Peering cautiously inside from the door frame that still holds with a gutted circuit board, he sees a pile of wooden crates in the middle and an apparition that looks like a fire column moving around the room in circles. If it is a sort of mutant, it doesn’t seem too interested in attacking him. It lights up a dark corner as it moves around, illuminating the body of a dead Stalker among the debris.

That moving fire, or whatever it is, looks like trouble— it’s moving in a predictable way, though, and I could reach that body if I wanted to. On second thought, it doesn’t look worth the risk.

He throws another bolt in the direction where a small space appears between the next anomaly and the wall. Immediately, a column of fire goes up an arm’s length away. He recoils with a jump. Finally, throwing

three more bolts, he finds a zigzagging path through the three anomalies, even if it means to jump over the crates blocking the way. No matter how foreboding the next room is, he sighs with relief once he leaves the corridor behind.

More Burners loom ahead. Repeating the tedious bolt throwing to find his path through, he reaches a chamber where his search proves fruitful: a dead man lies there, wearing the orange hazmat suit of scientists. He is glad that the opaque plexiglass on the helmet spares him the sight of a head that had been decaying for many years. Quickly going through the containers on the protective suit, he finds a note, barely readable and half-eaten by mildew.

“Excellent, colleague! I’m glad that you’ve received second-level access. At last you will find out what goes on in our laboratory. Your access code is 1243. Chief of Laboratory X-18, Piotr Ilyich Kalugin.”

Stepping out from chamber, the Stalker removes his gas mask and wipes cold sweat from his face.

1243? Good God. Who is the bigger idiot? The guy using such a pathetic code or me for not being able to guess it?

For a moment, the Stalker is confused as to which of the two similarly dark corridors to take, and the barely readable pieces of paper that are fastened to a bulletin board on the nearest wall don’t give any clue. Then the fire emanating from the room lights up the two dead mutants on the far end of the corridor to the left. He takes the one to his right.

Avoiding more anomalies, he eventually finds a room with lockers still standing to his left and a broken wall section to his right. The anomaly detector beeps like mad, but the anomaly behind the broken wall section poses no danger for a moment. It seems to appear and disappear like a distortion in space, and if it wasn’t for the crumbled wall, it would just snatch and crush him in a vortex of power that would eventually explode and scatter his body parts all around. After a few more avoided anomalies and corridors turning, he soon finds himself back in the elevator room.

The combination lock still works. With an unpleasant screech, the steel door opens and reveals another staircase.

Good God, this one’s leading real deep.

After several turns, the staircase ends in a rubble of debris. A room similar to the elevator room above opens. Swiftly moving down the corridor to his right, he reaches a dead-end – one more code-locked steel door bars his way.

I’m getting weary of these stupid doors.

The Stalker decides to take the hard way and track down the source of the thumping steps. Finally, another staircase appears in the small light

circle of his headlight. The ground is shaking. He almost feels more than a few hairs on his head turning grey from horror.

On the left side of the short corridor that appears to be the lowest level of the laboratory vaults, an opening in the wall leads into a huge, wide hall. The metal door that had once been there was removed, or shattered long ago. Inside a mutant is moving up and down, like a lion in a cage. It consists of barely more than a hulk, a short, reptile-like tail and two brawny legs. Its appearance would appear grotesque, ridiculous even if its growls weren't blood curdling and the head emitting them resembling a squashed human face with the mouth and teeth of a shark.

Suddenly, the thumping steps cease. Hoping that the mutant thinks to have scared him away, the Stalker sneaks inside. He has almost reached the center of the hall, covered in complete darkness save for a few emergency lights far away from him, when the light of his headlamp suddenly illuminates the distorted face. Flashing its shark-like teeth, it stretches its legs and now towers over him, raising one leg to crush him. The vault shakes as the pseudogiant smashes his leg to the ground. The impact causes the Stalker to drop his shotgun.

Screaming with fear, he makes a desperate dash for the exit. Once back to safety, he bends forward and leans on his knees, heavily panting.

I must get into that hall.

Having caught his breath, he enters the hall once more and takes a few steps towards the metal fence that had once protected a machine resembling a huge generator. Immediately, the lumbering giant starts closing in on him.

I must lure that beast into grenade range.

The pseudogiant trots towards him but before it could crush the Stalker with its massive hulk, he is already back to the corridor, pulling the safety from a fragmentation grenade and throwing it into the hall. A groan follows the detonation and the thumping steps continue.

Peeking inside, his headlight beam falls on a red fuel drum not far from the door.

He enters the hall and yells. The mutant immediately attempts to charge him through. Swiftly, he kicks the fuel drum into the direction of the door, lets the mutant approach and just before it can reach him, he leaps out to the corridor. By the time he is outside, he has removed the safety from another grenade. He tosses it close to the fuel drum and then jumps to his belly to avoid the wave of the huge detonation. The power of the explosion shakes the underground and the deafening bang mixes with the mutant's painful roar. Two more explosions follow as the shockwave makes two more fuel barrels detonate. For a moment, it seems that the whole vault is about to collapse.

The Stalker's ears are ringing, but the pseudogiant's steps echo no more.

He picks up his shotgun from the floor and reloads it. He looks around in the hall, keeping his weapon aimed at the dark shadows of some railroad containers from where something might still jump at him. Looking up towards the emergency light in the corner, an alcove catches his attention. A few metal stairs lead up there and continue in a catwalk along the walls. It looks like a good place for someone trying to hide from a monster. If Stalker lore about the fate of Lab X-18 is true, this was exactly what happened here.

To his disappointment, the alcove holds nothing useful. The rotting Saratov refrigerator in the corner is empty, so is the tool box on a table except for some junk.

Above the box, a photograph is glued to the wall. It shows a group of people, probably the scientists who had once worked there. Though the faces are barely recognizable, they look to the Stalker like a happy party, gathered up in front of their facility on a sunny day that had passed long ago.

So this is the bunch who built this lab... I wish I could better see the faces.

Walking cautiously down the stairs, he passes by a rusting metal casing with a locked door. It emanates a low, electric buzz.

Probably a generator. That would explain why some emergency lights are still on, but I haven't the faintest idea what could make it still run after so many years.

Squeezed between a railway container and the stairs leading to a low platform, pipes protrude and connect to the floor like an inverted U, thick enough to offer a man cover. Even so, this refuge didn't save the scientist lying dead behind the pipes. Any treasure hunter would hardly consider the body wearing an orange hazmat rewarding enough for venturing this deep into the vaults, not even for the Enfield L85A1 lying next to the body, but the Stalker even emits a low cry of joy when the corpse appears in the light circle. Patting down the pockets of the hazmat suit, his search proves fruitful – a small plastic card with a number printed on it.

For a moment, he considers taking the assault rifle with him but then reminds himself of the infamous unreliability of the weapon. Even in perfect condition, the Enfield has a tendency to jam and this one had been lying on the floor of a decaying vault for years.

Maybe this hapless fellow died because the rifle jammed at the worst possible moment – like rifles usually do.

Wishing in vain he could at least de-mount the 4x scope, he eventually leaves the Enfield alone and makes his way out of the dreadful hall.

He is almost at the exit when a giant mutant's body appears in the headlamp's light beam. In a blind panic, he fires the shotgun. His guts are still wrenched by fear when he realizes that it is the mutant he had killed before.

Phew... I'm getting nervous.

Back at the code-locked door in the small corridor with a few fuel drums and crates scattered on the floor, he is about to type the combination when a noise makes his blood freeze: it sounds like some heavy object is being smashed against the door from the other side. It's almost as if a giant force is desperately trying to break through, either to escape something even more horrible than itself – or to get at him.

The noise repeats itself and with each smash, the door bulges for a moment, making dust and moldy paint whirl up from the metal.

With a throat painfully dry, the Stalker pants in fear.

A low drone comes from the direction he was coming from. Adding to his dread, he sees the fuel drums slowly go up in the damp air. He can dodge the first one when it smashes at him after a second, but his luck runs out when the second drum hits his shoulders, causing him to lose his balance and moan with pain as he falls against the door. The power inside smashes it at the same moment.

Fucking lab. Fucking mission. Fucking me for coming here!

He fires his shotgun at the drum levitating above him, as if the unseen attacker making the objects trash him would still be aiming. The shot pushes the drum a meter away, from where it smashes at him again. He feels blood on his forehead.

I must get behind that door. I must.

Kneeling, he types the code on the pad. Immediately, the door unlocks. More eager to escape the unnatural projectiles than scared of whatever is inside, he swiftly enters the room. To his relief, no monster is jumping at him inside the abandoned room that, Judging by the instrument panel fitted to the wall on the far end, must have been some sort of a control facility. Broken machines stand on the decayed floor in ankle-deep debris. They don't resemble anything the Stalker has seen or heard before.

The documents I found in Agroprom mentioned oscilloscopes and spectrometers... perhaps this is one of those? A bloody guillotine or a bathtub with a dismembered corpse inside would appear more relaxing than these things... At least of those I knew what those were.

Separated from the rest of the room by a wire fence, huge containers stand in a corner. All bear the yellow hazmat sign. To the right of the door through which he has just entered, another code-locked door appears in his headlamp's beam. This, however, is wide open and letting him peer inside a dark hall looking like a laboratory. It is even darker there, with only light

beams falling in from above, although this would be impossible to be sunlight. A machine, similar to the broken one outside, is dimly visible.

Almost relieved over the quiet that promises no mutants close by, he is about to enter the laboratory when his sight reddens and a sudden dizziness creeps into his skull. Ignoring it, he steps inside.

The light beams come from three neon tubes atop of grey sections on the wall covered with green tiles. High up on the domed ceiling, a spherical object is hanging in the middle, looking like a space satellite from the Sixties. Thick cables connect it with six cylindrical cages standing on the floor, one of them fallen over either by its fittings decayed away or while someone—or rather, something—inside was trying to break free.

Something still appears to be in the other cages. The Stalker steps closer to the next one but regrets it immediately.

An oversized human embryo hangs inside, its extremities still undeveloped or not supposed to develop, the torso ending in a vestigial reptile tail. It has the greenish-yellow color of drowned corpses. It is not the size or the deformation, and least the color, that makes him shudder but the deformed face. He knows immediately that should he ever make it out of here alive and live to tell this story, he would have no words to describe the evil radiating from this face.

The other cages hold more mutated embryos, or rather: embryonic mutants, except the fallen one.

And I thought the gulags were bad enough.

Cautiously, he raises his shotgun and enters the chamber to the left of the entrance. It leads up into a smaller laboratory with cages built into the wall, and similar cylinders to those on the floor below, except that these are empty and lined up horizontally.

Two of the wall cages, however, still hold dead mutants – they are about the size of a cat but their mummified body resembles that of a rat.

I don't know what kind of animal was made to turn into such abominations, but the word "guinea pig" wouldn't come to my mind to describe them: these beasts were not even remotely cute.

He makes his way over to the stairs on the far end of the domed hall. They lead up to a position overlooking the whole hall, as if someone wanted to witness the development of the caged species from a safe position.

As soon as he steps on the first stair, he hears a howl from above that is sounding like a wounded beast. Instinctively, he runs back and takes cover behind the fallen cage, firing his shotgun towards the glittering, blurry apparition that floats down the stairs. The glitters look like shiny eyes as it approaches the Stalker. He frantically fires his shotgun.

The entity howls again. Beams of fire spout from the floor. Moved by his instinct of survival that tells him to run away, the Stalker glances at the entrance—the door which had been wide open when he entered the laboratory is now shut.

Damn!

Hoping that his armored suit will protect him from the worst, he tries to dodge the fire jets and pellets the floating apparition with shotgun shells.

Only four shells left. God help me!

Aiming the short rifle with his right and feeling in his ammo pocket for his last two shotgun shells, he fires the weapon into the entity as it floats right next to him. Suddenly, it disappears.

Another low, humming drone starts, as if emitted by the darkness itself—audible dread creeping from the fissures and cracks of the vaults. The floor shakes and the Stalker has to grasp the cage next to him to prevent himself from falling. It doesn't help him as his vision starts to dim and he falls into a full mental black-out.

One of his recurring nightmares appears. He is standing outside of the Chernobyl Power Plant, the fence with the sign of irradiation danger softly bulging in the wind, which slowly grows into a roaring gale. He realizes it's not the wind he hears but the noise of a thousand mutated critters, exactly like those he has seen in the cages, running away from the Power Plant—if it is not the Power Plant itself emitting them like a tsunami of corruption. He raises his carbine and starts shooting at them, more in despair than the hope of stopping them, and suddenly he hears someone calling a name, a god-like voice suppressing even the howling mutants and echoing on in his aching skull.

Then it is all over. He opens his eyes and glances at his watch. Only a minute has passed.

The Stalker gets on his feet, groaning, praising his good fate for leading no hungry mutant to his body while he had been passed out.

The door is open. The power that held it shut apparently vanished with the glittering apparition he had eliminated.

Cautiously, he climbs the metal staircase leading to the observation platform.

Even more control panels are fitted to the tiled walls. Their broken instruments and rusty panels have suffered more than the grey plastic of the stone-age personal computers lined up on two long wooden tables, though the opaque glass on the monitors has long been scattered.

Next to one of them, right at the window overlooking the laboratory below, there lies a waterproof case full of papers that look like documents.

After all the perils the Stalker had to overcome to find these documents, they appear easy to take – almost too easy. He looks closer to make sure they are not booby-trapped. Cautiously, perhaps fearing that touching the dossier would release another monster or some other apparition, he reaches out for it. He has almost touched it when the monitor rises up to the ceiling and smashes at him.

Damn thing, I'll give you such a beating once I see you!

He grabs the documents and descends the stairs. For a moment, he believes that the blurry shape emitting a bluish, fuzzy tint in front of him is caused by his exhausted eyes. It moves, though, and the Stalker fires his last two shotgun shells into it. A painful moan comes out of nowhere. Shouting and cussing, he unholsters his Beretta pistol and empties a full magazine of JHP parabellum rounds inside. Something red splashes as the bullets home, then a growling moan is heard and the blurry entity takes shape of a leg-less mutant that now helplessly falls to the ground, the long arms protruding from the humanoid torso still shaking.

Sorry for not fighting you by throwing things at you, but if the Zone's not fair, why should I be?

To make sure the mutant is dead, he reloads the pistol and shoots two more rounds into the mutant's head.

No more objects start to levitate. With no imminent danger around, he hides in a corner and fishes an energy drink from his rucksack. The vicious mix of taurin, guarana extract and caffeine would not satisfy his hunger but should at least allow him to keep his edge through the way out of the vaults. The beverage tastes of very artificial strawberry flavor.

Disgusting... but if all goes well, maybe tonight I can flush it down with something better.

The Stalker allows himself for a little curiosity and starts reading the documents. Lit by his headlamp, the yellowed pages tell the story of secret experiments carried out to study the effects of psychic radiation on living cells, set up in the wake of the 1986 disaster. It's nothing entirely new to him. The scientific descriptions are beyond his understanding, but the first few pages, describing how and when the secret facility had been set up, make him cuss loudly.

"Bastards—so that's what you've been doing there all the time!"

He thinks of all that he has seen here in the Zone – the abominations and mutants in the undergrounds, friends killing each other over a precious artifact and factions over ideologies they have by now almost forgotten over ground, the crows circling in the sky and looking for a new corpse to feast on, the emissions from the Zone's far-away center when it erupts with waves of supernatural evil and devastates earth and sky alike.

How I wish this all would come to an end, or if I had power over the world to end this.

Hearing a noise, he reaches for his rifle and shoves the documents into his map container. Suddenly, a transmission crackles in his radio set.

“Base, this is Zero Three-Four, we are right above the target.”

“Roger, Zero-Three-Four. Start the action. Teams One and Two: check the first floor. Team Three: main hall. Teams Four and Five: second floor!”

He pats the earphone connected to his radio set, as if the transmission could have been caused by a malfunction.

I can't believe this, what the hell is the army doing here? All right... let's sneak out while I can.

He holsters the shotgun and unslings the assault rifle. Having fished a magazine from his ammo web, loaded with armor-piercing rounds, he reloads his main weapon. Another message comes. This one is addressed directly to him.

“Marked One! The military has attacked the Bandit base. The entrance to the Garbage is blocked but there is an old road to the south. You can use it, but you want to be careful. Good luck.”

The Stalker curses in frustration.

Damn you, Sidorovich! All this shitstorm right when I thought I was already through! Such is life in the damn Zone...

Hoping that the Spetsnaz commandos, who would surely outgun him, have not made their way down yet into the vaults and block his only exit, he hurries back to the staircase leading back to the abandoned factory. His caution displayed on the way down is paying off – all mutants appear to be eliminated and the positions of anomalies are well-known enough to him to avoid their dangers.

Once back at the entrance to the laboratory, he stops for a minute and checks his weapon. Its touch is reassuring. The sawn-off shotgun had been barely passable for fighting off the mutants. Now that he is about to be facing hostile humans, his perfectly maintained Swiss assault rifle, loaded with armor-piercing FMJ rounds capable of tearing through the Bulat and Berill armors worn by the Spetsnaz, should be a more than adequate weapon.

Timing is strange, though... probably that rascal Sidorovich or perhaps that fat trader at the Bar has sold me out to the military. No matter if I complete this mission or the military catches me on his hint: they will profit... damn traders! They always have a life insurance.

The thought of the trader double-crossing him gives him a sudden idea. Carefully, he removes the first few dozen pages from the document he had found in the lab. The thin pages are easy to take out without tearing

into the text typed on them. He puts them into an empty first aid box and hides it under a pile of rubble beneath the stairs. Nobody except for one knowing exactly where it is would ever find this stash, and the waterproof box should protect the yellowed pages from further decay.

One always needs to think forward, way forward.

The Stalker hears the faint sound of several heavy boots moving down the staircase. He pats his assault rifle with an almost affectionate touch.

I'll need a bigger stock for all the notches I'll have to carve tonight—if I make it out of here alive.

He takes a deep breath and, holding his weapon ready, cautiously begins to sneak up the stairs.

November 2014

New Zone

The most fearsome weapon of mass destruction mankind has ever known are not nuclear arms. It was the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan.

Those to decide about employing nuclear weapons are more or less reasonable minds, and their nuclear arsenal had always been maintained rather for deterrence than actual use. The Mongols however did bring devastation on every land they had conquered and the terror preceding their hordes was just a side effect. From Bamyan to Baghdad, no stronghold withstood their rage and no inhabitants were spared. The victims of atomic bombs still haunt those in possession of such weapons; Genghis Khan's warriors built pyramids from their victims' skulls for pleasure.

The small kingdoms of ancient Afghanistan made a fatal mistake when they decided to resist the Mongol invaders. After the Mongols were gone, their mighty fortresses had been reduced to rubble and the once fertile, now blood-soaked realm was a land of desolation. Moreover, legend has it that it was at the fateful stronghold of Shahr-i-Gholghola where Genghis Khan turned into the monster that history considered him to be; though why exactly this happened is only told by tribal lore, hazier and darker than any legend.

Yet the fate of this land was sealed in more recent days. Another invader came, this time for a nobler cause—at least in his own understanding, but in the locals' eyes an invader nonetheless. Those who opposed it obtained nuclear warheads from their brethren across the eastern frontier; no one knows by which means and even less so where the warheads were actually to be detonated, but after they went up in Kabul and devastated what had once been Central Afghanistan, no one really cared about ifs and whys.

Nuclear fallout was not the only consequence. Soon rumors were spreading of horrible mutations in local fauna and flora as well as mysterious physical phenomena. It was disturbing news for many, but Stalkers in the Exclusion Zone eagerly listened to another Zone apparently being created. The most daring and desperate made their way there in search of a place free from the infighting and corruption that plagued the Exclusion Zone, no matter of the perils of irradiated badlands and mutated wildlife, even if it all proved to be meaner than what they had encountered previously. Of course, they also hoped to find the equivalents of the Exclusion Zone's artifacts: small, mysterious formations worth a fortune in the outside world.

They were not alone. Tough like cockroaches, remnants of the Taliban—or dushmans, as the mostly Russian-speaking Stalkers called them—survived the self-inflicted nuclear holocaust. Soon, the Stalker pioneers not only had to survive massive, radioactive dust storms and mutant attacks but battle a new human enemy as well.

Hostile to both, a third force had nestled in the valleys of the western ranges. In the Antonov bar at now-ruined AFB Bagram, the nerve centre of Stalker presence in the New Zone, the craziest rumors circulated about the Tribe. Some Stalkers described them as vicious man-eaters and others as high-tech renegades, with neither description excluding the other. For the dushmans they were simply the devil's legions.

Only a few among either faction knew what the Tribe really was: elements of a US Marine reconnaissance battalion who, already disillusioned about how the war was conducted, came under a terrible influence beneath the City of Screams. They revolted and took matters in their own hands, carrying on a war that was supposed to be long over; but as the Tribe itself thought, the fight for honor, courage and commitment never ends and if preserving these values means to cut every tie to a corrupted homeland, so be it.

Even the greenest of Stalkers knows that radio-activity alone does not create a zone. Hence in 2014, scientists—all of them knowing the Exclusion Zone inside out—had ventured to the New Zone in order to find out what had caused such phenomena.

They perished. The Ukrainian military, desperately trying to contain the Exclusion Zone ever since it was created, picked one of its best men to lead the team that was sent to rescue the scientists. They failed, and when their commander emerged from Shahr-i-Gholghola's catacombs he found himself the only survivor. Keen to prevent a corruption worse than the Exclusion Zone from spreading, he kept what he learned in that accursed place to himself. He stayed with the Tribe which he had befriended, hiding in the New Zone where the secrets of the catacombs, known only to him and the Tribe, would remain safe.

Or so Major Mikhailo Tarasov thought.

1

East of Shahr-i-Gholghola (City of Screams), New Zone

The deer, one of the few non-carnivore mutant species, might have been a graceful creature just a few minutes ago. With a pack of jackals sinking their fangs into its still steaming intestines and tearing bloody chunks out of its flesh, it will soon become just another pile of bones

littering the wastelands. The rays of the rising sun still can't reach the bottom of the stony defile where they dragged their prey.

Suddenly, the pack's alpha raises his head and sniffs into the wind. Detecting something hostile approaching, he lets out a snarl. Following his command, the other jackals leave the deer carcass alone, no matter how hungry they might be. The muscles of their massive bodies tremble from tension under the long fur as they wait for the alpha to point out a new victim.

On a sandy ridge not far from them, a shape appears among the rocks. The sun, still low, shines directly into his face. He raises a hand to protect his eyes against the strong light, like anyone would do after the long hours of night—or one who had spent too much time in the catacombs under the ruins of Shahr-i-Gholghola. Aptly named, the City of Screams looms on the southern horizon atop of a hill, still half-covered by the dark fog that had descended at dawn.

If they could think in terms of species, the jackals would see him as human, or humanoid if taking into account the size of the unnaturally strong muscles on his body. But the mind of jackals only knows two priorities: killing, and avoiding being killed. The alpha follows his first instinct, and emits a sharp yelp. Howling, the pack storms towards the figure on the ridge.

Jackals are ferocious, but smart as well. When he gets closer to the prey, the alpha barks up, warning his pack over an adversary that might be stronger than them. If jackals had a sense of time, the alpha would know that this was the first occasion when he ever had to bark this warning.

It proves unnecessary. By the time the jackals hear it, they are already on the run. The alpha loudly growls and barks at the figure, just to keep his standing with the pack. Then he too flees, ignoring the deer carcass from which he could have taken the juiciest, fattest parts.

The figure steps to the carcass. The wind blows his ragged leather coat open and an old body armor appears beneath, its red and black Kevlar plates held together by thick wire. Once it might have matched his size perfectly, before it became too small to cover the bulging muscles on his chest, arms and limbs. His face still bears the features of a Caucasian man but the muscles on his face and his skull have also become disproportionately big, fitting the size of his massive body. If the alpha jackal, who now looks back at him from a safe distance, had any understanding of the matters of humans—even if this one is not entirely human anymore—he would recognize in the red and black Kevlar plates of the ruined armor the colors of Duty, a group of humans founded to get the world rid of mutants like them. He might also see the long leather jacket as the signature outfit of Bandits, meaning either that Duty has

failed, or he himself decided to leave them and become a renegade. However, no one could tell how this human became what he now is.

He kneels down and, using his hands, starts tearing out meat chunks from the carcass, greedily chewing on what the jackals have left behind.

Watching him from not afar, the alpha licks its drooling snout. The pack gathers around him, staring at the half-human who is devouring the prey that they had so well deserved. Not even the alpha would approach this figure, who might have the worst, or maybe the best, of humans and mutants united in his disfigured body. Not as if there was a way for them to find out. Jackals are smart, but don't know the difference between good and evil. This is probably the only thing they have in common with many humans.

As he leans over his feast, a small Orthodox cross falls from under the leather jacket, hanging on a golden chain. The half-mutant, or half-human, pushes it back behind the Kevlar plates as to not disturb him in devouring the next bloody chunk of meat.

Another shape, similar to his, appears on the ridge. He looks up, with a sinewy meat chunk in his mouth, and signals the other one to approach. This one is clearly a mutant, despite the rags barely covering its hulk which might have been a Zone Stalker's armor long time ago.

A drop of saliva falls from the alpha's snout. He swallows hungrily and yelps. Then he and his disappointed pack move towards the rising sun in search of another prey.

2

SBU Headquarters (Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukraini/Security Service of Ukraine), 33 Volodymyrska Street, Kiev

Captain Dmitry Maksimenko had once been the most handsome officer in the Ukrainian special forces. Not that it mattered much for his comrades, but all the more so for the female cadets in officers' school, who enjoyed any lecture given by the tall and brawny soldier with striking blue eyes, be it in the classroom or an unused chamber close to their dormitory. Now, with a mutant's claws having disfigured his torso where once a perfect six-pack was, and one of his striking blue eyes lost to a mercenary's knife and its empty hole covered by a black patch, Captain Maksimenko's only charm is his impeccably ironed uniform and spotless shoes with hard leather soles, which loudly echo at each step he takes in one of the SBU headquarters' endless, white-painted corridors.

No matter of his once-great looks, Captain Maksimenko drew most of his charisma from being the commander of a famed spec-ops division of

the SBU, call sign Search Two. Even a fraction of what he was allowed to disclose about his missions to the secret laboratories in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone was enough to make Spetsnaz rookies shudder and female cadets get moist.

But now, as he stops at the end of the corridor in front of a white, bullet- and fire-proof door, he nervously looks into a window and looking at his reflection, checks his tie and bird-nest officer's cap. His hand on the copper door knob, he takes a deep breath as if he were about to enter a mutant's lair. Then he clears his throat and opens the door without knocking.

"Captain Maksimenko here to see Colonel Kruchelnikov."

Either it's the effect of the still steaming coffee in the elderly secretary's cup or the faded remains of the captain's virile beauty, she smiles at him. With her fat finger, she adjusts a strand of dyed blonde hair behind her ear. In the reflection of a glassed-in cabinet behind the secretary's desk, Maksimenko sees that she has the orange and blue interface of Odnoklassniki open on the screen, the Russian version of Facebook.

"You are to go in at once, Captain," she replies and jerks her head towards the door on the other side of the room. The strand of hair again starts misbehaving.

For a moment, Maksimenko wonders why a man like Colonel V.M. Kruchelnikov, the commander of all of Ukraine's special forces from embassy guards to elite Spetsnaz units, doesn't have a better-looking secretary. But then it comes to his mind that the SBU's prettier female employees have more challenging, and probably more pleasant jobs to do than sitting behind a desk and chatting.

Maksimenko's heels clack as he performs a perfect salute in the colonel's office.

"Dobroho ranku, tovaryshu polkovnyk! Captain Maksimenko reporting as ordered."

Colonel Kruchelnikov is standing at a window overlooking Volodymyrska Street with the heavy Friday morning traffic below.

"Shut the door, Captain," he replies. After a minute he adds, "Sit."

Maksimenko has an uneasy feeling as he sits down in the leather chair in front of the colonel's oversized oaken desk. He stares at his superior's back, broad shoulders and gray hair, cut down to stubs. The noise of the street below is muted by the bullet-proof window glass. All he can hear is a faint, scraping and screeching noise of a metal spoon squeezing a lemon in a cup of tea.

"I guess you know why I wanted to talk to you, Captain?" the colonel asks.

Maksimenko clears his throat. "My promotion is overdue."

"Indeed. We haven't forgotten what you did during Project Truth in 2012, before Strelok messed everything up."

The colonel is still standing with his back to Maksimenko, stirring the tea. The screeching sneaks into the captain's brain and he can barely suppress the feeling of ants crawling along his spine. He would sooner prefer the roar of an attacking bloodsucker.

"It was... an exciting mission," he says.

"By any means, you should be a major by now."

"I... based on my years of service..."

The colonel turns around and gives the captain a piercing look from his cold grey eyes.

"Sorry to say that promotions are not as easily given as some half-renegade officers think."

Maksimenko swallows before asking his question. "Does the Service doubt my loyalty?"

Kruchelnikov's mouth eases into something like a smile. "I was meaning Degtyarev and the promotion he gave to a certain... anyway, I didn't approve of it but that's none of your business."

"If you allow me to mention it, sir, I thought maybe I was assigned to desk and training duties because of my injury... but I am still a crack shot using my right eye! First I was left out from the siege of the CNPP, then Operation Fairway too, while another captain..."

His superior abruptly interrupts him. "I get your meaning but you'd better be thankful for missing out on those operations. Rest assured, the Service still counts on you. That is, unless the time spent as a lecturer in officer's school have softened you too much for a new assignment."

Maksimenko protests. "No, absolutely not!"

"Indeed, I heard that your lectures about... hardness and deep penetration tactics were quite popular with female cadets. Now, if you're for once willing to lubricate your way up the career path instead of female cadets' clits, maybe your time has come."

"I am listening," Maksimenko replies with a blush.

Colonel Kruchelnikov takes a red folder from a folder in his desk and shows a photograph to Maksimenko.

"He is your objective."

Taking the picture from the colonel's hairy fingers, Maksimenko tilts back in his chair. The colonel notices his surprise with amusement. "It seems you know this man, Captain."

"Everybody knows him, sir. He's a hero... a legend actually!"

"Keep your enthusiasm low. Seen from our perspective he's a loose cannon. He did perform valuable services but that's in the past. Frankly,

trusting him was one of the biggest mistakes this Service has ever made.” The colonel opens a small wooden box on his desk. “A Cohiba, Captain?”

“Thank you, sir,” Maksimenko says accepting the cigar. “With pleasure, sir.”

“Do you like cigars?”

“I actually do, sir. But—with all due respect, I think Major Degtyarev might be better qualified for this mission than I am.”

The colonel moves around his desk and lets himself half-way sit on it.

“Top brass wants to leave Degtyarev out of this,” he says fishing a box of matches from his pocket, “and I couldn’t approve more. Personal connections cloud proper judgment. It happened to him in the past but won’t happen in the future. Not during this operation.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Besides,” Kruchelnikov adds lighting his own cigar, “Degtyarev has been assigned to an undercover operation.”

Kruchelnikov ignites another match. Maksimenko moves closer to reach the burning match but it remains an inch too far from him, as if the colonel would hold it deliberately away. Maksimenko stiffens in this awkward position. The colonel leans closer and lowers his voice.

“Your target went off the radar but you are to find and bring him back. You probably guess it’s about intel he refused to share with us.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin looking for him, sir.”

“You can start by offering a few days of extra leave and a little cash to your grunts or anyone who leads him to you... but that will not likely help you much. For God’s sake, your file says you’re a resourceful officer, Maksimenko. Could the Service be wrong about you? Find him.”

Maksimenko stares at the match, now halfway burnt, its small flame licking the skin on the colonel’s palm and fingers. Not as much as an eyelid stirs on Kruchelnikov’s face.

“I—I think I know of a way to do that,” he whispers.

Colonel Kruchelnikov’s thin lips jerk into the triumphant grin of a wolf closing in on its prey. He pats Maksimenko’s arm.

“That’s my boy.”

His hand holding the match moves an inch closer. Before it extinguishes between his burnt fingers, the last flicker of the match lights up the captain’s Cohiba.

A bitter taste runs down Captain Maksimenko’s palate as he draws on the cigar.

3

Junkie den somewhere between Imperial Highway and Firestone Boulevard, South Central Los Angeles

In a decrepit house smelling of trash and decay, a lonely candle burns. Only the hands of the man scrawling into a tattered notice block are visible in its light. The barely legible scribble tells of despair, the shaking fingers of drug deprivation.

I need more pain.

Darkness outside as if the world were gone. I'm alone while Nelly sleeps. I can't.

Darkness keeping me imprisoned, dragging on day by day trapped in myself with my body as my shackles. Life has taken my sight and soul, let me live in hell.

Nelly is sleeping. She's leaving me, cheating on me with her dreams. She has to, can't blame her for it. She's happier in her dreams. But I—I can't sleep, can't dream. Keep my eyes open – filth and dirt is all I see. Close my eyes—nightmares is all I get. Nelly is dancing, singing, flying in her dreams. She is dreaming of being an angel now. I don't mind her cheating on me with angels. I love her. She may be gang-banged by an army of angels or God itself if that pleases her, I don't care. I am not jealous anymore. I love her and envy her for her freedom.

That's all I got out of my life; a mother dead, a father a monster, I'll get over them and myself too, don't give a fuck about anyone including me—especially me. Time goes so slow when all I have to do is sit around and wait to die. I'm like an animal trapped, trying to move away, one leg in the trap, cutting into my flesh with only the pain reminding me that I am still alive. I need that pain.

Nelly needs to fly and reach the skies. She only made one mistake: hooking up with me. But now she is free in her dreams of rainbows in a sky washed pure by rain.

Rain, rain, rain. It goes into the sewers and into the ocean. As a little kid I always dreamt of swimming in the ocean. I don't want to swim the ocean anymore, not fighting tides anymore. I just want to die. Or have at least a taste of it—for a starter.

Where is Sancho? When is that motherfucking son of a bitch of a latrino hauling his chili-shitting ass here? Fuck fuck fuck! It's almost midnight and he was supposed to be here hours ago! Damn border nigger. DAMN PIG. PIG!

Okay, okay— soon. Soon he will be here. He must come or—I don't know.

Father always told me, life is a hard game to play but he didn't tell me that I was gonna lose it anyway. I need the pain. I need to know I'm still alive, my willpower a lose circuit in my brain. How long I have tried to kill it away?

If only I could start it over. If only my fucking eye was a restart button for my life, I'd poke it till I go blind and feel my way out of myself. But I need to know I still live. I need the sting, the sweetest kiss I've ever knew. Nelly knows it. She understands, and that's the only thing we ever fought over. But she is sleeping now. Guess I'll have to scratch messages on the window which no one will ever read with raindrops flowing on the glass, could be God's tears but to me they are Gods own vomit pouring on this abandoned street and me watching it. Long time we gave up on each other, God and me.

I can't bear this any longer.

WHEN IS MY FUCKING FIX COMING?! Screw you, Sancho! SANCHO!

Come. Please, come soon my friend. Por favor.

4

Close to the City of Screams, New Zone

Not long ago, a battle raged among the ruins of the City of Screams. Probably no one would come to this place for a long time, save for mutants and crows to feast on the decomposing bodies which still litter the rocky hill. The half-mutant Stalker, however, came here for a reason different than food.

The main entrance, dug out with months of heavy labor, had been blown shut. It was at night when he crawled out through the tight passage on the northern side of the hill. On his return, he would have never found it again if it hadn't been for his sense of smell. The stench of moldy walls and damp tunnels was overpowering, carried in the fresh, pure wind blowing from the mountains to the west.

Nothing was to be found beneath the ruins. It was looted before, and what wasn't looted was useless junk. But loot was not on his mind when he squeezed his body through the tight entrance. He himself couldn't tell

what had made him to enter that place once more. For hours or even days he had scouted the bunker system, descending all the way to the deepest levels through air shafts that not even the bravest human would have dared to enter. But where his human half would have made him run from the perils and claustrophobia, his new instincts stepped in. He rejoiced at the sensation of not being blind in the gloom like a human would; his sight got gradually used to the dim that his oversensitive eyes had turned the darkness. His reason of being there only became clear to him when he stumbled on a humanoid figure, resembling himself except for the size. The wounded mutant first moved to attack him but then reconsidered. Maybe it was because of the truly non-human feature of mutants of not killing another one of their own species without good reason, or from the shotgun-inflicted wounds making it incapable of delivering a deadly attack. He had no reason not to use one of his medikits to patch the mutant up and lead it back to the light; neither had he any reason to doubt that humans, if approached in a cautious and peaceful manner, would offer him help.

Being close to the humanoid, he became conscious of one more mutant feature. When he approached it and was about to take a pull from his field flask, he *sensed* the mutant's thirst. After sharing his water with it, he sensed a feeling that could go for gratitude. He realized that if he dumbed down his thoughts to the essential, the slow-witted mutant could understand him and vice versa, he could perceive its thoughts as well. He attributed this rudimentary telepathy to his companion being humanoid, and was sure that the more sophisticated a mutant is, maybe the closer to humans, the more sophisticated such mental communication could be. The human in him rejoiced of the thought of sharing this discovery with other humans—it offered more insight into mutant nature than the scientists could only dream about.

However, when they were closing in on the roadblock before the Stalker base at Ghorband and a dozen automatic rifles and shotguns opened fire on them, all his hopes were shattered. His protégé had taken the worst of the brunt and seeing it die the night after in a cave where they took shelter was hard on him.

When death came to his companion, at the time when a human would have probably shared the location of a secret stash or muttered cheesy last words about his lost love or mother, the mutant's thought went back to the beginning of the life it could remember; while what and who it was before becoming a mutant remained obscure, it was clear where its life as a mutant had started—and it wasn't the City of Screams. What he concluded from the hazy thoughts was alarming for his human and comforting for his mutant half.

The mutant didn't mean much to him, but his loneliness and the disappointment did. The New Zone can despair even a well-equipped and resolute group of humans; how more dreadful it is to someone who is not only alone in its wilderness but stuck between the world of mutants and humans as well.

He knew that with his body becoming halfway, and his perception almost fully that of a mutant, he could understand more about the New Zone's non-human dwellers than anyone else. The human part of him longed for other humans who, although more incalculable than mutants with their moral weakness, treachery, greed and cruelty, at least offered a chance to react to less evil approaches in the same way—to friendship with friendship, helpfulness with helpfulness, love with love. No matter how the experience at Ghorband had devastated any such hopes, something inside still kept telling him that there was still a way to find his path back to humans, somehow making them overcome the fact that he was now very, very different from them.

It was a long night, and at dawn a dust storm was ravaging in the wilderness, even prolonging the hours of darkness. But by the time he could leave the cave he had made up his mind. The night and dawn were long enough to go through the stations of life – first being bullied in school for speaking the wrong language, then fighting the same children who bullied him and were now hostile soldiers in a bloody civil war, his homeland being united with the country from where it was once torn away for the sake of greater politics and only to be looked upon suspiciously and once more bullied for being different, even if he approached them as his brothers. His wounds acquired during the fight were less important to those people than the accent which he spoke their language, no matter that it was his mother tongue too.

Disappointed with the bitterness that victory had yielded, let alone the rise of people who justified their power with a war in which they never shed their own blood, he recalled a Ukrainian mercenary's words spoken at a long-forgotten campfire. Soon, he made to his way to the Exclusion Zone, first trying to carve out a living from artifact hunting like all Loners, then joining the ranks of Duty. First, it appeared a bunch of men similarly minded: longing for a reason to live, and having scores to settle with life, all the calamities of which they project on their enemies – be it mutants, anomalies or Stalkers from hostile factions. The human enemies were very much like Duty but looking at the same things from a different angle. He didn't waste much time thinking about which point of view was wrong or right; a hostile fighter was an enemy good enough for the single reason of being called a hostile. Such cynicism can wear off soon, though, and he soon found himself fed up with being told what to do and whom to shoot

at, and when word came of a New Zone having happened in what was once Afghanistan, he was among the first to defect.

Although the wasteland was bigger and the mutants meaner, the newly arrived Stalkers were of the same lot he'd met and got bored of in the Exclusion Zone. No wonder that in the word S.T.A.L.K.E.R. no letter stood for something positive – like, for example, S for sidekick, T for trusty, A for ally and so on. When eventually a Duty officer calling himself Captain Bone arrived and took matters into his own hand at the Stalker base at Bagram, he had enough of the New Zone as well.

The only way to escape now was stepping over his moral boundaries and he soon found himself at Captain Bone's mercy over killing one of his men. Then, out of the New Zone's cobalt-blue sky, a squad of Ukrainian Spetsnaz arrived, following their very own agenda. He had assisted them because their priorities temporarily coincided with his own. He helped them survive an attack by the dushmans, the remains of the Taliban. Turned half-mad by badly cured radiation sickness and a primordial hate of everything that wasn't on their side, they tried to wrestle Bagram from the Stalkers. Then he assisted their leader, a spec-ops major who appeared very self-confident in the beginning and ended up a broken but wiser individual in the end, to get into the catacombs beneath the City of Screams.

It was his disillusionment, his hatred of human treachery and egoism that made him abandon the small group and follow the tracks of one of the few friends he had, maybe proving to himself by his own sacrifice that people can stay loyal to each other despite the direst odds. His efforts were in vain, however, and by the time he emerged to the surface after hours or days of going through hell, he was alone. He was frightened of his own visage when he saw his reflection in a waterhole. Whatever evil lays beneath the ancient desert citadel, it had partly turned him into a mutant. His senses were sharper, his body stronger, but his mind in despair.

When the dust storm was over and he could leave his refuge, a look over the New Zone bathing in the new day's light—the sandy plains to the south, the snow-capped mountains to the west and north, the jagged hills with deep green valleys to their feet to the east—had been enough for him to make up his mind. He knew he belonged here, and there was no other place to go for starting his life over. It was here in this deadly but beautiful wilderness that he had to find a new meaning for his life: to purify this land from humans. Not by his own hands and murder, but their primordial flaws: hatred and greed.

The mutant in him said: *humans are easy to fool. All they need is a good excuse for hating each other.*

The human in him replied: *if we hate each other, we will kill each other.*

And he himself summed it up: *I will fool you all into killing each other.*

His ego however, squeezed between his mutant and human self, kept whispering a question: *what about you?* He ignored the question or perhaps it was the wind that made him not hear it, blowing his ragged leather coat and swirling up dust in his steps as he set out on his way to the east.

He knew that in order to fulfill his plan, he would need a veritable army of mutants.

5

Florencia gang territory – South Central Los Angeles

On a dark corner somewhere in the ganglands between Imperial Highway and Firestone Boulevard, illuminated only by a half-broken neon sign flickering every few minutes, a girl is standing next to a black Jeep Liberty. Wearing a long brown Gore-Tex coat with the hood pulled over her head, she looks upwards into the rain, letting the raindrops splash on her face, seemingly oblivious to the chilly wind and the three men who have been darting suspicious looks toward her from the other side of the street for the past five minutes. She continues to ignore them even when they cross the street and slowly walk up to her.

“Look at that, *mano*,” one of them says, “who do we have here?”

“A little girl and a rented car,” another replies glancing at the car’s license plate and the Alamo bumper sticker. “A lost tourist, here? I don’t believe my eyes!”

He rubs his eyes and forehead that bears a tattoo reading FLORENCIA. The visible part of his neck over the black leather jacket shows the same tattoo in much bolder letters.

“Hey *puta*, you lost?”

The girl still stands with her face against the rain, her back against the car. She doesn’t look at the three men who now form a semi-circle around her.

“No. I am not lost,” she calmly replies with a strange, melodic accent and licks a thick raindrop off her lips as if it were the sweetest thing on earth.

“Then what are you doing in our street?” the first man demands, raising his tone. “Think you’ll grow tall if standing in the rain like that?”

The other two laugh and high-five each other.

"Don't be too hard on her, *mano*," says the third one, who is the shortest of the three and bears a long scar on his cheek. "She might just give us what we want if we ask her nicely."

The tattooed man steps closer to her.

"We don't like strangers here. This is our street. You can only stay for a price."

"And what would price be?" she asks.

Now all three thugs laugh. "What do you think? On your knees, *puta!*"

Now she looks at them, but the hood is still covering most of her face. "Please, leave me alone. I want to enjoy rain."

"I'll give you such a rain on your face... *¡Una lluvia blanca!*" The tattooed one laughs. "*Esta es una jeva súper buena, manos!*"

"There is not much rain where I come from," the girl quietly says. "Please, let me just enjoy it."

"Where do you come from, huh? Nevada?"

"I am from Tribe."

The tattooed one looks at his companions. "Tribe? You ever heard about them?"

They shake their heads.

"Anyways, this crazy girl is beginning to annoy me," he snorts. "No *puta* walks into a street owned by Florencia and leaves without paying a price... especially if she's hot like this one!"

"You are right, tattooed man," she says, "I might burn you."

"We shouldn't do this," the short one interjects. "We are to stay put until Sancho is finished doing business with that junkie."

But lust has overcome the tattooed one. He takes one step closer to the girl and unzips his pants, grinning.

"*Mano*, shut the fuck up and hold her down!"

A collapsible knife appears in his hand.

"Your last chance to keep your face pretty," he says. "Kneel by yourself or we'll make you."

The two men step closer to grab her. The broken neon sign lights up for a second and casts a flickering blue light on the girl's face. Aghast, the short man who was about grabbing her right arm takes a step back.

"*¡Hija de su!*" he yells. "Look at her face! What scar is that?"

"I don't need no *mamacita* for a *cogida*," the tattooed man says opening the knife. "*¡El primer turno es mío, manos!*"

"Your knife is very small," the girl calmly says. She appears to smile under her hood.

"*Ahora me estás encabronando*," the tattooed man snarls and stabs towards her chest.

The stab cuts into empty air as the girl ducks with lightning speed. The neon light flashes on a curved blade in her hand and her attacker falls to his knees with a yelp of pain. His knife falls to the ground as he grasps at his stomach. Blood is streaming between his fingers.

A drop of blood trickles from his mouth as he whispers, his eyes wide open from surprise and pain. “*Maldita bestia... ¡Vete a la chingada...!*”

A curse is the last that escapes his lips as the girl, still ducking, thrusts the blade upwards and slashes his throat in another quick, arched movement.

During the few seconds that it took for their leader to get killed, the two other thugs stand petrified, staring at the girl’s blade that now glimmers with a red glow.

Now they too move in. The one to her left draws a Beretta from his belt but not quickly enough to have time to fire the pistol. The girl swiftly steps aside and her glowing blade flashes once more in the neon light. The Beretta falls to the ground, together with the hand still holding it. Ducking once more, she evades the swing of a baseball bat. The short thug wielding it freezes and a heavy rattle comes from his mouth. Then blood begins to stream down his neck to his chest where the blade went in so deep that only the hilt stands out.

The girl removes the blade, leaving her last attacker to collapse. She kneels down to the body of the now handleless man who still writhes on the ground in agonizing pain.

“*Me duele demasiado,*” he yelps. “*¡Me quema!*”

She replies with a smile. “Sorry, but I don’t speak that language.”

“It burns, burns! It hurts too much!”

“Of course it burns,” she replies, tenderly closing his eyelids. She keeps her hand over the thug’s closed eyes while slowly pushing the blade into his heart. “I told you so.”

The girl waits a few minutes until the body’s hands and legs stop jolting, then pulls the glowing blade from the dead man’s chest and wipes it clean in his leather jacket. Hiding the weapon under her coat, she stays and holds her open palms forward to let the rain wash the blood off her hands.

A faint whizz comes from the car as the driver’s window goes down. A hand reaches out and tosses the wrapper of a double quarter pounder with cheese to the ground.

“Damned LA, crawling with all this *cholo* street gang scum,” says a hoarse male voice inside. “The big man should’ve sent Lieutenant Ramirez here, not me. You all right, Nooria?”

“No need to worry, Top.”

“If I’d been worried about you for a second, those whackos would’ve been dead before crossing the street,” the man inside the car says. Then he adds in a fatherly fashion, “Don’t catch a cold out there!”

“We have to wait long?”

“Hope not. By now Mikhailo should have found the house where the big man’s son is supposed to be.”

6

Rundown residential area, Baseyna Boulevard, Kiev

The evening before, the pair of silk stockings, the short dress and the black lingerie might have been a woman’s deadly arsenal of sex appeal. Now, strewn around the floor of a shabby apartment in a drab, Stalin-era house, they are just an untidy mess. Even so, they tell of an owner who might be a well-paid young woman with a more sophisticated taste than most of the girls filling Kiev’s night clubs on a Saturday night. Even the obviously fake Luis Vuitton bag that lies next to the bed looks stylish and well-chosen to the rest of the outfit. All this looks as if a better-off but very intoxicated girl had ended up in a place way below the standards what she had gone for if sober.

The twenty-something girl in the bed, who is resting her head on the chest of a rugged-faced man, doesn’t seem to care. She lies there with eyes half-closed, her face telling of her being satisfied in every possible way, enjoying how the man caresses her head, playing with her long, red-brown hair, though his wrinkles and baggy eyes tell of an exhaustion other than bodily.

The girl stirs. She reaches for the blanket and pulls it over herself, covering her pierced belly and stunning breasts where the early morning chill has hardened the nipples. Then she cuddles closer to him, stroking his robust chest with her long fingernails.

He looks at his wristwatch which is the only thing he’s wearing and yawns. He reaches for a small vial, opens it and lets half dozen pills to his tongue. Then he gets a half-empty bottle of vodka from under his pillow and draws a long swig. He sighs; a minute later, his face becomes more relaxed.

“What does this mean?” she asks, letting her fingers run up to a tattooed word on his right forearm, made up from seven letters with periods in between.

“What do you guess, Dashenka?” he asks back. The words might be tender, but his voice is that of someone being mentally far away.

“Is it about you?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” she says gently caressing the tattoo, “I’d say— it means Sexy, Tender, Adorable, Lustful, Kinky, Erotic and... Racy.”

The man laughs dryly. “Kinky?”

“I noticed gas masks in your closet,” she replies. “I guess you collect them? You wear them when no one else can see you, don’t you?”

“Sometimes.”

“And all the things you did to me last night? That was more than kinky, actually...”

“You asked for it.”

“And you enjoyed it.” She takes a box of Eve Slims from her bag and lights up two cigarettes, putting one into the man’s mouth. “Stalker—is that your nickname?”

“It’s more like a life sentence,” he replies exhaling the smoke.

“You are a mysterious man... but that’s all right. I love that.”

“You’re lying,” he says with a sudden cold in his voice.

The girl frowns. “Why would I lie to you?”

“Because you’re a fucking *prostitutka*.”

All tenderness vanishes from the girl’s pretty face. She jumps off the bed and begins to swiftly collect her clothes.

“And you’re a jerk! How can you treat a woman like this?”

“Get out of here, *kurvo*!”

Cursing, the girl quickly gets dressed, grabs her fake Louis Vuitton handbag and hurries to the door where she turns back to face him once more. She looks humiliated and sad.

“You still owe me five hundred for swallowing it!”

“*Poshli!*,” he shouts back angrily.

Her brown eyes are now flashing with anger. “I won’t leave until you pay my price, *baistrukh!*”

The man gets up and takes a wallet from the floor. “Here’s your fucking money! Get it!”

He tosses a bundle of paper notes into the girl’s face. The money rains to the ground. Greedily, she gets to her knees and starts collecting it.

“That’s right, that’s right... seek it baby! Why don’t you smell it? You look like a dog sniffing for bones... want more?” He tosses even more money around. “Get it, doggie! Get it all! Almost three years in the fucking Zone, living in the dirt on food even a dog wouldn’t eat, killed hundreds, dug up secrets, sold them to the Motherland – and this is what I get!”

He screams with his face red from rage and kicks an empty vodka bottle. It flies to the wall where it breaks, covering the dirty carpet with glass splinters around the girl who is still picking up bank notes. “Look at me, bitch! Look at me! I was a master! I had guns! Missions! And now

only booze, whores and cockroaches in this shithole! That's what's left of me!"

He holds his forehead, gasping for air and recoils to the bed where he finally sits down, burying his face in his hands and sobbing.

The girl looks up from the floor and then gets to her feet. Quickly, she ties her loose hair into a long ponytail and wipes off her ruined make-up that is now mixed up with tears from humiliation. With her hair removed from the face and neck, her skin reveals marks of a recent beating.

She has already opened the door when she turns back and looks at the sobbing man.

"You are too low for me to rip you off," she says. "You aren't okay, you know that? I'll tell all the girls how fucked up you are. Here, fuck your money..."

She takes a five-hundred hryvnya note from the bundle of money she picked up and puts the rest onto the table. Carefully, she puts the ashtray on the notes to prevent the sudden draught from blowing them away.

"You poor, pathetic bastard," she says stepping out of the apartment, "you don't deserve me. No, not even a *prostitutka*. You are a low-life. I'll go to my church now and light a candle for you. May the *Bogoroditsa* give you a good death. *Schastлива, Stalker!*"

He hears her making a phone call as she walks down the corridor outside, but she is too far now for him to make out what she's talking about. The sound of her stiletto heels echoes as she descends the stairs, then dies off.

The man staggers to his feet and closes the door. He rubs his hands; the open door let the November chill inside.

He lights up a cigarette at the window and looks out to the empty street to have a last glimpse of the body that he had owned until his latest uncontrollable outbreak of rage.

He opens the window.

"Dasha!" he shouts, leaning out into the chilly air outside. "Come back! You are right, yes, how about that? I am pathetic! I don't deserve to live but I do! I ought to be dead long ago but I'm not! Ask your damned *Bogoroditsa* how this can be! Dasha! Come back!"

No matter how far he leans out and where he looks on the deserted street below, the hooker called Dasha is nowhere to be seen.

He hears a knock on the door and releases a sigh of relief.

"Wait! I clean up the splinters and let you in, wait a minute!"

He quickly starts picking up the pieces of the broken bottle. The knock on the door intensifies. He curses as a splinter cuts his palm. Carefully avoiding the mess on the ground, he steps to the door and, with an instinct

for precaution, looks through the peeping hole. It's the girl standing outside, appearing nervous.

"Dasha, *dorogaya*, how good that—"

The door is barely ajar when it swings full open, hitting him in the face and sending him to the floor. A sharp pain pierces into his skull and for a moment he sees nothing but stars dancing behind his eyelids. Glass splinters break under heavy boots. Four strong hands grab and turn him backside up and then quickly cuff his hands. He is manhandled and forcefully seated on the bed. With eyes still blurred from pain, he sees two heavily armed Spetsnaz commandos towering over him.

"What are the charges?" he mumbles.

Dasha enters the room, her face now looking down on him with such a scornful look that would make any man feel like a pile of dog crap. She steps aside to make way for an SBU officer wearing a black raincoat over his uniform. An eye patch covers his left eye.

"Hello, Strelok!" Looking around in the messy room, the officer slowly shakes his head. "What a damned shame to see you like this, Marked One."

"Your damned bloodhounds broke my nose, Captain Maksimenko!"

"That's what usually happens to unusually long noses poking into the Service's business."

"What am I charged with today?"

Dasha steps forward. "Can I have a word with him, *komandir*?"

"Suit yourself," Maksimenko courteously replies and moves aside.

"This is for abusing women in general," Dasha says and gives Strelok a big slap, "and that's for raising a hand on me in particular." The second slap makes the man called Strelok yelp with pain.

"That's enough, Agent Fedorka!"

"*Komandir*, dealing with this lowlife was both below my dignity and above my pay grade!"

Strelok wobbles his head. "Below pay grade? Oh, *that's* why you charged two thousand up front and then another five hundred for the lousiest blowjob I ever had!"

"Fuck you!"

Dasha, or better Agent Fedorka raises her hand to slap him once more but the captain quickly grabs her hand before she could strike Strelok's devastated face once more. "Is that true, Agent?"

"Of course not, *komandir*! He's lying! All his money is on the table, I didn't even touch it!"

"Wrong answer. The captain asked if your lovemaking skills really suck, Dashenka," Strelok says with a grin on his bloodied face.

"Confirmed."

“He is a liar, *komandir!*”

“You call me a liar, *suka?*” Strelok says trying to move his shoulder close enough to his nose to wipe off the blood. “I just happen to keep a lie detector in that cupboard over there. Looks like a Geiger counter and is one actually. Captain, take a measurement of the money on the table and then of Dasha’s purse. If the Geiger doesn’t tick higher, she can call me a liar.”

Suddenly, Agent Fedorka’s pretty face turns pale. She quickly fishes her wallet from her bag and tosses it to the floor, stepping away from it.

“Don’t worry, *dorogaya*, it’s not even remotely dangerous. Captain Maksimenko, why does your agent take me for a complete idiot?”

Agent Fedorka gives him a murderous glare but Maksimenko shows her out of the room.

“We’ll need to have a chat about this later, Fedorka. Go, get yourself patched up in the operation car,” he tells her. “On behalf of a grateful Motherland, thank you for your sacrifice.”

Maksimenko turns to the two commandos.

“And you, Vlasov— wipe that grin off your face or I’ll get you posted to the Exclusion Zone for the rest of your contract time!”

“*Yest, komandir!*” the apparently senior Spetsnaz quickly replies.

“Release him. I’ll handle Strelok myself from here on. Wait for me outside.”

With one of his hands held to his still bleeding nose, Strelok sways to the bathroom and splashes water to his face. Keeping a close eye on him and with one hand on his holstered Fort-15 pistol out of precaution, Maksimenko reaches for a towel lying on the bed. Before tossing it to Strelok, he smells at it.

“Envy by Gucci,” he says deeply inhaling the scent emanating from the fabric, “and a bit of moist pussy. Excellent mix.”

“You bet,” Strelok replies, sobbing and wiping more blood from his broken nose.

“Does she really suck in... performing her duty?”

“What’s your guess?”

“You lucky bastard. Did you really beat her?”

Strelok bows his head, shunning the captain’s eye.

“You’re one lucky son of a bitch, Strelok. Had this happened with her off duty you’d be worried about more than just a broken nose. Fedorka has a black belt in kyokushinkai karate—”

“That explains her sporty body. Good God, one has to love those thighs!”

“—and what kind of jerk have you become to beat women, anyway?”

“I only hook up with girls who have a hang for it. She was begging for it, I’m not kidding!”

“Strelok, Strelok... what happened to the Marked One?”

Strelok looks into the tiny bathroom mirror and closes his eyes.

“If you had been where I’ve been and seen what I’ve seen, you would know. First thing I remember from the Zone is somebody saying over me *‘at least death would have saved him from the dreams’*. It didn’t. I am tired. My body is worn out. My soul is tired and worn out. I lost myself to the Zone or the Zone has lost me, I don’t know anymore.”

“Boo-hoo,” Maksimenko says and mimics a sob.

Strelok laments on. “Sometimes I just want to explode from all the pain eating me up inside. Especially at night when I find myself alone. Sometimes that designer stuff you feed me helps me to contain it. But sometimes—I just explode.” He stares at his bloody hand and then makes a fist. “Sometimes I just get into a frenzy. I’ve become a Zone myself with my own emissions. Dasha was right—I’m all fucked up!”

“The radiation on those bank notes—” Maksimenko starts asking but Strelok finishes his sentence.

“—was a nice trick, huh?”

“Strelok, Strelok. You sly dog.”



Drying up more blood with the towel, the Stalker repeats his earlier question. “What am I charged with?”

“Nothing, apart from being a once great guy who became a failure.”

“Guilty as charged. Kill me now, save your Service the efforts and me the dreams.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Today you’re still needed.”

“No charges then?”

“Stop asking that stupid question.”

“Than what was all this overkill about?”

“You were difficult to find. Besides, I have to lubricate my field skills – they are a little rusty after two years in the Big Land. Sorry about your nose.”

“I think it was Dasha who broke it, eventually—damn, does it hurt—what’s her real name, anyway?”

“Never mind.”

“Suits her well.” Strelok sniffs on his nose. “You got something for me?”

With an ear to ear smile, Maksimenko fishes a vial from his pocket. Strelok greedily reaches for it but Maksimenko keeps it away from him.

“First things first, Marked One.”

“Let me guess—once more, the SBU lost some super-important documents and I’m to get them from a mutant-infested secret lab?”

“No.”

“Sidorovich being infected by a deadly virus? Please do tell me it happened. I won’t move as much as my little toe to find his antidote.”

“The trader’s doing well.”

“Another of your invincible Spetsnaz squads got stuck in an anomaly field?”

“That did happen recently but Lieutenant Priboi took care of the situation. You know, the new commander at Cordon.”

“Preventing Freedom and Duty from slaughtering each other, let’s say by sniping their latest commanders?”

“Yesterday’s joke ain’t funny today.”

“Damn, too bad. Last night I was dreaming about an upgraded Vintorez rifle. Long scope, integrated silencer and all. Then perhaps I’m to help you find someone? A Stalker knowing too much and up to no good?” Wiping blood from his nose doesn’t prevent Strelok from giving Maksimenko a grin. “Like myself?”

Maksimenko takes a white paper box from his breast pocket. “Want a cigarillo?”

“Since when do you smoke cigarillos?”

“Recently.” Maksimenko ignites a match and lights up a cigarillo. “Cohibas are above my pay grade but I got myself a box of Mini Silvers.”

“Stinks like a snork’s fart.”

“Your den smells weird anyway. Want one or not?”

“Very much, thanks. Now, could you remind me why I am actually running such errands for you?”

“An unlimited supply of designer-made painkillers, lots of money and the Motherland’s eternal gratitude.”

“You can add a new nose to that... shit, that black belt bitch devastated it. Anyway, who are we after this time?”

Maksimenko shows him the photograph he got from Colonel Kruchelnikov. Seeing it, Strelok chokes on the smoke and breaks out in a heavy coughing rush.

“Is that a joke?” he eventually asks, still coughing.

Maksimenko shows him the vial once more. “Do we have a deal or not?”

Strelok leans over the sink with fresh blood gushing from his nose. “I can’t believe you want me to be in this.”

“Yes or no, Strelok!”

Strelok stares at the vial and bows his head. Maksimenko lets the drug fall into Strelok’s outstretched, almost begging palm.

“Good doggie. I knew we could count on you to bag Tarasov,” he says with satisfaction as he watches Strelok taking two pills of the designer painkiller right away and flushing them down with water from the tap.

The Stalker looks up from the sink and looks into Captain Maksimenko’s eye. “Please don’t say I’m going to the New Zone.”

With his remaining eye narrowed, Captain Maksimenko’s look resembles that of a shrewd fox.

“There’s no need for that,” he says blowing a smoke ring. “Tarasov will come to you. You’ll be the bait, Strelok. Where’s your PDA? I want you to send him a message.”

7

Junkie den, South Central Los Angeles

The candle is almost spent. The scrawl in the junkie’s notice block becomes messier and messier with each line he writes; apparently, by now he can barely control his trembling hand.

If Sancho isn’t here soon I’ll just go and kill someone.

Maybe I should wake up Nelly, but she’s looking sweet in her sleep. Her face – so pure. But maybe she still has a shot somewhere, or a few

bucks in her coat. But I can't remove her coat. She's sleeping in it, it's cold in here. Is it? I try to ignore it, we burnt all the rubbish and then the old furniture we found. I need some warmth. The cold comes from inside, as if my guts were full of ice. Ice. Ice Cube. I wish I could listen to my iPod but there's no electricity here and I can't load the iPod with the two candles I still have. Fuck you, Apple!

At least Nelly sleeps in the only bed we have. I want to cuddle in next to her, but I could also fall asleep and miss Sancho when he comes. I can't. After I get my fix, I'll join Nelly.

I'll wait ten more minutes and if that bastard doesn't arrive, I go and kill someone for his money. Or steal something if there's still something left worth stealing in this filthy street. I have no choice. Do I?

Five minutes. Fucking time crawls up my spine like a bug. No, it's the cold. Time itself is cold. Freezing me to the bones.

What— what was that?

Thank goodness, it's the stairs squeaking. Someone is coming. Sancho. It must be Sancho. He has come.

My sweet, ever sweetest friend.

The door swings open and a stout, Hispanic man in an impeccably tailored black suit appears. He switches on a torchlight and pans around the room. The sight of cockroaches running down the rotting walls, the long-extinguished fire still oozing the stench of burnt, dirty rags and garbage, the small pile of feces in a corner makes him shudder.

"¡Madre de Dios! Did someone die in here, cabrón?"

"Thank God you came, Sancho!"

The torchlight swings in the direction of the shaky, almost whining voice that now bears a little hope and fixes on an emaciated young man. His face is grayer than pale, the eyes swollen and red. He pulls up the sleeve of his filthy military jacket that bears faded letters: USMC. Then, he drags himself closer to the man called Sancho like a half-dead dog.

"Sancho! Gimme my fix. Quickly! You have no idea how much I have waited for you—"

Sancho steps back in disgust.

"First we have some finances to settle."

If the junkie on the floor had resembled a stray dog until now, now his face turns into the snout of a rabid beast.

"My fix—gimme my fucking fix you bastard!"

He jumps at Sancho but a kick from the smartly dressed thug hits him in the chest. The junkie falls to the ground, whining.

"Sancho, please! You are my only friend!"

Two more men appear behind Sancho from the dark staircase.

“Look at this, *cabrón*,” Sancho says and removes a transparent plastic bag with white powder inside from his pocket. Holding it with two fingers, he shakes it tantalizingly close to the junkie’s face. He attempts to snatch it but Sancho’s companions grab his arms. While one puts his neck into a choke-hold, the other pulls back his head by his long and filthy hair. The junkie looks up to Sancho like a pig looks at the butcher before its neck will be cut.

“Is here a place where I can sit? On second thought, I better don’t touch anything in this shithole.”

Sancho puts the plastic bag away. The junkie, his mouth open and salivating, stares at the pocket where the heroin had disappeared.

“How can a human being live like this? Your father was a war hero. *You* were a Marine once. Now—look at you!” Sancho shakes his head. “You know, Pete, all this puts me into a philosophical mood. See, this house was built sixty years ago. Where was Mexico at that time? It was the anus of the universe. Okay, Mexico City still is. That’s why we came here. But what has become of you Americans, huh?”

One of his hitmen squeezes a cockroach with his foot.

“Exactly, Pedro! *Cucarachas*. This house has become a symbol of your country and you of those living in it. And who is the master now?”

“Gimme my—”

“Wrong. Keep thinking, *cabrón*.”

At a jerk of his head, the thug holding Pete’s head pulls on his hair. The junkie screams with pain.

“This fucking rain is so loud outside! Can’t hear you, *cabrón*!”

Another brutal pull on Pete’s head from behind.

“You,” he breathes.

“I have been toying with something I recently got and my hearing is still a little impaired,” Sancho says bending closer to Pete. A submachine gun appears in his hand. “It’s a bit old-fashioned but we Mexicans love classic values. See, this UZI is the epitome of classic values, except that this one fires .45 ACP rounds instead the trusty old parabellum. But you know what? Once a bullet from this piece of workmanship hits your head, you no longer worry about its slow rate of fire. Best Jewish invention since compound interest. So, Pete,” he says leaning even closer with a wide grin, “please tell me again – WHO IS NOW THE MASTER OF THE *ESTADOS FUCKING UNIDOS*?!”

He screams the last words into Pete’s ear.

“You are—Mexicans are.”

His words are barely more than a gasp.

“Correct. And we, Florencia own—*proudly* own the rest of the Mexicans. Talking about classic values, let’s get back to the time of the Founding Fathers. Do you recognize this old fart?”

Sancho flashes a 100 dollar note.

“It’s Benjamin Franklin.”

“Bingo! Now tell me, how many brothers did Benjamin Franklin have?”

“I—I don’t know.”

Another jerk of Sancho’s head is followed by the another thug punching Pete in the chest.

“That should bring back some high school memories. So?”

“Five?”

“Excellent! Just for the record, their names were Samuel, Josiah, John, Peter, and James. Now comes the big question: how many twin brothers did Benjamin Franklin have?”

“None—”

“Wrong!” Sancho shouts. He puts the 100 dollar note to Pete’s forehead where it stays sticking in the cold sweat. “*¡Estúpido!* Not even the Fed knows, so many! But I only care about the twelve you were supposed to deliver a week ago!” Sancho slaps the note on Pete’s forehead. “Where are my fucking little Benjamin Franklins? *¿Dónde, cabrón?*”

“I—I don’t have it but—”

Pete’s words turn into a sob. With eyes wide open with dread, he sees Sancho looking at his two companions in frustration.

“*Hijo de puta...* Would you believe this, *manos?*”

“Waste of time, *jefe*,” the thug holding Pete’s right arm says.

“Fucking twelve hundred hundred dollars... I guess your mother spent so much on weekly make-up while she was still alive, Pete.”

“Leave my mother—”

“*Cállate perro*,” the man holding Pete in a choke-hold says tightening the grip.

“He’s not worth your bullet, *jefe*.”

“Let me just break his neck.”

Sancho looks around. “Is there someone else here?”

“Nelly,” Pete stammers, “she’s sleeping.”

“Where’s she?”

“Over there.”

At a wave of Sancho’s hand, Pedro checks on the sleeping woman. “She’s stinking like a pig. Probably too stoned to hear a thing.”

“Let go of him,” Sancho says. Before a shadow of hope could appear on Pete’s face, the thug leader adds, “and close the door, *mano*. So, what

shall we do with him? We're supposed to set an example for the other *drogadictos* in Florencia territory."

"*A la chingada* with this two pieces of shit. Let's burn down this shithole with them inside."

"Agree with Pedro, *jefe*. Let's finish here, pick up Horacio and the three *manos* waiting for us outside and *vámonos*."

"I'm tired of talking to this shithead." Sancho works off the safety on the UZI. "It's a waste of bullets but since I'm losing cash on this zombie anyway, a few bucks more or less wouldn't make a difference. *¡Adiós, cabrón!*"

Pete doesn't look up. He hears his own heartbeat for a second. Then comes a loud bang.

But not from Sancho's submachine gun – it is the door being busted open. The silhouette of a hugely built man appears in the darkness. He immediately grabs the thug standing closest to the door and smashes him against Sancho, who is swept off his feet by the impact of his henchman's body. His jerking index finger fires a short burst from the UZI which hits the ceiling. Pedro hisses a Hispanic swear and draws a jagged combat knife. A powerful kick hits his wrist, causing him to let go off the weapon. The intruder catches the knife in its fall, flips it, slashes the thug's throat and throws the knife into the other thug's chest whom he smashed against Sancho a few seconds before.

At the far end of the room, Sancho desperately reaches for his UZI that fell off his hand and now lies a few feet away from him. With two giant leaps, the intruder reaches Sancho. For the length of a breath, he towers over the thug leader who looks up to him, his eyes almost popping out from fear, his fingernails breaking on the wooden floor as he still tries to get his weapon. Then the intruder lets the full weight of his massive body fall with knees kept forward. Blood fountains up from Sancho's mouth as the heavy body impacts on his chest, crushing his ribcage.

Struck with awe, Pete watches his savior getting to his feet and adjusting his long raincoat from which rainwater is still dripping.

"Are you a fucking Terminator?" he asks with a throat dry and painful from the thug's choke-hold.

"No. I am a Stalker," the intruder replies with a hard Russian accent, trilling the Rs. "My name is Tarasov. Mikhailo Tarasov. You are Peter Leighley, I presume?"

"What the hell are you stalking me for?"

"I am not stalking you. I am saving you."

"Are you one of my father's... mutineers?"

Mikhailo Tarasov shakes his head and offers Pete a hand to help him up. But Pete crawls backwards to the wall, perhaps in even greater fear than while facing the thugs.

“Yes you are! Leave me be! I don’t want to have anything to do with you mass-murdering bastards!”

The stairs creak. Someone is slowly walking up to the room. Pete darts a fearful look towards the door but the man with the strange name doesn’t seem to care.

“Pete,” he says calmly, “it’s time for us to leave.”

“Do you need assistance?” a hoarse voice asks.

Another tall shadow enters the room. To Pete’s astonishment, this man is even taller and stronger built than the first. The shoulders of his leather pilot jacket are wet with rain, just like the Tennessee Titans baseball cap. His steel-blue eyes under the bushy, dark brows scan the room, then get fixated on Pete.

“It’s all right, Top,” Tarasov tells him over his shoulder. “We were just in time.”

“So this is Pete?”

“Yes that’s me,” the youth says. “And who the fuck are you?”

The man who Tarasov addressed in US Marine slang raises his hand in salute. “It’s an outstanding honor to meet you. You’re the son of the greatest warrior the world has ever seen. I’m Sergeant Major Elliott Hartman and you may call me Top. And now haul your skinny ass, Marine! We’ve probably stirred up a hornets’ nest!”

“Unless you want to wait until Sancho’s buddies arrive,” Tarasov says.

Pete looks at them with distrust. “Don’t know which is worse—the Florencia guys or you!”

The two men share a smile.

“Guess it’s us,” Tarasov says with a chuckle. “You better believe me.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a safe place, son,” Hartman says.

“I won’t leave without Nelly.”

“Nelly?”

“My girlfriend, Michael Tarasov. She is sleeping right over there.”

“My name is Mikhailo. Not Michael.” Tarasov picks up Sancho’s torchlight. On a rotting piece of cardboard stretched out on the floor, somebody lies covered with a ragged coat and other trash. Only a few strands of dark hair visible between the rags tell of a woman being nestled under this pile of filth.

“*Oh Gospodi*,” Tarasov exclaims with disgust. “How can she sleep in a place like this?”

“She can sleep there good enough. She even dreams, man!”

The Top steps towards the sleeping woman. “I’ve a very bad feeling about this.”

Ignoring the rotten stench, he kneels down. Using his own small torchlight, carefully avoiding touching the filth, he lifts the rags covering the sleeping woman.

“Don’t wake her up!” Pete begs. “Please!”

“Mikhailo, the big man’s son is in deeper shit than we thought,” Hartman sighs looking at the woman. “Looks like an O.D. She’s been dead for at least three days, I’d say.”

Tarasov’s face turns into a grimace of disgust.

“No!” Pete shouts. “She’s just sleeping!”

Hartman pats down his pocket and slips a McDonald’s napkin from his pocket. He wraps it around the index and middle finger on his right hand and touches the artery on Nelly’s neck. Then he looks up to Pete and Tarasov and shakes his head.

“You don’t know nothing! She is not dead! She can’t be!”

“If I tell you she is dead, Marine, then she is!” Hartman snaps at him. “Believe me, I have seen enough bodies to know. Let’s go, it’s high time to get outta this hellhole!”

“No! She’s alive! She’s all I have! We must take her with us! Nelly ain’t dead, you stupid bastards! She can’t be dead!”

“Enough of this,” barks Tarasov, now in a commanding voice. “Top! Take him and let’s go!”

“On me, Marine, it’s shove-off time!”

The Top hoists Pete and carrying him on his shoulder as if he were weightless, hurries down the stairs where he carefully steps over another body. Looking down from the Marine’s shoulder, Pete recognizes the face of a Florencia thug. He lies at the entrance, his neck jolted to the side as if broken by someone who is extremely good at hand-to-hand sneak attacks.

Tarasov peeks out to the street and signals them to move on. The smell of rain gives a refreshing feeling, appearing almost pure compared to the stink of decay and death inside the hovel. They cross the street into a dark passage where their SUV is parked, covered by darkness save for a flickering neon sign.

“What happened here?” Tarasov asks.

“Nooria gave some *cholos* a bit of attitude readjustment. All right, Marine...” He puts Pete down. “You’ll use your own boots from now on except when we drive or fly. We gonna do that a lot in the coming days!”

Pete, stares at the bodies piled up between two garbage containers.

“Oh no. No—”

He is already looking around to find a way to run away when the car door opens and a tiny woman emerges from inside. She pulls back the hood of her raincoat and gives Pete a warm smile.

“Hi! I am Nooria.”

Seeing her face that’s half any man’s wet dream and half any woman’s nightmare, all that Pete can utter is his own name.

“Peter Leighley. Pete.”

“I know,” she says.

“Who are you?”

“I am your stepsister.”

“Our beloved witch,” the Top says with a smile.

“And my wife,” Tarasov proudly adds.

Pete’s eyes swivel from the so-called Stalker to the Marine sergeant major, then to the woman who appears to him as small and fragile as the other two are big and fearsome.

“Who the hell are you people?”

“We are from the Tribe, Marine. Your father is our leader.”

“And my stepfather.”

“And I still don’t know what degree of kinship that is but I am the husband of your father’s stepdaughter.”

“You guys better celebrate your family reunion later. We’re all wet, hungry and in danger here,” the Top says, eyeing a pick-up truck rapidly approaching from the far end of the street. “Let’s get outta this gang-infested miserable den of filth!”

“You mean Los Angeles?”

“The whole misery that my country has become, Tarasov,” the Top replies starting the engine. “Fasten your seat belts!” He looks in the direction of the pick-up that is now just about two hundred meters away, then pushes the gas pedal and lets the SUV dart out to the street with squeaking tires.

“Wish I had one of Bockman’s Humvees to play chicken with those *cholos*!”

The suspicious pick-up doesn’t follow them. It stops at the house where Pete had dwelled. By the time the thugs realize that the Jeep which had just slipped away in front of their eyes had anything to do with the demise of Sancho and his henchmen, Tarasov’s party is far away.

In a few minutes they reach a better neighborhood. Looking at the row of condos and shops, still open and brightly lit, Tarasov feels as if South Central L.A. had been on another planet.

“Probably it is,” he murmurs to himself.

“Come again?”

"I still can't get used to how quickly one gets here from shithole to luxury."

"It's not even luxury, just Glendale."

"Will we see Hollywood?"

"Timeframe's tight."

A moment later Nooria pats the Top's shoulder. The Jeep slows down and halts in front of a beautiful building with a bright electric signboard over the shiny, glass and metal entrance.

"Premium Aesthetics— Plastic Surgery Center," she reads out the sign. "Top, is this a place where American women get new tits made?"

"One of the many, yes."

"Do you think I could get a new face here?"

"I don't want you to get any other face than you have, Nooria," Tarasov says turning back in his seat.

"But I want one. Even my own stepbrother was scared when he saw me. You too would love me more if I had a new face, wouldn't you?"

"No. That wouldn't be you anymore."

"So for you I am just about my ugly scar?"

Tarasov sighs. "I love all the scars on your body because those remind me who you are and what you've been through. Your life, Nooria. And without your life, I have no life."

Nooria raises her hand to her face as if she wanted to wipe some dust from her right eye.

"Is that so?" she asks.

"It is so. And besides—I would feel very ugly if you had a new face. I would also have to get a scar operation?" Tarasov asks, glancing at the Top.

"You mean a beauty treatment," the Top replies, impatiently drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Thanks, Top. So, given how many scars I have, a treatment would take ages and we haven't got the time for that. Although... do they also do hair implantations? I wouldn't mind having thick curly hair instead of this receding hairline."

"I don't give a damn about you looking like a balding hedgehog," Hartman grumbles. "But if I let you two mutate into surfer boy and Baywatch girl, the big man will cut my balls off and have the devil pups play baseball with'em back at the Alamo. Forget it."

"Never mind," Nooria replies in a much cheerier voice, "I was just asking. Let's drive on."

"Yep. Let's get outta this screwed up vanity-run pussy country, and let's do it asap," the Top replies accelerating the SUV. When the car halts

at a red light a few minutes later, his and Tarasov's eyes meet in the rearview mirror.

"Situation well handled," Hartman tells him under his breath, quietly enough so that Nooria can't hear it. In reply, the shadow of a sad smile appears on Tarasov's face.

While they talked, Pete was looking all the time at the strange girl who is now staring out of the car window to the city lights. His hand moves now closer to Nooria's, and then, after a long minute of hesitation, touches it. It is not a man to woman touch but a brother's shy caress. Nooria keeps sitting motionlessly, staring out of the window, too much lost in her thoughts to react to the comforting gesture.

8

Central mountain range, New Zone

"We have no problem with your plan. Many of our fierce warriors thirst for the waters of Paradise. We shall call you Harbinger of Great News!"

"Two things, Commander Saifullah. First—spare me your bullshit. You are not talking with your brainwashed foot soldiers."

The half-mutant Stalker's words faintly echo in the cave where he and two other men have gathered around a campfire. One of them is wearing a black leather trench coat with a hood over his body armor. His appearance is that of the veteran Bandits from the Exclusion Zone, although his face is too cunning and intelligent for an ordinary Bandit. The other one, who was talking about his men being eager to die at his command, wears a British-made combat fatigue with an armored vest, obviously from the time of the Bush war. The thick, black beard and the blue textile wrapped around his face betray him as a Talib, or dushman commander. Under his bushy eyebrows, shrewd black eyes flash in the light of the campfire.

"Talk about my warriors with more respect, infidel. Wave after wave, they pound the steel walls of the godless intruders like a vengeful sea storm, stirred up by—"

"Cut the crap, Saifullah," the half-mutant Stalker says with a wave of his hand. He pulls the chain with the Orthodox cross from under his armor. "Call *me* an infidel and our deal is off. Second thing—save your breath and just call me Skinner."

The Talib commander sighs. "All right, all right... Skinner. Apologies, but you must understand I rarely have any reasonable man to talk to. While my fighters are keen to die in battle, I have to lead them. This postpones my own martyrdom. I want to live to see the day when God's banner flies over the stronghold of the Tribe."

“And to get out of that irradiated hell on earth that had been Kabul once,” Skinner dryly observes.

“Exactly. This is where our priorities match.”

“What about *our* priorities?” asks the Bandit who was listening to their conversation in silence. “Sultan has sent me here to talk business. It wasn’t easy to find a man reasonable enough to deal with and I trust you have no intention to disappoint me now.”

His English is the most sophisticated of the three men even if spoken with a Russian accent. When they first met a few days ago at a Stalker campsite close to the Salang Pass, he appeared to the half-mutant as a former lawyer despite his Bandit attire and boastful nickname. After all, the borderline between lawyers and criminals had always been vague to him. Besides, it was not surprising that Sultan, the infamous mastermind of all Bandits in the Exclusion Zone, would have his business in the New Zone set up by someone as skillful in negotiating as capable to make his point with less savory means.

“You’ll have your base at a central location of the New Zone, Bruiser. Ever heard of Ghorband?” asks the half-mutant. The Bandit nods. “The Tribe won’t bother you if you don’t bother them, but you can raid Free Stalkers at your pleasure. There are anomaly fields rich in artifacts between Ghorband and the Tribe, if you don’t mind shedding your own sweat.”

“We do,” Bruiser replies, smiling. “It’s easier to make ourselves home at Ghorband and let the Loners pay a toll on any artifact they carry on their way back to Bagram—so to say. However, that place is heavily defended.”

“I have something for you.” The half-mutant reaches into a pocket of his ragged coat and gives the Bandit a folded sheet of paper. “Here’s a map of the Asylum with all the weak spots marked. If you aren’t complete idiots, you can overrun it. The place is in disarray anyway since Shrink moved to Bagram.”

Bruiser glances at the map and then nods, obviously satisfied with what he sees, yet still gives the half-mutant a cagey look.

“Is this map reliable?”

“Believe me,” Skinner replies with a reassuring smile, “I know that place like the back of my hand.”

“And about what you’ve asked for in exchange—you sure about that?”

“Absolutely. I need a burer from the Exclusion Zone. Am I asking too much?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time for Barkeep to arrange for one, I guess. Still sounds weird. What do you need a burer for?”

Skinner smiles even wider. “They make cute pets.”

Bruiser frowns but makes a gesture meaning *whatever*.

“What about us?” the dushman asks. “You businessmen from the north don’t have to fight the Tribe, but how should we overcome those devils?”

For a heartbeat, Skinner stares into the flames of the campfire.

Now it would be my turn to talk in flowery language. It will be demons beating devils because I will unleash the demons of the New Zone. By the time you finish your petty business, my army will be ready. Then I will purge this land of human pestilence. There will be no souls left to be corrupted by a blood-thirsty religion, neither vicious minds to feed on greed. And then, maybe then, at least this one land shall be pure.

Looking at the two others, he eventually gives the dushman and the Bandit a patronizing smile.

“Rest assured, Bruiser, Sultan will get more loot and artifacts than he could sell in a lifetime. As for you, Saifullah, the Tribe will be annihilated. Just provide me with heavy weapons. Ten-fifteen dismounted NSV and DShK machine guns plus a few RPGs will do.”

Saifullah frowns. “Dismounted? Those are too heavy to be carried around!”

“Let that be my concern.”

“Your concern should be that no humans can beat those devils!”

“Don’t shit your pants, you brave, brave warrior,” the half-mutant replies to Saifullah’s whining. His smile turns into a grimace of despise. “My brothers will give you a helping hand – and they are not *humans*.”

He utters the last word like a profanity.

9

Bagram (Stalker base), New Zone

“Hey Mr. Fix-it! I got a pair of used boots, you have a look?”

“That will be twenty dollars, Ashot.”

“Hey come on, yesterday’s deal no bargain today!”

“Try those boots by walking over here!”

“I no can leave my bar alone. You come to me, huh?”

“No, you pop your head out of that wreck. The commandant wants to see you better.”

“Come again?”



"I CAN SEE ASHOT'S FACE THROUGH THAT WINDOW ON THE ANTONOV. CRAP! DOES HE EVER WASH HIS FILTHY DREADLOCKS?"

"That was the intercom's button, Shrink," Uncle Yar patiently explains. "If you want to zoom in with the telescope, you need to press the other button. Here."

Standing in the window of the control tower that overlooks what had once been Bagram air base, now the free Stalkers' home base in the New Zone, Borys the Shrink looks through the extra-large magnification telescope once more. He whistles in awe. "Now I understand how Captain Bone could keep a close eye over Bagram, literally!"

Proudly, Uncle Yar looks the telescope up and down as if this masterpiece of German optical engineering would be his own work.

"Repairing it was quite challenging but I loved having a break from broken weapons."

"Well done, Yar. Wish your hippie friend would have listened to you and came over here. I need to talk to him, actually." Shrink lets himself sink into the swivel chair that had once belonged to Captain Bone. "That fake Dutyer had have a good life here before Tarasov kicked his butts."

"With all due respect to the major, I heard it different," the technician says wiping his hands into an oily cloth hanging from his blue overall's breast pocket. "Something about a former Monolithian sniper and a bunch of real Duty commandos downing Bone's chopper and killing everyone on board."

"Either way, good riddance of Bone and his henchmen. You think Tarasov will ever be back?"

"Ask me three different but easier questions."

"All right." Shrink thinks for a moment, putting the tops of his fingers together. He lets the chair spin left and right. "First, how to install this telescope on top of the old control tower? I'm not a wanker like Bone was who probably watched the Stalkers in the shower tent while jerking off. Instead I need a relatively sober Stalker watching the surrounding area day and night."

"Can do. There's a wrecked Apache chopper in the junkyard. Gutted, but still has the PPG glass-fiber cabin roof intact. Should come in useful for building a weather-proof lookout."

"Excellent. Second, I'm not a secretive bastard like Bone was. I want all Stalkers be able to use their PDAs, just like in the Exclusion Zone. Possible?"

"Difficult. Enabling buddy tracking and messaging is just a flip of a switch away, but only in a 10 kilometer radius. You can contact anyone

through Bone's old radio up to 50 kilometers, but if we want more coverage for lesser mortals we'll need signal relay towers."

"Find out how, where, and when."

"We'll need a few volunteers to find locations for the relay towers. Do you mind if I broadcast a job opportunity?"

"Not at all. Third question: I'm not Russian like Bone was. I'm Polish. A Russian boss might let his men drink everything that has alcohol in it but a Pole cannot let this happen. I need to analyze Ashot and find a way to make him improve his vodka. Any ideas?"

"Maybe putting a gun to his head and telling him to stop watering it down," Yar says, grinning. "Bone was Ukrainian, by the way."

"That would make him half-Polish and the shame on him would be even bigger."

"With all due respect, but as a Ukrainian myself I wouldn't subscribe to the half-Polish thing."

"No offense meant. In any case, no self-respecting man with a single drop of Polish blood in his veins would allow Ashot serve that mutant piss."

"None taken if you make Mister No-good quit watering the vodka. I'll see if there's enough scrap metal in the wreck yard to weld a small tower from. Once I'm done with that and the scouts find a proper location, we can haul it there with the URAL truck."

"Let me know if you need a helping hand. I'll go to see Ashot later..." Shrink stretches his back in the chair and puts his legs on the desk. "Get working, Yar, and now let me feel important. It's cozier here than in the Asylum, that's for sure!"

10

Mountain track west of Ghorband, New Zone

"Hey dostan! Mikhahid be chizhaye aali gosh bedahid?"

Under a clear, cobalt-blue sky one of the Tribe's Humvee is driving down a narrow canyon. Painted over the sand-colored camouflage scheme in bright red letters, *Raghead Reaper* is written on its hood. The road is barely more than a track but with no anomalies in sight, the driver allows himself for more speed than what would be necessary to navigate along the bumpy track.

Looking around from his tower atop the vehicle, the machine gunner drums his fingers on the built-in .50 caliber. He repeats his question through the intercom.

"In mosik rak ast begzarid espeakerhaye MP3 player ra vasl konam!"

“

“We are to supposed to talk English,” the fighter sitting in the vehicle commander’s seat replies. He is wearing a Marine corporal’s chevrons on the sleeve of his light combat armor. “Anderson’s orders. Practice, practice, devil pups.”

“Okay,” the machine gunner replies. “Care for a little music?”

The corporal looks at the GPS, then at the high, rocky slopes flanking the canyon. The area looks safe to him. “Let’s rock.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

The machine gunner grins. He slides into the compartment and plugs his MP3 player into the dashboard radio. At first, the song that made him rave sounds oriental, but each line recited by a hoarse voice begins with an forceful guitar riff.

*Barra barra hozd wel boghd ou zawara
barra barra fezd wel l’hozd ma b’qa amene
barra barra l’alach we ness menhoussine
barra barra la horma dolm wet ouboudia...*

“Dig that, dude,” the driver says. “Sounds like Arabic. Like Ilias talks, the Moroccan guy in Lieutenant Trang’ squad. You got the lyrics?”

The corporal’s radio crackles but with the music playing loud, neither he nor anyone else in the compartment is noticing it.

“Papa Duck. Raghead Reaper, I have a drone image on you. You’ve taken a wrong turn about, uhm, half a klick back. Perform a U-turn and rejoin column.”

“Positive. I found the lyrics on the net. Wait a sec, I’ve a printout somewhere—”

He fishes a piece of paper from a pocket on his assault vest and starts reading it out loudly.

*Sadness, hate and the reign of tyranny
Destruction, jealousy; there is no trust left
Thirst and people are unhappy
No honor, but oppression and slavery...*

“That’s cool, dude. Carry on!” the driver says jerking his head to the rhythm.

“Love such patrols,” the machine gunner shouts back as he assumes his position behind the .50 caliber.

*The rivers dried up, the seas ruined the land
Stars are darkened and the sun went down*

*There are no trees left and the birds stopped singing
There are neither days, nor nights left, darkness only,
Desolation, hell, there is no beauty left*

“Did Driscoll write this between two kills?”

“Papa Duck. Raghead Reaper, you are approaching a non-secured map grid. Turn back. Repeat: non-secure section ahead. Turn back!”

“I don’t think so!”

“Does he ever listen to music?”

“A little Shakira might have a good effect on him.”

The machine gunner laughs and shakes his hips. “Hell yeah! Make him waka-waka!”

“Raghead Reaper, drone image shows an ambush prepared, I repeat: ambush ahead! Get your ass out of there, immediately!”

“Listen, the last part is really awesome!”

*Time flows like a raging river, there is no honor left
Ruin and war and the blood is flowing
There are only walls left, no walls standing
Fear and people remain silent
Barraaaaa! Barra, barra, barraaaaaa!*

The music becomes more chaotic, aggressive even as despair and anger mount in the singer’s voice.

“We should ask Bockman to build in subwoofers!”

“We’re not on a joyride, for God’s sake. Better keep your eyes open!”

With his gloved hands, the machine gunner drums the rhythm on the metal plates defending his position. A glimmer catches his eyes which instinctively open wide with alarm. He has only one second to shout.

“Ahr-pee-geeee!”

Then the rocket-propelled grenade impacts, lifting the vehicle and almost throwing it off the track. One single hit from an RPG wouldn’t be enough to destroy the heavily armored vehicle, but to the hapless crew their vehicle runs up a rock on the path that the driver would have certainly avoided if his eyes wouldn’t be darkened from the blood gushing from his forehead. The Humvee turns over, right at the moment when a second projectile impacts. Shaken, the corporal screams a desperate order.

“Out! Defensive perimeter!”

He doesn’t know that he is the last of his crew still alive. Neither does he have time to crawl out of his wrecked car when the third projectile impacts, penetrating the cracked bullet-proof windshield as if it were a sheet of paper and exploding inside the compartment.

A minute later three men emerge from behind their cover overlooking the canyon. They wear the kit typical for Loner Stalkers in the New Zone: a light brown armored suit with a small oxygen flask and a camelback water container on the back, a gas mask shouldered and a shemagh woven from white and sand-colored fabric wrapped around their necks. One of them shoulders the RPG launcher and takes a short-range walkie-talkie from his assault vest. The two others keep their AK-47 automatic rifles at ready.

“Hedgehog here. They went off in a ball of fire. We’re ready to move in with barrels blazing.”

“Good job. Be with you in a minute. Strip those suckers naked. Get whatever you can from the Humvee too. Ashot is waiting for you to unload all your crap on him.”

The Stalker with the RPG grins. “Roger that.”

One of his mates gives him a concerned look. “Are you sure it’s safe? More of them might be here soon.”

“Nah, Vitka. The big guy said it’s safe around here and he knows this canyon like the back of his hand.”

“You sure?”

“He told me himself.”

“And that makes you believe it?”

“I’d believe even Winnie the Pooh if he showed me a way to loot a Humvee!”

The three Stalkers hurry down the hillside. They have barely arrived at the smoldering wreck when they hear the sound of a heavy engine approaching.

“What the—”

Hedgehog is about to get his AKS-74U carbine from his shoulder when another Humvee appears, the hail of bullets from its .50 caliber killing his two mates instantly. He still has a moment left to curse the half-mutant who let them walk into a trap, no doubt to secure all the loot for himself alone, before three bullets hit his chest armor and pierce it together with the water pouch on his back. Blood and water mix in the sand.

About two hundred meters away, the half-mutant Stalker watches the grisly scene through a pair of binoculars.

“No happy end to anyone involved,” he quietly says to himself. “But then, this is just the beginning.”

11

Glendale, Los Angeles

“We drive all the way to that place you call the Meat Market, Top?”

“Negative. It’s been a busy day and I need to sleep off my jet-lag.” Driving by a fast-food restaurant, Hartman slows down. and steers it into the drive-thru lane. “Dinner time.”

“Again?”

“Nooria, my guts are rotting from deer steak, snake jerkies, First Strike Rations and especially HOOAH! Bars. Let my body stash on some real food for a change.”

“I can’t believe you’re eating this shit,” Pete remarks looking at the restaurant’s red and yellow electric sign.

“See, son? That’s why I have as much food back here as I can.”

“It was exactly fast-food I was meaning.”

The Top lowers his window.

“Welcome to McDonald’s. May I take your order?” a voice asks outside.

“Three double quarter pounders with cheese, two Angus Deluxe Snack Wraps and a large Diet Coke, please. Anything for you, Mikhailo? One Cheeseburger and a mineral water. Nooria? Two more bottles of Dasani—”

“Get a large Dr. Pepper for me,” Pete says, “but not the diet shit.”

“—and a large Dr. Pepper but not the diet shit.”

“Sir,” the voice says, “please restrain yourself from using offensive language on our premises.”

Hartman furrows his brows. “Uhm—what’s your name, please?”

“Keisha, sir.”

“Now listen up, Keisha. I am the customer, you the staff and I outrank you. You will serve me no matter if I call your food shit, your premises a shithole or you any name! Is that clear?”

“Sir, I will have to call my manager if you continue to—”

“Just kidding, Keisha. I love your meals, your restrooms are always clean and you have a very pleasant voice.” The Top takes a deep breath, lowers the window to the bottom and starts shouting into the microphone outside. “But if you continue lecturing me on political correctness instead of serving me within two fucking minutes, I swear I’ll go inside and tear the headphones off your ears to make you hear me better—I am hungry and want my order, now! Is that clear, Keisha?”

A moment of silence outside.

“I got your order, sir. Please proceed to the next window.”

“That’s the spirit, Keisha, that’s the spirit! Add a coffee to my order. As black as it gets—I don’t want you to think I’m a racist. Thank you very much!”

Three minutes later the Top switches off the engine in the parking lot and greedily unwraps his first burger.

“That’s exactly the attitude why I went AWOL,” Pete says and draws on the straw in his coke cup.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the Top asks munching on his burger.

“You spend the best years of your life with barking commands and screaming at people who might be better and smarter than you. The Corps brainwashes you to think you’re the best and brightest in the universe but once you’re back to the real world, nobody gives a shit about you but you keep acting and talk like a brainwashed jarhead, thinking you are someone, not realizing that all this only makes you an arrogant jerk!”

The Top stops chewing and looks into the rear view mirror to see Pete’s eyes. “It was that lecturing tone in that little ho’s voice that pissed me off. Maybe I overreacted. But think about how many jobless white males got refused just because that place had to take her to promote fucking diversity!”

“Who would want to work at such a place anyway?” Pete asks with a voice that is now strangely trembling.

“Pete, listen up,” Tarasov quietly says, turning back in his seat. “You might think that you are some very special person, deserving much better than what you got, and yes, maybe that special person is hiding deep inside you. But for God’s sake—have a look at yourself. Even the toilet cleaner in that restaurant is better off than you.”

“It’s the restroom our Ukrainian friend is meaning, son.”

“Stop calling me son, you asshole!” Peter screams back. “Thanks for your fucking coke, and now let me go! I need—I must—”

“Uh-oh.” Tarasov sounds concerned now. “Someone’s trying to escape.”

“That’s fucking right! Let me out of this fucking car! Let me out or I fucking kill you all! I have to—”

“Look at me, my little brother.”

Nooria’s soft voice relieves the mounting tension. The Top opens his next burger, Tarasov turns forward shaking his head in disapproval, and Pete, although reluctantly, looks into her eyes.

“Pete, you are tired. Come closer, I will help you relax.”

Slowly, like a stray dog that has been beaten all its life and now hearing the first friendly words in a long time, Pete moves closer to her.

“Come closer to me. I do not bite. You can rest your head on my lap. Yes, like this. Let me help you. I will heal you, Pete.”

She places her hand on Pete’s sweating forehead.

“Gosh,” Pete whispers, “your touch feels good.”

“Here, drink water... lots of water,” she continues and puts the Dasani bottle to Pete’s trembling, chafed lips. “Close your eyes. Sleep... sleep now, my little brother.”

“Who are you?” Pete mumbles. His panting slows down, and soon his hands too stop trembling. He sinks into a deep sleep, his head resting in Nooria’s lap. For a moment there is deep silence in the car.

“Nooria, you never cease to amaze me,” Tarasov whispers.

“Could we drive to a place to sleep, Top? It is not very comfortable here.”

“Sorry, Nooria,” Hartman replies. “I had to pull back my seat to make place for my legs but even so, the steering wheel keeps hitting against my balls!”

He puts the half-eaten burger back to the paper bag and starts the engine. “Let’s hope that motel room comes with a microwave.”

12

The Alamo (home base of the Tribe, ancient citadel of Shahr-i-Zohak aka Red City), New Zone

Near to the tower overlooking the valley beneath the Tribe’s mountain fortress, about fifty warriors have gathered in the shade of a camouflage net spun out between two trees. Sitting on plastic chairs, they face a large map of the new Zone fastened to a wooden board.



A few of them wear the heavy exoskeletons of Lieutenants with their helmets off, others only a light fatigue. Only one warrior is wearing full combat armor. He is standing at the briefing board with his helmet and face mask on, his M249 slung across his shoulder. *Semper Fi* is written on his helmet. He stands at attention and salutes when the Colonel appears from the tower.

“Attention on deck!”

“As you were,” the Colonel says. He looks over his men. “Warriors, I am irritated.”

No matter how many battles they have seen, the Lieutenants shun his eyes, ducking like schoolchildren who are about to be reprimanded for doing some mischief. Even the buzz of a lonely fly circling in the tent can be heard.

“During the past two weeks, our patrols have been constantly harassed by hostile fire. However, this morning was the first time that we suffered losses in an ambush. Three men are dead and one vehicle destroyed because of a small mistake and a great amount of embarrassing recklessness!”

One Lieutenant jumps from his seat and stands at attention.

“Sir, I apologize for my men’s mistake,” he says with a gloomy look all over his face.

“That vehicle crew consisted of idiots, Lieutenant Nelson, and got what idiots deserve. This land does not tolerate mistakes, and I even less so. Remember – for a Lieutenant of the Tribe, a mistake committed by his men is a mistake committed by himself. This applies to all of you. Am I understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” the Lieutenants reply.

“Nelson, only your rank prevents me from handing out severe punishment on you. There aren’t many Lieutenants left and I prefer you falling honorably in battle than being cast out from our Tribe. You are relieved of your command and assigned to base duties until I decide what to do with you. Get out of my sight.”

“Sir!”

Lieutenant Nelson salutes and marches out of the tent. His disciplined walk doesn’t deceive his fellow officers. Some of them give him a look of pity, others grin in apparent agreement with his mistake being duly punished. The colonel doesn’t bother to look at the reprimanded officer and continues the briefing.

“The only thing Nelson did right was to exterminate the ambushers. My suspicion was right: scavengers from Ghorband are behind the latest provocations. Such provocations, warriors, cannot and will not be

tolerated. Additionally to the scavenger ambush, more bad news arrived this morning. The ragheads have obviously replenished their ranks after we bloodied their nose at Bagram, because they tried to infiltrate our territory from the south. Here.” The colonel points at a marker on the map. “Before we punish the scavengers, something needs to be done about this nuisance. Lieutenant Ramirez!”

“Sir!”

“You will assume command over Nelson’s outfit. With them and your own men, you will move to the southern approaches and establish an FOB, here.” The colonel points at a narrow valley on the map, well south of the Tribe’s stronghold. “From that position, you will scout the area and repel any hostile attempts to infiltrate our territory.”

“I knew that Ramirez would get the shittiest task,” the Lieutenant with the cigar whispers to his neighbor who has a huge scar over his Asiatic face. “I just knew it.”

“Yep,” his neighbor replies under his breath. “He always does.”

Their whisper does not escape the Colonel’s attention.

“Bauer and Trang! If you have any tactical suggestions to make, please share your wisdom with the rest of us.”

The two Lieutenants jump from their seats.

“Sir, no, sir!”

The Colonel gives them one of his ice-cold stares.

“Then keep your mouth shut until you are allowed to ask questions.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Good. With Ramirez keeping our underbelly secure, a strike force consisting of two assault teams lead by Schmidt and Collins will proceed to the scavenger outpost at Ghorband and secure it. Anderson’s fire support team will assist the assault teams. Together, they will form Strike Force Anaconda and stand under the joint command of First Lieutenant Driscoll.”

Several Lieutenants frown, especially those who took part in the Tribe’s latest battle—the relief of the Stalker base when it had been besieged by their common enemy.

“Driscoll in charge? Sounds like an excessive body count,” whispers a Lieutenant with Latino features into Bauer’s ear, who sits just in front of him.

“You have any problem with that, Ramirez?”

“Of course not, but is it really necessary?”

Ramirez slowly shakes his clean-shaven, dark skinned head that bears a USMC tattoo on the nape.

“This ain’t all, warriors. Once the scavengers at Ghorband have been taken care of, Anaconda will proceed to Bagram and put it in a chokehold.

The Lieutenants in charge will personally ensure that no one and nothing gets in and out. When I see the time fit I'll lead Task Force Boomslang, made up from the teams remaining at the Alamo, against Bagram and take it together with the task force already deployed there. Lieutenants whom I haven't assigned a strike team will either join the squad leaders as support or stay here until we all join the main strike force. Questions?"

A moment of silence falls over the warriors. The fly is still buzzing above their heads. Then Lieutenant Trang's hand flits up. His fist closes and the buzz ceases.

Bauer raises his hand.

"Sir, what about me and my squad?"

"You're also assigned as reserve and to stay here in the Alamo. Use the time to intensify training the newcomers and devil pups."

"Sir, I—"

"I've made my decision, Bauer."

Another Lieutenant raises from his chair.

"Yes, Collins!"

"Sir, we're moving out in almost full force against the scavengers. It seems overkill."

"I suppose you have nothing against the Tribe stretching itself? We've been resting too long."

A few warriors laugh, but the blue eyes in Lieutenant Collins' tanned face remain serious. Bauer, Ramirez and a few other officers nod their agreement over Collin's concerns.

"Nothing against a little exercise, sir, but... with all due respect, we are already overstretched as far as defending our area goes."

"Permission to speak freely?"

All eyes are directed at the warrior in full armor. The Colonel nods.

"Collins, you didn't get the Colonel's point. We move out to purge the western approaches from scavenger scum. If you don't have the guts to do that – this is the time to chicken out."

"That's no option, sir!"

The Colonel resumes briefing his men. "First Lieutenant Driscoll has summed it up very well, Driscoll. We will teach them a lesson they won't soon forget. But don't be fooled by how pathetic scavengers are. A few weeks ago, when we saved their ungrateful asses from being kicked by the ragheads and Chinese, those among us who were there could see that the scavengers can put up hell of a fight with their backs against the wall. As the mistake made by Nelson's men has proven again, carelessness is deadly. Overconfidence too. There is no such thing as overkill, Lieutenant Collins. Clear?"

"Aye, sir."

“Bauer, I see you have another question.”

“Sir! When will the Top and the witch be back?”

“Whenever he has finished mustering the new recruits and made sure that Nooria is unharmed.” The Colonel halts his words for a moment. “You all know that I was not overly happy when my stepdaughter decided to accompany our Russkie friend on his mission. However, to put it this way: you also know that the women of the Tribe are not entirely subjects to our chain of command.” A wave of low laughter goes around among the Lieutenants. “All I could do was to order the sergeant major to keep watch over her. Until she is back, you’ll need to rely on the corpsmen assigned to your squads. Any other questions? Speak your mind, DiMatteo.”

“Sir, we have recently received a report about a new kind of mutant. I mean, it’s not entirely new to most of us Lieutenants... but that they to appear over ground and in groups of three or four, definitely is.”

Silence falls over the tent. The Lieutenants don’t smile anymore.

“Yes, I am aware of that,” the Colonel dryly replies. “If you’d read the report prepared by Staff Sergeant Rush, you must also know that he called them smiters. One has to agree, it’s a fitting name for those walking juggernauts. I’ve already ordered Boxkicker to issue more incendiary rounds for the .50 cal on our patrol vehicles. Same applies for the squad automatic weapons and M27 rifles. You’re also advised to have at least one in every three M4 carbines mounted with a grenade launcher. Though all this is more the concern of Bauer and especially Ramirez than the rest of you who’ll move east to crush the scavengers. So far, smiters have appeared only to the south.”

“I hate mutants, no matter what they’re called,” mutters the Latino officer.

“That’s the spirit, Ramirez. No more questions? Make your preparations and stand by for my command. We’ll move out soon. That would be all, warriors.”

Seeing the Colonel having finished the briefing, First Lieutenant Driscoll barks a command.

“Ten-hut!”

The Lieutenants stand in attention and the Colonel lets his eyes go around his most trusted officers.

“Dismissed,” he says and lights up a cigarette.

Followed by Driscoll, he walks off towards his headquarters in the tower.

As soon as they have left, the Lieutenants break out in chatter over what they’ve just heard. Bauer, Ramirez and Collins leave the tent. Standing on a rampart and looking down to the cluster of neatly built stone and mud houses in the Tribe’s living quarters, they stand quietly. None of

them wants to be the first to share his doubts. Ramirez offers a box of cigarettes. Eventually, Bauer draws on his smoke and begins to speak.

"The Stalkers are dead."

"Leave that gung-ho bullshit for a second," the blue-eyed warrior says. "I'm not sure it's the scavengers behind the attacks."

"Those bastards this morning certainly were, Joe."

"Why would they attack our patrols?" asks the Lieutenant with the shaven skull. "Stalkers might be unthankful scoundrels but it just doesn't add up. They know we can crush them easily. Why would they provoke us?"

"The big man's right, José," Collins says, scrubbing his stubble as if his hand was itching. "If it had been two, three uncoordinated attacks, I'd also say it were some renegades doing crazy shit on their own. But that ain't the case."

"Dunno," Bauer says staring at his cigarette. "I'm with you about us being overstretched, Joe. The whole thing sounds to me like a good idea executed at the wrong time."

"That's right, but would you tell this to the big man?"

"The only man who could talk the Colonel out of this is the Top, and only heaven knows when he will be back. Damn!"

"Maybe Tarasov could reason with the Stalkers," says Ramirez.

"It's not about reasoning with the scavengers, José. It's about killing them as a training exercise."

"And all this mess just when both of them are away!"

"Look at the bright side," Bauer says tossing his cigarette into the wind. "The plan is good. We take Ghorband first – that place had been a thorn in our flesh long enough. Shouldn't be a problem. Then we wait. Maybe even the big man suspects that there's more to these attacks than meets the eye."

"Good point, Charlie. Too bad I won't be seeing any of that. If I get the same shitstorm upon my head in the southern passage like the Stalkers got at Bagram, it's anyone's guess how long I can hold on with everyone else gone east."

"Till death, or so it's expected."

"Hopefully the ragheads' deaths."

"Don't worry, José. I'll be in the Alamo. Just drop me a line if you can't handle the situation."

"Don't get too bored back here, huh."

"I won't. Gonna be flirting with Saria and busily praying for you for my conscience's sake."

"If you approach my woman you'll need to pray for your dick's sake. Saria is all fire and brimstone, *hermano!*"

All three laugh. José Ramirez eventually heaves a sigh of concern. “This will be tough and I got the shittiest mission like always. Why, God why? Anyway, the big man has spoken and we follow. The Spirit be with us.”

“It will be,” Collins says. “Let’s get ready to kick ass.”

The three Lieutenants make fists and bump each other with their knuckles.

13

Motel 6 on South Garey Avenue, Pomona, Los Angeles

Standing with his back to the wall with a cigarette in mouth, Sergeant Major Hartman appears like any ordinary guest who would enjoy a smoke on the veranda overlooking the courtyard, escaping his uninspired room.

He stares at the pool in the courtyard and slowly shakes his head. It is vacant at this late hour but the water is still illuminated by lamps below. To him who calls a desert fortress his home the sight of so much pure water, used for nothing, is an incredible waste of one of the most precious resources.

The room door opens and Tarasov appears. “Mind if I join you, Top?”

“Hell no,” Hartman says and kills his cigarette in an ashtray.

“I’m worried about the boy,” Tarasov says.

“Giving him lots of water and cigarettes is all we can do. He’s going cold turkey.”

“Meaning?”

“Ain’t no time for rehab. He either manages to live without that shit or I don’t wanna know his other option.”

“What worries me is that the kid might be a walking virus container—HIV, hepatitis and who knows what else he could’ve infected himself with.”

“He’s all FUBAR,” nods Hartman. “That’s why we brought Nooria along. She should know how to deal with things beyond any doctor’s science.”

Tarasov sighs. “All we can do is to wait. The first few days are the worst during drug deprivation.”

“Your folks back in Ukraine, they too got a drug issue?”

“You’ve got no idea. One day I caught a few of my rookie soldiers preparing stuff from painkillers, iodine and lighter fluid. They called it Krokodil. A very cheap substitute for heroin. Invented by Russians, of course. When I asked the medics about it, they were looking at me as if I came from the moon. Turned out that in the Big Land even school kids use that shit.”

“Looks like your country too could use a big and thorough clean-up.”

“Which place on earth doesn’t, nowadays? Anyway, about Pete... when we bring him back to the Colonel, what then?”

“He will probably take the kid down to the Spirit to make a real warrior out of him.”

“What? I thought I had bound it with Nooria’s stone! You know, the last gem from the big Buddha statue’s crown or whatever it was!”

“See this wall? The rain has stopped an hour ago but it’s still moist. Same with the City of Screams – the worst might be over but the Spirit’s power still lingers around.”

“I don’t understand. I blew the tunnels leading to those cursed catacombs. How could anyone get in there now?”

“There’s a passage from the northern side of the hill. Only the Colonel, I and Driscoll know about it. Nooria too, of course.”

“Gospodi...”

“Come again?”

“Oh my God. Anyway—now that you mentioned Driscoll, what’s the matter with him? I’ve never met a crueller man.”

“He has been difficult to deal with even before we met the Spirit. Driscoll was the first to enter that chamber and probably got the most of it. If he hadn’t been a brainwashed jarhead like that worthless little junkie called my Marines, he would have gone mad. But our discipline... it goes into one’s nervous system. And into that of our enemies’ too, because they get very nervous when we come for them.”

“What was his problem?”

“It’s a sad story. Maybe I’ll tell you another time. Anyhow, the man has a death wish, just can’t make up his mind what death he wishes for more—his own or that of our enemies. The only death he wants to avoid is that from the Colonel’s hands. It would mean the big man has lost his trust in him for whatever reason, and the Colonel’s trust is all Driscoll has. Many more of us, too. I’d say, if the Colonel was the Godfather, Driscoll would be Luca Brasi.”

“Krestniy Otets. I know that film,” Tarasov smiles. “And who would you be?”

“Something between Clemenza and a consigliere. I mean the Abbando sort, not that pussy Tom Hagen with his queer hairdo. Before you ask—you could make a good Albert Neri. Pete would be Fredo, as I see him now. Glad you know that movie. It’s outstanding, simply outstanding.”

“Pete might have a Michael Corleone in his heart. He’s got his father’s blood after all.”

“Right now anything useful in him is hidden under thick layers of shit. We’ll peel that off, though, with a KA-BAR knife if necessary.”

“Part of it will be to clear up at least part of the truth about his father.”

“I doubt it will make any difference.”

“It will, for him.”

“Maybe. The truth about his father alone will not make him a better man. What if it does, anyway? Soon we’ll be back to the Alamo and everything will go on as it always does, who knows how long and where it will take us.”

“You sound a bit demotivated, Top.”

“You know, the Colonel and I have been through a lot of shit. Always living to our Code, always performing at two hundred per cent, always burying some of the Marines under our command. Always fighting with one hand tied to our back... Then we got to the City of Screams and the thin red line. You know that part already – we didn’t step, but jumped over it. You have been to the Alamo. We’ve got everything there, except booze because the big man can’t stand drunk warriors. Indeed, there is something I miss from all this.”

“Just a little peace, maybe?”

“Nope. Just a little treason.”

Frowning, Tarasov looks at Hartman.

“And a little treason is exactly what I will commit tonight,” the sergeant major replies with a wink of his eye. “Time to get my bottle of jack from the car. Dare to be my partner in crime?”

14

Antonov bar, Bagram

Ashot’s bar in the derelict transport airplane is empty, safe for three Stalkers in the corner in various states of intoxication ranging from being pissed to completely smashed.

Behind the counter where not even sober patrons could see what he is about to do, the barkeep is busily pouring the third bottle of Stolichnaya vodka into a jerry can. Then he takes the plastic tube protruding from another container, sucks on it and lets the liquid inside flow into the first one.

Satisfied with what he is doing, Ashot starts humming a slightly altered version of his favorite Bob Marley song.

I shot Voronin

But I didn’t shoot no more Duty, oh no! Oh!

I shot Voronin

*But I didn't shoot no more Duty, oh, oh, o-oh.
Yeah! All around in my home base,
they're tryin' to track me down;
they say they want to bring me in guilty
for not killing everyone Duty
for the sake of humanity.
But I say...*

He is about to light up a joint when he hears the metallic *click* of a revolver being cocked. He turns around and sees Shrink at the counter, pointing a .45 Magnum at his head.

"The man himself!" Ashot says, hiding his embarrassment behind a wide smile. "Welcome to me humble establishment!"

"Listen up, Ashot. Me taking over this place means you're my druggist. You better stop tampering with our best medicine."

"Yes yes yes, I will be the best droggist any shrink had ever had!"

"I said: druggist. Not droggist."

"What you mean actually is called a pharmacistian."

"No. It is called a droggist, and from now on you will sell only pure vodka."

"But I no make any profit on selling old Kalashnikovs, you see? Wanna ruin poor me?"

"I will kill *poor you* if I catch you watering vodka ever again, is that clear?"

"I promise! Just put that shooter away from me face!"

Shrink uncocks the fearsome pistol and holsters it. Relieved that the new commander is not inclined to shoot him over their squabble, Ashot risks one more argument. "It's still called a pharmacistian."

"If I say it's a druggist, it's a druggist."

"You mean a *pharmacist*, you two morons!"

Shrink and Ashot look to the bar where a short Stalker is impatiently drumming on the counter with his fingers.

"Moron, you said? Who calls me a moron?"

Frowning, Shrink is about to deliver a lecture on manners but just stares speechlessly when he sees the new arrival remove hood and balaclava. The Stalker turns out a woman with short, raven black hair.

Ashot looks at the exoskeleton the female Stalker is wearing. He points his finger at her, opening and closing his mouth again as if trying to recall a name.

"Yes, Ashot, it's me. Mac."

"Wow, Mac! I thought you went to Stalker paradise!"

"I almost literally did. Thank Billy I turned back just in time before the dust storm of the century hit."

"Ashot, could you introduce me to this... lady?" Shrink asks, still unsure over what he is seeing.

"Oh yeah! Mac, this is Shrink. He is the new boss in Bagram!"

"Oups," Mac says in embarrassment. "That makes you the only moron left, Ashot."

"No offense taken," Shrink quickly says.

"—and Shrink, he—I mean, *she* is Mac, Yar's apprentice."

"Apprentice no longer, hiding my face longer. I got bored of both. You serve food?"

"I can give you some 'tourist's breakfast' and even warm it up for you!"

"Cold is good. It's for Billy."

Ashot peers over the counter, then recoils. "No entry for jackals and pseudodogs in me bar!"

The mutant jackal patiently sitting at Mac's feet gives him a growl. Mac pats his furry head.

"He'll not bite your butt, Ashot."

"It's not about biting me butt but pooping in me bar! I no will clean up radioactive mutant poop!"

"It's not radioactive."

"But it's still smelly!"

"All right, all right. Get out of here, Billy. Wait outside."

The mutant yelps with disappointment but obediently jogs out to the lowered ramp of the old airplane where he sits down like a well-trained watch dog.

"You said the jackal warned you of an impending dust storm?" Shrink asks.

"Billy gets very nervous when a storm comes," Mac explains. "He can sense it, yes. Like any dog, because he is a dog."

"If you say so," Shrink replies with a jovial smile. Mac returns the friendly look, apparently happy that the base commander has spared her the usual discussion over her pet's breed. "In any case, I would say that keeping him as a pet is a reflection of your inner desire for company. Mind if I offer you a drink?"

"I can't believe it – at last a male with manners. Too bad I'm not much into Ashot's poisoned sewage water."

"Uhm... with Bone and his Dutyers gone, at last I can serve the real stuff, see? No more water in me vodka!"

"Let me try, Ashot."

“That will be twenty dollars.” With a wide smile, Ashot takes a bottle of Cossacks vodka and fills up a shot glass. “But since you are me first customer today, I’m givin’ ya a discount!”

“And I thought the folks back at the Asylum were nutcases enough,” Shrink says shaking his head. He waves in Ashot’s direction. “What brings you to our desert airplane, Mac?”

“I’m back here for the job.”

“At last there will be again someone helping out Mister Fix-it,” Ashot says. “We can expect proper repairs now!”

“It’s about that signal tower, actually.”

“Yes,” Shrink nods. “From now on, PDA signals will be available to everyone. No more monopoly over communications with *me* in charge. Yar has already extended the signal range over a range of ten kilometers around Bagram.”

“Yeah, that’s how I got the news.”

“Next step is to extend it to the north where most rookies are travelling through on their way here. Do you know your way around there?”

“You could say that.” Mac sends the shot of vodka down her throat and smacks her lips. “Much better than before. It was about time for a change of management around here!”

“*Na zdrowie*, Stalker. Pour me one, will you Ashot?”

Ashot fills another shot glass. Shrink gives its content a close look, then gulps it down, closes his eyes for a heartbeat and then emits a satisfied sigh. “See? You can serve decent vodka if you want... not as good as Zubrovka, though. So, Mac—guess you’re here to find someone to watch your back in the wilderness outside. Aren’t you?”

“For me to watch his back, actually.”

“Don’t gimme that look, dear! I no can leave my bar!”

“I was just wondering why the Antonov is so deserted, Ashot. Maybe your unkempt dreadlocks scare your customers away.”

“Just wait for the evening! Stalkers will pour in, pouring vodka down their throats and telling ya how they single-handedly finished off a pack of jackals and found dozens of Heartstone artifacts! Ya can make your pick then!”

“I don’t need little boys with big mouths, Ashot.”

“Judging by your pet and the F2000 you carry, you’re prepared for close quarters. Let’s see if I know someone reliable with a skill for long weapons,” Shrink says studying the Stalker’s equipment. He strokes the stubble on his chin. “Mac, you like men who talk too much?”

“Definitely not.”

“Then an assistant of mine would be just the right choice. Calm guy, keeping his thoughts to himself if he believes it’s useless to reason with someone. Otherwise, he speaks his mind.”

“What’s his name?”

“Got to admit I could never memorize his call sign. Something like ‘axe a little’ or ‘box a bottle’—it breaks the tongue of even a Polish. Sometimes he talks to his rifle, calling it by an even more tongue-breaking name.”

“Sounds like a weirdo to me.”

“I’d rather say, eccentric. For snipers it’s like an occupational disease. First I tried to heal him out of being a natural born loner, but when I saw him shooting a dushman from a distance of three hundred meters didn’t bother anymore. He’s beyond my skills. If human brains are broken watches and me a watchmaker, I’m not up to deal with a fine Swiss chronometer.”

“Come on, boss,” Ashot says with a skeptical smile while he cleans the counter. “Maybe ya wanted to say three kilometers? Not as if I’d believe that either.”

“Ashot, give me one more vodka,” Mac says. “I’m with you on this. With a good rifle, even a rookie could hit a target at three hundred.”

“At pitch dark, without night vision, aiming and adjusting range only by the noise the dushman was making in the bushes?” Satisfied with the impression his words have made on the Stalker, Shrink proudly smiles as if he was the sniper himself. “If anyone of you guys do it after him, I’ll analyze you for free.”

Ashot expresses his respect by giving a whistle. “Maybe it was him who shot that sheriff in me favorite song!”

“Is this guy in Bagram now?” Mac asks, now much more curiously.

“He’s up in the lookout tower. Loves to be left alone, you know.”

Mac is about asking for another drink when Shrink’s radio set starts crackling.

“Shrink here,” he says taking the receiver fastened to his body armor.

“Commander, you asked me to keep calling the Asylum but I still get no copy from them.”

“Keep calling them.”

Shrink’s face darkens as he puts the receiver back to its holder. “It’s the Stalker manning our communications gear in the tower. Mac, there is a change of plans. I want you and that box-in-bottle find out what’s going on in the Asylum. Can you repair a radio?”

“Sure, but do you really think the silence is because of a broken radio?”

Looking genuinely concerned, Shrink drums his fingers on the counter. “I think of their radio being broken because I don’t dare thinking of anything else.”

15

Motel 6, South Garey Avenue, Pomona, Los Angeles

Pete’s night had been a horrible one.

Every pore in his body was screaming out for stuff. Writhing on his bed with his skin turned gooseflesh and covered with cold sweat, he didn’t even try to sleep. Every minute or so he switched the air-con on and off, pulling a blanket over to warm himself, only to tear it off himself a few seconds later because he was suffocating from heat. Realizing that he had left his notebook in the abandoned house makes him even more upset.

Time appeared to stand still. He zapped through the TV channels with the voice down for minutes – or was it hours? He walked up and down the room, bashing and kicking the walls, cursing his father, the world, the people who came for him. The window could be opened only ajar and he found himself fighting for breath.

Then, just like in the car before, the desire to escape was all over him again. If he could only get away, he would find a way to obtain opiates—any opiates at any price.

He expected the door to be closed. Sneaking down the veranda and the stairs, he arrived at the vacated motel lobby and stopped at the cube ice-making machine, staring at it with an unfocused gaze. The faint blue light in the display window appeared insanely beautiful. Pete served himself one portion of ice after the other until melting ice cubes were all around his bare feet. He stepped on them, wondering why it felt like stepping on glowing coal.

The main door too stood open, letting the smell of wet asphalt stream into the lobby. Pete looked at the street lights outside, hesitating. He wished he would be able to run but already breathed heavily. Then the call was too strong to resist – somewhere outside there *had* to be stuff and he *had* to get it.

Pete was barely outside when someone blocked his way. He wanted to just punch him and push away, cursing, but the piercing blue eyes of the huge man in front of him made his curse turn into a whimper. *I fucking hate you, Hartman* was all he could utter. Hartman didn’t care to reply, just shoved him back to the motel where another shadow was coming down the stairs. Pete whimpered once again, this time in fear – the mess of red and white calluses covering the right half of the strange girl’s face appeared to squirm and twist. *You must be feeling dizzy, little bother*, she

said. Taking Pete's hand she lead him back to their room where she sat down in the sofa, pulling Pete closer to her until he was lying there with his head in her lap. *I'm dying*, Pete whispered and she replied *yes you are*. Then Pete felt her hands on his forehead from where she wiped off the cold sweat; her touch was soft and warm on his skin and Pete felt as if it would drain the ache off his whole body. *You are dying but will be reborn*, she said, caressing Pete's forehead which perspired no longer, and he felt like sinking into a pool of darkness with redeeming sleep in its depths.

Pete awakes in his own small room where the muted TV is still on. He has no watch but the bright light falling through the window tells him that it's late morning already.

His throat feels parched. He takes the Dasani that someone had caringly put on the bed stand; it still tastes cool as he greedily draws on it. A drop of water falls to his chest, making him aware that he is all naked. His clothes, cleaned and by now almost completely dry, are neatly arranged on a chair.

He quickly puts his clothes on. They smell of disinfectants and washing powder.

He tries to remember the last night, unsure if all had been for real or just a nightmare. It must have been real because he feels strangely light-headed, without the aches and nausea. Maybe it was just the sleep. It was his best in a long time, though he still finds it hard to believe that he was able to sleep at all.

Yet it all feels as if something had been taken from him; together with the thought of being virtually a prisoner, this feeling still leaves him in a dark mood.

He opens the door but almost shuts it again, seeing Tarasov sitting half-naked in a chair with Nooria kneeling in front of him. For a second, he gazes at her amazed—it is the first time he sees Nooria without her raincoat on, and the sight of her loosened, curly hair that coats her back like a silky, chestnut-colored robe down to her waist, impresses him beyond measure. Embarrassed over having interrupted a moment of intimacy, Pete is about to step back into his room but Tarasov waves to him.

"Come, kid. We're almost finished."

Thinking wild, perverted thoughts, Pete walks up to the couple.

"Good God!" he exclaims upon seeing what Nooria is doing. "Did you get that from Sancho's men?"

Tarasov looks at the wound on his chest Nooria is treating.

"No petty thug could inflict such a cut on me. How did you sleep?"

"Restlessly."

"No wonder. The Top told me you have a sleepwalking problem. Ouch!" Tarasov scowls. "That wound hurts enough without you biting my nipple."

"Sorry, I'm just playing a little."

Nooria leans closer to the wound she is sewing up and bites off the yarn protruding from the stitch. "Here you go—done. You behaved very bravely."

Tarasov gives a long sigh of relief and kisses Nooria's hand as she stays. She giggles, nonchalantly adjusts the jeans on her hip and wipes off a short piece of yarn from her red sweater. In Pete's eyes, the strange couple looks as if they'd be way beyond niceties like saying thank you to each other.

"Tea or coffee?" she asks, making her way to the kitchenette.

"Coffee. Pete?"

"Yeah, me too."

"Little brother will get herbal tea," comes her reply from the kitchenette. "I prepared it myself."

"You better don't contradict her," Tarasov says with a smirk, seeing the disappointment on Pete's face. "Sit down. Let's have a chat."

"Tell me first—is she really my stepsister?"

"Yes, she is—"

"She looks hot in those jeans and with all that long hair."

"—and Nooria being my wife makes me your stepbrother-in-law. That's our proper degree of kinship. We found it out last night with the Top over a bottle of whiskey."

"Geez. Could this family get any queerer than that?"

"Let's forget the in-law part. Just listen to me, as your stepbrother—"

"I want to know more about her. Who is she, actually? And what happened to her face?"

"To answer your questions I need to tell you your father's story in a nutshell, although a cartridge shell would be more appropriate."

"Tell me one reason why I should be listening to that."

"You think I came to see Disney World, huh?" Tarasov asks with a hint of anger in his voice. "Your father saved many good people to put me in debt. Finding and telling you what I got to say is what I have to do in exchange. Better listen up, Pete."

"I already know his story," Pete says with a shrug but sits down. "First he went on a killing spree with his Marines, then mutinied. Sorry if I'm not too proud of him."

Tarasov sighs and drums his fingers on the armrest of his chair. “First things first—you’ve been a Marine yourself and know how the drill goes about being the most badass fighting machines in the world.”

“I call it brainwashing.”

“During the Bush war, he struggled with the idea of fighting with one of his hands tied to his back. He believed that a brutal enemy can only be beaten by displaying the same brutality.”

“I know where the story goes. He lost it and massacred a whole village. It’s been all over the news back then.”

“Did you ever reflect on why it was on the news?”

“Why should I have?”

“Because that ambush was to provoke your father’s Marines into fighting back with full force, and staged such way that a news crew could record it from a perfect angle. It started with setting a nurse school on fire and... let’s say, *abusing* a girl who stood up against them. It was that girl who warned your father’s men about the bad guys. The village was destroyed in the fight. Once your troops left, the bad guys came back and littered the ruins with bodies of civilians they had killed themselves, arranged in a way to look even more disturbing on TV. That news crew paid them well—and then paid with their life too when they fell out with the terrorists over money. All that was witnessed by a shepherdess who managed to escape. It wasn’t easy, but with her help I found proof of all this.”

“That may be so, but then they revolted. Marines! You get that? Jesus, what a fucked up war. Marines never ever revolted. They are the *semper fidelis*, for chrissakes! It makes me sick to think of my father being part of that! Afghanistan—fuck that place.”

“Your father was between hammer and anvil, so to say. On one hand, he was faithful to his country and on the other, he knew that his country demanded an impossible victory from him. In his eyes, achieving victory for America was impossible because America itself prevented him from dealing with the enemy the proper way.”

“This doesn’t give me anything.”

“In his opinion, the war could have been won only by being fearsome and brutal because that’s the only language they understand. But he saw that whenever your soldiers behaved like that they got punished—for painting obscenities on bombs, pissing on the bodies of killed enemies, burning their bodies and ‘holy’ books... As he said, to be invincible one must be feared—kill one man, terrorize a thousand. But in that war, whenever his country killed one man she apologized to ten thousand. He said, America is more afraid of judgment than her enemies and that war proved him right—in the end it was judgment that defeated his country.

I'm not saying that subscribe to his point of view entirely but merely repeat his words."

"You Russians were less squeamish during your own war there but still got your ass kicked. How about that, huh?"

"First, I'm not Russian but Ukrainian. Second, our ass wasn't kicked. We were on the brink of victory when you Americans, in all your naivety, thought that anyone fighting the USSR must be a good guy and delivered Stinger missiles to the dushmans. It compromised our airborne operations which proved very, very effective until then and—" Tarasov waves. "Oh never mind, I got carried away. Shortly after that incident, your father's unit was sent to clean up a place called the City of Screams. It's a ruin in the middle of nothing, called that because the Mongols massacred there a whole town several hundred years ago—"

Nooria enters with two mugs of steaming coffee and tea, then leaves without a word. Pete sniffs at the beverage that has a dark brown color and smells of herbs. Even the vapor carries a calming effect.

"But what's really dreadful is what lies below the ruins," Tarasov carries on after sipping on his coffee. "It's a node of the Noosphere or so I believe, something that we have in our own Exclusion Zone, but this one is about pure evil."

"The—Noosphere?" Pete asks and wrinkles his forehead.

Tarasov reflects for a moment. "It's something to all humanity like a signal is to cell phones. We don't understand its nature. Just like an ordinary user wouldn't know much about cell phone signals. Anyway, in the New Zone, it reduces people and animals alike to their primordial instinct of aggression and mutates their souls and bodies into mere tools of such destructive instinct. It was bound by an ancient power that the bad guys destroyed in 2001. The rest is history. Your father and his best men were exposed to this evil but it did only partly overcome them. It pushed them over the edge though and they revolted, but were too disciplined and too loyal to each other to start killing each other."

Tarasov's face darkens as he recalls his own experiences in the catacombs.

"Anyway, what they ultimately did was the only way to win a war in Afghanistan. Picking a loyal ally, giving it its own little land and ruling over the rest together. It doesn't go without going native, and that's what happened to your father and his men. It seems they've found a new homeland there and consider it the only place in the world where they can live with their honor intact. In the Tribe's understanding, loyalty to a corrupted country run by self-righteous bureaucrats, lawyers and activists was corrupting their honor to which they had pledged."

Sergeant Major Hartman's voice comes from the bathroom where he is singing the *Yellow Rose of Texas*, very cheerily and horribly out of tune. Tarasov and Pete share a grimace.

"Strange understanding of honor," Pete eventually says.

"For the Tribe, it's like religion and they deserve respect for that."

"And who are you, Mikhailo? By what I saw last night, I guess you're some KGB assassin." Pete looks into the bottom of his mug where the tea has left a strange, thick sediment. "You sure this stuff is safe to drink?"

"Nooria's concoctions usually are. Just don't ask her what's inside."

"What's inside?"

"She wouldn't tell, just mumble something about herbs and artifact powders. They don't call her a witch for nothing, you know?"

Pete looks puzzled. "What? Artifact powder? What the hell's that—artifacts?"

"You'll see. Back to your question – there's no KGB anymore. In my country, it's called SBU now. I used to work for them occasionally, but now I'm just a Stalker. This stands for many things: scavenger, trespasser, adventurer, loner, killer, robber, of which I've been everything except for the last one. Before that, I was the commander of our troops securing the Exclusion Zone around the Chernobyl NPP." Seeing Pete stir, Tarasov laughs. "Don't worry, I'm not radioactive! To cut a long story short, not so long ago I was sent on a classified mission to the New Zone, as we Stalkers call what's left of Afghanistan. One thing led to the other, and I would've been killed by your father's people if it hadn't been for Nooria's mother – and ultimately, for Nooria."

"How romantic."

"Maybe from hindsight... anyway, the shepherdess who witnessed the set-up that framed your father was Nooria's mother. The abused girl warning your father's unit was Nooria."

"Got to admit I find her very peculiar."

"What's your guess, how old is she?"

Pete shrugs. "Don't know. It's difficult to judge age by such Middle-Eastern faces. My guess would be something between seventeen and twenty-five."

"Correct. In terms of years, she's twenty-three. In terms of lore and wisdom, she might be a thousand or even more."

"Now you're exaggerating. That's fantasy, dude."

"You've probably noticed the tattoo on her forehead. The only similar one I've ever seen was on a wall painting in a room that's been sealed for almost nine hundred years, and probably built another nine hundred years before that."

“Gosh! Okay, maybe I’ll let her call me her ‘little’ brother even if I’m two years older than Nooria.”

“Yes. The girl who is now washing up our tea cups bears the wisdom of—”

The bathroom door opens. Hartman enters with the vigor of a wild elephant, still wiping his upper body with a towel.

“We still got some coffee left?”

“You’re late for that, Top. Nooria has even finished doing the washing up.”

“Too bad for me. Anyway, there’s plenty of drive-thru’s on our way. Let’s get our gear and shove off!”

“What exactly is that Meat Market where we’ll go?”

“You’ve been always wondering where we get our supplies from. Today you will see.”

Nooria arrives from the kitchenette, holding her curved blade and pulling it from its jeweled scabbard.

“Mikhailo, are you finished talking to Pete? I need to cut his hair. My brother must not look like a sister.”

“You will not touch my hair with that weapon of mass destruction!”

Pete is about to jump up from the sofa when the Top grabs his shoulders and pushes him back to his place. Nooria starts cutting Pete’s black hair, ignoring the cusswords he utters under his breath.

“I always wanted to have a baby doll,” she says with a chuckle. “Now I have a baby brother. Don’t move, Pete! My knife is very sharp.”

“Don’t cut the kid’s ears off, Nooria,” the Top replies, slowly releasing his grip on Pete’s shoulders as the youth accepts his fate. “He’s got a big enough problem listening to me already.”

16

Mountain range around the former asylum at Ghorband (Stalker outpost), New Zone

In the United States Marine Corps, rifle squads usually consist of thirteen men. When the remnants of Colonel Leighley’s recon battalion rebelled and took the Hazaras under their protection, they found themselves at war with everyone around them strong enough to wield a Kalashnikov. Their stretched defense meant that single squads had to perform what had normally been a platoon’s task, and they rarely massed their forces to reach the numbers that would justify calling them a company. The Colonel had each squad commanded by one of his men who were with him in the catacombs of Shahr-i-Gholghola and became his most trusted and fierce warriors. He referred to them as his Lieutenants,

regardless of their earlier ranks save for Sergeant Major Hartman. No matter what, the warriors of the Tribe hung on their past as Marines and a Marine force needs a sergeant major as much as a body needs a backbone.

Later on, as their strength grew with recruits flown in and the martial Hazara youth beefing up their ranks, the Colonel could have refer to his units as companies and platoons but the term 'squad' stuck. It could by now mean any force between that and company level, organized in task-force manner as the objectives require. The nature of fighting in the wilderness where small skirmishes are the norm rarely makes big operations necessary, and it doesn't happen too often that a Lieutenant moves out with a 'squad' of three hundred men which would more or less equal the fighting force of three rifle companies.

Hence it is to First Lieutenant Driscoll's great satisfaction to look over the column of Humvees and trucks carrying the three hundred men of Task Force Anaconda. The vehicles stand still on the narrow road below the hill from where he observes the Stalker outpost through his binoculars. Lieutenants Collins and Schmidt are at his side.

"Looks like the scavengers did half our job already," he observes.

Though the road block at the end of the ruined village is manned by Stalkers, they appear busy looting the dozen bodies strewn around their position. Black smoke rises from behind the Asylum's all but impenetrable mud brick walls.

"Never seen them fighting among themselves before," Lieutenant Schmidt says.

"Scavengers," Driscoll grumbles with disgust. "At least we can save some ammo. Let's get this show on the run!"

"Sir, there's something weird about this." Collins lets his own binoculars down and points to the men looting the bodies. "They look different. The bodies have the standard scavenger kit. The looters though—look, it's trench coats."

Schmidt nods his agreement. "Yeah, I wonder how they could run over that place without heavy weapons. Most of them only have shotguns but those Ghorband guys were all armed to the teeth."

"So what? Trench coats seem to be the new scavenger fashion," Driscoll says. "Doesn't matter much what they're wearing when they die. Collins, call the Gunny and let his Javelin team move up here. I want them to blast that place before the assault team moves in."

"Aye, sir," Collins replies and takes his radio set to convey the order.

17

Bagram, New Zone

Mac leaves Billy at the bottom of the lookout tower and swiftly climbs the metal stairs. She is about to greet the sniper on the platform when he raises his hand, without turning back to look at her.

“Stay behind me,” the sniper says. “We better talk like this.”

“What?”

“It would be like talking to myself. But if you step into my aura, we start interacting. Exchanging glances. Gesturing. It would interrupt my concentration. Besides, I already know who you are and what you are, Mac.”

“How could you?”

“I hear the noise your exoskeleton makes. Your voice is hoarse now it betrays that normally, it is very soft. It sounds very young, too. I’ve heard of only one young Stalker who owns an exoskeleton, because rookies cannot afford one. He was Mac, Uncle Yar’s apprentice.

“Correct, so far.”

“Then I can smell soap on you. You smells better than Stalkers usually do. Adding this to your soft voice, and removing from the equation the not very likely possibility of you being gay, results in the probable assumption that you are a woman.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. Some of the best snipers in the world were women.”

“Does anything else exist for you apart from sniping?”

“Sure.”

“Like what?”

“Let’s talk about it another time.”

“Will you tell me at least your name?”

“Call me Ahuizotl.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Ahuizotl.”

“What does it mean? “

“A kind of spook, much like a ghost. Several ghosts, actually, such as the Headless Priest, the ghost dog Cadejo, or the Carreta Nahua, a wooden cart carrying chained lost souls—and some more.”

“¿Eres de América Latina?”

“Sí. Managua, Nicaragua.”

“Vamos a hablar español, porque soy de Argentina.”

“No. I prefer English if you don’t mind. I need some practice and yours is very good.”

“Ahuizotl... For a sniper it’s a great call sign since you are supposed to be like ghosts.”

The sniper nods.

“Now that you know so much about me and me about you only that you’re a hardcore sniper—”

“I preferred you saying, over the edge.”

“—maybe it’s time to tell you what I originally wanted. Shrink wants us to pay a visit to the Stalkers in the Asylum. Their comms are down and I may need to repair it, if that’s why they don’t reply to our calls.”

Ahuizotl shrugs. “All right. Let’s go.”

“Just like that?”

“The boss told us what to do and off we go. What else do you want, a farewell party?”

“Uhm, okay. If you are ready, I am ready.”

Mac is about to descend the ladder when the sniper scans the hills around Bagram once more. Then he fixes his binoculars to the northwest, where the road to the Salang Pass and the Asylum runs through a sparse forest.

“Look at that, Mac.”

Peering through the sniper’s heavy binoculars, Mac’s first reaction is to emit a surprised wow.

“These binocs are fantastic!”

“I know. Zoom in on that road intersection, about two kilometers from here, left from that ruined bus stop.”

“I see—I see a Stalker. He appears wounded. And—Jesus, I see a pack of jackals just a few hundred meters away, between him and the base!”

“He’s dead already,” Ahuizotl coldly observes.

“Shoot those damned mutants! You are supposed to be a sniper!”

“No. Even if all my shots were kills, there would be still enough mutants left to finish him. It makes no sense to waste precious ammunition.”

“You are a coldhearted bastard, you know that?”

Ahuizotl keeps watching the scene.

“Those are not jackals!” he says but Mac doesn’t listen to him. She grasps her PDA and switches to the emergency channel that every Stalker in the range of a few hundred meters receive.

“Wounded Stalker approaching Bagram base from the north-west. Jackals will attack him within a minute. Help! Brothers, help him!”

After a long moment, replies start pouring in.

“Is there a reward for risking my skin for him?”

“Tell him to send me the coordinates of any hidden stash before it’s too late.”

“I’m cleaning my rifle. By the time I get there he would be dead. Too bad, but the New Zone is about taking another life.”

“If he was a good Stalker, we’ll drink to him once more!”

Then at last Shrink's reply comes and he seems to be the only one who cares.

"Mac and Axe-in-a-Bottle. Get to the URAL immediately. Guards, raise that container and open the gate!"

Praising Uncle Yar for welding the steel ladder such way that the guards can simply slide down, Mac gets down and runs to the armored truck which has a twin-barreled ZU-23 anti-aircraft gun mounted on its flatbed. Shrink has already started the engine and the truck is slowly rolling towards the opening in the container wall surrounding the Stalker base when Ahuizotl reaches it. He grabs Mac's hand and jumps to the flatbed. Billy follows him with a huge leap.

"Switch to your intercom!" Shrink shouts while he drives the truck through the gate. "You better know how to use that autocannon!"

"You have no one to handle this shit?" she shouts back.

"Of course I have! You!"

Mac almost falls off the flatbed as the truck speeds up but Ahuizotl grabs her arm at the last moment.

"I know how to shoot this," he yells at her. "Hold on to the handrails!"

Shrink accelerates the massive truck and drives straight ahead towards the intersection. The shortcut through the bushes wins them a few minutes, but also prevents Ahuizotl from firing the cannon forward where the truck's cabin blocks the cannon's line of fire.

"Keep right, keep right!" the sniper shouts. "I can't fire from this angle!"

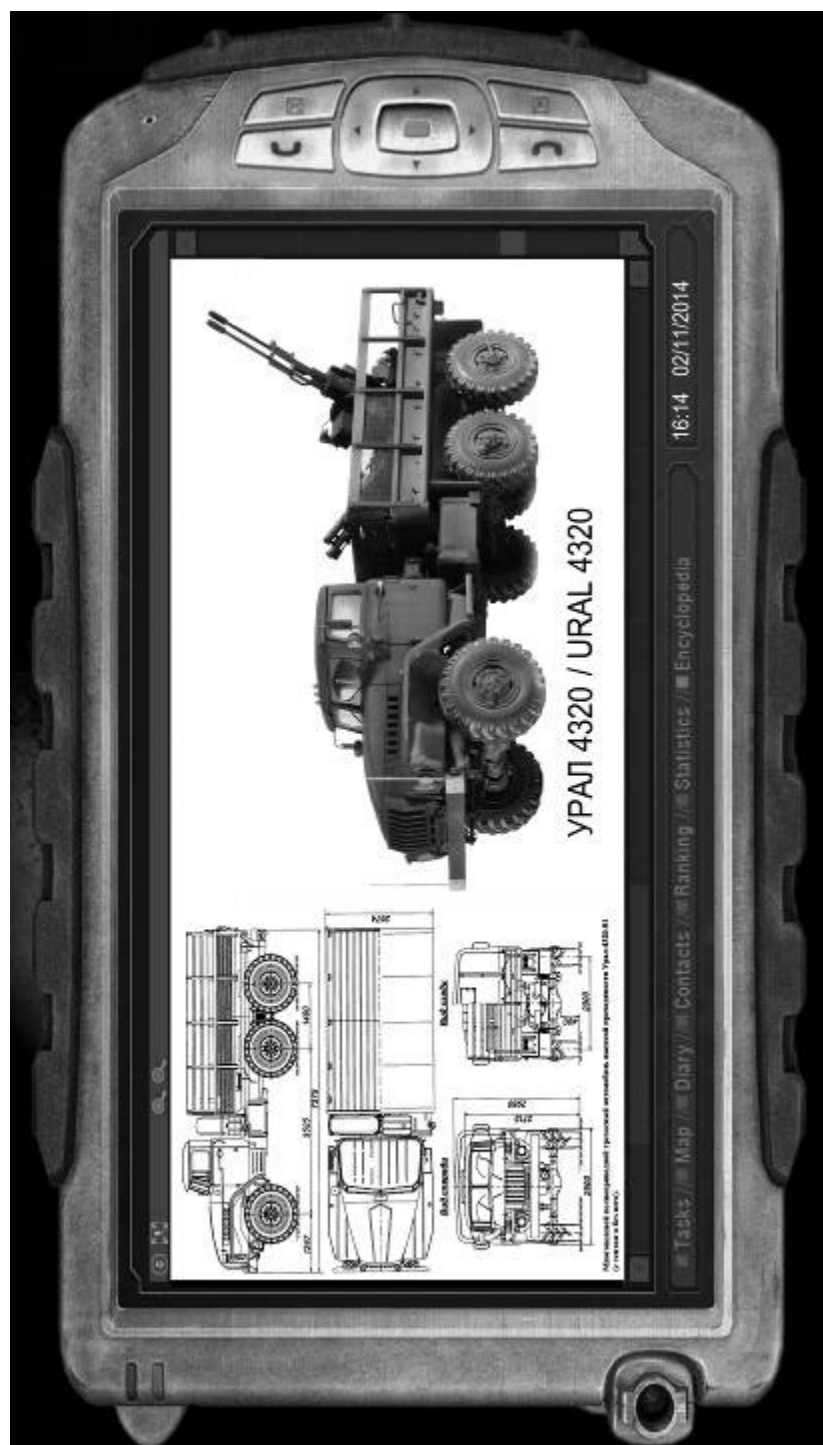
Ignoring him, Shrink drives the truck directly into the mutant pack. They have meanwhile sniffed out the bleeding man and move in for the kill.

Holding tight on the handrails on the left side of the flatbed, Mac watches the pack. The canine mutants that looked like jackals from the distance are actually twice their size and boast an enormous snout with fangs as long and curved as a saber. That would make them appear fearsome enough, but their red eyes glow with a rage that is insane even for a blood-thirsty mutant.

"These are not jackals," she yells.

"Told you so. It's wolves! Shrink! Turn the truck to the right! To the right!"

Putting his trust into the 15 tons of steel driving at full speed, Shrink attempts to run through the pack but the mutants are on their guard. The pack splits and lets the truck drive into their middle where they don't only keep up with its speed but encircle the vehicle.



“Mac! Keep those beasts away from us!” the sniper shouts. ”I can’t hit them at this range!”

Mac doesn’t need to be warned: she’s already holding herself with one hand and firing bursts from her F2000 rifle with the other. On the flatbed of the speeding and bumping truck, aiming is impossible but she hopes to hit at least the mutants running up the truck before they can leap onto the flatbed. Ahuizotl has also drawn a pistol with his left hand and fires at the wolves closing in on the truck.

“Hold on,” Shrink’s yell crackles in the headset. “We have almost reached the patient!”

“Keep driving instead of trying to be funny!” Mac shouts back.

At the same moment, one particularly agile mutant makes a leap and lands on the flatbed. Billy jumps at its throat but wouldn’t stand a chance against the wolf even if he were a fully grown jackal. Mac pulls the trigger, only to realize that the magazine is empty. The wolf’s massive fangs are about to tear into the yelping jackal’s neck when three rounds from Ahuizotl’s pistol hit it. The mutant shakes its head, as if trying to get rid of the sudden pain, and turns on its human attacker with a growl. Billy snaps after it, his sharp teeth getting hold of the wolf’s foot and interrupting its attack. Mac puts all her strength into the kick she delivers to the drooling mutant. For a second, the red glow disappears from the wolf’s eyes. In the next moment, a long burst from Mac’s rifle tears into the wolf’s head and makes sure that it doesn’t return.

Once more, Mac desperately grabs the handrails when the truck suddenly slows down.

“Grab him! Pull him up, pull him up!”

The wounded Stalker is kneeling on the ground. He looks up, and for a heartbeat Mac sees the pain on his face so clearly as if nothing else existed in the world.

“Your hand! *Day ruku! ¡Dame tu mano!*” she shouts in several languages and grabs the Stalkers outstretched hand as the truck approaches him at reduced speed.

The Stalker must have realized that his saviors will not stop and politely ask him if he needs a ride. Ignoring his exhaustion, he runs a few steps holding Mac’s hand aside the truck and then jumps. With her free hand, Mac grabs the belt on his armored suit and pulls him up to the flatbed. Then she unslings the weapon once more and starts firing at the mutants closing in.

“Nice catch,” she hears in the intercom. “Now brace yourselves, this will be bumpy.”

With the Stalker in safety, Shrink accelerates the truck and reaches the road embankment in a few seconds. The massive wheels tear into soft mud

and toil up the steep ascent. If lifeless rubber and metal could act desperately, the wheels wouldn't act much differently now from the Stalker who had pulled all his strength together to get into safety. Mac needs both hands to hang on and prevent herself from falling off the truck.

By now, the wolves won't need to be particularly to jump on the flatbed, but the asphalt road gives the truck an advantage not even the most resolved mutants can match. The truck accelerates to a speed that threatens it with falling apart, bumping over potholes and rocks amid the cloud of dust now blowing from its tires and chassis. The distance between the URAL and the wolf pack quickly grows.

But the mutants don't give up easily. Running at incredible speed, the quickest ones are almost catching up with the truck when at last the twin-barreled cannon starts firing. Its muzzle blinds Mac who loses any chance to effectively fire her assault rifle, but it is no longer necessary – Ahuizotl swathes their rear with short bursts from the cannon until the hard-hitting 23mm cartridges melt into an arc of fiery steel, decimating the mutants and suppressing the painful yelps coming from their scattered pack.

In a minutes, the truck rolls through the open gate into safety. The guards have barely lowered the container blocking the entrance, and the engine is still idling when Shrink jumps off the cabin. "Is he still alive?"

Mac glances at the Stalker she has held in her lap for the past few minutes. "Yes, he made it!"

"Bonesetter!" Shrink yells. "Where's the doc?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!"

A round-headed man appears among the Stalkers gathered up around the truck. He is the only one unarmed and wearing only a light brown jacket, appearing almost like a civilian. He checks on the wounded man whom Mac and Ahuizotl have carefully lifted off the truck.

"Get him into the infirmary! Do you want me to treat him here in the dust, you idiots?"

Inside the steel containers that might have once accommodated transiting visitors when it was still an air base, the Stalker is laid on one of the dozen makeshift surgery beds. Bonesetter cautiously removes his torn body armor. Two gun shots have penetrated the body armor but the integrated Kevlar plates have absorbed much of the impact, turning what would have been deadly into painful, but non-lethal flesh wounds.

"Our Asylum—Ghorband is fallen," the wounded men mutters. "It was overrun. All dead!"

"What? Overrun? By whom?" Shrink's face turns pale. "Mutants? The Tribe? Speak up, Stalker!"

The Stalker sighs as the effect of the painkillers administered by Bonesetter begins to set in.

“No. Bandits. They came out of nowhere and slaughtered everyone—I was returning from an artifact hunt and all I could do was to seek cover, stay put and watch how they looted the place... The Bandits saw me. I had to run away—”

“Bandits? There are no Bandits here!”

The Stalker tries to lean up from his bed. Apparently angered about Shrink not believing him, he grabs his arm and pulls him closer. “I have seen enough Bandits in the Zone to recognize not one but dozens of them.”

“Shrink, you know the drill,” Bonesetter calmly says. “He needs rest. You have heard enough for now.”

Shrink grazes his stubble. “Bandits? Then we should have left this sucker to his fate. There’s no need to piss off Bandits if they show up here!”

“Who said that?”

A Stalker steps forward. Shrink narrows his eyes and opens the folder of incoming messages on his PDA.

“Is there a reward for risking my skin for him? Vaska Bulldog, did you send this message?”

“Uhm, yes. Why?”

Shrink’s blue eyes sparkle with anger. “Because you need some cowardice management, Stalker.”

He gives Vaska Bulldog a head-butt and the selfish Stalker collapses with a yell of pain.

“That’s a lesson for all of you,” Shrink says. “This is our base now. A Stalker base. We will not let each other down, neither will we let ourselves be bullied by thugs in ridiculous trench coats. We will fight whatever the New Zone throws at us. If anyone disagrees—he can join Vaska on his way to the wilderness. He is cast out and shall never again set his foot in Bagram!”

The Stalkers gathered in the infirmary look at each other. Some faces lighten up upon hearing their new leader speaking. Others frown, thinking that they might be drawn into a conflict interfering with their plans of staying out of any trouble. But no Stalker sides with the humiliated coward who is moaning on the floor.

Shrink nods. “That’s what I thought. All right, men, let’s Bonesetter do his job. Mac, Box a Little – you spread the warning about Bandits in the northern approaches. Uncle Yar and the rest of you—prepare the defenses. Dima Toad, Mishka Bear – on me. You are old Ghorband hands and will be my first assistants. Let’s prepare the defenses! Those bastards won’t catch us with our pants down!”

The sniper shakes his head as he watches Shrink leave the infirmary with his Stalkers.

“It’s Ahuizotl,” he sighs. “Not Axe-in-a-Bottle or Box a Little.”

Mac gives him a pat on the shoulder. “Cheer up, *hermano*. Not everyone can be called Mishka Beekeeper!...”

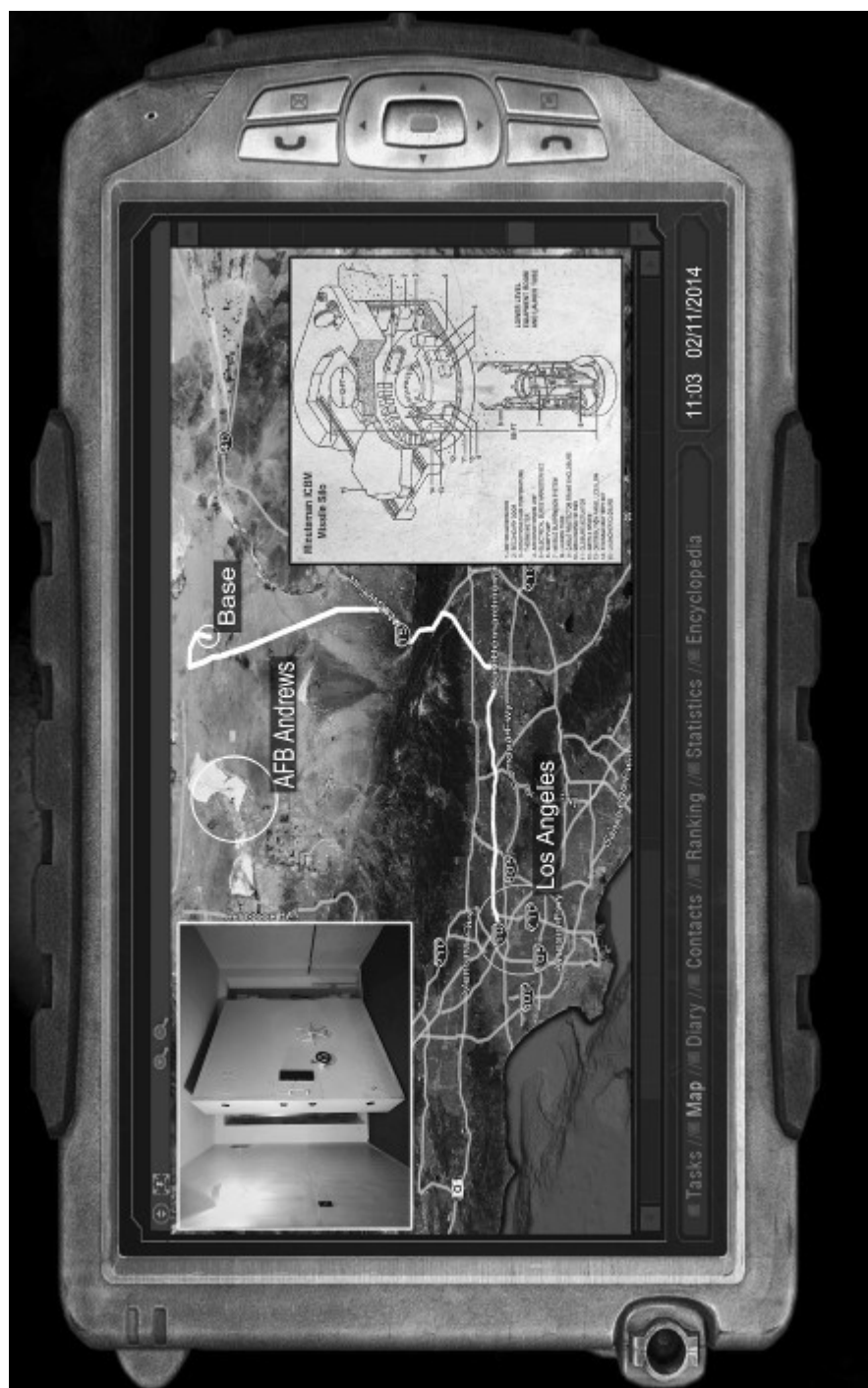
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Ontario Freeway, California

“Never believed I’d ever see a road sign for Las Vegas,” Tarasov says as their Jeep takes exit 58A from Interstate 10E and merges into the heavy morning traffic on Ontario Freeway.

“We’ll leave the freeway long before Vegas. In exchange you’ll have a glimpse of AFB Andrews,” Hartman replies. “Not as if you could see much from the distance.”

After thirty miles they take an exit toward Adelanto and continue northward on Three Flags Highway.



“Love this landscape. Reminds me of the sandbox. The New Zone, as you call it,” the Top says with a reference to the Afghan wilderness. “Wide and open. Makes me feel free... Doesn’t look it like home, Nooria?”

“I miss our valley, Top.”

Hartman takes a bottle of mineral water from the holster and draws on it. “Where we’re going is as close to the Alamo as it gets.”

“Must be some secret boot camp where you brainwash perfectly normal kids,” Pete grumbles.

“You almost got that right, kid. Almost.”

“Guess we’ll meet a bunch of rednecks with a vocabulary limited to *Semper Fi* and *gimme a mag, oorah*.”

“Listen, kid—instead of making us aware every minute how miserably you feel about us, give me your MP3 player. I prefer listening to music than your moaning.”

“Don’t think you’ll like my tracks,” Pete says handing over his iPod to the Top. “You’ve been warned.”

“You have any Metallica?”

“Metallica was yesterday.”

“Say that again and I’ll throw you out of my car.”

“You ever heard about Slayer? Songs like *Raining Blood* or *Have no Mercy*?”

“Nope, though the titles sound promising. Mikhailo, plug it in, will you?”

“Pop up the volume,” Pete says. “I want to see the pain in your face, Sergeant Major.”

The Top begins to grin and pat the rhythm on the steering wheel. Pete sees Nooria and Tarasov sharing a tortured grimace in the rearview mirror.

“Slayer,” he says with a shrug. “You’ve been warned.”

“That was enough,” the Top says. “Switch it off.”

Tarasov gladly complies.

“Told you wouldn’t like it,” Pete triumphantly says.

“Son, this stuff makes me want to drive with at least a hundred and fifty but speed limit is sixty-five,” the Top replies. “Pedal to the metal and a highway patrol will be on us in a second. We can’t risk that now. Let’s have something more relaxed.”

“I don’t have any music you’d find relaxing.”

“Then let’s just stay quiet.”

“Good idea,” Nooria observes.

A mile after the featureless town of Red Mountain, the Top takes a turn to the right, following a road going straight on a dull plain. Reddish brown hills loom in the distance beyond the mirage, making Tarasov

wonder if the Tribe had chosen this wilderness for its similarity to the Afghan landscape.

Expecting some kind of military base, he is surprised when the Top steers off the road and halts at a one-story building with three gas pumps in front of it. The place must have been abandoned for quite some time, because shrubs have grown around the pumps and the windows of the building are boarded. Nonetheless, he notices tracks left by dusty wheels on the broken tarmac, telling of recent visitors.

"You have seen America's worst yesterday," the Top says releasing his safety belt. "Today, you'll see her best."

"You got to be kidding," Pete says. "This is a bikers' bar! But where are the bikes?"

"Look at them," says Tarasov noticing the door swing open and two stoutly built men step out. They wear desert fatigue but no armor or weapons. "I'll be damned if I haven't met those guys before."

"Any hard feelings towards the Brothers, Mikhailo?"

"Strange. I'm actually kind of happy to see them again."

The Top switches off the engine. Before opening his door, he gives Tarasov a serious glance.

"You have no idea how much trust we place in you by letting you come here. You are our friend, but should the Ukrainian soldier inside you suddenly wake up and do some funny Spetsnaz stuff, or should you ever, wherever and for whatsoever reason get lose-lipped on what you're about to see—I will kill you myself."

"That's fair enough, Top."

"I'm deadly serious. Do we have an understanding about this, Major Tarasov? Because bringing you here means I vouch for you, and by trusting you I risk my honor."

"You have my word as an officer that I won't disclose anything about this to anyone, Sergeant Major Hartman."

"If that was enough for the Colonel, it'll suffice for me as well. Let's go."

The Top marches to the abandoned bar with huge steps that are difficult for even Tarasov to keep up with. The two men – one with a red beard, the other with sky-blue eyes – stiffen their stance as he approaches.

"Good to see you again, sir!" the blue-eyed man greets the Top.

"I hate it when my sergeants grin at me as if I were Miss November," the Top replies. "Both of you no-good pranksters, follow me."

The guards open the door and let the Top enter the bar.

"Hello, Spetsnaz," the blue-eyed guard whispers to Tarasov with a wink of his eye.

"Sergeant Polak! How do you and Brother Hillbilly like this view?"

“Dust and sand, sand and dust. Feels like home.”

“I’m lovin’ it,” Hillbilly ads.

“Zip it, Sergeant,” the Top snaps. “You make me feel hungry.”

With the two sergeants in tow, the Top moves directly to the bar where a young man wearing civilian clothes is waiting. His stubbed hair and USMC tattoo on his strapping arms tells enough of his real background. He nods his head in respect to the Top and opens a lid on the counter. A palm-reading device appears. The Top places his hand onto it. A green beam runs down the screen. After a minute, the noise of several heavy locks being disengaged comes from a door with a RESTROOM sign. It slowly opens and what appeared an ordinary door reveals itself as a metal gate fit for guarding the vaults of a bank.

“Close down the place and follow me.”

The fighter acknowledges the command with a nod and presses a button under the counter. Heavy, bullet-proof shutters descend and bar the light beams falling in through the wooden planks covering the windows. With the bar darkened, a blue glow emanating from behind the steel door becomes visible.

They all follow the Top who marches down a staircase. It takes several turns and leads deep below ground level, ending eventually in a narrow corridor. Another massive door is at its far end.

The Top presses a button on a metal plate fastened to the concrete wall. A pleasant but resolute female voice sounds from the speakerphone above.

“Voice check. Say the password.”

“Tarawa,” Hartman replies.

“Voice check successful. Welcome, Sergeant Major. Now identify the three elements you have with you.”

“I vouch for Major Mikhailo Tarasov on the Colonel’s orders. The other one is Corporal Peter E. Leighley, USMC. Last but not least, it’s the witch.”

“Please repeat.”

“Yes, you heard it well enough, Second Lieutenant Stone. It’s the big man’s son and Nooria. Let us in at last, unless you want to remain an usher for the rest of your life!”

The metal door slowly slides open. No matter what Tarasov and Pete might have expected, what they see is just a large room with yet another door at the far side. It is guarded by three warriors armed with M-4 carbines and wearing the Tribe’s sand-colored combat armor. A brunette female officer steps forward and performs a perfect salute.

“Sir! Second Lieutenant Stone reporting, Sergeant Major, sir!” “Stop screaming into my ear, Stone, I ain’t deaf,” Hartman replies. “I want to see the list of recruits.”

“Sir!”

Tarasov frowns. The respect the apparently senior officer shows to the sergeant major, who is after all below her rank, again reminds him of the unorthodox pattern of life in the Tribe. If the old saying of one saluting the rank and not the man is true, it certainly goes the other way round in the Tribe.

They are led into a cavernous, round room that buzzes with life. A round computer terminal is located in the middle, manned by a man in civilian outfit. Soldiers in fatigue appear busy everywhere – two fixing one of the many neon lights illuminating the hall, another driving a trolley loaded with open crates holding strange machine parts, while others tend to the devices that cover almost every inch of the concrete walls. With all the gauges and pipes running along the walls and under the ceiling, the place appears like a submarine being prepared for leaving port. This impression is even strengthened by a massive metal door at the far end of the hall. It appears as if it could withstand even a nuclear blast.

When Tarasov gives one of the machines a closer look, he realizes that what looks like an old-fashioned computer actually is one—built probably decades ago but still in perfect condition, even though they appear to be no longer in use. In contrary, the computers on the central terminal appear as state of the art as it gets with their large flatscreens displaying maps and muted news channels. He is surprised to see that the screen closest to the technician manning the terminal has a chat channel open.

“What the hell is that guy doing on AK47.com?” Pete asks. “And what’s this place, anyway? An old stage set for Starship Enterprise?”

Taking a sheet of paper from the Second Lieutenant, the Top goes through the long list of names printed on it. “Outstanding... outstanding.”

“Sir... permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Speak your mind, Stone.”

“Sir, during the last recruitment you promised me an assignment to the Alamo. I want to fight our enemies at last!”

“Forget it. Are the recruits ready?”

“Sir, the first dozen recruits are already lined up.”

The Top ignores the disappointment in the female officer’s voice.

“Let me see them. Sergeant Polak, Sergeant Hillbilly, you know the drill.”

“Sir!”

“I’m going to see the recruits. You guys can join me if you wish,” Hartman tells his companions.

Following the 'brothers', Hartman enters a smaller room where a dozen of young men are lined up in the middle. Judging by the fitness machines pushed into the corners to make space, the room serves as a gym and the faint smell of sweat tells that it is intensely used on other days.

The recruits are lined up in the middle of the room, with their backs to two closed doors where Polak and Hillbilly stand.

"Ten-hut!"

All men stand stiff when Hillbilly barks the command to stand still and the Top enters the room. It becomes instantly obvious who among them had ever served in any armed force.

Hartman looks over the men. "At ease. In the Tribe, they call me Sergeant Major Elliott Hartman. For you dewy-eyed manchildren my name is Sir Yes Sir. I don't care about knowing your name, because for me you are nothing but raw meat and raw meat has no name. The Tribe, *my* Tribe will be the meat grinder that will break your bones, squeeze your flesh and turn you miserable manchildren into warriors. And then, maybe, I say: *maybe* one day you'll have the unequaled honor of calling our Colonel your leader."

The Top looks around at the men.

"You look like a bunch of parasomniacs who in their sleepwalk got to the wrong place. Let me make one thing clear – you are about joining my Tribe. You can still change your mind. If you're getting cold feet over it, now's the time to leave."

Seeing that nobody moves, the Top carries on.

"Looking at your bunch of baby-faced manchildren, I'm sure only very few of you will actually make it. Those who do will leave everything behind. You will forfeit everything about your pathetic life outside – social security numbers, passports, nationality, family ties. You will disappear from this world. Once you join us, there will be only the Tribe and we want men who want nothing but the Tribe. Your umbilical cord will be cut for a second time and I will be the Ka-bar slashing it. By the time you will make a Tribe warrior, you will forget about alcohol – you will get drunk on our enemies' blood. You will forget about hamburgers because you will eat the meat of mutants you kill..."

"Such a liar," Pete whispers to Tarasov. "As if he wouldn't be burger addicted."

"Can't blame him," Tarasov breathes. "They do eat mutant meat over there."

"The thought makes my stomach turn."

"It's not so bad. Nooria knows some good recipes."

“...and you will forget about TV because the glorious shine of swags will make you forget about your hopeless little screen. Do you think you are up to it?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Even a litter of starving desert mice sounds more convincing!”

“*Sir yes sir!*”

“I don’t want to waste more of my Tribe’s precious time on you manchildren, so let’s get this over as soon as possible. You! First in the line from the right! Step forward!”

“Sir!”

The first recruit to be mustered is a brawny, young Caucasian male with a shaved head, wearing fatigue leggings and a white t-shirt.

“Why do you want to become a Tribe warrior?”

“I want to kill sandniggers, sir!”

“That’s good for a start, but exactly why do you want to kill sandniggers?”

“I hate’em, sir!”

“Why do you hate sandniggers?”

“For everything, sir!”

“In particular?”

“Nine-Eleven, sir!”

“And what about the *cholos*?”

“I hate’em too, sir!”

“All of them?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“And what would you do if you are given an order by a Lieutenant called Ramirez?”

“Follow it, sir!”

“What would you say if a black gunny called Anderson asked for your helmet to puke in it?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“I’ll give you a chance to prove that. Left door!”

The recruit turns around. He is about to walk to the door guarded by Brother Polak when the Top sees a tiny double-8 tattooed on the recruit’s nap.

“Back to me, double time!” he shouts.

When the bald recruit stands still in front of him once more, Hartman grabs his tee shirt and tears it off him. The recruit’s bare skin reveals a huge swastika tattooed over his heart.

“What the fuck do you think that is, manchild?”

“The sign of the brotherhood of all white men, sir!”

“Wrong! It’s a sign saying ‘watch out, asshole approaching’! It’s stinking skin disease! A disgusting birth defect! I’ve no need of mouth-breathing, basement-dwelling, white supremacist scumbags in my Tribe! Get outta my sight and take the right door!”

Brother Hillbilly opens the door and follows the failed recruit out of the recruiting hall. The door shuts behind him. After a few seconds, the sergeant is back and resumes guarding the door, standing at ease but with a face as hard as cast iron. Meanwhile the Top steps to the next recruit, a thin youth with a pale face, and gives him a stern look.

”Give me twenty push-ups, manchild!”

The recruit eagerly assumes a prone position on the floor and starts doing push-ups. His breathing becomes heavier with each push. At the eighth his arms begin to tremble. When it comes to the twelfth he gives up and stays prone.

“Get up,” Hartman sneers. “Who the hell has let you into my recruiting hall? Or did you got lost on the interstate on your way to Disneyland?”

“No, sir!” the recruits replies. He has sweat all over his blushing face.

“Where do they breed such a miserable stock of fish-eyed half-human beings like you?”

“Sir, I am from Iowa, sir!”

“You lie! The Hawkeye State would never produce such a walking inventory of failed genetic experiments! You better come up with a super-convincing reason about why you want to join my Tribe!”

“I hate Iowa, sir!”

“And what’s your problem with the great and noble state of Iowa?”

“It is boring, sir! The whole US of A is boring, sir!”

Hartman glances at the list of recruits in his hand. “Your file says you’re a nerd. Can you hack computer networks?”

“No, sir!”

“Can you repair equipment like an RQ-11 Raven small unmanned air vehicle?”

“No, sir!”

“Then how the hell did you get into my recruiting hall?”

“I... it was a mistake, sir! I want to go home!”

“Let me see your hand!”

The Top pulls a bank note from his pocket and puts it into the recruit’s palm.

“Here’s ten bucks, go and get yourself a discount video game. We are going to war and war is not about entertaining bored adolescents! Right door!”

The Top steps to the next recruit, a young black man with a thousand yards stare. He apparently makes a better impression on Hartman because he doesn't start addressing him with an abuse.

"I loved the way you stood at attention. Tell me you practiced it in your mother's dress room mirror and I'll cry in disappointment! Do you want to make me cry?"

"Sir! No, sir!"

"What's your story?"

"I was with 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Infantry Regiment, sir! Honorably discharged after Operation Whiskey Hotel, sir!"

"Never heard of it. What was it about? Bringing democracy to Belgium or what?"

"Sir! Not at liberty to say, sir!"

"Are you at liberty to tell me the ranger motto?"

"Sir! Rangers lead the way, sir!"

"And what's wrong with that?"

"I... We all have lost the way, sir!"

"Outstanding! You have a good take on how things are going in this country. Name?"

"Foley, sir!"

"Rank held?"

"Sergeant, sir!"

"What do you think of becoming a meaningless green private in boot camp once more?"

"Sir! In the Tribe – yes, sir! Proudly, sir!"

"You're aboard, Foley. Haul ass to the left door!"

The sergeant major seems to be in his element as he rants at the hapless recruits. Tarasov soon gives Nooria and Pete a sign to follow him out.

"Guess this might still take a while," he tells the female officer outside.

"Is there something we can do around here till he's finished abusing those who were stupid enough to volunteer for it?" Pete asks.

Second Lieutenant Stone gives him a disapproving glance. "Yes. You are free to move around in the base. And it's an honor to meet you, uh, *sir*, but watch your tongue. Even if you are the Colonel's son. We don't like being insulted."

"But, I mean..."

Tarasov gives a mental nod to the Second Lieutenant for reprimanding the cynical kid. "Is there a restroom where the kid and Nooria can have a chat?"

"You must mean the recreation room," Stone says with a little smile. "It's signposted. Follow that corridor to the left."

"And what's behind that blast door?" Tarasov curiously asks pointing at the massive door that had caught his attention earlier.

"Care to see?" Stone asks and turns the iron handles to unlock the door. It opens surprisingly softly. Following the wave of Stone's hand, Tarasov enters the room beyond.

He recoils. A sudden sense of dizziness comes over him as he looks down into the circular, deep shaft gaping ahead.

"Once a Minuteman-II intercontinental ballistic missile was standing here, always ready to deliver a nuclear warhead to Moscow. Maybe Kiev or Leningrad, whatever."

"A W56 warhead with a yield of 1.2 megatons of TNT, to be exact," Tarasov says under his breath. "Sixty times Hiroshima."

"Yeah. A real whizbang! This silo stood abandoned for decades. It's listed as dismantled and filled up with concrete in official papers. We've made a few tech upgrades to the silo and the bunker complex around it and moved in. Ain't nuclear disarmament great?"

"One of the greatest achievements in the history of mankind."

"Agree. Imagine if it would go on..."

"That would be truly great."

"Yes. All those missile silos in the States becoming abandoned!... We could take over a few more and then have the whole country covered by a network of bases!"

"That would be... outstanding. Thanks for the tour, but let's now get out of here. I feel kind of dizzy."

Stone closes the door. "Fascinating, isn't it?"

Tarasov nods agreement. "How do you finance all this?"

She reflects for a moment. "See... since the Top is vouching for you, probably there's no harm in telling you that from time to time we receive a shipment of swags from the Alamo."

"Must be big artifacts... I mean, swags. At least big shipments if you can afford all this."

"The last shipment weighed more than fifteen tons."

Tarasov almost jumps hearing this. "What? *Fifteen tons* of artifacts?"

"Yes, that was a big shipment. Usually, we receive only about ten-eleven tons of various swags every three weeks or so."

"And you spend the incredible wealth you make from artifacts on buying weapons, hiding in this missile bunker here and in your fortress in the New Zone?"

"Yes," Stone says with a smile. "For the time being."

“I’ve seen all kinds of desperate men wanting to join your ranks, but with all due respect – what does a charming, intelligent, young woman like you do here?”

“Sir – I might be young, charming and intelligent but not the kind of woman you take me for. I am a Second Lieutenant in the Tribe and privileged to keep up our Code of Honor, Courage and Commitment against all odds in the world. And if all my wealth were a dime, I’d gladly give it away to support our cause and follow the Colonel’s call!”

Although Tarasov can only guess what a dime means, he is well impressed by the Second Lieutenant’s dedication to the Tribe, even though she was obviously not among the Colonel’s Marines who turned into fanatic warriors after being exposed to the evil beneath the City of Screams. Not for the first time, he wonders whether his own defection had also been induced by that evil. Being used for bait to expose a general gone traitor, implicitly sacrificing him and his men, would have tested the loyalty of any officer; but what he really feels he betrayed is not Ukraine, even less so its army. It is the Exclusion Zone. Nooria, who appears to him as if she were holding all the mysteries of the New Zone in her dark green eyes, always had been a reasonable justification for his decision. Yet something keeps nagging at his conscience and now stirs up a sudden wave of homesickness.

“I have a PDA on me. Is there a facility where I could download messages?”

“Staff Sergeant No-Go can help you with that.”

“Staff Sergeant—who?”

“Not Hu. Ng, but we call him No-Go. He should be at his terminal over there. Only leaves his computers alone when he needs going to the restroom.”

“His name is... what?”

“Hui Ng. Joined us all the way from Taiwan.”

“I see. Thanks for the tour, Second Lieutenant.”

The female officer nods and gives Tarasov a respectful glance but gives him no salute when she hurries off.

He walks to a horseshoe-shaped workstation with large computer screens, several laptops and desktop PCs. A short Chinese man is sitting behind them on a huge chair. Despite his thin eyeglasses, No-Go doesn’t look at all like Tarasov would imagine a computer freak—the lean face and sinewy, tattooed arms rather remind him to a kung-fu fighter. With all the screens and computers around his workstation, he appears like a Bruce Lee who by some mistake wandered into the set of a science-fiction movie.

“Staff Sergeant... uhm, No-Go, I need logging on to a special server in Ukraine through my PDA,” Tarasov says.

“What does it have apart from a router and firewall?” No-Go replies barely looking up from a disemboweled PC he is mending. “VPN, IPS?”

“Come again?”

“I’ll need a little time to snuffle around before I can hack into a server, you know?”

“No need for that. I still have my password.”

“Oh.” No-Go sounds disappointed. “Help yourself. There’s an USB hub – plug and play!”

“Is that a secure connection? I mean, can it be tracked?”

“Course it can be. The question is what they find.” No-Go leaves the gutted computer alone and takes a wireless keyboard. He appears like a musician who’s about to play a challenging piece on piano knowing that it’s well within his abilities.

“If they try to nail the guy who made the call, a clueless geek somewhere in Beijing will be in for a surprise... look! I can see him hosting a guild party in World of Warcraft right now... geez, not only that. Seems like he’s running a gold farm! Damned cheaters... Now give me just ten minutes and all that gold will be mine, only mine!”

No-Go starts tapping his keyboard with fingers telling of routine.

“By the way, I presume it was you who provided us with Pete Leighley’s police file. Thanks, we would’ve never found him without that.”

No-Go sneers. “LAPD... gimme a break. We had police servers for breakfast before LulzSec got busted... oh yeah, those were the times!”

Tarasov logs on to the server of the Ukrainian military storing the messages during periods of an officer’s PDA being switched off. Back at the Tribe’s stronghold he did it a couple of times already, wondering if his old account is still available because the military hasn’t given up hope on his return. Knowing how things are run back in the army, sheer negligence is his other guess.

Intended for short periods during missions in locations where there’s no signal or during a leave, the log stores only messages from senders whom Tarasov or the system automatically has flagged as important. Now, after almost two months of absence, Tarasov is glad for this feature. It spares him the trouble of going through dozens of outdated emission warnings and status reports.

“Promotion to Lieutenant Colonel denied,” he reads out one of his messages, shrugging. “Looks like Degtyarev’s influence does have its limits after all.”

Most of the news is about usual events in the Exclusion Zone: supply lists, mission reports from his former comrades like *Freedom patrol sighted at Pig Farm, Dark Valley. Area secured. 2 KIA. Lt. Priboi*. A few Stalker warnings about mutant sightings.

All seems quiet in the Zone. Seeing how life went on without him, Tarasov is disappointed. The messages almost make him feel as if he were dead and looking back from the afterlife to the world of the living where he is no longer needed. Not even the thought of his impending return to the New Zone can cheer him up.

Only three messages are interesting. A report by a junior Duty commander shared with the military tells of an increased number of Bandits appearing. Strangely enough, they seem to avoid any confrontation with free Stalkers and other factions. The other two come from the same sender—Strelak.

Condor. Heard about your mission. Whenever you get back, come and see me. Back in my days I found something in X-18 that I want to show you now. Doctor and Barkeep are still reliable. Look for me in the Bar. Avoid Sidorovich.

The second, sent only a few days ago, makes Tarasov frown.

Condor. Got the SBU on my tail. Need your help. Hurry.

“Wow, yes! I’m rich!” No-Go shouts and thrusts his fist into the air, triumphantly. “All I have to do now is to re-route the server—hey, why so serious? Bad news?”

Tarasov reads the messages again, carefully. “Strange... first, an old friend says he has something important to talk about. A few days later, he says he’s in trouble and needs my help.”

“Who’s that guy?”

“An old friend, one of the last ones I still have in the Exclusion Zone.”

No-Go’s smart eyes wink behind his glasses.

“Let me know if there’s a change in your itinerary, okay? I’ll need to book your tickets, you know...”

“I need a moment to think this through. By the way – are you allowed to play video games all the time?”

“It’s part of my job.” Seeing Tarasov’s surprise, No-Go carries on. “Smaller part, though. The bigger part is monitoring YouTube and some forum threads—AR15.com, Marines.com and so on. Facebook too, of course.”

“How come?”

“Ever since the Bush wars, why do you think the bad guys were allowed to post hate videos showing our guys being blown up by IED’s, and worse? The NSA and all the other spooks were watching. As soon as Mahmud and Rashid started to praise those vids, the spooks ID-d them

through their IP address and put them under surveillance. Extremist sites —ditto.”

“And?”

“We do the same, just looking at it from another angle. If Jack or Joe starts ranting about killing all the baddies, we flag them, check them, and if they seem to be clear Judging by their net traffic, we reach out for them.”

“There was a kid among the recruits. Fond of computers, apparently. Did you find him like that?”

“You must be meaning the all-American Counterstrike champion.”

“What’s that?”

“Never mind, someone like you wouldn’t like it anyway. Though it made that kid a fucking millionaire. What door did the Top send him through?”

“The right one, I think.”

The hacker’s face darkens. “Uh-oh.”

“Why?”

“Well... anyway... so, as you see, our recruiting methods are much more efficient than Uncle Sam pointing his finger at you from a poster. But it’s just one part – there’s also the NRA, Probation Service, veteran and suicide help lines, Alcoholics Anonymous... lots of good people who’d get lost for the right cause without us.”

“All this must be top secret but you tell me everything without a second thought. How come?”

“The Top vouching for you makes you almost one of us.”

Although he is still curious about what this means, Strelak’s messages overwhelm Tarasov with desire to return to the Exclusion Zone. He is so much lost in his thoughts that he almost walks into Harman as he exits the recruiting hall.

“I see you are impressed by our little base, Major!”

“*Net, ya...* I mean, uhm, yes... You done with recruiting?”

“Twenty-four out of thirty-six. Good catch. Even got a Canadian and an kiwi among them. Outstanding stock.”

“Top, I saw and heard things I was probably not supposed to. Everyone kept telling about you vouching for me. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Follow me. I need you to see something.”

The Top opens a door. As soon as they enter the dark room behind it, an almost blinding light is switched on. A striking red stripe on the ceiling catches Tarasov’s attention. Then, as he looks down, a ghastly cry escapes him.

“*Gospodi...* it’s the recruit’s you’ve rejected! All dead!”

“Here they lie, one by one finished off by Sergeant Hillbilly’s silenced Beretta 92. They enter the room through that door from the recruiting hall. Light goes up and they instinctively look up to that red area on the ceiling, just like you did – and are dead before hitting the floor. A head jolting backwards makes for a perfectly clean headshot.”

“That’s horrendous!”

“Necessary, too. Now you know to what lengths we go to keep this place secret. We don’t want anyone talking about this base to the wrong person, be it for revenge or frustration over not being chosen. Though I feel kinda sorry for this kid here.” Hartman takes his ten dollars from the hands of the dead Iowa youth.

“No-Go said he was a millionaire,” Tarasov dryly observes.

Hartman shrugs. “So what? He was too weak to hold even a combat knife. I gave him a chance and asked if he has any skills we need. Well, he hadn’t. I’m tellin’ you, Major, if all these nerd types would make ten push ups every half an hour they spend video gaming or downloading porn we’d live in a better world. Anyway, you’re alive to see all this – that’s what vouching for you means.”

Tarasov is relieved when they leave the room. “I supposed you don’t have any alcohol in here.”

“We don’t but you can have a fix of caffeine. Hillbilly, Polak! Don’t stand there supporting that wall, it won’t collapse without you leaning against it. Show our friend to the next coffee machine and make sure he gets a real one. He’ll put his finger inside and if it doesn’t burn his skin off, I’ll get you reprimanded!”

“Aye, sir!”

“There’s something we need to discuss, Top!” Tarasov says.

“Later.”

Hartman hurries off. Brother Hillbilly gives Tarasov a gloomy smile.

“Our coffee recipe is classified beyond top secret but since the Top vouches for you, probably you can have one.”

“Only if no one gets hurt in the process,” Tarasov replies.

“Depends on who’s drinking it,” Brother Polak says as they walk down a narrow corridor. “It’s not for the faint at heart.”

“You know what that Scottish guy keeps telling me? That back in Somalia he once killed a whole bunch of skinnies with his coffee. Made it so strong that they got a heart attack.”

“Come on, Brother Hillbilly. I’m not buying that.”

He courteously opens a door to Tarasov and they enter a small, undecorated room where a few plastic chairs are the only sign of comfort. There is a chromed espresso machine on a table next to the wall that is decorated with an NRA poster. Tarasov finds the smell of freshly boiled

coffee more than relaxing, as well as seeing Nooria and Pete sitting there. The Colonel's son has a grin all over his face.

"That thing looks like a spaceship from an old sci-fi flick but makes decent coffee. Help yourself," Brother Polak says. "We need to do a little clean-up after the recruiting. If you miss our company, we should be back soon. We'll both deserve a cup of good coffee afterwards, don't we Brother Hillbilly?"

"You bet, Brother Polak. I hate that part of the job."

"Let's get that shit done."

Tarasov steps to the espresso machine. "I haven't got the faintest idea how to use this."

"Let me help you," Pete says getting up from his chair. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, why?"

"You're looking like shit."

"It's just that the Top reminded me of what the Tribe is about, actually."

"And? What is it about?"

"The best people I have ever known doing the greatest evil I have ever seen to achieve something that's beyond my comprehension."

"I'll need another coffee to understand even half of what you just said."

"Suffice to say, your father holds the greatest imaginable power over people on this planet. God have mercy on him if his power ultimately turns into evil. I'm afraid he has no soul anymore, though... unless you give it back to him."

Pete chuckles. "Sounds like mission impossible. Though he used to be normal once... I *think* I can faintly remember him petting a dog twenty years ago."

"What have you two been doing?"

"Being bored to death. My only entertainment is to see the self-proclaimed saviors of America hiding in this concrete warren like a bunch of rabbits."

"Soon you'll see them from a different angle, Pete... Thanks, that much coffee should be enough."

"Are we going back?" Nooria asks, barely able to conceal her hope for a positive answer.

"Yes, Nooria... but we'll make a detour. Let's go, we need to have a word with Hartman."

They find the Top at the computer terminal where he and the No-Go are going through some Excel sheets displayed on the screen.

"I feel for you," Tarasov says. "Guess you hate administration."

“Yeah, making inventory is a pain in the ass,” Hartman agrees with a grimace. “Thanks God I’ll take the newcomers to a few days boot camp. I love boot camp. You will fly back to the Alamo with Nooria and Pete. Bringing him back to his father will complete your mission, Mikhailo.”

“Not exactly,” Tarasov says sipping his coffee. “My deal with the Colonel was to tell Pete everything I know and have seen about the Tribe. Taking Pete back goes beyond that.”

“I love you, dude!” Pete shouts happily. “I don’t want to go there!”

The Top frowns. “Zip it, Pete. You want to stay here in California where the whole Florencia gang is hunting you now? I know you can’t turn to the police either. Don’t give me such a look! I know you’re wanted for one case of aggravated assault, two cases of attempted robbery and about a dozen times of petty theft. I wouldn’t want to have the choices you’d have if you stayed, son.”

“Do you have any idea how much I needed the money?”

“You will go back to your father. Period.”

“He is not yet ready to face him, Top,” Tarasov interjects.

“The hell he ain’t.”

“Listen, Top. Something has come up and we’ll make a little detour. I will take him to my kind of boot camp.”

“What? To the Ukrainian army? You gotta be kidding me.”

“An old friend of mine is in trouble in the Exclusion Zone. I must go back there, just for a short time, and will take Pete with me. Once we’re done there, he’ll be more than ready to meet his father.”

Surprised and terrified at the same time, Pete looks at Nooria. “Hope at least you’ve got your wits together! What do you think of this craziness?”

“I’ll follow my man wherever he goes, Pete,” Nooria smiles. “And to be honest, I’m excited about seeing his homeland.”

“Your enthusiasm is duly noted, Nooria, but I might have a problem with that plan,” Hartman says.

“Nothing to be worried about, Top. I will bring Pete and Nooria safely back to your Alamo but we’ll take a little detour on our way.”

“I don’t doubt you’re more than capable of keeping them safe, but I have my own orders from the big man.”

“About bringing him back?”

“About protecting him and Nooria, with my life and even against you if need be.”

“You’ll need to shoot me if you want to stop me.”

“Why is this guy so important to you, anyway?” the Top says wrinkling his forehead.

"I got two messages from him. The first was about something important he wanted to discuss with me. My friend, Strelok is his name, is one of the greatest Stalkers who have ever walked the Exclusion Zone. Suffice to say, the Zone has a dark history with all kinds of experiments conducted there first by the Soviets, then by the Ukrainian government." Tarasov stops for a heartbeat before he continues. "Strelok knows all the secrets, or at least most of them and if he says something is important, I better believe him."

"But why you?" Hartman asks. "He couldn't possibly know if you're alive at all."

Tarasov nods. "Yes, this crossed my mind already. Sounds like he's desperate. Because a few days later he sent me another message, telling he's in danger with Ukrainian KGB looking for him."

"Could be a trap to lure you back," Hartman says.

"Maybe, but there's another possibility," Tarasov replies stirring the coffee in his cup. "There's more connections between the two Zones than one could imagine."

"Like what?"

"Well... without going too far into esoteric stuff, one thing comes to my mind. Secret experiments conducted in the Exclusion Zone were partly responsible for what it became. We know they began in the mid-Nineties but such science doesn't come from nowhere. Maybe Strelok thinks I've found an early X-lab in the New Zone, or even knows about one. Don't know... just speculating."

"Maybe there actually is such a secret lab in the New Zone," Pete says. "That would explain how such weird species like the Top and the Tribe were created."

He obviously intended this as another sarcastic remark but unknown to him, his guess is almost spot on.

"Finding a lab preceding the Zone's creation would be like... finding a needle in a haystack," Tarasov says with a bitter reference to the code name of his mission that had originally led him to the New Zone. "Anyway, no matter what – I must help Strelok."

The Top thinks for a moment, then shouts for the base commander.

"Second Lieutenant Stone! Come over here for a second."

"Sir!"

"Whenever I come here, you start pestering me about a combat assignment. Are you prepared?"

Stone gives him a beaming smile. "Sir, yes, sir! Very much so, sir!"

"Outstanding. You will take the fresh meat to boot camp. If I'll like how they turn out, you'll get your combat assignment. To give you a little motivation – you might be assigned to First Lieutenant Driscoll's squad."

They've lost a few warriors recently and need replacements anyway. Do we have a deal, Stone?"

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! I will give them hell in boot camp!"

"No doubt about that. Keep your eye on that black guy, though. He might have got what it takes to be a good warrior. Besides, Lieutenant Collins could use another ex-Ranger in his squad. That would be all. No-Go!"

"I'm listening."

"Put the satellite maps up on that display." The Top turns back to Tarasov. "Now tell me, where exactly is your Zone?"

Tarasov recites the coordinates that every true Stalker knows by heart.

"Its center lies at 51 degrees 23 minutes 18 seconds north longitude, 30 degrees 06 minutes 12 seconds east latitude... and our infiltration point will be on the western edge of the Swamps, below the railroad emplacement with the wrecked freight train, opposite to the spot where the path to Agroprom begins and where a three meter stretch of the barbed wire fence is missing. No satellite map will show you that."

Pete protests. "Hey! Wait a minute! Why did nobody ask me about what I want to do? To hell with this, I don't want to go there! I heard about that place – it's irradiated and infested with mutants, anomalies and all that! Not even decent people there but crazy Russian shooters who jerk off on their Kalashnikovs!"

"I will be there too," Nooria tells Pete with a reassuring smile. "At least we will get to better know each other."

"We're going to the Exclusion Zone," Hartman concludes. "Outstanding! Let's go to the property shed. We'll need weapons, ammo, armored suits!"

"Sure, Top. Let's see if there's something we can use in the Zone."

Hartman gives him a proud smile for a reply.

The room where the Top leads him has a stronger door than the others. When Tarasov steps inside, he feels a tenfold of the awe that came over him when he saw the Tribe's armory at the Alamo. Walking down an aisle between two racks full of first-class weaponry, the Top points to the racks.

"Assault rifles, sniper rifles, silenced rifles, anti-material rifles, machine guns, chain guns, Gatling guns, bunker-busters, tank-busters, frag grenades, smoke grenades, stun grenades, incendiary rounds, armor-piercing rounds, tracer rounds, regular rounds, sniper rounds, light gear, assault gear, exoskeletons," he raps as quickly as a machine gun fires. "Welcome to warrior paradise!"

They halt in front of a workshop that seems to have all the gear of a weapon factory massed up on a few square meters. A merry-looking man

wearing a technician's khaki overall is standing behind a work bench and aims a futuristic assault rifle at them.

"Bang! You're blown away!"

"I am, actually" Tarasov replies looking at the rifle in the technician's hands. The behavior of the grinning technician is disrespectful at best but Hartman doesn't seem to mind. They even exchange a handshake.

"Major Tarasov, this is Jimmy the Nut. Best gunsmith in the world, although Boxkicker makes for a strong second."

Tarasov looks at the weapon in Jimmy's hands. Overall, it looks like a slightly bigger version of the M27 carbine that he has seen back in the Alamo's armory. The no-nonsense design tells of German origin.

"That's a Heckler & Koch, isn't it?"

"Not just *a* HK but *the* HK. 417, latest version. Mimics the AR-15 with a few gimmicks. Ergonomics *über alles*. This one's got a 20 inch barrel, telescope and detachable bipod. Fires 7,62x51mm NATO, emptying a 20 rounds magazine in two seconds. Yes, this one makes Kevlar a part of yesterday!"

"That probably means two seconds of fun and two minutes to let the barrel cool down," Tarasov observes.

"The barrel is cold hammer-forged. Can be replaced in a few seconds, even with simple tools in the field. By the way, our version has an accuratized barrel. Just make sure you use the proper ammo."

"Selectable fire?"

"Are you kidding? Single shots and full automatic mode."

"Short burst option?"

"You're hard to please, you know that?"

"I've heard that before," smiles Tarasov.

"Jimmy, when will these arrive to the Alamo?" the Top asks eyeing the weapon.

"The first few hundred or so in a matter of weeks, maybe a month."

"Jesus, Jimmy! What takes so long? Anyway, is that one over there what I think it is?"

"The fishgun?"

"No, that piece looking like an XM25."

"It also feels like an XM25 because it is one."

"I'll be damned. Let me try it – I mean, just holding it for a sec."

Tarasov studies the black weapon that the Top cautiously takes from its rack. It looks like streamlined, with its designers having eliminated almost every chance for dust and dirt getting inside. It has a bulky, non-demountable scope, apparently usable under any light condition.

"It's heavy," the Top says, assuming an aiming position.

"Twelve pounds. Won't be an issue if you wear your exo."

“How much does a single one set us back, Jimmy?”

“Thirty-five thousand bucks plus the ammo. Sorry Top, don’t reach for your credit card. This one’s not for sale yet!”

“Too bad. When and how many?”

“Depends on if the big man lets Allied Techsystems know the witch’s recipe. You know, her strange-smelling stuff that repels dust on gun metal. We might be in for a huge discount then.”

“What’s so special about this one?” Tarasov curiously asks.

The technician gives the Top a questioning look. He replies with a reassuring nod and Jimmy the Nut bursts out an enthusiastic presentation.

“This, my friend, is the modern version of the English longbow. We call it the XM25 Counter Defilade Target Engagement System. It has a range of eight football fields, meaning that you can stay out of the effective range of hostile assault rifles. You could do that with an RPG or scoped rifle too but this is far more accurate than a grenade launcher and takes a heavier punch than a long rifle, of course. That’s the long part. Once the trigger is pulled and the 25 mike-mike leaves the barrel, a computer chip inside the projectile communicates exactly how far it has traveled, allowing for precise detonation behind or ahead of any target. In practice, it will go through a wall before it explodes. That’s the bow part.”

“The longbow was a Welsh weapon, not English,” Tarasov wryly replies. “But I get your point.”

“Outstanding,” the Top says, handing the weapon back to the technician. “Truly outstanding. At last we have something useful that wasn’t designed by krauts or made by Belgians.”

“I knew you’d be impressed, Top,” Jimmy says, carefully putting the high-tech weapon back to its rack. He gives Tarasov a self-confident smile. “What about you?”

“Very impressive stock,” Tarasov replies.

“So, what would you like to have here? Now that the Top mentioned Belgium – care to try a SCAR? One of their new H-PR precision rifles? Perhaps something else?”

“Let me think... Do you have a Vintorez?”

The enthusiasm disappears from Jimmy’s face.

“Fuck. You.” Sinking in himself in front of their eyes, Jimmy the Nut looks rebuffed like a salesman who tried hard impressing someone with his stock and now realizes that he can’t deliver what his customer really wants. “A Vintorez... that’s sick, man!”

Tarasov doesn’t get Jimmy’s remark. “Sick?”

“He means, it’s outstanding, fabulous, great,” the Top explains. “Now he feels bad for not having any. You’ve stepped on a sensitive nerve there, Mikhailo.”

“No offense, Jimmy,” Tarasov says.

“All right,” the Top says clasping his hands. “Let’s decide which goodies we take with us. I would personally have a...”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Tarasov interrupts him. “We travel light.”

“Come again?”

“No weapons, Top. No grenade launchers, flame throwers, machine guns or sniper rifles. Neither exos nor armored suits.”

“You must be joking. If only half of what you told me about that place is true, then...”

“Everything is true, but probably you’ve no logistics in Ukraine to get such gear in and there’s no way to carry an arsenal in our checked-in luggage.”

“The man’s got a point about that, Top,” Jimmy the Nut says. “Sorry.”

“Damn,” the Top cusses. “Now that’s kinda anticlimactic.”

“Then, once there in Ukraine it isn’t exactly like here. You can’t just drive around with a trunk full of weapons. Most people can’t even own them legally.”

“Sounds like a dull place. Listen, I’m beginning to have second thoughts about this trip. What can we take with us?”

“Many things. Jimmy, we’ll need a dozen medikits or so for each of us. Lots of bandages and haemostatic drugs because bleeding can be a real pain in the neck... there’s something in the Zone’s air that hinders coagulation. Anti-radiation drugs, water purifiers, daily food rations...”

“Yikes,” the Top says with a grimace.

“Just about the same survival kit you use in the New Zone. I mean, in the sandbox, or whatever you call Afghanistan now. Then, some light but tough wear with a woodland pattern. Normal foliage green, not digital.”

“Now what’s wrong with that?”

“First, it’s ugly and second, it would cry ‘the Americans are here!’ We’ll need light rucksacks, sleeping bags, overboots, protective gloves for picking up artifacts, I mean swags and a gas mask for each of us.”

“Yeah, gas mask... but which type?” Jimmy asks. “We’ve got MR40s and 95s stocked.”

“M95,” the Top cuts in. “Smells better, fits better. Don’t forget spare filters and extra cartridges.”

“The M95 comes with full NBC proof filter already. No need to swap them as the wind changes, Top.”

“I don’t know shit about gas masks, Jimmy. I’m more into things I can shoot with.”

“Let me see one of them,” Tarasov says.

The armourer disappears in a storage room behind his workbench and returns with a brand new, black gas mask. Inspecting it, Tarasov slowly shakes his head. Compared to the obsolete GP5 masks commonly seen on Zone Stalkers which makes their wearer appear like an elephant, or even the military's more sophisticated PMK-2 type, their NATO counterpart was obviously designed with not only utility but at least a modicum of comfort as well. The M95's silicone-covered material feels much smoother, yet fits tighter and the mask even has a hydration port where a canteen can be connected. Nonetheless, the most useful feature to him is the close-fitting overall design and the wide angle of view through the two large eyepieces. Aiming a shoulder-fired weapon while wearing a gas mask is any rifleman's nightmare but at least this one would make it a little easier.

"They come with standard 40mm screw-in NATO cartridges, don't they?" Tarasov asks. The two Americans nod. "Good, let's take a few extra cartridges then. Could be useful should we ever need to trade with Freedomers."

"Freedomers?"

"Zone faction using NATO gear. Will explain later. Last but not least – we need bolts. A few dozen at least."

"Bolts? Do you think this is a DIY store?" Jimmy asks. "We're drowning in guns here and you ask me for *bolts*?"

"Bolts can do lots of things your guns can't. Like detecting anomalies. Can your XM25 detect anomalies? No. We need throwing bolts, not grenades."

"But what kind of bolts?"

Tarasov heaves a frustrated sigh. "Any."

"Listen, Major. I'm a precise man and take this kind of things seriously," Jimmy explains. "There's many kinds of bolts. Do you mean 1/4-20, 1/2-20, 1/8-20 or which caliber? Huh... size, I mean. What about screw-nuts, anyway? Those ain't good enough?"

Tarasov sighs and exchanges an impatient glance with the Top.

"Something like this," he says showing the size with his thumb and index finger.

"5/8-18, then. Okay. That would be 16mm x 1,5 for you in the metric world. Give me a few minutes to arrange all that."

Among the long weapon racks holding all kinds of rifles in several rows, they are already walking back to the lobby when something comes to Tarasov's mind.

"*Ten thousand pounds of education fall to a ten rupee jezail,*" he recites the Kipling quote he had heard from the Colonel when he met him first.

“Spot on,” the old warrior replies. “You know, I never told Jimmy but should I ever find myself in a really bad clusterfuck, I’d rather have my trusty M1911 pistol on me than any of his high-tech gadgets... but I still have a bad feelings about going there without weapons. *Any* weapons.”

They make their way to the lobby where Nooria and Pete are waiting at No-Go’s computers.

“We’re into a challenging trip,” the Top says. “Mikhailo insists on not taking guns.”

“We’ll need to keep a low profile,” Tarasov adds. “I’d hate to shoot at the same grunts I was commanding until just a few months ago.”

“But they are your enemies now,” Nooria says, surprised.

“My only real enemies are certain high-ranking officers and you won’t see any of them lurking in the Zone. That’s for sure!”

“And all the mutants you told me about?” she asks. “Those... snorks, pseudodogs, controllers and all?”

“We’ll need to avoid them, at least in the first days. Rest assured – when a Stalker has a destination in the Zone, he is usually pretty well equipped by the time he gets there. You can’t approach the Zone with heavy gear, but you’ll need heavy gear to survive there.”

“Sounds like a damned Catch-22 to me.”

“What do you mean, Pete?”

“What I mean is that the whole idea is bullshit.”

“Surviving there is not only about weapons and body armor. If you go in with gun barrels blazing and try to shoot your way through, the Zone will punish you. If you treat the Zone with humility and respect – it might just allow you to survive. We’re going to take a chance on that.”

“Sounds like a challenge and I love challenges. As for you, Marine – it might be a good opportunity to learn both humility and respect.”

“Top, stop calling me a Marine.”

“Once a Marine, always a Marine. Even if you went AWOL, even if you’re all but an empty shell of a Marine in your present state of a half-debilitated junkie.”

“Seeing you, a Marine doesn’t need to become a junkie to act like crazy.”

Scornfully, the Top steps towards Pete but Nooria stops the huge warrior by gently putting her hand on his chest.

“Are there swags in Zone, Mikhailo?” she asks Tarasov and darts a disapproving look at Pete who looks down to his shoes, shunning her eyes. “Like my glowing stones?”

“You will be in your element, I promise.”

“I want to leave right now!”

“Outstanding,” the Top observes. “When do we leave, No-Go?”

“Gimme a sec,” No-Go replies without looking up from his computer screen. “Thanks goodness, no visa’s needed with your US passports. That speeds up things. You can leave... let’s say tomorrow at 9.30 AM from LAX, stops at Chicago and LHR, arriving in Kiev at 1.15 PM the day after. With all the luggage you’ll have probably you’ll need business class or better.”

The Top and No-Go share a mischievous smile. “Once in a while we can afford a bit of comfort, can’t we?”

“Are our passports okay?” Tarasov asks.

No-Go glances at another computer screen.

“No noise from CBP and Interpol yet, but I’ll warn you if something pops up in their internal protocols.”

“Can you really hack into everything?” Tarasov asks in awe.

No-Go gives him a self-satisfied grin. “You want to see the self-nudes Lana Del Rey keeps in her smartphone? My gosh, that girl is... talented.”

“Who is Lana Del Rey?” Tarasov asks, innocently enough but still causing Nooria to give him a disapproving look.

“That’s enough bragging,” the Top snaps at No-Go. “Make the arrangements. Nooria, you check with the infirmary if they have something we’ll need. Tarasov, go through our gear once it’s assembled to make sure Jimmy didn’t forget anything. Pete, you stay put and keep your cynicism to yourself. Clear? Now I need to have a word in private with Stone. See you in an hour. On second thought, let’s make it two.”

“Sir!”

No-Go jumps from his chair and salutes. As soon as the Top has hurried off, Pete leans over the terminal to have a closer look at the screen.

“Hey dude,” he whispers. “You serious about Lana Del Rey?”

“Pete, on me,” Tarasov sternly says. “Let’s see if our gear is ready. Come!”

No-Go starts tapping on his keyboard again. “Didn’t even tell you that your trip will be sponsored by Shell... not as if they’d ever realize I’ve tapped their system. Go well, you’re going into hell... hey guys, you want travel insurance with the tickets?”

Tarasov gives him a laugh while he walks toward the storage rooms with Pete and Nooria.

“Guess that means no,” No-Go says to himself. “And like usually, no one cared to say thank-you to the local computer wizard. Tough boys, tough boys... what would you do without my magic?”

He hits enter and starts humming a song. *It’s you, it’s you, it’s all for you, everything I do, I tell you all the time...*

After an instant the melody is suppressed by the buzz of the laser printer ejecting e-tickets and boarding pass printouts.

19

Panjir Valley, northeast of Bagram, New Zone

Back at Ashot's bar in Bagram it all had appeared so easy.

Two days ago, when the brawny stranger appeared at Ashot's bar, he soon gathered himself quite an audience of bored Stalkers, all raving for stories about adventures, new mutants and artifacts. He claimed to have not only been to Panjir valley but a secret bunker or laboratory facility too. They all listened to him like idle knights must have listened to tales about the eastern realms before setting out on a crusade. The stranger's words flew like the vodka they were knocking down, and the next day, just like those knights of old times, two dozen adventurous Stalkers set out to find the promised land of artifacts and followed him to a wide, anomaly-infested valley beyond the forests covering the Shamali plains.

The stranger, wearing battered Duty armor beneath his ragged, long leather jacket, proved a perfect guide. The closer they got to their destination, the more fantastic his promises became. Oh yes, all those new and mysterious artifacts—the Emerald, raising stamina; the Heart of Gold, projecting its owner's image; the Heartstone, boasting health and preserving life. Unlike in the Exclusion Zone, every artifact is useful. The stranger's words made sense after all: a hidden area in the godforsaken wilderness far from Bagram, which he, as he himself had said, knows like the back of his hand.

A few Stalkers turned back with their premonition being stronger than greed. Their leader just laughed it off, saying that the less Stalkers arrive, the more artifacts the remaining men can keep for themselves. If their march had taken one more day, the Stalkers would have believed even a promise of artifacts growing on trees which only need to be shaken off to harvest. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, or just the hope that a trek as perilous and hard as theirs must be rewarded with treasures well worth the efforts. But two days after leaving Bagram, they arrived at what might have been an electronic sub-station once. Leading directly into the hill behind it was a bunker entrance, still half-buried with dust and rubble.

Now, in the underground vaults, the remaining Stalkers—about twenty of them—are exchanging looks of concern as they proceed deeper and deeper through this labyrinth of decaying concrete and rusting steel. One of them pats his PDA, as if the device could display a map without a signal. Another keeps looking backwards, checking if he could still find his way out if he got lost.

"Keep moving, boys," a Stalker says. Judging by his improved body armor and powerful Saiga shotgun he is a veteran of many raids.

“Where’s our guide, Cougar?”

The voice of the young Stalker walking behind him tells of fear.

“That’s why you should keep moving, Pashka!” replies Cougar. “We don’t want to lose each other from sight!”

“This place is just too darn creepy,” another Stalker whispers looking at the ceiling where water is dripping from thick, rusty pipes. His battered armor has a strange, blue and brown camouflage that betrays him as a former member of Clear Sky, a faction decimated in the Exclusion Zone years ago.

“Jesus, Willow,” the young Stalker says. “You’ve been everywhere, even to the CNPP. If you got shit in your pants...”

“I haven’t been to the CNPP, ” the former Clear Sky member says. ”That’s why I’m still alive.”

“Stop gum-beating, guys,” Cougar sneers. “Let’s move!”

More eerie corridors follow. Rusted signs and faded Cyrillic letters on the wall remind the Stalkers that this place had been a scientific facility decades ago: *Secondary Laboratories. Ventilation Maintenance. Library. From this point ahead entry in protective suits only. Long Live the Achievements of Socialist Science.*

Blue glow of anomalies on shrieking metal catwalks that threaten to collapse under the men’s weight. A seemingly bottomless cavern lies below with massive pressure tanks.

“What the hell was this place?” a Stalker whispers anxiously.

Cougar doesn’t care. His thoughts are fixed on the back of their guide. He doesn’t allow anything to distract him, unless he wants to lose him from his sight. In this huge underground labyrinth that would be fatal.

“We have arrived,” their guide says at last when they have passed yet another long corridor and through a steel door, ducking and bending to avoid the rotting cables hanging from the ceiling.

“Here?” Cougar skeptically asks looking around. “Where are all the artifacts you promised?”

Wherever he looks in the darkness, the light of his headlamp reveals only debris on the concrete floor.

“Give me a minute,” the guide says. “There’s a command post up there. I’ll switch on the lights.”

Alarmed, Cougar tries to grab him. “Hey! Wait!”

But the guide is already at the steel door. Before the Stalkers could stop him, he disappears outside and slams the door shut.

Cursing, Cougar and three Stalkers jump at the door and try to ply it open. No matter how hard they try, it wouldn’t move.

Fear makes the skin of even the most daring Stalker creep.

“No...” mumbles Pasha then shouts out, “no!”

“Calm down!” Cougar shouts, trying to sound reassuring. “Let’s follow the walls. There must be another way out of here!”

There is none. The Stalkers are lost in darkness. No matter where they look, no door, no exit appears in the weakening light of their headlamps. Only tubes and electrical fittings leading from the wall toward the center of the hall.

The Stalkers can hear their own hearts beating. The only other noise comes from water slowly dripping from the rusted tubes above. The concrete walls echo every step they make. It sounds fearsome and Cougar has to take a deep breath before he starts walking deeper into the darkness, following one of the pipes.

“Come with me,” he whispers. “Watch my back.”

“What the hell is this place?” Willow asks in a low voice.”

“Let’s hope it’s like X-16 was,” a Stalker behind them says, nervously peering left and right and holding his AKS-74U ready to shoot. “Been there once. Huge vault, just like this, and something weird with a staircase in the middle leading up.”

“Halt!”

They all obey Cougar’s command. The veteran points forward. If the Stalker who mentioned X-16 has hoped for something weird, he got it – but it is not a staircase leading out of here.

The pipe leads into a stasis tube, one of twelve arranged in a circle. The electric fittings are torn out or rotten away; the glass in the tubes is broken; and the tubes themselves appear like massive cages where the captive inside had bended the bars and escaped.

“Oh my God,” Pashka mutters.

“There he is!” a Stalker shouts, pointing upwards. “You bastard!”

Cougar yells at the shadowy figure appearing on the command post high above them. “Let us out of here, now! Let us out or I kill you, you fucking son of a bitch!”

The Stalker with the carbine aims at the guide and fires a burst. Several more join the fire before Cougar can make himself be heard.

“Don’t shoot him, idiots! Only he can open that goddamned door!”

But the trapped Stalkers cease their fire when they see that their shots barely do any damage to the bullet-proof glass. Faint laughter sounds at the command post.

“What are you doing to us?” Cougar yells. “Why did you bring us here?”

The guide appears busy. They can see him through the cracked, but still solid glass plates tampering with the gauges and valves fitted to the wall.

“You bastard!” Willow screams in horror, “I curse you! You traitor, you damn traitor!”

Whatever the guide is doing, he stops for a moment to shout back.

“Just call me Skinner, brothers!”

“We are not your brothers, motherfucker!” Cougar yells.

Skinner’s reply ends with an evil laugh. “Soon you will be, hahaha!”

Then he disappears.

The horrified Stalkers start shooting at the command post. Then, with ammunition wasted in vain and the bitter smell of gunpowder lingering in the darkness, they look at each other in terror.

Cougar swallows hard. “Okay, guys. I want every second of you switch off the headlamps. Let’s save battery power. Place all your grenades at that steel door. We’re gonna blast it open!”

The Stalker in Duty armor tears the gas mask off his face. “It opens to the inside, you idiot! We need a fucking RPG!”

The veteran is not easily intimidated. “Do you see any?” he shouts back at his despaired mate. “No? Why? Because we haven’t any! Put your damned grenades at the door, now!”

“That’s never gonna work,” another Stalker says. “There must be another way out of here!”

Chewing his lips, Cougar looks around. “You see any other exit? Whatever this bloody place was, it was made anyone from escaping and now it’s us trapped here. Move!”

After a minute, two dozen F-1 fragmentation grenades are piled up next to the steel door. “Stand back!” Cougar yells as he grabs a grenade of his own, pulls the safety pin’s pull ring with his index finger and tosses it at a low arc toward the others.

The splinters of the detonating grenade penetrate the steel casing of the others, pass through the explosive filler and strike the detonators. A series of blasts follow.

When Cougar looks up from his cover and sees the steel door blackened by the blasts but standing as firm as before, only one thing comes to his mind.

We’re doomed.

20

LAX (Los Angeles International Airport)

“Where’s Nooria gone? Oh, there she is,” Tarasov says waving his hand.

Appearing among the crowd in front of the tax free shops at Los Angeles International, a big, ear-to-ear smile is on her face and two heavily loaded bags in her hands.

“Jesus, woman! What’s all that?”

“I have been shopping for perfumes.”

“You could open up a perfume shop with all that! Couldn’t you make up your mind over which one to buy?”

“They don’t smell very good. I took a few and will mix them together. My own perfume will be much better.”

“Oh gosh,” Pete exclaims covering his nose, “I was supposed to sit next to you but that smell on you makes me sick... no offense, but how many did you try?”

“All.”

“Holy Mother of Jesus Christ – all?” Hartman asks with not entirely feigned horror on his face. “The only thing I love about airports is the smell of kerosene. Second best only to napalm. Now I won’t be able to feel a single molecule of it!”

“I am sorry, Top.”

“Pity that our gas masks are in the checked-in duffels... I could use one of those M40s right now.”

“I’ll need a full NBC suit once you start smoking those cigarettes,” Tarasov says looking at Hartman’s own bag, holding several cartons of non-filter Lucky Strike cigarettes.

“Those ain’t for me but the big man. It’s his favorite brand.”

Tarasov walks down the gangway with mixed feelings. He cannot suppress a certain excitement over flying back to his homeland and the Exclusion Zone, but he also regrets to leave America, this big and intriguing country he had never hoped to see one day, so soon and after barely seeing any of it.

Keeping in mind that they might have lots to discuss during the long-haul flight, Tarasov and Hartman pick two neighboring berths while Pete and Nooria make themselves comfortable in berths behind them. Meanwhile a middle aged woman, wearing lots of heavy golden jewelry, courteously helps Nooria to store her coat. Her smile vanishes when she sees the scar on Nooria’s face.

“Glad to fly business,” the Top says storing a tax-free bag with an oversized bottle of whiskey inside. “I’d hate to spend six hours squeezed in economy class.”

“That female officer in your secret base,” Tarasov says making himself comfortable in the berth, “she’s quite a character.”

“Who? Oh, you must mean Katie. Katie Stone. Sure as hell she is.”

“Why don’t you let her join your combat units? She seems extremely committed to your case.”

“For that alone? We all are. No, Major, we need no females in the line of fire.”

“I bet she’d do as well as any male warrior.”

“Her rifleman skills are fine, but that’s not the point—”

The pre-flight announcement interrupts him. By the time it is over, and the airplane lifts off the tarmac, Tarasov has already forgotten his question. It seems to have touched a sensitive point in the Top’s heart, however, because when the engine noise becomes lower at travelling altitude he finishes his reply.

“Yeah, women in the ranks... You know, when you see a friend die, that can devastate your heart. If you see your love die—that can bring the wild animal out from the bottom of your soul. We don’t need anyone going into a killing frenzy to revenge a dead woman, or taking on too high risks to get her out of harm’s way. Both are bad for discipline. That’s why we don’t tolerate any homos in our ranks either.”

“I get your point, but the ancient Greeks even promoted homosexuality among their soldiers. They thought, a man will fight harder and never behave like a coward if his love is seeing him. Matter of honor, too.”

“Your ancient Greeks were pussies. Neither did you get my whole point. In our ranks, not fighting hard enough is simply not an option. Being a coward even less so. Period.”

“I have to admit to feel a certain respect for your way of thinking, Top, even if it is rather old-school.”

“Yes it is,” the Top says yawning like a lion. “That’s why there’s no place for people like me in any of our forces anymore, not even in the Corps. You see, during the Korea war, a colonel told his Marines: ‘Not all the communists in Hell can overrun you!’ and damn right he was about that. He forgot to add, unless the Commies make it into the White House and use an army of lawyers to force you into their yoke, abusing and twisting our Constitution. It was judgment that destroyed us...”

The Top adjusts the pillow under his head and puts on his eye mask.

“But the true spirit of your country will be preserved until the Tribe’s flag flies over the Alamo,” Tarasov replies under his breath, not entirely sure if he actually meant his sentence as ironically as it sounds. Either way, Hartman probably didn’t hear it. When Tarasov looks at him after a minute, he sees that the sergeant major is in a deep slumber already.

Following suit, his mind has almost sunk into a peaceful half-slumber when he hears an annoyed voice from behind. Then someone pokes on his shoulder.

“Sorry to disturb, but is this woman with you?”

“She is,” Tarasov replies to the woman sitting behind him, next to Nooria’s berth. “What happened?”

“Sir, she is opening the twentieth perfume bottle and is mixing them together in an empty mineral water bottle. Please tell her to behave or I’ll call the flight attendant.”

Tarasov looks at Nooria who shrugs and gives a giggle, holding an Amarige de Givenchy and a Kashaya Kenzo in her hands.

“Is she disturbing you?”

“No offense, sir, but she’s behaving like a retard and the smell is nauseating!”

“I see... Nooria, could you please put those away and wait until we get to a place with more air? Thanks, dear. Would you like to drink something? Oh no, please don’t order mineral water. Try some champagne.”

Nooria frowns. “*Sarap?*”

“We’re on honeymoon and I insist. I’ll also take a glass... or rather two. It’s a long flight, so maybe three.”

The lady murmurs a thank-you but Tarasov grabs her hand before she can sit back. “Ma’am, do you see something on my hands?” he asks, softly but irresistibly drawing her over to himself.

“No, why?”

Tarasov leans closer and starts whispering in her ear. “That’s correct, because from the four men I killed in the last forty-eight hours, none did splash a single drop of blood on my hand. Now, for calling my wife a retard, I wish I could throw you off the plane but since we travel business class, I’m trying to behave. That’s my part of the bargain. Your part is to pay for everything, I say: *everything* my woman wants to drink and eat until we touch down. Do we have a deal, ma’am?”

“I’ll call the flight attendants,” she hisses. Tarasov’s grip on her hand tightens. “No... I mean, yes!”

“Attagirl,” Tarasov says releasing her hand from his iron grip and patting it. “Is that correct in English language to say? Attagirl?”

“I don’t know... I am from Latvia!”

“*Nu tipa, slushay*. Sit back and do as I told you, *labushka*, or you will have a very rough flight! *Ponyal?*”

It is only now that the lady gets genuinely scared— more by Tarasov’s choice of rude words than his sudden Russian.

“*Tvor zakon?*” she asks with her face growing pale.

“*Huzhe, tipa*. Sit back now, people are staring already.”

With a wide grin, Tarasov cuddles back into his comfortable chair.

“Mikhailo! There are six champagnes on menu,” Nooria asks from behind. “Which is best?”

“Let me see... now what would a genuine Ukrainian mobster drink? Dom Perignon maybe? Never heard about it but sounds promising. What’s Pete doing?”

“Sleeping.”

21

Ghorband, New Zone

“Good job, Bruiser. When will you send the first artifacts?”

Even through the miniature loudspeakers of the laptop where Bruiser has Skype open and the not so good connection through the satellite phone attached to it, Sultan sounds exceptionally pleased. Bruiser returns the smile of the Exclusion Zone’s Bandit kingpin as he replies.

“Matter of days, boss. The boys are eager to move out but we ought to be careful. This place... it’s huge.”

“Don’t get too lazy, Bruiser. Is the airstrip safe?”

“We had no problem landing there. Yoga’s crew is holding it now and waiting for the reinforcements.”

“I want to see results before I bring more men down.”

“Understood.”

“One more thing, Bruiser. You sure about that burer business?”

“I asked our partner the same question but he insisted. He kept his word and it would be a shame if we didn’t do the same.”

“Agree. Such a weirdo... anyway, tell him it’s been done. I will send that beast with the next flight I can arrange, together with a few more men and equipment.”

“We could use more Svarog detectors.”

“Those are expensive. Barkeep asked me a fortune for that burer and you know very well how much money this operation has cost me already. Keep your eyes open. You’re in the New Zone where there’s more artifacts than rocks, goddammit!”

“Yes, boss.”

“How are you dealing with the men?”

At this point Bruiser swallows hard. “Everything under control, boss.”

“Very well. Remember, I wanted to send Jack first. Don’t make me regret listening to your begging and letting you go with the first wave. Report your progress tomorrow.”

Sultan’s fat face disappears from the screen as he finishes the session. Bruiser is relieved that the kingpin cannot see the skepticism which now appears on his face. The makeshift bar where he now powers the laptop

down seems to him even more rudimentary than the 100 Rads. His trigger-happy men have riddled the wall with bullet holes and turned the place upside down in search for loot. Sun shafts fall in through holes in the ceiling and make the swirling dust visible. In the courtyard, two dozen Bandits are celebrating—as if taking the defenders by complete surprise and overrunning the place through an unguarded underground passage would have been a victory to be proud of. Bruiser carefully bags the laptop and shakes his head over the bragging audible from the courtyard.

“... but dat sonofabitch didn’t tell datta passage leads right into da latrine! Damn, ya should’ve seen dat douchebag Loner’s face when he was about to piss and looked right into my gun barrel! He says, *whaddafuck!* And my shotgun replies, *boom!*”

“We really caught them with their pants off, mwahahaha!”

Walking to the courtyard where his men are relaxing after this morning’s fight, Bruiser realizes that no one is manning the walls. He shouts over to the bragging Bandit who sits on the wreck of a US-made personnel carrier in the courtyard, surrounded by several other men in equally high spirits.

“Hey! Senka! Put down that damned vodka! Instead of getting drunk, take a few guys and keep a watch on the walls!”

Senka just laughs at him. “Got shit in yer pants, bro? Relax! Ya safe with us!”

“Barking orders doesn’t become ya,” another Bandit grins. He pats his empty artifact holder. “Tell us instead where all da loot is dat Sultan promised!”

“Damn right, bro!” Senka passes his vodka to the grinning Bandit and points at the pile of dead Stalkers next to the entrance. “We didn’t come ‘ere for a few lousy Kalashnikovs!”

Next to a dead Stalker he has just finished looting, another Bandit looks up. A white skull printed on his black balaclava makes him appear particularly tough.

“Three conserves, a few mags and a few hundred rubles, Bruiser. If that’s whadda New Zone’s got to offer, I’m already on my way back!” He looks at the wallet in his hands and gives the photograph he finds inside a grimace. “Tough luck, little girl. Yer daddy came, saw and sucked major cock—but I’ll have my fun with you, haha!”

He licks the photograph through the balaclava’s mouth hole and puts it away.

Bruiser swallows and curses the moment when he volunteered to come with such an undisciplined and disrespectful bunch, even though they were supposed to be the Bandits’ so-called ‘elite’. A true-blooded Bandit commander would have just kicked Senka’s teeth out but Bruiser is

not up to this. To his further embarrassment, he feels his face blushing in shame.

“Uh-oh,” Senka’s buddy says. “Gettin’ angry? Let me guess—someone stole your dried sausage?”

Bruiser desperately tries to act as a Bandit commander is supposed to. “I’m in charge here! Now get to those walls or I’ll... I’ll just shoot you!”

The Bandits laugh. “Didn’t ya just see how we kicked Stalker ass?”

“Chill out, man. There’s nothing to be scared of!”

He reaches for the vodka bottle that the other Bandit is about to pass him back but doesn’t get a chance to touch it.

A bell rings out not far from the Asylum. The deep sound echoing in the valley is as foreboding as it is unexpected in this wilderness.

Senka turns pale. “Whadda hell is that?”

The Bandits are looking at each other in surprise and fear. The bell rings again.

“Grab your weapons!” Bruiser yells. “At arms, you idiots!”

Now the Bandits scramble to take up defensive positions. Half a dozen of them frantically load their shotguns and freshly looted Kalashnikovs as they run up to the ramparts. The few of them with better armor put on their assault helmets.

“Whatever this...”

A hard guitar riff cuts into Bruiser’s words.

“Metallica?” Senka asks with utter bewilderment all over his face. “Whadda...”

Before he could say *hell*, a whizz sounds in the air for a split second, and then a massive detonation shakes the western wall. The impact kicks Bruiser off his feet. A second later the wall is hit again. This time, the weakened construction yields to the blast and a long section of the wall goes down, burying and killing the Bandits on the ramparts.

Lying on the ground and half-covered by dust and debris from the blasts, Bruiser’s ringing ears can barely hear the third that is coming from the direction of the road block outside the Asylum. Though their enemy hasn’t let themselves be seen yet, he is smart enough to understand that his men stand no chance against anyone with such firepower.

He staggers to his feet and dashes into the relative safety of the building as fast as his trembling limbs can carry him. One of the men who run up to the ramparts lies on the ground with a leg torn off by the blast, his horrible scream muted by the ringing in Bruiser’s ears. He recognizes Senka’s cheeky buddy.

Several mortar rounds impact in the courtyard, followed by heavy machine gun fire hammering the western wall. Dust and stone splinters fly around everywhere.

Bruiser jumps over the wounded man and brutally kicks the hand trying to grab at him. He collects his rucksack, quickly puts the precious laptop inside and is about to reach the hole leading into the sewers when he feels a strong hand on his shoulder.

“Running away, huh? Not without me, asshole!”

It is Senka who wants to grin but his lips are trembling with fear. “Move, Bruiser! I saw soldiers coming!”

Though Bruiser wants to at least know who had rooted them so quickly and brutally, he leaves any questions for later as he squeezes himself through the hole and descends back into the sewers from where they had emerged just a few hours ago. Neither he or Senka think for a second about saving anyone who might have survived the onslaught.

The sound of the frightful music is receding, though the handful of Bandits still alive can hardly realize it. Blood trickles from their blast-stricken ears. Rendered incapable by the shelling, they helplessly watch on fighters in desert camouflage appear through the breached wall and secure the ruined Asylum with well-trained movements.

22

Abandoned scientific facility beneath Panjir Valley, New Zone

Skinner’s sense of time tells him that enough time has passed since he had locked the Stalkers in the hall with the stasis tubes. He might even have slept a little bit, since a while ago he was imagining what would happen if one day he’d bring down jackals, wolves or even bears and this thought could have made for a nice dream. What would the laboratory do to them? Maybe adding the sneak ability of a snake to a bear? Or turn jackals into wolves with the size of a bear? Too bad he had so few gas at his disposal, and even so, he could counted himself lucky to have found enough of the mysterious substance at all. As of yet, there was no way to lead this group of unsuspecting Stalkers to the northern passage and down into the Catacombs beneath the City of Screams. The Tribe was blocking the approaches leading there from the south and east. Soon, they will be annihilated but for the time being, he had to settle for what he found in these vaults where experiments to emulate the effects of those fateful catacombs had once been conducted. And now it’s time to see if it worked out.

He estimates that the Stalkers were exposed at least half a day longer to the substance than he was in the catacombs, after he left the soldiers to fare alone on their suicide mission. While he walked down to the tightly shut metal door, it came to his mind that he still doesn’t know if that major

and his men survived. Probably not, but it's been long ago and without any importance to him.

Where there was quiet when the Stalkers had entered the vault, now heavy steps are thumping. No one bangs at the door, demanding anyone outside to open it. This probably means that whatever is inside has no fear of being there – as it would fit a mutant.

So far, so good, Skinner thinks and cautiously opens the door.

23

LHR (Heathrow Airport, London)

“The big man will cut your balls for letting Nooria get pissed, you crazy Russkie!”

“You should better see yourself carrying those two bags full of female perfumes, Top,” Pete laughs. “It’s incredibly devastating to your tough guy image.”

Tarasov himself has to smile when he watches the brawny sergeant major carry Nooria’s tax-free bags to an empty set of chairs. London Heathrow is even more crowded than the lounge in Los Angeles was, and it appears a miracle to find free seats not yet unoccupied by travelers who appear to talk in all the world’s languages to him, and many of them even looking as exotic as the words that hit his ears.

The champagne Nooria had had during the long flight has apparently put her in a mood beyond ordinary bliss. The words of song she is singing aloud don’t stand out in the mix of languages around them. It still makes Tarasov wary. The last thing they need is unwanted attention.

“Damn,” the Top says looking at the electric board listing departures. “Our flight has a one hour delay.”

“What shall we do until then?”

“I’ll have one of those roast beef sandwiches,” says the Top jerking his thumb at a café with delicious-looking sandwiches piled up in big glass cases below the counter. “Maybe more.”

“Is there a smokers’ room here?”

“Don’t think so, Pete.”

Shaking his head, Pete plugs the earphones back. Tarasov gives a long sigh.

“I need a drink. Nooria?”

“I don’t want more champagne. I will stay here with Pete.”

Tarasov moves to a crowded bar. He has barely gotten to the counter when the Top appears beside him and yells over to the waiter manning the bar. “Wild Turkey! Two shots in one glass, neat! What’s your poison?”

“Stolichnaya will do. I’m thirsty. Fill up a whiskey glass.”

Suddenly, the patron sitting on Tarasov’s right pokes his side with his elbow. He is wearing an outfit that looks as if he were preparing for a long stay in the wilderness and a hat with the brim turned upwards. He gives Tarasov the friendly grin of a man who the more he drinks, the merrier he gets.

“G’day mate! Sorry about that, it’s awfully stuffy in here! I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Watch out, man...”

“Mate, that’s exactly what I was talkin’ about to this Frenchie here! He says, one of you blokes could hit a razorback with a slug round from around a ninety yards as nicely as Tendulkar can bat a throw by a bloody beginner. You know what was the last words of the hunter who wanted hittin’ a razorback from ninety yards with a slug round? ‘Watch out!’”

“What’s a razorback and who is Tendulkar?”

“Bloody hell, you don’t know a thing ’bout hunting and cricket, do you? Noblest things in the world! If it weren’t for my plane being delayed, I’d be already on my way to hunt razorbacks in Ukraine! Speaking of which, I wonder if they play cricket in Ukraine.”

“You do *what* in Ukraine?”

“Mate, your accent is wicked. You’re Russian, yeah?”

“Ukrainian, actually.”

Tarasov regrets his words as soon as he has spoken them, but hopes that no one in the loud crowd would pay attention.

“Christ, guess that means you’ve got no cricket.”

“What are you up to in Ukraine, anyway?”

“As told you, I go hunting for razorbacks. That’d be boars to you, mate.”

“You’re into hog hunting?” the Top asks with his eyes kindled. “How? By making them look at your hat and fall dead from laughing?”

“I got four rifles in my checked-in luggage. And as to my hat, mate—have a little more respect of my trusty old squashy, will you?”

An idea comes to Tarasov’s mind.

“Top,” he whispers, “a solution for our weapon problem might have just come up.” He turns to face the traveler with a wide smile. “So, *mate*, where do you go hunting?”

“Crimea.”

“There’s better hunting grounds elsewhere.”

“But the thing is, I’ve already booked my trip and I paid the advance. It’s a good company, found ’em on the net. They organize hunting trips and all that.”

“And what did they say about the ninety yards slug shot issue?”

“Aw, you know, I’m to meet the local hunters only in Odessa. But really, Odessa? I don’t know mate, it kinda sounds like a girl’s name. Maybe it is. Heck, I’ve got the names of a few girls... Ukrainian-bride dot com or whatever was that site... is Odessa a town or a girl?”

“Instead of Odessa or an Anastasia, would you be interested in meeting such a fellow?”

Tarasov opens his PDA and shows the file photograph of a Zone boar. Thick-hided, enormously sized ferals with tusks protruding from the

mouth as long as a strong man's hand span, boars are probably the Zone creatures most resembling the animals from which they had once mutated.

"You're kiddin' me, right? That damn thing's a hogzilla!"

"I assure you it's for real, and quite common where we are heading." Tarasov notes growing interest on the patron's face. Satisfied over him being about to get hooked, Tarasov continues. "No shot will stop it from ninety yards. Its hide and skull are too thick. I mean, if you have an automatic shotgun like a SPAS 12 or an Armsel Protecta, your chances are a bit better but..."

"Jesus Christ! The way you're going you might as well use a Kalashnikov? Who the hell are you to use such gear on animals? Fascists?"

The Top intervenes gently pushes Tarasov away. "Ninety yards is a good range if you use a good old Triple Deuce and score a headshot."

The outlandish patron turns his attention to Hartman. "Yeah, but what about close brush hunting? It's almost impossible to get a clear shot. You need a cartridge taking a real big punch like the 44-40 Winchester. With that, it doesn't matter where you hit 'em, be it head or arse!"

"Agree to disagree. It all depends on where you place the round. When hunting in Tennessee back in my days, I've used simple .308 rounds on hogs. All six went down within fifty yards with just one shot. If broadside, lower shoulder. If quartering at you, vitals. Anyway, first and last thing a hunter needs is good luck."

Tarasov suppresses a smile, seeing that the Top has by now got the hunter's full attention. At last their drinks arrive. The hunter—if he is what he seems—raises his beer glass.

"To good luck, mates!" They toast. "I see you blokes know a thing or two about hunting."

"Contrary to your hunt organizers, it seems," Tarasov cautiously says. Just like any other soldier serving in the Zone, he had never handled anything else but assault rifles. To him, hunting boars means mowing them down with assault rifles or machine guns. Even worse, all he knows about hunting weapons is that an enemy with a hunting rifle is no match for anyone armed with an assault rifle – at least if fighting on equal ground. He decides to let the Top do the hunter's talk, who has just proven himself surprisingly knowledgeable on such matters. "Myself, I am just a tour guide but my friend here is a real hunter."

"What's his choice?"

"Uhm... really big, nasty beasts."

"Like what?"

"I mean, like desert boars."

“There are no boars in the desert, mate. At least not in the Tanami where I come from. Then there’s the Simpson, the Gibson and of course the Great Victoria but I’ve never met any boar there either.”

“I meant as a manner of speaking...”

Seeing that Tarasov is about to make a fool out of himself, the Top once more intervenes. “You’re an Aussie, ain’t you? I heard that a good kangaroo steak is even better than a Kobe!”

“Not sure about that—”

An announcement calling passengers of British Airways flight 0882 to Kiev interrupts the conversation.

“Sorry fellas, that’s my flight. The drinks are on me,” the hunter says. “Have a good hunt! Oh, and how rude of me, name’s Sawyer. Don’t be strangers, should you ever come down under.”

“My name is Jack, and my friend’s Joe. Easy to remember, thanks goodness,” the Top says and winks an eye to Tarasov. “Actually, we’re on the same flight. I’d love to carry our conversation on.”

“Really, mate? That’s great news, I hate ’em boring flights!”

They exchange a quick glance behind the Australian’s back.

“He’s in for the hunting trip of his life,” Tarasov whispers with a grin. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

24

Ghorband, New Zone

“Javelins kick ass,” First Lieutenant Driscoll says eyeing the carnage in the courtyard of the Asylum. “I can hardly wait to see more of this at Bagram.”

Lieutenant Collins nods agreement. “Yup. Though I suppose their main base will be a harder nut to crack, should it really come to that.”

“Of course it will.”

Driscoll looks at their dead enemies who the fighters have lined up in the courtyard like hunters would with their prey.

“Thirty-three scavengers and there might be more under the rubble. No casualties on our side. The big man will be pleased.”

“Agree, sir. With all the tasks we have, losing even one man would be —”

Driscoll interrupts him. “That’s not what I mean.”

He kneels to inspect the bodies.

The Lieutenant bites his lip, forgetting that Driscoll can’t see the concern on his face covered by the exoskeleton’s full helmet.

“You were right,” Driscoll says and waves Collins to look closer. “Appears that a band of scavengers, let’s call them trench coat gang,

fought it off with the regular gang and won. Look... those we have killed all have an arm patch I've never seen before. Have you?"

He lifts a dead enemy's arm to show the badge sewn to the sleeve of the jacket. It shows a black skull on white background.

"No, sir" Collins observes. "Scavengers usually have patches with the radiation sign, a red shield or something like that... a green wolf's head, occasionally. This is something new."

Driscoll touches his exoskeleton's built-in intercom to call the other Lieutenant. "Schmidt!"

"Sir."

"Any surviving hostiles?"

"Positive. *We fished him from a hole in the latrine.*"

"Is he a Ruskie?"

"Affirmative. *Staff Sergeant Novikoff is already squeezing him for intel inside the main building, over.*"

"Continue securing the perimeter. Out." Driscoll waves Collins to follow him. "Let's have a chat with that scavenger."

They move to Shrink's abandoned bar where half an hour ago Bruiser was skyping with Sultan. On the same spot, a tough-looking Bandit lies on the ground with a fighter manhandling him from behind. His abdomen is bloody where the light, Kevlar-padded armor beneath his leather trench coat failed to protect him from shrapnel. A balaclava with a white skull printed on it lays next to him on the ground. The crude features of his face make him appear like a textbook criminal.

"Ask him why the scavengers were fighting each other," Driscoll tells the Staff Sergeant towering over the prisoner.

"He says it was just between them and free Stalkers... they are bandits but don't seek trouble with anyone else."

"Bandits?"

"That's what he said, sir. Seems to be another faction or something."

"Is he from Bagram?"

The Bandit doesn't need translation to understand this one and shakes his head.

"Ask him where they have their base."

The Bandit replies with a curse. "*Vot khui te v rot, pindos!*"

A grimace appears on Staff Sergeant Novikoff's dust-clad face. "You don't want to have that translated, sir."

"Guess I don't," Driscoll replies. "Ask him once more about their base."

The Bandit replies with another cuss and spits towards the First Lieutenant to prove his resolve. "*Tak chto davai na khui, tvoia ochered!*"

After a heartbeat of menacing silence, Driscoll takes the Bandit's balaclava from the ground and wipes the saliva from his leggings.

"It makes me very angry when this happens," he slowly says and looks at the balaclava with the white skull. "Is this supposed to frighten people?"

Novikoff translates. The Bandit shakes his head and says something in Russian.

"He says, it is just a joke."

"Yeah, I thought so. A complete joke like scavengers are." Still speaking calmly, Driscoll waves for Lieutenant Collins. "Get a devil pup over here."

Collins barks a call into his intercom. While waiting, the First Lieutenant studies the Bandit's face. Though Driscoll's face is covered by his helmet's face mask, there is something foreboding about his calmness that makes the Bandit turn his eyes away in fear.

"Sir!"

A Hazara boy wearing light armor appears and salutes. He might be about seventeen, though the look in his eyes is hardened.

"Novikoff, translate," Driscoll says and draws his jagged combat knife. The artifact-alloyed blade emits a red glow. "You scum are just children playing men. I feel tempted to cut your nose and ears and send you to those 'bandits' to tell them: do not fuck with my Tribe. Too bad children like you wouldn't survive for a day here alone. It would spoil my honor to kill you myself. You will be killed by a child like yourself." He hands his knife to the young fighter. "Pup, finish this lowlife."

The Bandit starts screaming in Russian.

"Please don't hurt me and so on," Novikoff translates dispassionately. "I have a little girl back home, she's so sweet and needs me, look at her photograph, it's in my pocket."

"Let me see that."

Novikoff opens the breast pocket of the Bandit's jacket and fishes out the photograph taken from the dead Stalker.

"You must've been cheated on," the First Lieutenant says after glancing at the picture. "This girl looks way too intelligent to be your daughter. Now what smells worse – your fear or your lies?"

The Bandit tries to crawl backwards but the brawny arms of the fighter behind him hold him down. He bursts out in Russian.

"They have a forward base five clicks east of the Charikhar ruins," Novikoff translates. "He begs for mercy, he will never come back if we let him go and so on, it's all the fault of someone called Bruiser and whatever."

Driscoll stays and nods to the young fighter. The Bandit's eyes open wide in terror – few things can be more dreadful than a killer's dispassionate gaze before he slashes one's throat without fluttering an eye.

"Stop," Driscoll commands. A relieved grin appears on the Bandit's face.

"Sir?" asks the Hazara fighter.

"Not like that," Driscoll coldly replies. "Use the jagged edge."

25

Tribe outpost, New Zone

Two hours of driving have left the ten Humvees of Lieutenant Ramirez's column covered with a thick layer of dust. When they at last come to a halt in a valley running almost exactly from the north to the south and climb off the vehicles, he and his men are all wearing face masks and shemaghs wrapped around their face. The swirling dust would just be annoying but here, on the southernmost edge of the Tribe's territory, the Geiger counters begin to crackle.

I hate this bloody outpost, Ramirez thinks in the column's second Humvee. It is not his first time here and the caves in the steep hillside to their left bring back bad memories. A long time ago, he was reckless enough to recon one of them on his own. The jackal pack inside almost killed him, and if it hadn't been for Nooria's treatment he would have soon succumbed to his infested wounds.

The men manning the outpost appear to have similar feelings about this godforsaken canyon. They greet the arriving fighters happily, knowing that they can return to the Alamo now. Their leader trots to the Lieutenant and salutes. Even through the eyepieces of the M40 gas mask, Ramirez can see the relief in his eyes.

"Second Lieutenant Jackson reporting, sir!"

"Give me a sit-rep," Ramirez responds.

"No movement, no events. Would have called in, sir. Not as much as a single jackal."

Ramirez snorts. "Guess this place is too boring even for jackals."

"Did you come to relieve us, sir?"

"Yeah. Help my guys unload the supply trucks. Saddle up and RTB once done."

"Aye, sir!"

Jackson sounds happy. Ramirez climbs out and surveys the area. The dirt track follows the left bank of a creek that runs in the canyon. Where the rocky slopes narrow down to a few dozen meters, a rusty iron bridge spans over it; probably it was built by the Russians decades ago. The road

continuing southward on the right side of the creek is heavily mined. A strong roadblock is situated where the bridge reaches the other side, built from rocks and reinforced with sand bags. It's a perfect position to greet any approaching enemy with effective fire from the .50 caliber fixed behind it.

Behind a few huge boulders that have fallen from the mountainside ages ago, three stone huts serve as shelter, first-aid station and command post. Only sniper fire from the jagged hills above could pose a serious danger to this well-defended position. To deter any such threats, the defenders have two 81mm mortars at their disposal, safely located in a ruined house next to the bridge, that was once a police checkpoint or toll collecting point for the local warlord. Parts of the iron plates covering it have been removed to provide space for the mortars to shoot through, otherwise the roof offers the mortar team adequate protection from sniper fire.

Sets of camouflage net are spanned over the fortifications. They offer both shade and protection from hostile rifle scopes. All in all, the outpost is perfect for its purpose: scaring enemy patrols away and delaying a stronger assault force until reinforcements arrive.

Yet when he has finished surveying the outpost where he will spend the next few days, if not weeks, Lieutenant Ramirez has a strange feeling in his gut.

Must be those damned caves, he thinks, trying to rationalize the premonition that has suddenly come over him. *They are like eyes... eyes in the hills, watching us.*

Dusk is approaching and there's still a lot to do. Ramirez unslings his M27 automatic rifle and turns to his men who patiently wait for his command.

"All hands, listen up!" he shouts. "Let's get this show on the run! Unload supplies, take up positions!"

26

Borispol Airport, Kiev, Ukraine

"Welcome home," Tarasov says, sniffing into the chilly evening wind outside the featureless glass façade of Kiev's Borispol airport.

"Where to now, Mikhailo?"

Tarasov would prefer to stand there for a few more minutes, smelling the air and listening to the familiar language spoken around them. After his long trip took him all the way through the New Zone's perils, and then not only Los Angeles but a missile silo turned secret base too, it is hard for him to realize that he is home—to the extent Kiev is still his home.

“Too bad you couldn’t talk our Australian friend into leaving for the Zone immediately,” he tells the Top. “To be honest, I don’t know where to go... it’s my first time in my home town without a place I could call my own!”

“It is beautiful here,” Nooria says curiously looking around. Seeing the bitter smile on her man’s face, she caresses Tarasov’s hand. “Like America... just smaller.”

“Cars especially,” the Top says watching the mostly German-made cars in the huge parking lot, separated from the terminal by a cabs-only lane where newly arrived people wait for a lift between steel pikes and red plastic blocks that are supposed to make the cab drivers drive slower.

“You got no friends? No nothing?” Pete asks. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Why should you be, indeed?” Tarasov asks back in a low voice, ignoring the sarcasm. “I am a deserter, kid. Our forged passports have worked fine so far but I don’t want to run into anyone shouting ‘*Mikhailo, privet!*’ This country is still... anyway, how much money do we still have on that credit card?”

“Not enough to buy an airplane, but more than we need for a cozy place with mini bar and jacuzzi if there’s any.”

“Let’s go where probably no one expects me.”

“Where?”

“The hotel where Sawyer is staying will do.”

“We take a cab?”

Regardless of his mixed feelings about Kiev, being back to his home land fills Tarasov with self-confidence. “Negative. Taxis here are worse than jackals. Let’s rent a car that we can dump later.”

“I want a Russian car,” Hartman says. “Do they have Alamo here?”

“Yeah, I think I’ve seen their logo somewhere in the arrival hall.”

“Can we pay by credit card?”

“You’ll be amazed, Top, but we even have running water.”

“No offense... it’s just a little strange here. Evensmells different. Smokier, somehow.”

“It’s all right. Okay, let’s get a car—and now *I* will drive.”

“Your turf, huh?” Hartman asks with a smile of understanding. “Fine with me.”

Ninety minutes later in downtown Kiev, driving a Skoda Fabia chosen for being inconspicuous enough and as much Eastern-made as possible for the Top’s sake who wished for a Russian-made car that no car rental agency had in its fleet, Tarasov slows the car down. They have just crossed the short Rusanovka Bridge over the Dnepr river. For a moment, he seems to hesitate. Then he turns left on Davidovka Street.

“Where are we going?”

“Home, Nooria... or what had once been home.” He halts the car in front of a grey apartment building. “Wait for a moment. Top, give me your baseball cap.”

Tarasov walks up to the gate of the building where his mother lives. He looks around cautiously. Being sure that he is wanted for desertion and that the only place in Kiev for him to go is therefore under surveillance, he tries to act as inconspicuous as possible. At daytime he wouldn’t risk this visit, but evening has fallen and the street seems dark enough to prevent anyone from recognizing him. Just in case, he pulls the cap with the flaming T of the Tennessee Titans into his eyes to cover his face even in the dimly lit gate of the building.

The gate is locked, unlike when he was here for the last time, and the intercom’s panel is rusty and gutted like it always was. He is thinking about turning back to the car when a woman appears, carrying a bulging shopping bag. The little boy with her is proudly holding a new soccer ball.

“*Vybachte*, I am with Titan Parcel Service and have a delivery for Mariya Valeryevna Tarasov.”

“Mariya Valeryevna...” The woman gives the name a moment of thinking while fishing for her keys in her coat pocket. “Oh yes, the old lady from the sixth floor. She is not home.”

“Any idea where she went?”

“Yes. She is in Europe.”

“*Shto?*”

“You heard me well! She won the lottery or whatever a few weeks ago and went travelling.”

“Do you know by chance when she’ll be back?”

“Here? Never.” At last, she finds her key and opens the gate. “Rumor has it that she bought a new apartment on the Kreshatyk.”

“The Kreshatyk? That’s posh,” Tarasov says, biting his lip. He wanted to prevent himself from smiling but the woman gets the wrong impression from his grimace.

“Yes, some lucky ones get it all,” she says with a frustrated, tired sigh. “If I were in her shoes I wouldn’t buy an apartment but go west and never ever come back!”

The boy looks up to her with concern.

“*Ne boysa, Vova*,” she tells him, “I’d take you with me but only if you behave. Will you?”

Tarasov can hardly hear the boy’s reply. Neither can he see how the boy follows him with his eyes while he hurries back to the idling car. Holding the plastic mesh with the new ball inside, the boy starts kicking it with his knee.

“Vova! Will you come?”

Reluctantly, the boy called Vova follows his mother up the stairs.

“Mama, I think I have seen this man before.”

“Really? He didn’t even look at you, how could you tell?”

“I recognized his voice. But last time he was wearing an officer’s cap. I think his new cap is much cooler.”

“Silly boy. A postman with an officer’s cap...”

“*Ne znayu*,” the boy shrugs as they step inside the elevator. “Maybe he is no postman. Or no officer. And last time he was... much shorter. Now he is even taller than papa.”

Screeching and threatening its two passengers with leaving them trapped in the dirty cabin at every floor it passes, the elevator begins to ascend.

“You have a very vivid imagination, Vova,” the exhausted woman says, seemingly nerved by her son’s daydreaming.

“Maybe he is a criminal hiding from the police! Maybe he even has a reward on his head, dead or alive! A bank robber of mafia boss! That would be cool.”

This time, the woman doesn’t reprimand her son. Her bagged eyes sparkle up with greed. She caresses Vova’s blond head.

“We will need to talk about this once we get home.”

27

Central mountain area between southern badlands and Tribe outpost, New Zone

The overcast sky over the New Zone blackens out the stars. It is almost pitch dark over the hill where Saifullah and Skinner meet. A Nissan pick-up idles nearby, its headlights dimmed.

“Did you bring what I asked?”

Saifullah gives Skinner a nod and points to the flatbed.

“Five hand-held RPKs, three NSVs and two DShKs, all belt-fed with enough bullets to bring down a dozen helicopters.”

“Bullets are for muskets, Saifullah. Try to sound like a soldier and call them rounds, for God’s sake.”

“*You* want to lecture *me*?” Saifullah snorts. “If you’re thinking you can use them hand-held, you don’t even know how to deploy them!”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing.”

Skinner emits a gurgling growl, sounding so much like that of a mutant that Saifullah and his three men in the vehicle reach for their weapons, afraid that one of the New Zone’s more dangerous creatures might be lurking nearby. Their concern is proved right – but it’s not one

mutant appearing in the darkness but at least twenty. The sandy ground is shaking under their heavy steps as the lumbering hulks approach, each of them twice as tall as a human. Skinner grabs Saifullah's AK-47.

"Shoot at my brothers and we'll have you for dinner," he warns him angrily. "Tell your men to unload the weapons."

"*Gora! Daa tseshai di?*" a Talib fighter shouts. "*Laas ma raawrra!*"

Skinner notices his discomfort with a grin. "Scared of your new allies, huh?"

"Yes," Saifullah admits.

"Imagine how scared the Tribe will be once my brothers appear, hip-firing the weapons you've brought..."

"Very," the Talib says and begins to mutter a prayer in Arabic.

Following Skinner's mental command, each mutant grabs a machine gun. The half-mutant notices that although they can hoist the heavy weapons without effort, using them properly will require a little practice – their brawny hands hold the weapons as awkwardly as someone, who had never fired a weapon before, would hold a Kalashnikov.

Poor brothers. You still need to learn how to master your new strength.

Proving Skinner's thoughts, a mutant trying to get the best grip on a DShK anti-aircraft machine gun accidentally presses the trigger. The burst of heavy 12.7 millimeter rounds hit the Talib standing on the flatbed and tear his upper body to shreds. The mutant looks at his index finger and the weapon, and then growls as if he were chuckling.

"Oups... sorry," Skinner says, himself laughing. "The boys still need some practice."

"May God forgive me to deal with you and your ungodly creatures," an ashy Saifullah says.

"You better get out of here now. I need to gather a few more friends."

"More such... demons?"

"Jackals, though it remains to be seen if I can. They're dumb, you know? Compared to them, my brothers are fucking Albert Einsteins."

For the first time since they met, Saifullah sees a little self-doubt appear on the half-mutant Stalker's face.

"Jackals?" he asks with disgust. "What do you need those unclean dog-like beasts for?"

Skinner points at the gory remains of the mowed down Talib. "If you use gunfodder, why shouldn't I?"

28

Upmarket residential area, Reitars'ka Street, Kiev

The honey-colored designer lamp casts a cozy light over the room where Captain Maksimenko is sitting at a make-up table, blowing a smoke ring from his cigarillo. He watches it slowly fading away when it touches the mirror reflecting Agent Fedorka's naked body on the king-size bed. Two wine bottles stand on the table; one empty, one missing just as much as there is in Maksimenko's glass.

"Was he rough on you, Verka?" he asks, directing his question more to his cigarillo than the woman. Vera Fedorka lies on her belly, playfully moving her feet, very much immersed in working on her nails with a long, pointed file.

"Yes, Dima," she absentmindedly replies.

"How rough?"

"Not in the way you are."

"Why? How am I?"

"Rough, too... but in a more sophisticated way,"

"Be more specific for once."

She shrugs, not looking up from the nail file.

"You do it because you enjoy it. He does it because he has an urge. Maybe it makes him forget certain things for a few seconds... I'm not psi-ops to know what's going on in the head of Zone freaks." Vera Fedorka blows off the dust from the nails on her right hand, and starts filing those on her left. "Is it true that Tarasov has hooked up with a dirty Afghan girl and is hiding now with some *pindos* deserters?"

"At least that's what his last message to Degtyarev was."

She chuckles. "Alex Degtyarev... he's handsome. But Tarasov even more so."

"Really? Why are you so interested in Tarasov?"

"I am not interested in him. It's that woman who interests me, actually. Do you know what she looks like?"

"No."

"Come on... you know everything."

"We had a good asset in the New Zone—a very good one. Not even he could get close enough to those deserters."

"That's disappointing."

"Indeed. You know, the briefing note I got from Kruchelnikov says Tarasov has valuable intel about two things: the results of the lost expedition and the American renegades."

"I can guess why we want to have the scientist's reports, but why would we care about those deserters?"

"In the latter case, *we* actually means *us*, Verka. Getting intel on the Tribe would be more than appreciated by their government. They are probably a haven for criminals. That's one thing. They must also have

their supporters for smuggling weapons, trafficking criminals to boost their numbers and all that.” Drawing on his cigarillo, Maksimenko narrows his eye and lowers his voice almost to a whisper. “Imagine, Verka... just imagine. We get that intel, you and me. Then the only choice we’d have to make would be getting promoted in the Service or making the Americans happy on our own account. We could ask them for a ranch in Montana. Imagine, spending the long winter in a cozy ranch with a big fireplace, making love until spring comes—all sponsored by the US government.”

“We are doing that already, Dima, and on our own taxpayers’ money. But I dig your idea. It’s brilliant... and just reminds me what I love about you.”

“So, if opportunity comes, can I count on you?”

“Perhaps,” Verka replies with an enigmatic smile. Before Maksimenko can express his disappointment over such a display of typical female vagueness, she asks him something else. “What could Tarasov love about that girl?”

“Why do you care?”

“Tarasov’s got the *Za Zaslughi*... it sounds so much better in English: Chevalier of the Order of Merit. The highest reward, just for saving a low-life like Strelok. Guess she doesn’t even know she’s being fucked by a Chevalier.”

“Is that what’s on your mind while being with me?”

“Right now, I ask myself how a stinking tribal girl could have wrapped a man like Tarasov around her finger.” Vera shudders. “She must be irradiated, too.”

“That would just be a turn-on for a Zone freak like Tarasov.” Maksimenko stays and takes a big gulp from his wine glass. “Verka, could you please stop filing your nails? It makes me shudder.”

“I’m not finished yet.”

“Please.”

“You love me?”

“No.”

“You hate me?”

“Yes.”

“I hate you too.”

Vera laughs quietly and gives Maksimenko the finger. He walks over to the bed, takes her hand and sucks off the nail dust the file has left on her finger. He washes the fine dust down with a gulp of red wine.

“You could kill with that long file, you know that?”

“Of course. Will you light a candle and put it here, please?”

“No.”

“Yes you will.”

“No I won’t.”

“Yes you will... I keep them in that drawer, next to the TV set.”

Maksimenko ignites a long, thick candle, making sure that it burns with a big flame. Vera Fedorka chuckles while she watches him pushing the candle into a chandelier.

“Harder... deeper... Good so. Bring it here, please, Dima.”

Maksimenko carefully places the burning candle on the bed. Vera’s long red-brown hair glitters in the candlelight.

“Let’s assume that we put that girl into the washing machine, soak and disinfect her,” Maksimenko says. He steps back to the make-up table. Leaning against it, he lets his eyes feast on Vera Fedorka’s body. “What would you do with her?”

“First, you tell me whose turn is up first.”

“Mine.”

“No. Mine.”

“Yours.”

“Good,” Vera purrs. “So... I would let her stand naked where you stand.”

“In attention?”

“Your *yalda* is already standing in attention. Enough discipline.” Having finished her manicure session, she gracefully tosses the nail file to the make-up table. “I’d like to see what she has to offer. Come closer, Dima.”

She begins to run her hands over Maksimenko’s body, exploring it intimately.

“And after that?”

Vera Fedorka turns on her back, stretching out and playing with her manicured fingers like a cat opens and closes her claws.

“I would tie her hands and legs to the four corners of this bed.”

Maksimenko crushes his cigarillo in the ashtray. “And then?”

“Kiss her mouth.”

“And then?”

“That depends on... if she’s clean shaven, I’d put my tongue inside her to feel how she tastes... but I guess the women over there don’t even wash themselves.”

Watching his mirror reflection, Maksimenko moves the muscles on his shoulders and chest, as if warming himself up for a demanding physical exercise.

“Keep talking, Vera.”

Fedorka takes a small vial from the bed drawer, pours massage oil on her body, first applying it on her stiffened breasts, then her belly, inner thighs and sex.

"I would put some of this oil on my fists and penetrate her until she screams."

"Would you?" Maksimenko opens the drawer of the make-up table and removes a pair of handcuffs.

"Yes I would."

"Why?"

A handcuff closes on Vera Fedorka's right hand, fixing it to an iron bar. She caresses her tied-up arm with her left hand, letting it slide over her immaculately shaven armpit to her breast and squeezes it.

"To punish her."

With a soft click, the second handcuff closes on her left hand.

"Why?"

"For not being like me. For being ugly, probably. For being pathetic, surely. For being an irradiated, ugly, hideous little insect."

Maksimenko lets his eye scan Vera's body, her hands now shackled to the hand-forged iron bars, her body excitedly turning right and left, her legs spreading wide and closing. It takes all his self-control to stay in position, to stay in role and not throw her on the bed right now and fuck her till they were both spent.

"You lie," he calmly says.

"Of course I do. Part of my job description, *tovarishu kapitan*."

"And what's the truth, Agent Fedorka?"

"To get all the intel from her that I cannot get from Chevalier Tarasov."

"Not good enough."

"All right, I confess. I would torture her because I envy her."

"Envy for what, prisoner?"

"You know that very well, sir."

Maksimenko has already regretted his question. He knows that Vera Fedorka can't have children. She had her womb removed, probably out of irrational fear of giving birth to a child distorted by the aftereffects of the Chernobyl disaster, a misshapen like the thousands of barely human beings that vegetate in the orphanages and special care facilities in Ukraine and Belarus; though he never really fathomed how she dealt with this ultimate defect of her body that appears so perfect from outside. Although lovers for over a year now, he never asked about any regret she might have; even less so about guilt which would have been his other guess.

He decides to carry on with their game, hoping that his inconsiderate question appears to be just part of it.

"You bitch," Maksimenko says climbing on the bed. "You bad and cruel bitch. It is you who should be punished."

"Yes I should... I must," she whispers. "What are you waiting for?"

"*Suka*," Maksimenko whispers as he takes the candle and lets the hot wax splash all over her body. Vera moans with delight. He deeply penetrates her with one push, softly holding her neck with one hand and giving her a big slap with the other. It leaves her cheek blood red.

"More," she moans.

His grip on her neck tightens. A drop of saliva falls from his grinning mouth to the trembling breasts beneath him. He slaps her face once more, this time much harder. Vera Fedorka's low moaning grows into a lustful scream.

No matter how loud she screams, the sudden ringing of Maksimenko's mobile phone is even louder. The couple freezes and look into each other's eye, motionlessly. The penetrating ringtone from the TV show 24 is becoming louder with every repeated ring.

"I can't believe this shit. Damn!"

"Don't answer it, Dima!"

"I must take this one," he says climbing off the bed and frantically searching for the phone in his uniform jacket hanging on the back of a chair next to the bed. "This is the hotline dispatcher."

"*Blyad!*"

Frustrated, Vera Fedorka cusses and rattles on the handcuffs shackling her to the bed. Making sure that the caller can't hear the noise, Maksimenko takes the call.

"Maksimenko here. What? Two hours ago? At his mothers house? That was expected... Not the asset? A boy, by his voice? Are they at the HQ? Did they ask about the money reward? Never mind. He has a Skoda Fabia? Got the license plate number? No? Damn, there are thousands of Fabias in Kiev... In any case, send plain-clothes agents to all the cheap hovels in town. Make sure they have his most recent photograph. No, there's no need for patrolling the Metro... For God's sake, because he's from the Zone! Those guys prefer to travel in open spaces... Agree, he's probably using a fake passport. Good. Will be there within the hour."

He gives Vera Fedorka a triumphant glance.

"My plan has paid off. Tarasov was sighted two hours ago here in Kiev! He got the bait! The trick with Strelok's message has worked! Am I good or am I good?"

"*You* are dumb enough if you leave me here like this, Dima!"

Maksimenko walks back to the bed and gives Vera Fedorka the look of a real sadist.

"I'm in a dilemma," he says theatrically scratching his head. "What am I supposed to do... I could call Kruchelnikov, this time *me* waking up him in the middle of the night for a change. Or should I finish what I have started with you? Such a dilemma..."

Vera Fedorka growls like a captive animal. Maksimenko smiles at her. The woman now looks at him, begging, with full submission in her eyes.

He lies down on her and finishes within a minute. At the same moment, Vera Fedorka's beautiful face jerks into a painful grimace. She emits a yelp, followed by a long, faltering moan.

Maksimenko gets off the bed and quickly dresses up.

"Dima," Vera whispers, still panting. "Stay. I beg you."

He steps to the woman, caresses her sweating body and smears the female moist all over his face.

"To remind me of you until next time," he smiles. "That would be within exactly one hour."

"What?!"

Captain Maksimenko glances at his watch. "Agent Fedorka, I need you back at headquarters within one hour. We'll have a minor to interrogate. Do not be late."

Maksimenko ignores her begging gaze. He places the handcuff key on the bed, away from her shackled right hand, yet close enough to reach it if she makes a strong enough effort, even if at the price of badly chaffing her wrist.

He can still hear Fedorka's cussing when he shuts the door from outside.

"I love you too," he says to himself with a self-loving smile.

29

Premier Palace Hotel, Kiev

From all the hotels in Kiev, Tarasov didn't pick the Premier Palace Hotel because he desired all the extravaganza that the best hotel of Ukraine offered, neither to enjoy the marvelous view over the high-rise buildings of Kiev's downtown from the room. With the curtains carefully pulled close to deny any insight to the room he and Nooria occupy, he couldn't enjoy the view anyway.

He put himself in the SBU's shoes, thinking that if he were to watch out for a renegade army officer crazy enough to show up in his home town, he'd look for him in the cheaper hotels and railway station rest rooms where all staff had already been alerted and briefed about his

appearance and personal details. The Spirit of the City of Screams might have made him bigger—not as big as the Top and the Colonel’s Lieutenants, though still much above his former height—but his face didn’t change much. Tarasov had no doubts that many people had unexpected visitors leaving his photograph and a telephone number behind, should a taxi driver or hotel employee recognize him.

His other, even more important reason was that he knew the building inside out. For Tarasov, who had been with the Ukrainian Spetsnaz for several years before he was deployed to the Zone, being prepared for anything that might happen to rich and important people was part of his daily training – rescuing hostages, smoking out terrorists, locating and disarming bombs. The Premier Palace Hotel was one of the high-profile locations for which such plans were prepared and rehearsed regularly. He knows exactly which plans SBU commandos would follow if they’d come for him and where they might make a mistake. Keeping this in mind, Tarasov picked two adjacent rooms where he knows that the posh-looking ceiling is only half inch thick plaster, with an air-condition maintenance shaft running directly above. It could be made easily accessible with the fire axe he already took from the emergency case in the staircase, while the Top feigned an argument with a hotel employee to distract the attention of any security guard who might be watching the corridor through the hidden CCTV.

Hearing a faint knock on the door, Tarasov immediately removes the lock card from its wall case. The lights in the room go out at once, including TV and hair dryer.

“Hey!” Pete says from his chair in front of the TV. “I was watching this!”

Tarasov signals him to stay put. He quickly removes the key card from its holster to switch off all lights in the room and takes the clothes hanger that he had already placed close to the door – even the most heavily armed commando would be helpless if unexpectedly choke-held with that.

After a heartbeat another knock comes. This time it is someone drumming the rhythm of the Garry Owen song with his fingers on the door.

“Come in,” Tarasov says switching the lights back on. Nooria’s hair dryer starts buzzing again.

“Boo!” The Top emanates the strong smell of liquor as he steps in and fakes a frightening gesture. “Gotcha!”

“In high spirits, I see.”

Hartman collapses into a chair. “Jesus! In the end I was prepared to make Custer’s last stand and die with my boots on. That Aussie son of a bitch almost won our drinking competition.”

"Is he in business?"

"Bet he is. He's an oddball, though. Most hunters brag about what they bagged. Sawyer was bragging about what he didn't."

"Like what?"

"Among else, he mentioned gonorrhea in Warsaw and HIV in Cape Town."

"*Gospodi*, Top, how much did you drink?"

"More than necessary, less than enough... anyway, tonight he's on the hunt again. Masha is the name of the game, or Natasha or whatever... eyes of a cat, body of a panther! I could have taken her friend, a certain Katya but she was looking too KGB to me."

Hartman hiccups and makes a face as if he had already regretted his decision.

"I hope those hookers will not distract him from the trip tomorrow."

"Don't worry. I'd say he's the kind of fellow who wouldn't miss a boar hunt, not even for the sake of a dozen top models begging him for sex. And Jesus, the women here must all be top models because the way they look—good God!"

"Is the hotel bar still open?" Pete asks, amused. "I could use some company myself."

"Over my dead body," Hartman grumbles. "Anyway, what's the plan for tomorrow?"

Tarasov pulls the table closer to the Top's chair and unfolds a map he took from the lobby, found among brochures promoting the sights of Kiev and Ukraine. It has the logo of Chernobyl Tours on it, an agency that organized tourist trips into the Zone before it became off-limits. "We'll drive to a village called Prybirsk. Dytyatki would be even better, but it used to be the main entry point to the Zone and the army still maintains a big outpost there. I'm not too eager to run into former comrades. So, Prybirsk is where we'll meet Sawyer. I hope he won't be too exhausted tomorrow morning to drive there by his GPS."

"Why can't we drive together?"

"I don't want to get him into any trouble, should we run into any on our way to the Zone. Once we're out of the Big Land—we're in it together."

"Sensible."

"Look. There's an abandoned railway yard close by but already on the Zone's rim. Trains no longer stop there but the rails run through the Zone for a few kilometers. The entry point is heavily guarded, but with a little bit of luck we should be able to get through."

"We'll need more than a little luck."

“Exactly. We’ll also need to be on time and catch freight train 314. It goes daily between Kiev and Chernokhov, passing through the entry point at Pryborsk at nine in the morning.”

The Top hiccups. “By train to where no trains go? That doesn’t give me anything.”

“We’ll hijack one. Once inside the Zone, we jump off and follow the old railroad north-west until here.” Tarasov points at a position on the map. “We’ll go through the Tuzla tunnel, cross a river and arrive at the western edge of the Swamps. That’s where the real Zone begins.”

“And once there?”

“We’ll find my friend. He can be very elusive but I know of someone who keeps track of him.”

“Fine with me,” Hartman says and hiccups once more.

“First phase—let’s all go to sleep.”

“No way for me to sleep with the Top,” Pete scowls. “He’s snoring like a bear.”

Hartman grins. “Don’t even think of sleeping alone and sneaking away, you little rascal!”

“Sorry, little brother,” Nooria says. “You can’t stay with us either.”

Pete sighs. To stretch his legs, Tarasov walks over to Nooria and caresses her freshly washed hair. As he lifts a strand of her long hair, he smells a spicy and sweetish scent coming from her neck. It seems to go directly into his blood, invigorating his body, making all his exhaustion vanish and filling him with burning desire all over.

“What’s this?” he asks sniffing.

“I mixed my own perfume,” Nooria says with a mischievous giggle. “You like it?”

“If I like your perfume?” Tarasov asks taking a deep breath with trembling nostrils. He points to the door. “You two! Get out of here! Now!”

Sharing a grin, Hartman and Pete hurry out. They have barely closed the door when Tarasov lifts Nooria from her chair, tears off the bath robe from her naked body and tosses her onto the king size bed. Nooria is still giggling when Tarasov jumps after her with his clothes barely removed. After a heartbeat, her giggle turns into a moan. She moans louder and louder while letting the desire she stirred up in her man’s body take her with the vigor of a storm, screaming with desire as she becomes one with the waves of its force.

30

SBU headquarters, Kiev

“Emission approaching,” Captain Maksimenko says looking at his watch. The elderly woman wearing plain civilian clothes and standing at the far corner of the plain office in the SBU headquarters looks at him with surprise.

“What do you mean, Captain?”

“Making people wait is a perfect way to weaken their resolve,” Maksimenko cheerfully replies. “We’re into something big tonight, Alyona Ivanovna. Just wait a little longer.”

Although the blonde woman waiting outside is used to wait for anyone with just a little more power than ordinary citizens, be it at the local municipality, the train booking booth or a bank clerk’s desk, having to spend two hours on a vacated corridor of the SBU’s grim building has taken a toll on her.

Realizing that her son is to be questioned by the SBU instead of the police was a surprise bad enough. First, she had hoped that ten minutes after her son, who is now nervously shuffling his feet on the wooden bench beside her, had told what he saw they would be soon on their way home with a handsome check in her wallet. As time passed and nobody came to see them, she was hoping that they will get away without too many formalities. After one hour, she wants to leave, thinking that if her son’s information is not urgent for the SBU then they could come back any other time.

The guards abruptly refused them to leave. By now, mentally exhausted and nervously, she feels as if she has volunteered for imprisonment. The thought that the SBU can prove anyone guilty of anything makes her anxious.

“Anhela Kirillovna?”

The sight of the one-eyed officer who at last opens an office door and calls out her name doesn’t reduce her anxiety. When she arrived with her son, she expected that the SBU would be grateful and friendly for providing them with information about a wanted criminal. But now she feels as if she were the criminal herself, waiting for interrogation.

The officer repeats his call.

“Anhela Kirillovna, come in. And this young man is...?”

“Vladimir Alekseyevich Hrabko,” the boy respectfully replies.

“We call him Vova,” his mother adds.

“I am Captain Dmitriy Maksimenko, Security Service. Please be seated.”

Without any apology for making them wait, Captain Maksimenko shows Anhela Kirillovna and Vova to sit down in two chairs standing in front of his desk. Expecting only Captain Maksimenko, she frowns when she sees an elderly female agent with short, grey hair being present as

well. To Anhela Kirillovna, she has SBU written all over her wrinkled face as she leans against the wall next to a large photograph of a heroic monument. It shows the profile of a Soviet soldier from the Great Patriotic War, chiseled into a huge grey boulder. The inscription below says, *'Defenders of Sebastopol – we will never forget you'*.

"So, Vova... out of curiosity, you checked up the home page of the police. Then your mother saw there's a reward for providing law enforcement agencies with any hint about the whereabouts of those wanted criminals. Is that correct?"

"It is, Captain Maksimenko."

"Anhela Kirillovna, you have the right to stay here while we question your son but please don't answer any questions for him. Clear?"

The woman nervously nods.

Vova looks around, apparently disappointed at the total lack of anything that would resemble the world of secret services as he had seen in the movies. The Captain's laptop is the only high-tech appliance in the room, and even that is standing next to a desk lamp that might have already stood on the same desk back in times when the building still housed the KGB.

"So, it is you who saw the criminal?" Maksimenko asks the boy.

Vova looks at his mother for encouragement before replying. Feeling his gaze, Anhela Kirillovna stirs. She had spent the last few moments looking at a plastic bucket with a mop inside, standing in the far corner behind the desk, and had contemplated if the cleaning utensils are still used to mop up blood from the floor like she saw in movies featuring KGB interrogations. She quickly nods.

"Yes, officer."

"Call me Captain Maksimenko, Vova. Did you ever want to do something for our Motherland?"

"Yes, Captain Maksimenko."

"*Molodets*. Do you know that the man you have recognized is a dangerous criminal?"

Vova nods with a shadow of fear in his eyes.

"Don't worry, Vova, you are safe with us. We need your help, though."

Before he can continue, the door opens and Agent Fedorka rushes in. Maksimenko glances at his watch. Save for the neatly applied bandages on her wrists, the agent is tidy and her white blouse under the dark grey uniform jacket is perfectly ironed. No one could guess that just fifty-five minutes ago she had still been handcuffed to a bed, bathing in her own and Maksimenko's sweat who now gives her the stern look of a superior officer.

“We have been waiting for you, Agent.”

“Apologies, *Kapitan*. I burned my wrists when making tea.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Was it hot?”

“Very.”

“Anhela Kirillovna, according to our protocols, minors are to be questioned by female agents. Female perception, I guess.” Maksimenko gives the mother a faint smile and turns to Fedorka. “Good that you’re on time. I was about asking Vova to identify the suspect.”

Vera nods. She looks into the boy’s blue eyes.

“I am Agent Fedorka but you can call me Vera. And I can call you Vova, right?”

The boy nods.

Her mother, who compared to the beautiful agent appears like a rain-soaked little sparrow, studies Fedorka with narrowed eyes. Feeling the elderly female agent’s look on her, she quickly looks elsewhere and tries to make the appearance of a good citizen who has nothing to hide. Even so, the gaze from the grey-haired agent’s dark eyes makes her feel guilty for crimes nobody could ever know, including her – except the SBU.

“Vova, you are a very brave boy. That man wants to hurt people, like your mother and children like you.” Before she continues, Fedorka assesses the effect of his words on the boy. Vova looks genuinely scared. “Will you help us to find this man?”

“Yes, Agent Fedorka.”

Maksimenko turns his laptop towards the boy. The screen shows the home page of the Ukrainian police with the photographs and description of the country’s ten most wanted criminals. Maksimenko points at one of them.

“Is this the man you saw?”

“No.”

Satisfied that the boy didn’t say yes over the photograph of a well-known mafia boss, Maksimenko now points at Tarasov’s file photograph.

“Was it him?”

“I don’t know” Vova stammers. “I think so, sir.”

“He didn’t look like in this photograph?”

“Yes he did, but he was... different.”

“In which way? Did he wear a moustache or beard?”

“I couldn’t see his face well enough in the darkness because last week Sergiy and Oleg were throwing stones at the lamp and the lamp is broken now...”

Maksimenko and Fedorka exchange a glance.

“Sergiy and Oleg, they are your friends, right?” Fedorka softly asks.

“We will need to talk about this with them. What they did was wrong.”

“But maybe we’ll skip that if you help us by answering our question properly,” adds Maksimenko and smiles at the boy.

“He was... tall, very tall. And he had a face like... that one.”

The agents follow the boy’s outstretched index finger.

“Vova, this is very important,” Maksimenko says with a hint of impatience in his voice. “Please, if you want to help us catching that man, behave seriously.”

“Otherwise, he might even come for you, Vova. Maybe for your mother too!”

Seeing that Fedorka is bound to scare her son beyond measure, Anhela Kirillovna opens her mouth to protest. Then she feels the grey-haired agent’s gaze upon her once more and prefers to stay quiet.

“But he was looking like that!” Vova exclaims.

“You mean, like that Black Sea Fleet marine on the Sebastopol monument?”

“Vova, little Vova,” Fedorka says with a voice sweet like honey. “Tell us the truth. You don’t want Sergiy and Oleg go to the prison for breaking that lamp, do you?”

“But I am telling the truth!” the boy proudly says. “He had a big, strong chin like in the photograph and his face was very hard, like made from stone and he looked sad, too.”

“Nonetheless you recognized him.”

“Yes, because I remembered him. I met him once. He was wearing a uniform like Agent Maksimenko but with more medals on his chest, and even then he was taller—”

Hearing this, the Captain’s eye flutters. Looking at Fedorka, he can even recognize a faint shadow of amusement in her face.

“—and he told me that they don’t shoot at people in the army, and I believed him because my parents always tell me that our army is no good and just a waste of money...”

Vova’s mother whimpers. Covering her mouth with her palm, she looks at the grey-haired agent who hardens her gaze under the black eyebrows.

Maksimenko nods in satisfaction. “Thank you, Vova. That was all we needed to know.”

“Can I go now?”

“Yes, Vova,” Fedorka says with a warm smile. “You have been very helpful.”

Relieved, the boy jumps up from his chair but now it’s his mother’s turn to ask a question. She clears her throat before beginning to talk.

“About the—I mean, the reward... the cash...”

Unseen by Anhela Kirillovna and her son, Maksimenko gives Fedorka a wink from his eye.

“Oh yes, I think you deserve it. If I’m right, it is fifty thousand hrivnya, yes?”

“Yes. Quite a lot of money,” Fedorka says, still smiling.

Anhela Kirillovna’s look turns greedy.

“Is it in cash, or...”

“I am sorry,” Maksimenko says and closes his laptop. “You didn’t provide us with anything new.”

“The web site said that any information—” Anhela Kirillovna stammers.

“Not just *any* information. It said *useful* information. I am sorry. You can leave now.”

Anhela Kirillovna looks from one agent to the other with a mixture of humiliation and anger. She is about to protest and demand the reward when her eyes meet those of the elderly agent once more. To Anhela Kirillovna, her silence is more threatening than anything else. She feels as if anything she had done in her life that might be interpreted as a deviation from a proper citizen’s way of life—stealing candies from a shop when she was a kid, having had too many lovers in her youth, voting for the wrong party in last year’s elections—could become charges against her to which she could only plead guilty.

“Vova,” she stutters, “let’s go.”

After the door closes, Maksimenko waits for a minute. Then he hits his palm with his fist.

“Yes! It’s confirmed! He took the bait and came back! I told you so!”

“And now what?” Pain is suddenly apparent on Fedorka’s face as she adjusts the bandages on her wrists. “How will you find him?”

“I won’t need to.” Maksimenko looks at his watch. “Okay... I need to go to the Zone for a few days. That’s where Tarasov will go. Hunting season!”

The noise of a faint cough comes from behind them.

“Apologies, but can I go now?”

Maksimenko turns to the grey-haired woman. “Of course, Alyona Ivanovna. You can continue mopping the corridor now. Your time was appreciated.”

“Thank you, *komandir*.”

The elderly woman takes the plastic bucket and the mop. She gives the two agents a smile that could come from a grandmother and leaves the room.

“Who the hell was that?” Fedorka asks, puzzled.

“Verka, Verka, you might be one of our best assets but you’ll never have Aunt Alyona’s gaze. She was housekeeping here even back in Soviet times.”

“Psychological torture, I guess?”

“Exactly.”

“And here’s physical!” She gives Maksimenko a slap on his face. “Leaving me there in... that condition?”

Fedorka’s hand might be fast but Maksimenko’s is faster. Before she could strike again, he catches her underarm and applies an iron grasp. Fedorka whimpers with pain. He grabs her closer to himself and kisses her.

“Excellent job with that brat. You scared him shitless.”

“I love you,” Vera Fedorka whispers.

“Not here,” Captain Maksimenko whispers back, glancing at a barely discernible, dark spot in the ceiling that hides a CCTSV camera. “At your place.”

Vera Fedorka steps away from him, but not without gouging her nails into his hand so deeply that Maksimenko can barely suppress a shout of pain.

31

Tribe outpost, New Zone

Exposure to the Spirit means not only a growth in strength and bodily proportions, neither the almost complete exclusion of fears from a man’s instinct. A body thus toughened also reduces the need for sleep and rest, or maybe gives stronger willpower to resist such needs. Lieutenant José Ramirez never contemplated why he and the other Lieutenants could complete long marches during day, spend the whole night on watch and not feel any fatigue when resuming their mission the next day. But by whatever way the Spirit had changed them, it didn’t eliminate the need for something



to keep them warm during a cold night and now he is pleased to feel the smell of hot coffee steaming from the metal cup in his hand. Enjoying smell and flavor, he wishes for a cigarette to round off this simple pleasure. A glowing cigarette would make him an excellent target for any hostile sniper lurking in the darkness, though. Having finished his coffee, he continues to watch the canyon from the roadblock.

The fighters manning the roadblock are barely visible but he can smell them. A sharp musk of sweat and sleeplessness weaves through the air, mixed with the heavier scent of gun grease from his own recently cleaned M16.

Stars abound in the sky. He has a clear view over the canyon where through his night vision binoculars everything appears to be illuminated by the eerie green of St. Elmo's fire.

"About one hour to sunrise," a fighter breathes next to him.

The last hour of the night watch is so quiet that Ramirez can even hear the howls of a jackal pack far to the south.

"Jackals or wolves?" the fighter asks in a low voice.

"Who cares?" Ramirez whispers back with a shrug. "I hate 'em all. This place without mutants... that would be quite something."

"Yep. Been on patrol to the Amir Lake once... that huge blue water with pink and green anomaly fields all around it, reflecting the red sky before a dust storm hit... a marvelous sight."

Ramirez suddenly signals him to stop talking. He raises his binocs again and scans the canyon, but sees nothing suspicious.

Those howls... they ended too abruptly.

"Something scared the jackals away," he whispers. "I don't like this. Get Campbell over here."

Campbell too was a member of the Colonel's original team, but Ramirez, at that time a staff sergeant, had outranked Lance Corporal Campbell. Although now both are Lieutenants, seniority is still reflected by their positions – Ramirez a squad leader, Campbell his second in command.

"Sir?" the junior Lieutenant asks when he appears at the roadblock. He is wearing an exoskeleton like Ramirez and an M16A4 with grenade launcher is slung over his shoulder.

"Something just scared the shit out of a jackal pack, a few hundred meters south of our position."

Ramirez hands the heavy binoculars to Campbell. He pulls up his face mask and rubs his tired eyes.

"I see mutants!"

"Get the men ready, quickly!" Ramirez tells Campbell. "Move!"

He grabs the binoculars and looks where his second in command had pointed a minute ago. Still blurred in the distance, a huge pack of ferocious jackals appears in the green vision.

Muted noise comes from the outpost as fighters wearing heavy combat gear are manning machine guns and rifle positions.

"All teams, check your comms," Ramirez says into his intercom.

The first reply comes from the fighters taking up position at the roadblock. "Rifle One, in position."

"Rifle Two, ready," comes the reply from the other side of the creek.

"Mortar team ready."

"Heavy One, ready."

"Heavy Two, in position."

"Heavy One and Two, hold fire on the .50 cals," Ramirez commands. "Rifle One and Two, lock and load! Fire on my command!"

He waits until the approaching pack gets into point-blank range. When the mutants are just about 250 meters away, Ramirez aims at their alpha.

"Open fire!" he shouts and fires his assault rifle. The two fire teams immediately respond to his call. Their M16s hit the tightly packed jackals from the front and right side. Though decimated in a few seconds, they keep running towards the outpost.

Then the first mine explodes, followed by several more as the mutants enter the minefield laid out on the dirt track in front of the roadblock. Instead of turning back or scattering, the jackals keep running up, seemingly ignoring the bullets hailing on them, their heavy bodies releasing more mines as they step and fall on them. Lieutenant Campbell brings the last one down just a few steps before the roadblock.

Ramirez waves his hand and shouts, "Cease fire!"

Save for a few faint yelps coming from wounded mutants, silence descends. Unhurriedly, Ramirez aims his rifle and finishes them off one by one. "The sandbox has just said good morning."

Campbell snorts. "Mutants with a death wish?"

"They got it," Ramirez replies, loading a full magazine into his assault rifle.

A bark sounds in the distance. The noise makes the Lieutenant frown. To his ears it sounded more like a human imitating a jackal alpha, though if so, then in a very faithful way. He has no time to ponder over this as one of his fighters shouts out.

"There's more of them!"

An even larger pack appears. Lieutenant Ramirez orders his men to fire and the previous gory scene repeats itself. The only difference is that by the time the last mutant is killed, their bodies lay much closer to the

roadblock. A horrible suspicion comes to Ramirez's mind and he is not the only one perplexed over what has just happened.

"Jesus Christ, they've cleaned the minefield!" a fighter shouts.

"Try to decaf, man!" Ramirez shouts back. "The jackals were just hungry and got their bellies filled with lead!"

"What if they were sent to clear the mines, sir?"

Ramirez first wants to reprimand the fighter for talking nonsense but then admits to himself that the man has a point. Even if the two packs had attacked them senselessly, the track is now cleared right up to the roadblock.

"Campbell, set up the Raven. Heavy One and Two, stay alert, mortar team, prepare to fire," he commands. "Keep your eyes open, warriors."

His second in command rushes to the Humvee stationed beyond the cover of the fallen boulders. Hearing a noise, Ramirez glances at the steep canyon wall to his left.

"Just a loose rock," a fighter says.

"I need that SUAV, *now!*" Ramirez impatiently shouts over the intercom.

I want to see what's going on deeper in this goddamned canyon, the Lieutenant thinks. He is about to tell his men something encouraging to ease the tension when he sees a flash not far from their positions. A split second later he hears a muted blast coming from the same spot.

He screams out. "Incoming!"

The rocket-propelled grenade impacts on the dust track, just a meter away from the roadblock. A second one follows and hits the fighters' cover. It doesn't deal too much damage to the well-fortified roadblock where the weathered sandbags are hard like concrete, but shakes the men behind and showers them with sand and stone splinters.

Then all the hell breaks loose. Dozens, if not hundreds of Kalashnikovs start to rain fire on the defenders from the canyon walls.

"All teams, fire at will!" Ramirez screams. "Campbell, it's too late for surveillance now! Get back to position!"

He quickly assesses their situation. The attackers have obviously used the distraction by the jackals to take up positions above. They can pin them down from the canyon walls but can't get closer without leaving their cover. Their left flank across the creek is safe because no enemy, no matter how fanatical, would be crazy enough to wade through the irradiated water. Without the mines blocking access, the roadblock itself is in greater danger but the dirt track leading up can be easily held under fire by the nearby machine gun and the mortars in the rear.

"Here they come!" a fighter shouts at the roadblock. "Ragheads in the open, one o'clock!"

“Asking distance?” Ramirez demands.

“Two-zero-zero, approaching fast!”

“Mortar team! Fire emission, direction – twelve, distance – one-niner-zero, marker – jeep track,” the Lieutenant yells. “Fire for effect, over!”

“Fire for effect. Out.”

A second after the mortar section’s acknowledgement the first 81mm round impacts on the track. Ramirez mentally praises Gunny Anderson’s training skills—the two light mortars fire consecutively in a two-second cycle, sending a devastating HIE round every second into the approaching enemy. The two heavy .50 caliber machine guns also get into action. All in all, Ramirez sees with relief that they are still far from being overrun.

“Rifle teams, save ammo!” he commands. “Campbell, pass the word!”

The suppressive fire from the hillside doesn’t cease for a second but the Tribe’s well-protected machine guns and mortars deal carnage to the approaching enemies.

“Should we report this to the Alamo?” Campbell asks through the gunfire.

Ramirez grins under his face mask. “We’re an outpost, we’re supposed to be attacked. Wait till things get real dicey!”

“It’s your call, sir,” Campbell replies and continues firing. He has only fired two bursts when the assault appears to be over. No more ragheads appear from the south.

“Mortar team, hold your fire,” the Lieutenant commands. “Hold fire!”

The suppressive fire ceases on the hillside and Ramirez hears the attackers above shout out. It is not a battle that echoes in the valley but a triumphant cheer.

“What the hell?” he asks, wishing there had been enough time to set up the surveillance craft.

Cautiously, Ramirez peeks over the sandbags. Immediately, his instinct tells him to get back to cover but what meets his eye forces him to keep looking, trying hard to believe his own eyes. His fighters must be perplexed too because none of them open fire – even though that would be the natural reaction of armed men when seeing hulky, humanoid mutants lumbering towards them.

The mutants’ muscles tell of superhuman strength. On the brawny arms, chests and limbs, thick blue veins run under a pale skin. They bend forward as they get closer, as if their limbs cannot cope with the weight of their immense torsos, the disfigured heads slightly hung and having a mouth from where oversized teeth and fangs protrude. Once they might have been humans because they wear rags of protective suits and still know, or have learned again, how to use weapons. Big ones.

“Smitters!” Campbell screams, “Smitters! Oh fuck, they got machine guns!”

Apparently ignoring the hail of bullets fired at them, the dozen or so mutants sweep the outpost’s defenses with their machine guns. From the cover of their hulks, hostile humans fire and throw grenades.

Ramirez understands at once that their own two heavy machine guns are the only hope. “Heavy One, Two, kill those bastards!”

Tracers mark the arc of fire as the .50 calibers begin to rake the assaulting mutants. The smitters ignore the radiation in the water and cross the creek, forcing the to machine guns to disperse their fire over a wider range. At the same time, a mass of Taliban is storming toward the roadblock. Ramirez’s mortars can’t fire there, unless they want to hit their own fighters who are frantically firing their M16s.

“Campbell! To that fifty, go, go, go! Heavy Two, direct your fire at the smitters in the creek!”

The smiter’s walk is slow but their steps are as long as human leaps. They cross the creek in a matter of seconds and the first of them, ignoring the blood flowing from his wounds all over his rags with blue and brown camouflage, has already reached the machine gun post at the bridge. Ramirez hears the .50 caliber cease firing and his men scream in terror.

His own position at the roadblock is also about to be overrun. The incendiary rounds fired from the heavy machine gun rip into the closest smiter’s body and make it howl with pain. The smell of blood and burnt flesh rises as the rags over his chest catch fire. The smiter trembles and at last goes into his knees. But another already steps up from behind, raising the hand-held machine gun and mows the .50 caliber’s crew down.

Screaming with rage, Ramirez empties one magazine after the other but his M16 doesn’t have much effect on these huge mutants.

“Last mag!” he hears a fighter scream. It is the man from the watch who had fond memories of the New Zone’s beauties, and he won’t have the chance to see them again – a Talib jumps at him and holds his neck in a chokehold while another finishes him off with a long burst from his Kalashnikov. Ramirez fires his M16 and downs him, then reaches for another magazine on his assault vest only to realize that he has just finished his own ammunition.

He flips the M16 in his hand and moves to the disabled machine gun, shattering skulls and punching bodies with the rifle butt and screaming as loud as he can.

“Pull yourself together, men! Fight! Give’m hell!”

He grabs an M27 from the ground and fires it at a mutant who is about to climb across the roadblock. The smiter’s massive fist smashes into the piled-up sandbags as he begins to tear down the defenses. Ramirez aims at

the drooling mouth and sends all rounds still left in the STANAG magazine into the smiter's head. It staggers for a second, giving a painful and angry roar, then collapses.

But by now their forward defenses are overrun. Ramirez finds himself almost alone this side of the bridge, and the situation on the other bank looks dire—the Taliban and their mutant allies are already fighting among the stone huts. A fighter is already manning the tower machine gun of a Humvee. For a moment it seems that he can hold back the assault by peppering the fast approaching Taliban, but then two smiters step up and, to Ramirez's horror, get a hold on the vehicle, turn it over and let it tumble down the creek. Defeat seems certain to Lieutenant Ramirez, though amid all the carnage he can't see a single of his men retreating.

But all he can do now is to issue just that command.

“Fall back! Fall back, to the Humvees!”

Then he himself makes a dash across the bridge. Several enemies try to block his way. Ramirez charges into their midst, ignoring the 7,62mm rounds hitting his heavy body and sweeps them away, smashing two hostiles with his rifle and kicking down a third. He is just a few steps away from the Humvees, and sees his remaining fighters retreat there too. Ramirez lets go off the empty automatic rifle and takes a fallen Talib's AKS.

A thundering explosion blasts the house where the mortar team is located. He instantly knows that a grenade or RPG shot must have hit the mortar shells, killing friends inside and enemies outside. The radioman, carrying the heavy radio on his back, is slain by a smiter. With bullets whooshing over his cover, a corpsman attempts to give first aid to a wounded warrior, only to disappear in the fiery blast of an RPG shot.

“To the Humvees! Go, go, go!”

Ramirez turns back to fire and give as much cover as he can to his few remaining men. He presses the trigger. The battered rifle fires two shots – and jams.

A grenade hits the closest Humvee where a few retreating fighters were already climbing inside. The blast sends Ramirez to his knees but he staggers to his feet once more. Then a massive fist hits him from behind and he falls forward, face into the dust.

His last thought is that of Saria letting her tribal gown slide off her shoulders and baring her full breasts, where sweat glimmers like pearls on the olive skin. Then everything goes black.

32

Prybirsk village, on the border of the Exclusion Zone

The small shop at the main street of Pryborsk is no different from the thousands of similar establishments in the Ukrainian countryside. It is half shop, half drinking hole, with a round table in the middle where patrons can lean on because there are no chairs, and a shelf loaded with goods that get more expensive and dustier the higher they are placed. There is an electric kettle on the counter, next to a small rack with chocolate bars and chewing gum. A piece of paper fastened to the rack tells anyone interested that a Nescafé costs ten hrivnyi.

Ignoring the four costumers standing at the table and talking in a language he doesn't understand, an old shopkeeper counts his money. Occasionally, he wets his fingers with his tongue. It's a lot of profit for such an early morning, but the Bear type artifact detector he had just sold to his customers fetched a good price.

Through the door left ajar, one can see a factory building looming beyond the row of low village houses across the road.

In front of the house facing the shop, a topless UAZ-469 jeep is parked next to the house facing the shop, soaking in the gray drizzle. Rust spots dot its olive-green paint all over. At dawn, it still belonged to a farmer in a village about forty kilometers away. Knowing that this is the kind of car they need for the first part of their trip, Tarasov hot-wired the jeep by connecting the primary power supply and the electrical circuits. Before driving off, they left their Skoda in the jeep's place with a handwritten note asking the owner to return it to the car rental agency in Kiev. To cheer him up, the note was accompanied by a handsome amount of dollars, at least twice of what the nearly wrecked jeep is worth.

"The world is ruled by cast-iron laws," Pete says looking gloomily into his white plastic cup with lukewarm coffee inside. "It's horribly boring. I thought by spitting at my father's legacy, you know, running AWOL and doing things he would never approve of... thinking all that would break those laws. But I no longer know how to break those laws. Looks like my rebellion was useless."

"Agreed," the Top says taking a slow sip from his own cup. "Life's boring out there. To live in the Middle Ages was interesting.

Imagine, you step out of your little village and suddenly the world is full of mysteries and unknown dangers."

"That's exactly what we're about to do," Tarasov says, touching the Top's cup with his. "Wait... I think Sawyer is here. Great!"

He steps out into the rain, but immediately recoils as a red SUV brakes from its neck-breaking speed and splashes muddy water all around.

"Howdy!"

The hunter steps out with a friendly smile. He puts his hat on the top of the car and adjusts his hair, then courteously opens the other door. To

Tarasov's bewilderment, an elegantly dressed, beautiful woman appears. She gracefully lifts her long coat as she steps closer.

"This lady was so kind as to agree to come with us to the Zone," Sawyer says taking a rucksack and two rifle bags from the back seat. "She's a very courageous woman. Her name is—uhm, what's your name?"

"Are you really a Stalker?" she asks ignoring the hunter and looking Tarasov lasciviously up and down.

"Wait—I'll explain everything," Tarasov tells Sawyer. He slowly skirts the car.

"Go away," he rudely tells her.

"What a cretin!" the woman says. Without hesitation, she sits into the driver's seat and drives off.

"Hey! That's my rented Range Rover!" Sawyer shouts. "And my hat!"

"It's here," Tarasov says picking it up from the mud and shaking the rainwater off. "You did get drunk after all."

"Me?" Sawyer says stepping inside the shop. "What do you mean? I had a drink, like one half of the world does. The other half gets drunk. Including women and children. I just had a drink though. Damn it, what a mess here!"

"It's our last stop before entering the Zone. Go on, drink. We've got time."

"How about a glass for the road?" Sawyer asks. "What do you think?"

"Alcoholism is the scourge of mankind," Tarasov grumbles. "At least early in the morning."

"All right, we'll drink beer."

While Tarasov gets four bottles of Obolon from the shopkeeper, Sawyer rubs his temples.

"You know, I couldn't sleep last night with the jet lag and all, so I educated myself. I read a lot about the place on the internet you want to take me to. Thank God for wifi."

"Don't believe half of it," Tarasov says placing the bottles onto the table. "There's all kind of lies about the Zone. Some idiots even say it was created by radioactivity."

"Yeah, damned internet," Pete says. "Twitter, Facebook... it's all bullshit. Imagine, someone says 'I saw it, Lady Gaga has a dick' and everyone goes oh! and ah! And suddenly it turns out that the guy was lying, just having fun. There's no real truth anymore, just what people want to hear."

"Is it what you think about all the time?" Hartman asks.

"God forbid! In fact, I don't think much. It's not good for me."

“Tell me, Sawyer, now that you know where we’re heading—why did you let yourself get mixed up in all this?” Tarasov asks. “What do you need this trip for? You could have stayed in Kiev and have whatever fun you want. You seem to have more than enough money.”

“Money’s boring,” shrugs the Australian.

Nooria gives him a stern look. “Have you been used up?”

“What? Yeah, I guess, in a way. I’m not a hunter but a survivalist, actually. You know, my family was always rich. First I was driven by fear over losing it. What if one day I wake up with all gone? You could call it paranoia, I guess. But then it became a passion. I always need a fix of danger. I’m no fear junkie, no, nothing like that. I need the feeling of facing fear and being able to overcome it. Proving myself. If you think I’m your ordinary rich tourist prick – I don’t give a damn, no, but you’d be very wrong about me.”

“You’ve been SASR?” the Top curiously asks. “Special Air Service Regiment?”

“Nah. I’d never be able to bring myself to shoot at other human beings. I’m just a nature-loving man needing the odd danger to remind me I’m still alive.”

“That makes two of us,” Pete says. “Only that I need stuff for that.”

“I thought you were coming clean, little brother.”

“Wouldn’t know, Nooria. Being off for... how long? A week maybe? There was a time I thought I couldn’t live without it even for a day.”

“But you do want to come clean, no?”

Pete shrugs. “Why should I, anyway? Tell me one damned reason.”

“To live.”

“Spare me such clichés, please.”

Through the splashing rain comes the faint rattle, slowly getting closer. A train engine’s whistle pierces into the quiet morning.

“Do you hear it? Our train.”

Tarasov walks to the UAZ, followed by his companions. As if testing if the rusted car could fall apart or not, the Top gives its tire a soft kick. Pete suddenly halts.

“Dammit! I forgot to buy cigarettes.”

“Don’t go back,” says Tarasov.

“Why?”

“You must not.”

Tarasov makes a gesture that appears more like ‘brings bad luck’ than ‘we’re pressed for time’.

“Are you Stalkers all like this?”

“Like what?”

“Believing such nonsense.” Pete sighs and puts away the box with his last cigarette. “Okay, I’d better leave it for a rainy day.”

Hoping that the rain-soaked engine will start, Tarasov connects the ignition cables. To his relief, the battery comes to life and, after a squeaks and stutters, powers the engine up. “Keep your eyes peeled for army patrols.”

The drizzle turns into heavy rain. Driving slowly, he steers the UAZ into a narrow street flanked by dull brick walls. Tarasov doesn’t even bother to switch on the windscreen wipers, presuming they wouldn’t work in this decrepit car. He releases the windshield and bends it forward over to the hood.

After about a hundred meters, they reach a short section where the wall had collapsed. Tarasov turns left and drives through into an alley between two rows of old, dilapidated buildings. The smell of damp rot coming from the glassless windows can be detected even through the rain.

They are driving through a gate that appears like the entrance to the factory area beyond the village. The ground is now solely mud, as if it had never seen tarmac, but the silent buildings around tell of many years of heavy industrial activity.

They have barely crossed under the gate when Tarasov stops the car and switches off the headlights. After a minute, all hear the noise of a motorcycle approaching.

“Get down!”

Following Tarasov’s command, the travelers duck. At the far end of the alley between the gate house and a low building that looks like an old warehouse, a motorbike appears. The soldier driving it glances at the UAZ.

“Don’t move!” Tarasov whispers.

The patrolman apparently sees nothing particular about the UAZ. In its dilapidated state, the car blends in perfectly with the abandoned industrial buildings. He adjusts the AKM assault rifle hanging from his neck and drives on.

Tarasov waits a few seconds until the motorbike’s noise recedes, then starts the engine up, reverses the car and drives on once more to the left, in the opposite direction to where the patrol went. Now the village houses have disappeared completely and they drive through a maze of blackened factory halls, following the rails running along. They lead to a massive gate. Tarasov stops the UAZ at the entrance of a factory hall.

“Top, go and see if anyone’s there!”

Jumping out from the idling car, Hartman cautiously walks towards the other end of the hall.

“Move it, for God’s sake!”

The Top quickens his steps. He looks around in the alley running parallel to the one where the car is waiting.

“There’s no one here!”

“Go to the other exit!” Tarasov shouts back.

They hear the noise of the train again and the reason for Tarasov’s discomfort becomes clear at once. The Top peeks out to the alley and can barely pull his head back when the train appears on the rails. It rattles down the alley at only an arm’s length from the brick walls and shaking them, even though the engine only has a single flat-bed wagon in tow. It carries a strange device resembling a set of transformers for a gigantic utility pole.

Tarasov picks him up at the exit across the hall, slowing down the UAZ only as much as allows the Top to find a hold and jump inside. He is about to take a sharp turn to the left when the patrolman’s bike appears beyond the corner.

Tarasov presses against the brake at full force and quickly reverses the car.

“Where on earth did you look, Top?”

Luckily for them, the patrolman must have been away to attend nature’s call or gave in to another distraction because by the time he sits back on his bike, the UAZ is already gone.

Hiding behind a corner, Tarasov watches him leave. Then he rushes back to the car and drives it at neck-breaking speed into another narrow alley. The Top shares a puzzled gaze with Sawyer and Pete—the alley appears to lead back to where they were coming, directly to the rails leading to the gate.

Then, through a cloud of mist, the headlights of the train engine appear. Seemingly out of nowhere, a sleepy-looking worker appears with a cigarette in his mouth. He opens the gate, giving the gate wings just enough time to fling open before the train proceeds through. Before he can close them again, the sight he sees makes the cigarette fall from his lips—the old UAZ charges after the train as if it were towed by the engine itself.

The worker shrugs and closes the gate, thinking about all the strange things he has seen here on the outer frontier of the Exclusion Zone.

Unknown to Tarasov’s four companions, the gate closing behind them now also separates them from the outside world, that Stalkers refer to as the Big Land. Even if their leader fully concentrates on driving, the foreboding mist and the strange industrial shapes lurking in the gloom make them suspect the proximity of the Zone. Nooria is the only one who has the shadow of a smile playing around her mouth, while her eyes tell of exhilaration in place of anxiety.

Tarasov slows down, leaving more distance between them and the train driving ahead of them. Misunderstanding this, Sawyer pats his shoulder.

“We’re in the Exclusion Zone already?”

“No.”

“So that’s what you meant by hijacking a train?” the Top asks.

“No. That part comes now.”

“Oh crap,” sighs Pete. “I thought we were already there!”

Far ahead, a searchlight shines through the mist and a heavily guarded checkpoint becomes visible through the gloom. Tall, barbed wire fences run left and right from the rails which are blocked by a heavy barrier. The barbed wire fence forms a corridor where it runs along the tracks, apparently to prevent anyone to jump on or off the trains passing through. Soldiers in full battle gear man the tower looming above the checkpoint and the barrier itself.

Tarasov halts the car and switches off the headlights. He raises his right hand in a signal to everyone to hold still.

“We have exactly five seconds to get through there without getting killed,” he whispers.

The barrier slowly goes up and the train halts in the barbed wire corridor. A dozen soldiers give it a thorough search.

“Looks like a damn Checkpoint Charlie,” the Top says under his breath.

The train sounds its horn and gets into motion.

“Brace yourself,” Tarasov whispers. “Let’s pray this junk doesn’t let us down!”

He gives full throttle. The UAZ darts after the train, almost slipping off the rails and reaches at in the moment when the soldiers are about to lower the barrier. Barely able to keep the car on the slippery rails, Tarasov engages the differential lock and shifts into second gear. The tortured car emits a thick cloud of exhaustion fumes.

For a second, surprise seems to render the soldiers motionless. Then a loudspeaker crackles.

“ALERT! STALKERS DETECTED! OPEN FIRE! OPEN FIRE!”

Luckily for them, none of the guards has enough time to take proper aim. The fire of their hip-fired AKMs misses, and the precious load of the flatbed wagon hinders the guards manning the watchtower to lay fire on them.

Or so Tarasov hopes. In an instant, a heavy machine gun starts barking from above.

“So this is where they put that damned RPK from Cordon Base!” he yells through the whizz of bullets.

Only a few meters left until the train leaves the barbed wire corridor.

“We’re sitting ducks!” the Top shouts. “Drive, drive!”

Two bullets hit the hood. Hot steam jets through the holes immediately. The slow train has not entirely passed through yet when Tarasov takes a sharp turn to the left. The Top watches with dread as the wagon’s rear buffer is about to pierce into the car. Then it only shaves off the right mirror as the UAZ jolts off the rails, slides through the mud and turns right behind the corner of a ruined industrial building.

Tarasov drives through halls filled with debris and decrepit machinery. Glass fallen from the broken windows shatters and squeaks under the tires. They hit a pile of wooden crates that collapses behind them, one smashing against the UAZ and missing Nooria’s head by a hair. With brakes squeaking, the car comes to a halt.

Then it is quiet, so quiet that even the drops of water falling from the holes in the roof can be heard. It takes a moment for their ears to detect the faint noise of a siren – coming from a distance seeming safe enough. Then it dies off.

“I was told people here drive like crazy,” the Australian says climbing off the jeep, “but I didn’t expect... *this*.”

“Everyone still in one piece?” Tarasov asks turning back in his seat.

Pete touches his neck, then looks at his hand with sudden fright. “I’m bleeding,” he says.

Nooria immediately tends to his wound.

“You are lucky, little brother,” she says pulling a bandage from her shoulder bag.

Pete scowls. “Is that my artery?”

“How bad is his wounded?” Tarasov asks with concern.

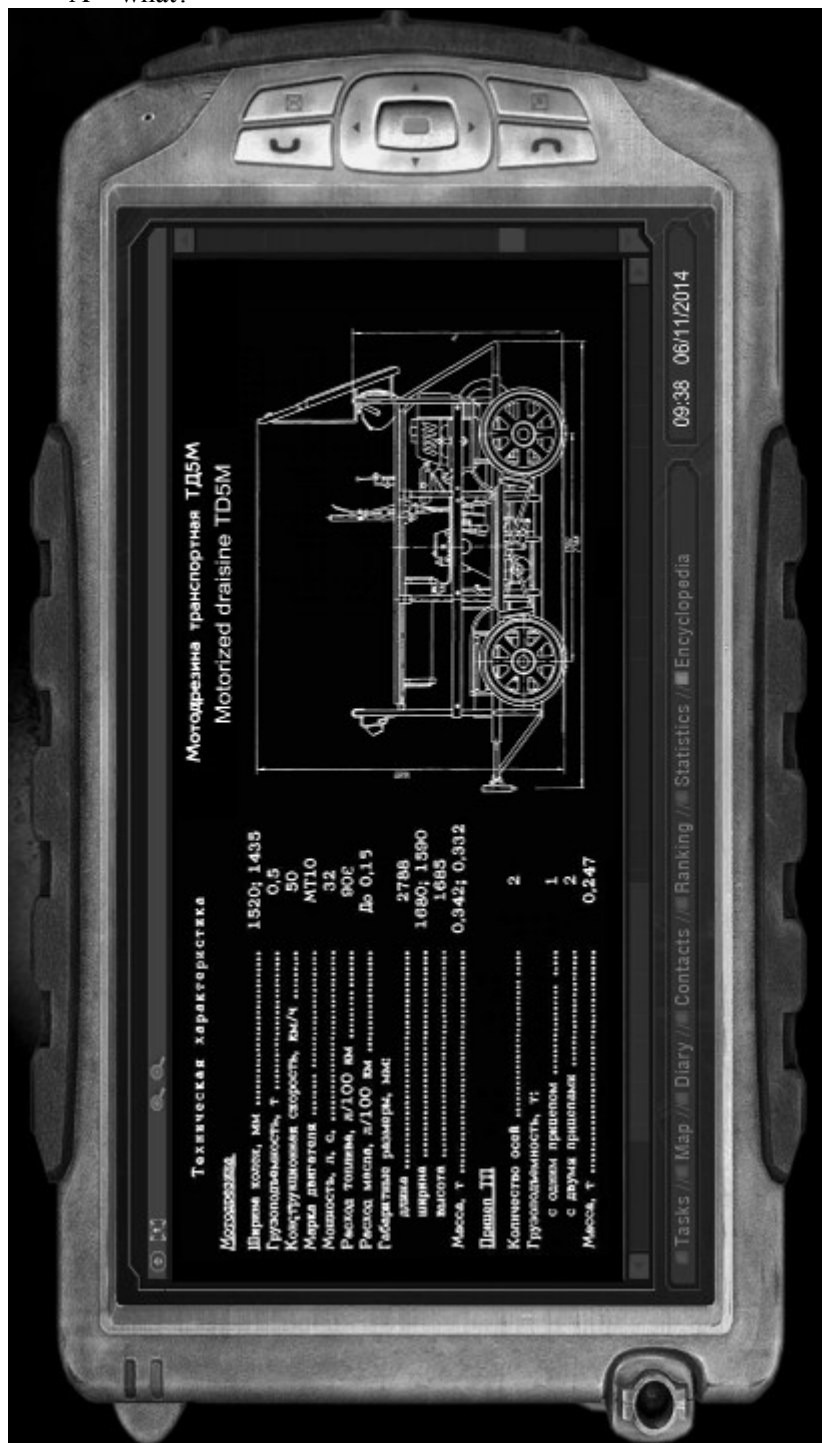
“Bullet just grazed him.”

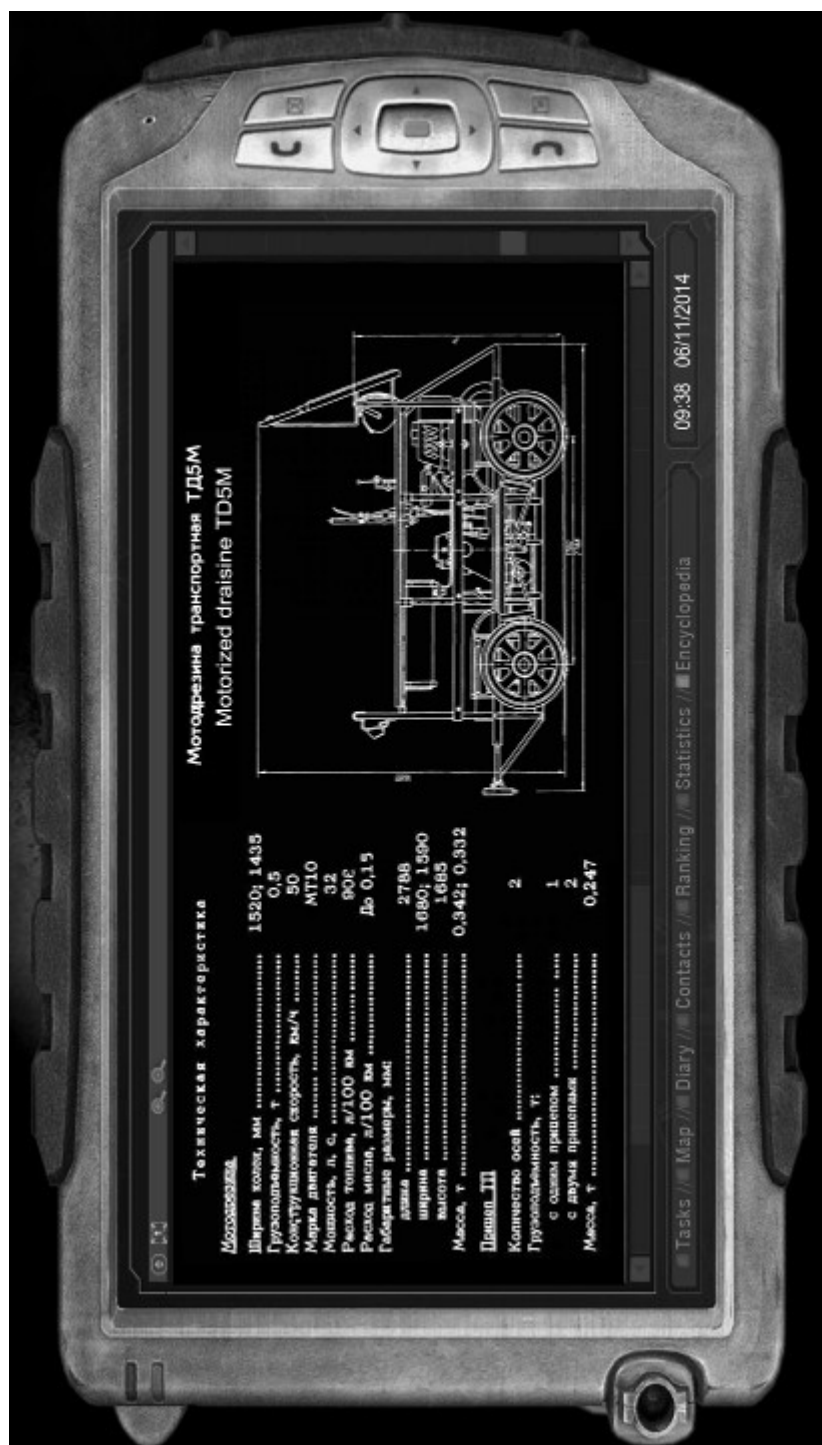
“*Slava Bogu*. Top, Sawyer, go and look if there’s a draisine where the rails begin.”

Hartman looks around in the hall. “What is this place?”

“It used to be a railway yard where the machines made in the factories were loaded. We need to find the draisine used for railway maintenance.”

“A—what?”





“Kind of a motorized hand car or train car. You’ll recognize it when you see it.”

“You must be meaning a rail speeder.”

Tarasov heaves an impatient sigh. “Whatever. Go now, before Sawyer gets lost.”

“Yes, sir, Major, sir,” the Top grumbles.

“You seem to be fully in charge now,” Pete says while Nooria applies the bandage over his wound. “Enjoying it?”

“No. Neither did I enjoy being in charge of the outpost we’ve just passed.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I was the commander of Cordon Base, and with that all the armed forces guarding the Zone’s perimeter. Including the checkpoint we’ve passed.”

“How things have changed,” Pete quietly says.

Tarasov looks around in the gloomy hall and sighs. “Yes... things have changed. There was no shooting on sight during my times. Who knows, maybe Squirrel was right... maybe I’m more a Stalker than a soldier.”

“Who is Squirrel?”

“He was a good Stalker.”

Sawyer appears. “We found your rail car. It has no fuel, though.”

“Where?”

“Next hall.”

Tarasov signals him to climb in. He drives through the lifeless halls, turns into the direction shown by the Australian and already sees the Top’s tall figure next to a two-person draisine. It stands abandoned where the rails leave the building through an opening in the wall. If there was a gate once its wooden wings had fallen apart long time ago.

“Get your gear to the cart.”

He rumbles in on the floor of the UAZ until he finds the plastic tube almost every driver of such a vehicle keeps in the car. With the car’s armatures being legendarily unreliable, no driver knows exactly how much fuel is left in the tanks. Gas stations are scarce in the countryside and if the tanks run dry, the best help is to wave off another car and buy enough petrol to make it back home. And transferring petrol from one kind to another requires a tube.

Tarasov plugs one end of the tube into the car’s trunk. He sucks at the other end and, feeling the petrol flowing, quickly puts the tube into the fuel drum on the draisine.

“Sawyer,” he says, “now would be a good time to prepare your rifles.”

“What do you got?” Hartman curiously asks the Australian.

“A Beretta DT-10, a Benelli Super Sport and a Steyr-Mannlicher for .223 cartridges,” Sawyer replies unzipping the rifle cases. “Seeing as this is the former USSR, and Russians knowing a thing or two about bears, I also have a TOZ-34.”

“I’ll have to ask you to lend me that,” Tarasov says smiling.

“Don’t mind if you ask me nicely, but I won’t let any of you touch my Steyr.”

“The Beretta is fine with me,” the Top says. “When did you clean them last?”

“The Steyr this morning. The others before leaving home. I didn’t expect to get to my hunting grounds so quickly.”

“You love the Steyr, I see. Oh yes, there’s nothing like a good old bolt action rifle.”

“Hey guys... I’m really happy to have run into you. You seem to know what’s good in life.” Sawyer takes an elegant, leather-covered hip flask from a pocket on his Gore-Tex jacket. “Want to make it even better?”

“Give me some cartridges instead.”

“The ammo is in that shoulderbag. I hope we won’t have to fire ‘em soon, though. I hate firing me rifle sharp before takin’ a warm-up shot.”

“That’s superstition. Back in Tennessee...”

“We’re not in Tennessee. It’s Ukraine and bloody cold.”

While the two gun nuts enter another friendly dispute over hunting rifles, Tarasov keeps his eye on the tube. He wouldn’t want to waste a drop of the precious fuel.

He pays too much attention to the fuel transfer to spot the shadows appearing in the gloom outside. They grow bigger, take a human shape, and when Tarasov casually looks there and sees soldiers stepping out of the mist, it is almost too late. They fire their AKMs before he could yell a warning.

“Take cover! Pete, Nooria, get off the car, now!”

They all duck behind the draisine. Bullets whizz, clinking and clanking as they hit the rusted machines around them and the concrete floor.

“Let’s get out of here!” Sawyer shouts.

“No! The fuel drum’s not full yet!”

“I don’t give damn about the fuel, let’s go!”

Realizing that the trespassers don’t fire back, the soldiers are moving closer. Tarasov can already hear the commands barked.

“*Na levo, na levo!*”

“Return fire, but try not to hit them!” he shouts.

“You mad? They’re here to kill us!”

“Do what I said, Top!”

Hartman fires his shotgun to suppress the approaching soldiers.

“*Nazad!*” shouts one of the soldiers. “*Nakroy menya!*”

“If someone gets hit, don’t shout or rush about!” Tarasov bellows. “If they see you, they’ll kill you! Crawl back to the outpost, they’ll pick you up!”

A wooden crate crashes as Sawyer pellets it with a buckshot round, forcing the soldier sneaking up behind it to fall back.

“Heard you, nanny!” he shouts back at Tarasov. “Let’s go, let’s go!”

The fuel drum is now almost completely full.

“Top! Sawyer! On my command, fire your rifles, barrel by barrel! Then let’s get to the draisine and move!”

“Wait, my rucksack is in the car!”

“We have enough gear, Sawyer! Get rid of your rucksack, it will just hamper you!”

“No way!”

With a flashing display of recklessness, Sawyer leaps over to the car, grabs his heavy rucksack and fires his rifle blindly towards their pursuers.

“Get back, Sawyer! Reload rifles! On my command, one, two... fire!”

Six rifle shots sound off the reel. Using the moments while the soldiers hide behind their cover, Tarasov gives the draisine a push with all his strength, jumps on the slowly rolling vehicle and pulls the string that should start the engine. Nothing happens.

“*Blyad!*”

Cussing, he jumps off. The soldiers recommence firing and seeing that they are about to escape, rush forward.

“Pete! Pull on that string as strong as you can! Top!”

Hartman doesn’t need any explanation. He joins Tarasov in pushing the draisine. All of a sudden, the crude machine appears to be much lighter. Sawyer fires his rifle once more. The sound of his rifle being reloaded is suddenly suppressed by the engine coming to life.

“*Chort! Blyadiviy Stalker, kushay blin!*”

Swearwords are the last they hear from the soldiers as the draisine gains speed and drives off with them into the mist. A few bullets still fly by but miss them by far.

“Phew,” Sawyer sighs. “This ain’t got nothing to do with Ukrainian hospitality I read about in *Lonely Planet*.”

“We were lucky,” Tarasov says, darting a concerned look behind. “Those grunts were surprised at us shooting back... Stalkers usually don’t carry guns at this stage.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t blame them for killing every damned grunt when they return from the Zone with all the heavy gear they get,” the Top says and wipes sweat from his forehead.

“Stalkers don’t make it back.”

“How come?”

“Real ones do not return. They stay.”

“Are there women in the Zone?”

“No, Sawyer. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Aw! You didn’t tell me that! Because that really sucks, mate. How can a man survive like that? Don’t tell me everyone’s gay there!”

“Sometimes I think the Zone is a woman.”

“You mean, jealous and demanding?”

“Beautiful too,” Tarasov smiles at the Australian.

“And we’re drivin’ into her at full speed like...”

Nooria clears her throat. “Can soldiers catch up with us?”

“Those grunts fear it like the plague,” Tarasov says slowly shaking his head.

“Fear what?”

He doesn’t reply.

The rain has stopped. By now the weak sun has climbed high enough on the southern horizon to make the mist slowly fade away. Gradually, the mist reveals an area spoilt by derelict metal structures, half-ruined buildings, piles of rotting logs and boat wrecks that hint at a river in the vicinity. Broken gantries loom like one-handed giants. A utility line follows the course of the rails; after one or two kilometers, the cables end hanging loose from the towers as if intentionally cut, making their steel structure appear like motionless sentinels guarding over this land that might have been thriving once, but has sunk into oblivion and decay long ago.

“Wow!” Pete says pointing at a tiny, wrecked car. “Someone dumped his toy car here?”

“It was called a Zaporozhets,” Tarasov replies looking elsewhere.

The draisine progresses along the bumpy rails with a monotonous clacking. To Tarasov it sounds like music and his heart beats faster on the thought of getting closer to the Exclusion Zone with each meter they make.

Gradually, the gloomy industrial structures become sparser. Low hills appear, covered by lush, overgrown grass.

A brown shape appears through thin fog. Then two more, moving slowly closer to the rails. Stirred by something moving in the lifeless landscape, Tarasov reaches for his rifle. But when the shapes become clearer he smiles.

“Aw my goodness!” shouts an astonished Sawyer. “Przevalsky horses!”

The draisine doesn’t seem to disturb the small troop of a dozen sturdy, tan colored, pony-like animals. Hearing the noise of the approaching draisine, a few horses curiously rise their round heads from the thick grass they are grazing. Staying at a safe distance from the rails, the strongest jerks its neck where the black mane stands up straight, snorts and continues with its breakfast. With their lead stallion not signaling danger, the rest of the troop follows suit, calmly wagging their black tails.

“Don’t even *think* about shooting them,” Tarasov says.

“Now why would anyone harm such wonderful creatures?” Sawyer resentfully says.

“I just wanted to have this said.”

“Are those mutants?” Pete asks.

Sawyer breaks out in laughter, but Tarasov only smiles.

“I think we had such a horse in my village,” Nooria says, pensively.

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Tarasov says gently putting his hand on her shoulder. “You’re a Hazara, and if legends are true, Hazaras are Genghis Khan’s descendants. His warriors used to ride this kind of horses.”

“Tough little sons of bitches,” the Top murmurs.

“Survive everything and everywhere, yes,” agrees Tarasov. “One could say, they’re the only thing that remains of Genghis Khan’s empire. Who knows, maybe he himself was riding an ancestor of the horses we’ve just seen.” A sudden shadow comes over his face. “And what has remained of *our* empire?”

He waves his hand toward the decaying ruins they have left behind. His companions don’t reply.

The rails ascend a low slope covered by a sparse cluster of alder trees. Despite the season only a few have turned yellow. The higher it gets, the more the draisine slows down, until it reaches the top of the hill where it finally comes to full halt.

Surrounded by tall, lush grass, two half-fallen utility poles stand atop the hill, resembling wooden crosses in a forsaken cemetery. The thick spider webs hanging from their crossbeams appear like ghosts.

Tarasov takes a deep breath.

“*Nu vot... mi doma*,” he says. His voice appears strangely cheerful in this foreboding place. “We’re home at last.”

Stretching his arms and legs, he gets off the draisine.

“How quiet it is,” Nooria says.

“This is the quietest place in the world,” Tarasov says and offers his hand to help her off. “You’ll see for yourselves.”

“Is this the Zone at last?”

“We are in a weird place, Sawyer, that’s not the Big Land anymore but the Zone hasn’t claimed yet. Call it the Rim. The real Zone is beyond the hills ahead.”

“Your Zone is like those wooden dolls I saw at the hotel’s souvenir shop,” Sawyer says. “You know, you take one apart and there’s a smaller one inside. In the end you’ll show us a tiny room and tell us, ‘well mates —this is it!’”

“Yeah... you mean *matryioski*. As for me, this is already the Zone. The wind is coming up... Can you feel it? The grass... Excuse me for a minute.”

With cautious steps, Tarasov disappears in the overgrown bushes. His companions begin to remove their gear from the draisine.

“So beautiful here,” Pete says. Standing on the draisine, he looks in the direction where Tarasov said the real Zone begins. Beyond patches of mist lingering over the valley, huge oak trees dot a dense forest of birch and alder trees; their striking color appears like yellow explosions in the dark green canopy. “Not a single soul here.”

“What about us?” Sawyer asks.

“Five men can’t spoil the place in one day.”

“Why? They can,” the Top says. “Besides, Mikhailo told me the Zone is full of people... though it seems hard to believe.”

Nooria picks a daisy from the grass that reaches almost to her waist.

“It’s strange that flowers don’t smell. Or do you feel anything?”

Sawyer sniffs at the air. “I feel the stench of a bog.”

“You should be right,” the Top nods. “He told me we’re heading towards a marsh.”

Not far away from them, Tarasov touches the grass with a caressing hand. He goes to his knees like he would do in a church, with knees still for several heartbeats. Then with a long, relieved sigh, he lays down into the grass, digs his fingers into the muddy earth and deeply inhales its smell. His head is resting on his arm, as if he was preparing to sleep. Then he turns to his back. With twinkled eyes, he stares at the overcast sky, shielding his eyes with his right hand. Bliss streams into his heart and mind, as if his body would draw it directly from the soil of the Zone.

I. Am. Home.

33

Tribe outpost, New Zone

When Lieutenant Ramirez regains consciousness, his ears detect that the battle’s noise has receded. All he can hear are cheering Taliban, firing their Kalashnikovs in the air.

He opens his eyes. The ground is littered with the bodies of his men; Campbell's severed head lies nearby. Enemy fighters are triumphantly dancing on a Humvee's hood and top, others are busily dismounting the .50 caliber machine guns to carry them away.

His M16 must have been blown away by the blast. Ramirez reaches for the M1911 fastened to his armor but someone steps on his hand. Looking up, he sees a face between human and mutant, giving him a look of pity mixed with disdain. From the corner of his eye, he can also see that the one trampling on his arm is a raghead, smiling triumphantly in his thick, black beard.

"Guess your Darth Vader outfit didn't help you, Lieutenant... Ramirez," the half-mutant says glancing at the name tag on the black exoskeleton. "My name's Skinner. That beard with a man somewhere in it is called Saifullah, or something like that. Pleased to meet you."

"I fucking hate mutants," Ramirez breathes.

"The feeling is mutual. Just to get better acquainted, do you like football? Soccer, I mean? As it seems, mutants versus Tribe – one to nil and the match has just begun."

"If it weren't for these damn smiters, you'd be a smoking crater by now!"

"Looks like I'm not but *you* are in deep shit, Lieutenant."

"Kill me if you want. You can't beat my Tribe!"

"I know, I know... One man can die but the Tribe will always live and all that stuff. Hey, wait a second—you know what? Maybe I surrender to you with all my smiters, just because you are such a badass. Let me think... Okay, I just made up my mind. Thanks but no, thanks."

"Go to hell!"

"To hell?" Skinner looks around in the desolate canyon with all the corpses lying in the bloody sand and the irradiated creek. One of his smiters is dragging a fallen Tribe fighter away, probably to feed on him; a jerk in the fighter's limbs tells that he is not dead yet. "Hell, you say? Ain't we all there already?"

"No... hell is what my Tribe's gonna give you."

Commander Saifullah impatiently pokes at Skinner's arm. "Let's put this piece of *kafir* shit up with the others. I want you to see how we deal out God's justice over unbelievers!"

"What are you up to, dushman?" Skinner asks looking up to the bragging Talib. Saifullah points to the bridge where the few Tribe fighters unlucky enough to be captured alive are lined up, all forced to their knees. A grim-looking Talib stands next to them with a long blade in his hand.

"Unbelievers are pigs, and to pigs, a pig's death!"

"If you ask me, I can see nothing wrong about that animal."

“Because you—” Seeing anger flashing in Skinner’s eyes, Saifullah bites his tongue. “Well, I mean—anyway, we’re about sending their souls to hell!”

“Always thought your god is benevolent and merciful,” Skinner says with a shrug. “One of us must have misunderstood the whole thing.”

“Enough talking! I want the officer watch how his men die one by one, then he will die last!”

“I have a much better idea,” Skinner says. “Lieutenant, you Marines or tribals or whatever you call yourselves now, you’re supposed to be men of honor. Ain’t that so?”

Ramirez nods.

“You know you gonna die, Lieutenant?”

Ramirez nods once more.

“Then you’ll perform a last mission for your Tribe. Do I have your ears now? Good, listen up. You will go to your Colonel holed up in the stronghold and tell him to either get the fuck out of our land or be annihilated.”

“It’s our land as well,” Ramirez says.

“It ain’t big enough for all of us. Give him our ultimatum and return with his reply.”

“And then?”

“Then we’ll kill you.”

“You better kill me now because I already know what his answer will be.”

Saifullah raises his eyebrows. “Skinner, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Trying myself at diplomacy. So, Lieutenant, will you give us your word of honor to return and meet your fate? You know, I want to give your Tribe a chance to get away.”

“Forget it.”

“See those men to be beheaded on the bridge?” Skinner looks at Saifullah. “Is your god in a merciful mood today, dushman? Maybe there’s one option left to make Lieutenant Ramirez co-operate.”

Catching Skinner’s meaning, Saifullah smiles.

“I give you my word to let them live, if you agree to be our messenger,” he solemnly says.

Ramirez thinks for a moment and then nods his agreement.

“Perfect!” Skinner says with satisfaction. “Saifullah, get something white and have your men fix it on a Humvee. Probably not your pants, though... Haven’t seen *you* even remotely close to the fray. Must’ve been diarrhea, huh?”

“I was praying to God to grant us victory and forgive me for joining up with your ungodly creatures!”

“Oh, *now* I know who made a difference.”

Seeing that Saifullah is about to spit on the Lieutenant, he leans over Ramirez’s body like a predator protecting its prey and snarls at the Talib. For the duration of a roar, his face becomes fully mutant and Saifullah, scared to death by the roar coming from the massive jaws wide open and showing sharp fangs inside, almost swallows his own tongue as he recoils several steps. Then Skinner’s horrible scowl turns into a human grin once more, appearing almost friendly when he grabs Lieutenant Ramirez’s hand and effortlessly helps him to his feet.

34

Close to Tuzla Tunnel, Exclusion Zone

When Tarasov walks back to his companions, his thoughts are already revolving around the perils ahead.

“Oh, there he is,” Pete says. “Did you fall? You’re all mud, man!”

Without replying, Tarasov walks to the draisine and pulls on the string to start its engine once more. Then he releases the brake and pushing it into motion with a kick, lets the draisine roll backwards.

“They don’t return from here,” he says.

Everyone is quiet. Then Pete has something to say.

“Thinking of those ruins... I don’t mind turning my back to your Big Land.”

Walking ahead of his companions, Tarasov takes the Bear type detector and fastens it to his belt, where the pouch holding a dozen bolts is also at easy reach.

“Where do we go exactly?” Hartman asks.

“We follow the tracks for a few hundred meters, cross a tunnel and then a river. Beyond that the real Zone begins.”

“A big swamp, you mean? I can already smell it.”

“No, Sawyer. The Swamps are just a small part of the Zone. What do you carry in that big rucksack, anyway? Diamonds? Seems to be more important to you than your life, *mate*.”

“My sleeping bag fills most of it. Then, all kind of stuff one needs to survive. Firestarters, first-aid kit, collapsible fishing rod, gun maintenance kit, whatever... you name it. Even a few condoms.”

“Wouldn’t be you if you hadn’t have any on you,” Pete dryly observes.

Sawyer waves his head. “It’s very good for collecting water, you know?”

“What about a portable kitchen?” the Top mocks him.

“That one too. A wonderful, reliable Camping Gaz cooker with all kinds of powdered food, including red wine powder.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. Pour it in a glass, add cold water, stir, wait five minutes – Presto!”

“Tastes at least like wine?”

“Well, it’s more like gasoline, I admit, but at least gives me the illusion of having a cab-sav.”



"You don't happen to have a Geiger counter, do you?" Tarasov asks him, amused.

"I reckon I do, mate."

"Seriously?"

"Sure! I heard a thing or two about Chernobyl. I grabbed one as soon as I knew we were going on a trip to Ukraine!"

"Amazing," Tarasov says. Many people try to think about every scenario they might encounter on a trip into any wilderness, but very few actually prepare for them properly. Sawyer appears to belong to these few. He suddenly takes the survivalist much more seriously. "Give me that Geiger right away."

Sawyer's US-made, PRM-8000 type portable radiation meter appears to him as a compromise between effectiveness and ease of use; very much in contrary to the Russian meters where the earlier always came first over the latter. It wouldn't match the sensitivity of a scientific meter, but what it lacks in accuracy is made up by its versatility: constant monitoring, straightforward operation and tone warning that can be muted in situations requiring silence. The case was made using metal if for additional ruggedness. All in all, it is a very useful device unless one is bound to penetrate the deepest, most contaminated areas of the Exclusion Zone.

Tarasov adjusts his belt to find a place for the cell phone sized device and then leads on. "There was a flower-bed nearby, but Strelok had trampled it down. The smell lingered for a long time though."

"Why did he do it?"

"I don't know. I asked him why, too. And he said, 'you'll understand later.' I think he just came to hate the Zone."

"Strelok, that's his name?"

"A nickname, Top. Like yours. He was my teacher. He opened my eyes. Then something happened to him, something broke in him. Though I think he was punished... for knowing too much of the Zone's secrets."

"How do you mean, punished? Or was it just a figure of speech?"

"Some people returned from here and get rich overnight. Fabulously rich. You call it punishment?"

"Can be, mate."

"Some hang themselves a week later. Strelok was looking for different riches. That's why he is still alive. Though he paid a heavy price for it."

Tarasov suddenly raises his fist.

The sound of a lonely cuckoo in the woods falls silent. A long, muted howl permeates the foggy valley.

"What was that?" the Top whispers.

Tarasov waits for a minute, then gives the sign to march on.

"There's not supposed to be any blind dogs here," he murmurs to himself. "Not in the Rim... or is it expanding so quickly?"

"What is the Zone about?" Pete asks.

"No one knows."

"And what do you think?"

"Nothing... or anything. A message to mankind, as some pompous scientists say. Or a gift. Some gift. Like a poisoned apple. Sweet poison for some. How do you think the New Zone was created, Top?"

"Ask Nooria. She'll tell you it's always been there, kept at bay by some weird witchcraft."

"Didn't take you for a believer in witchcraft," Sawyer says.

"I only believe what I see, and I'm telling you—I've seen some really weird things in the sandbox after the nukes had hit it. Bad things. Then Nooria grew up and she'd let us see the good things."

"What are you talking about, mate?"

"Afghanistan."

"Mister Stalker, could you please explain in what a bizarre company I am?"

"It's not bizarre. I was serving as an army officer in the Exclusion Zone for years. The Top, I mean Sergeant Major Hartman, did the same in Afghanistan. He came to love it too much to leave it. Am I right, Top?"

"About. Nooria's mother wants us to leave. But we'll only decide once we know if we love or hate it more."

"Then, Nooria... who are you?"

"I am Misha's woman and Pete's big sister."

"Apart from that?"

"Warriors call me witch. I don't mind—they must not know everything. Only Colonel does."

"Mysterious like always. So, last not least, the kid named Pete is the son of the all-knowing commander of the Tribe."

"The Tribe?"

"Actually, I always wanted to ask you," Pete says directing his words to Hartman. "I am a little confused about this. Sometimes you refer to Marines, sometimes you say Tribe... what are you after all?"

"The Tribe begins where the Corps ends. Coincides with the thin red line separating the call of duty from what's beyond it."

"Bloody amazing... You're the most interesting folks I've met in a long, long time." Sawyer halts his steps and wipes sweat from his neck.

"We'll have to pass through a tunnel soon," Tarasov says. "Look... over there."

A hundred or so meters ahead, the rails lead directly into a tunnel.

"Looks like a gigantic mouth devouring the rails," Pete whispers.

“Tuzla Tunnel.” Tarasov takes a bolt from the pouch and readies the detector. “Listen up. From now on, do only what I say. Keep your rifles ready but do not shoot at anything without me telling you so.”

“Local version of the Salang Pass?” the Top asks.

“Much shorter. Darker, too. Stalkers also call it the Meat Grinder.”

“And what are those things over there?”

Tarasov looks at the direction Sawyer is pointing. In the proximity of the tunnel entrance, his eyes detect blurry orbs that appear like huge soap bubbles.

“Stay where you are.” He takes a step closer to inspect the bubbles. “Don’t move.”

He opens the anomaly detector but it doesn’t indicate any danger. Cursing the limited capabilities of the low-end device, Tarasov takes a bolt from his pouch and throws it ahead.

The bolt disappears, as if sucked in by a void but no electric discharge sizzles, neither does the bolt go up in acidic flames. Yet the blurry orbs are there, unless his eyes are playing a trick on him.

“Stay away. This looks like an anomaly... a Space anomaly!”

“What if I take a chance—”

“Sawyer! Stop! Listen, what’s the matter with you?”

“Here a risk, there a risk. What the hell!”

“No! Those things... No one knows where you end up if you touch them! You could be caged for eternity in God knows what dimension!”

“You may do as you wish, but I must experience this!”

“You’re insane. Wait! Keep your hands off! Don’t touch it, I said! The others be my witness, I didn’t let you go there! You go of your own will!”

The survivalist reaches for the blurry orb.

“Of my own will. What else?”

“Nothing. Go, if you insist. God help you to be lucky!”

It is a matter of seconds for the orb to extend and a flash blinding them. When they open their eyes, the orb is still there but Sawyer has disappeared.

“Holy fuck,” yells Pete, “did you just see that?”

“Where did he disappear?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did it kill him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what do you know?”

“This is no place for leisurely strolls. The Zone wants to be respected. Otherwise it will punish,” Tarasov says, trying to hide his anguish behind words.

“Shit,” Hartman says. “I was beginning to like him.”

“The Zone is a very complicated system—of traps, and they’re all deadly. At the moment someone shows up, everything comes into motion. Old traps disappear and new ones emerge. Safe spots become impassable. Now your path is easy, now it’s hopeless. That’s the Zone. It may even seem capricious.”

“So it decides whom it lets pass?”

“I don’t know. I think it lets those pass who have lost all hope. Not good or bad, but wretched people. But even the most wretched will die if they don’t know how to behave. Whatever happened to him – maybe his example will save at least *your* lives by making you more cautious. Is that clear? Put on your headlamps and follow me.”

Tarasov warily enters the tunnel. Pete, who is walking behind him on the rails, begins to croon.

“I keep a close watch on this heart of mine, I keep my eyes wide open all the time, I keep the ends out for the tie that binds, Because you’re mine, I walk the line...”

“Cut it!” Tarasov snaps at him.

“Sorry man. It just came to my mind, with us walking the line and keeping our eyes open.”

“Then just walk and look but don’t make noise, Pete. There might be mutants here keeping their *ears* open.”

35

Alamo, New Zone

“Cigarette?”

Ramirez gladly accepts the Lucky Strike offered by the Colonel. Drawing on it, he continues to tell the account of the lost battle.

“We were doing good but then the smiters came. Still, the fifties and automatic rifles would’ve given us the advantage but then... when I saw they were wielding machine guns, it was clear that all is lost.”

“What type of machine guns?”

“Russian-made heavies. I saw two with DShKs and maybe three with DPKs.”

“Jesus Christ.”

The Colonel, who had so far been listening to Ramirez’s account with sadness but no fear, now turns pale.

“They got us pinned down, crossed the creek and breached our defenses. The assaulting ragheads used them for tanks. The smiters’ fire wasn’t too accurate but one doesn’t need much accuracy with a hip-fired AA gun... in short, we had no chance. At least that’s how I see it, sir.”

“No, you didn’t,” the Colonel agrees. “Any suggestions?”

“The only good news is that Staff Sergeant Rush’s report can be confirmed – those bastards can take a heavy beating before they fall but appear to be vulnerable to fire. Heavy automatic weapons with incendiary rounds, flamethrowers, portable miniguns with incendiary rounds... maybe the witch can concoct something from a swag to coat our small-arms ammo. I had actually hoped she’d be back with the Top in the meantime.”

The Colonel exhales the smoke of his cigarette. “I made a mistake,” he slowly says. “Before the recent trouble began, I let them go with Tarasov to the Zone in Ukraine. Let’s hope they find their way back soon.”

“We all wish Sergeant Major Hartman and Nooria were here now.”

“Indeed.”

“Until Nooria comes up with some witchcraft, Molotov cocktails could be useful too. Frankly, sir, those would be my choice against smiters and not rifles, not even the newest ones, should I ever face them again.” Ramirez holds his words for a heartbeat. “But then, I won’t.”

“You gave them your word of honor to return with my answer, and then be executed?”

“That’s correct, sir. They promised to let the dozen men return who they’ve captured.”

“How wicked of them. Well, if they want to martyr themselves en masse – so be it.”

“Will that be your answer, sir?”

“You will return, Lieutenant Ramirez, and show them that my warriors keep their word of honor. Just like anyone in the Tribe would.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Tell them that going to our knees is no part of our Code. That will be the answer of the Tribe. Are you ready to do this for us?”

“I am, sir.”

“Sometimes I regret that we have no medals and decorations, José.”

“I’ve had enough awards during old times,” Ramirez replies, referring to the period when they were still Marines. “I don’t care about those. I let Saria turn even the Bronze Star into a pendant. Looks better on her neck than on my chest—anyway, what counts is the privilege to have served with you, sir.”

“Nevertheless, there is something I can give you as a sign of my appreciation.” The Colonel takes an unopened box of cigarettes from his field table. “It’s my last pack. Enjoy as many as you can on your way back.”

“Thank you, sir. But... if you agree, sir, we could use their own weapons against them. I could put explosives on myself or hide a gun and...”

The big man interrupts Ramirez. “No, Lieutenant. This is not the way to do it. Besides, don’t forget about the POWs they have. But you can be sure as hell that we’ll get them soon enough.”

“I couldn’t hope for more.”

A moment of silence descends on the two men. Then Ramirez crushes his cigarette. “Permission to leave, sir?”

“May the Spirit be with you, José. Thank you and Semper Fi.”

Rumor has spread fast and when the Colonel and Ramirez appear at the tower entrance, the off-duty fighters have already gathered to see what they would otherwise not believe.

“Form a line!” Lieutenant Bauer shouts. “Ten-hut!”

The Colonel stands at the tower with his arms folded. Not as much as muscle stirs on Lieutenant Ramirez’s face as he walks down the line of his comrades.

Bauer looks at the Colonel who gives a slight nod. He, Nelson and the few senior warriors who had once fought as Marines and experienced the City of Screams together walk up to Ramirez. Handshakes are exchanged, accompanied by a few words of respect and encouragement.

“That’s awesome, brother,” Nelson says, “just awesome.”

“Don’t worry, José. We’ll kick their ass with your name written on our boots.”

“Be proud and strong, brother.”

“Hey! What the hell are you whining about?” Ramirez asks.

“You’re going to die, José,” Bauer replies.

Ramirez gives him a grim smile. “What’s so bad about dying, anyway? Come on, brother! You can’t deal out death if you’re not ready to accept your own.”

Bauer bows his head.

A woman appears; her colorful Hazara garbs fly in the wind as she runs down the alley from the living quarters to the fighters giving their farewells, screaming what sounds like horrible curses in the staccato of her hard-sounding language. Bauer and the Lieutenants respectfully step back – it is Saira. Toughness vanes from Ramirez’s face.

Amid tears, she throws herself into his arms. Ramirez holds her tight with his eyes closed, then pushes her away. Before Saira lets go of him, the Lieutenant feels her slip something heavy into his pocket.

Saira draws a curved blade from her belt and cuts a shallow wound in her own forehead. She touches the wound and draws her bloody fingers across her face.

“Badal!” she screams. “I will not wash my face until I revenge you!”

Then she steps to the Lieutenants. “You! Warriors! You will be brothers of my own blood until we revenge him!” Standing on tiptoe to reach the tall warriors’ faces, she smears a little of her blood over their forehead. They let her and their stone-hard faces tell that they are more than willing to take revenge. Saira then falls on her knees, crying and throwing dust over her head.

Led by the Beghum, more women appear and drag the hysterically crying Saira away. The Beghum puts her hand against Saira’s forehead where blood is still trickling from the self-inflicted wound. The woman’s screams slowly calm down to a silent weep.

“Let me get this over with at last,” Ramirez coldly says. He salutes for a last time. “May your revenge come soon, my life,” he adds in a much lower voice. He gives the Colonel and his comrades a nod of farewell and steps out of the stronghold gate.

With Ramirez gone, all eyes are fixed on the Colonel.

“Let the courage of Lieutenant Ramirez be an example of what honor means in our Tribe,” he says loud enough so that everyone around can hear him. “Mark his words—only those ready to die themselves are worthy of dealing out death to others. We have always been ready but must be even more so now. Man the defenses!”

Staying cautiously out of rifle range a few hundred meters away from the Alamo, Skinner, Commander Saifullah and a half-dozen Talib fighters watch Ramirez’s lonely figure approaching. Giving a cold shoulder to his fate, the Lieutenant is drawing on his cigarette as he returns at a leisurely pace.

“Their answer is no,” Saifullah says.

“Stubborn bastards,” grumbles Skinner.

“All the better,” the Talib commander observes. “When the infidel gets here, we’ll show them how they will die. All of them.”

“Not without gang-raping their women first, I guess?”

“This is Afghanistan, Stalker.”

When Lieutenant Ramirez walks up to the Humvee with the white flag fastened to the antenna, Saifullah gives his men a sign to get hold of him. Skinner pushes them aside.

“Let the man say what he has to say!” Then he turns to Ramirez and looks into his calm eyes. “Lieutenant, you’ve kept your word. Respect. Let us know the Colonel’s reply.”

Ramirez takes a last draw on his cigarette, then tosses it into the wind and clears his throat.

"I am to tell you that going to our knees is no part of our Code. That is the answer of the Tribe."

"Fine with me, Lieutenant," Skinner says shrugging his shoulders. "I appreciate you telling the reply without barking that cheesy *semper fi, oorah!* stuff. Guess we can all add it mentally anyway. Okay... Saifullah, he's all yours."

A bloodthirsty grin appears on the Talib's face as he draws a long, curved sword. His men step to Ramirez.

"On your knees, you dirty dog!" Saifullah yells.

"Didn't you hear what I've just said?" Ramirez shouts back.

Before Saifullah's men can manhandle him, he draws the M1911 pistol that Saria had slipped into his pocket, raises it to his head and pulls the trigger.

The gunshot is still echoing in the valley when Lieutenant José Ramirez collapses to the ground.

Taken over by anger and frustration, Saifullah kicks the corpse. "God curse your wretched soul, you miserable pig of an infidel!"

Skinner slaps his forehead. "Oh shit.... as if that would change a thing. Never mind, dushman, I guess they got the message anyway. Hey! We better get the hell out of here!"

But Saifullah, still in rage over the Lieutenant's suicide depriving him of a theatrical execution, now begins to hack off the head of Ramirez's corpse. Skinner grabs his arm and pulls him to the vehicle.

"You got dirt in your ears, you crazy dushman? We gotta move! Now!"

They climb in the captured Humvee and quickly drive away, backtracking the road to the southern outpost.

"God be praised!" Saifullah shouts over the roar of the engine and squeaking suspension. "That pig escaped our wrath but we still have the other prisoners. They won't be so lucky!"

"What?" Skinner asks back. "That man gave his word of honor to return and he kept it! Bloody impressive if you ask me. Now it's your turn to keep *your* word and release his men!"

"War is deception," Saifullah replies with a smile and mumbles something in Arabic that Skinner can't hear through the engine noise. Then he adds, "At least you told him the truth, Stalker. This land is ours. Invaders must quit it or die!"

Hearing this, Skinner slowly shakes his head.

'Ours' meant myself and my mutant brothers, not your sort of devious savages.

Edge of the Swamps, Exclusion Zone

Their passage through the Tuzla tunnel gave Tarasov's companions a good introduction of what is awaiting them deeper in the Zone. The heavy breathing under the gas masks. The light of their headlamps, appearing so tiny in the cavernous tunnel. The sizzling Electro anomalies, gleaming on the ground with blue sparks, the crackling Geiger counter, the green glow of the Veles detector's tiny screen and the beeps it made to warn them of unseen anomalies. The tedium of bolt throwing to find a safe way through. The three blind dogs with open wounds covering their bodies and their leaps as they tried to bite into the companions' throats. The blinding muzzle flashes of their shotguns in the darkness.

"Now you know why people venturing here are called Stalkers," Tarasov whispers to Pete.

"I wish we'd be out of here already," the kid whispers back, anxiously.

At least the tunnel was not long and the end, beyond which the inner Zone was waiting for them, came closer with each step they made.

Having at last covered the last steps separating them from the daylight outside, Tarasov pulls his gas mask off and deeply inhales the fresh air. Before him, the rails lead to a ruined bridge over a dark and slow-flowing river, flanked by sparse bushes and reeds. On the other shore, to their right and south to an embankment with derailed carriages rusting away in the tall grass, the Great Swamps are stretching out. Fog banks are floating over the endless fields of reed and the waterways between small islands of solid earth. A barbed wire fence runs along the far shore or the river, at places overgrown by reed. To the far south, a watchtower stands out from the grey fog. Even further, partly covered by fog and tall reed, greenish vapors squirm over the riverside. Tarasov is glad to be far away from the poisonous cloud and the anomalies that emit it.

"Welcome to the Swamps," he tells his companions who stand at his side in silence, apparently impressed by the vast, foreboding landscape. Then Nooria points forward and Tarasov immediately understands that no matter their first glimpse of the Zone, it was something else that rendered them speechless – and he himself is struggling to believe his eyes.

"Incredible," the Top murmurs.

"Hey," a familiar voice says. "Want some coffee?"

Tarasov blinks at the sight of Sawyer sitting on a rock and leisurely pouring a pouch of instant coffee into a metal mug full of steaming water.

"What is it, Mr. Stalker?" the survivalist asks cheerily, killing the flame of his camping gas cooker. "You not happy to see me again?"

"I'm certainly grateful that you—but how did you get here?" Tarasov stammers. "How did you manage to overtake us?"

"What do you mean, overtake? I stepped into that thingy, and here I was. Thought I'd wait for you here until you happily arrive. And how has your bolt gotten here?"

Tarasov stares at the bolt lying on a stone right next to the tunnel.

"That's the bolt I threw into the anomaly! *Gospodi*, I'm not going to take one more step until—I don't like it."

"Anyway, we'd better rest for a few minutes before crossing the river," Hartman says.

"But keep off this bolt, just in case."

"You don't want to keep off my coffee, I guess," Sawyer says offering them his mug.

Tarasov still copes with the idea of Sawyer not only surviving an anomaly, but being teleported at the shore of the river sound and safe while it took them a full hour to navigate through the perilous tunnel. "It's impossible!"

"What's important is that Sawyer's bag with his underwear is safe," Pete says and gladly accepts the mug of fresh coffee. "Got any sugar?"

"Creamer for me, please," Hartman adds merrily.

"Pete, don't stick your nose in someone's underwear if you don't understand it," Nooria says. "Zone appears to be very powerful!"

Sawyer shakes his head. "What's there to understand? I've got my energy bars, the cooker... all survivalist things that will come in handy. Got no creamer, but here's a pouch of sugar. Gives one extra calories to burn."

Tarasov sighs, then he too takes a sip of coffee. He begins to look at the Australian with a different eye; not far from them he sees proof that the Zone is still much less merciful to others. He points to a spot on the riverside.

"In any case, you've been lucky... unlike that Stalker over there."

Not far from a small, dilapidated wooden boat stands stuck in the sandy shore, a man lies in the shallow water. He wears a ragged protective suit, resting his head on his forearm in such a peaceful pose that makes him appear as if he were just sleeping.

Something moves in the reed, then the head of a black, dog-like creature appears. Its snout resembles that of an oversized bulldog, but its wide mouth flashes fangs fit for an alpha wolf. Seeing the corpse in the water, it licks its snout with its thick, blue tongue.

It trots to the corpse, licks its snout once more and bites into the dead man's face.

"Yes... this is the Zone," Tarasov whispers. "*Our Zone.*"

The mutant growls when it becomes aware of the five humans. It seems to hesitate, but its hunger is apparently stronger than caution – or maybe it just thinks about leaving the still living humans for later.

The bang of a rifle shot shatters the silence. A split second later, the mutant's head is hit and goes off with chunks of human meat still in his mouth.

"Sorry for spoiling your appetite, puppy," Sawyer says working the bolt of his rifle.

"Outstanding shot, Sawyer!"

"Just call me Finn, Top. My father was fond of Mark Twain, you know?" With a showy gesture, the Australian adjusts his hat. "Hey Mister Stalker, where're you goin'?"

"Keep your eyes on the reed and bushes while I check the body."

"That dog-like beast looks dead alright to me."

"It's that fellow I mean," Tarasov says walking to the dead Stalker. He puts his breathing mask on to filter the stench and pats down the pockets on the dead man's suit.

"Already acting like a scavenger?"

"Every body tells a story."

Triumphantly, he fishes a detector from a pocket on the corpse.

"A Veles," he says showing the device. "A next generation scanner. In normal mode it registers only radiation and anomalies, but if I open it, it also indicates nearby artifacts on a display screen. Pretty useful."

"Didn't help this fellow much."

"Whatever it was, it got to him on his way out or so it seems... the Zone didn't let him leave." Tarasov takes one more look at the body. "And if he had a Veles, and was on his way out, it means that..."

He dons his protective gloves and turns the body over. The sight drives cold down through his spine. Even the hardened Top turns his head away with a grimace of disgust.

"At least it wasn't for nothing," Tarasov takes an artifact from the container on the dead man's belt. It looks like two blue mushroom heads held together by a strange substance resembling non-sticking jelly. His radiation meter starts beeping. "A Shell... damn. I'd need another one, a Jellyfish or something similar, to balance out the radiation it's emitting. Sawyer! Come over here!"

"What is it?"

"I need your hunting knife."

Tarasov cuts the container off the belt and tosses it to the Australian.

"What do you prefer? Being encumbered by that rucksack or a little nausea?"

"It's not heavy at all."

"Fasten this container with the artifact to your belt, and ask Nooria for anti-radiation drugs every two hours or so."

"I don't follow."

"That's the point," Tarasov says getting to his feet. "Keeping that thing close to you, you *will* follow me even if your rucksack were twice as heavy as it is."

"How come?"

"It's an artifact, or call it a swag like Hartman's people do. The Shell I just gave you has a stimulating effect. Don't ask me how and why. Too bad it's a little radioactive..."

"Jesus! And you want me to put it next to my balls..? Keep that... *thing* to yourself!"

"Nothing an anti-rad couldn't keep under control."

"You sure?"

"Quite."

"What if I drink vodka against radiation?"

"You get drunk. Can't allow that till we get to a safer place."

Sawyer doesn't look convinced but when they prepare to leave, and he puts on his overloaded rucksack with much less effort, he starts to grin.

"Hey mate... that's awesome! But if I wake up one morning with nothin' left to piss with, I'll stuff that bloody thingy down yer throat!"

"Don't worry," Tarasov says, powering on the Veles detector. "Crap! the batteries are dead."

Using the Swiss army knife from the survival kit they all got from Jimmy the Nut, Tarasov screws off the battery compartment of the Bear detector to switch batteries.

"What was that beast Finn just killed?" the Top asks.

"A pseudodog."

"Lame name for a mutant."

"'Pseudo' means 'almost'," Tarasov replies, shrugging. "Almost like a dog—pseudodog. Sounds logical to me."

"At least it doesn't attack in packs like jackals do."

"Not so sure about that. Sometimes they team up with a pack of blind dogs. Blind dogs are cowards, they run if you kill one or two of them but the presence of a pseudodog gives them self-confidence. Once I met such a pack. They made me run faster than the devil... Okay, let's see if it works now."

With the new batteries, the green display of the Veles comes to life. Satisfied, Tarasov fastens it to his belt and scans the river with his binoculars.

"The current is strong but the river's not too wide here... Think we could cross it in that boat, Top?"

“Kidding? You have two Marines in the party!”

“Actually... it’s not the water that I’m concerned about.”

“Then what?”

For a reply, Tarasov gives Hartman his binoculars and points to a spot about fifty meters downstream. Hardly visible with bare eyes but all the more conspicuous through the binoculars, there is a circular area appearing like a shallow pit in the water, as if an invisible sphere of pulsating energy would be hovering above. Zooming in, small debris becomes visible as it whirls around in the sphere, driven by a vortex of invisible energy.

“Looks like trouble.”

“A Whirligig anomaly.” Tarasov shakes his head and sighs. “Damn! Right in the middle of the river. The current could drive us into it.”

“Anomalies in the water? Jesus Christ, this place is weirder than I expected. There’s no such thing in the sandbox!”

“Sure, because there’s not much water.”

“Because you haven’t been to the Amir lakes, far to the north of the City of Screams. It’s the closest thing the sandbox has to beauty. After our valley, of course.”

“Anyways, there’s an anomaly field between the observation tower on the riverbank and the abandoned Clear Sky base. A powerful emission must have relocated the anomalies. You know what makes me scared? The thought of the Zone being a balloon, emissions the air pumped into it, and each emission making it expand till one day it goes kaboom!”

“That’s very poetic but let’s focus on what’s ahead. Can’t we use the bridge? A stretch is missing from the middle but looks like we’re gonna wet our feet either way.”

“Metal structure. Must be heavily irradiated. Besides, if one of us slips and falls off... no, forget the bridge. We’ve already used up all our luck today with Sawyer getting out alive from that anomaly.”

“You too can call me Finn,” the Australian says behind them.

“That little boat ain’t exactly a landing craft,” the Top observes. Only three of us fit in at once. Besides, steering it overloaded would be difficult.”

“Good idea. First, I’ll take you two Marines. You’ll land and establish a bridge-head,” Tarasov jokes. “Take your rifles only. Then comes Nooria and most of our gear and finally Finn.”

The boat has barely reached the middle of the river when Tarasov realizes how right Hartman was. Water is leaking through the half-rotten planks of the hull and with everyone inside, they surely would have sunk. By the time he reaches the other bank, only a hands’ span of the hull stands out off the water.

“Do not move till I’m back. Keep your rifles at hand. Help me to turn the boat and let the water out.”

The reeds move and all three raise their rifles to face anything that might come out from there.

“The wind got stronger suddenly...” Tarasov worriedly says. “I hope this is not the sign of an emission approaching. If it catches us in the open we’re screwed.”

Crossing the river once more is easier with only Nooria and half of their rucksacks inside. Next, he and Sawyer load the remaining gear into the boat. Tarasov starts paddling, trying to steer the boat towards the bridge at an angle that would help them avoid the anomaly. Now he has to work hard not only against the current, but the wind too. With each paddle stroke, the safe angle becomes difficult to keep. Adding to their troubles, the boat is again half full of brown, muddy water. The Veles detector begins to emit a slow sequence of warning beeps. To his terror, Tarasov sees that despite his efforts they are driven directly toward the big anomaly.

“Holy fuck,” Sawyer gasps.

Tarasov doubles his efforts but it seems to him as if the strong current wants to tear the paddles out of his hands. The sluggish boat is almost impossible to steer by now. The detector’s warning intensifies.

“Take the paddles!” he yells and moves to the bow. Knee-deep in the water that keeps leaking in, he throws a bolt into the orb. The anomaly flashes on the surface where the bolt hits, followed by a weak orange glow as it consumes the bolt. Desperately, Tarasov throws a second one.

“Maybe it’ll just teleport us to the riverbank,” Sawyer shouts, trying to sound cheerful but Tarasov hears the fear in his voice very well.

“That’s not a Space anomaly! It’s a Whirligig!”

“Whirly-what?”

“A vortex that will shred us!”

The detector’s beeping grows into a frenzied whistle. Watching them with dread, their companions on the riverbank yell anxiously at them but their voice is carried away by the wind. The anomaly is only a few meters away and now they can hear its low, menacing drone.

“Paddle harder, Finn! Keep to the left, to the left!”

“I can’t!”

Tarasov grabs at the nearest rucksack.

“No!” Sawyer yells. “Don’t do it!”

Ignoring him, Tarasov takes and tosses Sawyer’s gear into the anomaly just when the boat is about to drift into it.

With a muted whoosh, the rucksack darts upwards, whirls in the sky and explodes into shreds, driven by a massive eruption of energy.

“No! my rucksack!” Sawyer whines. “I can’t do without my rucksack!”

Regaining breath, Tarasov watches the surface straighten itself as the boat drifts through. The boat’s stern has barely passed the spot where the anomaly had been a few seconds before when the drone continues. The shallow cavity reappears in the surface, then the blurry sphere above it is also back.

“I triggered the anomaly,” he says. “Bolts wouldn’t do the trick. I needed something big and heavy... sorry about your rucksack, Finn.”

“I had all my survival equipment in it!”

“Survive like that!” Tarasov shouts back at him. “I just saved your life, goddammit! Now let me back on the paddles!”

“Then I don’t need your radioactive shit any longer,” Sawyer says with frustration all over his face. “Fuck your swag!”

He removes the artifact container from his belt. Seeing what he is up to, it is now Tarasov’s turn to scream and his dread makes him forget about talking in English.

“Ne! Idiot, ne—”

Before Tarasov could grasp Sawyer’s hand, he throws the artifact back over his shoulder – right into the anomaly.

A light flashes brighter than the sun, then a deafening explosion thunders. Tarasov feels as if the boat would slip out under his feet and falls backwards. Where the Whirligig was, a jet of water raises and evaporates high above like the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb. The Geiger counter screams from values that overload its sensors. Rocked by waves, the boat almost submerges before hitting a sand bank close to the shore where it finally comes to a halt. The water column collapses with a splash. Then the Geiger counter’s signal is back to normal.

Tarasov cautiously peeks over the plank. The anomaly has disappeared.

The two men in the boat exchange a bewildered look.

“I—I didn’t expect *that*,” Sawyer stammers and takes his hat from the water that leaked into the boat. “Jesus Holy Christ, did my swag do that? I...”

“No,” Tarasov says getting up. He points his finger at his companion repeatedly, warning him. “Just—no. Do not say anything, Finn.”

“Still in one piece?”

With their ears still ringing they can barely hear Hartman shouting as he wades through the waist-deep water. The former Marine sighs heavily when he sees that Tarasov and Sawyer are unharmed, apart from being soaked and kind of shell-shocked.

“You two just made Iwo Jima look like women’s beach ball,” he grumbles and takes the remaining rucksacks from the boat. “Come! Let’s get to the shore at last!”

37

Fallen outpost, New Zone

“Dunno why I’m doin’ dis after what happened at Ghorband, but here’s your burer.”

Senka doesn’t sound too happy as he points the LED of his torchlight to the big crate. It is made of metal and seems safe enough to contain whatever is inside, but the Bandits have covered it with a metal mesh in addition to the strong ropes fixing it to the flatbed of their Japanese pick-up. The two other Bandits accompanying him keep their Kalashnikovs ready and dart anxious looks at the crate.

“You infidel scoundrels have just had bad luck,” Commander Saifullah says. “See the bodies of our ungodly enemies? We’ve beaten them!”

“Can’t see shit in this darkness,” Senka says.

“Don’t worry, Senka,” Skinner says. “It’s safe here. Saifullah told you the truth. We’ve finished off a whole squad of the Tribe right here at the bridge, including one of their oh-so-badass Lieutenants.”

“Amazin’. May I touch ya? Now get dat beast off our hands and make it quick. We don’t wanna tarry here too long.”

“Where’s Bruiser?” Skinner asks ignoring the Bandit’s distress.

“Back at da airfield in Charikhar, where I brought yer pet from.”

“You’re heading there now?”

“Nay,” Senka sneers. “First we go to Kabul to get a healthy dose of radiation. Holy fuck! Of course we’ll drive back right now!”

“It’s a dangerous road,” Skinner says grinning. “Full of anomalies and shit.”

“Dontcha say, man. Really? Hope we won’t drive into any.”

“You will,” Skinner says aiming his AK-74 at Senka, “at least that’s what Bruiser’s gonna think.”

A scream of surprise is the last sound leaving the Bandit’s lips when three rounds fired from Skinner’s rifle at point-blank range hit his chest. At the same time, two more rifles mow down his escort.

“I hate Bandits,” the half-mutant Stalker says to Saifullah.

“That makes two of us,” the Talib commander replies. He yells something in Pashtu to three fighters who now appear from their cover.

“Thanks dushman, but we don’t need your help,” Skinner says and makes a whistle. In a minute, two smiters approach. One of them, still

wearing rags with blue-brown camouflage, gives the dead Bandits a hungry look.

Get the crate off the car, Skinner mentally commands him. *Dinner comes later.*

“I will burn in hell for dealing with you and your *haram* creatures,” Saifullah murmurs as he watches the two mutants effortlessly lift the heavy crate.

Skinner shrugs. “Really? I thought your god will be pleased with you giving him victory. And the little fellow inside that crate is here to do just that.”

“What is it?” Saifullah asks. He looks at his fighters who move closer to him, keeping their index fingers on the trigger guards of their old Kalashnikovs.

A groan sounds inside the crate, as if a caged man would moan over his imprisonment in a humanoid, yet deeper and distorted voice.

“Saifullah, you and your men better step back a few meters,” Skinner says. The four Taliban comply more than happily.

Open the crate, brothers.

The smiters remove the steel mesh and open the crate. Feeling the stench it emanates, even Skinner has to cover his nose.

Something sniffs at the air. Then a stocky, almost dwarf-like mutant appears, clad in shreds of a shabby overall that resembles a tattered coat. It waggles out from the crate and sniffs at the air once more.

Freedom smells good, doesn't it little brother?

Focusing on the stocky little mutant's mind, Skinner senses relief, hunger and anxiousness.

Come, you are among friends here.

“By God! What's this abomination?”

Hearing Saifullah's startled words, the Burer hisses and thrusts his short arms toward him. The AK falls from the Talib's hands, as if an invisible force had torn it from his grasp. One of Saifullah's bodyguards fires—and shouts with dread seeing his bullets being repelled by an unseen shield. The air undulates and shimmers between the mutant's outstretched arms, then forms a conical field that shoots out toward the Talib and hits him with full force. The telekinesis attack sends him helplessly to the ground.

“Don't shoot, you idiots!”

Alarmed, Skinner jumps between Saifullah and the mutant.

He doesn't know you yet, little brother. He is with us. See me? I am your brother. See them? They are your big brothers. Don't worry about the humans. They will not hurt you.

Fear, is the reaction he senses. *Hunger.*

I will bring you to a nice dark place with plenty of food, Skinner replies.

Tired.

You don't even have to walk, burer.

The mutant looks at him. The two little pig eyes in its face that resemble grotesquely disfigured human features tell of fear.

Don't know this place. Alone. You protect me?

You will be safe with your brothers, Skinner nods and waves his hand. One of his smiters steps to the Burer and lifts it. The helpless little mutant moans but sounds more embarrassed than scared. In response, the huge humanoid emits a growl that might go for a laugh and tosses the Burer to the other smiter who skillfully catches and has a close look at it.

Stop that! He's not a dwarf to be tossed around, Skinner mentally commands but he himself can barely suppress a smile when he senses the thoughts of the nearby smiters.

Smells good! Female! Will have fun!

His smile hardens into a cruel grin when he turns to Saifullah who stands there like petrified and mumbling a prayer. "The Tribe is annihilated, they just don't know it yet."

"Will that... demon kill them all?"

"No, dushman. We will. That is mostly me and my brothers, while you stay back and then boast over your victory in the name of your benevolent and merciful god. Just like it happened here."

Saifullah is too daunted to realize the scorn in Skinner's words. "How?"

"This little friend is a burer. Dwells underground and digs like a mole. He'll find a way into the caves under the Tribe's stronghold. All we have to do is to follow him. He'll be our battering ram, so to say."

"He?"

"Good question. Maybe a she? Be my guest if you wanna check it out."

Saifullah wildly shakes his head.

"He's hungry," Skinner continues looking at the three bodies. "So are we. Care to join us for dinner?"

"God forbid," the Talib says with a gasp.

"Then you better go, dushman. We'll move out as soon as our belly is full. Wait for our signal."

Apparently fighting a sudden sickness, Saifullah turns away from the mutants and hastily leaves.

Skinner waves to the two smiters and the Burer and jolts his head toward the bodies.

Dinner time, brothers!

To make sure that the dim-witted mutants can understand him, he adds: *Eat! Nom-nom!*

38

Swamps, Exclusion Zone

“It’s surprisingly comfy here.”

Finn Sawyer looks around in the small cave where they are hiding from the rainstorm raging outside. “Definitely looks well frequented.”

“It’s a hideout of the man we’re going to visit,” Tarasov says putting down his rucksack. He breathes into his palms to warm them up. “He uses it as a stopover during his trips to Agroprom and beyond.”

“Who is he?”

“Will tell you later. Finn, do you have firestarters left?”

“Course I do.”

“Pete, Top, get a few branches from those bushes at the cave entrance. Nooria, it’s time to take our medicine.”

She fumbles in her shoulder bag and gives Tarasov and Sawyer a pack of red and blue anti-radiation drugs.

“You must dry your clothes, Mikhailo. Getting a cold is not nice.”

“Thanks God for vodka.”

To wash away the sickening metal taste that lingers on his tongue since he was exposed to the exploding Whirligig, Tarasov rolls the spirit in his mouth before sending it down his throat. Then he takes the drugs and flushes the pill down with another gulp.

“Call me overcautious,” Tarasov tells Nooria who watches his alcohol intake with a frown. He offers the bottle to Sawyer. “Finn, you’re next.”

“*Mexaminum*. Experimental radiation protection medicament’,” the Australian reads out the label. “‘This drug induces contraction of peripheral blood vessels and oxygen deprivation, which serves to treat and prevent radiation exposure. The drug does not have severe side effects, although isolated cases of mild nausea, dizziness, cramps and stomach pain have been reported. Made in Germany.’ Frankly, mate, after reading the side effects—dunno what’s worse.”

“Just take it. Germans make good anti-radiation stuff ever since Chernobyl scared the shit out of them.”

“At least we have a good excuse to drink. This is to my rucksack! May it go to the Walhalla of heroic survival gear, if there’s any!”

“Cheers,” the Top says arriving back with a small pile of branches. “Leave something for me, will you?”

“Firestarters and the cooker were in me rucksack. One day I will have my revenge on you, Mister...”

“Mikhailo. And sorry again.”

“Mikhailo, then. So, one day you will be beggin’ me for a little wine powder. And I’ll say with incredible pleasure: *nope, mate*.” He reaches for a pocket on his trouser from where he fishes a small metal box. “Anyway, luckily for us, good ol’ Sawyer is prepared for everything. Like losing my rucksack, hangin’ on a rope that’s about to crack and needin’ to cut the straps or somethin’, though I’d never imagined to lose it like that. See, I have a redundant survival kit on me with Mayan sticks and water-proof matches, plus a mirror, a button compass...”

Pete chuckles. “Jesus, you’re beyond rad and all but why not use a normal gas lighter?”

“Because it would burn your thumb till you set wet wood alight, and there’s a good chance that wood you find in the wilderness will be wet. These sticks are 80% pine raisin and burn hot as hell. Here you go. I don’t make it big, otherwise we’ll all die in this hole from smoke inhalation.”

In a minute a small fire is burning, casting its flickering light on the items someone had moved here: a shabby bedroll in the corner, a footless chair and a car tire. A shovel and a bucket stand in a corner, apparently used for digging out the cave.

A thunder sounds outside. Tarasov looks at his watch.

“Half past one. Let’s hope the storm will be over quickly. We only have about five hours of daylight left and don’t want to spend the night without shelter, believe me.”

“Where exactly are we going?” Nooria asks. “To a friend of yours?”

“Strelok’s, actually. I’ve seen him only once, shortly after... anyway, I was there with him and Alex Degtyarev. Hope I still remember the way.”

“I have to say your leadership was quite all right so far.”

“There’s no such thing in the Zone, Top. Only luck and the Zone’s mercy.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t start sermonizing again,” Pete says mimicking a yawn.

“I know you hate hearing this, but – one day you’ll understand.”

“I do hate hearing it.”

“Better get used to it, son. Compared to your father, Misha Tarasov is a nanny with a heart of gold.”

“And what does this make you, Sergeant Major? A grandma?”

“Call me a grandma once more and I break your goddamn neck,” Hartman grumbles,

“Misha does have a heart of gold,” Nooria quickly cuts in with a smile. “And you too, Top.”

“Don’t ruin his image of a tough guy he’s been working on all the time, big sister.”

“Pete, shut up. And thanks Nooria, it’s appreciated. Let’s have some *havchik*... eh, I mean food.”

They sit quietly, listening to the storm outside and sitting as close to the small fire as they can. Nooria distributes some of the rations from the Tribe’s base. It is not for the first time Tarasov realizes that American gear may be more sophisticated but not necessarily better than what’s common in the Ukrainian or any other ex-Soviet army. At least the chili-and-macaroni as main dish, peanut butter and the Top’s object of pet hate, the HOOAH! Bar doesn’t fill his belly much better than the Ukrainian rations having canned meat, concentrated broth, sardines and porridge for backbone.

“In case of war, your food wouldn’t make us run over to you,” he shares his thoughts loudly. “This flameless ration heater is a good idea, though.”

“Does that mean I can have your Tabasco sauce? Thanks.”

“You can have my peanut butter too. *Gospodi*, Hartman, how can you eat this stuff with bread? It’s like... molten sugar.”

“That’s mine, if you don’t want it,” Pete says and eagerly takes the small pouch. “Don’t say anything bad about the national pride of America, please.”

The Top gives a snorting laugh.

“That’s damn right, son.”

“Don’t try to peanut-butter me up, Sergeant Major. I’m not gonna share it with you.”

“What has happened to camaraderie in this world?” the Top says with a disappointed sigh.

The fire is soon spent. Going to collect more wood, Tarasov peeks out from the cave’s entrance. The rain falls unabatedly and the thunder makes the ruined bridge cast bizarre shadows on the river. The turned-over railway carriages next to the cave entrance block his view to the northern horizon where the wind is driving the dark and mighty clouds. It doesn’t appear as if the storm will cease anytime soon.

Doesn’t make a difference in this weather if it’s night or day, he thinks.

“Let’s move on,” he tells the others when returning to the cave. “Makes no sense to wait for the storm to recede.”

“My rifle bags were also in my rucksack,” Sawyer reproachfully says. “At least carry the rifles with barrels down.”

“No,” Tarasov says putting on his rucksack. “Better carry them ready to shoot.”

“I won’t shoot at humans,” Finn Sawyer says getting up. “Just for the record, mates.”

“And if they shoot at you first?” Hartman asks.

“Never happened but maybe I’d reconsider... when all of you gung-ho guys are dead already.”

Tarasov takes point as they leave the safety of the cave and begin to trek eastwards between the railway embankment and a long stretch of barbed wire. After a hundred meters or so he stops, waits for the Top at the end of their small column to catch up and turns to the south, towards the thick reed.

Damn. The reed hides mutants, but at least makes them easy to detect by the noise they make. But not in this storm.

“Stay close!”

Tarasov must shout to make himself be heard in the rumbling thunderstorm.

“Keep your eyes open,” he yells. “If the reed moves – shoot!”

“What?”

“Prepare for your boars, Finn!” Tarasov shouts back and waves his hand to the others. “Move!”

He feels a surge of self-confidence as his steps lead him unerringly to the spot where the barbed wire is missing for a few meters, though the triangular sign warning of radioactivity is still visible in the reed that has overgrown the fence separating the Zone proper from its outskirts.

“Why didn’t anyone just cut through the fence elsewhere?” the Top asks.

“At least this passage through the reeds is safe, but who knows what lies a few meters away from here!”

Not seeing further than two or three meters in the splashing rain, Tarasov hopes that the headlamps will not fail. They would betray their presence to any hostiles lurking behind the reeds but at least he as leader can see if everyone’s still following him.

Sawyer, having switched from his hat to the hood of his Gore-Tex jacket, looks around wearily.

Nooria, right in the middle with two armed men walking ahead and behind her, carefully watching her steps, jumps gracefully over a piece of corroded metal standing out from the mud.

Pete, cursing as he almost stumbles over the same object but having the common sense of swiftly turning his rifle sideways, lest it might accidentally go off and hit those walking before him.

Above all other lights but still barely over the high reeds, Hartman’s headlamp shines. Tarasov can’t see his face, even though the distance between them is not more than a few steps. Yet the presence of the hardened old Marine is reassuring. Whatever should come at them from

behind, it will find itself taking on the hardened warrior and his immense strength.

All of a sudden, Tarasov begins to laugh.

"What's so bloody funny?" Finn Sawyer asks behind him.

"A rogue leading a ranger, a fighter, a cleric and a thief!"

"Is that so, you rogue?" Sawyer gives him an allowing smile. "You just made me wish for a cozy inn where I can have a pint of ale..."

A smile appears on Tarasov's rain-soaked face as he pushes the reed aside to find another piece of wooden plank, leading from one piece of solid earth to another over a stretch of water. It comes to his mind that ever since they left the Tribe's stronghold, he hasn't seen Hartman in battle. But his guts tell him that he'll have that opportunity soon enough.

I hope it's not the Military. I'd hate to shoot at my former comrades.

Lightning flashes in the black sky.

At least we don't need to use night vision. These damned flashes would render them useless.

Where the path leads through a wider water surface, he can see a searchlight in the night.

The Pump Station. I wonder who is occupying it now, with Clear Sky's troops obliterated.

He has almost reached the next patch of solid ground when two bright dots appear in the darkness. Immediately, he raises his fist to signal a halt.

"Stop!" Finn Sawyer shouts behind him.

That's great. Yes, make sure even blind dogs know we're here, if they can't see the headlamps and smell us in the rain.

Ignoring the rainwater flowing down his forehead and making his eyes itch, he kneels and aims the TOZ shotgun to where the two dots appeared. It could be a boar. Any other mutant. Or his tired eyes playing a trick on him.

"Nothing. Move on."

They reach a flat area that stands out from the murky swamp like a little island. Fragments of concrete protrude from the earth here and there. He stops behind one, where he would be covered at least from one side, and waits for the others. To Tarasov's reassurance, his companions follow him closely.

Good. After all none of us is a rookie.

He leads on, wiping off water from the PDA display. The faint light from the screen casts an eerie light upon his face.

Now, from the island with the concrete circles, to the east. Deeper into the Swamp. Damn! I hope my memory doesn't fail.

The growl from behind them is louder than the storm.

"What?"

He hears the Top shout and fire his rifle. Sawyer, guided by the instinct of a real hunter, steps aside to give him a free line of sight. The two dots glowing in the darkness are now not just a reflection. Neither are the other four or six approaching them.

Hartman's rifle fires ones more, then Pete's.

"Watch out for Nooria!" Tarasov yells.

"Don't panic, mate! Uncle Finn is here!"

Sawyer's yell is followed by a thundering shot from his heavy bolt-action rifle.

Tarasov himself doesn't dare fire his TOZ. It is loaded with buckshot and if fired, the pellets could hit any of his companions.

Sawyer fires once more while the two other rifles are being reloaded. Realizing that they are covered at their back, Tarasov turns forward, just in time to for his headlamp to fall on the biggest boar he ever saw charging at him.

His first shot is fired by instinct and misses. The second one is aimed. The mutant growls louder. It shakes its head, as if trying to shake the pain off. Tarasov takes two steps back and frantically reloads the two barrels, but not fast enough to raise the gun once more and effectively fire it.

Nooria's blade flashes. Growling, the boar turns to charge through its new enemy that has cut a long wound into its hide. Tarasov fires both shells into the black hulk of the mutant that now appears in his headlamp's light at point-blank range. The boar raises its head once more when another shot thunders.

About twenty meters behind them, the Top stands like a statue, still aiming his rifle at the dead boar.

"Ace, mate! Shot that bloody hogzilla right in the head!"

"I was aiming at you, actually," comes the Top's reply. "Say *mate* once more and I'll fire my second shell. It fucking nerves me."

"Sorry, mate!"

Pete quickly steps between the Top and Sawyer. Tarasov sees a grin on his face.

"Nooria, you all right?" he shouts.

"Yes."

"Next time, don't do that! I could have shot you!"

"You didn't."

"All right, fall back into line, everyone!"

"Wait! What about the fangs? It was my first Zone boar! And one bloody difficult to kill!"

"Everyone includes you, mate!" Tarasov shouts back angrily.

Damn. They seem to be on the edge. Except Nooria and that indestructible Australian.

Tarasov wipes the water from his face. "Step up! Let's go!"

Hours pass. The process becomes a toil and their boots heavy from mud. As Tarasov's body tires, the straps of the rucksack seem to cut deeper into his shoulders. His mind weakens also, having half of his attention on the anomaly detector, the other half on the Geiger counter, and whatever strength is left in his mind above that put into his eyes and sense of perception.

The PDA map shows him only brown patches of isolated land among darker areas of swamp water where they could sink at the first wrong step. There is no marker for the place he is looking for. The known landmarks are too far to give him any idea about the way to take. He decides to continue eastwards.

Heavy rain continues to pound relentlessly. By now there's barely a difference between solid soil and yielding swamp beneath their steps.

Tarasov stops for a moment to recollect himself. He is about to reach for his canteen when, seemingly out of nowhere a pseudodog appears in the weakening light of his headlamp. He gasps and raises his rifle but his index finger remains motionless on the trigger.

"Don't shoot!"

Maybe it is the shape of the mutant's head, or one of its pointed ears bending downwards that makes it appear familiar. Maybe just the fact that it doesn't attack them. But it's the dog-like bark that makes this one differ most from similar beasts. Tarasov repeats the order. "Don't shoot at this one!"

The pseudodog barks once more and darts off to the west, in the opposite direction Tarasov was about to take. After a moment, it barks at them and disappears to the west again.

This cannot be. No. But then...

He waves to the others and turns westwards where the pseudodog went. Loud barks help him keep on the mutant's track. The ground gradually becomes more solid and the reed sparser as they walk.

Then they reach an open area. The eyes of their unlikely guide light up once more in the darkness before it runs off toward a light that gleams in the distance like a firefly.

A big smile comes over Tarasov's tired face.

The Zone. This is only possible by the Zone's will. We are saved.

Soon, the dark silhouette of a wrecked helicopter appears in the light of flashing thunder. Not far behind it there is a wooden cabin, its dark features wreathed in fog. The light they have seen comes from a window.

As they approach the cabin, the thatched roof and white window frames make it appear similar to the decaying homes in the abandoned villages found all over the Exclusion Zone. This appears intact though.

“Who the hell lives here?” Pete asks, sniffing and wiping his nose from where rainwater is dripping. “A mutated Tom Bombadil?”

Tarasov walks up to the door and knocks. Seeing the polite gesture that appears to be completely out of place here, his companions share puzzled looks.

The door opens and light falls outside. It makes Tarasov twinkle, yet he immediately recognizes the old man standing in front of him. He is unarmed, either because he expects nothing and nobody hostile or has nothing and nobody to fear.

The old man strokes the white stubble on his cheek as he looks his unexpected visitors up and down. Then a smile appears on his wrinkled face. The pseudodog who guided them to the house sits at his feet, panting and dropping saliva from its formidable snout.

“Glad to have found you at last,” Tarasov says for a greeting with a beaming smile on his muddy and rain-soaked face. “Long time no see, Doctor!”

39

SBU headquarters, Kiev

Staring out of the window in a locked room, Strelok can’t tell what looks gloomier—the heavy rain outside or his reflection on the glass.

He realized soon enough that Maksimenko knows a thing or two about psychological torture; at least to him, being kept in a locked room where a small TV set was the only means of comfort already equaled to torture. Maksimenko didn’t even provide him with a bottle of vodka. Deprived of freedom and alcohol, all he can do now is zap between mind-numbing late-night TV shows and wait for the captain.

On *Inter* – a cheesy soap.

On *1+1* – football.

“What? Shakhtar Donetsk trashing Real Madrid 5 to nil by half-time?” he murmurs to himself watching the football match for a minute. “What are our peg-legged boys on? Oh yes... at least now I know where all the Moonlight artifacts go... probably that’s what makes them run like that.”

Bored, he changes to the midnight news on *Ukraine ICTV*. What he sees makes him jump from his seat.

The town of Termez, close to the northern fringes of the New Zone, is in ruins. An agitated voice-over speaks of a radioactive dust storm hitting the southern areas of Uzbekistan. A shaky video, probably taken with a mobile phone, shows ruined buildings, people in despair and, for a second, a pack of mutants that appear to Strelok like blind dogs the size of wolves and good eyesight as well. Then an egghead tries to explain that it was just

a natural disaster, nothing more nothing less, and the alleged mutants were merely stray dogs. However, he has obviously no idea why the so-called dust storm has only hit the areas north of the New Zone while nothing similar was reported from elsewhere – even though anyone who knows even a little bit about the Zone knows that emissions are spreading in concentric circles.

“Idiot,” Strelok says slapping himself on the forehead, “you’re all idiots! It wants to come here, it is reaching out for *our* Zone!”

Damn it! I must get out. I must, before the darkness comes!

He bangs on the firmly locked door.

“I must go! Let me go, you bastards!”

No answer comes.

40

The Doctor’s house, Swamps, Exclusion Zone

Small flames crackle and snap in the Doctor’s fireplace while slow rain raps on the windows. The travelers’ soaked suits and rucksacks are placed close to it to dry. Sitting around a rustic table lit by a petroleum lamp, Tarasov and his companions enjoy the cozy safety of the Doctor’s home. The warm light of the fireplace and the lamp almost make them forget about the darkness outside. The aroma of oak wood smoke mixes with the vapors of warm food rising from a soup bowl and their plates.

“At last someone who knows how to prepare a *narodnaya solyanka*,” Tarasov says stirring the thick soup in his aluminum plate. “Many people just mix everything together they find in the trash. But this, Doctor, is delicious. Your tummy is happy, Top?”

“Outstanding. What did you just call it?”

“Translates as ‘people’s soup’.”

“Too bad I have no sour cream to add,” the Doctor replies in a Russian-accented but almost impeccable English, speaking softly and sophisticatedly as it befits a well-educated man. He puts a second petroleum lamp on the table and adjusts it to burn brighter. “And especially, real vegetables. Cabbage is fine, sometimes Barkeep gets some from the Big Land and once boiled, it stays edible for weeks. Fresh vegetables are a different matter. Carrots and peas from cans are just... not the real thing.”

“What to do? Zone soil is contaminated,” Tarasov says serving himself one more from the soup bowl. “Vegetables grown here would make one’s teeth fall out even before finishing the meal.”

“Or they would mutate like the animals did,” Pete says.

“And then we’d have an attack of the killer tomatoes!” Sawyer adds, followed by laughter around the table. “Laugh if you want but I mean it. Those pseudodogs, boars, fleshes... imagine what happened if veggies mutated?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m working on the vegetables,” the Doctor says. “I’ll show you something when you’re finished.”

“Your English is impressive, Doc,” says Hartman.

“One has to learn it. In the beginning, we only had Ukrainians here. Then Stalkers came from all over the former USSR, and eventually Westerners. Everyone prefers to tell about pains and aches in their own language. I couldn’t heal them if I don’t understand them, could I?”

“Do those foreigners get along well with the Russian Stalkers?” Pete asks.

“In fact it’s the Russians who still have a grunt towards the foreigners, especially the *pindos*... Americans. Some still think that it was you who stole our empire from us and now want to snatch the Zone too. They also think that non-Russians could never understand what the Zone is about. But that’s... *pizdabolstvo*. How do you say that in English, Misha?”

“Bullshit.”

“Yes, that’s it. Bullshit. What an expressive word.”

“Why wouldn’t Westerners understand the Zone?” Pete asks.

“Have you seen those rusty cars, usually white and with the engine and air intake in the rear?”

“Yes. Funny little cars, I gotta say.”

“See? For you, a wrecked Zaporozhets is just a funny little car but to me it’s a reminder of my childhood. My father used to have one. Whenever I see those wrecks I see the remains of a world that had once appeared safe and sound. One day we ruled half of the planet, the next day we were orphans, lectured by those who feared us for decades. Many of us still need to learn how to forgive.”

The Doctor stays and puts more wood into the fire.

“Yes, the Soviet empire collapsed, but our desire for being respected did not. For many Stalkers from the ex-USSR the Zone is as much a source of nationalist pride like the first Sputnik was. For the more sensible, the Zone is a place where everything is a reminder of those days – the wrecked Soviet cars, the murals on the houses in Pripjat, the heroes’ statues, and they try to carve out their new world from the ruins of the old. This is something only few Westerners can understand. Half of our heart is still back in the USSR. For many newcomers this time capsule is merely exotic, like the Cyrillic alphabet.”

“Not all western Stalkers are that superficial, Doc,” Tarasov says.

"Of course not. After all, being a Stalker is not just about wandering around, drinking vodka and admiring this Soviet time capsule. Being a Stalker is a matter of heart. Those lucky enough to become a real Stalker have the same heart beating in their chest. Regardless of where they've spent their previous life, here they are all children of the Zone, and as such — brothers."

"So one would like to hope," Tarasov says thinking about the warring factions and greedy artifact-hunters who would betray anyone for the coordinates of a precious stash. It appears to him that seclusion has made the Doctor a bit forgiving toward the downsides of a Stalker's life, or perhaps even human nature in general.

"Interesting," the Top says eyeing the US-made rifle on the wall. "You know, Doc, I always thought that Stalkers were merely scavengers."

"Some of them are." Tarasov's words are accompanied by the Doctor's allowing nod.

"More than likely, sure, but what the Doc just said is... yeah, it makes me think. After all we're doing the same with the Tribe. Carving out a new world from the ruins of the old. Whatever..." Hartman shrugs. "Never mind. Just thinking loudly."

"Wow, we live in an effed-up world," Pete sighs.

Tarasov shakes his head. "No. We just live in a world where some effed-up things happen. The world as a whole ain't broken— just some individuals living in it."

"Your story sounds rather sad to me, Doc," Pete observes.

"Not for you, my friends. There's no reason to deny that you won the Cold War, or more accurately: that we lost it. You don't know how lucky you are."

"I could tell you a thing or two about the lucky US of A," the Top bitterly says. "I'm sure a lot of Westerners come here because they are fed up and disappointed by how things are going in their quarter of the world."

"Touché," the Doctor says raising his glass to the former Marine. "And this makes them brothers to the Stalkers flocking here from all over the former USSR. But now it's your turn to talk. What brings you here, Misha? I still can't believe that you made it to the New Zone and then out of nowhere, you pop up at my doorstep!"

"Well, Doc... it's a long story."

"We have all the time."

While pondering over how to cut his story short, Tarasov lets his eyes wandering around in the Doctor's home. Their wet jackets and boots dry in front of a fireplace. It keeps the room warm and cozy, though the ZM-LR300 rifle hanging on a nail above it reminds of the perils outside.

Bookshelves line the walls, holding all kinds of things that tell of a life in the Exclusion Zone. It is all about a lonely Stalker's life, except for the scientific books and magazines in several languages.

A framed photograph hangs on the wall next to the door. It shows Strelok in the middle, with two others looking at him; he might be giving orders to them. Though they are not recognizable, Tarasov suspects them to be members of Strelok's group on one of their deep raids into the Zone, hoping to find the legendary Wish Granter. In the end, only Strelok made it while his friends died one after another. Strelok, always tight-lipped about his dealings in the Zone's heart, once hinted at another of his friends still being alive. He referred to him only as Guide, describing him as an extremely elusive character who preferred to stay unknown. Thinking about it, Tarasov's guess is that the Doctor himself might have taken the photograph and deliberately kept Guide out of the frame. That would explain why only three of the five legendary Stalkers are visible in the picture.

Seeing that he is at a loss of words, the Doctor fills Tarasov's glass with vodka from a glass jug to ease his tongue.

"Thanks, Doc. Suffice to say, I had to do an errand for a certain new friend of mine from the New Zone. He is a powerful man and his... Tribe, or maybe faction as we would say here in the Exclusion Zone, has an impressive network back in America. When I checked my stored messages in their base I found two coming from Strelok. The first was about meeting me. The other a cry for help. Strelok is... you know. I couldn't ignore either of his messages and have returned. I had hoped that you might know what his messages are about, or at least tell me of his whereabouts."

The Doctor strokes his white stubble. "Interesting... Alas, I have to disappoint you—I don't know where he is now. Strelok used to come here, yes, and he still has a stash here. Sometimes he spent time praying in the old wooden church to the south-east. You've probably heard that his mind is... troubled."

"I know. Few have a better reason to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after what he had been through."

"PTSD is a pussy's excuse," Hartman grumbles, prompting Tarasov to dart a disapproving look at him.

"I'm adept at healing wounds," their host says ignoring the Top. "Daresay, I know a few things about curing wounded souls as well. However, Strelok's troubles are beyond my skills. I warned him before he set out on that fateful raid to the center of the Zone. I still can't forgive myself for not being with him in his direst hours."

"What happened to Strelok?" Nooria asks.

“Only he could tell.”

Tarasov watches the Doctor with narrowed eyes. When they arrived, he greeted all his companions like ordinary Stalkers, except for a little surprise in his eyes when he saw Hartman’s size. When Nooria stepped in, though, he looked at her for a moment as if seeing a ghost and then bowed his head with such a deep respect that went far beyond an old-fashioned gentleman’s politeness towards a woman, or the understandable surprise over meeting a woman in the virtually male-only Exclusion Zone. Just like Nooria in the New Zone, the Doctor had always been a node of lore about the Exclusion Zone. All this makes Tarasov curious about what these two might have in common, since the two Zones also have more in common than what meets the eye.

“If he is in trouble, then you did the right thing by heeding his call. He doesn’t have many friends left.” The Doctor jerks his thumb toward the photograph. “Fang was the technical genius and Ghost the daring one. You’ll need Fang’s aptitude to find him, Ghost’s skills to help him and Guide’s knowledge of the Zone to get to him quickly. As far as I’m concerned, I’ll give you all the help an old medicine man can.”

“I don’t know about who you’re talkin’ about,” Sawyer says raising his vodka glass to Tarasov, “but this guy knows the Zone like the back of his hand. I’m tellin’ you that!”

“Thanks, Finn,” Tarasov says with a smile. “And thanks to you too, Doc. You already did much by making us forget the Swamps outside.”

“Say thanks to Druzhok,” the Doctor says caressing the mutant’s head. “Sometimes I let him roam the Swamps and he brings me a snork’s leg or a boar’s ear in exchange. I think he wants to share his lunch with me.” He looks at his pet with a warm smile. “*Da, Druzhok? Kakoy molodets ti, umnaya sobaka. Nu, idi gulyat’!*”

The tamed mutant gives its master a friendly snarl and jogs to the door. It opens it with its paw and disappears outside.

“*Sobaka! Zabil zakrit dver’!*”

In response to the Doctor’s call, the pseudodog smashes the door closed. Tarasov and his companions exchange perplexed looks over the table. The Doctor smiles mysteriously and fills their cups with tea from the samovar.

“Maybe the Bar at Rostok would be a good place to start asking around,” Tarasov says clearing his throat.

“This Strelok guy... is he on his own?”

“What do you mean, Top?”

Hartman studies his dirty fingernails, apparently embarrassed over what he has to say.

“Let me put it this way, Mikhailo... you didn’t return by your own will, did you?”

“Correct. It was Strelok’s message.”

“So—are you sure that message came from him?”

“It certainly came from his PDA.”

“You don’t get my point. What if someone made that Strelok character send you a message, or perhaps just used his PDA, to lure you back?”

Tarasov slowly rotates the vodka glass in his hands and doesn’t look at Hartman.

“Who would have done so?” he eventually asks.

“Someone pissed off by you not bringing back the research data you were sent to find.”

“That’s a little murky, I admit,” Tarasov says and feels a sudden urge to scratch his head. “The whole mission was a set-up. The SBU used me and my men as a bait to expose an arms dealer. Finding the research data was just the cherry on the cake. At least that’s what Alex Degtyarev told me when I made up my mind to contact him from the Alamo. Believe me, Degtyarev would be the last one I could piss off by desertion. He is kind of a deserter himself who no longer knows if he’s with the SBU or the Free Stalkers—the Loners.”

“I don’t know that Degti... Degta... Degtyarev guy. You might be right. All I’m saying is – you better be very cautious.”

“I know exactly that I’m a wanted man, but I trust Strelok. Why? Because I am one of the few left who he himself can trust. He wouldn’t betray me. You don’t need to remind me about being cautious. That’s why we entered the Zone the long and hard way.”

“You’ve been lucky so far,” the Doctor says. “Better to not tempt the Zone, if you follow my meaning.”

Using an iron pincer, he takes a few glowing embers from the fireplace to heat up the copper samovar that stands in the middle of the table.

“What’s in the stash that Strelok keeps here?” Tarasov curiously asks.

The Doctor shrugs. “Ammunition, some canned food, a few grenades... nothing particular.”

“Grenades could be useful,” Hartman says.

“Not here and now.”

Tarasov drums his fingers on the table, thinking. *Strelok, Strelok... where are you hiding?*

Pete uses the momentarily silence to ask a question. “And what have *you* been doing here the whole time, Doc?”

"I don't mind showing you around my abode until tea is ready. There's a room with a few mattresses where you can sleep, and my laboratory is next."

The Doctor takes a petroleum lamp and leads his guests into the neighboring room. Except Tarasov, all are surprised when they see metal shelves loaded with artifacts, the apparently more dangerous in radiation-proof, scientific containers. There is a surgery bed in the corner, together with an old-fashioned hospital lamp and a white cabinet on which all kinds of medical tools lie neatly arranged. Below the window, where the room is apparently brightest during daytime, there is a large table loaded with vials, retorts, dosimeters, calculators and even a laptop – as if a medieval alchemist' apparatus had been mixed up with a modern scientist's high-tech equipment. A brochure in English lies on the wooden chair next to it. The Top picks up and opens it.

"H&H Tools Catalogue, 2012," he reads out the title. "*Twenty Years of Excellence*. Says it's a company from Nevada dealing in medical and surveillance robotics... Not my kind of stuff."

"They make a device called *My First Infirmary*. A truly marvelous machine. I'm trying to build something similar but still have a long way to go. Until then, artifacts and healing plants will have to do the job." The Doctor opens a wall cabinet. "This is my herbarium."

"Wonderful," Nooria says with excitement looking over the small pots and jugs filled with aromatic herbs. "Will you tell me more?"

"Plants like marjorie, wolf's bane and marigold grow to bigger sizes here than in the Big Land, thereby multiplying the amount of curative substances one can extract. For example, a few capitula of wolf's bane grown in the Zone produce enough thymol derivatives to imbue a whole bandage, which can be applied for speeding up the healing rate of bruises and non-open injuries. Like anti-inflammatory drugs would do, but then one can't harvest ibuprofen from plants." The Doctor chuckles.

Sawyer and Nooria look at him in awe as he hands them a bandage.

"Can I keep this?" Nooria asks with eyes sparkling.

"Sure. Then I also try to save some Stalker lore from becoming oblivion lost. For example, I drop a Pellicle artifact into a Springboard anomaly and in about four hours, the Springboard spawns a new artifact. I just call it Skin because it boosts cell growth, meaning that the body will be less vulnerably to chemical burning and acid. Alas, it contains physical uranium which makes it radioactive."

"Our friend Finn might be a good apprentice," Tarasov says and pats the Australian on the back. "When we were crossing the river, he threw a Shell into a Whirligig!"

"You threw my rucksack in first. Why dontcha tell him that, huh?"

“And?” The Doctor’s eyes shine up with curiosity. “What happened?”

“He almost got us killed.”

“All research has its risks,” the Doctor replies laughing. “Anyway, what I’m really proud of is this.”

Expecting something strange, perhaps a machine with flashing lights powered by glowing artifacts, Tarasov frowns when the Doctor shows him three rusted buckets filled with earth. Tiny plants grow on the surface.

“I see nothing out of the ordinary,” he says.

“Each bucket has a Jellyfish inside,” the Doctor proudly explains. “I thought, if this gravitational artifact is able to attract and absorb radioactive particles from a human body, why not using it for purifying soil? Measure the radiation!”

Tarasov takes a Geiger counter from the table and holds it to the buckets. The device doesn’t indicate any radiation.

“I vot, Misha! Vegetables grown in this soil will be eatable—oh, sorry—I mean edible. In a few weeks I’ll have fresh carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes. As you know, fresh and healthy vegetables is what Stalkers miss most from their diet.”

“You could make powder from Jellyfish and use it to clean more earth,” Nooria says, “and purify a whole garden.”

“Pulverizing an artifact?” the Doctor says bemused. “Wish that were possible!”

“I do it with mortar and pestle.”

“I admire your enthusiasm for artifact lore, young lady, but...”

Seeing both Hartman and Tarasov smile and nod, the Doctor doesn’t finish his sentence.

“Misha, by everything that’s holy, who did you bring into my house? She puts me in shame!”

“Please don’t say so, Doctor,” Nooria says blushing. “I wish I could stay and learn from you.”

“Well, if you don’t insist on leaving at dawn tomorrow, there might be an errand you could assist me with.” The Doctor looks at the quartz watch in the table where the red digits tell that it’s past midnight. “Actually, today. Let’s have a cup of tea and go to sleep.”

“Best idea I heard today, Doc,” says Sawyer and stretches his arms, yawning. “Your place looks like a comfy Russian home. Got a sauna too? Please say you do!”

“We call it *banya*,” the Doctor says. “But what you’ll need to live with is called water from buckets. Don’t look so gloomy, it will be hot enough.”

Hartman smirks at his disappointed companion.

“No worry, Finn. Just toss a swag into it and you’ll have the biggest jacuzzi on earth!”

41

Preobrazhensky Bridge, Zaton, Exclusion Zone

Each area in the Exclusion Zone has its own character. Some even have a certain dark beauty to them. Zaton, however, is probably the most desolate and appears even more so in the mist and drizzle falling from the dark dawn sky.

Once there was a river meandering through the area, which by now has turned into marshland amidst arid hills. Dilapidated port facilities, ship wrecks and industrial ruins are a reminder of the times when Zaton was thriving. One of the ruins is that of a waste processing station and next to it, a bridge spans over the former riverbed about sixty-seventy meters below. Back in Soviet times it had been called Preobrazhensky Bridge, named after a Bolshevik economist of the Twenties.

It was littered with wrecked vehicles among a cluster of anomalies, with sections of it in complete disrepair, until a powerful emission cleared off the anomalies and army high command decided to set up a permanent outpost in the abandoned ranger station not far away. The bridge was repaired, allowing for the odd supply truck to pass through.

On this dark morning, a convoy of two army vehicles is passing over the bridge. A BTR-80 personal carrier is driving in front of a mighty URAL truck. Strelok is sitting in the truck, facing Captain Maksimenko and resting his feet on his rucksack. Of the dozen men travelling with them, five are Spetsnaz, all wearing heavy combat suits that make them appear like toughness incarnate. Their sergeant’s folded-up visor on his tactical helmet reveals a lean, hardened face. The others are regular army soldiers in much lighter armor but looking equally grim.

“You heard the news, Captain?” Strelok asks.

“What news?”

“Looks like the New Zone is spreading. There was some kind of emission that hit the southern border of Uzbekistan. *Novosty* said mutants are all over Termez.”

Maksimenko shrugs. “That’s far enough for me to give it a damn.”

The Spetsnaz don’t share his equanimity.

“*Pizdets!*” one of them cusses. “I hope the two Zones are not trying to merge!”

“Don’t talk bullshit,” the sergeant replies. “Last time I checked, the Exclusion Zone ended at Cordon and that was yesterday.”

“Wouldn’t mind the Russians having their own Zone,” a regular soldier says. “At least they’d be busy containing it and quit poking their nose into Ukrainian matters.”

Strelok gives the soldier a stern look. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, *boyevoychick!*”

“Listen, here’s a joke,” says the Spetsnaz sergeant in an attempt to cheer up the mood. “An American and a Russian satellite meet in orbit. The American is spying on us, and the Russian is – broken down.”

The junior commando on Strelok’s other side dutifully laughs but the others don’t react. Maksimenko shakes his head.

“Vlasov, you are a capable non-com but telling jokes is not your strong side.”

“Just trying to cheer us up, *komandir.*”

“Then try a better joke next time,” Strelok says grinning.

“You happen to know one, Stalker?”

“Many. Listen to this: one day a journalist visits a Freedomer base—”

Strelok breaks off as the column comes to a halt and the 14.5mm heavy machine gun of the lead BTR starts firing. After a minute that was probably needed for the soldiers travelling inside the compartment to get to their firing positions, a half dozen automatic rifles begin to rake an unseen enemy.

“Leader One to Leader Two. What the hell is happening?” Maksimenko shouts into his radio set.

“Leader Two to Leader One. A horde of fleshies blocked the bridge. Stand by.”

The gun fire ceases after a few moments.

“Leader Two. We’re about to remove the carcasses from the bridge. Moving on in three minutes.”

“Leader One. Acknowledged. Make it two.”

“Why didn’t we just drive them through?” asks the junior Spetsnaz.

“Idiot!” Sergeant Vlasov bashes on his subordinate’s helmet with his fist. “Who will dig the gore from wheels and chassis? You volunteer, huh? No? I thought so.”

“Those mutated pigs smell like shit,” Maksimenko says. “Let those guys in the tin can clean up the mess.”

“And where will I have my fun?” asks Strelok. “Will you tell me at me at least what I have to do exactly?”

“Stay put in Cordon.”

“We’re in Zaton. Why the detour?”

“I wanted to be a nice guy for once and agreed to take some supplies to our outpost at the Ranger Station.” Maksimenko jolts his head towards

the two big crates travelling with them in the compartment. “We still have time. Cordon will be a good place to get all this over with.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Think of it: Tarasov knows the area like his vest pocket... you, his old buddy being kept there at the mercy of a bastard called myself... He’ll probably try to contact you and you’ll lure him right into our welcoming arms.”

“You want to lock me up at your Outpost until he comes—or doesn’t, eventually? Come on, Captain! I’ll be bored to death!”

“Infiltrating our base might be too risky even for that cunning bastard. He wouldn’t try. The Dairy Farm will do, all the more because it will give him the impression that you’re about to be brought to Cordon Base and then out of the Zone.”

“What if the Farm is occupied by Stalkers?”

Hearing this, both Maksimenko and the Spetsnaz sergeant give him self-confident smiles.

“I got it.” Strelok nods. “Shrewd plan... and then what do you want to do with Tarasov?”

“None of your business. There’s something else I wanted to talk about.” Maksimenko opens the artifact container on his SKAT armored suit. “What’s this, Marked One?”

“Let me see.”

Strelok glances at the artifact. It consists of two copper disks in the size of a saucer, about a few centimeters thick, with a space of a hand’s span and a half between them. There’s just empty space between. However, there is some force between the two disks, because it is impossible to press them together or pull them apart either.

“It’s a Spring,” Strelok says, visibly unimpressed by the artifact. “Kinda hybrid between Battery and Shell. How much did you pay for this crap?”

The truck starts rolling again. With Strelok not having an intercom, Maksimenko has to speak louder now.

“A patrol stumbled on it in the Dark Valley, just north of the building with the entrance to Lab X18. Gave the grunts a little cash and a week’s leave for it. Is it valuable?”

“Comes to about 3000 at Sidorovich. 3200 tops.” The truck speeds up and Strelok too has to shout to make himself heard over the engine noise. “Maybe 5000 at the egghead’s den in Yantar, but that’s still not enough to quit your day job!”

“Not too bad either. And what does it do?”

“Depends,” Strelok says playing with the artifact in his hands. “It does something about the gravitational field around you.”

“What? Speak up!”

“I said, it can prevent you from breaking your neck when you fall from a tree or something!”

Maksimenko looks disappointed. “Doesn’t sound too exciting.”

“Could be useful to have one during combat jumps,” Sergeant Vlasov observes with a little envy in his voice.

Strelok gives him a wide grin. “Your Spetsnaz is right, Captain. It can be very useful in certain situations.”

“What situations?”

“Like this!”

Holding the artifact tightly, Strelok jumps off the truck. Desperately, Maksimenko and his two Spetsnaz grab after him but reach only into thin air. The Stalker steps on the bridge railing and takes a straight header into the deep valley beneath.

“Shit! That dog... that sly dog!” Maksimenko shouts and barks a quick command into the radio set. The convoy halts.

Joined by the two Spetsnaz who look as embarrassed as their captain, Maksimenko stares down into the abyss but sees only fog.

“Put your NVG on and scan the area!”

After a minute, Vlasov shakes his head. “Can’t detect anything, sir. No movement, no body.”

Maksimenko shakes his head while frantically thinking about what to do.

“Shall we go after him, *komandir*?” Sergeant Vlasov asks.

Looking towards the stretch of bridge ahead, Maksimenko stamps his boot to the ground in frustration. “Damned Stalker! Shit, shit, shit! By the time we get off the bridge and climb down to the riverbed, he’ll be at the Jupiter plant already or in Dark Valley or I don’t know!”

“Plus an artifact worth five thousand. He pulled a clever Stalker trick on us, I give him that.”

The captain stares at his second in command.

“Don’t even dare remind me of that, Vlasov!” he shouts. “Goddammit! I hate Stalkers! Each and every single one of them!”

“*Tovarishu Kapitan!*” From inside the truck, a regular army soldier shows him a backpack and a small device. “I found something.”

“It better be good, soldier!”

“He left his carbine behind!” Knowing that he has just saved the situation, the soldier triumphantly smiles. “His PDA too. Must have slipped from his pocket!”

Maksimenko and the two Spetsnaz share a look of relief.

“*Slava Bogu!*” Sergeant Vlasov sighs. “I was already preparing my butt for a kick from Kruchelnikov’s boots.”

“That was a damned close shave, Vlasov.” Maksimenko shouts over to the driver. “Let’s get moving, *davai!*”

Back in the truck, Maksimenko fiddles with Strelok’s PDA. All he will have to do is to turn on Strelok’s distress signal once they reach their destination, and Tarasov shall walk by himself into the trap. He calls on the soldier who found the device.

“Private!”

“Sir!”

“You’ve just been promoted to corporal. Having his PDA is as good as having with us that bastard himself!”

“What about Strelok?” Vlasov asks. “We just let him go?”

“Couldn’t care less. Without a rifle, mutants will eat him. Even if he makes it, in a few days he’ll return to beg for more painkillers.” He smiles with satisfaction. “Strelok is a dog, but we have the means to keep him on a tight leash.”

42

The Doctor’s house, Swamps, Exclusion Zone

The fresh morning air drives a chill over Pete when he steps out of the cabin. The Doctor is cutting wood nearby and greets him with a smile.

“Good morning, young man!”

“Name’s still Pete, and good morning indeed... rain seems to be over.”

“It is. I love autumn aurora.”

“Autumn—what?”

“Oh, I mean we had a lovely sunrise.”

“Where are the others?”

“Tarasov and the lady are away to do a little errand for me. The two others went to hunt down a boar for tonight’s dinner. Druzhok is playing in the bushes.”

“Sounds almost like a scout camp.”

“You want to be a good scout, Pete?”

“Guess so.”

“Then come and help me chopping wood.”

“I could use the exercise,” Pete says and takes the axe.

“I love the smell of autumn,” the Doctor pensively replies and takes a deep breath. “It reminds me how good it is to be alive.”

“Come on, Doc. What’s so good about being alive anyway? Everyone just keeps repeating this like parrots on speed but no one actually knows why.”

“One doesn’t need a new thrill every minute to sustain the pleasure of being alive,” the Doctor says with a shrug.

“I wish I could think the way you do.”

“Why?” the Doctor asks with a wise smile. “You are young, healthy, have friends who would go through hell for you... That’s more than most people could ask for.”

“Honestly, Doc?” Pete halts chopping the wood for a moment and wipes sweat from his forehead. “I don’t care much about my life. Not that I wanted to die. I just don’t want to live. My life is nothing but toiling on and on, following a path that I don’t know where it leads because—I don’t know. It’s not fear from going to hell and bullshit like that... clinging to my life is a bad habit I can’t get rid of.”

“Spend some more time here and you will see what life is about.”

Pete looks around. “Right now, it’s about being stuck in a cottage in the middle of nowhere with a renegade army officer, an adrenaline-junkie survivalist, one of my father’s brainwashed retainers and a strange girl who’s supposed to be my stepsister. Sometimes she acts like a retard but she is also a pint sized ball of radness.” Pete makes a gesture as if describing something more awesome than words could express. “There’s nothing around here but an irradiated marsh full of anomalies and mutated boars. Not even a socket where I can charge my iPod. Frankly, Doc, I see nothing around I could be enthusiastic about.”

“If that were be true, the Zone wouldn’t be a home and refuge for many. So much even that wherever they go, they still walk its paths.”

“Is that so?” Pete shrugs once more before continuing to chop wood. “Sorry but I can’t see much of the Zone’s wonders, Doc.”

“I’m afraid you can’t see the Zone from the Zone, young man.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you don’t see the real meaning of the Zone.”

“And what’s the real meaning of the Zone?”

“Experiencing what it means to be alive.”

“This place is all about death and decay, Doc. Why would anyone have that experience here?”

The Doctor smiles and hits Pete’s cardia with a quick punch. Pete almost doubles over and desperately gasps for air.

“Because once you have to fight for your life, you value it much more. Like you’re fighting now for a breath of air that appeared the most natural thing until a second ago.” He offers his hand to help Pete back to his feet. “Everything smells better all of a sudden, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll give you that,” Pete replies still breathing heavily.

“If you feel just for a moment that life could be over, and then comes the relief of still being alive, what would you do?”

"Be happy about it, I guess."

"Why?"

"Because... it would mean that I can still do something with it."

"Correct. If you start valuing your life, you won't want to waste it anymore."

"So, if I get your meaning, the Zone teaches me to value my life?"

"By making you aware of how fragile you are. Hence life in the Zone can help you discover your true self. This is the most precious treasure one can find in the Zone, but only if you don't let yourself be fooled by its riches. That would make you a scavenger, not what you are really supposed to be."

To prove to the Doctor that his punch wasn't as painful as it really had been, Pete takes a particularly big piece of wood from the pile. It is from the trunk of a birch and the axe stays stuck in it when he smashes it into the wood.

"How am I supposed to know what I'm supposed to be?"

He swings the axe up together with the trunk, but as he smashes it, it still doesn't split.

"What is my dog doing over there?"

"It's sniffing around in the bushes."

"And those ravens in the sky?"

"Circling," Pete says and swings the axe once more. This time the trunk begins to split.

"He's sniffing at the bushes because he's a dog—more or less, that is. The ravens are circling in the sky because they are ravens. And what does Pete do?"

"I am chopping wood."

"See? That's you."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Why, aren't you chopping wood?"

"Do you suggest the meaning of my life is about chopping wood?"

"Your life is about what you are doing. Do bad, and you will be bad. Do good, and you will be good."

Pete at last manages to split the trunk. He stares at the axe that has just cut through the hard wood.

"Do nothing, and you will be nothing," he murmurs.

"Exactly. Whatever you do, be aware of it and of the consequences as well. Just like you are aware of yourself cutting wood, knowing that it will make for a cozy fire tonight."

"Is this some kind of Zone wisdom?"

"No. It's Japanese. They call it Zen."

"I heard of it, but Zen doesn't say anything about chopping wood."

“No. It says, if you are hungry—eat. I am hungry now and don’t mind being The Man Who Eats for the next ten minutes.” The Doctor glances at his watch. “Strange... by now, Tarasov and Nooria should have been back.”

43

Bagram area, New Zone

“Alamo to Tango Foxtrot Anaconda, do you copy? Over.”

“Driscoll here. Loud and clear, sir, over.”

Hearing the big man heaving a sigh, First Lieutenant Driscoll furrows his brows. Silence between the Colonel’s lines means nothing good. Instinctively, he braces for bad news but what his commander has to say is worse than anything he would have expected.

“Driscoll, I have dire news. Our southern outpost has been overrun. We lost a full squad. Lieutenant Ramirez was taken alive and sent to the Alamo with a call to surrender. Needless to say, it was rejected without consideration. Ramirez... we could recover his body. Over.”

Driscoll’s response is short but all he can say over this. “Understood.”

“That’s not all, unfortunately. Be advised that any raghead force you may encounter will probably be supported by smiters – using heavy automatic weapons.”

“Come again, Alamo?”

“You heard me right. smiters using heavy machine guns have teamed up with our enemies. Over.”

Now it is Driscoll who needs a few seconds to collect himself. “Sir... what do you want us to do?”

“Your orders are standing. Keep your grip on the scavenger base until I sort this situation out. Stay alert. Alamo over and out.”

“Roger, Alamo. Out.”

Silence falls over Task Force Anaconda’s communications tent where Driscoll, Collins, Schmidt and Gunnery Sergeant Anderson have gathered. The radioman who usually handles less important transmissions than the last one doesn’t dare look at them and buries himself in transcripts of radio messages intercepted from Bagram.

“Sergeant, give us a moment,” the first lieutenant tells him. “Don’t you dare speak of this outside the tent. I’ll deliver the bad news to the warriors myself. Oorah?”

“Oorah, sir,” the radioman replies. He salutes and leaves the tent.

“So, gentlemen,” Driscoll tells the two officers and the gunny. “You heard the man.”

Anderson still struggles to believe. "Smitters with machine guns... Jesus!"

"What's important now is that we keep up morale. Ragheads are one thing but mutants with guns another."

"We never lost a full squad before," Lieutenant Schmidt quietly says. "Where on earth are those beasts coming from?"

"All I need are coordinates and I'll blast that hole away!" the black gunny says.

"That will come after we do our job here, Anderson. As for now: Scotty, double the guards at our southern perimeter and relocate the fifties. I don't expect the scavengers attempting a break-out and we'd better keep a close eye toward raghead lands. Gunny, I want the mortar section to fire a few eighty-one shells into the scavengers' perimeter every now and then. Just to let them know who's in charge here. That's all."

"Can I make a suggestion sir?" Collins asks. "If you agree, I'd return to base with a fifty-sixty strong squad. It would be a waste of resources to have our main force sitting around here while the Alamo itself might be in danger."

"What makes you think the Alamo is in danger, Collins?"

"With the southern outpost lost, the road from the south is open. If I were a raghead, I'd use the momentum."

"I would also return if I were you," Driscoll says. "But contrary to you I know what a command means. We stay where we are."

"But..."

"There's no 'but' in 'chain of command', Lieutenant Collins. Dismissed."

44

Railway embankment, northern edge of the Swamps, Exclusion Zone

"This is the closest thing I have to a home, Nooria... even though I have found my place in the New Zone, my heart will always long to see this land."

"It is beautiful here."

"I haven't heard anyone talk like this about the Swamps for a long time... but today I must agree."

Approaching the railway embankment in the northern part of the Swamps, Tarasov checks his PDA map. Now that the Doctor has placed a marker, the path to his cottage appears almost straightforward. It is marked as an empty stash, out of caution, but it will be easy to find the

way back. The clear sky too makes yesterday's tedious march appear like a faint memory.

Strange, Tarasov thinks. *All appears peaceful... Something's not right.*

"The embankment isn't far now," he says to Nooria. "What exactly do you have to do there?"

"Put Slime into Vortex, wait and tell Doctor what happens. I am very curious to see."

"You already speak like a Stalker." Tarasov smiles. He halts his steps and listens to the cackle of two wild ducks flying over the Swamps. "How capricious the Zone is! Yesterday it was dreadful, today it shows us its beautiful face."

Without the gloom they had been through yesterday, Tarasov's eye reaches over the reed fields to the western hills where the tunnel lies and the fields and stretches of forest beyond the river. Cirrus clouds drift high in the sky and below, on the far horizon, white cumuli like cotton balls.

No shot or howl disturbs the Swamp's ordinary noises, only frogs croak, bugs chirp and the endless reed fields whisper as the wind moves them. It would appear like any landscape if it weren't for the rusted, derelict train engines and wagons that stand on the embankment. Their wheels are overgrown with weeds and grass.

"If my memory serves, the anomalies are behind the wagons," Tarasov says. They walk up a few concrete stairs leading up the steep embankment. Tarasov uses this vantage point to scan the Swamps with his binoculars.

"Wait! Get down and stay behind that wagon!"

There is something sinister in a groove overshadowed by a cluster of oaks and poplars, halfway between the railroad embankment and a wide stretch of water. He takes a closer look.

"Mutant?" Nooria whispers.

"Worse. Men."

Cautiously, Tarasov sneaks around the wagon and lies down on his stomach between the tracks.

Zooming further in he observes a small group of Stalkers. The party is a surprisingly mixed bag: a Loner is sharing his food ration with a rookie-looking Bandit sitting next to a Freedomer cleaning his MP5 submachine gun, while two more Loners are engaged in a conversation with a companion wearing ragged Monolith armor. Two tough-looking Bandits are keeping watch a little further away. They are armed with LR-300 assault rifles, a much better weapon than most of the others have. Another Bandit, apparently the leader or guide of the group, is even wearing an FN

F2000 slung over his shoulder, a rare and state of the art assault rifle in the Zone.

“These are not supposed to have a picnic together,” he whispers. “Stay put!”

With his old reflexes setting in, Tarasov starts thinking about a way to engage them. Whatever this bunch of Stalkers might be up to, it can’t be good if they are led by Bandits. However, he knows that he would be hopelessly outgunned. All he can do is to take a steady aim at the Bandit guard standing closer, who now steps into the bushes to relieve himself. Through the ironsights, Tarasov aims directly at his hooded head. He jerks his index finger and mentally pulls the trigger.

“Bang,” he whispers to himself.

Then he hears the quick tick-tick-tick of a burst fired from a noise-suppressed sniper rifle. With the wind blowing through the poplar trees and playing with the thousands of yellowing leaves, the rifle’s sound could have just been his imagination.

A whimper escapes him seeing the Bandit’s head jolt, splattering blood with skull fragments that look real enough. Tarasov closes and opens his eyes to check if what he saw had been for real, but when he looks again at the spot where a second ago the urinating Bandit had stood he only sees his dead body.

The rest of the party hadn’t noticed the danger yet, neither did the other guard who is now looking up at the sky as if a bird had caught his attention. Another tick-tick and he falls too. Tarasov realizes that he is witnessing a perfectly executed sneak attack, aided by the Bandit guard’s mistake of having stood with a tree between him and his fellows who wouldn’t see him collapse.

With the two guards removed from the flanks, Tarasov knows that the butchering phase is about to begin. He hears a thump and a moment later a rifle grenade lands right in the campfire. The explosion immediately puts several Stalkers out of action. The leader jumps up, barking frenzied commands as he tries to scramble his men who are already under the concentrated fire of automatic rifles. Tarasov easily recognizes them as Kalashnikovs by their barking sound. The Stalkers frantically return fire but have no chance to repel the attack of their still invisible enemy.

Realizing that their situation is hopeless, the leader makes a dash to save at least his own skin. Tarasov can’t blame him – by now, all his men are down. The Bandit fires a few bursts from his rifle in a vain effort to keep his pursuers at bay, but is smart enough to run. Rifle shots hit the ground around him and someone shouts, “Halt!”

A Spetsnaz appears from the bushes, then three more on the left flanks. One of them, who is shouting commands to the others and is the

ambushers' commander apparently, is wearing a heavy SKAT suit that betrays him as a military Stalker. A Sphere helmet is covering his face. To Tarasov's surprise, three fighters in Duty armor step out from the bushes to the commander's right.

The military Stalker runs after the fugitive, with the Spetsnaz and Dutyers dashing out to flank him. This leaves the Bandit with only one direction to escape – up the embankment, directly in Tarasov's direction.

Tarasov knows that his cover will be blown in a few seconds. Either the Bandit will stumble right over him, or the attackers will find and shoot him in the very reasonable assumption that he is a Stalker from the group. He doesn't even want to consider what would happen to Nooria if that happens. All he can do is to let them know that he is not their enemy, or at least not sided with the Stalkers they have ambushed. He waits until the fugitive Bandit is just about two paces away, where he can already hear his heavy panting, and then fires both barrels of his rifle.

Fired from such a point-blank range, the heavy slug rounds in the chest would have made a standing target fly back or at least recoil a few steps. The hugely built and armor-wearing Bandit, running with full strength into the direction from where the shots came, just stops in his tracks and falls to his knees as his feet collapse. His body rolls half a meter in the wet grass, right to Tarasov's feet who gets up from behind his cover and raises both arms. He leaves the hunting rifle on the ground.

"Hold your fire!" Tarasov shouts. "Friendly coming out!"

By now, the rest of the attackers have caught up with their commander. Assault rifles are pointed at Tarasov from all sides.

"Step away from that shooter and keep your hands up, Stalker!"

The commander pointing a Vintorez rifle at Tarasov is still panting from the excitement of battle and the run afterwards. With his prisoner being secured, he allows himself to remove his tactical helmet and wipes sweat from his face.

Tarasov gives him a wide and friendly smile.

"Sergeant Shumenko! How is your bladder doing?"

The military Stalker drops his jaw.

"I'll be damned! What the hell are you doing here, *komandir*?"

"Boar hunting, mostly. My compliments for an ambush well executed, by the way."

"Thanks, Major, but I only did what you taught me. I can't believe this!" Tarasov's former soldier turns to his comrades. "Down with your rifles! Don't you know who this is?"

They don't seem to know but follow Shumenko's order nonetheless.

"Before you stumble on my companion and shoot her—I'm not alone. Nooria! No need to hide anymore. Come, it's safe now!"

Sergeant Shumenko gives Nooria a curious look when she appears from behind the wagon. Knowing the reaction most people give over her scar, she had already pulled the hood of her long coat over her face.

“Who’s that, Major? Are you traveling with an anorexic pet burer?”

“Will tell you later, Sergeant. I’m dying of curiosity over all this. Army and Duty together ambushing a group of Loners, a Freedomer and even a Monolith, all guided by Bandits? It’s like the whole Zone in a nutshell.”

“Things have changed since you went off the radar, Major.” Shumenko offers his canteen to Tarasov, and then takes a long draw of water from it. “Let us finish our business before we chat. You’ll have the questionable pleasure of seeing Duty in action.”

“I mean no trouble,” Tarasov says. “May I take my rifle now?”

“By all means, Major Tarasov.”

They all walk back to the groove where a Duty fighter and a Spetsnaz are guarding the Freedomer. He appears to be the only one who survived the ambush, even if wounded. However, seeing the Dutyer towering over him and rubbing his gloved hands with anticipation, Tarasov is not too optimistic about the wounded prisoner’s fate.

“As agreed, Inquisitor,” Shumenko tells him. “Freedomers are yours to interrogate, so it’s your turn. Do us all a favor and make this one speak, will you?”

“Guys... don’t shoot me!” the Freedomer whines.

“My poor friend, you got shot in your chest,” the Dutyer called Inquisitor says. “No wonder, with you wearing such a pathetic excuse of body armor.”

“Give me a medikit, please!”

“Yes, you’re a touch pale, buddy! A kit wouldn’t help you much but I might have a bandage for you. Just answer my first question: what were you up to?”

“We all wanted to leave the Zone! Travel to the south, to the New Zone! That’s all!”

“Why am I not surprised to see anarchists and criminals running from the Zone?” The Dutyer snorts. “Here comes my second question and I’m going to ask nicely. Where were you going?”

“I don’t know! Only the guide knew!”

“I *did* ask you nicely.” The Dutyer steps on the prisoner’s chest, pushing it so strongly that blood gushes from his mouth. “This is the kind of bandage that Duty applies to bleeding anarchists! Where in the fuck were you heading?”

“Oh God...”

“Yes, that’s what I am to you now and you’d better answer to my question, or I’ll stuff your stinking hide with shit and display it in my zoo of dead mutants! Damned anarchist!”

“I don’t know, I swear!”

Each word the Freedomer utters makes him spit up more blood. Inquisitor looks at Shumenko who replies with a shrug. Seeing the Dutyer unholster his Makarov pistol, the Freedomer emits a last cry.

“*Svobo...*”

Inquisitor fires his pistol.

“*Da. Net cheloveka, net problema,*” he says holstering the Makarov.

Nooria stirs and looks at Tarasov in disgust. She might have treated many dreadful wounds but seeing a man being shot in the head from close range is a different thing. Turning away from the ghastly scene, she starts vomiting.

“Such is life in the Zone,” Tarasov quietly says.

“Did you eventually quit or may I still offer you a smoke?” Shumenko asks, offering Tarasov a cigarette. He waves it off.

“Duty,” the Sergeant continues as they walk away from the body, rolling his eyes. “Joint operation, not exactly to my liking. The problem is that whatever that freak said, killing this man didn’t solve our problem. Many Stalkers from all factions are moving to the south. Maybe it’s winter approaching and they just migrate like those cranes in the sky. Look—a lovely sight, those big Vs.”

“What’s so odd about Stalkers moving to the New Zone? At least you’ll have less trouble here.”

“People smarter than me think the Bandits might have a hand in this. The strange thing is, we never find any intel on them. Just like now—*nichego*. If we take them prisoner, they don’t know shit about where they’re heading. Just like that hapless anarchist. We tried to make them talk as best as we could, believe me. Apparently only their leaders know the destination and they don’t keep the coordinates stored in their PDAs.”

“Then it’s a pity I shot that Bandit.”

“Probably we couldn’t have caught him alive,” Shumenko says with a weary wave of his hand. “Two days ago, we encountered a similar group and had the boss cornered. He blew his own head off with a hand grenade. Whatever secret they have, they are keen to keep it. All the better for us, I guess. If grunts don’t know where to go after deserting, they think twice before deserting.”

“You talk now like an officer.”

“The army has treated me well, so I play according to its rules. No reason to complain.”

“What about Sergeant Kolesnik?”

"Being low on men has its advantages. Cordon Base is run now by a lieutenant. Patrols are commanded by sergeants. Kolesnik and I are patrol leaders now. He's doing well, patrolling somewhere between the Red Forest and Limansk. Now you tell me, who's that girl with you?"

"Just a rookie."

Shumenko stops at a tree and takes a leak. "She's from the New Zone, isn't she?"

"She is. How do you know?"

"That's where you went. Now you're back, I guess with her as a souvenir."

Tarasov smiles. "Yes, kind of."

"We all believed that you found a treasure trove of artifacts down there, got rich and were living happily ever after," Shumenko says closing the zipper on his camouflage leggings. "I mean, with dying never being too much of an option for you, that's the only thing we could think of. What brought you back as a Loner, apparently?"

"Just passing through. Really. You wouldn't believe me that I'm actually a hunter's guide, anyway."

"No, I wouldn't. In any case, tread carefully."

"I left my cover because I had no choice. That Bandit was running right up to me with you closing in on him."

"Wise decision. We would have shot you first and asked later. Some of us would have shot you even knowing who you are."

"No surprise, with everyone mistaking me for a deserter."

"But you are. No offense."

"I don't take any because there's a lot to be told that you don't know. Where are you going now?"

"Back to Cordon. Another squad will arrive soon to continue combing this sector. We have some intel for a certain Captain Maksimenko."

"Maksimenko? He was always a self-loving bastard but not without abilities... very good abilities, actually. He missed the career bus if he's still only a captain."

"Maybe not for long. He's in charge of our operation, at least partly. His superiors might appreciate the intel we found."

Hearing this, an alarm bell goes on in Tarasov's mind. Slowly, his hand moves to unsling his rifle, disguising the movement as adjusting the strap on his shoulder. Meanwhile his other hand in his pocket touches a button on the PDA.

"You just told me you didn't find any intel during your patrol."

"That was true until you appeared, Major Tarasov," Shumenko says tossing away his cigarette. Then he shouts out to his men.

"Seize them!"

Before Tarasov can get his rifle ready, Shumenko has his Vintorez already pointed at him.

“Sorry Major. Don’t even bother to ask that question. Two weeks leave and two thousand hrivnya is more tempting than letting you go for old times’ sake.”

Held in check by the Sergeant’s rifle, Tarasov watches helplessly as Inquisitor puts his heavy hand on Nooria’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, rookie. I’ll only ask you a few questions.”

She reaches for her blade but two more Dutyers grab her arms.

“Don’t touch her! Shumenko, you bastard—”

No matter how much Tarasov curses him while the Spetsnaz manhandle and bring him to the ground, Shumenko just shrugs it off. The sergeant only reacts when he sees Inquisitor holding Nooria’s chin and rudely turning her head left and right, checking how she would look as another wall trophy in his collection of dead mutants.

“Hey, you creepy freak!” he shouts. “Leave that girl alone or you’ll have a really big problem!”

Checking if the plastic handcuffs are tight enough, Shumenko kneels down and pats Tarasov’s back.

“Don’t worry, *komandir*. If he touches her, I’ll shoot him. That I will do for old times’ sake.” Then the sergeant waves to the Spetsnaz with the patrol’s communication gear. “Call Cordon Base. Ask them to send Osprey One to our exfil position. Tell them, we have priority intel for Captain Maksimenko.”

45

Vaults beneath the Alamo, New Zone

Walking his watch in the Alamo’s vaults where the Tribe has its ammunition, fuel and other supplies stored, Lieutenant Nelson is desperately wishing for a cigarette but smoking is strictly prohibited here. To face the impending attack, the Colonel has ordered to haul up most of the ammunition to the overground defenses but the ban on smoking still stands and not even a Lieutenant would dare to defy it. Least of all he, Nelson, who still feels guilty over the ambushed Humvee under his command.

He moves down the hall which looks like an underground hangar. The walls and ceiling are reinforced with concrete, with several smaller vaults holding supplies opening on the sides. Usually, this place is bustling with life: the rough terrain takes its toll on the Tribe’s vehicles and there’s always something to be repaired. Supplies are administered and moved 24 hours a day. Most of the combat vehicles are in the field now and the big

maintenance hall is all but empty, save for a few trucks that were in too bad repair to be used. Apart from a single fighter in one of the smaller vaults taking stock of food supplies, it is only Boxkicker and Lance Corporal Bockman there. They are busy fixing a broken-down Humvee.

Nelson smiles as he looks over the hall. When they first entered this underground, there was nothing but a dark but spacious cave system and a path to the then still ruined citadel that was probably an ancient escape route from the citadel above. In the few years that had passed since then, no efforts were spared to turn the cave into a well-equipped storage and maintenance facility. The narrow path leading up to the ancient town where now the Tribe's living quarters are has also been re-built into a safe and wide passageway since. Nelson, however, can still remember the frenzy, panic almost, that overcame Marines and their Hazara protégés alike when the nukes went up. The Hazaras repaid for this protection well enough. Without them, they would have never found this refuge. Nelson himself owes his personal luck to them; his girl, at that time barely more than a scared little brat but now grown into a beautiful woman in her early twenties and already a proud mother of two, was one of the Hazaras who guided them here. After the Colonel assigned him to guard and training duties, Nelson's only comfort is that he can spend more time with her—such short periods of peace are rare in the life of Lieutenants, who always fight in the first line and deal with the most perilous assignments.

There is silence in the vaults, and Nelson is missing the usual bustle as he trots to the broken vehicle where two pairs of legs stand out from under the chassis—one wearing a blue civilian overall and the other in grease-stained fatigues.

“Think this gear shift will ever work again?”

“My fault. Should've looked at this weeks ago when some pups first complained about it... geez, a Lieutenant's boots! We got company!”

“As you were, Bockman,” Nelson says when the lance corporal's oily face appears from under the chassis. “Take your time. There will be more to repair once the strike force returns.”

“Sir!”

Bockman smiles flashing his impeccable teeth and disappears under the Humvee again.

“With all due respect, Lieutenant Nelson, but could you just kick that monkey-wrench over?” Boxkicker asks. “Gotta be there next to my tool kit.”

Nelson finds the tool and is about to move it closer to the technician when he hears a strange noise, coming from one of the storage vaults. It is muted but sounds like stones rumbling. “What was that?”

“Something's wrong, sir?”

“Both of you, on me!”

Sharing a frown, Boxkicker and Bockman climb out from under the Humvee. Nelson’s ears detect the muted rumble once more. It is louder now.

The Lieutenant unholsters his M1911 and whistles to the fighter in the supply vault. The three men follow Nelson to the vault where the rumble is coming from.

“Bauer, come in,” Nelson speaks on his radio.

“Bauer here.”

“Something weird’s going on in storage vault Bravo Five. Send down a team immediately.”

“Roger.”

Nelson waves to the fighter. He is a Hazara boy, armed with an M4. With Nelson only having his sidearm on him and the two technicians completely unarmed, the carbine is the only rifle they have. Nelson can only hope that Bauer’s guard team will arrive soon. But then, what danger could have been expected here in the vaults? And is it a danger at all?

Once in the vault, he hears knocking from the other side of the wall where nothing is supposed to be but stones and earth. If Lieutenant Nelson doubted if the noise signifies danger or not, now he knows that the knocking means nothing good.

“Nelson here. Something is trying to breach into the vault. I repeat, breach detected at Bravo Five!”

Lieutenant Bauer’s voice becomes anxious.

“Jesus Christ, you mean someone’s trying to infiltrate the vaults?”

“Don’t know, but I always thought Santa Claus would come through the chimney. Means this definitely ain’t him. Better raise the alarm!”

“Roger. Sending Jackson down with a squad, over.”

A siren begins to scream in the living quarters.

“Bockman, Boxkicker, stay back and wait for Jackson’s team to arrive,” Nelson commands, then gives the young fighter an encouraging wink. “You and me, we’ll stay and welcome whoever is coming through. Take cover behind those strongboxes!”

The two unarmed men hurry away as Nelson and the fighter take up position, aiming their weapons at the section of the wall that is now trembling from heavy blows.

Fucking caves, Nelson thinks. This whole cursed land is full of them. Damned ragheads or scavengers must have found a way through. But how was that possible?

The wall crumbles and two humanoid but immensely strong hands appear.

Lieutenants of the Tribe are not supposed to get shocked. However, the face appearing in the breach makes Nelson's skin creep. The ugliest mutant's snout wouldn't look to him as scary as this horribly distorted human face that appears to grin under its dark hood.

"Fire!"

The creature growls as the bullets fired from the M1911 and the carbine hit it. It sounds more like anger than pain. Nelson feels his vision blur—or is it just the air undulating between the mole-like hands? He has no time to think. His shock makes way to near panic when he sees the bullets being reflected by an unseen shield. All Nelson can do is to bark the only command making sense.

"Fall back, fall back!"

Several blows shatter the wall. Rocks crumble and in the wide hole an even more frightening sight appears.

"Smite! Run, run!"

Firing one more desperate burst from his M4, the fighter makes a dash toward the maintenance hall where the guard team should have arrived by now. Nelson empties his magazine into the torso of the mutant appearing through the hole, reloads, then sees that if he wants to live, he too had better run—following the first, more bulky mutants come through the breach and what is perhaps even more alarming, grinning Talib faces appear behind them.

Where in the hell is Jackson and his men?, the Lieutenant desperately asks himself as he turns and runs. Bullets whizz and ricochet from the walls. Then a shockwave hits him from behind and Nelson feels as if his stamina had been just sucked from his body. A bullet from a Kalashnikov hits his limb, then another one his back. Surviving, running, falling, then getting up and crawling away would require super-human strength.

The Lieutenant has it. Even if his exposure to the power beneath the City of Screams has been just a fraction of what had created the smiters, his strength is beyond that of any hardened warrior. If Nelson would only wear his combat exoskeleton and have a weapon more powerful on him than the simple pistol, he could make a stand until the reinforcements arrive.

And they come—a dozen heavily armed fighters appear from the tunnel leading to the Alamo, yet Nelson knows they are too late.

"Get out!" he screams. "They're gonna overrun you!"

He must make it to the vault where the rest of the ammunition is stored. All Nelson can do is to set a claymore mine or C4 charge, let the section of the vault collapse and bury the intruders – with himself.

The relief squad's M16s open fire. Nelson sees the two technicians run into the tunnel. The young fighter lies dead in his blood pooling from

three gunshot wounds on his back. Nelson grabs his weapon and can fire a short burst backwards before the magazine is empty.

Triumphant howls and shouts come from the attackers' direction when Jackson's team falls back. Nelson knows that they will attempt to hold the intruders back until more men arrive from above with heavier weapons. Taking cover behind the Humvee that was being repaired just a few minutes ago, he screams a warning through his radio.

"The vault's been breached! Get out of the tunnel, get out! I'm gonna blow it!"

Using smiters for cover, dozens of Taliban push forward. Only a few steps separate Lieutenant Nelson from the ammunition vault. He takes a deep breath and darts out. He needs three leaps to get there. Two. One.

Another shockwave hits him. Depleted of stamina, Nelson falls but keeps dragging himself forward. Only a half meter to go.

A huge foot steps on his back and pins him to the floor. Nelson gasps and spits blood. Without seeing it, he knows it's a smiter.

"Hello Lieutenant," a hoarse voice says. "As the old saying goes—nothing's worse than having an itch you can't scratch, right?"

The voice belongs to a triumphantly grinning half-mutant wearing ragged Stalker armor. He pats Nelson on the back and steps away, joining the Taliban who by now have overrun the vault. Then he steps away and nods to the smiter pinning the Lieutenant down. Horrendous pain and suffocation are the last things Nelson feels as the mutant raises his massive foot once more and then crushes his spine.

46

Cordon Base, Exclusion Zone

Standing in the courtyard of Cordon Base, Maksimenko watches the helicopter approaching from the west. His eye sparkles with satisfaction.

"Is it the renegade's dumbness or our luck that's beyond measure, Vlasov?" he asks the Spetsnaz sergeant standing at his side.

"Both, I'd say. You'll bring him to Kiev as soon as possible, I guess?"

"Guessing is no part of your job description, Sergeant. No, we let him boil a little in his own gravy... to soften him up, if know what I mean."

"You mean—interrogating him?"

"I said: to soften him up. Then I'll do the interrogation myself." The Captain thumps his right fist into his open palm. "Oh yes, I'll do that. And what's even better: Agent Fedorka will interrogate the female Stalker he had been with. Dunno what he was thinking. Female bodyguards didn't help Gaddhafi either."

Sergeant Vlasov obediently laughs with his superior.

The Hind gunship, call sign Osprey One, hovers over the Base with an ear-splitting whoosh and descends to the concrete helipad. It has barely touched down when the hatch swings open and Sergeant Shumenko appears, followed by Tarasov and Nooria. Both are handcuffed but two commandos still hold them by the arms.

"Package delivered," Maksimenko cheerfully says. "I love this job, Sergeant. Let's go and say hello."

However, he only walks a few meters toward the helicopter and then stays still, stiffening his stance and letting Shumenko and his Spetsnaz drag the two prisoners up to him.

"Major Tarasov," he says with a beaming smile, "it's wonderful to see you."

"Makes you wish for still having both eyes, eh?" Tarasov angrily replies.

"Is this the way to greet an old comrade, Mikhailo? What about 'good to see you too', for example?" Shaking his head, Maksimenko steps forward and punches Tarasov in the stomach. "Or maybe, 'how good it is to be back at Cordon Base'?" His knee goes up and kicks the deserter in the face, who is still bending over after the painful punch. Nooria can't hold back a scream.

"And who do we have here?"

"Don't touch her, you bastard!"

Tarasov tries to break free with all his strength but three Spetsnaz jump on and overpower him like terriers would a raging bull.

"A witch, so I heard? Or a mattress where American deserters lay down for just a little bit of comfort?"

Biting her lip, Nooria returns his stare without a word.

"Pull back her hood," Maksimenko orders Shumenko and the other Spetsnaz holding her. He rudely pulls on her hair to force her to look up at him. Seeing Nooria's face, he grimaces.

"Good God! Did a mutant piss on your face or what?" Grabbing her head, he takes a closer look at her scar. "No... it definitely looks like you gave a blowjob to a bloodsucker and then got his acidic load all over your pretty face!"

Maksimenko gives a bellowing laugh. The low-rank Spetsnaz laugh with him, though Shumenko and Vlasov stay quiet and exchange a disapproving look.

"Glad you too managed to put on a grin at last, Sergeant Shumenko," Maksimenko says. "You're about to be rewarded after all!"

"Komandir, I—"

"Later. First you load this wreck of a woman into the chopper and escort her, or should I say *it*, to SBU headquarters. Wait for me!"

A hint of regret and compassion lurks in Sergeant Shumenko's eyes as he leads Nooria to the Mi-24 and darts a glance to Tarasov, who is being manhandled and pinned to the ground concrete by the commandos. This time his gaze doesn't elude Maksimenko's attention.

"Sergeant, wait a minute!"

He turns towards the soldiers. "I know many of you have served under this deserter. He was a highly decorated officer. Look at him now. Look at him! He repaid the Motherland's trust with treason and desertion. Let his be a good example for how we deal with such scum!" Maksimenko gives Shumenko a grin. "Sergeant, your reward is well deserved. You'll be given the cash and extra leave as soon as you return from an urgent patrol to Limansk."

Shumenko's face grows pale.

"Sergeant, you don't want to forfeit the reward by thinking stupid things over the fate of this deserter, do you? It will be best for you to stay away from Cordon Base until your former commander is being kept here. Same goes for his pet mutant."

"But—"

"It's in your best interest, Sergeant! Get out of my sight."

Tarasov writhes on the ground to break free from the Spetsnaz' hold. "You bastards! If you lay as much as a finger on her, I'll kill you!"

Pulling all their strength together, the commandos manage to hold him down. Maksimenko gives Tarasov a cold, triumphant look. "I doubt it, deserter."

As if Tarasov hadn't been humiliated enough in front of his former soldiers, Maksimenko theatrically steps on him and cleans the sole of his muddy boots into his fatigue. Vlasov though, who is watching the scene with growing disapproval, quickly intervenes before the humiliating gesture could be followed by a kick into Tarasov's face.

"What are your orders, *komandir*?"

Maksimenko fishes his mobile phone from his pocket.

"Take him to the holding cells. I want two Spetsnaz guarding this cage day and night until we bring him to Kiev," he says. "If he escapes, or just tries to, I'll make you wish you were never born!"

"Understood."

Maksimenko dials a number. "Verka, it's me. I have a surprise for you."

47

Northern edge of the Swamps, Exclusion Zone

Under normal circumstances, the wounded soldier would be a sight pitiful enough to make even a battle-hardened opponent feel just a little compassion.

However, when he looks into the steel-blue eyes of the Top who is holding him up into the air as if he were a helpless puppy, the soldier knows that he can hope for no mercy.

Nor can he expect any help from his four comrades. Two of them had already been incapacitated by shrapnel when they walked into a makeshift trap prepared from fragmentation grenades, and those still standing were hit by a well-directed volley of heavy slug rounds that effortlessly pierced their standard-issue body armor. Before they could even see their ambushers, the encounter was lost.

"All right, manchild, I'll ask you one more time. Where is the woman? Where is Tarasov?"

"*Ne znayo a shtom ty govorish,*" the soldier stammers.

"He can't speak English, Top," says Pete who stands next to the Top, keeping his rifle pointed at the captured soldier. "This makes no sense."

"Bullshit, Marine!" the taller one shouts back at him. "He's Spetsnaz, special forces. He is supposed to speak English. They were trained to extract information from people like me and you."

"*Pozhaluysta... ya net Spetsnazam!*"

"Speak English, you goddamn vodka-soaked Russkie bastard! We received Tarasov's distress signal. It was next to the position of one of your squads, close to here! He was hunted, there was a price on his head, you must know where they would take such prey!"

"*Klyanus bogom, ya ne ponemayu!*"

"I think he said he is no Spetsnaz."

"Since when do you speak his lingo?"

"I don't but he said *net Spetsnaz* that obviously means *no Spetsnaz*. Do the maths, Top."

"He fucking lies and I know only one Russian word—Tarasov!" The Top shakes his prisoner mercilessly. Bearing a deep gunshot wound in his limb, the soldier's pain must be tremendous. Unmoved by his screams, his tormentor repeats his question. "Where is Ta-ra-sov?"

"*Kordon... nasha baza,*" the soldier splutters.

The Top tosses him to the ground. "Now we talk, Russkie."

Pete tries to intervene. "I think..."

"I don't care what you think. You better keep your eye on the bodies. I want no hostile-is-almost-dead-but-reaches-for-his-weapon antics on my ambush ground. Clear?"

"Semper fi, Top."

"Now back to you, you miserable failure of a manchild playing soldier. How many men at your base? What weapons they have?"

"Kordon... tam spetsnazovtsi. Oni budut vam strelat... bugte umerit kak sobaki, blyadiviye Amerikosi!"

"Any idea what he said?"

Pete shrugs. "Cordon is guarded by Spetsnaz who will shoot us like dogs and that we Americans can suck his dick. Maybe something worse. Whatever."

"How you know?"

"Spetsnaz means Spetsnaz and I heard the Doc calling his pseudodog a *sobaka*. The rest is easy to guess."

"I'm really blessed with a linguistic genius like you. Goddamnit! If I had ten men, only ten Tribe warriors I could take that place, shake it until all those Spetsnaz fall out like apples from a tree and then have a word with our reckless friend! Provided if Nooria is unharmed, because if not... Oh God! Ten men. Eight. God, give me five men!"

"You've got only me and Sawyer and he refused to shoot humans, anyway."

"And I told him that bugs are tougher than humans, predators are stronger and monkeys funnier, yet hunters like him don't have a problem killing them. Makes him a peacenik and hypocrite."

"Whatever. Bottom line is, we can't get to Tarasov if he's kept at that base."

"It bloody well seems so, yes, but I'm glad at least you had the balls to come with me." Hartman turns his eyes to the agonizing soldier. "Time to finish our business."

"He's all fucked up, Top. We should let him go."

"Listen up, son," the Top says loading his shotgun. "There's a saying in Uncle Sam's armed forces: no man is left behind. We in the Tribe prefer to say: no enemy is left alive. And we've good reason to do that—you'll see."

Lying helplessly at the Top's feet in the mud, the by now barely breathing soldier closes his eyes not to see it coming.

"And what now?" Pete asks when the bang of the rifle shot died off.

"Back to base," the Top replies. Seeing that Pete is about to check the bodies for anything useful, he adds, "Looting is not an honorable thing to do. We are not scavengers, son."

"Sometimes you really give me a hard time understanding you, Top," Pete says shaking his head but leaving the bodies alone. "You and your Tribe speak about honor. I mean, you shoot a helpless man without batting an eyelid but don't touch his gear because it's not honorable. I just don't get your logic."

“You’re not supposed to understand. You’re supposed to follow.”

“You are a heartless SOB if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“I take that as a compliment,” Hartman says with a grim smile. “Take point, big mouth! Watching out for anomalies will keep you from thinking too much.”

48

SBU headquarters, Kiev

The gossip magazine full of cheesy photographs of beautiful people doing all kinds of nice things is very out of place in the SBU’s vaults. The female guard reading it fits there perfectly, however—she’s got the hands of a butcher, and her knee-length blue skirt with a belt holding a baton, pepper spray and a holstered Fort pistol reveals fleshy legs crossed under her desk. With a thick finger, the nail cut short, she scratches her head that is topped by a bun of greasy, dyed blonde hair. Occasionally, she lets her blue eyes wander around the corridor from where a row of holding cells open on both sides, then continues completing a sudoku riddle. Overall, she appears a person no prisoner would mess with. Yet she stirs and jumps at attention when the entry door opens.

Radiating an aura of authority, Maksimenko and Agent Fedorka appear and walk to her desk, their steps keeping the same pace.

“Did you clean her up?” Fedorka demands.

“Yes. But—”

“Did she stink?”

“Just a few days’ share of Zone grime. I need to—”

“Did you disinfect her?”

“That was not necessary. But in the process—”

“What?”

Glad that the agent at last gives her an opportunity to tell what she wanted, the guard keeps her message short.

“She is pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” Maksimenko asks and smacks his lips in amusement.

“She got knocked up by one of the Spetsnaz or what?”

“No, *tovarishu Kapitan*... at least not to my knowledge—”

“How do you know?” Fedorka asks, impatiently.

“According to the protocol, we took a blood test to check if the prisoner has any contagious diseases like HIV or hepatitis—”

“I know exactly what a contagious disease is, Corporal Ivanovna,” Agent Fedorka snaps at her. “Don’t you dare lecture me.”

“Apologies. The test proved negative on diseases but positive on pregnancy. Between six and eight weeks.”

The two SBU agents exchange a meaningful look.

“Very well,” Fedorka says. “She is from the New Zone and has even spent several days in the Exclusion Zone. She will be thankful later if we prevent her child from being born. It must be distorted by irradiation already.”

“Yes, but—”

“Why do you keep interrupting me, corporal?”

“With all due respect—the protocol says pregnant prisoners must be kept in a special facility. Not here!”

“She’s holding information we must get from her.”

“*Tovarishu*—”

“On second thought, it’s good news actually,” Fedorka says, putting her finger on her lips. “Threatening her with losing her child might be good leverage. When she has talked, the abortion will be performed anyway.”

“Good idea,” Maksimenko says and gives Fedorka an approving smile.

“It’s your call,” the female guard says with a shrug.

“Yes it is,” Maksimenko snaps at her. “Open her cell.”

“I better go alone,” Agent Fedorka says. “I’ll soften her up.”

The prisoner squatting in one of the corners and hiding her eyes behind her hand to shield them from the strong neon light above looks rather innocent to her. Fedorka even feels a slight envy when she looks at Nooria’s waist-long hair.

“Get up,” she commands but the prisoner doesn’t move. Fedorka grabs her arms and lifts her to her feet. Taking Nooria by her chin, she forces her to raise her head. Fedorka notices the sadness and fright in Nooria’s green eyes. She decides to play cat-and-mouse with her.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” she tells Nooria. The scar on her face don’t impress her much, but being nice is part of her game. She strokes the scar covering Nooria’s right face.

“Poor girl. This must have been sulfuric acid,” she says with mocked compassion. “Who did this to you? Let me guess—the usual story of a refused lover taking revenge? Some bearded old men being upset over you going to school?”

Nooria doesn’t reply.

“Not as if I’d care, you know,” Fedorka continues. “I am not even surprised. You’re barbarians—we should have killed you all but luckily, you took care of that with the nukes yourselves.” She chuckles. “Not without some unfortunate side effects. You know, my dear, ever since Chernobyl we have been dealing with the effects of radiation. Do you know what radiation does to a fetus? A little child in its mother’s belly?”

Nooria's eyes flicker. Fedorka takes this as a sign of fear.

"Not very nice things. Let me show you." Fedorka browses through the images on her mobile phone and shows one to Nooria. "Such monsters are better not being born. We are not bad people, my dear. For the sake of both of you, we will not let it be born."

Nooria stirs. Satisfied with the effects of her words, Fedorka continues.

"Look, you know a lot of things. Some people might hurt your baby but I won't let this happen if you help me. All you need to do is tell me about a few things."

"About what?" Nooria asks now.

"About where you live. The men in your Tribe. How many of them are there, how they are armed, what they do, how they get supplied—things like that. Will you help us?"

"Will you harm my child?"

Fedorka leans against the wall, her hands over Nooria's shoulders. She leans close to her prisoner, as if she wanted to press her against the wall with her own body.

"Silly question," she whispers. "I am a woman myself, can't you see? How could I hurt a pregnant woman?"

"I—I don't know why to trust you."

"Because I will be very, very sweet to you, and give you a chance to hurt the man who has hunted down your husband."

"Who is he?"

"First, tell me about Tarasov. Does he love you?" Nooria nods. "Even with that scar? Does he touch it? Kiss it? Does it make him excited? Oh—I see now."

"Who is the man who was hunting him?"

"You will find out soon enough. See—that's how sweet I can be, if you're sweet to me too."

Fedorka caresses Nooria's scar and gently kisses it. Then she lets her lips glide over Nooria's mouth and gives her a long, sensual kiss. Stepping away, she notes the effect with satisfaction—Nooria's mouth is still open with a mix of surprise, fear and maybe even disgust all over her face.

"You see, my dear?" Fedorka says, wiping her lips with her hand. "I am not here to hurt you."

"Why did you do this?"

"To prove that I can be kind to you and because I like you. Think about what I said. I will be back soon."

Fedorka knocks on the cell door. Stepping outside, she shuts it and emits a sigh.

"She will talk. I feel it. Our trick has played off."

Maksimenko frowns. “Are you sure?”

“I promised her that she can hurt you,” Fedorka says with a low chuckle.

His frown turns scowl. “Are you out of your perverted mind?!”

“Look who’s talking. Let’s take her, she’s sweet and smells surprisingly good.”

“Wait a minute. What in hell did you promise her?”

“Nothing you wouldn’t like. Come on, a threesome is every real man’s dream!”

“You are completely crazy!”

“Getting cold feet, *dorogoy*? She has more than enough hair to cover that scar and if you don’t see that—the rest of her face is all right.”

“Stop. Answer my question, Verka. You promised her a chance to hurt me?”

“Not more than I do usually. Don’t worry, I will be there too. Once we are done having fun with her, I’ll make her talk. By pointing a kitchen knife to her belly if necessary.”

“I’m not so sure about this, Verka.”

“I am. Let’s go. Or do you want Kruchelnikov to get her intel first? You forgot about that ranch in Montana?”

“But we can’t take her to your place or mine. She’s a high-priority prisoner, for God’s sake! And we can’t disable the CCTVs in the interrogation rooms!”

“Good point. Shit! I got carried away. Where then?”

“Wait—there’s the drivers’ dorm right on the corridor leading to the entry hall.”

“I love your brains, Dima. Let’s go.”

They walk back to the guard’s desk.

“We need to take the prisoner for further interrogation,” Maksimenko tells her in a voice that forbids any argument. “We also need everything she had on her when she was brought in.”

“I’m not sure if I’m allowed to do that, *tovarishu Kapitan*,” the female corporal stammers. “According to Point 3 of the holding protocol, I must ask for approval—”

Maksimenko darts a quick glance at the celebrity magazine on her desk.

“Point 17 Section 6 of the protocol on the holding facilities of Ukraine also says that guard personnel on duty must stay alert and keep their attention at the holding facility full time,” he replies, giving the guard the look of an officer upset. “Letting your attention be distracted by stupid sudoku riddles goes against that. You can make up for this lack of discipline by displaying unquestioning obedience in following the orders

of superior officers as provided for by Article 2 of the Protocol on the internal rules of the SBU—” Maksimenko stops for a moment to catch his breath. “—unless you want to be posted to a prison where you get all kinds of viruses by the inmates merely looking at you. Am I understood?”

The guard opens her mouth to reply but immediately shuts it again.

“*Da, Kapitan*—as ordered,” is all she can mutter.

In a few minutes, the two agents lead a handcuffed Nooria from the holding facility.

“You made me moist with that speech,” Fedorka chuckles. Maksimenko gives her one of his self-satisfied smiles and opens the door with his magnetic badge.

It is late night and the building is deserted. Maksimenko knows that even if a guard of the night shift would have nothing better to do than watching the CCTV, two agents leading a prisoner wouldn’t appear suspicious. But probably they do have something else to do, like reading men’s magazines or listening to their MP3 players. At least this is what the Captain hopes for when opening the door, because the drivers’ dorm is an unusual destination for prisoners. To his relief, no busy-body detail manning the main entry gate comes to check them out.

“Yikes! This room smells like old socks,” Vera Fedorka says with a grimace as they step into the small room with three beds and a sink. Captain Maksimenko puts down the bundle holding Nooria’s belongings and locks the door from inside.

“What will you do to me?” Nooria asks anxiously. Fedorka steps to her and caresses her face.

“Treat you well—very well. Don’t worry.”

But seeing that Maksimenko is getting undressed, a look of ultimate horror appears on Nooria’s face. Seeing that she is about to scream, Vera Fedorka swiftly puts a chokehold on Nooria and presses a hand to her mouth.

“If you dare to emit as much as a whimper, you will lose your child. Clear?”

Nooria nods, her eyes wide with fear. Fedorka cautiously removes her hand shutting Nooria’s mouth, and opens the neatly knotted bundle holding Nooria’s clothes and the few things she had on her. Her blade is among them.

“Wow,” Fedorka says pulling it from the scabbard. Holding her cheek, she forces Nooria’s face toward the bed. “Are you scared of his missing eye?” Nooria nods once more. Fedorka puts the point of the blade close to her eye. “Listen, my dear. You will do exactly as you are told or you will end up like him. Clear? Good... Truth be told, I think he looks cool like that. And now get out of those prisoner rags.”

She tosses the blade to Maksimenko who skillfully catches it in the air and puts it beside the bed, far away from Nooria's reach. Fedorka uncuffs Nooria's hands.

"Make it sexy," Maksimenko cheerfully says. He got split naked meanwhile and has made himself comfortable on the bed. Together with Vera Fedorka, they watch Nooria undressing.

"Embarrassingly small tits," she says staring at Nooria's half-naked body. "Please raise your hands."

"Aren't you getting a little too soft on her?"

"You're right, Dima. Hey! Let me see if you're shaven, bitch. Hands up!" Fedorka nods satisfied with what she sees. "Now get out of those pants. Do it!"

"Oh my God," Maksimenko utters when he sees the scars on Nooria's lower belly. "Knife cuts?"

"Suits her face well," Fedorka says with another chuckle.

By now, Nooria is standing naked in front of them, shaking from embarrassment, cold and fear.

"Nice pussy," Fedorka says studying Nooria's pubic as if her prisoner were a sex slave on sale. "The last shave has been a few days ago, but that happens sometimes. All right... my turn."

She starts undressing by removing her dark uniform jacket first, then the black tie.

"You can leave your cap on," Maksimenko tells her with a grin.

"I don't have any."

"Nobody's perfect."

"But I am. Watch me prove it."

Fedorka tosses her skirt right into Maksimenko's face. He quickly puts it down, eager to see her removing her shoes and stockings. Fedorka gracefully moves her beautiful body dancing to an imaginary rhythm, until she wears nothing but her white bra with a G-string, colors matching. Softly shaking her hips, she walks over to Nooria.

"That's no tits," she says, caressing Nooria's nipples and then touching her own. "*That's* tits."

She walks back to the bed, giving Maksimenko such a seducing stare that only a woman who has wrapping men around her finger written in her job description can.

"I have only one handcuff. Will you behave, Dima?" she purrs shackling Maksimenko's hand to the radiator behind the bed.

"You bet I will."

"I need the lubricant first."

She opens bag and rummages inside, then impatiently empties it on one of the unoccupied beds. Among many things including a make-up kit,

spare stockings and panties, a mobile phone and the long nail file, a discreet tube of lubricant falls out. Fedorka pushes a little liquid on her palm and waves to Nooria.

"I'm proud to give you the best cock of Kiev—," Fedorka lustfully whispers. Maksimenko gives a low moan as he feels her warm palm applying the lubricant on his sex. "— and the man who lured you two here attached to it. First, you will take him. You can do anything to him— anything I let you do, of course. Then we'll change roles and we will make you feel good like you never felt before!" She closes her hand into a fist and gives Maksimenko an accomplice's smirk. "Come closer."

Nooria is standing motionlessly with embarrassment written all over her. She feels utterly humiliated not only for getting naked against her will but also for her body being much less attractive than those of the sadistic couple. His naked beauty might suffer from scars on his torso but apart from that, it is a pleasure for any female eye to look at. Nooria cannot deny herself a shadow of desire. However, the sight of the woman's perfect body fills her with bitter envy.

Her eyes meet Fedorka's. They look warm to her, tempting, lewd and full of evil.

"You have beautiful eyes," Nooria says, stepping closer. With her hands behind her back, she kneels down between the bed occupied by the couple and the other one with the opened bag on it.

"Submissive already? I love that," whispers Vera Fedorka, caressing Maksimenko's thigh. "Watch him getting ready for you. I want to watch him fuck your brains out. Then we'll change position and I will give you the fuck of your life."

"Why?" Nooria asks with trembling lips.

Vera Fedorka and Maksimenko exchange a glance. She opens her mouth with a burble of laughter. With disgust, Nooria watches a thick drop of saliva falling from her lips. The beautiful woman looks to her now like a drooling bitch.

"Come," Fedorka commands her. "Look how big he is. He is all yours until my turn comes."

"I would rather not," Nooria replies. Behind her back, her hands are frantically searching among the spilled contents of Fedorka's bag.

"Why so?" Vera Fedorka asks, leaning up on the bed. She smiles at Maksimenko. "*Sumasedshaya...*"

Having at last found what she was looking for, Nooria takes a deep breath.

"Sorry," she sighs, "but I don't like you."

Vera Fedorka's brown eyes open wide but even if they were closed, the metal nail file in Nooria's hand would just as easily punch through her

right eye, fracture the soft bone tissue beyond it and pierce into her brain. Surprise still lingers in Vera's unharmed eye when she falls back to the bed, her hands and legs jerking for a few seconds until her brain ceases to function.

With his mouth open wide enough to scream but emitting only a moan, Captain Maksimenko shakes on the handcuff shackling him to the radiator. A wave of cold runs down his spine when he sees the rage in Nooria's eyes as she takes her blade. Maksimenko can't tell what is more frightening—the freezing gaze of Nooria's green eyes or the curved blade she is unsheathing.

“Go ahead! Cut my head off if you want, you barbarian bitch!”

He knows that his hoarse words sound all but defiantly.

With a quick leap, Nooria lands kneeling on Maksimenko's chest. For a long moment, she looks him in the eye, holding her blade an inch away from his throat. Maksimenko moans from both fear and excitement as he feels his sex touch that of hers.

“It was your woman wanting to take away my child, not you. Now she has one eye, just like you.” With her free hand, Nooria reaches between her legs and grasps him so strongly that Maksimenko's face distorts from pain. His arm strains against the handcuff.

“My man is bigger,” she breathes into his face. If Vera Fedorka appeared and smelled like a bitch in heat, Nooria looks now like a demon in rage. “This is to remember me.”

Nooria puts her index finger on her lips, then touches the Captain's mouth as if giving a kiss. Maksimenko hears a silent hiss from the direction of his neck. Burning pain follows a split second later.

Cold fire still burns in Nooria's eyes when she removes the glowing blade from his neck. Maksimenko wants to shout but realizes at the same moment that if he is found here, with Fedorka dead, he handcuffed to the radiator and a high-profile prisoner about to escape, he would be beyond dead. He closes his eye to avoid Nooria's soul-piercing gaze.

When he opens it a few moments later, she is gone. So are her belongings.

After ten minutes spent with trying to reach the key that Vera Fedorka has put beside his bed, far from his reach but close enough to get at the price of chafing and bloodying his wrist, he gets off the bed. Vera Fedorka lies on the floor with blood still gushing from her eye. For a moment, he forgets about everything.

“Help!” he screams.

No guard comes. Then he realizes that what he thought to be a scream was just a whimper, muted by the dryness inside his throat and the bleeding cut outside.

Outside on busy Volodymyrska Street, no passer-by could tell that the fragile woman walking down is hiding a blade that's still bloody from killing the two security guards who tried to stop her on her way out of the building, Nooria occasionally stops and looks around. It is not the tall buildings and shiny shop windows she is looking at over but people's faces. Most don't even give her as much of a glance and don't notice that Nooria closes her eyes and deeply concentrates for a second when some of them step her by.

Next to a huge SUV with its engine idling, a brawny man and a well-dressed, blonde woman are fighting. Although a fur parka covers her shoulders, she is underdressed for the chilly night in her mini skirt and thin stockings. She trembles with cold and pain as the man delivers one slap after the other to her face. She grabs the golden chain hanging from the man's neck, strong as that of an ox, as if that could prevent her from falling on her knees under the impact of the slaps.

"Smerdyucha suko," he shouts, *"ya komu skazav, viddai meni vsi babky!"*

He grabs her hand holding on to his thick chain and twitches her wrist. The woman yells from pain, falls on all fours and tries to crawl away.

A police patrol car drives by them. It slows down for a minute, then accelerates again and drives off. Neither do the passers-by on the sidewalk pay any attention to the scene. A pimp punishing a hooker is not a sight they would prefer over looking at the glittering shop windows.

The man is too preoccupied with beating the woman to pay attention to them. He is about to slap her once more when his hand, ready to deliver another strike, goes down and reaches behind his back. Then he looks at his palm which is bloody all over. His body jerks forward as if he had taken a punch from behind. Then he looks down to his left chest from where the tip of a long, curved blade is protruding.

"Shcho tse bulo?" he whispers before emitting a painful moan as he collapses. A car drives by, honking wildly.

The woman stares at the tiny figure with the hooded coat appearing behind the collapsed pimp.

"Shcho ty zrobyla? Chomu ty obrazyla yoho?"

Nooria steps over the body and cleans off her blade in his jacket. She signals the hooker to get into the SUV.

"Sorry but I don't speak your language," she says. "I only know *Zona* and *Stalker*. Drive me there."

"Zona?" asks the hooker in bewilderment. *"Ty zdurila?"*

“Stalker,” Nooria calmly repeats, “Zona. Artifacts. Kalashnikov. Shooters.”

The blonde hooker stares at the blade. Then nods.

Twenty minutes later, she stops the car in front of a two-storey house that looks like a nineteenth century building reborn as a neon sign designer’s psychedelic dream. Blue, purple, yellow and red signs are blazing their light all over the façade. An arched electric sign flashes the word *SHOOTERS* above the entrance where a half-dozen bouncers, all looking like heavy-weight boxers dressed in tailor-made suits, try to keep order among the crowd of mostly young people waiting to be let in. The men are all dressed in their best and handsome but no matter how smart they look, the beauty of their women blows their appearance out of the water. It is as if the most gorgeous women of Ukraine had gathered here, but there’s still enough of them for the bouncers to refuse entry to a few. Those not judged pretty enough to deserve entering the hallowed night club shout abuses at the bouncers but quickly disappear to try their luck elsewhere.

The hooker takes Nooria’s hand and drags her right to the entrance.

“*Zakryi svoye brudne lytse,*” she whispers and pulls the hood over Nooria’s face.

She exchanges a few agitated sentences with the senior bouncer, who gives them a pass after she skillfully lets a bank note slip into his palm. Apart from Nooria no one else seems to have noticed it.

Once inside, the hooker ignores the wardrobe and the mass waiting for the attendants to take their leather jackets and fur coats. Making her way through the crowd that smells of alcohol, perfume and sweat, she leads Nooria into a hall where those lucky enough to have a place on the dance floor jerk their bodies to a groovy song, all hands in the air. The whole place seems to be drowning in red light and loud music. On the far end of the hall, flanked by an overcrowded bar counter, a staircase leads below. It is guarded by a particularly huge bouncer. The left side of his perfectly tailored black suit is bulging. He might have a pistol or even submachine gun hidden there.

The hooker takes another banknote from her purse but the man is not impressed. Only when she gives him two more banknotes does he step aside, giving the two women a glance of utter disdain.

“*Nu ot,*” the hooker says, nervously looking around and pointing to the stairs. “*Tse Shooters i os’ tam zona, de zabavlyayutsya hloptsi zi zbroyeyu!*”

Then she disappears in the crowd.

Slowly making her way down the marble stairs, Nooria looks around in the posh lounge where a dozen bossy-looking men have made

themselves comfortable in oriental-fashioned sofas. The beats of the music played above give way to subdued chill-out. The aroma of exquisite cigars lingers in the air, mixing with the fruity flavor of hookah pipes and traces of marijuana. Low, round tables stand an arm's length from the sofas, loaded with delicious food from all over the world, not lacking plates with small hills of black caviar. The sight and smell makes Nooria's stomach rumble. It all appears like an oriental fairytale come true, and the veritable harem of gorgeous-looking, young women cuddling in to the patrons or already sitting in their laps is ready to deliver any pleasure that dishes and drinks can't. Completely lost in this world of sinful glamour, Nooria feels like an ugly grey duckling among a flock of graceful black swans.

From a sofa in a dimly lit corner, a stout man is staring at her with his almond-shaped eyes narrowed under the arched eyebrows. He would be fearsome to look at even without his shaved skull and the long, carefully groomed moustache makes him appear even more like one of Genghis Khan's fierce raiders. As if picked to match the color of his tie, a blue-eyed brunette is sitting next to him, wearing a black silk dress so short that it could pass as a napkin. She rests one of her improbably long legs in the man's lap, nonchalantly flashing bare skin on her inner thigh. A brawny, tall Caucasian man, obviously a bodyguard, stands close by and keeps a watchful eye over the lounge.

Out of ideas about what to do, Nooria looks around. Suddenly, she feels a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Nu, kurvo, shcho tobi potribno?"

Towering over her, the bouncer whom the hooker had bribed a minute ago gives Nooria a very unfriendly look.

"Zona," she stammers.

The bouncer pulls the hood off her face to check if she is pretty enough to merit entry.

"Bozhe miy—idy het!"

Glass shatters on the floor. One of the glamor girls who had been watching the scene screams at the sight of Nooria's face, putting her hand to her mouth that was holding a champagne flute until just a second ago.

Cussing under his breath and rudely grabbing Nooria's arm, the bouncer drags her back to the stairs. She doesn't try to resist and is about to be kicked out of the lounge when a slow-talking, deep voice comes from behind.

"Hrisho, ne chipai ii, day iy pity!"

The bouncer immediately releases Nooria and steps aside with a respectful bow.

"Divchyno, hodimo zi mnoy!"

It is the bald man's bodyguard talking. Realizing that she doesn't understand Ukrainian, he gives Nooria a signal with his index finger to follow.

"Listen up," he says in slow, heavily accented English. "Sultan wants to see you."

He walks back to his boss, who is waving a strand of the brunette's hair from his face to better see Nooria. Nooria keeps standing there, not sure if this place could mean anything better than the SBU she has just escaped from.

49

VIP lounge, Shooters bar, Kiev

Heeding the bodyguard's call, she follows him to the man called Sultan. He looks her up and down, his face resembling that of a shark that has had enough prey for the day and now gives the helpless little fish before him a jovial smile.

"I see you don't speak our language," Sultan says. His voice is rough but not unpleasant. "No problem, I do speak English. Sit down, little one."

With a wave of his hand, he sends the long-legged brunette away. Reluctantly, Nooria takes her place at Sultan's side where the leather is still warm. She pulls the hood up to hide her face.

"No need for that, little one. I've seen worse where I do business."

His bodyguard seems less relaxed.

"*Sultane, slukhaite...*" he whispers into his boss' ear.

"Shut up, Knuckles. Fresh meat is fresh meat wherever you find it." Sultan turns to face Nooria. "Don't worry, little one. I am Sultan and you're my guest now. Do you want a drink?"

Nooria is unsure about what to reply. She can only name a few drinks in this world.

"I want *kvas*," she says recalling the beverage that Tarasov had once taught her to prepare.

"What? Asking here for that crap would put me in disgrace. This is Shooters, little one, not a filthy drinking den. How about a Margarita? Just because you look like a Margarita. Is that your name?" Nooria nods. Sultan gives her a shrewd smile. "Of course it is. So, what do you desire apart from *kvas*, *malenkaya* Margarita?"

"Dasani water," she says, "or Dr. Pepper's but not diet shit."

"Come on, they only serve Evian here. And who is Doctor Peppers?"

Nooria sighs. "I want champagne. Dom Perignon."

"That's my girl!"

Sultan laughs as if he was wonderfully entertained and snaps his fingers. A waitress immediately appears to take his order.

“Dom Perignon, *bystra!* So, Margarita—”

Sultan is about to ask Nooria something when a soft ringtone sounds up from his pocket.

“Dancing on the ashes of the world, I behold the stars, Heavy gale is blowing to my face, Rising up the...”

“Alo,” Sultan says into his cell phone. What the caller at the other end of the line is telling him might be important, because Nooria sees Sultan narrow his eyes in a look of sudden concern. He barely replies to the caller save for occasionally grumbling *da*.

“Apologies but I had to answer this,” Sultan says putting the phone back to his pocket. “It came from a very important business partner.”

The waitress arrives with two crystal flutes and an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne inside. She skillfully opens it without popping the cork, maybe to save certain jumpy patrons a heart attack caused by a sound resembling a gun shot. Nooria eagerly empties her glass, unaware of Sultan giving her a long, inquisitive gaze.

“Slowly, slowly,” Sultan says, raising his own glass to her. “It has no legs to run away. *Na zdarovy!*”

After two more glasses of Dom Perignon have quenched her thirst, Nooria stares at the nearest table. Sultan’s brown eyes follow her look.

“Hungry? Have some *zakuski*. Sushi is good here but I’m no snork to eat raw fish. Are you? I guessed so. Try this instead.”

Sultan takes a plate from the table. Finding the pile of tiny, black, glassy balls disgusting, Nooria gives the dish a distrustful look.

“I could enjoy a good champagne even with some greasy ‘tourist’s breakfast’ but the Shooters is a snobby place,” he says. “When in a snobby place, do as the snobs do. Have some caviar... oh my God, not like that! Use a spoon, please.”

No matter how politely Sultan treats her, Nooria now senses impatience in his voice. Thinking of the phone call he had received a few minutes ago, a feeling of nervousness creeps into her mind. She takes a few spoonfuls of caviar, which she finds tasting much better than it looks, then gulps down another glass of champagne.

“I do not want to keep you,” she says wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Still politely, Sultan offers her a napkin. “Thank you. Caviar is nice food.”

Sultan waves Knuckles over to him. “*Viz’my mashynnu! Zabyraemosya zvidsu.*”

The bodyguard nods and hurries up the stairs.

Sultan offers Nooria a cigarette from an elegant, black and golden paper box.

“Sobranie. You don’t smoke, little Margarita? All the better for you.”

Sultan stays. In a moment a waitress appears with a brown leather wallet. She gives him a polite smile that might be even flirtatious if the rich patron wouldn’t be already accompanied by a woman. Sultan removes a few banknotes from a thick bundle held together with a silver clip, puts it in the wallet and signals Nooria to go ahead of him.

“I too need to go now,” Nooria says as they walk up the stairs. “Thank you again for champagne and caviar, but I—”

Sultan cuts into her words.

“*Zona, da?*”

Nooria understands. Even if walking ahead of Sultan, she feels as if she were led by an invisible chain. But knowing that this man, who has something fearful all over him despite his gentlemanlike manners, is her only hope to get back to the Zone, she decides to follow him despite the uneasy feeling in her heart.

On a spot where probably not even God himself would be allowed on Judgment Day to park his car, a black Hummer H2 is waiting. Knuckles opens the rear door, letting Sultan and Nooria climb inside. To Nooria this means climbing literally, but Sultan softly lifts her onto the leather seat. When the auto-lock on the heavy, bullet-proof doors engages with a loud click, Nooria feels herself reminded of the SBU’s holding cell. The Hummer’s compartment is much more comfortable but the feeling of being a prisoner appears all the same to her.

“Back to base,” Sultan instructs his bodyguard. The heavy vehicle accelerates with surprising swiftness and soon blends into the flow of vehicles on Moskovskaya Street. “I have to apologize for keeping our dinner so short, Margarita. I received bad news.”

“I hope everything is okay, Sultan.”

“That was a strange call actually, even if I sometimes do deliver my associate the kind of goods he’d asked me about. Usually such goods are difficult to find. However, I have a gut feeling that this time my life will be easier. Now open your coat and let me see what you’re hiding there.”

Sultan’s voice is hard and commanding now. He switches the search light above their seat on and gives Nooria an inquisitive gaze. Now he is looking like the fearsome gangster boss she suspected him to be. Slowly, Nooria moves her hand towards her blade but Sultan jolts his index finger as a sign of warning.

“No, no, little one. First, I don’t want to hurt you. Second, if I would be easy to hurt, people wouldn’t call me Sultan but something like Pansy or Sissy. Or Borov.” A self-satisfied smile appears on Sultan’s face but it

doesn't at all make him appear less threatening. "Third, should you by God's miracle manage to hurt me nonetheless—the door locks are engaged and you couldn't get out. Being stuck inside and having a pissed off Knuckles outside don't mix well. He likes to set things on fire."

Reluctantly, Nooria lets Sultan take her blade. He studies it carefully.

"Hm... nice one. Persian workmanship, I'd say from Shiraz or perhaps Tabriz, second half of the fourteenth century. The jewels on the scabbard are worth at least—hard to tell in this dim light, but I'd say that big ruby on the pommel is worth twenty thousand dollars alone. And the blade—artifact-alloyed Damascene steel! Amazing little toy. Suits you well." Sultan gives the blade back to Nooria. She quickly puts it back behind her belt, relieved.

"Listen up, Margarita. See, my business partner is looking for a short female aged between twenty and twenty-five years, half face pretty, half face scarred, probably by sulphuric acid. I was told that she'd killed one of his associates using an old-fashioned blade and wounded another one in the neck while he tried to protect her." Nooria doesn't reply. "Strange coincidence, Margarita—the assassin's description reminds me of you. Or have you seen anyone else like yourself? Because you could earn a lot of money if you did. My partner is a bit upset and asked all local businessmen like me for help. Of course, his own corporation is also hunting the assassin, not to mention the cops—useless clowns as they are."

Nooria still prefers not to say anything. However, with Sultan pushing and no way to escape, her resolve to keep her secret begins to crumble.

"Is that story true, Margarita? Do you know or have heard something about it?"

"It is not true," Nooria eventually says with a sigh. "Not entirely."

"No surprise. Everything that my partner says should be taken with a grain of salt. What did he lie about this time?"

"I did not kill her with my blade."

"You're telling me it wasn't you, or that you didn't use that metallurgic masterpiece?"

"I used a nail file."

"A nail file?" Sultan gives her again one of his bellowing, jovial laughs. He is again relaxed, just like before he started squeezing her. "Then your name should be Nikita, not Margarita!"

"Nikita?"

"Never mind."

Sultan lights up another Sobranie. Seeing that Nooria wrinkles her nose, he lets his window slide down a hand's width.

“Sorry Margarita but I love smoking. One cigarette gives me a hundred ideas. Must be the relaxing effect the smoke has on my nerves.” He takes a deep draw on his cigarette. He tells something to Knuckles in Ukrainian and turns back to Nooria.

“You told me the truth about you—some of it, as it appears—and in exchange, I’ll share part of my story with you too. See, I don’t particularly like my partner. Not long ago, one of his associates screwed up a business venture that could have been very profitable for me. *Baistryuk Degtyarev! Kurva yoho mama!*” Sultan switches to Russian to hiss a nasty curse. “*Tak i khotilosya b zlamaty yomu shyyu...* Sorry little one, but thinking of it still makes me mad. This incident has forced me to move part of my activities to the New Zone. Logistics are more expensive, which means less profit, at least until I’ll have enough associates working for me there. But that’s none of your concern.”

Nooria keeps looking at her knees but this time to hide the surprise on her face. The name Sultan had mentioned sounds more than familiar to her. She has often heard Tarasov talking about his former comrade.

“Anyway, the price on your head is pretty high. Luckily for you, it’s more tempting to retaliate for the troubles my partner’s associate had caused me. Tit for tat. So, coming back to square one—it is the Zone where you want to go, yes?”

Nooria nods.

“I don’t know why a tiny little thing like you would want to go there, but I’ll bring you to the Zone. Zaton area, to be more specific. Bringing you there safe and sound will be my part of our deal. Your part will be twofold. First, you will entertain me.”

Nooria frowns. “How am I supposed to entertain you?” she asks with a hint of fear in her voice. Again, Sultan laughs.

“See? You are entertaining me already. Keep it up! Sweet little Margarita, for *that* kind of entertainment I have enough girls who still have their whole faces pretty. No offense. You’ll entertain me by just being as you are. I find you kind of funny, you see? Now—the second part on your side of the deal will be entertaining for you as well, I assure you.”

“And what would that be?”

“Don’t worry, it should be barely challenging for someone with your abilities, Margarita,” Sultan says with a charming smile. “Or should I call you—but no. Until you’re with me your name will be Margarita. It’s just one part of keeping you away from my partner and his bloodhounds. Besides, who knows—maybe you’re looking for your Master in the Zone, yes?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. Never mind, Margarita, never mind!” Sultan laughs so much that he has to wipe a tear from his eye. “So—I’ll help you with getting into the Exclusion Zone, whatever you are up to there. In exchange, once you’re finished with your own business or just had enough of crawling in radioactive mud, you will travel to the New Zone and whack someone.”

Nooria gives Sultan a puzzled look.

“Whack? What?”

“Kill. Him.”

“You are wrong about me. I am not a killer. I only hurt bad people and only when I have to.”

“How entertaining you are, my innocent little Margarita,” Sultan says, smiling even wider.

“Why kill? Did he do something bad to you?”

“Listen up, *docha*. I can’t get to the person who screwed my *Skadovsk* scheme because that would upset his boss. There’s nothing good in losing a valuable partner, whether I like him or not. But I, or more specifically you can deal that bastard a sting where it will hurt a lot. An eye for an eye, a friend for a friend, and I lost more than one friend to that bastard’s hands. Luckily, even bastards have some emotions left and that’s his weak spot where your blade comes in—literally. It’s all tit for tat, you see?”

“If I agree, how will I get to New Zone?”

“You’ll need to talk to a friend of mine called Jack once you’re ready to go. You will find him in the Container Warehouse south of Yanov Station. Once in the New Zone, you will kill the troublemaker. However, in case you think about trying to disappear without coming up with your part of the deal—see, I could threaten to hunt you down, delivering you to the people looking for you or just kill you myself but come on, we’re friends, no? I have my honor and you seem to be an honorable person as well. Aren’t you?”

“I—I don’t know—I mean yes, I do have honor.”

“Good. I give you my word of honor to bring you to the Zone and you will entertain me and perform that little task. Do you give me your word of honor?”

Nooria hesitates.

“Poor little girl, you look wasted,” Sultan says. “After all you must’ve had hell of a bad day. So, once more—do I have your word of honor that you’ll whack that man, in exchange for me letting Knuckles just drive by that grey building instead of stopping and delivering you to the SBU?”

The Hummer suddenly slows down, almost coming to a halt in front of the building from where she had escaped a few hours before. It appears now like an ants’ nest stirred up – a cohort of heavily armed commandos

is lined up in front of it, while plainclothes agents hurry in and out. Two ambulance cars are standing next to the entrance with their flashing blue lights on. Paramedics are about to put a stretcher with a body inside one of them. One commando, apparently becoming aware of the sinister Hummer, waves to two others. Together, they start walking towards Sultan's car.

Frightened, Nooria quickly pulls the hood over her face.

"Do we have a deal, little one?"

Sultan doesn't sound jovial now. Realizing that she is trapped, both in the net of the slick gangster's words and his car that holds her like a mobile prison cell, Nooria heaves a resigned sigh. Sadly, she bows her head to Sultan.

"You have my word of honor," she quietly says with submission in her voice. "How will I find troublemaker?"

"That's my little Margarita!"

Sultan rubs his hands in satisfaction and puts his charming smile back on. The Humvee accelerates and quickly drives away. In a minute, they turn off from Volodymyrska Street but Nooria still doesn't dare looking outside.

"Relax, Margarita. Tomorrow evening you will be in the Zone. Sultan always keeps his word and I trust you will keep yours as well. Once you make it to the New Zone with Jack's help, start asking around in Bagram. You could also do a little research while you're in the Exclusion Zone. Just in case, you know."

"Does this man have a name?"

"He's probably not using his old call sign anymore," Sultan replies lighting up another cigarette. "But his real name should also ring a bell in some heads. It's Tarasov. Mikhailo Tarasov. Yes, Margarita! Once Degtyarev learns about his old buddy's death he will look as devastated as you do now. Boo-hoo, the bastard might even cry—hey, but you don't have to! Take this napkin, here. Come on, pull yourself together! We've almost arrived!"

50

Sultan's residence, Kiev

They drive southwards on Klovskiy Street, leaving behind the high-rise apartment blocks and office buildings of Kiev's downtown. Taking a turn from the avenue that follows the right bank of the Dnieper River, Knuckles drives into a quiet residential



area with neat-looking family houses. They appear to Nooria like smaller versions of the houses she had seen in the suburbs of Los Angeles, though these are secluded from the street by high fences and high-grown bushes hide most of them from the outsiders' view.

The building in front of which the Hummer finally slows down lacks any of this seclusion. Where a garden would be, there is a parking lot and the house boasts a flashing electric sign that reads TAHITI SAUNA CLUB.

Slowly, Knuckles drives into a narrow lane leading to a black metal gate that slowly opens on their approach. From the backside, the house would look like the home of a decent family but the wall around the backyard garden is topped by CCTV cameras. The windows have grills, nicely forged but nonetheless placed there to keep anyone outside—or rather inside, an icy feeling in her guts tells Nooria when Sultan gallantly opens the door and helps her out of the car.

"You could use some rest," Sultan says. "Do you want to stay for a few days?"

"No," Nooria says a bit more decisively than what would be necessary. "Sorry. I thank you for your hospitality, but I want to get to Zone as soon as possible."

"A reliable man will drive you tomorrow to a spot where you can easily enter the Zone. Until then, if you feel lonely there are some ladies living here who can give you company."

When Knuckles opens the heavy safety door and they enter, the lights go up without Sultan touching anything. He notices Nooria's surprise with a satisfied smile.

"When I was a kid, I had to write my homework by a petroleum lamp. I came a long way Margarita... we all did."

The interior of the house is spacious but appears surprisingly spartan for a man of Sultan's standing.

"You could definitely ask my ladies to share some of their dresses with you," Sultan says as he takes Nooria's coat and sees the light fatigue she wears. "But what do I say—on second thought, I'll see if I can get you something more suitable for the Zone."

"My coat is enough," Nooria says.

"Size will be a problem," Knuckles says ignoring her words and looking Nooria up and down. "She'd fit twice into the smallest Kevlar jacket we have."

"Have it arranged, I don't care how," Sultan snarls at his bodyguard. Then he asks Nooria in his polite tone: "Are you sure you want to leave tomorrow? I'll fly to Minsk and my local partners are even worse than

those in Kiev. I'd appreciate if you cheered me up there, Margarita. Those greedy Belarus bastards always make me nervous."

"I want Zone."

Sultan smiles but keeps pushing her. "You would enjoy going to the Zone with me. Just in a couple of days. You see, I love my car but there's a much more comfortable way to get there. Unfortunately, that still needs to be arranged. That's why I need to talk to my partners in Minsk."

"I want tomorrow."

"All right," Sultan sighs and turns back to Knuckles. "*Ah, neterperlivaya suchka*. Show her to one of the rooms upstairs. Good night, Margarita. I hope we shall meet again!"

Knuckles leads Nooria up a wooden staircase into a corridor from where a few doors open. The noise of a TV comes from one of the rooms behind as they walk down the corridor. Another door is ajar and Nooria feels the smell of freshly washed laundry mixed with sweet perfume. Knuckles opens the last door and ushers her into a small room with only a bed, a cupboard and a make-up table for furniture. The small window is barred on the outside.

"Sauna and jacuzzi are on the first floor," Knuckles says putting the key to the door into his pocket. "Or ground floor or whatever *tsokolny etazh* is in English. First door to the right where we came in. Kitchen too. You will be picked up at five tomorrow morning. Good night."

"Good night."

"Don't forget—you can't go out of here!"

Knuckles' malicious words already come from the corridor. Nooria looks around in the room, hesitating between the tiredness that makes her want to lay to sleep right away and her desire to take a proper bath at last. She opens the cupboard where she finds a set of towels, a white bath robe and a half-full tube of shower gel. Nooria takes them and makes her way back to the ground floor. Although she has no idea what a jacuzzi is, she hopes it's a kind of shower.

The door where Knuckles directed her to leads to a large bathroom. To Nooria's surprise, she finds not one but five showers and a variety of beauty products on the dark wooden shelf under a huge, brightly lit mirror. The bathroom is spotlessly clean and the pleasant smell of steam perfumed with pine wood scent emanates from somewhere. Suddenly she feels very dirty. Nooria quickly gets out of her clothes, and then lets the invigoratingly hot shower wash away the grit of the past days.

Stepping out of the steaming shower cabin and donning the bath robe, she is about to clean her socks and underwear in the basin when a door opens and a very young woman appears. She wears the same robe like Nooria and has a towel rolled around her head. Nonchalantly, a cigarette

hangs on her full lips. She looks at Nooria in surprise, who quickly hides her scar with her wet hair.

"*Novaya ty?*" the young woman asks and exhales the smoke. "*Te vazy az uj lany?*"

"Sorry but I don't speak your language," Nooria replies and glances over to her clothes. To her relief her blade, that she wouldn't take a step without, is hidden from sight under her jeans.

"Oh sorry," the other woman says with a giggle. The rolled Rs give her English a very hard accent. "I thought you were Hungarian like me. You look a bit like a gypsy, you know? I'm no gypsy, thanks God, but Sultan wants me to play one so I play a gypsy. The clients love it."

"A—gypsy?"

"Where are you from?"

"From—the south," Nooria cautiously replies, "and my name is—Margarita."

"Welcome. I'm Lili."

The woman called Lili measures her up and down and draws on her cigarette once more. The bitter scent of cigarette smoke spoils the clean atmosphere of the bathroom. Although apparently trying to appear cheerful, her gestures imply nervousness.

"*Aha persze,*" Lili skeptically says. "Whatever." She looks into the mirror and moistening a finger with her tongue, removes a lash from under her eye. "Come, let me introduce you to the other girls."

"I am washing my clothes."

Lili laughs. "Why? We have a washing machine!"

"But I—"

It is only now, looking at the mirror, that Lili notices the scar on Nooria's face. For a moment she says nothing, then laughs again.

"I see you tried to rebel once," she says, killing the cigarette butt in the sink. "No need for that here. This place is not so bad... it's quite okay, actually."

She leads Nooria through the door where three other women relax in a jacuzzi. The room looks plain, though, with plastic chairs and tables arranged around the pool and a green tube lying on the tiled floor like a thin, long snake. Paper boxes line the wall, all filled with heaps of empty bottles.

"*Vot novaya,*" Lili tells the girls as they enter. "The black haired sweetheart is Irina. That with the round face, she is Nastya, and the blonde one is Larissa. Come... but not like that. Take off that robe."

The girls notice Nooria's embarrassment with giggles. Larissa is the only one who remains quiet and studies Nooria's face with curiosity. Without any excuse for not doing as asked, Nooria takes off her robe.

With a female instinct, she knows that the four twenty-somethings not only study her body with eager eyes but also compare it to theirs, and the envy she sees on Nastya's face doesn't comfort her at all. Quickly, she steps into the pool and hides her nakedness under the water sitting next to Larissa. The pool is small and the closeness to another naked female body makes her embarrassment grow even further, although the blonde girl avoids touching her.

For a few minutes, the girls are silent. Nooria studies her faces: they are not the gorgeous female predators of the Shooter variety but still pretty, each in her own way of being a girl from the neighborhood. Black haired Irina appears the smartest of them until she sniffs on her nose in a disgusting manner, telling of her being pretty but lacking sophistication. Nastya has something written on her face that makes Nooria feel uneasy, despite the girl smiling at her. Larissa avoids any eye contact with her and only speaks up when Lili asks her a direct question.

"Didn't you learn English, Larissa? Margarita doesn't speak Russian. You'll have to entertain her."

"Is that so?" Larissa replies. Her voice sounds tired.

"Would you remove your hair from your face, please?" Lili asks Nooria.

Reluctantly, Nooria removes the strand of hair covering her scar. She feels worse as if she had to stand up in the middle, turn around and present herself to the critical female eyes once more. The girls say nothing, only Nastya's fading smile tells of repugnance.

"*Baystrukhi*," Larissa finally says and continues in English. "The man doing this to a girl should have his balls cut off and be killed!"

"*Vsyo*," Nastya says and stays, revealing an overweight body with breasts big like melons. Forgetting about any decency, Nooria stares at her milky white skin.

"*Poka, kofe s molkam*," Nastya tells Nooria with a strange smile. "*Idu spat*."

"She likes you," Larissa whispers. Unsure about this means good or bad, Nooria turns her eyes away from the plump girl.

"She also called you milk and coffee. Probably because of your skin color, my gypsy friend," Lili says. While she speaks, her lips reveals teeth yellowed from nicotine. "You two have fun. We go to sleep. Just to remind you—work starts at ten in the morning!"

A sudden desire of getting out of the pool and running into the relative seclusion of her rooms comes to Nooria, but she feels Larissa patting her thigh in a friendly and reassuring way. With the pool now empty, the blonde slides farther from Nooria and watches the other girls leave. She stretches out in the water.

"At last Lili is gone," Larissa says. "One cannot talk in her presence. She tells the boss everything we say."

"What is this place?" Nooria asks her the question that was bothering her since she arrived with Sultan.

Larissa looks at her with eyes wide open. "You come from the moon, *tsiganka*?"

"I don't know what this place is."

"*Gospodi*..."

Gospodi. Tarasov's pet cuss comes to Nooria's mind with the impact of a sledgehammer. Suddenly, her strength leaves her. She buries her face into her hands, sobbing, with all the torment she had been through in the past two days overcoming her.

Larissa moves back to her and comfortingly puts her arm around Nooria's neck.

"Come on, it's not so bad here," she says caressing Nooria's head in a sisterly fashion. "Money is good and Sultan is not a bad boss."

"He wants me to kill my man," Nooria says crying. "I gave him my word of honor. I must do it. I—I don't know what to do."

"Was he bad to you?"

"Who?"

"Your husband or boyfriend or whoever you mean."

"No. He is the best man in the world and now he is—"

"Heard that before," Larissa says with a skeptical expression on her pretty, round face. "Let's chat! I have some *pertsovka* in my room and a little *anasha* too, but Knuckles must not know that."

"Wh—what is *pertsovka*?"

"Vodka with honey and pepper. You look like you could use a drink or two."

"And *anasha*?"

"Something you could use even more. Come, let's go... it's almost midnight and we're not supposed to use the Jacuzzi so long. *Davai!*"

Slipping into her bath robe and grabbing her clothes, Nooria lets Larissa drag her up the stairs by her hand, staring at the thick, wet pigtail reaching down to the blonde girl's waist. Then she finds herself in the room from where the pleasant smell of fresh laundry had emanated when she arrived. Larissa lights up a candle and puts it on the table.

"Have a seat," Larissa says taking a hairdryer from her cupboard. "Will you help me dry my hair?"

"You have very beautiful hair, Larissa," Nooria says while combing the girl's long hair with her fingers in the warm jet of the hairdryer. "It has color of honey."

"You want to know my secret recipe? I wash it with *kvas* twice a week. You know what *kvas* is?"

"Yes. It is like beer."

Larissa leans over to the make-up table and takes a box of cigarettes that is lying there among a host of cosmetics. Using her long polished fingernails she opens a cigarette, puts the tobacco into a thin paper taken from a small blue pouch and adds something to it. Although Nooria can't see it clearly, she immediately recognizes the scent.

"Marijuana?"

"Why, what did you think? I'm not crazy to use Krokodil and don't want to spend all my money on cocaine like Lili does..."

"Why was she nervous?"

"Oh, you realized? She hadn't see a cock for about... three hours," Larissa says lighting up the joint. "Cocks are her second best drug."

"Men?" Nooria asks switching off the hairdryer. Before she could smile upon the stupidity of her own question, Larissa cuddles to her on the bed and pulls the blanket over them.

"You think the girls are here because bad, bad gangsters dragged them by their hair? No, *dorogaya*. Not here."

"And you?"

"And me? And you? Always the same stupid question," Larissa says and takes a bottle from under her pillow. "You better try this."

Nooria takes the bottle. It contains an amber liquid with a few small pods inside. She smells at it. Then, partly out of politeness to the girl who tried to comfort her and partly of curiosity, she takes a swig. The sweet-smelling vodka immediately turns into fire in her throat and makes her cough.

"Easy, easy. Wait, drink it with this."

Larissa steps to the cupboard and returns to the bed with a small glass of pickles.

"Take one. Come on, take it," she says putting one small cucumber into Nooria's mouth. She laughs. "It looks like little cock but tastes much better."

"It tastes—different," Nooria replies and smiles. "It is very sour."

"You're so funny, Margarita. What brought you here? You don't seem to be one like us."

"Sultan brought me here."

"The man himself? Bravo. But you are—" Larissa bites her tongue. "I like you and all, but—your face is a little—"

"Ugly," Nooria says with a wide smile and shrugs. The liquor already makes its strength felt. "I know I am ugly. Everyone looks at me like I was an animal. It makes me sad but what can I do?"

“Maybe some men like that,” Larissa says drawing on her joint. “But wait—what was that story about killing your boyfriend?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Your choice, *tsiganka*.”

For a few minutes they sit in silence. Nooria tries to understand if Larissa’s casual words were referring to the murder eventually depending on her decision only, or were just meant to leave her secret alone. She wishes to share the mental burden weighing down on her but her caution prevails.

“Your jewelry is nice,” she says looking at Larissa’s earring. It forms a silver butterfly with two tiny, red gems where its eyes would be.

“You are very kind. Men like it too. You want some?”

“Men?”

“*Anasha*.”

“No.”

“And men?”

“Only mine.”

“Yes, I feel like that too.” The blonde chuckles. “I always keep thinking of him. I do everything that’s normal but for no money in the world would I look into their eyes. Or kiss them. That’s off limits. I keep my eyes closed and think of my boyfriend—and God save me from thinking of certain guests when I’ll be with him again!” Larissa chuckles again and narrows her brown eyes like a cat.

“Where is he?”

“He still studies.”

“Does he know?”

“Are you out of your mind?”

“Sorry. Are you here like Lili? I mean, are you here for—”

“No, no!” Larissa shudders with overplayed disgust. “To me it’s just for the money. Good money.”

“How much money do you need?”

“Don’t play Mother Teresa on me, okay? I feel all right where I am. At least for the time being.”

“I don’t understand. Sultan makes you do things you don’t want—not decent things. Not honorable things.”

“You are very mistaken if you think Sultan has no honor, and even more so if you think *I* have no honor. Do for one day what I do and you will understand that your body is an asset like... oh never mind. My soul is not into it, most of the time, anyway.” She shrugs. “I’m just helping them. Sometimes it’s like being a doctor, I tell you that.”

Nooria doesn’t know what to reply. Secretly, she had hoped that if she gives her word to someone who is after all just a criminal and as such a

man without honor in her eyes, it would be as if she wouldn't have given it at all. She could forget about it, after a little struggle with her better conscience. What Larissa has just said disturbs her view of Sultan profoundly, and Larissa hasn't even finished.

"Those guys have their own idea of honor. You can call them a bunch of jerks locked in a perpetual dick measuring contest but they do keep their promises, be it good or bad. Like Sultan. He respects us, in his own way. The problem is—give me a sip, Margarita." With a few deep gulps of vodka apparently boosting her courage, Larissa cuddles closer to Nooria and continues in a lower voice. "He keeps my money safe—but from me also. So, thing is he always keeps telling me how much the Jacuzzi, hot water, electricity and all that shit costs and deducts it from what I earn. I still don't have enough collected."

"How much would you need?" Nooria asks.

Larissa puts her head on Nooria's shoulder.

"Not too much, I guess... enough for an apartment that I choose, with furniture that I like, with all kinds of stuff that makes me feel comfortable. So that I could be standing on my own feet, you understand?"

"But you speak English. You must have good education. Why this?"

"Are you kidding me? Do you know how much I would earn as an office assistant? I still would have to suck cock if I wanted a better salary."

Larissa makes a sad face but then bursts out in laughter. Nooria laughs with her. She pulls the blanket tighter and sits closer to Larissa. As she moves, she feels something soft pressing against her bum. Taking it, she realizes it's a teddy bear.

"That's Misha," Larissa says taking the toy. "He is the best man in the world. He has been my friend since I was a little girl." Larissa takes the bear and holds it tight to her breast. "Misha is the only man I go to bed with outside of business hours." They laugh. "Here, Margarita. Try my *anasha*."

"I don't want to."

"Please."

"No."

"Your loss... your loss. You want to listen to some music? I have an iPod somewhere in my cupboard."

"First tell me how much money you need to get out of here."

"Look, *tsiganka*... you're getting a little pushy. It's all about me trying to be my own master, don't you understand?"

Larissa puts the bottle to her lips, blows the smoke into the bottle and takes a swig.

“But how can you be your own master when you can’t leave from here?”

“I can. I only need to ask Knuckles or another guy staying with us for our... safety. They knew I wouldn’t run away.” Larissa drums with her fingers on the bottle. “How could I run away anyway, with them keeping my papers... But one day I will, if I have enough money. Rest assured, I’m not a slave.”

“But how much you need?”

“Oh my God! Just to shut you up, maybe... fifty thousand? Dollars, of course! You have that on you? No? I guessed so. In a good week, I earn about three hundred—with all that damned expenses that Sultan deducts, I still have to work—how long? Damn, I have a degree in sociology, not maths—”

“Do you have a knife?”

“Why?”

“Anything metallic?”

“You are really strange,” Larissa says. She gets up, opens the window and tosses the joint butt off. For a minute, she rummages in the drawer of the table.

“Here’s a knife,” she says slipping back under the blanket with a blunt kitchen knife. “Spreading butter is the only thing it’s good for.”

Now it is Nooria who gets up. She takes her blade from the chair where she had left her clothes.

“Where did you get that from?” Larissa slowly whispers when she sees the jeweled sheath.

“From my stepmother.”

Nooria begins to remove the ruby from the pommel with the blunt knife.

“Are you mad?”

Ignoring Larissa’s whisper, Nooria works on the ruby until it becomes loose. She holds it close to the candle.

“Sultan said it is worth twenty thousand,” she says, holding the jewel between her thumb and index finger close to the candle. The ruby shines and glitters with deep, blood-colored red. “Dollars, of course.”

“Oh my God,” Larissa whimpers. “That means it’s worth at least two times more than that.”

“You have been kind to me,” Nooria whispers. “Take it and go where you really want.”

“You are completely crazy!”

“Take it.”

At first Larissa refuses to open her fist but Nooria folds her fingers back with a force that leaves the blonde aghast.

“Ouch! That hurts!”

“Take it and go,” Nooria says closing Larissa’s reluctant fingers into a fist again, now holding the ruby.

“It feels warm,” Larissa says.

“It is a glowing stone. An artifact. Like in the Zone.”

“The Zone? Oh my *good* God,” Larissa whispers, moving a little away from Nooria. “The guys who have been there are the worst... complete freaks!”

“Why?”

“Come on – they spend a long time in that irradiated hellhole, totally deprived of sex, make good money with the artifacts they smuggle out and then – guess where they spend it. They’re mad about sex! And they all fuck as if could be the last one... for some it probably is. Don’t tell me you’ve been there!”

“I—I can protect myself.”

Larissa points at the blade.

“With that?” Seeing Nooria nod, she studies her for a long minute.

“Who are you, Margarita?”

“You helped me. I help you. Now find out how to escape.”

“It’s not escape but... all right... that jerk Knuckles keeps my ID card, and he keeps telling me that if I run away he will kill my mother, and she is the only... But now If I take this to the right person... are you serious? This is worth a fortune!”

“It is, and it’s yours.”

“Wait—wait a minute. No, Margarita. Let me give this back and—”

“I could kill Knuckles,” Nooria casually says with a shrug.

“No! Don’t even think of it! Sultan would kill you for that!”

Even if she feels nothing but disgust towards Sultan, Nooria realizes that invoking his rage would destroy any of her chances of getting back to the Exclusion Zone and then the New Zone. She quickly reconsiders.

“It is just the vodka speaking, Larissa. Can you leave with glowing stone?”

“Maybe, but what do you want from me in exchange? I’m not like Nastya, if you have *that* in mind.”

“Why, how is Nastya?” Nooria wonders.

“I was right,” the blonde says with a smile. After a heartbeat of hesitation, she gives Nooria a soft kiss on her scarred cheek. “You don’t belong here—it is not me but you who should escape from here.”

“Will you go home to your boyfriend?”

Larissa turns her head away and doesn’t reply. She stares at her teddy bear, as if expecting the toy telling her what to do.

A few minutes later, back in her room and stretching her exhausted body under the warm blanket, the first smile comes to Nooria's face since she got separated from Tarasov. She had been able to help someone who did good to her, even if just by offering a little sympathy. This night she sleeps deeply, not even awakening to the commotion at dawn and the noise of the heavy door being slammed.

51

Bagram area, New Zone

"Driscoll here, sir. Task Force Cobra is ready, over."

"Good job. You will keep a strangle on them until I arrive. Wait for further orders, over."

The Colonel's voice sounds calm, but First Lieutenant Driscoll risks to ask the question that bothers him.

"Sir, our detachment at Ghorband reported heavy gunfire coming from the Alamo's direction. Is everything all right? Over."

"Ragheads, supported by about two dozen smiters have infiltrated our lower defenses. The storage vaults have been breached, but we managed to keep them off the upper fortifications. I'll deal with the assault. Don't worry, Driscoll. Stick to your orders. Over."

"Sir, do you want us to return?"

"Negative. I repeat, we can deal with the situation here. Over."

"Sir, please confirm—Task Force Cobra on Sierra Bravo while the Alamo is under attack?"

"Driscoll, I will not say it again. Your orders have not changed. Over."

"How could they infiltrate the vaults? Over."

"They used some kind of a mutant we've never seen before to navigate through the caves, then had the smiters break through the wall. Extremely effective, I'll admit."

"A new mutant?"

"Affirmative. It's been neutralized. Appears to be brought in from the Exclusion Zone. Your intel from Ghorband supports my gut feeling about the ragheads having connections to the scavengers. Give me Collins, over."

Driscoll passes the mike to Lieutenant Collins.

"Collins here, over."

"Lieutenant, it's time to check on the intel obtained at Ghorband. Take a Sierra Romeo squad to the northern approaches. Reckon the airfield at Charikhar and neutralize any hostile presence. Any further

supplies for the new scavenger faction must be interdicted. We have enough on our plate already. Over."

"Understood, sir. Sierra Bravo on Charikhar airfield, search and destroy, over."

"Good luck, warriors. Alamo over and out."

If Collins and Schmidt could see Driscoll's look under the helmet's face mask, they would be startled—doubt and bewilderment only rarely come to the tough First Lieutenant's face. But Driscoll's voice tells nothing of his misgivings.

"You heard the big man. He wants us to stand by. Until we get further orders, we keep Bagram locked down. Collins, prepare to move out. Questions?"

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" Schmidt asks.

"Go ahead, Scotty."

"Sir, our main strike force is idling here while..."

Driscoll interrupts him. "The task force is not idling, Lieutenant. We are carrying out orders. Our orders are to maintain our position, except for Collins' special recon. Is that clear?"

"Sir, with all due respect, I agree with Scotty. We might have a Waterloo situation here."

"What do you mean, Collins?"

"The Alamo might be hard pressed while we are away. If we return, no matter what, we might be just in time to prevent a disaster."

"The big man told us to stick to our standing orders. It's his call. Maybe you think you know better than him?"

Collins swallows. "No, sir. Absolutely not, sir."

"Good. For a moment I thought you doubted the big man's judgment. If he says he can handle the situation, that's that. Period. Dismissed."

The two Lieutenants salute. Leaving Driscoll's command position, none of them says anything till they are out of hearing distance.

"Bauer was damn right," Collins says breaking the silence. "Without the Top to reason with the big man, this... stubbornness will be our doom."

"There's no reason to doubt the big man's insight, Joe."

"I hope you're right. Nonetheless, I got the feeling that we're in the biggest trouble ever! Don't forget what happened to Ramirez! That situation was also supposed to be under control!"

"The Colonel is not Ramirez. And hey, we're talking about the Alamo here. It's a little harder to overrun than that outpost, even for smiters!"

"For Chrissakes, Scotty, they managed to infiltrate the vaults! You get it? This mess is becoming a clusterfuck of epic proportions, brother! I

really do hope the big man knows what he's doing, while we just sit around here and do nothing because Driscoll can't think for himself!"

Schmidt kicks a rock away. "At least you got a recon assignment while we're staring holes into the air, instead of blasting holes into the scavenger's defenses."

"That's right! Taking a damn airfield twenty clicks north of here while the Alamo is under siege. Really great." Collins sighs. "All right... I better start assembling my team."

"Going by Humvees?"

"Nope. It's special recon this time. We'll need to keep a very low profile until we get there."

"At least you get a chance to fire your weapon."

Collins adjusts the barely used M27 slung over his shoulder, muzzle up. "It's about time!"

52

Sultan's residence, Kiev

"Get up. I am here to bring you to Zaton."

The voice awakening Nooria is pleasant but spoken in a manner that will not tolerate any argument. Stirring, she opens her eyes and sees a tall, handsome man wearing a smart suit standing next to her bed. He holds a big bundle in his hand, wrapped in drab brown paper. There is also a small rucksack next to her bed.

"You are to wear this," he says and drops the bundle onto the bed. "It's already five past six. You have ten minutes to get ready."

With that, he leaves the room. Nooria sits up and opens the bundle. She finds a black leather anorak inside that appears surprisingly heavy for its small size. On closer inspection, she finds that the jacket has plates of Kevlar over the areas covering vital organs, and each of the two big pockets holds a removable pouch, probably with a thin layer of lead sawn into the fabric.

The rucksack contains a Stalker's most basic survival gear – a first aid kit, a bandage, a few bolts and two cans of processed meat.

When she appears downstairs, she sees the man leaning against the door and reading an English-language newspaper. With the paper, he appears to Nooria like a decent business man she had seen on the airports and the expensive hotel in Kiev. Only his hands tell of him being involved in shady business – there is barely skin left that is not covered with tattoos. Even his fingers bear strange symbols.

Seeing that Nooria has donned the protective suit under her long coat, the man nods and opens the door. Sultan's Hummer is standing outside with already idling engine. He signals her to climb into the back seat.

"Who are you?" Nooria asks as the Hummer leaves the compound.

"I am the transporter," the man replies. "The rest is not important."

To Nooria's relief, she recognizes some buildings and direction signs from her first drive to the Zone. Assured that she is indeed being driven to the promised destination, she leans back in the seat and tries to feel comfortable in the brand new leather anorak that is still stiff.

The car drives along Minsky Avenue that becomes highway Number PO2 after it leaves the northern outskirts of Kiev. Before it bends westwards, PO2 runs by the Dnepr reservoir. Visible on a short stretch of road between the factory buildings of Stari Petrivtsi and the apartment blocks of Lyutizh, the lake appears like a grey sea beyond dark brown fields and sparse forests. Thin fog sits over the flat land.

Nooria soon starts feeling warm under her anorak and coat. When the driver sees her removing the coat, he immediately lowers the heating. It appears a polite gesture but also means that he keeps his eyes closely on her from the rear view mirror. But Nooria knows that she's on the way to the Zone now and this thought prevails over any dark ideas she might have about the ride and the tongue-tied driver.

"Can we drive faster?" she asks.

Without reply, the driver accelerates the car and honks lengthily when a dilapidated bus doesn't move aside quickly enough. She soon regrets her impatience when a sudden dizziness comes over her.

"Please, stop," Nooria says with one of her hands held over her mouth. "I feel sick."

"I'm not driving *that* fast," the driver replies and gives Nooria a frown in the mirror. Then, probably thinking that he would rather risk her escaping than clean tarnished leather seats, he pulls over and unlocks her door.

When Nooria is finished vomiting, the driver courteously offers her a paper tissue.

"Are you all right?" he asks with an inquisitive stare.

Nooria nods and blows her nose.

The Humvee keeps its speed even when the road gradually deteriorates after the first hour of driving. It only slows down after Ivankiv village, where Nooria knows they are close to the village from where Tarasov led them into the Zone.

The driver takes a left turn before they reach Ivankiv and the Hummer leaves the decaying tarmac in favor of a bumpy dirt road.

"Where are we driving?" Nooria asks with suspicion.

“To the north of the Zone.”

“Is this a shortcut?”

“It’s the easiest.”

Obviously, Sultan doesn’t own a Hummer only for showing it off. The road has partially deteriorated to deep mud but the car navigates through without any difficulty. She wonders why Tarasov had chosen a way apparently much more perilous.

After ten minutes she understands that her man had made the right decision. Two eight-wheeled BTR-80 personnel carriers block the road. Heavily armed, tough-looking soldiers stand around them. One of them, wearing a black beret and apparently an officer, waves the car down. The driver halts, though Nooria sees no sign of concern in his face.

His window goes down. To her surprise, the officer and the driver greet each other like old friends. The driver takes a thick envelope from his suit pocket and hands it over. The officer looks inside, nods with satisfaction and waves the car through.

As the time passes, a weak sun illuminates the landscape that appears now like an ordinary forest. The morning fog raises among the pines and slowly fades away as the sun climbs higher. It looks peaceful but Nooria senses the closeness of the Zone – or at least hopes for it. She can’t make out any familiar landmark because low hills cover the sight to the north east where the Zone should lie, and without anything better to do, she puts her trust into the driver.

When the mouth of a valley appears between two hills, the driver finally halts the car.

“Get out,” he says.

Nooria deeply inhales the refreshing air outside and closes the zipper on her coat. It is chilly after the warmth inside the car. Pulling the hood over her head, she looks around.

“This way,” the driver says. “Come! What are you here, a statue?”

“What is that?” Nooria asks pointing at something sinister on the horizon.

“The power plant,” the driver replies with a shrug. “Thought you knew that.”

Narrowing her eyes, Nooria looks into the distance. Far but discernible enough, a huge building looms on the horizon. Only the upper part is standing out from the fog – a rectangular structure and a tall chimney topping it. A flock of black birds passes through her sight and she hears the echoing croaks of ravens.

“It appears close,” Nooria says.

“Too close, actually,” the driver says. “Come quickly. I will show you the way.”

Holding a small bag and carefully avoiding the mud puddles, he leads Nooria about a hundred meters away from the car and towards the valley between the hills. There he halts and shows Nooria a PDA.

“Do you know how to use this?”

“No.”

“Strange Stalker you are. Anyway, this is the button to power it on. Now, wait a second and then press on the map tab on the touchscreen.”

Nooria does as instructed.

“This blue symbol marks your position. Beyond those hills is the north-eastern edge of Zaton. You should make your way to the *Skadovsk* first. That’s a derelict cargo ship. Sultan has friends there. Once you are ready to move on, go to the Container Warehouse in the Jupiter area.”

“Is it easy to find?”

“I’ve put a marker on the map.”

“And how will I get to New Zone?”

“Ask for Jack. He’s Sultan’s local agent and will tell you everything you need to know. When his men ask you what you want from him, you will reply: *Say hello to my little friend!*”

“Say hello to my little friend,” Nooria repeats.

“Do not forget this password.”

“I will not.”

“Take this too.” The driver gives Nooria a silenced Sig Sauer P229 with two spare clips. A few scratches on the black ergonomic grip show that the weapon is not new. It looks well-maintained, though, and even has a tactical laser attached under the barrel. “I heard you are quick with a blade, but this might come useful if you can’t get close enough to your target.”

Nooria shakes her head.

“I do not want this.”

“But you will take it.” He grabs Nooria’s hand, forces her fist open and puts the pistol into her hand. “That’s not all. Sultan wants you to have this too.”

He throws a small bundle at her feet.

“Good hunting, Stalker!”

Laughing, the driver walks back to the idling car and drives away.

Nooria picks up the bundle and opens it. First she finds a note in neat handwriting.

Margarita,

my sweet, innocent little thing. This little present should help you blend in with people in places like the Shooters. I hope to meet you there

again, so that we can finish our dinner that was interrupted so abruptly. Apologies for any inconvenience, little one.

There is something else for you. It is a little thank-you for the extra entertainment you provided me, involving one of my assets. You proved as funny as I had thought. My gift should help you to better understand our world. Like it or not, it is as it is. Tit for tat – you’ve already learned what that means, I trust.

As you see, I keep my word. You better do likewise.

Your friend, Sultan.

Inside a soft leather pouch which has YSL printed on it with gold-colored letters, Nooria finds a stunning silk scarf, its emerald color perfectly matching that of her eyes. As she unfolds it, a much smaller pouch falls to her feet. Nooria unfolds the waterproof paper. What she sees inside makes her scream.

She finds herself holding a severed human ear in her hands. A drop of blood spoils the shine of the silver butterfly earring in the lobe.

Her trembling hands let it fall to the mud. She starts running towards the Zone, oblivious of any danger that might lurk in between the hills. She runs through the dry bushes and jumps over a fallen tree, looking only forwards where the valley opens, and keeps running until she reaches a groove of pine trees on a hill overlooking the landscape that finally opens up before her eyes from where tears of relief, pain and anger flow.

Panting from the rush, Nooria leans against a tree to catch her breath and scans the horizon but can’t see much from her present position. Taking deep breathes of fresh forest air, she walks further and climbs up a boulder for a better view.

To the right, atop a distant hill, there is a cluster of buildings that might have been a factory once. Even further, the silhouette of tall cranes loom against the horizon, tucked far away beyond lowlands resembling a vast, dry riverbed with patches of reed and dilapidated ship wrecks, all in shades of faded brown. She can’t see the ill-fated power plant but there is something equally sinister to her far right. It appears to be a gigantic metal structure, standing out among the low hills like a tower with something foreboding about it even from the distance. She jumps off the boulder and moves down the hill to have a better look at what lies to the east.

A low hill lies ahead, its surface cut by crevasses from where jets of steam rise. Beyond it, she sees another watery patch of marshland with a small, stranded boat. Now it appears sure to her that once this lowland was a river, from where the water disappeared so quickly that the ships had no time to navigate into a safe harbor. Yet in this land where decay and bent physics are the norm, stranded ships seem to be all but out of place.

All is quiet, only ravens croak in the sky.

Nooria takes a deep breath and blows her nose into the scarf that was Sultan's gift. She touches her blade fixed firmly to her belt and a feeling of confidence comes over her. She glances at the PDA and looks over to the distant ship wreck which is supposed to be her first destination.

"Yes, Sultan," she says to herself and tosses the tainted scarf away. "I must find my man. Then I will see you again and teach you what real honor means."

She pulls the hood over her face and disappears in the bushes, following the direction where her PDA indicates south.

53

Bagram, New Zone

"I can't believe this. Twenty-five Stalkers went with that bastard. None have returned. Twenty-five good men!" Shrink bashes at the improvised table. "All this when the Tribe is on our neck!"

The mood in Ashot's bar is gloomy. At first, when the Tribe appeared and began setting up positions on the hills overlooking the ruined air base, the Stalkers didn't expect anything bad to happen. After all, it was just a month ago that they repelled the dushmans besieging Bagram together. When the warriors blocked the access roads in the forest to the west, Shrink became alarmed but there was nothing he could do to prevent the Tribe's forces to set up forward positions blocking access to Bagram from the north. The eastern approaches were still open, but the Tribe's machine guns and mortars made short work of the jackal and wolf packs occasionally roaming the open plains in search for prey – probably intended as a warning to the Stalkers to stay inside their base.

When it became clear that the Tribe had put Bagram under blockade, Shrink realized that Captain Bone was not entirely a bad commander. He and his sinister henchmen had piled up valuable supplies in the former command building, mostly food, water and, to Ashot's great pleasure, vodka. It could be enough to keep the besieged Stalkers on their feet for a week or two, but beyond that their prospects look bleak. No Stalker can venture out to hunt down a hind for food; no ammunition or spirit could be brought in by Ashot's shady 'business associates' who used to appear every now and then. Ammunition caused Shrink the biggest headache. When Bone and his men left Bagram for the battle at the City of Screams they left enough supplies behind, apparently in the belief that they would use it later, but they took most of the ammunition with them. Facing a strike force of the Tribe with only lightly armed, undisciplined men *and*

being short of bullets is not exactly how Shrink imagined how things will be when he moved here from Ghorband.

"That's why they're called *Free* Stalkers, boss. They're free to roam wherever they please, even if it's their doom."

"Shut up Ashot, for God's sake. You just keep reminding me how difficult it is to keep this bunch together."

"We can defend Bagram to the last bullet but if we run out of vodka, we're doomed already!"

"I could ask Yar to tinker a distillation device to make our own."

"Really? And where do you get grain from? And water? You want me to make spirit out of me poo and pee?"

"Dunno if I'd feel any difference between that and the poison you used to serve... But why all this?"

"I think it has something to do with that big Loner guy who showed up here a while ago," a Stalker says. With his heavy protective suit still bearing the green camouflage used in the Exclusion Zone and the desert-pattern shemagh around his neck, he appears a veteran of both Zones. An old, but well-maintained SVD rifle is slung over his shoulder. "He reminded me of that Duty renegade, what was his name?"

"That's bullshit, Siryk," Shrink replies. "Skinner's dead. He followed Tarasov into the catacombs and didn't make it back."

"Anyway, I overheard him talking to three Loners right there, in the corner. He was talking about ambushing a Tribe patrol to get all those cool weapons, maybe even a Humvee."

"That's suicide, man," Ashot remarks.

"So one of the Stalkers said, yeah, think his name was Hedgehog. They followed him anyway. Then a few days later that big guy returns alone, this time spreading rumors about some abandoned factory or whatever in the Panjir valley and all." Siryk shrugs. "Well, y'all know the rest."

Shrink cusses in Russian. "*Pizdets!* You want to tell me that those idiots attacked a Tribe patrol and now those savages came to revenge it?"

"Siryk has a point, boss," Ashot observes.

"But if so, why don't they attack us?"

"Maybe they are scared of us, that's why!"

"Especially of you, Ashot." The Stalkers laugh but Shrink's face remains gloomy. "All we can do is wait. Damn!"

"Wish that Spetsnaz were here," another Stalker says. He is one of Shrink's men from Ghorband, who followed him when he took over matters in Bagram. "Rumor has it he joined the Tribe. He could put in a word."

Shrink rubs his chin. “Dunno even if he made it out alive of those bloody catacombs. If he did – I can’t imagine Tarasov letting the Tribe come upon us. No matter what, he’s not here now to intervene.”

“We could make their life a little difficult,” Siryk says patting his sniper rifle.

“Don’t even think of that,” Shrink firmly says. “That would just provoke them. Shoot at those bastards with a Dragunov and they shoot back with all they have. Goddammit! We’ve got maybe a hundred hungry Stalkers with light weapons only. If the Tribe attacks us, we can put up a better defense by farting at them— they’ll kick our butts anyway.”

“So what then?” Ashot asks. “Just sit and wait?”

“Sit and drink,” Shrink grumbles. “Until we run out of vodka.”

54

Zaton, Exclusion Zone

Sitting on a rock, Nooria presses her hands against her aching knees.

Pain, leave me.

She senses the fatigue in her limbs fade. Then she raises her hand and makes a wave, shaking off the pain as if it were dust in her palms. Her fatigue is gone but the thought of the long road ahead still weighs on her like a heavy burden.

Navigating through the watery paths of Zaton is proving more difficult than it first appeared. Without a weapon suitable to protect herself from the packs of blind dogs and boars roaming the marshland, avoidance was her best and only defense. Luckily for Nooria, their barks and grunts had forewarned her of their presence in time. She could have easily taken on one or two of them, especially that the blind dogs appeared to be the dumber and weaker cousins of the fearsome jackals roaming New Zone, but whole packs were a different matter. Avoiding the mutants was time-consuming, however; she had to wait in cover until they were gone or take a wide detour around them that led her into places where anomalies slowed down her progress. Some she could see, like jets of vapor shooting from crevasses in the ground or grooves shining with an eerie green glow even in daylight, others she just felt. Maybe the invisible anomalies weren’t even there and it was just her premonition that made her stop. In this frontier between possible and impossible, where everything that appears ordinary can turn out to be all but, telling imagined dangers from real proved more and more difficult as she proceeded deeper into the Zone.

The wrecked ships and boats that litter the land made Zaton appear to her all the more alien; they were a reminder of days long gone when this

part of the Zone was just a river like any other. Now they appear like the land's memories of those days, slowly fading away in the decay and rot that the appearance of the Zone brought on everything within its borders, and it seemed to her that their dilapidated hulks echo the pain of the tortured Earth.

Despite all this, Nooria did find signs of human presence. Here and there, she saw campsites with still smoldering fires, telling of Stalkers who spent the last night there. When the sun began to set, she saw a small group of them cautiously marching towards the cranes in the distance that might have been a river port once, then falling in disarray while fording a stretch of water and even hearing one of them screaming *kravastos*, *kravastos!* when the water stirred as if an invisible creatures had been circling around them. Then they fell one by one, firing their weapons blind. The sight of two of them being dragged into the reed by the same invisible creatures that massacred them made her quicken her pace and move further from the dreadful scene.

On the ship wreck that was supposed to be the *Skadovsk*, a bonfire was alight even during daytime, making her guess if it is a beacon for times of danger when sudden darkness might fall. This was where Sultan's people lurked, however, and she had no intention of running into them too soon.

First I must get back to Doctor's house, she kept telling to herself. *Top will know how to free Mikhailo. Maybe he can even bring in warriors.*

Even if much smaller than the wilderness of her far away homeland, the Zone proved vast. When the sun finally set, sending its last rays into a narrow valley spanned over by a bridge high above, she checked the PDA and despaired over the meager progress she made in a day. The valley continued to the east, but her goal was to the south; going in that direction would have involved climbing up a steep hillside and going through a massive ruin beyond it. Proceeding to the east would have meant to pass by a huge anomaly that appeared like a curtain reaching up to the sky, blurring the view beyond and emanating from a long furrow in the earth as if a gigantic knife had cut the earth open. Though not a bit afraid of it, Nooria decided that navigating through either the valley or the ruins would be better done in daylight.

Not far from a derelict barge, she found a makeshift rain shelter that appeared good enough to spend the night. It began to rain after night fell but then, from the north where the Power Plant was, a dark blue cloud grew which soon engulfed the whole sky. It emanated its own light after all others went dark, accompanied by thunder so fearsome that she moved close the nearest boulder and pressed her body against it, hoping that it

would protect her from the rage of darkness that seemed to even tear the stars from the night. A sense of hitherto unknown loneliness overcame her, as if left alone in a black void that was about to crush her and Nooria, whose ascendants built statues adorned with benevolent artifacts to keep the very same power at bay that was now unleashed over the Zone, felt fearful and fragile. While the darkness raged, she missed her man more than ever, touching cold stone instead of the muscles of a warrior supposed to protect and fight for her. She screamed ancient words of anger at the darkness, feeling her knees tremble and willpower wane, until a sudden feeling of warmth emanating from her womb gave way to rage.

Dark wind blew her long coat, tore the hood off her head and let her hair fly lose when she shouted "*Darkness! I curse you, go away or feel my rage!*" Then she felt the wind receding, the thunder diminishing and saw the stars begin to appear again among a layer of grey clouds.

Now, by the morning, all that Nooria feels is slight nausea. What fully awakes her senses is not hunger but the noise of a stone becoming loose close to her hiding place. For the first time, she draws the Sig Sauer P229.

Spending time with Tarasov was a good training. Ducking and staying in cover, she checks her surroundings in the direction where the voice came from. All the bigger is her surprise when a voice comes from behind her.

"*Ruki ver, Bandit!*"

"I don't speak your language," Nooria replies, careful not to take any threatening stance that her opponent might mistake as a sign of aggression.

"I said, hands up!" comes the reply from the unseen Stalker. It is fluent English but with Russian accent. "Stay where you are, *pindos*. My gun is pointed at you."

Nooria feels something hard in her back. A hand pats down her pockets. The Stalker is obviously not doing it for the first time but still makes the mistake to quit searching her when he finds the pistol.

"That's a nice one!" the Stalker says. "Turn around."

Nooria does as told and sees a lean face with cunning eyes and a nose green and blue from recent beating.

"I wasn't armed," he triumphantly says and shows her the middle and index finger on his right hand that he poked into Nooria's back, like he would a rifle's barrel.

It only takes the fragment of a second for Nooria to draw her blade.

"But I still am."

The Stalker looks down to his chest where the blade's point is directly over his heart. It would go through the Kevlar plates sewn into his armored suit like a knife through butter.

“Guess we can call this a Zone stand-off,” he says and smiles. “What about talking our way out?”

“We can. I am no Bandit.”

“You look like one. Wearing that long coat and all.”

“I am no Bandit,” she repeats.

“Okay, okay! Why don’t we both just take a step back?”

Nooria warily recoils. The Stalker does the same and raises his arms. She realizes that his right leg is wounded, because the string on his boot is untied to make place inside for a bandage wrapped around his ankle.

“Give back my pistol,” she says, flipping the blade in her hand and holding it ready to throw.

“There’s really no need to kill each other,” the Stalker says slowly laying the weapon on a crate. “See? Your turn.”

Nooria studies the Stalker’s face. Sensing no bad intention about him, she sheathes the blade and swiftly takes the pistol. “Why did you want to rob me?”

“Thought you’re a lonely Bandit with something to eat in his rucksack,” the Stalker says. “I haven’t eaten for two days!”

“I have some food,” she says reaching for her rucksack.

“Really? That’s great, brother! Where are you from, anyway? England? America?”

“America,” sighs Nooria to save her the explanation. She takes a can of processed meat from her rucksack, removes the lid by pulling on the metal flap attached to it and offers the open can to the Stalker. “What happened to you? You look hurt.”

“Just a sprained ankle,” he says sitting down at the campfire. Then his eyes open wide as Nooria pulls the balaclava off and swishes her hair.

“I should have called you sister,” the Stalker says staring at her. He doesn’t appear averted by her scar.

“Eat,” she replies. “After food I will see to your ankle. What happened? You fell from a tree?”

“A bit higher, actually. Anyway, I was trying to reach Noah’s Ark but didn’t make it far from the bridge in this condition. All I had on me was a few bandages and you don’t make it far in the Zone like that. So, I stayed put in a cave close to here and it probably saved my life because if that last emission had taken me in the open...”

The Stalker moves his hand along his throat, mimicking a cut. He devours his portion with such an appetite that doesn’t leave any doubts about his food deprivation.

“So... where are you heading, Stalker?” he asks munching on the last bit of meat.

“I am no Stalker,” Nooria replies.

“Then what are you?”

“Lost.”

“Uh-hum. And what are you up to, then?”

“I must find and kill somebody.”

“Sounds familiar...” The Stalker scratches his unshaven cheek.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I wanted to find way to Swamps but lost my way. It was very dark and I was scared.”

“You mean the emission last night?”

“Emission? Yes. I had to find shelter.”

“I guess you made it to Noah’s place?”

“No. This is my shelter.”

“You’re lying. Nobody can survive an emission in the open... or did you take antibiotics?”

“No, and I cannot lie,” Nooria says, sadly. “Sometimes I wish I could.”

The Stalker looks her up and down.

“You are either the biggest liar the Zone has ever seen, or you are—special.” He thinks for a moment. “Since a guy called Magpie already claimed that title for himself, you must be special. We’ll soon find out.”

“I must go to Swamps.”

“That’s quite a long trek from here.”

“But I must. Swamps, nowhere else.”

“That makes you the first Stalker who doesn’t want to get to the Wish Granter ... Why the Swamps of all places in the Zone?”

“I must get back to Doctor’s house.”

“What?!” The Stalker looks utterly baffled. “You know where the Doc lives?”

Nooria nods.

The Stalker gives her an inquisitive look. “Very, very few people know about his whereabouts. How did you find him?”

“I don’t trust you good enough to tell,” Nooria replies shunning the Stalker’s gaze.

“Fair enough,” he says with a shrug. “How’s the old man doing?”

“Good. Now let me see your ankle,” Nooria says.

“Does he still keep that smelly pseudodog?” The Stalker removes his boot and reveals a badly swollen ankle. Nooria softly touches the bandage but it’s enough to make the Stalker grimace with pain. “Ouch! Yes, right there...”

“It doesn’t look so bad,” Nooria says removing the bandages and having a closer look at the injury. “Your... I don’t know how to say but you know, things which keep your muscles on bones...”

“*Suchozhilye?*”

“No—oh yes, it is called sinew. Or is it tendon? It appears to be okay.”

“At least that’s comforting,” the Stalker says. “You might want to keep your nose away from my foot, though. You know, spare socks are a luxury in the Zone and—*ai, blyad!*” He screams with pain when Nooria gives a sudden, quick thrust to his foot and twists it. “*Uzhasno bolit!*”

“It is good now,” Nooria says satisfied with her work. She takes the Doctor’s bandage from her rucksack and neatly applies it over the Stalker’s bruised ankle. “This bandage will make it heal quickly but you better stay put for a day or two.”

“Staying put? Me? No way!”

“If you have to move, try not to step on it too hard.”

The Stalker sets his teeth but his tension apparently begins to wane. Cautiously, he stays.

“It feels a bit better now. Let’s see if—”

“Wait. You need to rest now.”

“We can’t stay here,” the Stalker says. “We must get to Noah’s Ark. That’s the closest safe place.”

“I go to Swamps,” Nooria says impatiently. “Can you tell me direction?”

Suddenly, the Stalker puts his finger to his lips.

“Shh!”

Something shakes the reeds nearby.

“You sense danger?”

Instead of replying to Nooria’s concerned whisper, the Stalker signals her to duck.

They hear a moan, halfway between a boar’s grunt and a dog’s growl.

“Snorks!” the Stalker screams. “Use your knife if they get close! Give me your gun, now!”

It sounds like a desperate plea, not a demand. Nooria quickly hands the Sig Sauer over to him. In a second, the Stalker has the safety worked off and starts shooting at the three humanoids emerging from the reed-covered riverbed.

Even though they crawl on all fours, the hillside is steep enough to slow the mutants’ progress. The Stalker uses the moment gained to his advantage and scores a hit on the closest mutant, shooting it directly in the eye through the eyehole of the half-rotten gas mask covering its skull, but the remaining two are about to reach the distance they need to leap close to their human prey where they clawed hands and legs would give them the advantage over any weapon.

One snork jumps, is hit by the bullets and is dead by the time it smashes against the crate behind which Nooria is ducking.

Then the magazine is emptied. The last snork leaps over the crates and hurls himself over Nooria.

With lightning-quick reflexes, she rolls to the side. The mutant lands in the mud but leaps again at its apparently weaker prey. Nooria jumps to her feet, tries to step aside to avoid the mutant hurling itself at her but human speed doesn't match that of a snork's at close quarters.

In terror, the Stalker watches the growling Snork land on Nooria, bare the row of sharp teeth in its mouth and thrust them into her face.

Then it doesn't move anymore, save for its convulsing limbs that also cease after a minute.

"Fuck," Nooria says with disgust as she pushes the dead mutant off her and pulls the blade off its chest where she has thrust it with all force.

"Fuuuck," the Stalker slowly repeats and whistles. "I'm really happy we could settle our differences without you using that knife!"

"This beast jumped right into my blade," she says, looking for something to wipe the mutant's blood off her hands. "I was lucky."

"You bet," the Stalker says giving her back the Sig Sauer. "You got any spare mags for that?"

Nooria nods and holsters the weapon. The Stalker looks at the dead mutants and shakes his head.

"Damn me... They must have heard me crying out when you treated my ankle. At least they keep Bloodsuckers out of range, because those beasts fear Snorks more than shotguns."

"So, where is way to Swamps?" Nooria asks, wiping her blood-splattered face with her sleeve.

"To the south," the Stalker replies jerking his thumb behind his back. He looks up into the sky and sniffs at the air, as if detecting a strange smell. "But... I suggest you to come with me to Noah's. Believe me – another emission will hit soon."

"Who is Noah?"

"Paranoid old Stalker obsessed with the idea of the ultimate emission coming, after which mutants will kill everyone who isn't prepared. This is why he built his so-called ark in the first place."

"Is he crazy?"

"Troubled and pissed off by rookies asking him about artifacts and shortcuts. He's a good man, but his helpfulness was abused more than once. One can still deal with him if he knows how to approach Noah properly."

"Does he know a shortcut to Swamps?"

“Maybe,” the Stalker sighs. “Now let me see if your treatment worked.” He takes a few steps and nods, satisfied with his condition. “I’ll be limping for a while but it is much easier to walk now. Damn, wish I still had my old exoskeleton...”

Together, they begin walking along the riverbed. Nooria lets him walk in front of her, partly to keep an eye on him and partly because the Stalker, despite his limp, appears to know exactly where to step without walking into an anomaly or making nearby mutants aware of their presence. To her unease, he leads her toward the shipwreck she had avoided last night. It looks as foreboding in early daylight as it did at dusk. The *Skadovsk* had a bonfire burning on its deck to signal human presence; here it’s a crude wind wheel on the mast from where scraps of a camouflage net hangs proving that the derelict barge is actually a human hovel.

A wooden door covers a hole in the rusty hull. Nooria reaches to open it but the Stalker pulls her away.

“Wait,” he whispers. “Told you he’s a bit... eccentric.”

Nooria frowns as she watches the Stalker open the door and step aside. “Noah?”

The growl of a pseudodog comes from inside. The Stalker steps in and waves to Nooria to follow.

“Mutant assholes! Piss off,” shouts a man aiming his shotgun at them. A huge pseudodog is growling at his side.

“We are no mutants, Noah!” the Stalker shouts back. “Don’t shoot!”

“Stalkers? Worse! I hate asshole Stalkers coming here, opening the door without knocking and pestering me for a Compass!”

“I’m glad you don’t start shooting at everyone who approaches your place, Noah.”

“I ran out of bullets! Did you bring me bullets? Can’t shoot mutants without bullets!”

The pseudodog keeps growling but the Stalker boldly steps closer.

“Lassie! Hey old girl, how’s it going? You don’t recognize me? Lassie, come to uncle Strellok!”

“Strellok?” Nooria asks surprised. “Are you Strellok?”

“I am. Why are you staring at me?” the Stalker says petting the ugly predator that is now sniffing his hands. “You want my autograph on your jacket or what?”

“Don’t be rude. I heard a lot about you.”

“Don’t believe half of it. I do not kill pseudogiants with bare hands, neither eat artifacts for breakfast.”

“I heard other things. Like you being disturbed, unpredictable and not who you once were.”

Noah lets out a snorting laugh. “Hah! Someone seems to know you well, Marked One!”

Nooria studies their strange host. He is a middle-aged man with a short, unkempt beard and blue eyes clouded by insanity, wearing a long brown coat that could use some mending. Whoever Noah is, he doesn’t appear to value comfort much – a makeshift bed, an equally crude table and a few shelves fastened to the cabin’s rusty metal walls are the only furniture. Strangely though, there’s also a large trunk in a corner with a woodcutter’s axe in it. The only light inside comes from a petroleum lamp.

“Disturbed? Disturbed, you say? Now *that* hurts,” Strelok says wiping off pseudodog saliva from his hands with a grimace. “Who told you that?”

“A man called Mikhailo Tarasov.”

“You know him?”

“I am his woman from the New Zone. My name is Nooria.”

“*Presvyataya Bogoroditsa!* His—woman?” Strelok cries out loud. “Misha Tarasov’s woman? All the way from the New Zone? And I thought I’d seen everything and everything’s opposite as well! What the hell are you doing here without him... Nooria? Did I get your name right?”

“Yes. We were betrayed. Soldiers took me to Kiev and Mikhailo is held prisoner at Cordon Base.”

“And how did you end up here in Zaton?”

Nooria turns her face away. “Bad people in Kiev helped me getting here.”

“Bad people, really? There’s too many of them around here for me to guess who it was.”

“A man called Sultan.”

“Uh-oh. This sounds like trouble.” Strelok shares a dark glance with Noah.

“Yes, I am in trouble. Can you bring me to my friends at Doc’s house? We must help Mikhailo!”

“Oh shit, they bagged him after all! Shit!”

“Will you help me?”

“Sorry, but I can’t.”

“But he saved your life in Pripyat!”

Strelok heaves a long sigh. “That’s why I didn’t want to be part of this... Listen, I’m on the run from the military. Okay, that happens from time to time. Nothing I couldn’t make up by delivering some trinket that makes them forgive me. Freeing Tarasov from that outpost would be a different matter, though.”

“Since when are you afraid of the grunts?” Noah asks.

"It's not about the grunts but... this." Strelok fishes a small vial from his pocket. "I can't function without this shit anymore. Only the SBU can provide it. They get it from India or I don't know where."

"Strelok, what happened to you? You became a junkie?"

"It's not a drug, Noah. It's painkillers."

"For what pain?" Nooria asks.

"Phantom pains," Strelok says with a dark smile. "Literally."

"I don't understand. You have all your hands and legs."

"I—I can't explain. It is as if the Brain Scorcher would still affect me. When it gets dark—the ghosts come."

The pseudodog sniffs into the air and suddenly begins to yowl. Noah signals Strelok to hold his tongue.

After a few heartbeats of silence, it appears as if the sky would fall on Earth with a shattering thunder.

"Emission approaching!" Noah shouts.

"I felt it coming, but so soon again?"

"Do you think emissions are trains with a schedule, Strelok? Get into the aft room before the mutants are on us!"

Somewhere far a siren begins to wail but is soon suppressed by the rumbling sky.

"The *Skadovsk* calls," yells Noah. "God have mercy on anyone caught in the open!"

A thunder shakes the barge, making its hull tremble. The rusty metal plates screech and shriek as if they could disintegrate any moment. Through a crack in the hull, Nooria sees the sky turning red and a huge dark cloud engulfing the sky. Lightning crackles amidst the thunder. The Stalker appears to be incapacitated by the emission. He falls to his knees, pressing his hands on his ears and screams. "Darkness! The darkness!"

With hands trembling, he opens his vial and is about to pour several pills into his mouth when a strong hand grasps his arm and shakes the pills to the barge's metal floor.

"My medicine!" screams Strelok desperately. He looks up to see who has taken the painkillers from him.

A forceful wave of energy hits the barge. Before it becomes pitch dark, Strelok sees the reflection of a flash in Nooria's green eyes.

Then darkness falls and the first ghost appears, its arms outstretched as it levitates towards him with squirming tentacles in its face. He fires his rifle at the apparition. It diminishes from his sight.

He is running up a causeway leading to a hill, with abandoned factory buildings to his right and a dense forest to his left.

A thunderbolt flashes, turning the green dim of his night vision into blinding white. He curses himself for approaching the Brain Scorcher deep in the night and during a thunderstorm.

A humming drone creeps into his skull. It sounds as if an enormous generator is nearby, almost resembling a human voice shouting a warning—though it is unclear if it's warning him to stay away, or alerting its own source of Strelak's approach.

After a few minutes, he reaches a brick wall. Jumping over a stretch where the wall had collapsed, he enters a compound littered with wrecked vehicles, rusty railway containers and derelict wagons, their wheels and chassis overgrown with weed. Suddenly, everything in his vision turns into grainy amber.

Five columns of eerie blue light radiate in the night sky. A flash of lightning makes five huge antennae appear. It appears as if the blue dim would emanate from their metal structures themselves.

"Die, enemy of the Monolith! Brothers, to battle!"

Through the drone and thunder, Strelak hears the bellowing shouts of Monolith fighters. He ducks and moves to return fire only to realize that his rifle is gone. His eyes open wide with dread when another apparition materializes – a pseudodog running up to him, its snout baring fangs ready to tear on his flesh. Strelak desperately tries to find a weapon in him but finds nothing to protect himself. He screams.

Another apparition appears right in front of him and blocks the ghost's assault, making it disappear like a soap bubble.

"Glory to the Monolith!"

The Monolith fighters' blood curdling cries are followed by burst from their assault rifles.

"Kill the intruder!"

Strelak feels the bullets hit him but there is no physical pain.

The apparition waves its hand in a sign for him to follow. The drone, the hail of bullets and the flashing thunderstorm become one vortex of dark noise, echoing in his head and suppressing any thoughts of his own—except the desperate desire to run away or succumb to his enemies, finishing his torture either way.

Strelak runs after the apparition. It waves to him once more. Climbing up the derelict wagon he sees that its far end is open, leading into a tunnel. The apparition moves forward. It appears to bear an aura that makes the ghosts that materialize from the amber hue bounce off and disintegrate.

Strelak follows it into the tunnel where the walls appear to close in on him with each step he takes. He knows that wherever the tunnel ends, a horror beyond all imagination awaits. He takes several turns in the maze that is littered with decayed machines, all of them having served the

purpose of creating this hell on earth from where any sane man would try to run. Strelok knows he must get to the end of the tunnel, but also that one of the turns he takes will shatter his sanity with pure horror.

It is not his willpower anymore that keeps him running but the apparition's aura. Strelok feels that the horror outside of it would overwhelm him.

Eyes appear in the shadows and howls blend into the humming drone. Claws of bloodsuckers reach for him, the Monolith's bullets hit the floor and walls around. The apparition leading him accelerates. Strelok feels his side hurt and can barely breathe. He almost collapses when at last he reaches a hall where huge, cylindrical containers stand. A catwalk leads up to a control panel with a switch. The apparition stops short of it and illuminates the instruments. He will have to make the last few steps alone.

Stepping out from behind the apparition, Strelok feels like entering bitter cold after the warmth of a protective room. The cold that almost crushes him is terror, the goose skin is coming from fear. With limbs trembling and teeth clattering, he enters the darkness, feels his way to the switch and pulls it.

His vision blurs. The catwalk, the rusted containers, the sinister vaults appear to revolve around him. Losing his balance he falls.

Suddenly, the darkness vanishes and he can see clearly again. In a huge hall, atop a heap of rubble and scrap metal, a crystal monolith glitters in the light beams falling in from high above. The air smells burnt and his saliva tastes like metal. He wants to crawl closer to the crystal but something keeps him away from it. Strelok stretches his arm out to reach it, fingers trembling, while the nightmares flicker in his mind as if this would be his moment of death: the truck carrying his body, believed to be dead, hit by lightning, his unknown savior's face, the Power Plant with the waves of mutants, the hooded shape with the face he could never see—but now he understands the call of the voice that comes from deeper than the deepest vaults. It is calling him.

“Strelok!”

But for the first time he senses no menace in the call. The darkness lies behind and he is again what he used to be before – a man called Strelok who has been marked by the hell he has been through and now, when facing the maze of his nightmares once more, has found his way back to sanity.

Still terrified that once he opens his eyes something terrible will happen, he only dares to rise his eyelids a little but enough to recognize Noah's untidy home.

Probably no Stalker has ever emitted such a sigh of relief at its sight than Strelok does now. His heartbeat slows down and his strained muscles loosen up.

Then he realizes that it was not the feeling of safety that made him calm down. It was the lack of pain: he feels as if he was a crystal glass filled with morning light.

Strelok feels something warm pressing his forehead. He reaches for it and touches Nooria's hand. Embarrassed, he lets go of her hands which release their grip as he sits up, rubbing his eyes.

"How long did I sleep?" Strelok asks.

"About fifteen minutes," Noah observes.

"Good God—it felt as if I had slept for a whole day!"

"How is your pain?"

Strelok looks at Nooria and it seems to him that he must have slept with his head in her lap. His embarrassment vanishes as he feels the refreshment of a long sleep getting stronger, bringing a clarity to his mind he hadn't felt for a time longer than he could remember.

"It is gone," he says, baffled.

Noah nods. "This was a short one, thanks God!"

"I didn't mean the emission—I meant this, this—this is strange. I have never felt good like this, at least not in a very long time."

"That's a surprise," Noah says. "You were screaming and wriggling in your sleep as if tortured by a thousand ghosts."

"I was." Strelok slowly shakes his head. "What did you do to me?"

"Nothing." Nooria giggles. "I just helped you to get out of your bad dreams."

Strelok gives her a long, inquisitive look. "Will I have those dreams ever again?"

"Not for a while, I think," she says. "I mean a very, very long while."

"But how long?"

"Long for you, short for me."

"Do I still need to take those pills?"

"It depends on you. You can take pills if you want. But now you must decide if you still need them."

Strelok looks into the green eyes that appear to keep secrets deeper than he had ever tried to solve. When their eyes meet, he sees kindness, wisdom, warmth – but they come from bottomless darkness. He turns his eyes away and shudders.

"You are a witch," he whispers.

Noah gives him a perplexed look but Nooria just shrugs and giggles once more. "Some people call me that."

“There are no witches, Strelok,” Noah says. “This is not a fairy tale. This is the Zone! Only asshole mutants, everywhere! She could be a mutant too!”

“No, this is not a fairy tale,” Strelok replies. He looks down to his boots. “This is the most confusing situation I have ever faced.”

“Why so?” asks Nooria.

“Because now I have to make a choice of going back to the Big Land,” Strelok says very seriously, “or stay in the Zone – forever.”

“Stay, Marked One!” Noah says, grinning. “I also stayed here and look how fine I’m doing! If I only had bullets...”

“Do you have a PDA?” Strelok asks from Nooria, ignoring Noah.

“Here.”

Strelok scrolls the map with a concerned face. “Have a look, Nooria. Cordon is at the other end of the Zone... damn far away. Especially with me in this condition.”

“We must get there quickly,” Nooria insists.

“You will need lots of bullets for that trip! There are—”

Strelok interrupts the half-crazy Stalker. “I know, I know, mutants everywhere. Give me a break, huh? It’s not just bullets we need.”

“What else would one need?”

“Not what but who. We need Guide.”

55

Dead city of Pripyat, Exclusion Zone

The sewers remain pitch dark beyond the cones of light emitted by their headlamps, but when Nooria grabs Strelok’s hand and at last emerges from the manhole and looks around in the daylight, what she sees hardly offers relief.

The Stalker had first led her to the south, an area he called Jupiter which is full of odd metal structures and derelict buildings. There they followed a railway track eastwards and to an abandoned, tower-like building raising high over the misty landscape. Cautiously entering the cellar through a low, tunnel-like entrance from the nearby waterway, he dug out a container from under the debris which turned out to hold an assault rifle and some ammo for it. A hand-written note on the back of an old document was also there. When Strelok read it, he bowed his head and whispered something about a man called Fang who had apparently been supposed to find this stash; the sadness coming over him was such that Nooria felt compelled to give him a comforting stroke. Pulling himself together, Strelok quickly led her on, crossing the canal and descending into a manhole leading beneath the concrete walls running along the water.

Though Nooria didn't recognize the rifle's type, it appeared serious enough to make a reckless man overconfident; but Strelok proved as composed as lurid his earlier behavior had been. They sneaked through claustrophobically narrow tunnels that seemed to run endlessly in the darkness. Nooria, after all a child of the New Zone's boundless wastelands, followed Strelok with growing



discomfort and hoped at every turn to reach an exit and leave the underground passage behind.

It is to her great relief when Strelok at last climbs up a metal ladder, works the iron lid of the manhole aside and cautiously peers outside.

Nooria's heart sinks when she emerges from the underground and looks around.

Under an overcast sky, derelict apartment blocks loom among alleys overgrown with dry bushes. The wind moving the branches of dead trees makes them appear like ghosts waving a welcome through the gloomy drizzle. The tiles that had once covered the facades have fallen off, revealing spots of drab concrete. Odd saplings grow from the broken windows and broken masonry. On the top floor of a house across the next alley, a tree has grown from a seed apparently blown there by the wind. It appears like a symbol of nature's victory over this man-made stone desert.

Fear creeps under Nooria's skin like chill from drizzle. Her fear is mixed with sadness, however. A ragged curtain still hanging in a broken window; the rusted lid of the manhole with Cyrillic letters and the number 1972 on it; a street sign over an entrance filled almost knee-deep with rubble; the decaying blue and white tile work on a façade nearby that was supposed to soften the drab appearance of the building—the few still visible signs of ordinary human life that had thrived here stir compassion in her heart as she feels the dead city's haunting memories descending on her.

It is the sight of a playground with rusty climbing bars where the traces of red and blue paint are still visible, that makes her eventually sigh with deep sorrow.

"I have never seen a sadder place."

Lost in her thoughts, she moves toward the playground but Strelok grabs her hand and pulls her back.

"Okay, listen to me carefully. Here's a few rules. First, do not touch or even go close to anything metallic here. It's still radioactive and you aren't much protected in that rookie suit. Stay on the paved road. If we have to leave it, do not lay down. Earth is contaminated. If you have to take cover, crouch but try not to kneel. Avoid touching the ground. Last but not least, watch out for any movement in the windows, on the roofs—everywhere. If the radioactivity doesn't kill you, a Monolith ambush or sneaky mutant will. Stick to me and keep your eyes peeled."

The Stalker checks his rifle, rocks the safety from off to on and gives her a wink, though his eyes appear sad as well.

"Welcome to Pripyat," he adds. "If it appears haunted now, imagine how it is at night."

Holding his rifle ready to shoot, Strelok peeks through the bushes on the corner of the house and signals Nooria to follow. Their process is more sneaking than watchful walking as they move ahead for a hundred meters, cross a street and leave behind the shell of a one-story building to their right and a huge, fallen tree to their left. There is the rusted wreck of an UAZ at the intersection. Strelok stays away from it but his Geiger counter emits a low crackle of warning nonetheless.

“Look,” Strelok breathes pointing at two buildings connected by a gangway. “This was a hospital.”

“Are people living there?”

Strelok shakes his head.

“But someone is walking there, talking to himself.”

Strelok immediately ducks. He aims his weapon to the source of the voice he must be hearing now too—it is coming from a human because only humans speak in words. But no human would emit words of barely discernible, deep moaning while slowly staggering ahead, one arm outstretched as if in sleepwalk. Neither would any human have the long extremities of the figure appearing in the gangway or the ragged overall darkened by gore.

“Move to the left,” he whispers, “through that passage.”

“What was it?”

“Move!”

Nooria does as commanded while Strelok slowly follows her, backwards in a crouched walk and ready to fire. He relaxes his stance only when joining her on the other side of the building.

“Izlom,” he says, “that’s what it was. A kind of undead... wouldn’t call it a zombie. Zombies are brainless too but carry weapons and shoot at you, growling strange words—”

“Then they are like *kuchis*.”

“What? Kuchis?”

“In my language. Tribe calls them ragheads and Stalkers call them dushmans.”

“Dushmans?” Strelok snorts. “Oh, I see... fitting parallel between them and the zombies.”

“And what’s that?” Nooria asks and points to a spot where between two high buildings a round, tall metal structure is partly visible.

“The Ferris wheel,” Strelok indifferently observes.

“It looks like a big iron flower.”

“You know, it’s a—a big wheel that turns around,” Strelok adds, noticing that Nooria doesn’t get it. “Those yellow things looking like petals to you are gondolas where people could sit and adore the beauty of their beloved city.”

He wants to move on but Nooria holds him back.

“Why are you so cynical, Marked One?”

Strelok nervously looks around and sighs.

“Look at this,” he says raising his assault rifle. “And this.” He pats his armored suit and the gas mask fastened to his shoulder. “They protect me. But *this* is where I survive.” Strelok points at his head. “If I started to think about what a nice place it was, if I cried boo-hoo over the fifty thousand people who lived here, a third of them children, and all this misery—I’d just have a bottle of vodka and shoot myself. Would that change a thing? That’s why try not to give a damn.”

Nooria bows her head. “You have a good heart. I like you.”

The Stalker takes his binoculars to survey the area ahead.

“Look, that building at eleven o’clock was a school. Now it’s little snorks being educated there. I don’t see anything suspicious but one can never now... We must be very cautious here.”

Strelok moves on but after a few steps turns back to Nooria. “Do you really like me?”

“Yes.”

“Then keep watching my back.”

They make their way through a gate in the fence to their right and then, across the space between the wings of a two-story, U-shaped building, around a low structure that might have been a greenhouse once. Nooria treads as cautiously as she can, yet a piece of glass that lies unseen in the grass breaks as she steps on it. Strelok signals her to freeze.

A long growl echoes in the school building. Before they realize that the echo is actually several mutants answering each other, the first snork already appears on the roof. It looks around and leaps down in a long arch, followed by several more. They roll on the ground as they touch down and start moving around the courtyard, apparently without a clue. But when Nooria peeks over the low wall of the greenhouse, she sees them sniffing the air in search of prey.

Finding nothing, they move back to their lair one by one. Their growl sounds hungry and disappointed.

Strelok jerks his head as a sign to move on. He only dares to talk when they have crossed another set of climbing bars and slipped through the fence, leaving the mutant-infested ruin behind them.

“Phew,” sighs Strelok. “Thanks God for November rain... in summer, when one’s soaked in sweat and smells like a dog after spending days in these suits, those beasts can smell a man from a hundred meters!”

“Is it still far?”

“We’ve arrived,” Strelok says. “Guide is living in one of those tall buildings over there with the Vine anomaly in between. Feel like climbing?”

Nooria looks in the direction where Strelok is pointing. Growing from a crater between two towering apartment blocks, twisted vines stretch out and run up the grey concrete walls like long strands of wet hair sticking to the skin. If the horribly mutated tree—if it had ever been a tree—wasn’t foreboding enough, the bright cloud of green, almost solid gas travelling along the vines certainly is.

“Climbing?” Nooria skeptically asks. “Even if it supports our weight, anomaly would kill us! Do we really need to climb?”

“Just kidding,” Strelok replies and gives Nooria a mischievous smile. “We’re not in a video game, are we? No, no... come, we’re almost there.”

They reach a wide open area that might have been a town square once, but now more resembling a sparse forest between the apartment towers from where they are approaching and a large building with a mural on its corner. Wrecked cars litter the overgrown square, as if an immense power had lifted a rusty bus and a truck and smashed them to the ground, separating the driver’s cabin from the chassis. A white Zaporozhets is buried axle-deep into the ground.

In front of the building with the mural and in the middle of a low pool that might have been a fountain once, a blackened statue towers. It resembles an immensely strong man holding something in his arms, delicately formed yet appearing so heavy that the muscles on his massive limbs bulge as he tries to hold it upwards.

“See the River Port? Yes, that ruined, long building with the small tower on the roof. That’s where we’re going.”

Strelok moves on. Then he slows his steps, looks at the statue and sighs.

“Yes, it happened right here... I left my lucky shooter behind for a friend,” he pensively says and pats his rifle, “and was only armed with a shitty carbine. Monolith had us under crossfire, there, from that port building and their snipers from over there, that tall house with the large iron letters on its roof... We were running like hell to the choppers sent in to evacuate us, and then out of those bushes came a huge Monolith fighter, shouting his *glory to the Monolith!* nonsense. My carbine jammed, he was already aiming his rifle at me and for a moment I thought, ‘oh God, will his gorilla-face gas mask be the last thing I see in my life?’ but then couldn’t see anything because Mikhailo jumped in and took the bullets for me. Next moment the Monolithian was dead, I think Alex Degtyarev was who finished him off when he came running up our right flank, there, after knocking sense into a shell-shocked Spetsnaz medic... He and Colonel

Kovalsky dragged Mikhailo to the nearest Mi-24 and I remember, they hit the hatch with his head in the process and he was cursing at them like a sailor, even with his chest covered with blood—" Strelok chuckles. "Yes, it happened right here, at the Prometheus statue."

"It was Operation Fairway," Nooria says. "He told me about it."

"Yes. Luckily for us, the Monolith was already weakened at that time. We killed scores of them, then Duty and Freedom patrols foraying into Pripyat did the rest. Guide told me he once saw them fighting a Monolith squad together. Hard to believe, eh?"

"Why is Guide hiding in such a dreadful place?"

"He's obsessed with all things Monolith. The river port had been their stronghold before we kicked their asses. Guide is looking for anything that can help him to understand them better. If you ask me, he's compensating for not reaching the Wish Granter... All right, it's time to tell him we're coming."

Strelok takes out his PDA. "Guide, do you copy?"

He waits a few heartbeats before repeating the call but no reply comes. Nooria is already thinking about coming so far in vain when Strelok's PDA beeps.

"I'm busy. Leave me alone."

"Guide, it's me," Strelok speaks into the device. "Whatever you're doing, stop it. I'm moving in with a friend. Do us a favor and don't shoot at us, all right?"

"Marked One? What the hell?"

"We're inbound from the cinema. Watch over our approach."

"Prinyal," comes the Russian roger-that.

Strelok moves out. The square between their position and the river port is covered with dense bush and the odd pine tree, their roots having forced the stone plates that had once covered the square to bulge and turn up from the ground. They are about to walk through a hole in the barbed wire fencing the port building when the Stalker's PDA beeps again.

"Stay put. Small squad approaching from your nine. Hundred meters."

"Monolith?" Strelok asks under his breath.

"Negative. Bandits. Keep low."

Strelok puts his finger to his lips, signaling Nooria to duck. Now they can hear the faint chatter of the approaching Bandits.

"—so I was kicking his head till he was dead, mwaha!"

"And what was in his stash?"

"Closer," they hear Guide's whisper in the PDA, *"slow down, guys, please slow down."*

"I had hoped for a dirty magazine but a can of rotten meat was all I found!"

"That sucks, *tipa*, that really sucks!"

"Hey, what's that?"

"*Yes... stop and check out that crate, you scum. It's there for a reason...*"

Though Nooria doesn't understand Guide's muted words, his slow breathing indicates that he is deeply concentrating.

"It's empty."

"*Blyad!* I was hoping for a Gauss rifle!"

"You think those just lie around here? In your wet dreams maybe!"

"Let's—"

The bang of a rifle shot prevents the Bandit from finishing his sentence, followed almost immediately by a second shot. The muzzle echoes among the tall buildings but Nooria's ears detect their source: up in the tower of the port building, a rifle barrel protrudes between two boards covering the window.

Kneeling behind a bush, Strelok fires his rifle too. A cry of pain follows his bursts.

"*Patsani!*"

"*Bullseye, Strelok. Three down. One on the run... Damn! Lost sight of him. Moved behind the statue. Still armed.*"

Strelok stays. He works the mode selection switch on his rifle, aims and fires a single shot.

"*He's down. Still alive. Be careful.*"

Strelok acknowledges the warning. "Keep your eyes open."

"*Prinyal.*"

With his weapon at ready, Strelok walks up to the wounded Bandit. He had left a trail of blood as he crawled behind the low platform that had once contained the fountain around the Prometheus statue, where he apparently hoped to be safe from the sniper in the tower and the rifleman in the bushes.

"*Nu privet, patsan,*" Strelok says for a greeting. "Any more of you cocksuckers around?"

"*Net, net!* Please, don't kill me!"

Nooria studies the wounded man's brown jacket that looks almost identical to the one she got from Sultan.

"He works for Sultan?" she asks.

"*Ti s Sultanom, khuyesos?*" translates Strelok so that the Bandit can understand the question.

"*Da*" is the man's response. "Jack and Sultan will give you a reward if you help me!"

“Want to earn some money, Nooria?” Strelok asks. “Because—”

Nooria brusquely interrupts him. “I asked, is he with Sultan?”

“Yes, and he said that—”

Strelok’s mouth stays open in the middle of his sentence as he sees Nooria drawing her blade, stepping to the agonized Bandit and slashing his throat. He stares at her with utter astonishment, his lips still moving.

“—that Sultan will... oh, forget about it.”

“Others are dead?”

Strelok looks at the three bodies which lie nearby in still extending pools of blood.

“They look dead enough to me.”

Nooria steps over to the bodies and stabs each in the heart. Then she gracefully shakes the blood off her blade and sheaths it. “Now they look dead enough to me too.”

“*Jopta*,” Strelok mutters a word for surprise in Russian.

Nooria shrugs. “Easily amused, huh?”

“Guide,” Strelok says into his PDA, “if you have seen what I’ve just seen, you better put on a gas mask with a polite and nice face painted on it. You wouldn’t want to offend her.”

“It’s a woman? *Okhuyoshka!*”

“She doesn’t speak Russian but you better watch your tongue anyway, lest you want her to cut it off.”

“I heard you. Come, I’m opening the trapdoor.”

The ruined pavilion of the river port might have once housed a café or restaurant, yet with the narrow windows facing the square, the two buttresses flanking the entrance and the slim tower above makes the adjacent building resemble a tiny fortress. At the end of a debris-covered corridor, a steep set of corroded metal stairs leads to an open platform overlooking the square and the brown, lifeless river behind the building. Through a ladder fixed to the wall, Strelok and Nooria climb up to a smaller platform where another ladder awaits. It leads to a hatch in the ceiling from where a round, jovial face looks down at them. To Nooria’s eyes, Guide—if this balding man in a Stalker suit is him—appears very different from Strelok with his cunning eyes and lean face.

“I am Guide. Nix English,” their host says with an apologizing smile as he helps Nooria up and into the chamber above. “Bye-bye!”

“Cut the crap, man,” Strelok tells him as he makes his way up. “Bye-bye is for *poka* anyway.”

“I know—I’m just embarrassed over seeing a woman here, that’s why I got confused!”

“Yeah, yeah. Glad you didn’t confuse us with the Bandits when firing that Dragunov,” Strellok says pointing to the sniper rifle standing in the corner. “Good to see you, brother!”

“It’s been a while, eh?”

While the two men embrace each other and exchange a kiss in very Russian fashion, Nooria looks around in Guide’s hideout. It is small for even a single occupant, and now with the three of them inside she can barely move without stepping on the bedroll on the ground or hitting against the wooden crate serving both as cupboard and table. Maps and documents cover it all over, flattened by several PDAs that look more sophisticated than those she has seen before. The windows are carefully boarded up, each having only a narrow hole through which the surrounding area can be observed and kept under fire if needed. She can’t imagine of any hideout in Pripyat having much to do with comfort, but even if there were, this tower was definitely chosen over comfort for its strategic location and suitability for defense.

As she tries to leave enough room for the two men, she accidentally kicks the rifle over. With a quick reflex she didn’t think the jovial Stalker capable of, Guide catches the Dragunov before it could fall on the concrete floor.

“Budte ostorozhna!”

“Careful with that,” Strellok translates and adds, “It’s the Lynx. A very special rifle.”

“I am sorry,” she replies curling her lips.

“Nichego, nichego,” Guide quickly replies with a reassuring smile. *“Khotchite strelat?”*

“No time for shooting lessons, brother,” Strellok says. “We must get her to Cordon. Now.”

“She’s got any cash?”

“It’s me who’s asking you.”

“Strellok, you damn freeloader. I should have picked a hideout where not even you could find and pester me for a free trip!”

“That’s not even all. I need a way that runs close enough to Dark Valley. There’s something I must get from one of my stashes. Won’t take too long, I promise.”

“I don’t know.” Guide scratches the stubble on his chin. “Presuming that I’m willing to take you there, bad business as it is for me, there are paths in the Zone I don’t want others to know. Can she be trusted?”

“Yes. So, you mean there’s a shorter way than through the Radar, Warehouses, Rostok and the Garbage?”

“Tell me first why I’m supposed to help her. Hope she’s not pretending to love you while squeezing you for secrets... like my hideout for example?”

Strelok sighs with impatience. “Could you stop being paranoid? Please? Listen: the man who caught a bullet for me once is in trouble. He’s being held at Cordon Base. The SBU might be taking him to Kiev right as we speak. I must get him out. This is his wife, lover, girlfriend or whoever from the New Zone. She healed me out of my nightmares and now I’m doubly indebted to them. You get it now?”

“From the New Zone? *Bozhe moi!*”

“Yes, yes, she’s also a witch or something and survived a blow-out in the open.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Bottom line—I don’t want to let her down. Will you help or not?”

“A witch and killer?” Guide looks at Nooria with sheer respect. “If that’s how women are in the New Zone, maybe I should take a trip there!”

“Glad I could impress you. So?”

“It wasn’t you but her, Marked One.”

Guide bows his head to Nooria. Although she doesn’t understand a word from their conversation, she returns the Stalker’s gesture with a smile. Guide turns back to Strelok and rubs his gloved hands together.

“I do know a way to get you there quickly. Not short, but safe. It’s the road used by *grozovikami smerti*.”

Strelok’s face turns suddenly pale. “*Grozovikami smerti?*”

Nooria frowns upon seeing the shadow of fear over the hardened Stalker’s face.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Death Trucks,” Strelok translates, swallowing hard. “Monolith used them to transport dead and brainwashed Stalkers.”

“Brings back fond memories, huh?” Guide smiles. “Don’t worry, we won’t need to ride one. I’m talking about the road they used.”

“A road for Death Trucks?” Strelok asks taken aback.

“That’s correct. Mostly a dirt track in good overall condition. The Monolithians marked all anomalies and regularly cleared off the mutants roaming along it. Now that they’re cornered to the north, the road is no longer maintained and we might run into a few obstacles.”

“What obstacles?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle. It’s still much safer than any other way to southern Cordon and a safer way means quicker process.”

“Incredible,” Strelok murmurs.

“Why? If you were Monolith, would you drive those trucks first through Freedom, then Duty and Army territory? They aren’t that stupid, you should know that very well!”

Guide takes two PDAs from the crate and holds them over to Strelok.

“Monolith PDAs. See? You think I’m here to shoot zombies? Come on, *bratan!* Their stashes and PDAs are a treasure trove for learning more about the Zone. For example, did you know that there is a Space anomaly in the CNPP that can teleport you right next to Sidorovich’s bunker?”

“I do. Have been through it, too.”

“Oh, stop bragging about your big raid at last!”

“A secret Monolithian path...” Strelok frowns, wagering their chances. “You sure about this?”

“You’re funny. First you beg me to show you a fast way to Cordon, then don’t believe me when I tell you!”

“Sorry. It was just... never mind. *Uhodim!*”

“Yes, let’s go. Wait for me downstairs until I lock up my place.”

While Guide closes the trapdoor with several number-coded, unbreakable padlocks, Strelok explains Guide’s plan to Nooria.

“But why not to Swamps?” she asks.

“We better go directly to Cordon Base. There’s no time to waste. If they take him to Kiev he’ll be out of anyone’s reach.”

“Ready?” Guide asks heading down the ladder. His Dragunov is slung over his shoulder.

“How is your ankle?” Nooria asks Strelok.

“Hurts, but I’ll survive,” he replies with a grimace. “It’s okay with the bandage and the last two painkillers I had.”

“What happened to you?” Guide asks.

“Uhm... fell out of a tree,” Strelok says looking elsewhere.

“Welcome to the man-made hell,” Guide replies, grinning. “Move! Keep up with me or become bloodsucker food!”

56

Cordon Base, Exclusion Zone

Tarasov curses himself.

He lets his encounter with Shumenko go through his mind for the hundredth time, but still can’t find anything he could blame for his capture apart from bad luck.

Had they taken a different path.

Why would we?

Had they run away while they still could.

No chance.

Had he just shot Shumenko and escaped into the wilderness.

One hunting rifle against a squad of Spetsnaz and Duty? Suicide.

It was bad luck and betrayal that resulted in a situation from which he could have never fought his way out; not with the hunting rifle he had.

All he can think about is Nooria. If he could break out of his confinement at the price of a broken skull, he would gladly ram the metal wall with his head. Setting his teeth to suppress the desire to scream and curse, he sits on the floor, banging the walls with the back of his head. The unceasing rapping of the heavy rain on the top of the metal cell even adds to his mental pain.

What would I shout, anyway? Calling on my former soldiers to take on the Spetsnaz guards and free me? It was one of my most trusted soldiers who betrayed me for a handful of money. What could I expect from the rest?

He curses Maksimenko for the subtle way to torture him – kept prisoner in his own former base, in a holding facility he himself had ordered to be transformed from a mobile command station and, like the vigilant officer he had been, personally made sure that it offered no way to escape.

I had so many good men under my command. Viktor Zlenko. Ilchenko, that bastard. Damn... I don't even know his given name. Squirrel... Freedom hates the military. Gospodi, I'll find myself hoping for the anarchists to come and raid Cordon... no way, they are way too weak for that. All gone... at least I'm still alive, unlike them. God save their souls.

The only one he could put his remaining hopes on is the Top. But no matter how strong and capable the old warrior is, Tarasov knows that he would have no chance coming to his rescue.

Damn... damn. He doesn't even know where I am. And those bastards took Nooria to Kiev. Damn! What now? Will the Tribe declare war on Ukraine?

He smiles bitterly over the nonsense of his thoughts.

Those goddamned renegades... if they'd come for me, it would be only to kick my ass for putting Nooria in danger. Yes... that would be quite a show. The Top, Driscoll and all those fanatic Lieutenants storming the Zone. Renegade Marines against Spetsnaz. Hell of a showdown. Wish they were here, blasting this whole place with me inside, I don't care!

His capture by the Tribe flashes through his mind. They kept him in the place they called the Brig, where he wished for the Zone unleash its power on the Tribe who he loathed then.

There I wished for the Zone to come... here for the New Zone's warriors. Where do I belong now?

Thinking of this, the controversy appears to him so ridiculous that he has to laugh. One of the Spetsnaz guarding the holding cell immediately bangs on the door.

“Shut up, prisoner!”

“Why?” Tarasov shouts back, loud enough to make himself heard through the metal walls and the heavy rain outside. “Can’t I laugh about the fucked up situation I’m in?”

“You—”

Whatever the Spetsnaz wanted to tell him, it ended in a gurgle. Then all is quiet again, only the rain keeps drumming on the container’s metal roof.

After a moment, he hears someone tampering with the lock, and after another heartbeat the door slowly opens. Through rain and darkness, Tarasov cannot see the face of the figure wearing a Stalker suit, but the eyes dimly illuminated by the night vision goggles’ green light look familiar. He hears a whisper.

“Come, quickly!”

Tarasov heeds his call without thinking twice. The Stalker points to the ground where a dead Spetsnaz lies.

“Get his weapon and help me hide the body!”

Tarasov slings the commando’s AN104 rifle over his shoulder and grabs the body by the legs. Together, they quickly drag him behind the holding facility where the searchlight in the watchtower can’t detect it. The body of another Spetsnaz is already lying there.

The rain soaks him to his skin in seconds. Tarasov quickly takes two more magazines from the ammunition vest of the second body.

“Follow me,” the Stalker whispers.

Ducking, the two men cautiously proceed to a bush opposite the base gate.

The searchlight slowly sweeps over the perimeter, more as an excuse by the soldier manning it for doing something during his watch than an attempt to detect anything. Tarasov mentally praises the storm that covers the perimeter with a curtain of heavy rain.

About two hundred meters away, beyond the barracks, a twisting fog bank conceals the low hills lying to the east. His rescuer points in that direction, but to reach the cover of fog they need to pass through between the barracks and the helipad. This section is brightly illuminated by two reflectors, just like the Mi-24 attack helicopter itself – another feature Tarasov had had installed during his time as security-savvy base commander. The light would deny even the most daring Stalker any chance to sneak into the base and sabotage the helicopter, the military’s

most powerful weapon in the Exclusion Zone. Now he finds another of his brain children turning against him.

To his dismay, Tarasov sees a soldier guarding the helicopter. Seeking shelter from the rain, the soldier huddles up under the short wings on the fuselage, facing directly the section where they have to pass through. A cigarette glows in the soldier's hand, but his assault rifle is unslung and ready to shoot.

The Stalker aims his silenced pistol. With a cautious movement, Tarasov pushes his weapon down and slowly shakes his head.

The Stalker shrugs. Then he takes a bolt from his pocket, aims for a second and throws it in a long arch towards the helicopter. Through the splatter of rain, Tarasov's ears detect the faint noise of metal hitting metal.

The guard tosses his cigarette away. He aims his weapon and peers in the direction where the bolt has hit the helicopter.

Tarasov hears a muted command. "Move!"

With quick steps, Tarasov passes the brightly lit section. Reaching the other side of the barracks, he ducks at the bottom of the wall made from pre-manufactured concrete slabs. Nothing is between him and the fog that would safely hide him, even if his escape would be detected. He has to wait for the Stalker, though.

Having found nothing out of the ordinary, the soldier shrugs and swears in a low voice. He steps back under the wings and pats down his armored vest, probably looking for his pack of cigarettes.

The noise of a TV comes from behind the boarded windows of the barracks. Judging by the explosions and gunshots the soldiers inside must be watching an action film. He hopes it is exciting enough to keep them in front of the screen.

"Vitka! You still got any smokes left?"

It is the helicopter guard shouting at his comrade in the watchtower.

"Yes! Come over here!"

Yes, Tarasov thinks. *Go to Vitka. Get your cigarettes. That's an order, goddammit!*

"No! You come over here!"

"No way, buddy! I'm still dry here, it's you who's already soaked!"

Cussing under his breath, the helicopter guard leaves his position and walks to the watchtower. Using the moment when he fully concentrates on catching the box of cigarettes tossed from above, the Stalker swiftly crosses over to the bush where Tarasov is hiding.

"Thank goodness for bad habits," Tarasov sighs.

The Stalker is not in the mood for chatting. He signals him to move on.

“There’s barbed wire,” Tarasov whispers when he sees the direction the Stalker is taking, “and a minefield behind!”

Undeterred, the Stalker moves northwards with quick but cautious steps. Tarasov realizes his savior walks with a slight limp. Soon, they reach the barbed wire fence separating the outer perimeter of the base from a sparse forest.

“Up that tree,” the Stalker whispers.

After leaving the brightly lit helipad, Tarasov’s eyes have not yet fully accustomed to the darkness. First he doesn’t see much, but straining his eyes, he soon makes out a tree fallen over the fence. If moving carefully enough and without his feet slipping on the wet wood, a man could vault the fence.

Cautiously, always looking for a branch to hold on should his feet slip, Tarasov balances his way over the fence and jumps. The Stalker follows suit, although his descent from the tree is more cautious.

“Keep right, as close to the old barbed wire as you can!”

Just a few steps away, a minefield lies. It is the outermost protection of the army base. During his times at the base, Tarasov had seen more than one dumb mutant being blasted by the anti-infantry mines hidden under the fallen leaves. Hoping that the Stalker knows what he is doing, he follows him along the barbed wire. His Spetsnaz training kicks in and he holds onto the Stalker’s rucksack, tightly enough to prevent them from getting too far from each other in the dark but not too strong either to hinder the Stalker from quickly changing his stance should he detect danger ahead.

The fog sits thick among the trees, but Tarasov sees two bright spots not far to their left. Bushes rattle. They hear a noise, halfway between a grunt and a growl.

“Boar to our nine,” Tarasov whispers.

They both halt. With his heart beating fast, Tarasov hopes that the mutant will not attack them. He would have to fire the rifle, which would immediately expose them to the guards. The base is still less than fifty meters away.

The boar doesn’t approach them. Tarasov is about to sigh with relief when more rattling comes from the bushes. It must be one of the fleshies usually lurking together with a boar. He hears the noise of several mutants galloping away.

Then an ear-piercing detonation comes. Immediately, the base comes to life.

“ALERT! STALKER DETECTED!”

The guard's warning through the megaphone is followed by the wail of a siren. The searchlight from the watchtower swings over to the northern perimeter.

"Run!" the Stalker shouts.

The leafless trees wouldn't conceal them from the searchlight that is now scanning the woods, getting closer to the fugitives with each second. With the minefield to their left and the barbed wire fence to the right, they have only one way left—forward, to the north.

The soldiers in the base become more agitated. Amidst indiscernible shouts, the guards begin to blindly fire their weapons into the woods. Someone is frantically shouting commands.

"MEN DOWN! THE PRISONER HAS BROKEN OUT!"

He hears the growl of the boar and the agitated squeaks of his harem of fleshies. Rifles fire bursts and one more explosion shatters the ground. By the time the mutants' noise ceases and the soldiers' firing becomes sparse, Tarasov and the Stalker have reached a safe distance from the base.

They soon reach the eastern slopes of a hill overlooking the base that is now to the far south. Beyond the road leading to the northern areas, an abandoned village lies to the west.

Stopping, the Stalker gives Tarasov the sign to halt and kneels down. When hearing the low, pulsating hum, Tarasov immediately knows that even bigger peril lies ahead.

The Stalker throws a bolt. A tiny light flashes and the bolt disappears into nowhere. For a split second, the pulsating drone changes to a sharp crackle. Then the anomaly ahead continues to hum.

One more bolt flies. They can take two steps ahead. The third bolt is again consumed by an anomaly. The fourth shows them a safe path through. Following the Stalker, Tarasov finds himself in a small circle of boulders. It might have been a sacred site in historical times but now it's a safe refuge, hiding them from the sight of anyone following them. There is a makeshift rain shelter too, made up from a canvas pitched between a boulder and two sticks.

Another Stalker, apparently guarding the place, lowers his Dragunov when he sees them approaching.

"Phew!" The Stalker with the pistol loudly sighs. He powers his night vision down and switches on his headlamp. "If any grunt follows us here — he deserves a damn medal!"

"Strelok?" Tarasov asks wiping rain water from his face.

"I hope you didn't expect Sidorovich," Strelok replies with a grin. They shake hands and embrace each other. "That's Guide over here. Without him we'd never made it here in time."

“Thank you, Strelak. I thought they really screwed me this time,” Tarasov thankfully says and bows his head towards Guide. “Guide? The legendary man himself? Most Stalkers think you don’t even exist!”

“That’s correct,” Guide says, smirking. “Because I do not exist for most Stalkers.”

“You guys know anything about Nooria? The girl they captured together with me?”

“Let me think,” Strelak says. “I heard some rumors that she was to be interrogated, raped, abused and her baby aborted—”

Tarasov grasps Strelak’s shoulders and shakes him hard.

“*What?!*”

“—but then she killed the female agent trying to do all these things to her, left your buddy Maksimenko shackled naked to a radiator, killed two SBU guards and then a pimp on Volodymyrska, made her way to a gangsters’ club where she hooked up with Sultan and tried to set one of his prostitutes free but found her ear next day in a package that Sultan’s henchman gave her when she dumped her on the edge of Zaton—”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“—where I literally stumbled into her. So, we made our way to Noah’s Ark when an emission hit. Bottom line—she cured me out of my chronic headache!”

“Are you high? Spending too much time with Freedomers or what?”

“Indeed, it was high time for me to get free. Because thanks to your witch, I am no longer anyone’s errand boy!”

“Will you at least tell me where she is?”

“I am here!”

Tarasov spins on his heels and almost falls over when a joyful Nooria appears from the rain shelter and throws herself into his arms.

“I had to tell you her story to see if I believe it myself, you know,” Strelak and Guide exchange a grin. Seeing that the couple’s emotional reunion is not going to end soon by itself, Strelak impatiently continues. “Hey, love birds! That’s already more romance than the Zone has ever seen. Come, we have important things to discuss!”

“Let’s move to the Rookie Village,” Guide suggests.

Tarasov is still embracing Nooria who cuddles against his chest. The rain on her face blends with tears. He pats her back, gives her another kiss and turns to the Stalkers.

“No. The Rookie Village is the first place where the grunts would start looking for me. It’s the Swamps where we go. My companions are still waiting for me there, or so I hope.”

“You know about the tunnel in the hill, south of the village?”

“Sure. Hopefully it’s not blocked.”

“It isn’t,” remarks Guide.

“There’s something we need to talk about at last.” Strelok looks up to the dark sky. “Damn rain... let’s get under that canvas.”

The canvas keeps the rain outside of the tiny shelter but doesn’t protect from the chilly wind. Strelok looks towards the base and risks lighting a campfire from a small pile of firewood. Initially, the damp wood doesn’t burn but after the Stalker has wasted half a box of matches, the flames slowly begin to emanate soothing warmth. All three of them move closely around the weak fire.

“Have some *havchik*,” Strelok says opening a can of ‘tourist’s breakfast’. Tarasov gladly accepts it. “*Nu, delo bylo tak...*”

“Better in English,” Tarasov says, “so that Nooria can understand you.”

“I’ll try to keep it short. You know, I used to do jobs for the SBU from time to time—Nooria will tell you why I was depending on them. Kruchelnikov ordered Maksimenko to bag you.”

“Colonel Kruchelnikov? Now I realize what deep shit we’ve been in. That man is a monster.”

“And Maksimenko his shrewd minion. He made me send you a message to lure you back to the Zone. Then they wanted to bag you when you contacted me.”

“It worked out after all, just the other way round.”

“What the bastards didn’t know was that I wanted to talk to you anyway. Did you get my first message as well? Good.” Strelok reaches into his rucksack and fishes out a bottle of vodka. Tarasov gladly takes a swig. He is about to give the bottle back to Strelok when Nooria grabs at it.

“Do you mind if I drink a little?” she asks.

“Of course not.”

Nooria quaffs, coughs and grimaces, but then gives a satisfied sigh and cuddles back against Tarasov.

“Since when do you drink?” he asks with surprise.

“*Pertovka* reminds me of a friend.”

Before Strelok puts the bottle away, he too takes a swig. “Cheers! Now let me finish my story before we all get drunk. Two years ago, when I opened up the X-18 vault, I found documents describing how and when the secret labs were established here. To cut a long story short: when the USSR realized that the Afghan war could not be won by conventional warfare, Soviet scientists began to develop psychotropic weapons.”

“I should have guessed,” Tarasov wearily says.

“The first laboratory was located in the Panjir Valley. According to the documents I found, the scientists made some progress but the USSR

gave it up before they could have completed their research. Their lab had to be evacuated. Guess who was in charge of the evacuation—a lieutenant from the GRU, Soviet military intelligence, called Kruchelnikov.”

“I’m not surprised. When I first heard Stalkers gossiping about the New Zone in Afghanistan, I thought they had too much vodka at the 100 Rads. Once I knew it better, I realized that the two Zones are not only similar but also connected by a thousand things. Among them the shadows of the USSR.”

“Until it lasted, that is. In the chaos around 1990 nobody cared about the scientists’ research, but they decided to keep on experimenting—” Strelok stops for a moment to sneeze. “Damn! My suit protects me from radiation, biohazard and even small-caliber bullets but can’t hold off a little flu! God, right when my nose is in shambles!”

“What happened to your nose, anyway?”

“Uhm... I head-butted a Monolith fighter while he still had his gas mask on... Right, Nooria?”

Nooria smiles and gives him an allowing nod.

“Anyway, the secret experiments were financed after the USSR had collapsed. The biggest part came from government funds, originally paid to support research in the Agroprom. The guy in charge, a certain Petr Strizh, channeled the funds to procure all kinds of high-tech gadgets for the researchers.”

“I know that part already,” Tarasov says. “It was Captain Maksimenko who investigated it.”

“Misha, Misha... it’s a shame that two of the best men the military ever had in the Zone are now enemies.”

“Now we’re beyond simply being enemies,” Tarasov grimly says.

“I can imagine. So, when I had a glance at the documents I found in that hellhole, I removed the parts dealing with Lab X-1 and hid them. The pages I kept tell everything—where the first lab was built, who was running it, what they were researching and how.”

“Not a new method to produce more toys for the USSR’s five year plan, I guess.”

“You bet—it was about some weird gas or electromagnetic radiation or whatever. I’m no scientist to understand. The mastermind was a certain Professor Chubko. He describes in the X-18 documents how he got the idea. When the Americans began to equip the dushmans with Stinger missiles, the head designer of the Mi-24 gunships visited Bagram to get fresh ideas from the pilots. They did a little demonstration for him, performing amazing stunts with their helicopters like spinning them around their vertical axles—something that the gunships were not

supposed to be capable of. It didn't help the helicopters in the end, but Chubko got inspired: if machines can be brought over the edge, so could human beings..."

"Bastards," grumbles Tarasov. "They didn't give up on the idea. That's what our so-called scientists were after, too!"

"He and his minions started to experiment on volunteers. First, it was die-hard Spetsnaz who wanted to go beyond their limits, but then things went wrong and the scientists switched to *strafbat* grunts who preferred becoming guinea pigs over going to the labor camps."

"Have you ever heard of this, Nooria?"

"No," she replies staring into the flames. "But Panjir Valley was always a bad, very bad place. Since very long ago."

Strelok frowns. "If you don't mind me asking, Nooria – how old are you?"

"I don't know exactly," she says with a shrug and gives one of her innocent giggles. "But eight years ago when Colonel came, I was big enough to go to nurse school."

"You know, whenever I look into your eyes I think that... On second thought, never mind. After all, it's not mine but that lucky guy's business to know who sits next to you." Strelok takes a water-proof medikit box from his map holder and opens it. Inside is a pile of yellowed pages. "Bottom line: here's what I took from the X-18 documents. I saved you the trouble of getting them yourself. Please appreciate it."

"I do appreciate it but what am I supposed to do with this?"

"As a starter, take these papers and keep them safe. It would be a shame if they'd get spoilt now after surviving two decades in the vaults. Read them... and then decide what to do."

"I have a bad feeling about this." Reluctantly, Tarasov takes the box from Strelok. "If this turns out the way I believe it will – do you feel like joining me on a trip to the south?"

Strelok shakes his head.

"No. The Exclusion Zone is all I have and I'll never leave it. Not even for a Zone where the only mutants are roasted pigs and it rains vodka. I suppose the New Zone is not even remotely like that." He grins and gives Tarasov a challenging look. "And you? Feel like staying here?"

Tarasov gently caresses Nooria's face.

"Well... I think I get your point. However, this brings me to the worst piece of bad news," Strelok says.

"What could be worse than what you've told already?"

"Looks like your New Zone is spreading, or at least attempting to."

"Come again?"

“I saw it on the news—a massive emission has hit southern Uzbekistan, but only there. It appeared to me as if the New Zone wanted to extend northwards.”

“Oh no!”

Nooria’s sudden cry makes the men scowl.

“I know why—it is—it wants...”

“Nooria! You’re trembling. What’s the matter with you?”

“It is—no, I’m just freezing... it is very cold here.”

Strelok offers her his bottle. Nooria takes another swig.

“Mikhailo,” she says, “I have to tell you something.”

“I’m listening, dear.”

“Not yet... Later. When we are back. I am not sure yet.”

Tarasov sighs and exchanges a puzzled look with Strelok.

“See? That’s why I didn’t get married. Women... always talking when they are not supposed to, and keeping quiet when one would expect them to talk,” Strelok says and begins preparing to leave.

“You must have pissed off the SBU big time,” Tarasov says. “What will you do now?”

Strelok shrugs but gives the couple a dashing smile.

“It’s about time for new adventures. I told you, I am a free man now, and I must thank your woman for that... She has set me free, perhaps from a worse prison than I got you out from.”

“As an old friend of mine would say – we’re quits then. I’m glad you don’t want any secret stash coordinates in turn.”

“No coordinates, but now that you mentioned a reward...” Strelok gives him a smirk. “Yes, there is something. Nooria, do you mind if I keep this pistol?”

Strelok unholsters the silenced Sig Sauer P229 that was Sultan’s farewell gift to Nooria.

“Yes. Definitely,” she replies. “It is yours as a reward from me for helping Mikhailo.”

“Great! Nooria, when we meet next time, please do have a bigger one on you... an artifact-enhanced Gauss rifle maybe? For that, I’ll rescue this clumsy guy even from Kruchelnikov’s closet!”

“There will be no more need for Mikhailo to escape from anywhere,” she confidently says.

Meanwhile, Strelok takes an armored suit from his rucksack.

“Before I forget – this is a mercenary suit from my secret stash in the Rookie Village. I keep it in an attic because Stalkers are too lazy to climb up there. Don’t give it that look, it’s better than what you’re wearing. And here’s some more goodies.” Rummaging in his rucksack, he fishes out a few food rations, bandages, a plastic bag holding a dozen bolts and a

Veles type artifact detector. "It's not exactly the best stuff on earth but should keep you alive until you get back to the Doc. Give him my regards."

"I can only thank you, Strelok."

"I wouldn't give a damn about you, you know, if it weren't for Nooria. How I wish we had some female Stalkers!"

"I've met one in the New Zone, actually. Goes by the name of Mac, but the real one is Beth and she doesn't have very fond memories of you."

Strelok stares at him with eyes fully wide open. "What? You have met her? How is she doing?"

"Perfectly, probably because she's far away from you."

"Oh dear. You almost make me want reconsider my decision to stay here—you know what? Make sure Nooria tells her what happened in Noah's Ark, and—eh, just tell Beth that my message is: never say never."

"Will do. But didn't you just say that you'll *never* leave the Exclusion Zone?"

"I need to go now," Strelok says without answering Tarasov's question. He hauls his rucksack to his back. "Hey, Guide! We're leaving!"

"It's about time," grumbles the other Stalker. "Where to?"

"Don't know. Got any idea where we could stir up mischief?"

"Heard about weird things going on at the Duga-3 radar."

"Guess it was just a woodpecker scaring the shit out of some rookies."

"Stalkers suffering from a strange sickness at Polenskoye."

"Too far. Takes an eternity to get there. Besides, what's the point of heading there knowing we gonna catch some damn disease and spread it around the globe?"

"Rumor has it the Black Digger is back."

"Now *that* sounds interesting. To the Garbage then! Haven't seen Seriy for a while anyway. Good bye and good hunting, you lovebirds!"

"Yes... good hunting to you too, Marked One."

Tarasov gives a long sigh as he watches Strelok and Guide wave farewell before they disappear in the gloom. He knows that the last bond between him and the Exclusion Zone has just been cut.

"We should move on too," he says and glances at his watch. "It's almost dawn and the military will send out patrols at first light."

Nooria nods and stamps out the smoldering campfire.

"When I got free from SBU and was all alone in your big city—that was hardest. I was thinking, maybe I will never see you again."

Tarasov sighs once more, unsure about how to express his feelings. Nooria takes his hand. Her warm gaze assures him that he doesn't have to waste any words. Yet there is a shadow of sadness in Nooria's eyes that he

has never seen before. He tries to focus on their next step and appear cheerful.

“If only half of what Strelok said about your misadventures is true and the Top learns of it, he won’t be pleased.” Getting on his feet, he slings the assault rifle over his shoulder. “Truth be told, I’d prefer Captain Maksimenko’s torture chamber than—”

“Never say such a thing!” Nooria replies with sudden anger. Tarasov bites his lips.

Then he takes Nooria’s hand and leads her towards the south-west, where low hills separate Cordon from the fringes of the Swamps.

57

The Doctor’s house, Swamps, Exclusion Zone

“I still can’t believe he sold you out for two weeks leave and two thousand hrivnyi, Misha!”

Surprise and contempt mix in the Doctor’s look, while he puts a kettle with fresh water onto the samovar.

They were relieved to arrive at the Swamp cottage, of course, but not as relieved as the Top who would have faced the Colonel’s fury if anything would had happened to Nooria. Tarasov himself got away with the old Marine calling him names for being dumb enough to let himself be captured. He saw it better not to argue.

It also turned out that they didn’t arrive a moment too soon. After the Doctor was thoughtless enough to tell them about the Mercenaries being a faction in the Zone, Hartman and Pete decided to set out and hire them for a raid on Cordon Base. However, this was only the first step in Top’s desperate plan. After taking the Base, he wanted to use the military’s radio to contact the Tribe, let a ‘squad’ of warriors be secretly sent to Kiev and then overrun the SBU headquarters itself. No matter how crazy the plan was, Hartman appeared a little disappointed over not having a chance to execute it.

Shaking his head, the Doctor puts more wood into the fireplace.

“Two thousand local money? How much is that?”

“About two hundred and fifty dollars, Top.”

“Pathetic pocket money. There’s no honor left in this world, I’m tellin’ you.”

Tarasov shrugs.

“I can’t blame him. It’s more than one month’s of Shumenko’s normal pay. Besides, in the eyes of my former comrades I’m a traitor and deserter.”

“I say, let’s get out of this cursed place as soon as we can!”

"I'd rather stay," Finn Sawyer says, filling his cup with tea from the samovar. "I like it here. Boars are plenty and this cottage is cozy... I count myself lucky for running into you at Heathrow."

"You told me yesterday you miss women," Pete says with a smirk.

"Err, yeah, I mean that's true," the Australian says scratching his nape. "And a good cab-sav too. Be that as it is, the Doc told me in a few days he'll go to... what was it, Roswell?"

"Rostok, my friend."

"Yeah, to Rostok for supplies and there's supposed to be a bar which might have a bottle or two. I mean no offense, but living on neat vodka makes my guts rot. This place is great, so lonely and all, and it has so many things I can't find anywhere else. Yeah, I think I could take a break from tits and pussies. A little break, I mean."

"You don't want to come with us to the New Zone?"

"Why would I? I've seen enough desert down under."

"It's more than just deserts."

"Nah, I've made up my mind. As far as I know, no one has written a survivalist's guide book about this place anyway. The idea came to me yesterday when I was cutting firewood, you know, and please don't jinx it by telling me that there's anything written already. Okay?"

The Doctor nods.

"It's a good idea. I'll add my chapters too, and if our advice will save just one rookie's life we didn't live for nothing."

"Oh yeah! *Exclusion Zone – a travel survival kit*, written by Finn H. Sawyer," says the Australian enthusiastically. "Or even better— *Mud, Swags and Fears*. Like the book by Bear Grylls!"

"Why don't you start with the New Zone where you could grill Bears?" Hartman laughs loud over his reference to fearsome mutant living in the other Zone.

"Oh God, make my ears unhear his Dr Evil laugh," Pete breathes mimicking a prayer.

"I'm not sure if Stalkers are much into reading, Finn," Tarasov amusedly says.

"Smart ones do."

"I got a book idea, Doc," Pete bursts out. "Listen, what about a perfectly normal guy waking up one day to find himself transformed into a giant insect-like creature?"

Sawyer waves the idea off. "Gotta come up with something better, kiddo."

"Why would Stalkers care about stories written about life in the Big Land?" the Doctor asks. "The Zone is their world now. So, let's write about the Zone—or even both Zones. Yes."

Tarasov nods. "Good point."

"Yes, let's get to the point at last," Hartman says still chuckling. "So, how do we get back to *our* Zone?"

Tarasov takes sips his tea. The Doctor has added a pine cone to the charcoal that keeps the samovar warm and the delicious aroma of autumnal forests lingers in the steam rising from his cup. He inhales it deeply. "Nooria has an idea."

"Sultan gave me this," Nooria says and puts her PDA on the table. "We have to go to a place marked on map. Bandits know how to get to our Zone."

"This is the Container Warehouse in Jupiter area," Tarasov says looking at the display. "Three days' hike from here. If we set out at dawn, we should reach Rostok by nightfall. Then we follow this road east of the Military Warehouses, continue northward on the edge of the Red Forest and assuming that we don't run into anything nasty, we should reach Jupiter the next day."

"How on earth is anyone supposed to travel from that place to the sandbox?" the Top asks. "Is there an airfield or something?"

"There's not as much as a landing strip in the Zone. All I know of is a derelict helipad close to the Jupiter factory, but that's not for airplanes."

"Nooria, why was that guy so eager to help you get back to the New Zone?" Pete asks.

"He, uhm—he asked me to do something there for him."

Nooria pretends to study the PDA display closely, shunning the eyes of her companions.

"The end justifies the means," Tarasov shrugs. "The only thing that counts now is to get back to the New Zone. If it's a gangster giving us a helping hand, we'll have to accept it."

"Yup," Pete nods. "Can't think of any other way. We can forget about our fake passports."

Hartman frowns.

"Wait a minute. You want us to become... criminals?"

"Just to join them for a ride," Tarasov says.

"And then what?"

"Once we're back to the New Zone, we'll find a way to slip away."

"I don't like this idea." The Top drums his fingers on the table and shakes his head. "No way. Hiding and sneaking was bad enough. All right, I see a few things about the scavengers differently now but to join a bunch of lowlifes... no, I don't like this at all!"

"Any better idea?"

"There must be a high-capacity radio somewhere in the Zone. We get to it and contact my Tribe to get us out!"

"You sound desperate," Sawyer calmly says. "Even if your mates were able to help us, it would take ages for 'em to get here."

"Maybe that is so, but I will not spoil my honor by joining a bunch of lowlifes!"

"But you already are, Top," Pete boldly says, avoiding the former Marine's angry eyes. "Look at us. Technically we're all criminals. First, all of us are wanted for trespassing the Exclusion Zone. Then, you're probably wanted in the States for mutiny and war crimes. Don't look at me like that! You know it's true! As for me, apart from going AWOL I'm also wanted for petty crime. You know the charges. Then, Mikhailo is a deserter and traitor, not to mention grand theft auto..."

"We left that peasant seven hundred dollars for that piece of junk!" Tarasov protests. "That was no car theft but charity!"

"Still leaves you with the charges of desertion and treason. Then, Nooria is wanted for murder. Geez, imagine how much the FBI would want to bag one who killed three spooks! The KGB or whatever it's called here must be even worse."

Tarasov gives him an allowing nod.

"So, with all due respect, Top," Pete continues, "empty talk about honor won't make us any better than the baddies we're about to join. At least not in the eyes of the guys on our tail. Let's face it, folks – for the world outside, we're all just criminals and outcasts!"

"You are way wrong about our honor," the Top angrily says. "If the extent of how wrong you are could be measured in caliber, I'd blast the moon from the sky with it!"

"I guess you'd enjoy that but as I see it, we're almost overqualified for becoming bandits. At least for playing along with them until we get out of here."

"Smart kid," says the Doc.

Tarasov too finds himself giving a nod of agreement.

"Sounds bizarre, but Pete has a point."

"But those fucks have no honor!"

"Come on, Top! You like Godfather, don't you? The mafia is all about honor this and honor that but it still makes them criminals!"

Still, Hartman doesn't budge.

"Screw Hollywood, Mikhailo! For chrissakes, this is a real life situation and you're testing my very understanding of honor!"

"Then what the hell can we do? Even if we manage to sneak out from the Zone, what should we do? Trek all the way home?"

"We still have our passports and our credit card..."

"This is the SBU we are dealing with, and that also means all the former KGB network from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok! Don't you ever

underestimate them. Right as we speak, they must be assembling a killer squad to hunt us down.” Tarasov gives Hartman a grim smile. “Your candor is appreciated, Top, but we’re outlawed, outgunned, outnumbered and on the run. Clusterfuck Central as you would say.”

“To sum it up: we’re goddamn stuck here, but we cannot stay here,” Pete adds, emboldened by Tarasov taking his side. “I don’t see any other way out than Bandit Tours. So, what’s your final say?”

Hartman spins his tea cup on the table.

“Let’s Nooria have the final say,” he presses out between his lips. “She’s the most important of us.”

All eyes switch to Nooria who is effing with her blade.

“We go with Bandits,” she softly says. “They do have honor, Top. Sultan gave me his word to bring me to Zone and he kept it.”

The Top rolls his eyes but doesn’t dare arguing. However, Nooria has not finished yet and as she speaks her voice becomes harder and harder.

“I want us to go with Sultan’s men because I hate them. You can not imagine how much. I must stay with them because I want Sultan feel my rage. Let’s see if he will be entertained when I cut his chest open, tear out his black heart, burn it and curse its ashes while he is still alive to watch it!”

She screams the last words with such a rage that makes even the Top recoil in his seat.

Tarasov stares at her aghast. He has never experienced such an outbreak of elemental fury of his tiny woman who now appears like a true witch—eyes burning with rage, veins pulsating on her neck and her voice carrying evil power that, so it seems, would by itself kill the kingpin if he were here to hear it.

“Witch has spoken,” Nooria says in a lower but still trembling voice. She pulls her hood on and storms out of the house into the night, leaving the door ajar.

Tarasov jumps up but the Doctor shows him to stay and whistles. The pseudodog gets up from his place at the fire and rushes after Nooria.

“*Druzhok!*” the Doctor shouts. “*Zakry dver!*”

The door slams shut.

“My dog is the only company she needs now,” the Doctor says, calmly sipping his tea. “He will protect her until the stars calm her down.”

For several heartbeats there is deep silence in the room, only the fire crackles.

Finally, Pete looks around and clears his throat.

“Looks like we have a plan.”

“Do you think they’ve hurt her?” the Top asks.

"No," Tarasov says, shaking his head. "I have a feeling that something happened in Kiev that made her not only angry but very sad as well. Something she experienced and wants to revenge. She wouldn't tell me what it was."

"Outstanding. She can bloody well count me in."

"Oh, women," Sawyer says. "We lesser mortals just can't understand what's goin' on in their heads."

"I need vodka, Doc," Tarasov says.

"Me too. Geez, I've never seen anyone in such a rage!"

"If you want to keep it that way, Pete, never piss off your father. Nooria's just been a purring kitten if compared to the big man in rage."

"Is that so? Now that I've seen my stepsister in a fury I wouldn't want to be part of a family argument. That's for sure."

"Well, friends, I think it's time to relax now." The Doctor places a bottle of vodka on the table and fills five shot glasses. "*Za udachy*," he says rising his glass. "To success!"

They all finish the vodka in one gulp.

"Becoming Ukrainian?" the Doctor asks and smiles at the three foreigners. "Good!"

"It's your vodka that's good." Tarasov smacks his lips. "Cossacks?"

"Finlandia."

"You're a traitor to the Motherland, Doc."

"Then I should also go and join the Bandits, I take?"

Tarasov wishes the Doctor weren't joking.

"We better call it a day if we want to set out early tomorrow," he says switching off the PDA. "Sawyer, are you absolutely sure about staying here?"

"Avoiding having to get up at an ungodly hour is just another reason to stay," the Australian says getting to his feet. "G'nite, peeps. I'll say my farewells in the morning... if I manage to get up!"

"Shouldn't we check out on Nooria?" the Top asks.

"If the Doc says she'll be fine, there's no need to worry."

"There better ain't."

"When do we set out?" Pete asks.

Tarasov glances at his watch. "Five sharp."

Hearing this, Pete loudly yawns. He takes his towel from the fireplace where their clothes are drying on a rack and waves good night.

Tarasov and the Doctor move two chairs to the fireplace where they make themselves as comfortable as they can. They both know that even if they ever meet again, it will be in a far and uncertain future. For a long time they just sit and listen to the fire crackling. Then the Doctor breaks the silence.

“How is Strelak?”

“Nooria somehow rejuvenated him. He told me he’s out to do mischief, so maybe one of these days he’ll show up here to hide for a while.”

“Yes... this house will always be a safe haven for him.” The Doctor fills two shot glasses. “Let’s drink once more. To him and those lucky enough to make it here.”

“How do you manage to keep this place secret?” asks Tarasov taking one the glasses. “Word of your healing skills must drive many Stalkers here.”

“Only those come who the Zone allows,” the Doctor says. “Only those make it back from here, too. They all know that the only thing that can guide one to me is the Zone itself.”

“You think Sawyer has been called by it, too?”

The Doctor firmly nods.

“Definitely. Entering a Space anomaly was as foolish as it was brave. His survival was a sign that the Zone wanted him to enter. It remains to be seen what plans the Zone has with him. For now, he’s a man with a good but weary heart, looking for something that can give a new meaning to his life.” A mysterious smile plays around the Doctor’s mouth. “Nothing a little woodcutting couldn’t heal.”

Just a few minutes ago, Tarasov had been eager to clean himself up and get into bed for a good night’s sleep. He knows that this moment of peace and safety will be the last before another long, perilous stretch, and the temptation to enjoy the cozy warmth of the fireplace proves too strong to resist. Moreover, it could be the last time for him to chat with the Doctor. After all, chances are that once he is out of the Exclusion Zone he will never return. Thinking of his future, all is a riddle.

He takes a deep breath before asking on, because he knows he’s about to inquire a secret.

“Can I ask you something? Talking about the Zone—is it true that you made it to the Wish Granter before Strelak?”

Sadness comes over the Doctor’s wrinkled face like a shadow.

“You mentioned my healing skills,” he says. “Also, you know that every fulfilled wish comes at a price. The price I have to pay is seclusion. Think about it.”

“So, after all the legend of the Wish Granter is true?”

“For some. I wouldn’t dare saying, the *Chosen*.”

“I could never make up my mind whether to believe it or not. Probably I better wanted it to be just a legend, so I believed it a legend. When I was there I didn’t dare wish for anything. Probably I’ve been a coward, missing on my only chance to find out the truth.”

“No. It was very wise of you. A choice one needs the most courage to take, even.”

“I’m glad you said that.” Tarasov heaves the sigh of someone who has just released from a burden weighing on his heart. “I’ve been having a run of bad luck ever since.”

“Bad luck? I heard of rookies who got eaten by blind dogs on their first day. *That’s* bad luck. But you? Some way or another, you always get through.”

“Maybe so.”

“If you want to know what I think, the fact that you made it to the Wish Granter and didn’t fall for the temptation makes you useful to the Zone. Yes—for the Zone, or better: the power behind it. You are still an empty page. Who knows what story will be written on it and how it will end? Not my business to know, mind you, neither would I want to look into anyone’s future if there were such an ability.”

“What do you mean by saying, ‘the power behind the Zone’?”

“You know best that the two Zones are connected. Superficially, by the Soviet past and Stalkers. Deeper, maybe by something that’s broken about our planet. Maybe you starting a new life in the New Zone is part of something bigger. Again, who knows? You might be a small link in a long chain of events. In any case, I don’t believe the Zone would let anyone survive if it had no plans for him. Or *her*, for that matter.”

The Doctor fills his cup with tea. Tarasov is about to reply when he continues his thoughts.

“However—I believe Nooria is special. More than you and me, who are just ordinary people sucked in by the Zone. She might be the proverbial place to stand on that’s needed to move the world – or at least what’s behind the Zone. From the very first moment I met her, I sensed power in her—power I’d never sensed before.”

“She is special, and wise too, but just human like us. Hartman and the others in the Tribe call her a witch, true enough, but that’s just a manner of speaking. If artifact lore and healing skills made her a real witch, Doc, you would be a veritable witchmaster!”

“That’s your wishful thinking, my friend. Don’t try to deny what can no longer be denied.”

“What are you hinting at? That she is not human?” Tarasov sneers. “Come on, Doc. I assure you she feels, smells and tastes like a flesh and blood woman.”

The Doctor grins. “Don’t tease an old and lonely man with things like that!”

For several minutes he appears to be fully consumed by the pleasure of inhaling the vapors rising from his tea cup. Finally, when Tarasov already thinks he wants to keep his wisdom to himself, the Doctor replies.

"I think she is a vessel holding power beyond our understanding."

"*Gospodi*, Doc! I'd never go into a gunfight with you."

"Why?"

"Because if I asked you for a spare mag, you'd tell me the history of gunpowder. So, in less flowery words?"

"Maybe your child will be that power. Perhaps it will rule both Zones, make them disappear – or spread over the whole world. Who knows?" Seeing the utter bewilderment on Tarasov's face, the Doc adds almost comfortingly: "Time, my friend. Only time will tell."

Stuck for words, Tarasov stares into the crackling fire. For long minutes he lets the time just pass by, enjoying calmness he hasn't felt in a long time; now however the Doctor's prophetic words have struck a chord of discomfort in his soul. Then a simple thing comes to his mind.

"It's about time to thank you for letting us stay."

The Doctor waves his hand in a gesture that could mean *don't mention it* but *it was the will of the Zone* as well. Probably both.

"I haven't seen Strelok in ages," he pensively says. "Sometimes I asked myself, could it be that he has died? And I kept telling myself, no—he will overcome any obstacle, he's just fine. He will always be a good friend. Druzhok is good enough company on most days, but he only cares about his lunch. It's more important to him than the fate of an old friend."

Tarasov gives him a world-weary look. "I always knew your mutant is almost human."

"No," the Doc says returning the bitter smile. "Some humans are like mutants."

"You know, I'm beginning to feel guilty over Nooria meeting only the worst of our people."

"That's because you keep bad company yourself. Stalkers, renegades, military, all kinds of Zone scoundrel, including an old medicine man hiding in the Zone's butt-hole," the Doc replies with thick irony. "And as if that hadn't been enough, now you'll join the Bandits! The worst of them all! Can't blame her if she hasn't yet applied for Ukrainian citizenship." They both chuckle. "Yes... no wonder she didn't have a chance to meet a few ordinary people who, after all, keep this country alive."

"Who always have and always will," nods Tarasov.

The Doctor raises his glass. Tarasov follows suit and they clink their glasses in a silent toast.

SBU headquarters, Kiev

“Idiots! You deserve two years *strafbat*! Cleaning up radioactive shit is the only thing you are good for!”

Captain Maksimov has endured more than enough pain during his missions into the Exclusion Zone. In battle, waves of adrenaline made him scream and swear and compensate for the pain. Now, standing at attention in Colonel Kruchelnikov’s office, he can only grind his teeth, trying to conceal the pain from the wound in his bandaged throat and the shame on his face. Sergeant Vlasov, whose Spetsnaz detachment was responsible for guarding Tarasov, is standing next to him and apparently doesn’t feel any better.

Colonel Kruchelnikov bashes his desk with both fists. His artery is swelling as he yells at them.

“First, Strelak makes a fool of you. Then your prisoner kills one of our best agents and stabs two guards while she walks away! Using *your* key card! And if that wasn’t already be a disgrace of incredible proportions, Tarasov too escapes from Cordon Base!”

“That was my fault, Colonel,” the sergeant boldly admits.

“Shut your mouth, Vlasov! Tell me, Captain, what the hell am I supposed to do with you two? You are not worth the price of the bullets I want to put in your heads!”

“Sir,” Maksimenko says shunning the Colonel’s eyes. “Agent Fedorka’s death is the greatest punishment that could ever fall on me.”

“What the hell happened with you and Fedorka? Don’t even think of lying to me!”

“Fedorka—I mean, I applied aggressive interrogation methods including, but not limited to psychological pressure. Things got out of control and—”

“Maksimenko. Captain Maksimenko,” the Colonel says with sudden calmness. “Did you ever see me wearing cap and bells?”

“No, sir,” Maksimenko replies, baffled at his superior’s change of mood. “Of course not, sir.”

“Then why do you take me for a fool?” If the Colonel was yelling at him before, he is screaming now. “Don’t you think I know everything about your liaison with Fedorka, including your perverted practices?!”

Maksimenko feels his face blush. He swallows and stares straight forward, standing stiff like a statue.

“Did you think you could keep anything secret from *me*? Did you forget where you work? Who I am? I looked the other way while you appeared a capable officer. Now you are not just a failure but a

laughingstock as well, and I will not tolerate ridiculous idiots in *my* Service!”

“Sir, the only thing I ask for is to give me a chance to kill Tarasov and his... partner. I have nothing left but my desire for revenge.”

The Colonel shakes his head and steps to the window, looking out into the rain. Several minutes pass and Maksimenko already hopes that the Colonel’s rage is spent.

“Idiots! Useless, incapable idiots!”

Kruchelnikov turns around to Maksimenko and the Spetsnaz. His face is red from anger.

“You will bring no more disgrace on my Service. Both of you will go to the New Zone and hunt down Tarasov, his woman, everyone around him! Even his pet mutant if he has one! From this moment, you are off our payroll until you bring me the renegade’s head on a silver plate. You have twelve hours to assemble a squad from the *strafbat* cleaning up Balaklava submarine base. Those are men who brought as much disgrace on our forces as you did. Nobody will miss them if they die with you, and you dying in that irradiated desert would be very much to my liking!”

“Sir! Will we be reinstated if we succeed?”

“Come again, Maksimenko?” Kruchelnikov makes a face as if not hearing well. “Reinstated? The only thing you can hope for is that I will not tear your head off with my own hands! Get your useless ass to Logistics and make your mission arrangements! Useless bastards...”

Maksimenko and the Spetsnaz perform a perfect salute and turn on their heels.

“We’re screwed,” Sergeant Vlasov says matter-of-factly when they have left the Colonel’s office.

Captain Maksimenko doesn’t reply. He sets his teeth but fails to prevent the mix of despair, shame and anger appearing on his face. They march down the corridor, avoiding the glances of other SBU staff. Maksimenko only opens his mouth to speak when they face an office door signposted *Transport and Logistics*.

“Tarasov,” he shouts and hits the wall with his fist, ignoring the pain. “Tarasov! I will not only kill you and your bitch, I will fucking exterminate you!”

Sergeant Vlasov grabs his Captain’s hand where the knuckles are already bleeding.

“Count me in, *komandir*, but don’t make this worse for you than it already is!”

“Damn!” Panting and with his face distorted from rage, Maksimenko bashes against the wall once more. “I will find the bastard. I will find and eliminate him even if I’ll have to hunt him for the rest of my life!”

“Sir—we will find him, but what’s good in finding him if you can’t pull the trigger with a broken hand? Let’s arrange things and begin the hunt!”

59

Ruined village north of Bagram, New Zone

Both Mac and Ahuizotl had spent a long time in the New Zone, but its vastness still makes them feel lost and fragile with every step they make.

The weirdly gnarled trees and ruins in the post-apocalyptic landscape were not really new, neither the remainders of life that had once thrived in the forsaken villages – wrecked trucks and abandoned homes. Walking the paths of the Exclusion Zone before had hardened their hearts. The low but constant crackling of their Geiger counters is the best proof of civilization being all but vain when nature’s rage becomes unleashed by accident or malevolence.

“Look at that peak,” Mac tells her companion. “It has a halo around it.”

“Must be the altitude,” Ahuizotl replies. “Light is dispersed somehow differently here.”

“Still weird.”

“Watch the surroundings, not the peaks.”

Deadly silence is all over the ruined village they are passing through. Holding her rifle cradled and ready to shoot, Mac watches Billy snuffle at the debris inside what had been a roadside shop, then adjusts her sunglasses that protect her eyes from the harsh sunlight and walks on. The sniper follows her steps at a distance of twenty meters, anxiously looking around every corner.

Mac stops and checks the map on her PDA. Unlike in the Exclusion Zone, no signal shows her current position and if she didn’t know the New Zone well, she would have a hard time keeping on track. The thought of new arrivals being confronted by the vast wilderness without any help to find their way makes her aware of how important their mission is.

“The hills aren’t far away now,” she says. “Yar’s closest marker is next to an abandoned airfield to the north.”

“How far?”

“Ten kilometers.”

“What’s your radiation reading?”

“Forty microroentgen per hour,” Mac says glancing at her Geiger counter. “Half of what’s in Pripyat on a dusty day.”

“Piece of cake.”

When they have left the village behind a few minutes later, Mac hears the sniper cuss in a low voice.

“No hay ninguna maldita diferencia...”

“What is it?” she asks.

The sniper halts and looks around before replying. “I was just looking at you, wearing that heavy armor, the intercom on your head, the sunglasses, the cradled weapon and all that – and your anxiety while moving through that godforsaken place. I guess the good guys were passing through the same way before the bad guys nuked the place.”

“What’s your point?”

“This land had it coming,” Ahuizotl sighs darting a wary eye around. “All it offers is peril. Always been like that—with or without the nukes, it’s all the same.”

“At least we know that anything that moves will move to kill us,” Mac says. “Without people around, there’s no false friends to fool us.”

60

Rostok (Bar), Exclusion Zone

It is dark, and white stars are shining, when Tarasov and his companions come at last to the abandoned industrial area that Stalkers call Rostok. The small Duty detachment guarding the southern road didn’t bother to question them; to them, the four travelers were just another band of Stalkers seeking shelter for the night.

Their passage has been smooth throughout the day. Tarasov nonetheless sighs with relief when they enter the maze of grey warehouses and factory halls.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the Top asks looking up to a Russian inscription written in bright yellow letters on a warehouse façade: *ТЕРРИТОРИЯ ПРИМЕНЕНИЯ ОРУЖИЯ В ПРЕДЕЛАХ ЛАГЕРЯ ЗАПРЕЩЕНО! НАРУШИТЕЛЕЙ ЖДЕТ РАССРЕЛ!*

“Duty Territory. Use of weapons is forbidden. Disobey this order and you will be shot.”

“Now we know who the local tough guys are.”

As if to echo the Top’s words, a loud announcement crackles from the intercomm.

“STALKERS! PROTECT THE WORLD FROM THE ZONE! JOIN DUTY!”

“Tough or not, I don’t mind them keeping mutants away,” Tarasov says entering the warehouse. “Duty knows how to keep this place safe, I give them that.”

To their left, beneath a large window where the glass has long been replaced by plywood boards, a row of rusted pressure tanks is lined up along the wall. To their right, a lonely guard watches them from a catwalk. He is wearing a full combat suit with his gas mask on, even though Tarasov's meters show no signs of any dangerous substance nearby. Noticing the four travelers, he shouts down from the catwalk.

"Idi svoeyi doro'goi, Stalker!"

"What's his problem?" Hartman asks.

"He said, 'get out of here, Stalker'."

"But we've just arrived!"

Tarasov just shrugs and moves on. "You'll hear it a lot here."

The nightfall has awoken a myriad of crickets who now fill the Zone with their high-pitched, rhythmic chirp. Through the loudspeaker comes the faint sound of music: a female voice sings a sad and slow song accompanied by a piano.

"I know that song," Nooria says. "It was playing in Sultan's telephone."

"It's certainly more pleasant than Duty's propaganda."

Pete has barely finished his sentence when another announcement comes.

"CHERNOBYL VETERANS! WE HAVE A HUGE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT THE WORLD FROM THE EXPANDING ZONE!"

"Give me a break," Tarasov grumbles.

Through the warehouse they reach an alley running along yet another industrial building. *ARENA – Danger Zone* is written on a grey metal gate. To their left, an almost identical building looms in the darkness. A huge sign reads *BAR* and, probably to make sure that even the dumbest Stalker finds his way to the local inn, another sign over the door of a lower building is painted in flashy green and red Cyrillic letters.

Tarasov leads his companions through a narrow lane between a concrete fence and more brick walls, until they reach a stair leading to the basement of a building that appears like an air-raid shelter. A bright lamp casts its light over the entrance and the promising sound of chatting patrons and glasses ringing in a toast comes from below.

"Welcome to the 100 Rads," Tarasov says with a smile.

"What's this?" the Top asks looking at the discolored picture fastened to the concrete wall of the staircase. It shows a soldier closely examining the breech of his rifle with a Russian text below.

"To have accuracy and agility in battle, maintain your rifle, soldier, as you maintain your life," Tarasov translates. "Sounds much better in Russian: *Chitob metkost i snorovku imet v boyu, hrani boets vintovku kak zhizn svoyu.*"

“Outstanding,” nods the former Marine. “I like this place.”

At the bottom of the stairs, behind a counter welded from metal grates, a Stalker is standing, wearing a Mercenary’s outfit consisting of a grayish fatigue with a wood camouflage assault vest worn over it. A black balaclava hides his face but his eyes give them a friendly wink. Seeing the travelers stopping and study the picture, he waves to them.

“*Nu chom stoish? Davai, podhodi!*” the Dutyer guarding the entrance says.

“Translation please,” Pete says.

“He said, ‘come in, don’t stand there!’” Tarasov replies as he walks down the stairs.

“You can’t go there!”

Pete looks at the second guard blocking the way to a dimly lit corridor who looks exactly like the other one calling them in a minute before. They resemble each other to the extent that for a moment, it occurs to Pete that he might be the same person. The only difference is that this one has noticed that some of them don’t speak English and has addressed them accordingly. It could have been a courtesy if he didn’t sound rude nonetheless.

Pete, however, is not much impressed – as if a bouncer in the middle of the Exclusion Zone greeting him in English would be the most natural thing.

“But you just told me to come in,” he says. “Make up your mind, dude.”

“I said, you can’t go there.”

“Why?” Pete asks.

“Because you can’t go there.”

“You told me that already.”

“And you should have gotten it the first time. I said, you can’t go there!”

“Never mind, Pete,” Tarasov says. “That’s just Barkeep’s quarters.”

Under the arched ceiling, two dozen Stalkers have gathered around a few roughly hewn tables. Their attire varies from the newcomers’ light jackets over jet pilot style protective suits to the heavy combat armor that the few Dutyers among them are wearing. However, not even the tough-looking fighters seem to be in a better mood than most Stalkers—alcohol has apparently taken a toll on the patrons’ spirits and a cloud of melancholy seems to linger over them. The food is certainly not something that could cheer anyone up: the only ingredient visible in the kitchen separated from the rest of the bar by a counter is the neatly skinned head of a boar in a huge pot, stewing over low fire. A ventilator standing on the top of a rusted refrigerator blows the vapors rising from

the pot directly towards the customers. It smells surprisingly pleasant, but seeing the source of the aroma would probably make even the hungriest customer think twice about ordering food.

Behind the counter, a balding, stout man walks slowly up and down, keeping his hands in the pockets of the lambskin vest he is wearing. The tucked-up sleeves of his green pullover reveal tattoos on his forearms resembling blue flames. Every movement he makes shows the calmness of someone completely aware of being the boss around here. He occasionally greets a familiar customer with a deep voice, not making an exception with Tarasov either.

“Hey man, how goes it?”

“*Nichego. Normalno,*” Tarasov casually replies.

Barkeep looks at the travelers with his eyes narrowed. He gives Tarasov a particularly inquisitive look.

“Making it to Rostok was a *major* feat,” he smirks and gives Tarasov a wink. “Welcome to the 100 Rads, Stalker.”

“Glad to be here,” Tarasov replies, relieved over their host’s apparent willingness not to blow their cover. “A bottle of Cossacks for me and my friends, please.”

“Here you go,” Barkeep says putting a bottle of vodka on the counter. Its blue label has a picture of a bunch of merry-looking Cossack raiders on it.

“Best vodka in Ukraine,” Tarasov proudly says and offers the bottle to his companions. “Cheers!”

An action movie plays on the small TV set on the top shelf, showing someone running along a train and brandishing a handgun. The TV is muted though, and an old-fashioned tape recorder plays a song featuring only two instruments – a bass guitar and a flute. It sounds overly melancholic but seems to fit the mood of the patrons. Enjoying the soothing effect of the spirit in his stomach, Tarasov allows himself for a moment of bliss – the chatter of the half-drunk Stalkers and the slow music evokes memories of days when he was still a player in the Zone, often meeting with old friends here. Although he hears a few sentences in French, German and a Slavic language he guesses to be Croatian, most of the chatter is Russian. Staring at the vodka bottle, he keeps on listening to the chatter and to practice his English, mentally translates the fragments of conversations overheard.

“*Pojrat bi chego khoroshego.*”

Wish we had something nice to eat.

“*Ne uchatsja nichemu nekotorie, I uchitsya ne khotyat, kina amerikanskogo nasmotrelis I krishi poekhali, ti emu pro anomalii, a oni pro khabar, tolko babki ikh interesuet.*”

Some don't learn anything, and they don't want to study either, they saw enough American movies and went nuts, you talk about anomalies and they tell you only the news, only money is what interests them.

"Net, ot sudbi tochno ne ubejat i nikuda ne detsja, shto napisano, to i proizojdet. Nichego ne vidno na gorizonte."

No, you cannot escape fate, what is written will happen. There is nothing on the horizon.

"Novichkov ninche—i vse oni lutshe starikov znayut."

Those rookies nowadays—they know everything better than the veterans.

"Vot ved kak grustno vse vikhodit."

So, that's how sad everything is.

He scans the faces in the Bar, hoping that he might discover Alexander Degtyarev's mysterious smile or another old friend under one of the hoods or through the eyeholes of a balaclava. He finds no familiar face except for one, and even then he wishes his eyes had never met.

"My information might well be of use to you, Stalker!"

The man who has mistaken his gaze for an invitation to chat is wearing a Bandit's long coat. The small mouth hole of his balaclava can't hide his grin. Tarasov turns his eyes away but the sinister figure keeps staring at him.

"Leave me alone, Snitch," Tarasov says. "Life is bad enough!"

"Come here. I have always got something for people like you."

An idea comes to Tarasov's mind. "No, Snitch, *you* come here. See that that tall guy in a Stalker suit? He might be interested in your intel. Doesn't speak much Russian, though."

Curious as to how the Tribe's most respected warrior would deal with the Exclusion Zone's most annoying pusher, Tarasov watches the Bandit approach the Top.

"I have always got something for people like you," Snitch says in broken English and pokes the Top's arm.

"Not interested," the Top replies looking him down as he would stare at an insect and then turns back to curiously studying the message board.

Snitch is not brushed off so easily. "But my information might well be of use to you, Stalker!"

"I said, not interested," the Top snaps at him with growing impatience.

"But my information—"

Snitch pokes the warrior's arm once more. The Top grabs Snitch at the collar of his long coat and effortlessly lifts him off the ground. "If you ask me one more time, trench coat, I fucking kill you!"

Pete is about to step to them but Tarasov stops him. Coughing and gasping for air, Snitch staggers to the counter where Tarasov offers him a sip from his vodka bottle.

"Thanks, man," Snitch says after taking a gulp. "That guy must have been with the Monolith. Holy God! Did you see how he lifted me?"

"What information do you want to sell, anyway?"

"Uh-oh!" Sensing a business opportunity, Snitch's eyes shine up. "It's about a renegade Spetsnaz major. The whole army is looking for him!"

"Why?"

"Dunno. I heard he finished off a whole Spetsnaz squad with a sawn-off shotgun." Snitch cautiously looks around and lowers his voice. "I also heard that he paid Duty a visit and killed all of Voronin's bodyguards. The general himself only survived because an emission came and they all had to hide!"

"Really?"

"Sure, man! If you put together all the men he has killed, they'd make up an army! You can imagine what the price on his head is! And I know where exactly in Limansk he's hiding! You can sneak up to him, kill him and collect the reward at Cordon Base!"

Tarasov bites his tongue to prevent himself from smiling bitterly.

"Sounds too dangerous to take on a guy like that."

"Damn rookie," Snitch grumbles. "Then keep on collecting snork legs for small change, you coward."

He retreats to a corner as far from the Top as possible.

"Damn," a half-drunk Stalker says at the counter, "if only someone helped me!"

"What's your problem?" Barkeep asks.

"I want to find out who plays this song with the flute, and no one can tell!"

"Sounds like Jethro Tull played ten times slower than the original," says Pete.

Barkeep makes a bewildered grimace. "Jethro – what? This is *Gurza Dreaming* by a band called Addaraya, Stalker."

"Really? My goodness, I was trying to find this out for ages!"

"Why didn't you just ask, stupid?" Shaking his head, Barkeep pokes his temple with his index finger. "Eh, rookies..."

"But who is Gurza?" the Stalker asks.

"Who cares? If my customers love it, the song could be even about a gay bloodsucker's wet dreams."

"I like this song too," Tarasov says. "Kind of resonates a bleak life, with little to hold on to."

“Yup,” Barkeep says with a nod. “Although most of my customers are happy if they can hold on to their vodka.”

Underlining Barkeep’s words, two drunk Stalkers start moaning at a nearby table.

“Same thing day after day... When is this all going to end?”

“Ravens, black ravens circling above the grave—”

“He was a good Stalker. Let’s drink to him once more!”

“Still alive?” Barkeep greets a shabby Stalker entering the Bar. “That’s great!”

The Stalker stares at him, as if the song, the chatter and Barkeep’s voice would make him realize only now that he is actually alive.

“How did I manage that?” he asks himself, probably wondering how he made it into the safety of Rostok with his Kevlar-padded jacket torn by mutants’ fangs and a bandage over his limb.

“Did you bring me the eye of a flesh?” Barkeep asks him.

“Mission accomplished,” the Stalker proudly says and puts a transparent plastic pouch to the counter. It appears to hold a small spherical object and is bloody inside.

“Keep that radioactive shit away from the counter, stupid,” Barkeep says. He wets his finger with his tongue and counts a bundle of bank notes, and then gives the Stalker three hundred rubles. Seeing the disappointment on the Stalker’s face he sighs, opens a drawer and gives him two cans of processed meat and a handful of shotgun shells.

“Why did I bother?” the disappointed Stalker grumbles as he puts his meager reward into his rucksack. “That was a bad raid... I guess it’s fate.”

“If you gathered anything else, show me what you got.”

The Stalker glances around, as if concerned that someone might steal the artifact he is about to show.

“Aw man, dog food is more valuable than this!” Barkeep says when peeking into the Stalker’s artifact container.

“Sidorovich told me just the same! But why? I found it near a Burner anomaly that almost scorched me!”

“Sidorovich is no idiot, neither am I. That’s a Droplet, cheap and common. If you want to talk business – you know the story about the fairytale about the Goldfish? Yeah, yeah, that’s the one. There are a bunch of jokes about it too. Anyway, I need that artifact. The client is from the outside, respectable. Will you help out?”

“I’m not interested in that kind of jobs.”

“It’s up to you, Stalker.”

“There is something else I want to ask you.”

“Spill the beans.”

“Have you seen Nimble around?”

“He moved his business to the *Skadovsk* long ago.”

“Damn! I want to buy a Desert Eagle.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s fucking awesome!”

“I will show you something fucking awesome,” Barkeep says and fishes a rusty iron bolt from his pocket. “Here’s a bolt. Still want a Desert Eagle? Yes? Throw a bolt. This will save your life, not a handgun with a recoil that kicks like a mule. Take it and don’t let the door hit you!”

When the frustrated Stalker has left, Barkeep turns to Tarasov. “You have anything to sell? Or maybe you interested in buying stuff?”

“How much cash do we have?” Tarasov asks the Top.

“We haven’t spent a dime since entering the Zone. Let me see... we still have about fifteen hundred.”

“What can we get for 12 000 hryvni or 46 000 rubles?”

“No need to calculate so hard,” Barkeep replies with a smile. “I accept dollars as well. Come, have a look at my stock. Garik, let them in, will you?”

“At last now I’ll see what this dude’s been guarding,” Pete says as they enter the corridor.

The door leading to the counter opens to their left, and a short glance reveals nothing particular but the usual, if a little messy, kitchen stuff: sinks packed with dirty plates and drinking glasses, a red propane gas container feeding the small stove, drawers and cupboards. The corridor leads to a spacious room where a few cabinets and a safe stand. Two tables and a sofa with relatively clean upholstering occupy much of the space inside. The room is tidy and well-maintained. Even the two neon rods fixed to the ceiling are operational, unlike in the badly lit drinking area.

“Have a seat,” Barkeep says as he opens the safe, jerking his thumb towards the sofa. “1500 dollars can get you some pretty good stuff. Matter of fact I do have a Desert Eagle in stock.”

Hartman waves his hand in disinterest. “The only thing more overrated than the Desert Eagle is Godfather Two.”

“You don’t say.”

“Bulky, heavy, difficult to maintain in the field – thanks but no thanks.”

“You got anything particular in mind, then?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start. A Colt M1911 perhaps?”

“We call it Kora-919 in the Zone.” Barkeep takes the Top’s favorite pistol from his safe. “You want plain FMJ bullets or something with a bigger punch? Here, these have an improved hollow point for better

expansion and a steel penetrator. A good combination of stopping power and penetration.”

“Barkeep, marry me,” the Top happily says, apparently under the influence of vodka. “I want to have children with you!”

“Give me a break. I have already three kids in the Big Land and they’re a pain in the ass. Take the Kora if it gives you a hard-on.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, okay?”

The Top lets the empty magazine slide from the grip and cocks the pistol. Satisfied with the weapon’s condition, he opens the green and white paper box with the diagonal black stripe that has *Hydroshock* written in it and starts loading the magazine with the rounds that have a black dot on the tip of the copper-colored projectile. “Outstanding.”

Tarasov nods. “Side arms are a good idea. Two more pistols is what we need, same type or at least same caliber.”

“Two H&K USPs perhaps? Apart from those, I have a few Makarovs, of course, then a Beretta 92—”

“Pete, check out those USPs. Then, I wouldn’t mind having something for close quarters, like an AKS-74U. You have one? Perfect! Pete, have a look at that carbine too. Finally, we could trade in that TOZ for something longer.”

“I have no SVD in stock, sorry, and don’t even ask me for a Val or Vintorez.”

“Too bad,” Tarasov sighs. “I was just about to.”

“I can sell you a PSO scope that you could mount on your AN104.”

“Does it come with the receiver?”

“No problem. Would the kid like to have an AK47?”

“With all due respect, I’d prefer an AR15, an M4 or something less antiquated,” Pete says.

“That’s the spirit,” says the Top approvingly.

“Maybe from Skinflint in the Military Warehouses, if you want to hike so far. Which would be a stupid thing to do, considering that this *Kalash* is in pretty good condition.”

“The muzzle break is misaligned,” Pete says inspecting the rifle. “It’s jolted to the right.”

“Jesus, Mari... Mary and Joseph,” the Top snaps at Pete. “How come you don’t know shit about the AK? It shoots 7,62mm as every child knows and has a tendency to jolt the barrel upwards and to the right. That cut-off muzzle break makes the gas exit from the barrel exactly to that direction, practically pressing the barrel to the lower left to balance out the jolt.”

“Sorry. I was a desk rat with the supply train, did I ever tell you that?”

“Things are better learnt late than never,” Tarasov says with a smile. “We’ll need two or three extra magazines for each rifle and some spare ammo, of course.”

“Here are the mags,” Barkeep says and presses the spring in each magazine to test their condition. He also takes half a dozen small paper bags from the safe. Each holds exactly as many 5,45x39mm rounds as needed to fill the magazine of an AKM or AKS-74U carbine. He keeps on rumbling inside the safe until he finds similar paper bags holding 7.62x39mm rounds for Pete’s AK-47. “What about that silent Stalker with you? He’s small, so maybe I can recommend something lighter for him? I have a serviceable MP5 in stock, or a Scorpio submachine gun—”

“I have my own weapon,” Nooria says.

Barkeep looks at her in surprise. The balaclava that Nooria is wearing hides her features but the sound of her voice of course betrays her gender.

“I should set a dress code for Stalkers coming to the 100 Rads,” Barkeep grumbles. “No balaclavas, no gas masks, no curtain helmets. Half the Stalkers always moan about not having women in the Zone without realizing that the guy next to them might actually be one. Well, what you are and who you are is none of my business, anyway... Anything else?”

“We have a few NATO standard gas mask filters.”

“This is Duty territory if you haven’t realized. No Freedomers come here.”

“Barkeep, Barkeep,” Tarasov says shaking his head. “As if you, Skinflint, Sidorovich and the other traders wouldn’t have your own little network. Come on, let a rookie bring the filters over to the Freedom base and you cut a deal with Skinflint. At least your errand boys would have something better to do than bringing you mutant body parts.”

Barkeep grins. “Now that you mention mutants – imagine, not long ago an obscure client asked me for a burer. Alive. Would you believe that? Luckily, there’s that old character by the name of Trapper at Yanov. He and his guys managed to catch one in the abandoned railway tunnel between Jupiter and Pripyat. I let the client’s purse bleed dry but his representative paid me on the nail.” Barkeep shakes his head. “Well, in the Nineties, the newly rich kept potbelly pigs, then weasels and ermines were the craze, now it’s obviously mutants from the Zone. I don’t know where the world outside is heading, really... Anyway, what you said makes sense. How many filters you got?”

“Four, with two spare cartridges. With that, would it be altogether?” Tarasov asks.

Barkeep fishes a calculator from his vest pocket.

“Three handguns, an AKS-74U, a *Kalash* and a PSO scope, plus the mags and ammo... So, if I take that hunting rifle and the filters off your

hands for, let's say, two hundred thirty... that leaves us with 1270 dollars. You didn't mention bandages, medikits and food rations but that goes without saying. Am I right? So, plus the small stuff, it all comes to 1400."

The Top looks at Tarasov who shrugs in reply. "Pay him. It's a bit more than we had expected, Barkeep, but I don't think you're in the mood to haggle."

"Never."

"You seem to make good business anyway."

Satisfied with the deal, Barkeep shuts the safe and waves them to follow him back to the bar. Before switching off the lights he stops for a moment.

"Don't let yourselves be fooled by the crowd tonight," he tells Tarasov under his breath. "The 100 Rads rarely gets packed these days. Many Stalkers have left for the New Zone. The good news is, it seems that Bandits are also migrating there and that means less trouble for me and my suppliers."

"I guess it does," Tarasov says, at the same time being curious and concerned about where Barkeep's story goes. "What's your point about the Bandits?"

"Certain Stalkers join them because that's the easiest way to get to the New Zone. I don't know how they do it but it's just the way it is. Many of those trying to get out with the Bandits are on the run from bad guys, like debt collectors or worse—Duty, the Army, the SBU... who knows? There's a lot of hunters out there."

Tarasov suddenly he feels the same iciness in his guts like he did in the moments when it dawned on him that Shumenko is about to betray him.

"Sometimes my own and the bad guys' interest is the same," Barkeep continues, "but not today. If the bullets I've just sold you eventually end up in a few Bandits' cold bodies, no matter if here or in the New Zone—my interest will stay the same tomorrow."

"If so, there's no reason to change that even on the day after tomorrow," Tarasov replies.

"*Molodets*," Barkeep says with a shrewd smile. "Enjoy your stay at the 100 Rads!"

He turns off the lights and ushers the travelers back to the bar.

"Are you going to eat that?" Nooria asks as they pass by the kitchen where the aroma emanating from the smoldering boar head assails their nostrils.

For a moment, Barkeep appears perplexed but then he gives a bellowing laugh.

“What? The boar? Oh for God’s sake, how could you even think of that? I heat it to collect the fat when it starts running.” Barkeep is still smiling as he takes the promised first aid kits, bandages and a few plastic trays with army rations from below the counter. “Boars have a high resistance to radiation and their fat makes an excellent coating for protective suits.”

“Amazing,” Nooria says with eager interest. “Do you know more such recipes?”

“I know a few, but they are my trade secrets,” Barkeep says.

Nooria is disappointed. “Oh. Pity. I could have also shared some of my own recipes.”

“You? Come on, you look like greenness incarnate to me. No offense, but have you ever seen an artifact from close?”

“Yes. I use pestle and mortar to make artifacts smaller or turn into powder, and apply it to weapons, wounds, armor... like that,” Nooria shrugs and giggles. “I have a knife that can cut an artifact in two.”

“Don’t waste your breath, Nooria,” Tarasov says packing their purchase into his rucksack. “Barkeep won’t believe it.”

“If I have an artifact that would be good for health but is radiating, and another which is good against radiation, I take a small part of health artifact, add a piece of radiation artifact, and put them together in a nice casing. So I will have an amulet that will make one healthy but doesn’t emit radiation.”

“Your mate was right. I’d sooner believe the Wish Granter’s legend than that!”

Barkeep’s laughter is not meant to be mocking, though it is clear that he didn’t believe a word. Nooria hides her smile under her hood. She is still smiling when she climbs up the stairs and joins her companions on their search for a safe spot to spend the night, hidden from the Duty patrols that stroll along the brick buildings and walls of concrete slabs.

Tarasov leads them into a factory hall nearby. The roof has huge holes but where it is still intact, two Loners have already made themselves comfortable at a campfire.

“Do you mind if we join you?” he asks them.

“Not at all, if you have something to trade,” a Loner replies. His companion laughs.

“They don’t look like they need that jamming MP5 you’ve been trying to sell all day, Varyag!”

“We’ve had enough of trading for today,” Tarasov says. “But we can share some food with you. You look hungry, *bratanki*.”

Without asking, Nooria takes a few rations from Tarasov's rucksack and offers them around. Then she takes her blanket and cuddles close to Tarasov.

"*Spasiba*," the Stalker referred to as Varyag says as he takes a can of meat from Nooria. "What's the price?"

Tarasov takes a closer look at Varyag who appears to be the more experienced of the two Loners. He is wearing the standard Stalker suit, but patches here and there tell of gunfights survived and his Vintorez of dangerous enemies overcome – or at least enough money made on perilous missions to afford such an expensive weapon.

"A good story would do," Tarasov says. "My friends are from, erh, England and don't speak much Russian but I will translate."

"Don't worry, I speak English! I am from Sweden myself."

"That's why they call you Varyag then? Like those Norse warriors in Russian history?"

"Exactly," the Swede says proudly.

The Top, who was stretching his arms and back with sighs of satisfaction while they were speaking, notices the other Stalker eyeing Nooria.

"I think these guys haven't seen too many Stalkers cuddling at a campfire," he whispers to Tarasov.

"So what? If any of them have any objection to my woman's presence in the Zone, I'll just shoot them."

"Sounds like a plan," Hartman nods and bites into a slice of bread. Tarasov turns back to Varyag.

"So, what about that story?"

"You guys ever heard the story about the Crystal Shard? No? You know, it's supposed to be a splinter of the Wish Granter itself. A unique artifact if there ever was one. So, there were this group of Loners when the Zone was just being explored. Three guys who had been the best of friends since they started out from the Rookie Village to explore the Zone. They were a merry bunch, except for one who was heartbroken ever since his girlfriend died in a car crash."

"The Zone," Tarasov says staring into the fire. "Adventure for some, riches for others, and a chance to escape the past for the unlucky ones."

"Don't get poetic on me, bro! It's my story, OK?" Varyag says. "Yeah, of course she was beautiful and sweet and her name was..."

"Natasha, of course," the other Loner says who obviously heard the story before.

"Shut up, big mouth! Anyway, one day when they were exploring an old building somewhere in the Wild Territories after a Duty patrol chased the bandits away. The commander of the Duty squad had ordered his men

not to enter, he said the building gave him the creeps and he was a man who trusted his gut feelings.”

“A rare specimen,” Tarasov says smiling.

“Yeah, kind of,” Varyag says with a grin and looks around for any Dutyer who could have overheard them. Seeing none around, he continues. “But our friends were not of the superstitious kind, so they entered the complex. At first everything seemed just great – small artifacts everywhere, only minor doses of radiation. That was until they saw what looked like a faint blue light. And, like most of us would, they immediately thought they had found the mother of all artifacts.”

Varyag fishes a bottle from his rucksack and takes a swig of vodka before he continues. “Once they entered, they found an artifact that didn’t look like anything they had seen before. It looked more like the kind of crystals you see in sci-fi flicks. There was something weird about it and they couldn’t make up their mind as to what to do about it. Eventually, the bravest decided to pick it up while the rest were guarding the door.”

“Pass me that bottle, Varyag, will you?” the other Loner says.

“Only if you stop interrupting me. So, they got horrified when they heard him suddenly scream *Natasha!* before falling to his knees. When one of them ran up to see what was wrong, he just stood up and picked up his PKM and started firing all over the room, screaming her name.”

“A man with his woman’s name for a battle cry,” Nooria whispers. “Beautiful.”

“He then charged through the door and ran out of the building still screaming and firing his machine gun while holding the crystal in the other hand. The others tried to run after him but were pinned down by his fire. Once he ran out of bullets he just charged away, never to be found again.”

Varyag falls silent.

“That’s the end?” Tarasov asks.

“No. My throat is dry and I’m out of vodka. I need to lubricate my tongue, if you follow my meaning.”

Tarasov offers him his own. After a long gulp, Varyag wipes his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and continues.

“His friends were shocked by everything that had happened and returned to the Bar. But since they were friends, they decided to go back for him. Eventually they found him in the basement, sitting in a corner with a gun in one hand and the crystal artifact they had found earlier in the other one. His machine gun lay on the ground – he used his Makarov to blow his brains out. As the Stalkers looked at the mess, they heard a scream in the distance – *Natasha!*”

For a moment, the crackling of the fire is the only noise to be heard. Then, far away beyond the decaying walls, a mutant howls.

"Some people say the artifact was a piece of the Wish Granter," Varyag continues, "or some deranged version of it that shows your worst fear over and over again. He wanted to see his beloved again, and his wish was granted – just not in a way he had imagined."

Silence falls again, longer and deeper than before the Stalker had concluded telling his story. It's Hartman who breaks the silence.

"And that's what you guys are still after? Some abomination that turns your deepest desires into nightmares?"

"Everyone hopes to fare better than the man before him," Tarasov replies. "Legends die hard."

"Oh, women... they're like a shadow," the Top says with a sceptic wave. "They always keep following us, even when we think we got rid of them—at least for a little while."

"You've spent too much time with Sawyer," Pete says, laughing. "Do you have a woman at all?"

Hartman laughs. "No! I jerk off lubricating my palm with gun grease and shout *Semper Fi!* when I cum."

"That coincides with how I think of you, actually."

"Jesus-H-Christ, Pete! What did I do to you to think of me like that?"

"More or less everything since we met."

"You are so wrong about me. Of course I have a woman, and a damn hot one too!"

"A Hazara wife in the Alamo?"

"Nope. They ain't my type. Sorry about that, Nooria. No offense."

"None taken, Top."

"In the States, then?"

"Yes and no. Why do you think I don't want to put Katie Stone in harm's way?"

"*Gospodi!* I should've guessed that."

"Yup. Finest piece of ass ever wrapped up in combat fatigue. Makes the best macaroni with cheese in the world, too."

"You must be missing her very much."

"I do, Nooria. But imagine what would happen if *I* step out of the line, should she ever get hurt."

"An embarrassingly high body count, I guess," Tarasov smiles. "But wait—you promised her to be assigned to Driscoll's squad. Good God, why him?"

"Guess I reached my breaking point. It was a compromise with the Colonel—she can come, but assigned to the squad who acts as security team. You've seen one of our battles and know what that means."

“They are the ones preventing the enemy from escaping.”

“That’s correct. Our assault teams usually don’t take prisoners. The security team does, because the big fish among the ragheads is usually trying to escape while their foot soldiers get martyred. This is the only way the Colonel can keep Driscoll under control. If he is not restrained by strict and direct orders in battle, he might just go mad. We might be a bit crazy but we don’t want anyone to act like a madman in battle.”

“Hey! What the hell are you talking about?” asks Varyag. “Instead of talking bullshit, tell me—did you like my story?”

“We did,” Tarasov says and darts a glance to the Top and Pete that means *hold your tongues*. “You don’t need to bother asking, Stalker. I do respect you. Your story was impressive.”

“Thanks,” the Loner replies, apparently pleased. “Do you have any stories to tell?”

“Heard this joke once,” Tarasov says. “A veteran Stalker is standing at a crossroads, looking at a sign: ‘if you go right, there will be anomalies and a little loot’, ‘if you go forward, there will be lots of mutants and more loot’ and ‘if you go left, there will be a shower with hot water, women, and endless loot’. He thinks for a while and then walks on, talking to himself: ‘I know about anomalies, mutants and loot but what does shower and women mean?’”

“Wow, you’re good!” Varyag says laughing. “Anything slightly newer?”

“*Konchay uzhe*,” his fellow says. “Without music, no happiness.”

He takes a battered guitar from behind his back and begins to tune it.

“What will you play?” Varyag asks.

“He was a good Stalker,” replies the guitar player.

“Who?”

“That’s the name of the song I’m going to play, *novichok!*”

“Haha! Look who’s talking,” laughs Varyag. “*You* are a dumb rookie if you still get fooled by the same silly question, day after day...”

61

Red Forest, Exclusion Zone

When the Chernobyl disaster occurred in 1986, the Wormwood Forest received the highest doses of radiation. In the worst affected areas, the pines turned red and died, causing the survivors to give the area a new name: Red Forest.

In the post-disaster cleanup operations, a majority of the pine trees were bulldozed and buried in trenches, very much like mass graves containing the most innocent victims of this nuclear holocaust. The

trenches were then covered with a thick carpet of sand and planted with pine saplings. Since then, the saplings grew into adult pines, some of them bending and twisting by mutation.

More than one ghastly mutated pine appears on the roadside where the companions walk northwards. Once the road was a long clearing, cut into the dense forest to accommodate a long line of utility poles. They had fallen into disrepair long ago – some collapsed, others still stand with shreds of anomalous vines hanging down like curtains from the steel structures, slowly moving in the wind and resembling gigantic ghosts in the approaching twilight.

Tarasov, always walking a few steps ahead and scanning their path for anomalies and mutants, climbs up a boulder and studies a utility pole through his binoculars. This one is still connected by electricity cables to the next one, and a ball of blue lightning travels along between the two structures, emitting a sparkling glitter against the reddening horizon. His Geiger counter ticks faster than usual.

There is a dilapidated log hut close to the steel structure with a wrecked vehicle in front of it. The wreck has the chassis and cabin of a truck, but the superstructure of a bus is mounted to the flatbed. The mule of a vehicle might have been used to transport the workers who dug up the trenches to contain the contaminated pines, and left to its fate when it broke down three decades ago. Rust and decay has done away with most of the blue and white paint that had once covered it.

He glances at his watch and sighs.

“Something not okay?” the Top asks.

“Spending the night here would not be okay. We better move on,” Tarasov says. “Time for medicine. Take an antirad, everyone. Have a sip of vodka too.”

Before he jumps down from the boulder, Tarasov scans the road ahead once more, and then zooms in the binoculars.

“Hold. Take cover behind this boulder. I see someone ahead.”

The Top climbs up the boulder and joins Tarasov who has already assumed a prone position.

“Hostiles?”

“Hard to tell from this distance,” Tarasov says giving him the binoculars. “We’d better presume they’re not friendly.”

“Wise precaution.”

Looking through the binoculars again, Tarasov sees the small group getting closer. Now he can see their outfit better – the half dozen men approaching them are wearing heavy body armor with NATO-issue wood camouflage, their faces covered with modern gas masks with large, triangular eye lenses. He can recognize their weapons too – three are

cradling G-36 assault rifles, one is armed with a Dragunov SVD and another fighter, apparently the leader because he is the only one wearing an exoskeleton, has a powerful LR-300-ML assault rifle with a scope and grenade launcher attached. His armor has the same camouflage like that of the other, dark red and brown patches resembling the shades of an autumn forest.

“Here comes Freedom,” Tarasov says.

“Is that good or bad?” the Top asks.

“Hard to tell.”

Although the dark forest doesn’t seem to hide any immediate danger, the Freedom squad moves with the caution of experienced soldiers.

Tarasov reconsiders their options.

“Freedomers would probably not open fire on Loners,” he whispers.

“But this being the Red Forest and any squad patrolling it probably being over the edge, we better be careful about how we behave.”

“I hate hiding but maybe we better just keep out of their way?”

Tarasov is about to reply when the Freedom squad stops at the hut and assumes a defensive position. It seems impossible for them to have detected Tarasov or any of his companions, meaning that the squad is bracing for a different danger.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Tarasov whispers. “Whatever makes such a heavily armed squad feel unsafe, we better avoid it too.”

He gives a hand signal to Pete and Nooria to duck behind the boulder. Before he can take another look at the startled Freedom squad, he hears the first shot being fired. It comes from the forest and makes Tarasov wonder about who would be crazy enough to hide in ambush where only the toughest of protective armor could save one from lethal radiation.

A deep voice makes his blood curdle. It is a battle cry, seeming all the more merciless for the monotony in it.

“Onward, warriors of the Monolith. Avenge your fallen brothers. Blessed, as they are in their eternal union with the Monolith.”

“A Monolith Preacher! This will be something, Top!”

“Clusterfuck Central to those Freedom guys. Look!”

The Top points in the direction of the dense undergrowth behind the log hut. Several ambushers appear, giving suppressive fire while more of them jump out from the bushes on the opposite side of the road, moving in to flank the hard-pressed defenders.

The ambushed Freedomers defend themselves as best as they can. As they return fire from their cover they even have the guts to taunt the ambushers.

“Here is a grenade for you! Yeah, one is dead!”

“We must break out!”

“No! Sashka’s down!”

The deep voice sounds from the forest again, with no emotion and all the more fearful for that.

“Bring death to those who spurn the holy power of the Monolith.”

In reply, the ambushers shout from both sides.

“Death to the enemies of the Monolith!”

A desperate shout comes from behind the truck.

“*Svoboda vperyod!*”

Freedom, forward. Last time Tarasov heard this, it came from his trusty guide in the New Zone, before he died at the hand of First Lieutenant Driscoll.

“Top! You and the Tribe must make good the death of a friend of mine! Follow me!”

“We join the battle?”

“Hell yes!”

He glances at the Top and freezes, seeing that his companion is breathing like a predator smelling blood, with eyes shining in anticipation of the upcoming fight and giving Tarasov the look of a wolf pack leader ready to begin the hunt.

It dawns on Tarasov only now that his companion is not just any veteran soldier but the second-in-command of the Colonel, a warlord commanding hundreds of men who are willing to go through hell at his mere word—and a few of them actually did beneath the City of Screams. But so did Tarasov, too, and a strange sensation creeps into his mind that he has never felt before battles in his previous life—blood thirst.

“We have their right flank!” he yells. “Pete, watch over Nooria! Top, let’s get them!”

“I’m gonna put that monolith up their butt!” the Top bellows back at him with a grin and jumps off the boulder.

Running up quickly on the two opposite sides of the road, both open fire from their assault rifles. From the corner of his eye, Tarasov sees that despite the heat of battle, the Top isn’t acting reckless by far: moving crouched, he ducks and kneels to offer a target as difficult to hit as possible. What impresses him even more is the accuracy of his fire—within a few seconds, the former Marine downs two of the hostile fighters before they can reach the cover of the truck.

Their surprise attack directs the ambushers’ attention to their right flank, allowing the pinned down Freedomers to intensify their fire.

“A grenade’s not stupid, man!” someone shouts inside the hut. A grenade flies from the window. One Monolithian has a quick enough reaction time to leap away, evading the blast behind the truck, but also

exposing himself for a moment long enough for Tarasov to take aim and pull the trigger.

“One down,” he shouts.

Their adversaries are not new to combat either and soon realize that they outnumber their new attackers. The Preacher barks a command and five heavily armed fanatics begin raking them with bullets.

“Cover!” Tarasov shouts and lays prone.

Nasty curses blend with intense rifle fire as the Freedomers scramble to break out from their position.

“Retreat, brothers,” the Preacher bellows.

Tarasov aims his rifle in the direction where he expects the Monolithians to retreat towards the forest, using the truck as cover between them and the counterattacking Freedomers. The Preacher’s next command surprises him as much as it frightens him.

“Fall back behind those boulders, brothers!”

With two of them firing their weapons backwards to keep the Freedomers at bay, the remaining half dozen Monolithians start running towards the safety of the boulders where Nooria and Pete are hiding, confident that they can run over Tarasov and the Top who have barely any cover between the dirt road and the forest. Two bullets from Tarasov’s rifle hit the Preacher but apparently fail to penetrate his armored suit.

“Pistol time,” Hartman shouts and fires his M1911 at the Preacher. A Monolithian jumps at him, preventing Hartman from shooting at his commander from point-blank range. He dies in his place when the Top’s next shot hits him. Tarasov exchanges a few bursts with the Monolithian closing in on him. At this distance neither of them needs to aim carefully. His adversary falls but Tarasov also feels sudden heat explode in his limb. Clenching his teeth, he turns after the three Monolithians who ran through their positions and have almost reached the boulder by now.

“Go for the Preacher, Top!” Tarasov screams and fires the last three bullets in his magazine after the Monolithian leader.

“Changing mag!”

Kneeling, the Top carefully aims his M1911 and fires. The head of a Monolithian jolts back, and then he falls face forward to the ground with his arms stretched out. The few seconds Tarasov need to reload his rifle are enough for the last two Monolithians to reach the boulders. His burst from the reloaded rifle hits one of them in the limb, making the hostile fighter emit a painful cry and let his weapon fall, but then he hears the Preacher’s blood-curdling yell from behind the boulders.

“No mercy to the enemies of the Monolith!”

Then an AK barks two short three-round bursts.

With the Top at his side, Tarasov runs to Pete and Nooria's cover. To his relief, he finds Nooria unharmed, with Pete standing over the Preacher's wriggling body on the ground.

"Enemies of the Monolith—can't you understand the good we do to you? Die!"

The Preacher feels with his hand for his AS VAL assault rifle lying a step away from him.

"No. Can't *you* understand you're dead?" Tarasov says drawing his pistol. "Nooria, look elsewhere."

But before he can pull the trigger aiming at the Preacher's head, Pete fires his AK47 once more.

"I killed a man," the youth says without emotions. "Now I'm no less than you. No better either."

"He was about killing us, little brother," Nooria says.

"Yeah... One moment he was still yelling his bullshit, trying to kill us, then I pulled the trigger and he was dead."

"It wasn't the first kill in your life, son," the Top says. "Remember that ambush?"

"The first where I was close enough to see his face."

"Keep up the good job, Marine."

"Don't think too much of it," Tarasov says and gives the kid a comforting pat on the back. "Monolithian fanatics are not even remotely good guys."

"That's not what I mean, Mikhailo." Pete stares at the dead Preacher with the look of someone who just woke up from a long slumber. "I killed a man and I liked it."

"Slowly, you're becoming fit for the Tribe," the Top says with a satisfied smile.

"What did you like about that?" Tarasov asks.

"Myself. I liked myself over not feeling anything."

Tarasov nods and gives him a smile. "That's good to know. The Top would disagree but if you have a hang for killing, death will also have a hang for you."

"Oh, come on with that," the Top says rolling his eyes. "Let's get down to earth. We made it through and they didn't. That's that! On we go."

"Yes, we better go. It's almost dark. Nooria, you okay?"

"I am. But look, that man is still alive!"

They all look at the Monolith fighter lying a few steps away. It was the fighter whom Tarasov hit after reloading his rifle. Rolled on his side and wriggling in an embryonic position, the Monolithian moans from pain.

“*Ya ranen! ...*”

The Top moves to shoot him but Tarasov holds him back. Undecided about what to do with the wounded enemy, he kneels down to him. However, it is not him but Hartman the Monolithian is talking to.

“*Bratan,*” he says raising an arm and pointing to the Top, “you are a brother! You are one of us! I feel it!”

“What’s he saying, Major?”

“Just bullshit,” Tarasov replies and looks elsewhere. Strange thoughts come to his mind.

A Monolithian recognizing a Tribe warrior as a spiritual brother? Could it be that the Wish Granter and the evil altar beneath the City of Screams are related?

“Seems like he is talking to me, Major. Hey, you’re looking pale!”

Of course they are. The Colonel’s men wished for ruling the world. They got it, in the Wish Granter’s twisted way. Oh God – it’s all the same!

“He’s... just talking in delirium.”

“Wow, wow, wow,” a cheerful voice says. “You’ve got really bad karma, that’s for sure!”

The Freedom commander raises a hand in greeting. Two of his men accompany him, holding their assault rifles cradled. Judging by their heavy gear, Tarasov believes them to be one of Freedom’s more elite assault teams and not the reckless guerillas this faction is infamous for.

“Peace,” he greets them. “We’re just Loners on our way to Yanov.”

“Whoever you are, you really helped us out. Thanks!” the Freedom commander replies. “We’ll chat later but first, let’s see to this fellow here. I’m gonna patch him up first and then interrogate.”

“How?”

“By a great display of teamwork,” the Freedomer says as he takes a first-aid kit from his rucksack and tends to the Monolithian’s wound. “Tolik and Kolya will grab him, I’ll count till three and then they throw him into the nearest anomaly.”

“Are you joking?”

“Yes. Kolya, help him up and bring him to that log hut. We’ll stay there for the night.”

“Always me,” the Freedomer called Kolya grumbles but drags the Monolithian on his feet.

“My name is Che,” the Freedom leader says. “We lost two good men to these fanatics but it would’ve been more without you showing up. Before you ask—we have nothing in a way of reward, if that’s why you’re looking at me like kids at Santa Claus.”

“I’d be pleased enough if you let me keep the Preacher’s VAL rifle,” Tarasov says.

“Oh, *that’s* why you’ve that look on your face,” Che replies, smiling. “It’s yours, along with anything else you find, except intel. Maps, PDAs and all stuff like that belong to Freedom. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Perfect. Unless you insist on marching through the Red Forest at night, join us in the log hut.”

“Who are these guys actually?” asks the Top when Che has left.

“Daredevils and anarchists,” Tarasov replies. “I like their company but loathe their ideas.”

“What are their ideas?”

“Officially, to share the Zone’s secrets with the whole world. In reality, to let Western powers steal those secrets from us Ukrainians. Why, where do you think they got all that NATO gear from?”

“I’m not much into local politics, Mikhailo, but we’d better accept their offer. If something nasty comes out of this forest at night it’s better to have more guns around.”

Tarasov looks up into the sky where bright stars shine on the deep blue sky. In a few minutes it will be dark.

“I’m with the Top,” Pete says.

“Right then,” Tarasov concludes seeing that Nooria also nods. “Just don’t tell these guys that we’re going to join the Bandits.”

He takes the silenced, 9mm caliber assault rifle from the Preacher and pats down the corpse for anything valuable.

“I’ve been wanting this rifle ever since I left for the New Zone,” Tarasov says, eyeing his new possession with satisfaction. “But a Gauss rifle would have been even better... Anyway, if not even their Preachers are equipped with coil guns anymore it means we really gave them a beating after Operation Fairway.”

“Coil guns? Jesus!”

“Their god is called Wish Granter, Top.”

The Freedomers have already lit up a small campfire inside the log hut. Two bodies lie outside with a blanket pulled over their faces. With darkness falling, the first mutants begin to howl in the forest outside.

“I think we made the right decision,” Hartman observes.

Tarasov bows his head for a greeting as they enter the log hut. It smells like earth and damp wood inside. One of the five Freedomers is about to make a campfire, cussing under his breath at the soggy branches not catching fire. Three of his comrades are wearing bandages, apparently to treat the wounds suffered during the ambush. The fighters called Tolik and Kolya flank the captured Monolithian while Che is rolling an improbably big joint.

“I kinda like these fellows,” Pete says with his eyes shining.

"If you even reach for that stuff I gonna break your damn hand," Hartman grumbles.

"Hey hello, our nameless saviors!" one of the wounded fighters says for a greeting. "Are you looking for a safe place?"

"Yeah," Tarasov answers.

"Well, buddy," the Freedomer drawls, "then you're at the best place. Freedom will watch over you tonight!"

"That's very reassuring," Tarasov says.

Meanwhile, Che has lit up the joint. He removes the prisoner's helmet and the hazmat mask. A young and handsome face appears, though the look in his eyes is empty.

"Oh Monolith, why did you abandon us," he whispers.

"I haven't the foggiest idea buddy, but this will help your imagination." Che draws on the joint and then forces it between the prisoner's lips. "Attaboy. Now take a deep breath or I shoot you."

No one is surprised when the prisoner prefers to inhale.

"So, how many of you are there in Limansk? I've shared this first-class weed with you, you must have very base reasons for not telling us about your base."

The prisoner's eyes are still empty as he looks at Che, who chuckles about his own pun.

"Limansk? Base?"

"You're cool, man! Yes, I asked you about your base in Limansk!"

"I don't know."

"Okay, keep on smoking that weed. Good, ain't it?"

For the first time, something resembling a smile appears on the Monolithian's face. "Uh-hum."

"Okay, listen up," the Freedomer called Kolya says. "A Dutyer visits the 100 Rads and tells Barkeep, 'I want to buy the Goldfish artifact, everyone has one, only I am like an idiot!' Barkeep says, 'But it's radioactive! What do you want to do with it?' The Dutyer replies, 'Radioactive, radiopassive, who cares? It's not like I'll put it down my pants, I'll keep it on a chain!'"

He looks at the Monolithian with expectation and laughs.

"You get it, *patsan*? He doesn't know what radioactivity is, haha!"

"Hehe. That's good," the Monolithian replies with a grin.

"Alright, buddy. You see, we're going out of our way to make you feel good. Spill it – how many people in your assault group in Limansk?"

"I'm not telling you bastards anything! Do what you want!"

"You like that stuff, eh? Just think about it – we'll give you a pack of weed for every man you name in your team!"

“Haha! Do you crazy anarchists really think I would sell out my Monolith brothers for ten packs of weed?”

The Freedomers exchange a puzzled glance, then burst out laughing. Seeing how the apparently easy-minded Monolithian let himself be fooled, Tarasov too slaps his forehead and chuckles.

“What are they talking about?” the Top asks.

“Tell you later,” Tarasov replies, still chuckling.

“All right... This is where the fun ends,” Che says wiping a tear from his eye. He turns to Tarasov and tries to sound serious. “You guys feel like joining us on a trip to Limansk?”

“No, sorry. We have to find an artifact for Barkeep,” Tarasov cautiously replies. “He gave us forty-eight hours to find it, otherwise the deal is off.”

“Damn,” Che sighs. “I can’t take a Monolith stronghold with four men... We better make it back to base and come back with reinforcements.”

“I guess we have no other choice with our new friends preferring to hunt for artifacts instead Monolithians,” Kolya says. “Eh, damn Loners... thinking only about themselves. Why don’t you broaden your perspective for a change? Join the good fight!”

“Kolya, agitation and propaganda is my job,” Che says checking his assault rifle for any dirt spots that might require cleaning. “Give these guys a break, will you?”

“What if they would give us a break? Always the same – they come to our base, beg us for supplies and all, but when it comes to the fight for freedom in the Zone... We are fighting for you, Stalkers!”

“Is that so?” Tarasov asks in a voice betraying his lack of interest.

“It’s a fight of the Stalkers for the Stalkers. Freedom is an armed nuclear—nucleo—” Kolya looks at Che, expecting him to help out.

“Nucleus,” his commander sighs.

“Yeah, that’s it. Nucleus. The fighting avantgarde of the Stalkers—”

“Vanguard, not avantgarde,” Che says and takes a small book from a pocket on his armor vest. “Avantgarde means paintings of naked women looking like a pile of cubes. Rodchenko and all that. Here, educate yourself better before you try agitating others.”

“Yes, commander,” Kolya shamefully says and opens the book in the light of the headlamp fastened to his helmet. Its title says *Guerilla warfare*.

“How’s Ashot doing?” Tarasov asks the commander to make the Freedomers change the subject. He knows very well that Freedom’s former arm dealer has moved to the New Zone but is curious to hear more of the story.

“Ashot?” Che says with a smile playing around his mouth. “He left for the New Zone.”

“Some Mercenaries were after him, sent by another trader or so I heard,” adds Kolya. “Ashot had cut under the agreed price. All about the damn money, of course.”

“Really? Because I heard a different story,” the third Freedomer says who in the meantime had managed to make a small fire. He takes off his gloves and warms his hands at the still weak flame.

“How cold you Nika? You weren’t even in the Dark Valley base in the old days.”

“I wasn’t, but a guy at Yanov told me he heard it from another guy who was on patrol with the guys from Dark Valley...”

“That’s what I call first hand intel,” Che says with a smile.

“It went like this: after a long day of repairing equipment, Uncle Yar returned to the tent he used to share with Ashot. As he approached, he noticed the tent was shaking violently.”

“That’s why I hate having canned beans for dinner,” Kolya says.

“Anyway, Yar slowly drew his combat knife and pistol. Walking up to the flap he slowly opened it. He saw the rumble of shadows and heard the lustful moans of Ashot—and some strange growls.”

“Ashot moaning while having sex is okay but a gun barrel growling?”

“Stop interrupting me, goddammit! So Yar thought to himself, Damn! What kind of whore did Ashot get his hands on? He walked over to turn on the light. The rambling in Ashot’s bed came to a halt. With wide eyes, Ashot looked at the body on top of him. He yelled ‘H-HOLY S-SHIT!!’ and leapt out of the bed. Yar stood there like a statue, seeing a bloodsucker purring and looking at Ashot affectionately.”

“Yeah! That’s what!” Kolya says, laughing.

“Was it at least a female one?” Che asks.

“Whatever. Ashot left next morning in shame and never came back.”

“You know what? Funniest part is I can actually believe it,” Kolya says.

“Yeah... Ashot and Yar, “ Che says with a sigh. ”The good old days. Less Duty, more fun...”

After their laughter that Tarasov couldn’t resist sharing, silence falls. Only the wounded Monolithian keeps whispering.

“Monolith... oh Monolith... why did you...”

“Shut up,” Che suddenly says and puts his hand on the prisoner’s mouth. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Tarasov whispers back.

Che reaches for his weapon. “Wait—listen!”

"I don't hear a thing, commander," Kolya says but he too works his rifle's safety off.

"That's it—it's dead quiet in the forest. No mutants, nothing!"

"Top, Pete," Tarasov whispers. "Weapons at ready. Something's not right."

He moves closer to the door and listens. Che was right – not as much as a single blind dog howls in the deep night. Even the croak of the ravens has died off.

"Emission approaching?" Nika asks under his breath.

Che shakes his head. "No—the mutants are scared."

"What would scare a mutant?"

Che has no time to answer. All of a sudden, something heavy impacts on the roof of the log hut, followed by a deep, gurgling growl.

"Chimera," Che yells, "it's a chimera!"

"Let's get the hell out of here!" a panic-stricken Nika shouts. "The roof is about to collapse on us!"

"No!" Tarasov shouts back. "Stay close to the walls! Nooria, get into that corner! Top, Pete, stay in front of her!"

"What the hell is happening?"

"We just became the lowest on the Zone's food chain!"

The two Freedomers don't wait for Che's command and open fire. The bullets tear through the rotten wood and apparently hit the still unseen mutant, because the growling from above gets louder and angrier.

"Wait!" Tarasov shouts through the noise of gunfire. "You'll just piss it off! Don't waste your ammo!"

Suddenly, two of the beams bulge and fall directly into the fire, sending up a cluster of sparks. Nika, who was closest to the fire, falls to the ground and moans from pain. This probably saves his life—a long arm reaches inside through the hole of the roof and two curved claws, as long as a man's forearm, scythe the air where the Freedomer was standing just a heartbeat ago. Missing him, they carve into Kolya's chest, lifting up the hapless fighter who is still firing his weapon. The mutant's arm disappears together with its prey. Another beam falls when the chimera's limbs thrust the massive body off the roof, with Kolya's scream marking the direction of its jump. It dies off before bushes rattle not far from the hut, marking the spot where the mutant has landed with its prey.

"Holy Jesus, what the fuck was that?" Pete asks. His voice is trembling.

"The top of the Zone food chain," Tarasov says and exchanges a worried glance with Che. "We're trapped here!"

"Nika! You still in one piece?"

“Think so,” the fighter replies as he gets to his feet. “That beam fell right on my shoulder, goddammit!”

“It saved your wretched life,” Tarasov observes.

“For the moment only!”

As if in reply to Nika’s panicked words, the growl is back. Heavy steps circle around the hut, as if the chimera were looking for the best angle to attack.

“Jesus, one body was not enough?” Pete sighs.

“Appetite comes with eating,” the Top replies eyeing the hole in the roof and holding his AK ready to shoot.

“We either wait until it tears down the whole hut or we do something!” Tarasov turns to the Freedom commander.

“*Bozhe moi*, he got Kolya,” Nika moans. “He will get us all!”

“Stop whining,” Che commands.

With another jump, the chimera lands on the roof once more, now hacking its claws into another beam and tearing it off. The Top looks up and fires his weapon. For a second, his headlamp illuminates a head like that of a tiger, only that this has no fur and the open mouth reveals a cruel, teeth-flashing grin. However, this is not what makes even the hardened warrior scream, neither is it the sight of the predator’s massive hulk that appears for a second in the light when the mutant jumps off the roof.

“It has two heads! Two freaking heads!”

“That damn beast is teasing us,” Tarasov says. “We’re sitting ducks here!”

“I’m the only one wearing armor that gives me a chance,” Che says after a moment of quick thinking. He draws his combat knife. “I’ll take it on outside.”

“No!”

All eyes are suddenly fixed on Nooria. “I am quicker and my blade is better,” she says.

“No way!” her three male companions shout back at once.

“But—”

“No, woman!” Tarasov shouts. “Stay in cover!”

“Now that’s what I call resolve.” Che grins but Tarasov can see his lips trembling with fear. “I’ll step out. It can’t pounce at me between the hut and the bus wreck, the place is too limited for it to leap. I’ll try to stab its face. As soon as it gets close to me, I’ll try to lure it in front of the door. Fire all that you have. Will you have my back?”

Tarasov nods. “We won’t let you down.”

He switches from the silenced rifle to the AK that is still slung over his shoulder and reloads it with a full magazine. “Change your mags now. Wait for my fire. Top, you fire second. Pete, then you. Nika, can you hold

your weapon? Good. You fire last. We don't want to be reloading at the same time." The men nod. Magazines click in the breach as they all prepare their weapons. "All ready? Then—*Svoboda vperyod*, Che!"

Che takes his helmet from the ground, wipes the dirt off and dons it. The growls accompanying it make them all feel as if the mutant outside were savoring the moment, knowing that its prey has no chance to escape.

"Damn thing is playing cat and mouse with us," the Top breathes.

Che peeks out into the twilight and the dark forest around. He listens to the hulking steps.

"I'm counting on you, people," he whispers and steps out of the half-collapsed log hut.

A second of silence follows, as if the chimera itself were surprised over the willingness of its prey to die.

"Hey! *Chuda pryrody!*" Che shouts. "What's the good of having two heads if you only got one dick?"

The mutant doesn't need to be taunted. The impact of its massive body makes the rusty metal shriek as it jumps onto the bus wreck. It growls once more and looks at the Freedomer, as if hesitating between its hunger and instinct that might warn it of a trap. However, compared to its hulk, the human standing there appears utterly weak even in his heavy armor.

Then it jumps, landing in front of Che and slashes at him. Swiftly, the fighter takes a step to the side to dodge the attack and recoils. The chimera follows him, directly to the spot where Tarasov and the others don't even need to aim in order to hit it in the side.

Four automatic assault rifles start barking, unleashing a hail of bullets into the mutant. The chimera roars, with its attention now divided between the closest prey and the others. Its right head growls at the shooters while the teeth in the mouth of the left snap after Che. For a second it appears to hesitate where to push with the attack—it has two heads but only four legs, the fangs can't reach the shooters and it needs the claws on both front legs to slash the man in front of him. With good reflexes, Che uses its confusion to dodge another attack. A moment later, when the chimera instinctively turns both heads to its right where the pain from the impacting bullets must be horrendous even for a mutant of its size, he takes the knife in both hands and slams it into one of the distorted heads with all force.

The chimera gives its loudest howl. It sounds painful but the mutant's strength is not wasted yet. Shaking its wounded head it tears the knife from Che's hand, then raises its paw to strike at him. The fighter is now too close to dodge the claws and falls with a scream.

"Reloading!"

Tarasov quickly switches magazines but before he can recommence firing, a shadow darts out from the hut and hurls itself at the mutant.

“Cease fire, cease fire!”

Tarasov’s shout comes more from his instincts than realizing it is Nooria putting herself into harm’s, and their bullets’, way. By the time he moves to jump after her, she is already facing the mutant that crawls towards them. She ducks and dodges a blow, slices the mutant’s neck below the still intact head and jumps back, then prepares to slash the mutant once more.

Covered with blood all over, the chimera still keeps crawling closer.

Tarasov grabs Nooria at the shoulder and pulls her behind himself. He raises his rifle, aiming at the mutant’s head that still growls and bares its teeth, but it is the sound of death the chimera now emits. The growl weakens and then stops, and with a last jerk of the muscles, the mutant collapses.

After a few heartbeats of silence, a far away blind dog begins to howl again. Then a whole pack joins in.

“I never ever imagined how happy that howl would make one,” Nika says. Tarasov doesn’t need to see his face to know that an ear-to-ear grin appears on the Freedomer’s face.

All emit sighs of relief—except Nooria who is already kneeling at Che’s body. The fighter cusses as he tries to get on his feet, holding on to Nooria’s arm. Then the Top and Nika help him up.

“For a moment I thought I was done for,” Che moans when they carry him into the log hut.

“Are you hurt, commander?” Nika asks as they gently lay him down inside. Tarasov quickly takes off the Freedomer’s helmet with the integrated gas mask.

“Nah, I’m fine,” Che replies battling for air. “It’s just that my armor’s busted.”

“That red stain doesn’t look like the exo’s hydraulics leaking,” says Tarasov worriedly.

Che looks at his chest where the chimera’s claws have ripped into the armor. His face, pale already, becomes even whiter as he watches his blood seep through the fissures.

“*Ai blyad*,” he groans.

“Nooria, get me a bandage,” Tarasov says opening the exoskeleton. “Quickly! Nika, help me get him out of the exo. You know this Freedom shit better than me!”

“Will do.”

Releasing the clips fastening it to the metal body frame, the Freedomer removes the Kevlar-padded breast plate to let Nooria get to the wound.

Tarasov immediately wishes he hadn't done so. Che's open chest reveals a deep wound obviously beyond healing – not in these conditions and the meager first aid kits they have. With hands bloody to the wrists, Nooria applies a large, streptocide-coated gauze pad nonetheless.

"Use a double amount of antiseptics," Tarasov suggests. "That monster could have poisoned his blood stream."

"It poisoned him?" Pete asks. "Jesus!"

"I don't want to imagine all the rot it could've collected under its claws. Nika! *Davay*, give me the antiseptics from your medikit!"

"Oh, fuck that," Nika shouts. He takes a hip flask and pours a colorless liquid into the wound.

"What are you doing?" Nooria shouts back at him and pushes the Freedomer's hand away.

"*Nu shto? Eto vodka!*" Nika says. "Hey, tell her this will disinfect the wound!"

"Are you nuts? Top, keep him away from the wounded!" Tarasov angrily shouts and continues in Russian. "*Durak!* Only pure alcohol is disinfecting! Pure, hundred percent alcohol! Vodka has forty!"

"Not mine!"

"Even if it had been pure, there's now more saliva from your dirty mouth in it than alcohol!"

"Give me one more bandage," Nooria demands. Tarasov hands her another gauze pad and she applies it over the first bandage that it already soaking with blood.

"Don't waste any more bandages," Hartman whispers, holding the worried Freedomer in his grasp. "He's done for."

As if he wanted to protest, Che emits a gasp. His grey eyes scan the faces of those around him and finally rest on Nooria.

"*Dyvchina...*"

"He's talking to you, Nooria," Tarasov says and tries to smile at Che. "That's it, *bratan!* Keep talking!"

Che grasps Tarasov's hands but keeps looking at Nooria.

"*Divchina... ty na kaleni moyi yaytsa.*"

A grin appears on Tarasov's face while he translates. "Uhm... you are kneeling on his balls, Nooria."

"Oh... sorry," Nooria replies embarrassed and pulls her knee from the fighter's groin.

"Tough SOB. He'll make it after all," the Top says with relief. "Don't die on us, soldier! That's a damned order! Tell him, Mikhailo!"

It appears Che is slowly regaining his strength, though the fresh bandage is already becoming red from the fresh blood still gushing from the wound.

"Kak ty... krasivaya," Che whispers and a faint smile appears on his pale, sweaty face. "I said... you are very beautiful."

"Thank you," Nooria replies, wiping blood from her hands. "You are —"

But the fighter doesn't seem listening to her.

"You are so beautiful," comes another English sigh from Che's lips, "like... like my...mama."

Che mutters the last word with a long sigh and the grasp of his fingers on Tarasov's hand suddenly loosens.

Nooria buries her face in her still bloody hands.

For a moment, the companions stand speechless.

"Net! This cannot be!" Nika struggles himself free and kneels at the body. "Hey Che, you can't do this! Don't fucking die!"

"He died a fine death, a good warrior's death," Hartman says. "He will be remembered. What was his name again?"

"Che," Tarasov softly says. "Like in Che Guevara."

"Outstanding. Pete, come with me. Don't know what other shit this place gonna throw at us but I don't want it to catch us with our pants down!"

"Don't be wandering too far."

"We'll be standing watch right at the door, don't worry."

Cold and unfeeling as the Top's level-headedness appears, it helps his companions to get over the Freedomer's death. Nooria gently closes his eyelids. Nika takes a big swig from his flask while Tarasov checks on the Monolithian prisoner.

"What should we do with this guy?" he asks.

Nika shrugs. "I don't care. If you ask me, we better shoot him on the spot. No way for me to take him back with me alone." He wipes sweat off his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "Don't even know how I will get back to Yanov. My shoulder is busted. Hurts like hell. I need to hold my rifle with my left hand. But then I was never much of a marksman, anyway."

Tarasov studies Nika's round, fair-skinned face. Obviously, the Freedomer is no genius but appears to be a trustable man. The battle with the chimera proved that he is a hardened fighter, too, who can be relied upon.

"To Yanov, you say?" Tarasov asks. "That's bad news. There's a Duty outpost at the old electricity substation on the way there. If they see you in Freedom kit, wandering alone—tough luck, Nika."

"I could also go to the Army Warehouses. That's closer, but then I'd have to go through that damned village with all the Bloodsuckers! Looks like I'm fucked either way."

"You are," Tarasov says. "Better listen to my proposal. We go together to Zaton. Where we go exactly is none of your business, but we can bring you close enough to Yanov Station – if you do something for me."

Nika looks at him with eager interest. "I'm all ears, buddy."

"You will not deliver the prisoner to your commander."

"What? Commander Loki would promote me for bringing him in!"

"No, because you will look for a free Stalker called Strider or Crow or whatever call sign he uses now."

"I heard about Strider. Folks say he's a hell of a sniper. Rumor has it he also used to be with them," Nika nods and jerks his hand towards the incapacitated prisoner. "But didn't he join those Duty assholes?"

"He is working alone now. So—find him, hand the Monolithian over to him and we're quits."

"What if I just shoot him once you're out of sight?"

"Rumors are correct. Strider was a Monolith squad leader once. He and his comrades are still looking for other Monolithians to knock some sense into them. They value any opportunity to save one of their brain-washed 'brothers'. You don't want to make a bunch of former Monolithians angry at you, do you?"

"You think I'm mad?" Nika says with a shudder. "Of course I don't!"

"Smart choice. Now give me your PDA for a moment."

Reluctantly, Nika hands him over the device. Tarasov switches to text message mode. The transmission will reach almost every PDAs in the Zone, although many Stalkers have turned off this facility—no one would share anything important with the whole Zone. Tarasov hopes his former ally from the New Zone belongs to the few who didn't.

Crow. Where are you striding? Reply to this PDA only. He hesitates for an instant before completing his message; after all, it would be unwise to sign it as Condor, his old call sign. Then he just adds: *No choppers to down this time.*

"All right," he says, "message sent. Let's see if he replies."

"You keeping my PDA is no part of the deal, buddy!"

"Don't worry, I'll give it back soon enough."

Tarasov proves lucky. He has just moved Che's body into a more dignified position when the PDA beeps, signaling an incoming text message.

Thought condors are extinct in the Zone. Glad to know at least one still prevails. Hope you found cigarettes for me.

Tarasov smiles while he types the reply, this time directed only to one particular PDA. Strider has the positioning facility turned off, not giving Tarasov any clue about his whereabouts but he finds this secrecy very much suiting the renegade's character.

Bad habits die hard. So does the whisper of the Monolith. I'm sending your way a pair of ears needing you to make it unheard. Be at Yanov Station tomorrow. Freedomer called Nika will be looking for you.

After half a minute, Strider's next message arrives.

Roger Wilco. Thanks, owe you big time. Will be looking for Nika Polar Explorer then.

Tarasov frowns. *How do you know his call sign?*, he texts back.

Strider's reply comes soon and it makes Tarasov slap his own forehead.

You are using his PDA! Better have a rest, my friend. You need it. Out.

"Polar Explorer?" Tarasov asks the Freedomer. He gives back the PDA, but not before deleting the messages he has exchanged. "They really call you that?"

"Uhm... you know, I used to have a really nice *ushanka* fur hat. Was very proud of it until some bastard stole it. That's why... still better than Dima Liveshits or Petka Smartass, no? Because I knew guys by those names."

"Don't want to think about how they must've felt," Tarasov says and joins Nooria who is resting at the embers left from the campfire, very much in need of a little comforting.

"You did all you could," he says, putting his arm around her neck.

"I know. It was not death but you and Top who made me sad."

"Come again?"

"Why didn't you let me fight?"

"Listen—that was a chimera, you understand? The biggest, meanest, deadliest mutant in the whole Zone. There was no way for us to let you take it!"

"You don't trust me anymore?"

"You silly woman, how can you even ask me that?"

"I told you I could deal with it. I am quick. He was slow. He did not know how to use his knife. You never trust a jagged knife where you can not get it out. His got stuck in chimera's skull. Now look at him."

"It was not Che but us riflemen who were supposed to kill it."

Unconvinced, Nooria shakes her head. "I could have killed it better. You didn't let me and now Freedomer is dead."

"You better get used to the idea that your life is not only yours now."

“What will you do when my belly grows big? Lock me up in our house?”

“Yes, with me inside and throw the key away.”

“But I don’t want to be *fucking* locked up!”

Tarasov still thinks about a snappy response to save his authority as Nooria’s man who, at least according to Tribe traditions which are not entirely against his liking, would have the last word in a domestic dispute. Pete’s appearance interrupts his thoughts.

“Hey, what are you guys fighting over?” he says holding his hands over the embers.

“Mind your own business,” Tarasov snaps at him. “How is the watch going?”

“Pitch dark in the forest, mutants howling, weird blue clouds in the sky. Just another beautiful night in the Zone.”

Tarasov can’t decide if Pete means what he says or if he is just being ironic.

“Your stepsister thinks we should have let her take on the chimera,” he says. “For God’s sake, Pete, talk some sense into her. She’s not in the mood to listen to me.”

Standing outside with his rifle held to his shoulder and finger on the trigger, Hartman appears to have overheard their argument.

“She is rebelling, ain’t she? Don’t let her gain the upper hand, Mikhailo, or you’ll be screwed for the rest of your life. When we in the Tribe say ‘till death parts us’, we mean it.”

“She’s right. Half-right, at least. But there was no way for me to let my pregnant woman fight the worst mutant of the Zone.”

“Agree. That was one badass beast. Maybe not as bad as a bear, but at least a bear wouldn’t make such huge leaps.”

“And Bears have only one head.”

“I miss my sandbox and the warriors, Mikhailo. The sooner we get back, the better.”

“Nooria wants the same. That’s why she’s so strange. I never heard her swear before.”

“Me neither.”

Tarasov sighs. “I fear this has something to do with Maksimenko or maybe Sultan. Ever since she returned from Kiev, she’s been—downbeat, hiding anger I’ve never seen from her. I don’t like this. Not at all.”

The Top scans the forest around them. Detecting no imminent danger, he takes a more relaxed stance.

“Those fanatics almost raped our butt today,” he says. “Imagine, if that Freedom patrol hadn’t shown up, we would’ve run directly into them. Holy hell, we’d have been completely clusterfucked.”

“Yes.”

“Monolithians seemed good fighters to me, except for their last move.”

“Trying to run us down was the smart thing to do,” says Tarasov. “They only had the two of us between them and the nearest cover.”

With still having Nooria on his mind, Tarasov doesn’t feel like discussing tactics. “Let’s forget the Monolith for now... Whatever happened to her—once I find out who did it, I’ll skin him alive.”

“Maybe it was her time at the KGB or whatever you call it here.”

“I don’t think so. Remember, it was Sultan she cursed. Not Maksimenko.”

“Yup.”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Sure you don’t. It’s a woman thing. I’ll sooner become the President of the United States than understand what’s going on in their heads, especially Nooria’s.”

“Anyway... Do you need some rest?”

“Nope.”

“Good for you.” Tarasov glances at his watch. “We still have about four hours till daylight. Wake me up if you change your mind.”

62

Yanov Station – Jupiter Plant area, Exclusion Zone

“This place never ceases to surprise.”

Pete looks over the Zaton area from a hill where they have arrived after a march of two hours, having left the log hut at first light. After the green wilderness of the areas around Rostok and the gloomy Red Forest, the arid lands to the south of Yanov Station almost appear to him like a semi-desert. Although it will be noon in one hour, everything beyond a few hundred meters is veiled in chilly mist. The bare poplars dotting the landscape cast dim shadows in the pale November sun.

“I mean, every place is different. Before I got here, I thought it was gonna be just one huge forest.”

“Surprising indeed,” Tarasov replies.

His attention is attracted by something else: just half an hour’s march away from Yanov railway station, occupied by a small detachment of both Duty and Freedom who by some miracle agreed to make the station a no-fire zone, the land is teeming with Bandits. On the eastern road leading to the abandoned Jupiter factory, he sees two small groups of them, easily recognizable by their long trench coats; along the western road, between a cluster of trees and a small marsh, another patrol makes its way towards a

depot where several campfires burn among piled up cargo containers. The helipads – an U-shaped spot carved into the slopes of the hill where they are standing, surrounded by a concrete support wall and barbed wire. There is a wrecked Mi-24 in front of a small command post adjoining the wall. It appears to be the only place in the area apparently not occupied by Bandits: next to the helicopter wreck, Tarasov's binoculars detect a dozen Loners camping. The view further to the north is obscured by mist.

"There are more Bandits in this area than maggots in an untreated wound... Indeed, it's apparently the Container Warehouse where they all try to get."

"Why?" Hartman asks. "What's there?"

"Nothing of interest. Normally, either Duty or Freedom would put an end to this trench coat convention but they are too busy fighting each other. Damned faction war!"

"Is this the place where I'm supposed to meet that Strider guy?"

Tarasov turns to Nika and the Monolithian who sit in the grass behind them, sharing a cigarette.

"You are to bring him to Yanov Station, Nika."

"The road's damn dangerous with all those trench coats out for a stroll, you know?"

"Let them be my problem." Tarasov looks at Nooria and then Hartman. "So, now comes the Bandit part if none of you has a better idea."

"It's your call," the Top says. "Rest assured, my boots are itching to give your butt a good kick for making me join a bunch of—"

"It was *my* choice," Nooria says. She dons her black balaclava and pulls her hood over her head.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

"Just one word before we leave," Tarasov says. "Bandits are a tough bunch and their leaders are the toughest. Top, I know you're a big shot with the Tribe but I want you to stay out of trouble. Let me do all the talking. Don't provoke these guys."

"What if they provoke me?"

"Don't let them. Remember: our way out depends on the Bandits. Last but not least, Nooria already has her Bandit call sign – Margarita," Tarasov says with a smirk. "Please remember – all of you – that my real name must not be mentioned. I am Misha... uhm... Chekh, if any name must be given."

"You mean, Czech? Like the car we rented?"

"No, Top. Not Czech but *Chekh* for Chechens. Russians hate them. If they think I'm Chechen, they won't bother talking to me."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Pete says.

"We all do. So, are we set?" Tarasov looks at his companions. They all nod. "Let's go."

Following the road downhill toward the Bandit base, they pass by a wrecked passenger car and a blue-white bus similar to the one that stood close to the log hut where they spent the last fateful night. Scrub grows from the cracks of the dilapidated tarmac. As they approach the warehouse, more and more Bandits appear behind the barbed wire fencing it.

"Holster your weapons," Tarasov says when he sees the Bandits guarding the entrance. One of them walks up to them, keeping his MP5 submachine gun ready to shoot.

"Nu shot vam nada, tipa?"

"Moi druzya ne ponyat shot ti govorish," Tarasov says. *"Po angliskom govorish?"*

"Whatcha want?" the guard asks in very bad English. "Too much loot on yer back, *pindosi*?"

"We need to see your boss," Tarasov replies.

"Fuck no yer don't, ya mongrel! Get yer ass up and hit da road! Or maybe yer want to shoot me in yer ass to get ya goin'?"

"I have business with Jack," Nooria says.

"Whaddaya want from him?"

"Say hello to my little friend," Nooria says looking him in the eye.

"Oh," the guard says with a bow of his head that could be intended as a sign of respect. "All right! Get in but don't stay too long. Ya find 'im in the garage behind da containers."

"We stay as long as I want," Nooria confidently says. Before she can move on, Tarasov steps to the guard.

"These two need safe passage to Yanov," he quietly says and jerks his thumb backward where Nika and the Monolithian stand. Hearing his words, Hartman too steps forward and fiddles his shouldered assault rifle. "They bring good news to a friend of ours who might get very angry if he doesn't receive it."

"Safe passage costs money, ya know?"

"How tall are you, *tipa*?"

"Whaddafuck ya meanin'?"

"You know, my friend happens to be a damn good sniper and it seems you offer a pretty good target here. I guess one meter seventy, maybe seventy five make a big difference for the location of your brain matter – inside that undersized skull of yours or being splattered on the ground. You follow my meaning, *tipa*?"

"Wanna be threatenin' me?"

"I'm making a business proposal, you dumbass. You give these two free passage to Yanov and keep your brains where it is or..."

"Okay, okay, I got it," the Bandit says taking the walkie-talkie fastened to his belt. "Hey men, it's Vadia Hunchback 'ere. A guy in Freedom suit is goin' yer way with a Monolith zombie in tow. Let'em pass, will ya?"

"Temka Bum here. Who says?"

"I says, Temka. Touch'em and Jack's gonna assign ya for guard duty da next days. Got it?"

"Freedomer with Monolith. Good, I'll let 'em pass if they behave."

"Ya better do!"

Tarasov nods. "Good boy. I'll let my friend to know that you were promised free passage. Vadia Hunchback was the name, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. Now better go!"

"And my friends better arrive safely at Yanov," Tarasov replies, directing his words rather to Nika than the Bandit. "Nika, send a message to Strider and don't forget to mention who we made the deal with."

"We part ways then?" the Freedomer asks.

"Good hunting, Stalker."

Tarasov watches Dima and the Monolithian walking toward the railway tracks leading northward to Yanov Station, hoping that they won't run into anything that their assault rifles can't handle. He darts a grin to Vadia Hunchback as he enters the perimeter, thinking that if the Bandit is still alive by the evening, it will be a good enough proof of Dima having delivered the captive Monolithian to Strider.

A veritable maze of cargo railway containers covers the open space in front of two abandoned warehouse buildings. As the companions make their way through the narrow confines between the containers, it is easy for them to make out how the Bandit food chain goes: rookies squat on boards and mattresses lying around campfires; the more prominent occupy the open containers where they are much better protected against cold and rain; finally, closest to the garage where the Bandit commander resides and well-protected against the weather by a roof spanning over several containers, the apparently most respected dwell. Even if their hovels don't indicate their position, their attire does: the small groups of lesser mortals gathered around the campfires are dominated by reinforced leather jackets and track worn by Stalkers new to the Zone, no matter if Loners or Bandits, and they hold their pathetic shotguns and Makarov pistols as if they were unique, artifact-enhanced weapons. Here and there, a Stalker in black Duty and forest-camouflaged Freedom suit also appears; though deserter turned bandits or not, they apparently seem keen to avoid mixing with those from the hostile faction.

All of them have one thing in common: a Bandit arm patch with a white skull on black background. Tarasov observes a Stalker cutting the Duty patch off his black armor and replacing the stylized red shield with golden reticule with the Bandit's skull patch.

"Pete, you were wrong about us being overqualified for the Bandit job," Tarasov remarks. "Desertion seems to be an entry-level crime here."

The Bandits who are respected enough to settle in the containers ignore their lesser brethren as they tend to usual camp tasks—cleaning their Kalashnikovs, drum-barreled Protecta shotguns and a few Dragunov SVDs, all apparently prized possessions. The long trench coats and Russian army surplus body armor betray them as more experienced Bandits and Mercenaries. The big shots under the roof have their expensive NATO rifles standing against the container walls, probably feeling safe at the core of the camp and sure that no lesser mortal would make them reach for their G-36 and LR-300 rifles. Heavy armored suits dominate here, among them a few exoskeletons with helmets off to facilitate any Stalker's favorite pastime—drinking vodka and munching on canned meat, exactly what most of them are doing. A few veterans are standing atop the containers, keeping watch over the perimeter. One of them, wearing an army-issue exoskeleton with a Bandit's arm patch, gives Tarasov a long and inquisitive look. A Vintorez rifle is slung across his shoulder.

"See that exo guy?" he asks the Top without looking in the Bandit's direction. He touches the balaclava to reassure himself that it covers his face, leaving only eyes and mouth visible. "I don't like his face."

"His face?" Hartman asks back. "I don't follow. He's wearing a gas mask and tactical helmet."

"Manner of speaking... what I said comes closet to what I feel about him."

"Why?" Nooria asks, boldly returning the Bandit's gaze.

"Don't know. Maybe because he's the only one paying any attention to us... Never mind. Just a gut feeling."

"I'm telling you, it's him who's gonna feel something in his guts if he keeps staring at us like that."

"Calm down, Top. Let's not appear nervous."

"Yeah, there's nothing to be nervous about," Pete says giving the Bandit camp a distrustful look.

When the companions are about to enter the garage, two heavily armed men in the Mercenaries' urban camo suits block their way.

"Shto vam, patsani?"

"She's here to see Jack," Tarasov replies to the guard's question. "Her name is Margarita. We are her, uhm, bodyguards."

"You may enter," the guard says. "No funny movements inside, huh?"

"Understood."

"Jack's in his office behind the garage."

The smell of engine oil lingers inside. Rusted and lacking wheels, a derelict truck stands over a maintenance shaft. Another Mercenary guard watches over the gloomy interior from a catwalk. Among crates, piles of decrepit car parts and fuel drums, a door leads into a shabby room that might have once been an office.

The Bandit commander is sitting with his feet on the table, cleaning his Armsel Protecta shotgun with an oilcloth and wearing the obligatory leather trench coat. A pair of shrewd eyes measure them up through his balaclava's eye holes. The rest of his features remain hidden. On another chair close by, a short but brawny Bandit with a thick black beard appears to doze off the effects of the vodka bottle lying on the floor next to him.

"Ahh! Fresh meat," Jack says for a greeting.

"I am Margarita," Nooria says.

"Margarita!" the Bandit leader says barely looking at her. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Did he just ask, *'to what do I owe dishonor?'*" the Top says under his breath.

"Glad to see you keep your word," Jack says, apparently oblivious to Hartman's whisper.

"And I am glad to hear you speak English."

"Of course I do. *'Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!'* *'Make a wish, it'll be your last!'* I love fucking cheese at my feet!" You see, I know a lot of English!"

Pete can barely suppress a chuckle.

"Did you find any tracks of the troublemaker, Margarita?" Jack asks.

"No. I must go to New Zone."

"We all will soon enough. However, Sultan didn't say anything about you bringing people with you," Jack says darting an eye at Nooria's companions. "We've no need for a basketball team anyway. Who are they?"

"My bodyguards."

"That may be so, but they need to confess their sins to Friar."

"What are you talking about?" Tarasov angrily asks.

"Back with the fangs, big boy, or I'll throw you to the next blind dog pack to eat," Jack snarls back. "We don't need any goody-two-shoes but people who can keep from being shot or robbed. That means, anyone wanting to join the new hordes must be good at shooting and robbing others. I know from the boss that she's cool, but the others need to

convince Friar why we should take them aboard. I'll have a chat with you until then."

"When she said 'bodyguards' she meant it, *patsan*. We're not going anywhere without her."

"Shut up and move your asses to Friar in the warehouse building. Now!"

Hearing the agitation in Jack's voice, two Bandits appear from the repair hall and point their rifles at the three men. Jack repeats his demand. "Go!"

Reluctant and grinding their teeth, Tarasov, Hartman and Pete let themselves be led away.

"I am Sultan's friend," Nooria says.

"Of course you are. I respect that. Think I'd want to hurt you?" Jack asks and gives a bellowing laugh. "Until you do what you were told to, that is!"

No matter how she feels about the kingpin, Nooria mentally admits that compared to Sultan, Jack is barely more than hot air. He appears to lack Sultan's subtle way of appearing menacing without threatening, and inspiring respect without demanding it.

"How will we get to New Zone?" she asks.

"Don't be so impatient. Tell me first about your buddies. There's something I like about the small one but where did you find the two big guys? In a basketball team?"

"One is from America. Other is Chechen."

"He's rather tall for a darkie," Jack observes. "Did he teach you how to use your knife? I hear you're very good at it."

"No."

"Keep it to yourself, fine," Jack shrugs. "You know the New Zone well?"

"Parts of it."

"How do you want to find your target?"

"I will decide once there."

"Fair enough. You have kept your word up so far, and you better do so once off our radar. You don't want to disappoint Sultan—and me." Jack gives her a long look. "I actually don't mind if you've your buddies watching your back. See, my guys are good fellas but they haven't seen a woman in a while – if you get my meaning."

"I understand."

"There's also a few Chechens among us. Why do you look surprised? Darkies love trouble like flies love shit, and we're up to make a lot of trouble in the south. They will probably approach your buddy to team up, like those damned savages do wherever they are. But I won't tolerate any

of their *obshina* bullshit. If we want to trouble Stalkers there's no need to quarrel amongst us."

"I will tell him to stay away from those men."

"Excellent. Of course, all this was said presuming that they gonna pass Friar's little test. If they don't, you'll need to part ways."

"What's that test?"

"Told you already. Each of them has to prove to have what it takes to be a friend of ours."

63

Friar's den in the Container Warehouse, Exclusion Zone

"A sinner is born every minute, and ye're just on time!"

The apparently insane Bandit's voice echoes in the dark, all but empty room he occupies in the warehouse. His thick Russian accent adds to the oddness about him. The only features around are a mattress in one of the corners and a makeshift altar, made up from a crate on which two burning church candles stand with a skull in a gasmask in between. Two Kalashnikovs lie crossed under the skull like a pirate flag. The moldering walls bear graffiti quotes, barely readable in the darkness.

Some rise by sin and some by virtue fall.

There is no sin except stupidity.

We are each our own devil and we make this world our hell.

He who turns the other cheek is a cowardly dog.

Nothing is evil which is according to nature.

"I am Friar, knower of yer deepest thoughts! I, and only I will decide if ye're worthy to join us! On yer knees, all of ya!"

Tarasov sees Hartman's face blush with anger. He can only imagine how humiliating this bizarre ritual must be for Sergeant Major Hartman of the Tribe. Hoping that his companion has enough self-discipline to manage his anger, he too kneels down on the dirty stone floor in front of the skinny Bandit whose restless eyes and exaggerated antics tell of madness, or at least that's how Friar appears to him.

"And now—I wanna hear yer confession, sinners!" Friar continues. "Let's start with ya, kid! What can ya tell me dat would make me accept ya to da most glorious faction of da Zone?"

"Uhm... what am I supposed to say?"

"Imagine, I am God and know all your sins but will forgive only one! What would that be?"

"Huh... I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Don't test my patience, sinner!"

"Well... a little shoplifting, did a car or two—"

Friar grins. "Not bad enough, kiddo! I did all dat when I was still in kindergarten!"

Pete sighs. "My real sin?"

Friar emits a hysterical laugh. "Only tellin' me your deadliest sin can save yer life. If ye fail to confess, da Zone will claim your life!"

"So—one thing I will burn in hell for is Nelly, my girlfriend. I—I wasn't myself at that time. I gave her an overdose of heroin and spent the next days with her corpse, convincing myself that I helped her into a better world. Yes, for this the Devil will take my soul, no matter what I do!"

Friar takes a step back and nods, appearing satisfied. "Despicable enough."

"I know," Pete whispers.

"Ye're next," Friar tells Tarasov. "Confess!"

Kneeling like his two companions, Tarasov stares at the altar, the quotes on the wall, Friar's insane eyes. To his own surprise, he feels calm inside—almost relieved. The Bandit ritual might be mocking everything a decent man would hold holy but even so, it is as good an opportunity as any other to ease his mental burden.

"I am a killer," he says in a low voice. "I don't know how many men I've killed. I quit counting at forty-three. All men who trusted and relied on me."

"Dat sounds exciting!" Friar hisses.

"Must be over a hundred now. Men I was leading and supposed to keep alive. They died by the claws of mutants, hostile fire, anomalies. But some by my own bullets. Some by my own recklessness. I was an army officer, bound by my duty to keep those men alive. Every death is my failure as a leader. I consider it that and nothing can me convince otherwise. No excuses like fate, bad luck, the Zone's will. No. Their shadows keep following me. My biggest fear is to turn around one day and face them. I was told once, if you put together all the men I have killed, they'd make up an army. If I think of them it's true. And probably more will come. That's my sin, and I am punished for it by being alive."

"Disgraceful enough."

"It is," Tarasov says bowing his head.

The crazy Bandit now turns to Hartman. "Whatta 'bout ya?"

"I am a deserter too, like the man next to me," Hartman slowly replies.

"Boooooorin'!"

"And I'm kind of a drug addict as well, like the kid was."

"Me temper is bad enough without ye borin' me like dat!"

"I am addicted to the drug called blood. I love spilling my enemies blood and piss on their bodies."

"Dat's whad everyone wearing a uniform is bragging about."

Hartman takes a deep breath. "I am a well-trained soldier and struggled with fighting a war with one of my hands chained to my back. Then came the day when we went deep below the New Zone where lots of our bravest fell. The price waiting for those who made it through was freedom. We chosen few were touched by the power of the New Zone. It liberated us from the shackles of loyalty to a corrupt country that no longer deserved our sacrifice. We became the rabid stray dogs of war. We became victorious at the price of countless deaths on our hands. Yet it was still treason and desertion. I am a traitor and deserter to my country and I try to deny it by being loyal to my Tribe and my leader till I die and beyond. But I am still a traitor and deserter. I spill our enemies' blood to wash that shame away, yet it will always tarnish my soul. Lawyers can acquit me but I will never be able to. The great Spirit has touched me and the part of my sanity it has left keeps calling me a traitor. This is the sin I would ask God to forgive but He has fallen silent on me long ago. If you lousy lowlife dare open your filthy mouth to insult me by telling that all this makes me fit to join your scum—I swear I will tear your head off, so bless me God. Because if we are talking sin, I'm not merely fitting in but should be your goddamned general."

Hartman's slow-spoken words seem to have made an impression on Friar.

"We already have a general," the Bandit quietly says. "His name's Sultan. Though I didn't vote for him... should we ever elect our leader by votin', ya can count on me."

He unslings the Obokan assault rifle from his shoulder and fires a burst into the ceiling. "Ye are hereby absolved from yer sins by me welcomin' ye into our ranks, for here we are all brothers in crime. Wadever ye've been judged and cast out for by da ignorant world outside will be yer source of pride with us. Rise and be proud, brothers, for yer sins make you worthy of becoming Bandits!"

"That's it, then?" Tarasov asks standing.

"What did ya expect? Prickin' yer trigger finger and drippin' blood over a damned religious icon? Ya better make a Loner bleed until he tells ya where he hides his stash, haha!"

Tarasov, Hartman and Pete leave the bizarre room, shunning each other's eyes.

64

Container Warehouse, Exclusion Zone

Daylight fades and a chilly dusk descends over the Zone. Without anything else to do but wait, the four travelers kill time at a campfire, not

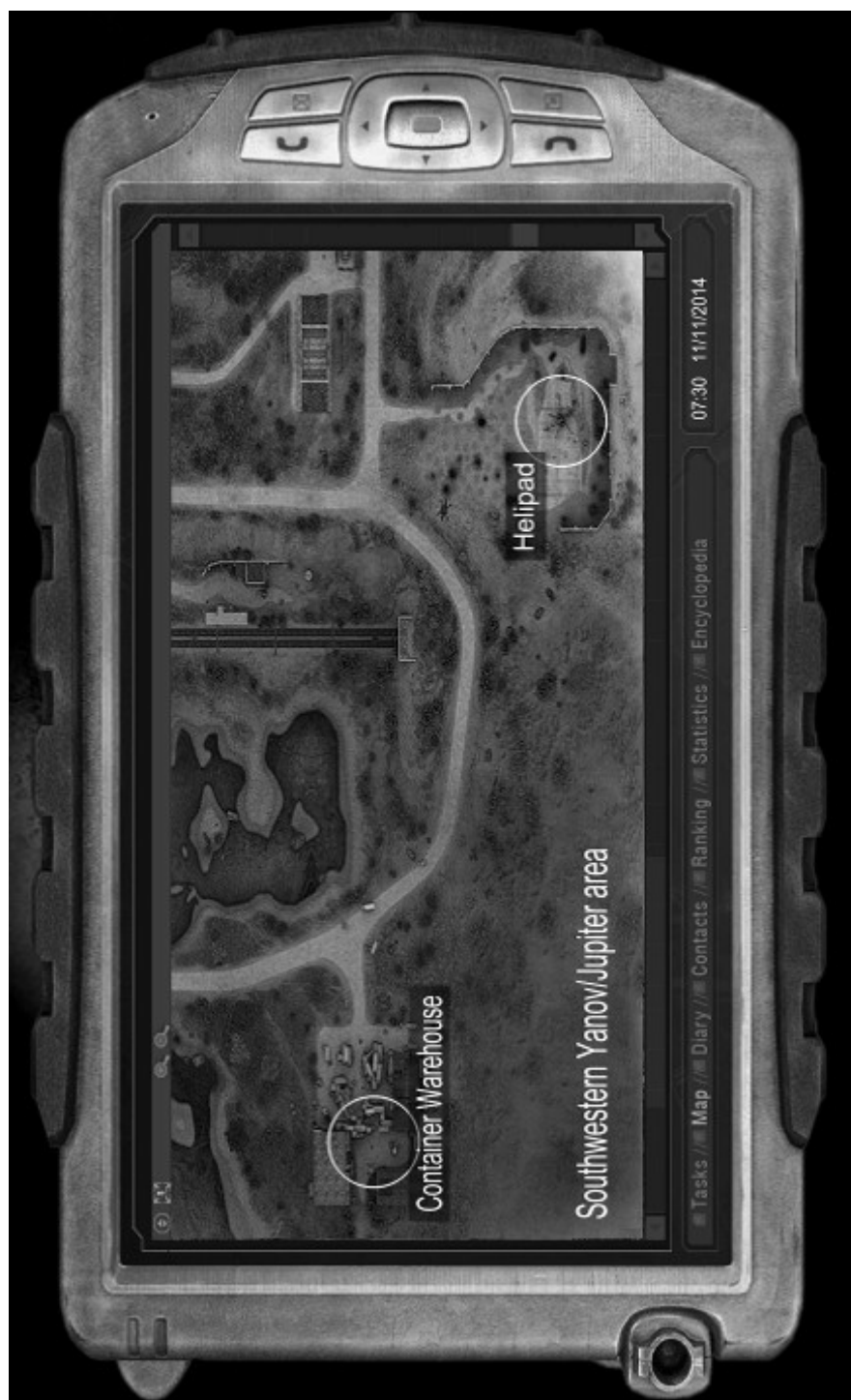
in much of a mood to chat. Nooria appears to be lost in her thoughts and the three men still feel embarrassed over their confessions, as if they were forced to strip their very souls naked in front of each other and are now fighting with the subsequent embarrassment.

Tarasov is in a particularly foul mood. Having made camp in one of the containers between the tougher Stalkers' and the veteran Bandits' quarters, the chatter all around them begins to nerve him. The Stalker-turned-Bandits ceaselessly brag about their own toughness and the treasures they hope to find in the New Zone, spicing the conversation with the dirtiest jokes. He is glad Nooria can't understand them. A former Dutyer, who Tarasov recognizes as the newcomer who was switching arm patches earlier, is the loudest of them all. He and the Bandits nearby don't

bother

them,





though; the apparent deserter has obviously found an easy mark for verbal target practice in the form of a newcomer wearing Freedom armor.

Four men appear and make their way to the container of Tarasov's party. Their faces are open and reveal dark skin and black eyes. The conversation at the nearby campfires goes quiet.

"Uh-oh," Pete says. "These fellows look like trouble."

Tarasov looks at the four sinister men. "Chechens," he quietly observes.

"They're kind of a mob?"

"Not kind of because they *are* the real mob," Tarasov explains. "It's called *obshina*."

Hartman's eyes flash and he reaches for his pistol. He looks at Tarasov who shakes his head in a sign to stay cool.

One of the men steps to the companions' campfire. His black eyes gaze at them inquisitively under a thick unibrow.

"*Assalamu 'aleikum*," the Chechen says to Tarasov. "*Mukha vo ho, vasha?*"

"Let's speak Russian, *vasha*," Tarasov grumbles for a reply. "I have nothing to hide from my friends."

The Chechen shrugs and continues in Russian. "*Nu khorosho*. Word has it you are one of us. The brothers want to meet you."

He jerks his head to the three others behind him.

"Nooria," Tarasov whispers in English, "remove your balaclava and show your hair. Now."

Slowly, Tarasov gets to his feet. Meanwhile Nooria, though surprised, does as he has commanded.

When her long hair falls over her shoulders, the Chechen gasps with surprise. Tarasov steps closer to him.

"What did you just say?"

"Is she your wife?"

"Yes she is," Tarasov shouts at him, "and I will teach you manners!"

He lands a kick in the abdomen of the Chechen mobster who bends forward with a gasp of pain. Tarasov grabs his arm, turns him around and pulls him backwards over to himself. He takes the head of the Bandit between his hands and twists it violently. Vertebrae break with a faint crack. Tarasov lets off the dead mobster collapse at his feet.

The three other Chechens have barely realized what was happening in the past few seconds. By the time they reach for their weapons, Hartman already has his M1911 pointed at them.

"Back off, whatever crazy lingo you speak!"

Tarasov gives them a cold look.

“He was looking at her in a bad way,” he says, then points to the Chechen’s body where the head is jolted over the shoulder in a disturbingly unnatural way. “Now he is looking at her in a good way.”

The three Chechens exchange looks of shock. Then the tallest gives Tarasov a killer’s gaze.

“You will die for that.”

“No. *I* will kill *you* if you approach her ever again,” Tarasov says. “I don’t want to do anything with scum like you who call me a brother but don’t give a woman under my protection the respect she deserves. Now take your *vasha* and get out off my sight!”

Eventually, the three Chechens back off and leave without a word, carrying the body with them. Their silence appears more menacing than if they were cursing and threatening.

“Phew,” Hartman sighs. “Next time you tell me in advance, will you?”

“Was that really necessary?” Nooria asks.

“First, I made sure that no one will ever set an eye on you. Second, they would have blown my cover in a moment. Third, these *obshina* guys are the most dangerous in all the Russian underworld. Don’t shed any tears over him.”

“Now you’ve made an enemy out of the *obshina* or whatever they are called,” Pete says with a headshake. “Bravo.”

“An enemy?” Tarasov snorts. “Why, do we have any friends here? All I see is enemies.”

“You’re wrong, brother,” someone says nearby. The voice is English but obviously spoken by a Russian. “Those cocksuckers were bullying us long enough. Guess I’m not the only friend you’ve just made!”

It is the man in Duty’s light black armor speaking.

“Yes, I’m meaning it. You’ll have all the rookies’ gratitude for teaching them a lesson!”

“Bandits skinning Bandits?” Pete says. “This place is more screwed up than I had thought.”

“Every man for himself, might makes right—pick your meaning,” the Dutyer shrugs.

“Ain’t that Jack character supposed to keep order here?” the Top asks.

“He does. Shit flows down, loot goes up. That’s the local law. Anyway—”

The Dutyer cuts his sentence when Jack himself appears and approaches the campfire with two Mercenaries in tow. The Bandit who they saw sleeping in his headquarters is also with him, still yawning but looking very martial with a grenade belt over his assault vest and an RG-6 grenade launcher in his hands.

“You bloody newcomers just don’t know how to behave,” the Bandit leader snaps. “If you weren’t with Margarita I’d just kick your fucking butt into an anomaly. Whaddafuck were you thinking, huh?”

Tarasov gives him a bold grin. “What did you expect? Solving our differences with peaceful dialogue or what? That prick was looking at Margarita with eyes bulging, goddammit!”

“And then you break his fucking neck? Just like that?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking savages... Luckily for you, I need a badass like you. See, you’re my ‘ace in the hole’, as they say in America. I have a stone in my shoe. You can remove it.”

The Top quietly coughs.

“I’m all ears,” Tarasov says trying to sound enthusiastic.

“Sultan needs us to secure three positions in the area. This Warehouse and the Jupiter Plant are already ours. Now I need you to take a few hardy fellas and clean the helipads. Some crazy Loners have nestled in there. We need to press alt-control-delete on their activities.”

“What’s the big fuss?” Tarasov asks suspecting a snatch. “You have many men here, some of them armed much better than we are. Why don’t you just wipe those Stalkers out?”

“I give you a dozen badass brothers but someone needs to lead them. Friar told me you are pretty good leader. Is that right?”

“Fuck that cretin,” Tarasov grumbles.

“I take that as a yes. You must make sure that this fellow gets in one piece to the wrecked chopper blocking the landing pads.”

“I don’t follow.”

That’s Abdul, our man from Dagestan,” Jack gives the sleepy Bandit a patronizing pat on the back. “You love blowin’ things up, right?”

“Bombs are great!” the Bandit called Abdul replies with an eager nod.

“He’ll take care of that wreck. He’s also the only one in your team who speaks English.”

“A Dagestani who speaks English?”

“Grew up in Northern London, mate,” Abdul says with a genuine Estuary accent. “Finsbury Park. Suppose you’ve heard of it, haven’t you?”

“If you want to help us, get moving,” Jack impatiently says. “If you don’t – there’s no such option.”

“What about her?” Tarasov asks pointing at Nooria.

“She’ll stay.”

“Then you were wrong about refusing to help you not being an option.”

“You nuts? She is Sultan’s own assassin. No one dares to hurt her, especially after you broke that darkie’s neck!”

Tarasov looks at Nooria who just looks at her feet and chews on her lips. However, this is not a time to ask her questions.

In ten minutes, Tarasov, Pete and Hartman are on their way to the helipads with a group of Bandits. The Dutyer is among them and, breaching every sound discipline, exchanges loud insults with the Bandit wearing a Freedom suit.

“Hey, anarchist. You’re wearing your armor the wrong way. The Kevlar shouldn’t cover your chest but your butt. That’s where most of you get shot at, you know?”

“You can’t talk about armor. Even the meat inside my can of tourist’s breakfast is better protected than you in that black ninja suit.”

“You two!” Tarasov says. “Keep your voices down! Where do you think you are, on a stroll in a park or what?”

“Sorry, boss,” the Freedomer replies in a low voice.

“Tell me something,” Tarasov continues, keeping his voice down too. “You know that veteran Bandit with the Vintorez and army-issue Mark-II exoskeleton?”

“You must be meaning Dimitry Molotov,” responds the Dutyer. “Strange guy. Mostly keeps to himself, though. Why?”

“I didn’t like the stare he gave me when I arrived.”

“Why, did you expect a kiss on your mouth or what?”

“Well, never mind. Fuhgeddaboutit.”

“Hope dis guna be like me last raid,” a Bandit remarks behind them. “Went to da Garbage with a few fellas. See a free Stalker comin’ from da north. I says, now whatta strange guy that one is, strollin’ down da road as if it were his own. So, I ask him, yo *tipa*, ya gotta pay a road toll. He says fuck you and draws his AK. Then all the fellas come chargin’ from them bushes. Stalker tries to run away and then, *bang!* steps into a Vortex and all we see is him flyin’ up with a whoosh and then boom, we just stand there, body parts rainin’ out on us. His liver there, his arm here, and his rucksack right at me feet. All I had to do was to pick it up, hahaha!”

The Bandits laugh with him.

“What was so funny?” Hartman asks.

“Just pointless bragging,” Tarasov replies.

65

Helipads in the Jupiter factory area, Exclusion Zone

Their group has now reached an intersection with a fenced-off structure to their left and a wide, ascending slope leading to the helipads to their right. Tarasov signals the men to halt and moves forward to observe the area.

Covered from the Stalker's sight by a bush, he observes the helipads through his binoculars. The Stalkers have not only made a campfire behind the wreck of a BTR personnel carrier, but erected a defensive perimeter using it as barrier. It could be taken by storm; the only thing Tarasov is worried about are the mines between the road and the helipad. He hopes that Jack had been right about stray mutants having virtually cleared the minefield. At least the decomposing carcass of a boar close to the helipads proves such optimism.

There is a wrecked Mi-24 close to the Stalker's campsite. Seeing it makes Tarasov smile bitterly. The helicopter had been one of the aircrafts carrying him and his Spetsnaz comrades to Pripyat during Operation Fairway, call sign Stingray One. He sighs and makes his way back to the other men.

"We've a position to take. It's built into a hillside and surrounded by a minefield on three sides." Tarasov draws a rectangle into the mud and pricks his finger around it to make dots indicating mines. "It can't be approached from the front because there's no cover at all and the defenders will shoot us like sitting ducks. However, the wall is supported by buttresses every five meters." He draws a second line along the longer side of the rectangle. "The defenders can easily keep it under fire from here—" He puts a pebble into the square to symbolize the Mi-24 and another for the BTR. "—and here. We can't lay down fire from the hill because it's mined. We can't attack from the north where the approach is open, because there's no cover. How would you do that?"

"Well... a mortar should do the job with a few high explosive shells, but we have no mortar."

"Abdul's launcher has an effective range of three-fifty."

"Should work."

"He'll need an eternity to recharge it if the first volley isn't effective enough. Let's still think a little."

"Laying a smoke screen, sneak up the walls and keep the defenders under suppressive fire until we all get close enough to charge them?"

"Abdul, you have GRDs?"

"I have only one and it's my lucky smoke grenade!"

"Looks like you just ran out of luck. Load it."

"But—"

"Load it or I open a path through the mine field by making you run through it. Your fat ass would make a pretty big bang."

"But I've kept it since Beslan! It is my lucky charm!"

"I thought the Spetsnaz killed all the terrorists," Tarasov says with narrowed eyes.

Abdul gives him a wide grin. "Why do you think it's my lucky charm, huh?"

The Top and Tarasov share a quick glance.

"Wait a minute, Abdul," Hartman says. "You took part in the attack on that school?"

"Yeah, so what? And how many of my brothers and sisters did you Yanks kill in Iraq and Afghanistan?"

"Brothers and sisters, really? If you're such a believer, how come your breath reeks of liquor?"

There's a chill in the Marine's eyes that promises nothing good for Abdul's future, but Hartman gives him a smile nonetheless. Seeing the former Marine's blue eyes turning icy, Tarasov reckons that Abdul is a dead man.

"Allah is too busy preparing hell for those Stalkers to watch me," the now fumed Dagestani replies.

"You know what I think, Abdul?" Hartman's smile hardens. "You were too much of a coward to die a martyr's death. That's why you drink. You're an Al-lah-coholic, eh?"

Tarasov quickly intervenes before the ex-terrorist and the ex-Marine can start up a fight. "Shut up, both of you! Here's our plan: Abdul, you'll fire your smoke on my command. Then one of us will move in, take cover behind that UAZ and lay down suppressive fire until the rest catch up. Meanwhile, you'll launch a grenade each time I tell you. When the assault team has caught up with the man up front, they will throw a volley of grenades and then charge the Stalkers down. If your grenades are accurate, they will be shaken enough to make the rest of the job easy. Understood?"

"I'll volunteer for the UAZ," Hartman says.

"Negative, Top," Pete says. "With all due respect, but you move like a rhino. I'm quick and offer a much smaller target than you."

"Outstanding progress, son! You'll become a real warrior in the end."

Pete grins and shakes his head. "Actually, giving suppressing fire means I don't necessarily need to kill those Stalkers."

"Where did you find this guy?" Abdul asks. "Amnesty International?"

"Exactly," Pete says. "That's why I'm siding with criminals and terrorists like you, Abdul."

The Dagestani's reply would probably be an angry one but Tarasov cuts in.

"Weapon check," he says and continues in Russian to make the rest of the team understand. "*Proverit oruzhie!*"

In a few words, he recaps the plan and the orders to the Bandits.

"Locked and loaded," Pete and Hartman say.

“Good. Now wait, all of you. I want to give those fellows a last chance.”

Ignoring the frowns of his men, Tarasov shoulders his rifle and leaves the cover of the bushes. Standing up, he shouts out.

“Don’t shoot! Stalker coming through!”

Keeping as close to the wall as he can and watching out for every suspicious spot in the mud, he slowly approaches the tarmac with the helicopter carcass.

“*Stoi!* Stay where you are!”

The Stalker shouting from behind the BTR has his AK pointed at him.

“I am unarmed!” Tarasov shouts back, raising his hands.

“And I am Valentina Tereskova, talking from outer space! Hands up!”

“They are already! What’s wrong with you?”

He hears several men laughing behind their safe cover.

“We are the Reapers and don’t talk to Bandit scum!”

“You are—who?”

“The Reapers! A new faction! Soon we’ll own of the Zone!”

For a heartbeat, Tarasov hesitates between taking the Stalker for either mad or drunk even beyond Zone standards.

“That might be so, but there’s two dozen Bandits out there wanting to kick your butts. Listen, why don’t you just leave? There’s no need for bloodshed!”

“You don’t frighten us, Bandit pigs! Go and boil your bottoms, sons of bitches! Soon we’ll have the Heart of Oasis artifact and then we’ll blow our noses at you!”

“Now listen, brother—that artifact has already been found!”

“Don’t try talking us out of it, you boar-headed son of a blind dog bitch! We know it’s close! We’ll find it, get dirty filthy rich and own the Zone!”

“God damn you, Stalker! Trust me, it wasn’t such a big deal anyway!”

“You lie, ass-face! It’s gonna make us invulnerable and then we’ll rape you Bandits in the asshole!”

“Don’t die searching for a stupid legend, Stalker!”

“I don’t want to talk to you no more, you empty-headed bloodsucker food!”

“Is there someone else there I can talk to?”

“No! Go away!”

The Stalker fires a warning shot to underline his message. Tarasov gives himself beaten and carefully retraces his steps along the concrete wall.

“What a strange person,” Abdul whispers when Tarasov rejoins the others. “He’ll be a dead person now, won’t he?”

“Bunch of lunatics looking for the Zone’s Holy Grail!” Tarasov heaves a sigh of frustration before prepping the team. “They leave us no choice. All right then—take up position at the wall. Abdul, you and me stay in the middle. When the suppressing fire starts, we all move in. Aim carefully. Clear?”

“Clear,” the Bandits nod.

“Pete, stick to the wall and move from buttress to buttress. Once you reach that car wreck, duck, fire that AK without peeking out, and try to stay in one piece. Hartman and the others will be there in about ten seconds.”

“They’d better will.”

Tarasov is about to follow Abdul to the agreed position when Hartman signals him to wait.

“The less of this scum reach the New Zone, the better,” he coldly says when he is sure that Abdul can’t hear him. “If you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Tarasov whispers in reply. “But I don’t want the deserters to get hurt. I mean the two guys in black and woodland camouflage armor. They could be useful later.”

“Just get them separated from the Bandits.”

“Let’s move,” Tarasov says and adds, “Watch Pete’s back.”

“Affirmative.”

Tarasov joins Abdul who is lying prone behind a bush. When everyone is in position, he gives him a nod.

“No wind,” the Dagestani whispers. “Good for smoke. God has blessed us.”

He aims the grenade launcher. With a muted thump, the projectile darts out in a long arch and hits the tarmac right between the UAZ and the BTR. A second after impact, thick smoke rises and wreathes the helipad.

Agitated noises come from the crazed Stalkers’ perimeter. Tarasov watches Pete who proceeds with a cat’s dexterity.

“Careful, kid, careful,” he whispers under his breath.

He is sure that by now the Stalkers know that doom approaches. However, by discipline or lack of ammunition, they don’t start shooting blindly into the growing smoke.

Meanwhile Pete has reached the edge of the tarmac and disappears into the smoke that already engulfs the UAZ wreck. Three seconds later his AK starts barking in short bursts.

“Abdul, fire!” Tarasov commands. “Do not hit the kid!”

The concrete walls surrounding the helipad amplify the thundering explosion. By now the assault team’s rifle fire adds to the hellish noise of gunfire echoing in the compound.

“One more!” Tarasov shouts.

The smoke screens what's going on from his view but after the next deafening *bang*, Tarasov hears cries from the direction of the Stalkers' perimeter.

"Nice shot," he shouts, "let's move!"

Moving along the wall they hurry towards the fight. Tarasov draws his pistol, knowing that at close quarters, with the smoke still hazing the scene, his rifle with the attached scope would be useless. A defiant shout comes from behind the BTR.

"Eat this, cocksuckers!"

Before anyone can shout 'cover!', a grenade is thrown and goes up in a blast close to the UAZ that now takes shape in the smoke. Feeling safe tarmac under his feet, Tarasov dashes to the car wreck.

"Still in one piece, kid?"

"Yeah," Pete shouts back. His eyes are wide open from the adrenaline rush that has made him ignore the blood gushing from a wound on his left arm.

"You're wounded!"

Another grenade detonates and both of them instinctively duck.

"What?"

"Keep low! You're wounded!"

"Aw shit!"

"Where's the Top?"

"Moving around the chopper to flank them!"

Rifle fire comes from the wrecked helicopter, hitting the defenders from an angle where they are only protected by wooden crates and a few metal boxes. The agitated shouting of the Stalkers behind the BTR becomes panicked as the Bandits' assault rifles spray them with automatic fire through this less than adequate cover. Hartman's voice bellows over the gunfire.

"Frag out!"

Three hand grenades detonate behind the BTR where the defenders are now hopelessly cornered.

"Give it up!" Tarasov yells. "Give it up, fools!"

"Die, Bandit!" comes a desperate but defiant reply.

The thud and whine of gunfire comes from the direction of the chopper wreck. Bullets hit the BTR and ricochet with a sharp whizz. Then the last Kalashnikov of the defenders ceases firing.

"Keep your eyes open," Tarasov commands.

"Hey hey, buddies, it's too soon to hide the guns!" a Bandit shouts in reply.

"Top, on me! Let's check the command post!"

Hartman kicks the rusty metal door open and Tarasov, holding his pistol at ready, quickly surveys the interior. Hartman follows him. Save for a few dirty mattresses and a few worthless items, they find the rooms empty.

“Clear!”

“Clear,” Tarasov replies and holsters his weapon.

Oblivious of their three dead comrades who lie between the UAZ and the helicopter, the Bandits and a few Mercenaries are already moving into loot the dead Stalkers.

“Hehe, this little stiff’s a kind one, he’ll share, won’t he? Hmm, this one was an idiot—no supplies, all shit—”

Tarasov fires his pistol in the air.

“Stop looting,” he says once all eyes are on him. “We still got a job to do. Abdul, the stage is yours. Until he places the explosives, let’s all move to a safe distance. That includes you, trench coat! Those bodies won’t be going anywhere.”

“Yes, you better move into that command building,” Abdul says removing his rucksack. “This one’s going to be a big one.”

Tarasov watches him take several blocks of C4 explosives from his rucksack and begins to position them at the weak-spots of the wreck.

“Perhaps you want to report Jack that the helipad is ours?” Abdul asks while attaching a radio receiver to a block of explosives.

“When you’re done, Abdul.”

After five minutes, they all throng inside the windowless first floor of the command post. Tarasov grimaces as he feels the smell of cordite mixing with the reek of stale sweat and dirty fatigues in the confined space.

“Duck, keep your mouths open and ears covered,” Abdul warns them putting plugs in his ears. “Ready? Three... two... one. *Bismillah!*”

He presses the button on the detonator.

When the chemical reaction inside the C-4 is triggered, it releases a blast of nitrogen and carbon oxides that sucks most of the gas out from the center of the explosion. When the gases rush back in to the vacuum, they create a second wave of energy, this time inward. To the men ducking inside, the only observable feature about all this is a detonation that shatters the command post and almost kicks them to the ground.

Small metal parts clink as they fall to the tarmac.

“Ooo-kay,” Abdul shouts. “Now let’s have a butchers at what we’ve done.”

Low smoke lingers over the tarmac. All that remains from the Mi-24’s wreck that had stood there a minute ago is a pile of metal debris.

“And now – let’s loot,” a Bandit says cheerily.

Hustling like shoppers would at sales time, the remaining Bandits scramble to the now ruined perimeter and begin to pat down the bodies and force the containers open.

Tarasov stops the deserters. "Hey, you two! Back into the command post. Pete, you too. Check it for anything useful."

"But there is nothing but junk," the Freedomer protests.

"Do what I said, goddammit!" Tarasov shouts at him.

Realizing what's coming next, Hartman rubs his hands.

"Scavengers," he grumbles and gives the looters a scorn.

"Hey!" Tarasov shouts to the machine gun Bandit. "Trench coat! Let me see your PKM!"

"Ain't for sale, *tipa!*"

"I can see from here that it's jammed. Let me put it right until you're busy. What if mutants show up and you stand there with just your dick in your hands?"

"Whatcha mean? This one's in perfect condition," the Bandit says but hands over his light machine gun nonetheless. "But if ya wanna clean it for me, go ahead!"

With a wink from his eye, Tarasov hands the weapon over to Hartman who gives it the look of a specialist.

"How do you say in Russian, 'comrade, the condition of your weapon brings shame on you, now give me twenty'?"

The former Marine opens the breech, removes the ammunition band and pulls it through again. Then he closes the breech and works the bolt carrier. With a loud click, the bolt moves back into position, ready to fire.

"No longer jammed?" Tarasov asks drawing his pistol and rocking the safety off.

"There's only one way to find it out!"

The Bandits look puzzled. They were listening to their conversation but didn't understand it. One of them is about to make a joke when his eyes open wide with dread.

"Patsani..."

If he wanted to shout a warning, it came too late. The PKM's hail of bullets hits the Bandits who have neither a chance to escape nor time to draw their own weapons which they have carelessly slung over their shoulders to make looting easier. While Hartman relentlessly fires the machine gun, Tarasov points his pistol at Abdul who stands there taken over by complete surprise, watching the slaughter with a horror-stricken face.

"Stay where you are, *dagi!*"

The machine gun fire ceases. For a second, empty cartridge shells keep jingling as they fall to ground around Hartman's feet.

“Jesus Christ, what was that?”

Pete and the two deserters rush from the command post. Seeing the pile of dead Bandits, Hartman with the still smoking machine gun and Tarasov keeping Abdul in check, they drop their jaws.

“What the fuck are you staring at?” Hartman asks. “We’re mobsters now. Ever heard of Valentine Day’s Massacre?”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Tarasov tells in Russian to the two deserters, watching Abdul from the corner of his eye. “Top, take their rifles until I deal with this terrorist here.”

“And now let’s kill that fucking raghead,” Hartman says.

“Sorry Top but this is personal.”

“Suit yourself,” Hartman says with a shrug and adds, loud enough for Abdul to hear it, “I’ll kill enough ragheads once I’m back to the New Zone!”

“Who the hell are you?” Abdul asks with slowly moving lips.

“Who I am is none of your business, but I’m proud to give you to Sergeant Major Hartman,” Tarasov says with a grin and jerks his head toward the Top. “He’s from the Tribe. You heard of them, I guess. Renegade Americans, addicted to kill bastards like you who blew up schools in Russia and sprayed acid into girls’ faces in Afghanistan. Like your ’brothers’ did with *my* girl.”

“Oh God,” Abdul mutters.

“Take off your ammo belt and run – I’m giving your god a chance to save you.”

Hoping to make a quick dash and escape in the twilight, Abdul starts running across the open area where the minefield once was. Keeping his eye on the fleeing terrorist, Tarasov holsters his pistol and unslings the scoped Val from his shoulder. He takes his time for an accurate aim.

“This is for Stingray One,” he whispers as he watches Abdul’s back in the reticule.

Softly, he pulls the trigger.

The muzzle blast is barely more audible than the faint whizz of two sub-sonic bullets and the hard clack of the receiver ejecting the spent cases. The reticule jolts upwards from the recoil. When it flattens back a moment later, Tarasov sees Abdul fall forward with arms outstretched. Then comes a sudden and blinding blaze, accompanied by the blast of a detonation.

“Wow!” Hartman says with a satisfied grin. “Now I understand why that bastard was so attached to his lucky charm!”

“Fitting death for someone fond of explosives,” Tarasov observes and shouldered his rifle. “You feel like making a little noise? Take his launcher and fire a few grenades to where he fell. Just in case there’re more mines.”

"Oh yeah," Hartman says gleefully, taking Abdul's orphaned RG-6 from the ground. "This is my grenade launcher. There are many like it, but this one's mine!"

"Hey, you two!" Tarasov shouts to the deserters. "Come over here. Let's have a chat."

Mistrust is written over the two deserters' faces as they approach him.

"You belong to self-respecting factions. How on earth did you end up as Bandits?"

"I want to see the New Zone," the Freedomer says. "Heard that Bandits are looking for men to beef up their ranks and move there. And honestly, I wouldn't mind checking out the rumors about extra-large weed growing there either. That's all."

"I'm amazed," the Dutyer says feigning surprise. "If they are looking for men, how did they let you join them?"

"But I *do* know why they let *you* join, buddy. Friar told me being a Dutyer is the greatest crime against humanity."

"Stop that banter for a minute," Tarasov says tiredly. "What about you, Dutyer?"

"Unlike this junkie, I'm a reasonable person. Realized long ago that this war with Freedom will never end. But if I became a Loner, my comrades would hunt me down for desertion. That left me with the Mercs and Bandits to choose from. Guess if I join the latter and go with them to the New Zone, I can be free there."

"What's your name?"

"Call me Buryat. Before you ask—I'm Russian but was born in Ulan-Ude, Buryatia, that's why."

"You, Freedomer?"

"Name's Ferret. Where I was born is none of your business. And what about you? Been with the army, huh?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Come on, *patsan*. You're used to ordering men around, no reason to deny it. Are you a deserter?"

"I prefer to think of it the other way round: my army deserting me." Tarasov stirs as a grenade from the RG-6 detonates with a loud *bang*. "Looks like neither of you is committed to Bandit business. That means we're in the same shoes because all we want is to get back to the New Zone, just like you."

"You've been to the New Zone?" Buryat asks. "How is it there?"

"Everything's kind of bigger. If we stick together, we have a better chance to deal with the Bandits once we're in the New Zone."

"How do you want to deal with them?"

Tarasov cocks an eye at the spot where the dead Bandits lie. The two deserters exchange a grin.

"Besides, the New Zone is a tough place. Local equivalent of the Bar is Bagram. I can help you get there. All in all, it's your best interest to side with us."

Not to mention a trigger-happy Hartman who'd shoot you without fluttering an eyelid if you don't, Tarasov mentally adds.

"Fine with me," Buryat says.

"You, Ferret? With or against us?"

The Freedomer nods. "Count me in, but I beg you not to take the Dutyer. Duty's presence is bad for the mood."

"And yours for morale," Buryat grumbles.

"Guys, I don't want you to suck each other's *yalda* but please, try not to stab each other in the back until we're in Bandit country. Is that too much for me to ask?"

"I'll try," says Ferret.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, 'Chekh'. A Dutyer would never stab anyone in the back. Only black-hearted anarchists do that."

"Let's make a campfire," Ferret says. He rubs his hands together. "It's freezing!"

"What will you whine about next?" the Dutyer asks. "Your sausage is too small, huh?"

"You should try Freedom sausage, buddy. It's bigger and longer than what you Duterers are used to!"

"Stick it up your anarchist butt and rotate!"

Leaving the two quarrelling men to themselves, Tarasov sees the time fit to report back to Jack – including the final body count. Having secured Buryat's and Ferret's loyalty, it is no longer necessary to dispose of them and extend the casualty list. He presses the switch on the radio set.

"Jack. Misha Chekh here."

"At last! What the hell took you so long?"

"Resistance was heavier than expected but the mission is accomplished. The helipad is secure and the wrecked chopper has been removed."

"Casualties?"

"Only the two *pinos*, the Freedomer and the Dutyer made it through."

"Abdul?"

"Abdul's gone. Stepped on a damned land mine after he finished the job."

"There are still mines?"

Another detonation blasts the edge of the minefield.

"Don't worry, we're about to clean it."

"Yeah, I hear it. Too bad about Abdul. Such a waste of talent."

"Damn tragic indeed."

"Never mind, at least I don't have to pay him. Good job, fellows. Sultan will be pleased."

"That's why we're here, Jack. To please Sultan." Tarasov is glad Jack can't see his grin. "What's next?"

"Stay where you are. Keep any mutants off the helipad until more men arrive."

"Is, uhm, Margarita safe?"

"You bet she is. Stop whining about her, patsan! You in love with her or what?"

Jack clears the channel.

"As a matter of fact I am," Tarasov murmurs reattaching the radio set to his belt.

He walks over to Hartman who is giving a Pete a crash course on handling the grenade launcher. "Love at first sight, huh?"

The Top gives him a beaming smile. "You bet."

"The two deserters are on our side."

"Wise choice."

"What about Nooria?" Pete asks. "I'm worried about leaving her alone in the Bandit camp."

"Jack told me she's fine."

"What was that talk about her being an assassin, anyway?"

"No idea. Probably the big boss was impressed by her escape from the SBU."

"Yup," the Top nods. "Can't blame him for falling for her charm."

"Three hours till daylight," Tarasov says illuminating the dial on his watch. "I wonder what they're up to now."

"Guess they need the place to land a chopper with supplies."

"Or a chopper to fly us out."

"Wishful thinking, Pete. They'd need a whole fleet of choppers to get out all the Bandits."

"We'll find out soon enough," Tarasov says. "Now look at that! Our new friends eventually managed to make a campfire without killing each other. Let's warm ourselves up and wait."

66

Container Warehouse, Exclusion Zone

"You know the New Zone well, Margarita?"

Nooria stares at the huge map Jack has rolled out over his table. Her answer would be yes. However, she never used maps to navigate through

the wilderness where she grew up. Even if she could read maps, there's still the concern that Jack might ask her about directions and places she has no intention to share.

"I know about Bagram," she cautiously says.

"It's the northern areas I'm interested in."

"I don't know northern passages very good," she replies, relieved over Jack not asking her about the Tribe's valley.

"We might have a problem." Jack sounds genuinely concerned. "Recently, we tried to establish a base for our operations west of Bagram but an idiot called Bruiser screwed it up. Looks like we'll need to be more cautious this time."

"What happened?"

"He and his men cleared out a Loners' lair at a position that would've been more than perfect. Right in the middle of the New Zone, between the artifact fields here and Bagram, here." Jack points his finger to two points on the map. "They barely had time to catch their breath when a bunch of heavily armed whackos appeared out of the blue. Our brothers didn't stand a chance—it was not a fight but a massacre!"

"Who did it? Stalkers?"

"You heard of them whackos calling themselves the Tribe?"

Nooria is barely able to suppress a smile. "Yes. Very dangerous people. You better don't get close to them."

"That's my second question. See, a short while ago there was a huge emission that devastated Termez. Sultan has spent a fortune to get things arranged there – landing, switching to choppers, getting over the border into the New Zone and all. Now the place is a mess and our arrangements no longer stand. The good news is, our flight will less likely be suspicious among all the disaster relief traffic. Bad news is, we have to land directly in the New Zone. Bruiser and his remaining men are holed up at a village called Charikhar, here, north of Bagram. My question is: do you think the Tribe can attack us there?"

"It is far from Bagram."

"I know, but the road running close to it is the only place where our airplanes can land. Kunduz and Mazari Sheriff are too far north."

"It is Mazari *Sharif*," Nooria corrects him.

"Mazari – Whatever!" Jack snorts. "I give a rat's ass about what locals call it."

Nooria finds Jack's arrogance very much to her satisfaction, and hopes that it will translate as carelessness once they are there. It wouldn't be the first time the New Zone would punish arrogant newcomers. It appears to her that the place marked on the map is out of the Tribe's regular patrol

grids; however, close enough for the Colonel to send in a strike force and eliminate the Bandit's foothold once he learns the location.

"Let me think," she says patting her lips with her finger, ignoring the stare Jack is giving her mouth. "No, I don't think Tribe will go there. It looks safe to me."

"You better be right about that." Jack unpockets a cellular phone and dials a number. "Sultan, it's me. Margarita says the Tribe will probably not bother us there. Yes, yes, I know Bruiser said the landing strip is safe but he was an asshole. No disrespect meant. All right... okay, boss. I'll ask her... Yes, everything is prepared. We move in one hour. Understood."

He puts the phone away and gives Nooria an inquisitive look.

"The boss wants to know who your bodyguards are and if they're also from the New Zone."

"Misha... well, he is a Chechen, and two Americans... tall one is from Tennessee and kid from Los Angeles—"

"It's not their damned curriculum I want to know but if they're from the New Zone like you."

Unsure about what reply would be best, Nooria decides to tell the truth. "Yes."

Jack appears satisfied with her reply. "Excellent," he says. "You will land first and secure the area before the rest of us moves in. Maybe this would be a good time for you to get a real weapon, no?"

"My blade is enough."

"*Bozhevilna*," Jack grumbles something disapproving in Ukrainian. "Whatever. Visit Limpid in the warehouse if you change your mind, but you better hurry. The first detachment is already moving out."

"Where?"

"What do you think, Margarita?" Jack cheerily asks. "We're flying to the New Zone today!"

67

Helipads, Exclusion Zone

The wind grows colder as the night slowly fades away and the eastern horizon begins to glow with soft pink. Beyond the far hills of Zaton, the silhouette of the CNPP looms in the pale sunrise. White frost covers the sparse grass growing on the cleared minefield where Tarasov and Buryat are dragging Abdul's corpse. In a minute, his stiffening body lies among the grim yield of last night's battle—dead Stalkers and Bandits laid out next to the command post. Their faces are covered with their bullet-torn jackets and trench coats to give them at least a modicum of dignity.

“Looks like it’s going to snow today,” Tarasov says warming his hands at the campfire. “Time for us to leave, really. The Zone is hell in winter. Mutants are starving and become more aggressive. Some anomalies are buried under the snow and you can’t see them—and when the snow recedes in spring, one often finds the body of Stalkers frozen to death months before.”

“Must have run out of vodka,” Pete says, shaking with cold.

“Just like we did,” Hartman says. “How’s your wound doing?”

“Hurts.”

“You’re lucky it’s just a flesh wound.”

“Hurts nonetheless.”

Tarasov is about to check if the bandage on Pete’s arm needs to be changed when they hear a shout.

“Hey! *Patsani!*”

One of Jack’s bodyguards appears below the grassy slope leading to the helipads and waves his hand. “Is da minefield clear?”

Tarasov waves back and points to the spot where Abdul fell and from where their own footsteps lead to the safety of the helipad’s tarmac. “Follow that path, just in case!”

When more armed men appear from the direction of the Container Warehouse, Tarasov notices with surprise that it’s not just a patrol coming to occupy the helipads. Led by one of Jack’s bodyguards, several dozen Bandits are approaching. All are carrying heavy rucksacks.

“Good job with ’em Stalkers,” their leader says when he gets to Tarasov. “They guna bother us no more. You can return to base now.”

“What’s next?”

The Bandit shrugs. “Dunno exactly. Jack told us to come ’ere with one third of ’em bros. Another hundred are on da way to da Cement Factory. If y’ask me – Sultan’s guna send choppas to get us outta ’ere.”

“Yeah, but what kind of helicopter could carry so many people, plus cargo? There’s none in Ukraine capable of that. Besides, the New Zone is three thousand kilometers away!”

“Sultan says he’s guna take us there and ya better be trustin’ him. Da boss always keeps his word—’nuff said!”

Walking back to base in the early morning mist, they pass by a veritable caravan of Bandits on their way to the helipads. All are cheerful and excited. However, all thoughts about the Bandits’ plans are momentarily forgotten when they find Nooria sound and safe at their campsite.

Jack's Mercenaries don't leave them much time to relax. They walk down the alleys between the containers and shout orders for everyone to get ready to move out. Still unsure about what comes now, Tarasov's party gears up and follows them to the open area stretching out in front of the Bandit camp where a crowd of more than a hundred men has already gathered. Friar has climbed up a pile of ammunition crates and shouts out over the crowd.

"...and He cast upon them the fierceness of His anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels! Behold, brothers, for today those angels will carry us to the heavens!"

"Is he crazy or just drunk?" Buryat asks.

"Probably both," comes Ferret's reply.

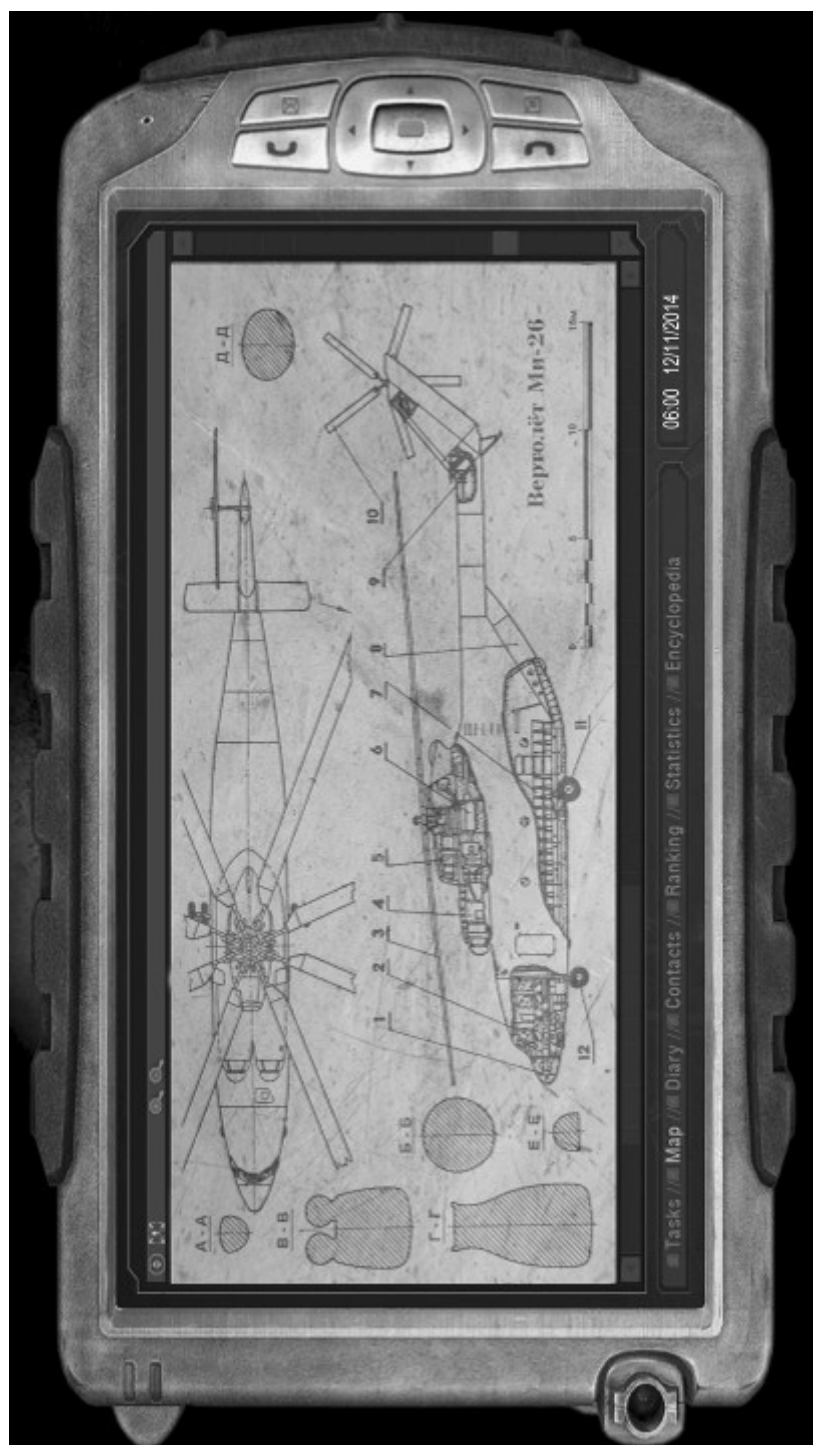
"At last we seem to agree over something."

Then they hear a noise coming from the north. It sounds like a helicopter but is undertoned by the drone of engines that must be much bigger than those powering a Mi-24 or any other helicopter likely to appear over the Zone. The noise becomes louder and after a minute three dots appear on the misty northern horizon. As they get closer, Tarasov realizes they are indeed helicopters – but of a type he had never seen in action before. The roaming noise of engines fills the sky as the gigantic aircraft approach. Their broad bodies appear more like that of a cargo plane than a helicopter. The downwash of the enormous, eight-blade rotors whirls up vortexes in the thick morning fog.

"Holy mother of Jesus Christ," Pete slowly says.

"Mil Mi-26," Tarasov says in admiration. "The biggest helicopter in the world!"

Hartman sounds equally impressed. "Codename Halo. I've seen one lifting a Chinook, back at Kandahar in 2010. That helo is... massive."



Two helicopters leave formation and fly towards the helipads and the Cement Factory. The first hovers over the Bandits' compound.

"Step back! Back!" Jack's Mercenaries shout and push the mass of awed Bandits away from the landing zone. Their orders are easier to read from their lips than heard in the now thundering roar of the engines.

The helicopter slowly descends and Tarasov, although standing far away, feels the propulsion of the rotor blades—each with a diameter of 32 meters—hit him like a gale. Before its wheels touch the ground, the Mi-26 gracefully turns its tail to the gate of the Warehouse to make loading easier. By now the flag on its tail can be clearly seen, as well as the huge red cross on the light grey fuselage.

"They're from Belarus!" Tarasov hollers through the noise. "Look at the green-red ensign and WE registration number on the tail! Belarusian Red Cross!"

The engines are cut but it still takes several long minutes for the heavy rotor blades slow down and come to a halt. Then the tail ramp opens and Sultan appears in the helicopter's cargo bay, flanked by several tough-looking men in heavy armor suits. A mighty cheer goes up from the Bandits.

"He's a scoundrel but must be an organisational genius too," Tarasov says shaking his head.

"I still don't get that assassin thing about Nooria," Pete says looking around. "Hey—where is she?"

Tarasov and Hartman share alarmed an look. Pete is right – while they were admiring the landing helicopters, Nooria has disappeared.

68

Container Warehouse, Exclusion Zone

Had rage not clouded her better judgment, Nooria would have thought twice about what she is about to do. Forcing her way through the crowd of Bandits with her elbows, she gets closer and closer to the helicopter where Sultan is standing, wearing a long brown leather coat and surrounded by heavily armed men. Knuckles is next to him, sporting a grey exoskeleton with a winged skull on the breastplate.

"Brothers!" Jack's excited voice bellows from a megaphone. "Our leader has kept his word like always! In minutes, we will be on our way to find riches you've never dreamed about! Brothers – be proud, Sultan is with us!"

Excitement runs high among the Bandits. The mostly strongly built and tall men don't pay the fragile woman much attention, and also cover

her from the view of Hartman who desperately scans over the mass to find her.

Nooria doesn't even think of her companions. Obsessed with the thought of avenging Larissa, the only person who treated her with friendship in the outside world and perhaps even more so by the humiliation of being blackmailed into giving her word of honor to kill the man she loves, her thoughts are fixed on thrusting her blade into Sultan's heart.

Tarasov has checked the containers all the way back to Jack's now abandoned headquarters. His search proved futile. Nooria was at none of the smothering campfires, neither in the garage or the warehouse from where Bandits are carrying crates of equipment and ammunition boxes toward the helicopter.

Out of some subconscious reason, his eyes are for a moment fixed on the hunting knife of a Bandit watching over the remaining crates in the warehouse. Jack's words crackle through the megaphone, announcing Sultan's arrival, and a sudden thought comes to Tarasov's mind.

She hates him, he thinks. She cursed him and wants to kill him.

He runs toward the helicopter, taking a shortcut through the container maze to avoid the Bandits blocking the area between the helicopter and the warehouse with all the equipment waiting to be loaded.

She will get herself killed. I must stop her. Now.

Tarasov is about to navigate through the last narrow passage between two containers when two men block his path.

"What's the hurry, *vasha*?"

The two Chechen mobsters give him a grim smile and draw knives. Like a ghost, the third one appears on the top of the container and jumps down, blocking Tarasov's way backward.

The Chechen grins. "I have a blade with your name on it."

"Brothers! My proud children!"

Sultan's words and the applause that follows them echo in the maze of railway containers. They are all empty now, with all Bandits gathering at the giant helicopter to hear what their leader has to say. Tarasov knows that no help will come, neither will there be anyone to witness this fight.

"My Bandit brothers, let me address you first."

Tarasov steps to the container to his right and turns to face his three attackers.

"I say to all of you, you have been treated to this day with no respect. Borov, Yoga and the other so-called leaders before me—you've earned

them money, made them rich, and asked for little. It is time for you to stand up!"

The Chechen to his left stabs at him. Tarasov dodges the attack with a quick bend backwards. His left hand grasps and twists the arm holding the knife, forcing the Chechen to bow and expose his temple where Tarasov delivers an incapacitating edge-of-hand blow with his right.

"I see Renegades amongst you. For so long, your small faction has been fighting in vain for a place under the sun. Those times are over—no one will kick you around anymore!"

His left hand goes up to block the frontal stab by his nearest opponent, glides down the forearm, grasps the wrist and twists it to make the Chechen fall. The fingers holding the knife loosen in pain and in the next second, the weapon is in Tarasov's left hand.

"I see many brave Dutyers here. Your officers will no longer send you to face the evils of the expanding Zone, while generals like Voronin cowardly hide in their bunkers!"

The third aims at his abdomen, putting all his strength into it as he bends forward. Tarasov steps back to dodge the stab, grabs the forehead of his attacker with his right hand and kicks his feet to make him lose balance. The knife in his left pierces through his attacker's windpipe. In the next second when he falls on his back, the Bandit opens his mouth to emit a cry of pain but instead of the cry blood begins to gush.

"I rejoice over seeing the best of Freedom with us, who were smart enough to realize that no freedom comes from anarchy."

His first attacker has shaken off the effects of the incapacitating blow to his temple. Getting to his feet gives Tarasov the one second he needs to draw his silenced rifle, work off the safety and pull the trigger.

"All of you, forget your old factions! Find true camaraderie that exists only among brothers who share their best and direst moments alike."

The third mobster is writhing on the ground, his left hand clutching his dislocated right wrist as if that could ease the pain. The curses he is hissing turn into a low cry of despair when he sees Tarasov taking aim at him. For a split second, he stares at the rifle barrel like a paralyzed rabbit would at a snake that's about to strike.

"I'm proud to lead you. We shall go to the New Zone together and have bloody adventures."

However, the Val has no visible muzzle flash to make him see it coming, neither does it emit any noise that would make anyone nearby aware of another short burst being fired.

“And we will suckle on the New Zone’s riches as on a whore’s tits until we can suckle no more, and then, when enough Stalkers have died, we will be the masters! For if Stalkers will not give, we will take!”

A loud cheer follows Sultan’s words.

When Tarasov at last reaches the landing area and sees the tightly packed crowd between the containers and the helicopter, his heart sinks – there appears to be no chance to find Nooria in time. Nonetheless, he takes a deep breath and begins to fight his way through the crowd.

69

Open area close to Container Warehouse, Exclusion Zone

Sultan’s bodyguards appear to have fallen to the excitement hanging in the air, or maybe it is just negligence towards her fragile and apparently unarmed figure, but not even Knuckles seems to notice Nooria when she at last emerges from the mass and approaches the ramp a few meters away. All she has to do now is to slip in, approach Sultan from the back and let her blade do the rest. Quick and small as she is, she might even have a chance to get away in the commotion that would surely follow. She is too focused on the kill ahead to detect the sinister, exoskeleton-clad Bandit following her to the helicopter.

“And now, brothers, let us leave the Exclusion Zone and wreak havoc on the New Zone,” Sultan says merrily into the megaphone’s mouthpiece. “Don’t be surprised to see the Red Cross on these helicopters! We are on a humanitarian mission because we will put many suffering Stalkers out of their misery!”

The thundering laugh and applause of more than a hundred men follow his words.

Nooria is already behind the kingpin and his bodyguards. Sultan replies to the cheering crowd by darting his fists into the air.

“Sultan! Sultan! Sultan!”

He repeats the triumphant gesture as the crowd shouts his name. Nooria knows: if she stabs him, a jerk in Sultan’s body would inevitably follow. If stabbed at the right moment, this gesture might hide the convulsion. It could be done in a second – just stab, turn the blade around, pull it out and hide it. With Sultan being now only a few steps away, her stomach is in knots. She swallows to get rid of the nausea mounting in her throat.

“Yes! Onward to the New Zone, brothers!”

Not even the cheer of the crowd can make Nooria ignore the wild thumping of her heart when Knuckles finally notices her and gives her a bow. Then he turns his eyes towards the crowd again. After sliding

through two bodyguards behind Sultan, she is at last there, right behind him.

Apparently done with addressing his followers, Sultan waves his hands once more.

Nooria recognizes the now or never situation. Standing right behind Sultan, her right hand slips under her coat and reaches for the blade in her belt.

A steely hand grabs at her arm. Looking up, Nooria sees the Bandit who gave them the suspicious gaze upon arrival.

“No!” he whispers, audible only to her through the cheer the Bandits are giving to their leader.

She still could do it as long as the cheering lasts. Determined not to waste this last chance, Nooria uses her free hand to unsheathe the blade.

Suddenly she feels as if someone has punched right into her stomach. Insurmountable nausea comes over her and forces her to bend forward and grab at Sultan’s coat. The exoskeleton-clad Bandit lets go of Nooria’s arm.

The kingpin turns around. Immense surprise appears on his face when he sees Nooria vomiting and desperately clutching at his spoilt trench coat.

Sultan gives one of his jovial laughs. “Margarita! Airsick already? We didn’t even lift off!”

He fishes a pack of paper tissues from his pocket. Seeing that she is still suffering from the cramp and utterly embarrassed as well, he cleans her face up without hesitation.

“Congratulations on your speech, boss,” Jack says. “Especially the suckling on tits part.”

“That was from *Gladiator*, one of my favorite movies. Educate yourself, Jack... but first clean up this mess.” Sultan lets the tissue fall into the pool of vomit at Nooria’s feet. “You don’t want to fly with this tin can smelling like this, do you?”

An excited Bandit appears. “Sultan! Someone has whacked Zhyogal and two other Chechens!”

Sultan darts an angry look at Jack. “What the hell is going on in your outfit?”

“Dunno, boss,” Jack says looking up while wiping Nooria’s vomit from the metal plate. “Must have been that darkie who whacked Zhyogal’s brother.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nooria’s buddy did it. A darkie looked at her in the wrong way, or so the man told me.”

Sultan grimaces. “Chechens, huh? The air smells much better without them. I could never trust them... one can’t turn away from them without the feeling of getting stabbed in the back the very next moment.”

He turns to Nooria who has more or less recollected herself in the meantime. "You all right, Margarita?"

"Yes, Sultan," she replies avoiding his eyes.

"Good. Tell your buddy he has my gratitude for that Chechen job. Where is he?"

Before Nooria could even think about a fitting reply, a voice in English bellows at the ramp.

"What the fuck happened here?"

Sultan gives the tall man in a Stalker suit a curious look. His steel-blue eyes sparkle with anger under dark, bushy eyebrows and gray hair. Another Stalker is standing next to him, barely reaching to his waist but with a similarly defiant look on his young face.

Sultan's bodyguards have already aimed their rifles at them. "Step back!"

"They are with me," Nooria quickly says and gives the Top and Pete a faint smile to let them know she is all right.

"Was it this big guy who broke that Chechen's neck?"

"No."

"I wonder what *this* giant would be capable of," Sultan says looking the Top up and down. "It's good to see that you are in safe hands. You still have my present, I suppose?"

Nooria has to cough. "The gun? It is... a friend is taking care of it."

"Good God, that was *expensive*! Don't give it to anyone. It might get stolen with all this cutthroat scum around!"

Respectfully, Knuckles touches his boss' arm. "Sultan, the chopper's ready to take off."

"Excellent. Margarita, I'll insist on seeing that friend of yours when we have more time. I always have a good business proposal for men who can easily whack three darkies. And as you see, I keep my word – the helicopters will bring you and our brothers to Minsk first and then a cargo airplane to the New Zone. I hope you were right and we're not running into trouble at Charikhar."

"It should be safe, Sultan."

"I trust you will also come up with your end of the deal. Matter of honor, yes?"

Nooria suddenly turns away from the kingpin to wretch once more. Jack slaps his face and cusses in Ukrainian. Amused, Sultan claps.

"Let's get moving, *patsani!* *Davai, uhodim!*"

Seeing Sultan and Knuckles moving down the ramp, Nooria calls after him. "You don't come with us?"

Sultan waves his hand, smiling. "See you soon, Margarita!"

Lined up in long rows the Bandits move into the Mi-26. The cavernous cargo compartment is only dimly lit by the three bullseye windows on either side and the slightly domed, dark grey fuselage appears like a church interior. Their helicopter is a version designed to haul vehicles and goods, and therefore lacks any seating, causing the Bandits to exchange a few swears as they hustle for space. A Belarusian aviator, probably the crew chief, attempts to keep order but is brusquely pushed aside.

Among the Bandits comes Tarasov with the balaclava pulled over his face. He quickly joins Nooria and the two Americans flanking her. The three of them were lucky enough to occupy a place by the two bigger windows behind the pilots' compartment.

"You... what were you thinking, huh?" Tarasov says in a low voice when he takes his place next to Nooria. "Don't give me that look! I know what you were up to!"

"I hate him," Nooria whispers.

"What if you succeed and his henchman tear you to pieces?"

"I had a plan."

"Did you want more than a hundred Bandits to start shooting at us?"

"No."

"Did you forget that this is the only way back to the New Zone?"

"For a moment, I did. I'm sorry, Misha."

"*Gospodi*," Tarasov sighs and shakes his head. "Never ever do that again, please. You scared us shitless!"

"Aw mate, ye know how wimin are," Pete says with a smile, imitating Finn Sawyer's accent.

"Guess there's no flight attendant to serve us breakfast," Hartman says. He smiles, apparently amused over Tarasov's half-hearted attempt to reprimand Nooria, and takes a dry sausage from his rucksack. "*Havchik*, anyone?"

The Mi-26's massive twin turboshafts begin to howl.

"Your Russian is improving," Tarasov says accepting a slice of sausage. He is about to bite into it but then offers it to Nooria who gladly takes it.

"Yeah... but that's about it. Chances are I won't hear your lingo for a long time," Hartman replies.

The Bandits break out in loud cheer when the helicopter lifts off. Compared to the stomach-knotting ascend of the Mi-24 gunships that Tarasov is used to, the giant helicopter's take-off can barely be felt. The feeling of flying in a helicopter only sets in when the Mi-26 gains an altitude of two hundred meters and the accelerating engines make it tilt its nose slightly downwards.

Ferret is sitting not far from them. He asks a Bandit for his guitar and begins to tune it. Expecting a spirit-lifting song, everyone cheers around him.

“Freedom’s secret weapon!” Buryat snorts next to him. “He’ll kill us all with that racket!”

The others browbeat him into silence and Ferret begins to sing. He does his best to make himself heard in the noise of the engines, and the song is known well enough to make more and more Bandits join in.

*S pokorennikh odnazhdi nebesnih vershin
Po supenyam obuglennim na zemlju shodim,
Pod protselnie zalpi navetov i lzhi –
Mi uhodim, uhodim, uhodim!
Proshchaite gori vam vidnei...*

“What’s that song about?” Pete asks.

“It was written when we moved out of Afghanistan.”

Tarasov looks at the singing Bandits with a bitter grin. They seem to ignore that this song with a powerful melody is actually full of pain, fittingly for a song about the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan; although a second thought tells him that for Bandits, who were after all loathed and hunted by every faction in the Exclusion Zone, going into the wastes of the New Zone must appear like a ride into the promised land. Probably for many Stalkers who joined them as well—some tired of a Loner’s perilous fate, others weary of the pointless and never-ending faction wars. He begins to translate the lyrics, occasionally thinking over an odd word for a heartbeat.

“From the once conquered celestial heights we are descending to earth, down the charred stairs... Through the salvos of slander and lying—we’re leaving, we’re leaving, we’re leaving! Farewell mountains, only you can see to tell who we were in that remote land, it is not up to a one-sided judge or mere bureaucrat... to judge what makes up our pain and glory.”

“Outstanding,” the Top quietly remarks.

“My friend, let’s have a toast tonight, first to those who made it through the latest raid, the second to the dead, for whom the wind is silently grieving—we’re leaving, we’re leaving, we’re leaving!”

“It sounds beautiful,” nods Nooria.

“Farewell mountains, only you can see to tell who we were in that remote land, the price we’ve paid and what sorrow, which friends we’ve had to leave behind, what enemy escaped the finishing blow, and tell how our sorrows, hopes and pain will mark and form future people’s mind.” Tarasov swallows. “Well... that’s it.”

“Truly outstanding,” Hartman says. “The guy who wrote it must have know a thing or two about that war. This song could be so much our own!”

“He did and it could.”

“And those Bandits, all singing it as if they’d understand!”

Tarasov shrugs. “Maybe they do understand, if they refer to the Zone with the *we’re leaving* part.”

“I’m with the Top, for once,” Pete says, though his *for once* sounds as if he had to force himself into saying it. “It’s beautiful... and the chorus, all that robust C major, it is... so fitting.”

“Don’t tell me you had a Fender Stratocaster once,” Tarasov says wrinkling his forehead.

“Hell no, but—great song, anyway.”

The Top appears slightly confused. “Yes, I can hardly wait to be back to *our* Zone. But I don’t really know what to do once we’re there—oh damn that song. I no longer know what to do about the scavengers, even if they are Bandits. I was so sure about them being just scum. Now... I just don’t know any longer.”

Tarasov turns back to face the window. By now the Jupiter Area, with all the derelict railroads and industrial buildings appears below like a scenery for model trains. To their right, another Mi-26 hovers over the dilapidated cement factory, and the third one should be about to take off from the helipads. Their own helicopter proceeds to the north, passing by the Stalker refuge of Yanov Station where abandoned trains still rust away on the tracks overgrown with grass. Then, as the helicopter turns to the west, they fly over the low hills where only heaps of rubble and brick chimneys mark the place of a village that had to be buried for the high amount of radiation it received back in 1986. The glowing anomalies among the ruins appear threatening even from far above. Then their flight continues to the west, giving a wide berth to the CNPP that looms on the far horizon.

“Yes, I’m leaving,” he murmurs to himself.

The Top notices his feelings and gives him a pat on the back. “Mikhailo, if you dare get sentimental now—I’ll throw you out of this helo!”

Tarasov is not in the mood to appreciate Hartman’s rude but well-meant remark. “You wouldn’t dare, Top... you just wouldn’t dare.”

He feels like heaving a long, sad sigh, eventually keeping it inside and only mentally sighing when he turns his head away from the Exclusion Zone where, mixed with dull rain, the first snow begins to fall from an overcast sky.

Valley south of ruined Charikhar village, New Zone

“Strelok, yes... I met many remarkable men in the Zone. Ashot is so funny and Yar like a wise, old brother. Major Tarasov, that mean bully. You ever met him? No? Never mind... No one was like Strelok, though.”

Mac sounds pensive as she removes the sight cover from her F2000 assault rifle as the first step of field maintenance.

“He always used to say, *you’re a girl after all* as if I couldn’t kill anything just like him till I had enough ammo. I hated him for that...”

“You mean he was patronizing you?”

With the barrel and optical part assembly now open, Mac begins to clean the moving parts with an oilcloth.

“Not exactly. I don’t know how to put it, actually.” She takes off the butt plate and removes the hammer assembly from the receiver part. “Partly patronizing, yes... but I wouldn’t call him chivalrous. I don’t know—he liked us making love the hard way.” The hammer makes a faint click as she releases it. She adds a few drops of weapon oil from a plastic flask onto the spring and carefully wipes it with the cloth piece. “At that time I was still a rookie with long fingernails. I used to dig my nails in his back but he just smiled, liking the violence of it—as if he wanted to assure himself that he could bear the pain.”

She starts to reassemble the weapon.

“If half of what I heard about his exploits is true, Strelok had no reason to prove that.”

“Yes, in the beginning... later on he became violent to me. First I thought, it’s because that usual Ukrainian macho thing. But it always came out of the blue, you know, one moment kind and gentle, the next one slapping my face and pulling my hair.”

“Uh-hum.”

Having finished maintenance, Mac reloads the rifle with a 30-round STANAG magazine.

“And so was his behavior too. I didn’t know any longer who I was with—the old Zone hand who has seen it all or a psychopath.”

Ahuizotl gives a shrug. “Maybe one thing doesn’t go without the other.”

“That’s what I thought, but then there are men like Uncle Yar. He is also a Zone legend but always calm, always radiating such a sense of safety. Or Shrink.”

“None of them have been through what Strelok has.”

“True. And I couldn’t help him. Jesus, brother, you have no idea how guilty I feel over leaving him...”

“Yeah. Guess it must have been tough on you.”

“It was tough love, yes. When I saw him for the last time, I asked him if there would be a way to start things over. Outside the Zone if necessary, far away from all that shit that kept torturing his soul. He said never.”

“Don’t forget where you were,” the sniper says getting on his feet. “I’ll have a look outside but will be right back.”

“Bored of me, huh?”

The jackal lying lazily at Mac’s feet emits a yelp.

“Oh, Billy my boy... at least *you* never get tired of listening to me, do you?”

Ahuizotl doesn’t reply but heaves a long sigh when he raises his binoculars to survey the rocky valley. The sun has already set, turning the western horizon dark purple yet no stars are visible in the black sky. Scanning the land to the south, he realizes why the darkness is so gloomy.

“We have a dust storm approaching!”

Mac appears from the cave and takes the binocs. Though she has seen and survived many dust storms before, she gives a yell of surprise when she sees what is looming on the southern horizon.

“Oh my God!”

Still far away yet darkening the skies, a wave of radioactive dust and sand stretches out on the horizon. It dwarves the hills as it approaches and the two Stalkers watch it like fishermen would watch a tsunami thundering towards their boat on the open sea. The wall of sand moving towards them must be several hundred meters high. Thunder flashes in the giant wave that’s stirred up by an energy beyond human understanding.

Ahuizotl gabs Mac’s arm. “Back to the cave!” he yells. “Quickly!”

But before he can follow her into the relative safety, something catches his eye in the valley below.

“Look! Headlamps!”

A gale heralds the oncoming dust storm. Mac has to hold on the sniper’s shoulder as she looks in the direction where he is pointing.

A dozen men in heavy combat gear are approaching. They can’t see the dust storm from the bottom of the valley, but must have noticed the sudden gale because they attempt to find shelter.

“Goddammit!” Ahuizotl screams. “It’s a Tribe patrol! The last thing we’re needing now! Come, let’s hide before they see us!”

Mac is already flashing the red light on her torch. “Tribe or not, we must help them!”

“Are you out of your mind? They shoot Stalkers on sight!”

In her excitement, Mac cusses in her mother tongue. “*¡Por Dios!* They are humans like us, *hermano!* We must help them!”

“Fuck them! Let’s hide, now!”

By now the Tribals have noticed Mac's light signals and start running up the hill to the cave, where Mac frantically waves the red flashlight.

"Here! Over here!"

Her voice is carried away by the gale that already swirls up dust and sand at their feet. The radiation meters start crackling. Mac spits dust and quickly pulls the exoskeleton's hazmat mask over her face. The shapes of the fighters climbing up the hill appear like ghosts in the greenish dim of the NVGs. As if having closed her eyes after looking into strong light, her sight is flickering with millions of tiny stars. She knows it's photons illuminated by the growing radioactivity.

The first man reaches the cave entrance and rushes inside without saying anything. The second halts and helps the others coming behind him up the last meters. By now the gale has grown so strong by now that it would kick a man off his feet. Several of the fighters are staggering to reach the safety of the cave, but the apparent commander of the patrol maintains his solid stance as he ushers the fighters inside.

A bad feeling comes over Mac and Ahuizotl: this one must be one of the Tribe's fearsome Lieutenants, someone that Stalkers have nothing good to hope from. For a moment, Mac almost regrets her moment of compassion.

When the fighter and the two Stalkers finally move into the cave, the once spacious hideout has become packed with the three dozen men inside. Panting is heard through their US-made gas masks; the headlamps and rifle torches illuminate the Tribe's heavy combat armor.

In a minute, the massive wall of energy hits the valley with a deafening thunder. Yet the Geiger counters don't start screaming from reading extreme radiation values. The thunder and dust sweeps over the valley as if it would keep its full force to be unleashed later, further to the north. Instead of covering the New Zone with a cloud of destructive force, it just moves on like a wave would sweep over a boat in the sea without sinking it.

The thunder rolls towards the north. The beeping of the Geiger counters lowers and then falls silent.

The two Stalkers and the Tribe fighters eye each other for a moment. Then the patrol commander takes off his protective mask.

"You have our thanks," he says wiping sweat from his tanned face where Ahuizotl's headlamp illuminates a pair of blue eyes and several days' worth of stubble. "I'm Lieutenant Collins. Me and my men are on a special recon mission."

The sniper looks at him distrustfully. "Hunting for Stalkers?"

“It’s Bandits we’re after, actually,” the Lieutenant says with a grim smile. Noticing Ahuizotl’s long rifle he adds, “Guess that puts us in the same shoes—for now.”

71

Clandestine SBU flight, somewhere over the Southern Caucasus range

Since the Antonov An-24 cargo aircraft took off from the naval base at Sevastopol, Captain Maksimenko’s ears got used to the ear-splitting drone of its two turboprop engines. He had spent the first hour of their flight deep in dark thoughts, his low spirit reflecting the blackness of night outside. Now the first lights of dawn are falling over the snowy peaks of the Northern Caucasus below.

He glances at his watch. The small aircraft would still need about two hours to reach their destination at Termez. To distract himself from being depressed, he powers up his laptop and opens the file of the six soldiers from the punitive battalion who got assigned to his command.

Every convict’s file states chronic disobedience, bullying and drug abuse but some have their specialties.

Private Bronsky, rape and murder of a female medical worker

Private Volkov, assault on a commanding officer

Corporal Maslak, bullying a junior soldier resulting in death

Corporal Kushnik, use of aggressive interrogation methods resulting in death

Sergeant Tokarsky, rape of a junior soldier resulting in serious injury

Staff Sergeant Brechko, dealing with narcotics

Second Lieutenant Wargo, selling military equipment to criminal organizations.

In each file, the laconic headers are followed by a more elaborate description detailing each crime. They are written in the dry language of military prosecutors but even so are gory enough. A note adds, “*Convicts have forfeited their ranks and privileges and are to be considered as privates, regardless of former ranks held.*”

Maksimenko sighs.

My kind of scum.

He opens the briefing file received from Colonel Kruchelnikov. It contains a detailed description of the New Zone areas that had already been explored, most of it taken from a report by an agent with call sign Renegade. All that Maksimenko knows about him is that the agent was in some way affiliated with the Duty faction, who got the SBU involved when the arms dealing operation they were investigating turned out to be

run by corrupt army officers. Maksimenko can well imagine that the sudden disappearance of Colonel Kuznetsov and General-Major Khaletskiy, two infamously corrupt officers, might be connected to the outcome of that operation.

His hopes of Kruchelnikov restraining himself from adding a last biting comment proves to be in vain, but at least it also contains a hint.

Maksimenko. I would sleep much better if the Russians accidentally downed your airplane like they did with one of our civilian jets a few years ago. They would do us the favor of getting the earth rid of our country's worst scum, led by my Service's biggest idiot. However, to justify the costs of sending you there I must give you at least a slight chance to succeed.

The documents obtained by Strelak in Lab X-18 two years ago were incomplete. However, I know that missing parts refer to a facility maintained in Afghanistan during the war, evacuated when Operation Magistral failed. Its code was X-1 and the research leader was Professor Chubko. We cannot exclude the possibility that Strelak has handed that intel to Tarasov or, what would be worse, the Americans. You better hope that he will show up there. The current state of that facility is unknown. Location coordinates are 35°16'44.22" N and 69°28'48.92" E.

If you manage to stop Tarasov by whatever means necessary, maybe I'll grease the wheels where I can to prevent you from punitive discharge – and worse.

The Captain's thoughts move back to his last assignment in the Exclusion Zone. Acting on orders of Kruchelnikov, he led a search group on a thorough investigation into the activities at the Agroprom Research Institute back in May 2012, code named Project Truth. It revealed that the Institute was in fact a front for clandestine research conducted in the Exclusion Zone. However, further investigation was blocked by Lab X-18 being inaccessible at that time. Acting on a tip-off by Zone trader Sidorovich, the military launched a frantic operation to intercept Strelak who managed to find a way into the vaults, but he blasted his way through the Spetsnaz commando and escaped with any information he found there.

Recalling his successful mission puts the Captain in a somewhat better mood. It now appears to him that the sinister story behind the secret laboratories continues after being bogged down for two frustratingly long years.

They started experiments in Afghanistan. When the war was lost, they moved to the Exclusion Zone to carry on the research in all secrecy. Lab X-18 was the missing link. Now the circle is complete – I will not only

settle scores with Tarasov but also bring Project Truth to its conclusion. It will be more than enough to redeem myself.

“Thinking of your girlfriend, eh? I guess she’s a tasty little dish!”

Maksimenko stirs. “What?”

He glances at the Spetsnaz who grins at him from the opposite side of the cabin. He is a tall and brawny man with a look on his face that betrays a knack for violence. Sergeant Vlasov sits next, keeping a weary eye on him.

The Captain quickly looks into the personal files with the photographs. The disrespectful soldier is the private who, according to his file, had raped a nurse in an ambulance before beating her unconscious and setting the car on fire to conceal the crime as an accident. Maksimenko feels nausea stirring up in his guts and not because of a sudden turbulence.

“What’s your problem, Bronsky?”

“You looked gloomy, *komandir*. Now you smile. Maybe she is smiling too with some lucky guys banging her, while you fly with us to the hell on earth!”

Bronsky laughs, but his laughter is cut short by Sergeant Vlasov’s elbow hitting him in his cardia. The private groans and would fall to the floor if the safety belt wasn’t holding him tight.

“Have more respect to your superior, maggot,” Vlasov says.

A crew member appears from the cockpit with the radio headset still on his head. He takes it off and gives it to Captain Maksimenko.

“Kiev is asking for you, captain.”

Maksimenko follows him to the cramped cockpit where the radioman plugs the headset back in.

“Maksimenko here.”

The captain’s guts knot themselves when he hears Colonel Kruchelnikov’s voice in the headphones.

“Captain, it appears to be your lucky day after all. You have a new secondary objective.”

“I’m listening, *tovarishu polkovnik*.”

“Finally, we learned from an undercover asset what the criminal gangs in the Exclusion Zone were up to all the time. A large number of them left this morning for the New Zone. The air force was standing by to shoot them down but the criminals used Belarusian helicopters, which we couldn’t touch. Luckily for us, the asset has managed to inform us about their destination. Do you copy?”

“Clear, sir.”

“They will use two An-12 transport airplanes, armed, using fake Belarusian commercial radar signs. Normally, the Russians would dispose

of them quickly in their own airspace or over Kazakhstan, but Moscow has rejected our request to intercept them. The Uzbeks could do the job as well but as you know, the situation is getting out of control there.”

“Yes, sir. I heard there was an emission or something like that that swapped over from the New Zone.”

“You have two things to do. First, when arriving in Termez, do not play the hero. You are explicitly forbidden to get involved. Clear?”

“Clear, sir.”

“Second, you have a new destination in the New Zone. The helicopter waiting for you at AFB Termez will take you to the proximity of an abandoned airstrip at Charikhar, north of Bagram. According to our asset, the two Antonovs are heading there. You will reckon the place and do as much damage as you can to the Bandits and their airplanes. We don’t want them to set up regular flights between here and the New Zone.”

Of course you don’t, Maksimenko thinks. That would ruin your lucrative artifact and weapon trade in the Exclusion Zone, you bastard.

“Understood,” he replies. “Any intel on the Bandits’ strength?”

“Two to three hundred, so you’d better get there before they land and hit them before they can deploy.”

Maksimenko frowns. “With a team of nine?”

“Making good on a big time failure requires big time heroism, Captain.” Hearing this, Maksimenko can well imagine the cynical grin on the Colonel’s face. “Be resourceful. If you get there quickly, you’ll have the advantage of surprise.”

“Can we count on air support?”

“God Almighty might send you angels if you pray. Everything else is a negative. Count yourself lucky that we could arrange that Mi-17 to get you there. When done with the airfield, move to your primary objective. Questions?”

“All clear, sir.”

“Good hunting. Out.”

72

Cargo area, Minsk International Airport, Belarus

The main terminal of Minsk International Airport resembles a broken half of a cogwheel where the six gates of the semi-circular terminal would be the sprockets. Not much can be seen from the impressive building from the cargo area where the three giant helicopters have landed; two Antonov AN-12BP transport aircraft, being prepared for flight, block the view of the Bandits who were ushered out to the tarmac after the short flight and now wait for instructions in the cold sleet.

The men share cigarettes and vodka bottles but the cold keeps creeping under the skin. Their cheerful spirit is gone.

Exhausted from spending the last night without a moment of sleep, Tarasov, Hartman and Pete feel the cold even more than the others. Tarasov is tempted to join the chatting men around them, spending the idle minutes until their trip continues with swearing over the cold and Sultan's Belarusian 'partners' who make them wait in the freezing weather.

He waves Ferret and Buryat over to him and can't suppress a smile while they approach. Although the two men had belonged to warring factions and constantly tease each other, they appear like cup and can.

"Guys, you remember what we discussed last night?"

The Stalkers nod.

"Do you have a plan?" Ferret asks.

"Jack has," says Tarasov. He looks around to make sure no Bandit can hear what he has to say, then jerks his head towards Nooria. "She told me about it during the flight. A bunch of Bandits are supposed to have secured an airstrip but Jack doesn't appear to trust them. He wants us to go in first and see if the area is safe. How many men can we rely on?"

"You mean, Stalkers who joined the Bandits only for the ride?" the Dutyer asks.

"Exactly."

Ferret scratches his stubbed chin. "Let me think. There is Vitka Tooth Fairy, Vaska Wireless, Ferret, Dingo, Dima Molotov—"

"In short, five or six men we can trust," Buryat cuts in.

"That would be eight men including us," Ferret observes.

Buryat gives him a grin. "Six and two make eight – wow! You're a math genius, man! Spent some time with the scientists at Yantar, huh?"

"You mean Dimitry Molotov?" Tarasov asks. "He appeared to me like a veteran Bandit, not a disgruntled Stalker."

"Maybe that is so, but let me tell you something." Buryat looks around, then lowers his voice. "Two days ago, Jack sent him and a few tough guys into the tunnels under the Ventilation Complex, not far from where we're heading. He thought there might be a valuable artifact there. Nine tough guys went in, one came out – guess who. Overheard him and Jack talking. Dima Molotov said zombies and tushkanos got the others. That idiot believed him. I didn't."

"Why?"

"Because once he turned away from Jack, Dima began to grin like a kid who did some naughty mischief. Guess he whacked the Bandits. I tell you, anyone who whacks nine Bandits for fun is a potential friend."

"And did he find the artifact?" Ferret asks.

“Sure!” Buryat says to him. “He’s keeping it in his buttohole for you to dig out.”

“It would be the three of us and maybe eight Stalkers,” Tarasov translates to the Americans. “Not enough.”

Hartman nods agreement. “Nope.”

“*Rebyata*, let’s do it like this,” Tarasov continues in Russian. “Make sure all the Stalkers we can count on board the same plane. When we land, we tell the Bandits to wait and move out first to check the situation. You got an idea of how many of them are already there?”

Ferret lowers his voice. “A few days ago I overheard Jack bitching at Bruiser. He wanted to brown-nose Sultan by taking a forward base but got his nose bloodied by a local faction. Jack was in rage when he heard about it.”

“Bagram Stalkers?”

“Some tough guys called the Tribe. Anyway, point is that he only left two dozen men or so behind to guard the airstrip. If we’re lucky, mutants have already eaten them.”

“If the Bandits only have a few men there, we can deal with them. So—we land, get out to check on the situation, meet that Bruiser character and kick his ass. The Bandits will see that there’s trouble and take-off in panic. Margarita told me the airstrip is close to Charikhar village. That’s north of Bagram.” Tarasov looks up to the cloudy sky. “*Gospodi*... it’s hard to believe that if all goes well, this time tomorrow we’ll be at Ashot’s bar.”

“Ashot?” asks Ferret with eyes wide open. “People told me he is living in a cave with a female bloodsucker!”

“Cut the bullshit, Ferret. Last time I saw your trader was through the ironsight of my assault rifle,” says Buryat. “Anyway, the plan is good. It only needs to work.”

“Go and gather our friends. Start a game of cards and say you want to continue it on the plane so that the group stays together.”

“But I don’t play cards,” Ferret says.

Like always, Buryat is quick to tease him. “Come on, buddy. Everyone will understand that a Freedomer needs to stick with the tough guys to cover his ass!”

Tarasov recaps the plan to his companions. Hartman has no better idea and Pete also agrees, only Nooria seems to be at odds with it.

“I want to kill Sultan,” she says frankly. “If we escape, I don’t know if I’ll ever have a chance!”

Tarasov frowns. “That has to wait. I’m worried, Nooria... If the Bandits appear there, soon we’ll have an all-out war raging. We must get back to the New Zone as soon as possible.”

“Why?” the Top asks. “A single squad of my warriors would wipe these scumbags out.”

“No doubt about that,” Tarasov says. “You know the difference between Bandits and Stalkers, Top, because you’ve been with me to the Exclusion Zone. But if the Bandits are foolish enough to harass the Tribe, the Colonel won’t make a difference between them and free Stalkers. As far as I know him, he will move to exterminate them all.”

Hartman bows his head. “That would be a dire mistake.”

73

Abandoned airfield east of Charikhar, New Zone

A gloomy dawn looms over the New Zone, making the wide-spread ruins of Charikhar village appear even more foreboding in the twilight. The weak November sun stays hidden beyond the dark clouds. Fog covers the mountain ranges to the west and grey mist wreathes over the plains east to the ruins where, barely discernible from the rocky earth, a landing strip is aligned due south. A few campfires burn among the decrepit buildings scattered around it. They might have been warehouses or barracks long ago, but by now have fallen to ruins. Only one has a makeshift roof made from wooden beams and rusty metal plates. A tall antenna extends through a hole in the roof.

On the top of a low hill about two hundred meters from the abandoned airstrip, there is the wreck of a mobile radar station. The tires of the URAL truck with a radio compartment on its flatbed have long rotten away and graffiti covers its rusty body. Anomalous moss is hanging like torn curtains from the antennae and radar dish and emits a faint green glow.



Two Bandits are shuddering in the cold while they keep watch over the hilltop that is the only vantage point in area around the airstrip. Three dead jackals are proof of a perilous night watch. The guards are apparently relieved when the shapes of three men appear on the path leading uphill.

"It was about time for you to show up," one of them shouts. "You cocksuckers were supposed to be here half an hour ago!"

"This bloody cold makes the shit freeze in my guts," the other guard adds. "Did you bring us vodka?"

"Net."

The two Bandits have no time to get surprised over hearing a female voice. A short burst is fired from a noise-suppressed F2000 assault rifle and sends the first Bandit to the ground. The other one who asked about vodka is about to fire his AKS-74U from his hip when a 9mm bullet hits his chest, fired from a silenced Beretta M9 pistol.

The three shadows quickly check the hilltop for more hostiles with a well-coordinated sweep, then exchange muted shouts.

"Left clear!"

"Right clear."

"Objective is cleared," the leader says on the radio. "Squad, keep your position."

Two clicks crackle in the radio to signal acknowledgement. Holstering his Beretta, Lieutenant Collins gives Mac a grin. "Good shooting, Stalker."

"So far so good," she replies reloading her rifle. "But don't get too close to that wreck. My Geiger counter goes off scale only by me looking at it."

"If it weren't for the mist, I could put down suppressive fire from here while you clear the ruins," says Ahuizotl, the third attacker.

Collins looks over to the ruins. "Yeah, that would come in handy... We'll do this the hard way, then. You two stay here while we move in. Should the fog lift, look for targets of opportunity. Try not to hit any of us, okay? I'll tell you when we move in. The signal will be... let's say, *Geronimo*. Brings luck, usually. Once the airstrip is secured we'll decide what's to do next. Clear?"

The sniper nods. "Clear."

"Can I go in with you?" Mac asks.

"I'd have you rather here watching my back," Ahuizotl replies.

"Agreed," Collins says. "Sorry Mac, but the men in my squad are a team and know their drill. A stranger among us would be a liability, no matter what a good shooter she is."

"But—"

“I said no. Stay put and keep your eyes peeled. That’s even more important than having one more rifle in my team.”

The Lieutenant leaves the hill to rejoin his men waiting below. In a few minutes, he has gathered them around him in the cover of rocks and dense shrub.

“Textbook breach and clear, men,” he says. “I will move up from the southern end of the strip with Team One. Harper, your team is Two—proceed and take up position hundred and fifty meters to the west. Walker—Team Three, two hundred meters, east. Report when you’re ready. The word will be Geronimo. Infiltrate and clear the ruins. Have grenades at hand. Stay clear of the strip until I tell you it’s clear to proceed. Our objective is probably in the building with a roof, because I’ve seen an antenna that tells of a radio inside. We must take the command element alive. Any questions?”

“What if he resists?” a fighter asks.

“If I don’t get there first, use a flashbang when breaching and non-lethal force to subdue him or whoever is inside. Remember – our primary objective is grabbing the commander or at least the radioman. Are we set?” Seeing that all men have understood the plan, Collins nods. “Lock and load!”

He knows that the fighters spreading out to his left and right have their weapons already loaded, but no self-respecting officer would ever miss an opportunity to bark this adrenaline-boosting command.

In his estimation, visibility in the fog is limited to thirty meters. Fifty before the southern end of the runway, he raises his fist and ducks behind the sparse scrub. Then he puts his left wrist behind his back, signaling to his men to assume wedge formation.

Wishing mentally for a scope with infrared capability, the Lieutenant perks his ear to get an idea about the Bandit’s location. The faint Russian chatter betrays three or four of them around the nearest campfire.

“Bloop!” he calls out under his breath. He points to the campfire and uses another hand sign to tell the squad grenadier: *prepare your M203 grenade launcher*. Then he waves to the squad automatic weapon’s operator to move up with his M249.

A subdued voice crackles in his radio.

“Two. In position.”

“SAW ready,” the gunner whispers.

Collins waits for the other squad to report in. He has Team Three move up further for two reasons: first, to avoid the risk of friendly fire; the two infiltration teams had better not meet each other face to face. Second, having the infiltration point further away should also make sure that no hostiles escape to the north or fall into Team Two’s flank.

At this moment the wind rises and stirs up the fog. Collins sees that his estimation was right—four Bandits are squatting next to the campfire.

“Three. In position.”

“One. Two and Three, fog is lifting. You have visuals?”

Four clicks in the radio come in reply, an affirmative double-click from each team.

Collins nods to the grenadier who aims his rifle with the under-barrel launcher. At the same moment when the projectile is released with a clack, the Lieutenant yells into his microphone.

“Geronimo! Geronimo!”

His second call is suppressed by the detonating grenade that goes off right in the campfire.

“Fire mission!” he barks to the machine gunner. “Front, traversing! One hundred, sustained! Fire!”

The M249 begins to sweep the area ahead with a long, uninterrupted burst. The Bandits not incapacitated by the grenade are riddled with the machine gun’s hard-hitting M855 ball rounds. With every fifth a tracer, the arc of fire appears like a deadly fan covering the airstrip between the row of ruins. The three hostiles at the campfire further ahead are equally hit, sticking to the ground and firing blindly into Collins’ direction. Detonations and small-arms fire comes from the ruins where Teams One and Two have begun the infiltration. The door of the radio shack opens but is immediately closed again as bullets impact on the ground and in the mud bricks. A few Bandits foolish enough to follow their instincts and leave their cover to see what’s happening are mowed down. Those staying among the ruins will now be the job of Teams One and Two.

“Cease fire!” Collins yells and waves his hand in front of his face to ensure that the machine gunner understands the order. “Two and Three, proceed! One, on me! Let’s go!”

Using the ruins to their advantage, Collins’ team quickly moves forward. The distinctive barking of Kalashnikovs can be heard from where the other teams move among the ruins. The lighter muzzle noise of the Tribe fighters’ M16A4 and M27 rifles answers, but it is mostly the blast of a grenade detonating inside the roofless buildings that makes the final point.

Three swift-limbed fighters of Team Three reach the radio shack first. One smashes the rotten boards covering the window with his rifle butt, another throws in a flashbang. A deafening blast sounds inside. The third kicks the wooden door open and dashes inside with his weapon aimed, immediately followed by the other two.

“Freeze! Drop your weapons! Weapons down!”

Panting and spitting dust, Collins reaches the shack with his men. In a minute he has them arranged around the perimeter. By now, fighting goes on only in the sector to the north west from where defiant Russian and English cusswords mix with Kalashnikov fire.

"Ya tebya kak sobaku strelayu!"

"Give it up, suckers!"

"Kushay granata, pindos!"

"Grenade incoming!"

The men spearheading Team Three duck to avoid the worst of the blast. Someone shouts in pain.

"Fry those pigs! Grenades!"

"Tvoyu mat'!"

"Fire in the hole!"

Three blasts shake the Bandit's last point of defense. A long scream ends in Russian swearing, ended with a single shot from an M16A4. Then silence falls.

Lieutenant Collins' ears are slightly numb from the firefight, especially the SAW's deafening bursts. He can barely hear the crackling voices through the radio, though now they are spoken out loud.

"Two. Clear. One WIA. Gunshot."

"Three. Clear. Two WIA. Damned grenades."

"One. Objective secured, all clear," Collins says on the radio. He looks around and is relieved to see that everyone in his team appear unharmed. Then he notices the stinging pain in his shoulder where a lucky bullet went through the exoskeleton's Kevlar pates. "One WIA," he adds, thinking: *shit!*

The squad corpsman is already there to see to his wound. Collins waves him away. "See to the others first."

He himself takes off his heavy rucksack, glad that the painful grimace coming to his face remains hidden under the shemagh he has wrapped around his face, like most of the others.

The man lying before his feet, wearing a black trench coat with a skull patch on the arm sleeve, has no option to hide his face. The fighters who captured him have already pulled his balaclava off. His eyes might appear intelligent in other circumstances but now reflect the fear of a captured animal.

"Objective secured," Collins repeats, now directing his words to the two Stalkers. "Sniper, come down. Mac, keep watching the area."

Then he turns to the captured Bandit.

"You smelling of fear," he says without exaggerating. A dark stain on the prisoner's groin tells that he has wetted himself. "You speak English?"

"I do, sir! Please don't hurt me!"

“What’s your name?”

“Bruiser, sir!”

A few fighters grin. In his present state nothing justifies the Bandit’s pretentious nickname.

“Calling me ‘sir’ won’t help you, Bruiser,” Collins says, he too smiling under the shemagh. “If you want us to be friends, you have to be cooperative. If you want us to be enemies—”

“No, no!”

“Attaboy. First question: is this your only base?”

“That’s correct.”

“Do you expect more Bandits to arrive, and if yes, when and how many?”

“Today. About three hundred.”

Collins frowns. “What? Three hundred?”

“Yes. With two Antonovs... see, I’m cooperative! Please don’t hurt me!”

“When exactly?”

“In about two hours.”

“Call signs, passwords, landing protocols?”

“Hitman One and Two. They will make contact before landing. I will tell them if everything is clear on the ground. Hitman One will land first with enough men to secure the area, then the rest will disembark.”

Collins turns to his two team leaders and Ahuizotl who has just arrived. “Let’s get outside for a minute.”

Away from the Bandit’s ears, the Lieutenant gives the three men a concerned look and recaps the situation for the sniper.

“Three hundred hostiles expected in two airplanes, due in two hours. How do we deal with this?”

“What kind of airplane?” the sniper asks.

“He said Antonovs. Probably Cubs, since nothing bigger can land here.”

“You mean the An-12.”

“Yup.”

Ahuizotl reflects over their options and shakes his head. “I can take down a chopper by hitting the pilots. An Antonov – no way. Not from this angle.”

“We could just scare them away if we send enough bullets in their direction,” team leader Walker suggests.

“Risky,” Ahuizotl says. “They might have tail gun turrets and blast us from above.”

“Besides, we need to annihilate them and not just scare away,” Collins observes. “The whole thing wouldn’t make much sense if they come back

later. Three hundred of these sons of bitches, Jesus! We need more firepower than we have.”

“It’s a small airstrip,” Harper says. “They can land one airplane at a time. Means we’ll have to face only a hundred and fifty, I guess. If we have good cover, and use the SAW and blooper wisely... it could work.”

“Those Antonovs have rear ramps, right?” Collins asks.

Getting the Lieutenant’s idea, the sniper points to the airstrip. “They will probably land from the north. The fighter is right—if we have the machine gun positioned at the right angle, we can hit the tail gun to neutralize it and then the ramp as soon as it goes open.”

“Gonna be like bloody Omaha,” Walker remarks.

“I don’t like the idea,” Collins says after a moment of thinking. “If I were aboard and see this happening, I’d raise the ramp immediately, turn the aircraft around and take off. One SAW won’t be able to stop a big airplane.”

“Then what do you suggest, sir?”

“We’ll have to wait until they begin disembarking. The airplane will be a sitting duck while the men and cargo inside are being unloaded. First, you’ll take out their command element with the long rifle. Then we strike from behind the ruins.”

“What about the second airplane?”

“We’ll have to deal with that another day.”

“How will the sniper identify the Charlie Echo?” Walker asks. “These Bandits or whatever look all the same to me.”

“Bandits are like Neanderthals,” Ahuizotl says with a smile. “Look for the biggest, meanest son of bitch and you’ll find the boss. I’m sure he will make for a nice big target.”

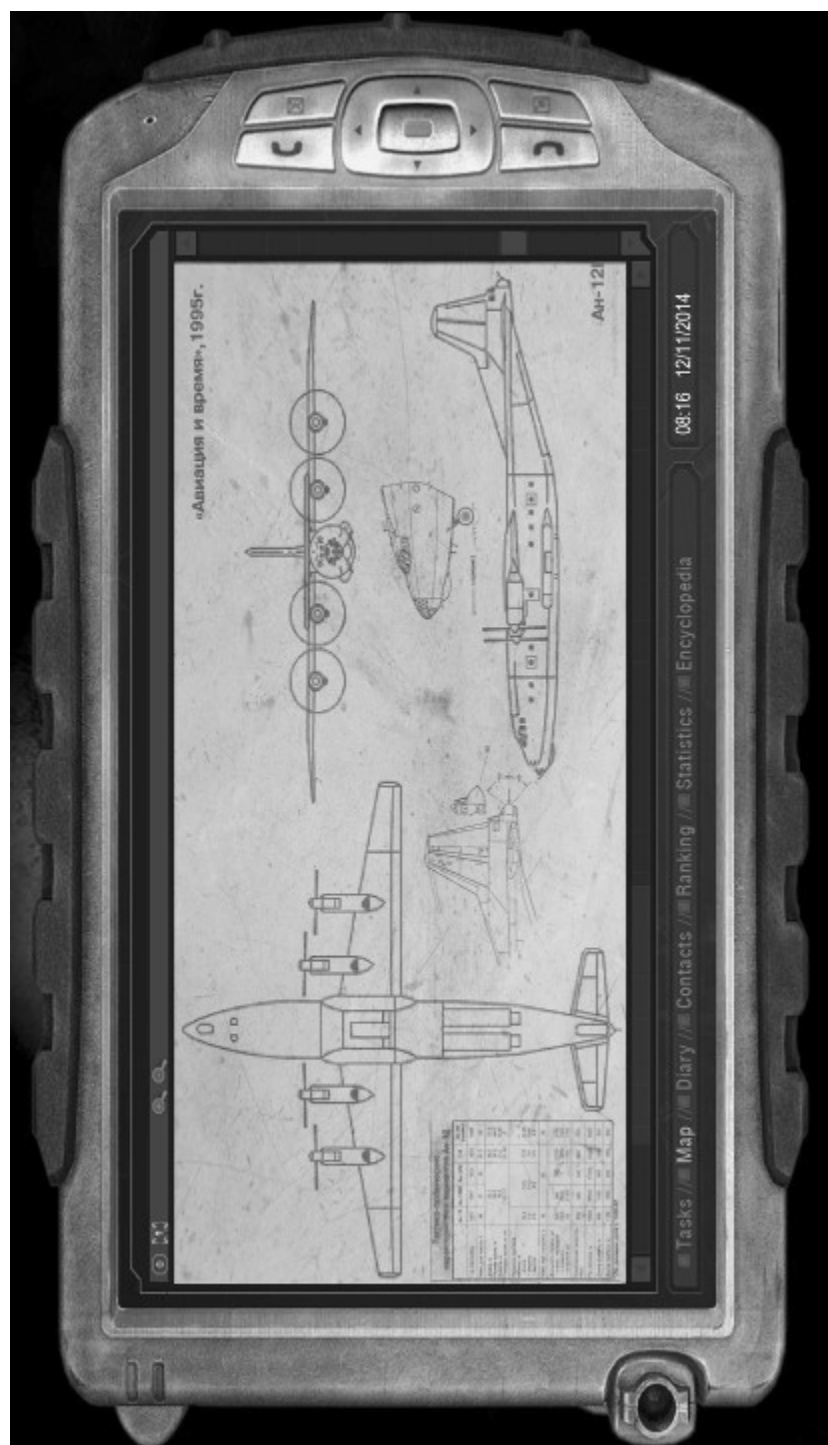
Collins nods. “Then we mow down the rest. Go back to your position on the hilltop and send the girl down. I need her to listen to what that bastard says in Russian when the airplanes report in.”

“Will do,” Ahuizotl replies and hastily makes his way back to the hill.

74

The Bandit’s Antonov AN-12, somewhere over southern Uzbekistan

The Antonov An-12, Russia’s reply to the C130 Hercules and bearing the NATO call sign Cub, has a cruising speed of 415 miles per hour. With a normal payload of 44,000 pounds, it would take about five and a half hours to cover the distance between Minsk



and the New Zone. However, each of the two Antonovs arranged by Sultan have about a hundred and fifty men cramped inside, much more than the ninety passengers the aircrafts would normally carry. The conveyor belt with crates holding ammunition, weapons and other supplies make the cargo bay even more congested. To make fuel consumption cope with the heavy load, the airplanes fly below cruising speed; this adds two more, painfully long hours to the haul.

Cramped in the cargo bay without any comfort, the Bandits who were in such high spirits when leaving the Zone soon started to grumble. After a while, the first fights broke out over places that appeared just a little more comfortable than the cargo bay's bare metal floor. A veteran Bandit knocked a former Stalker out when the latter retched next to him, prompting other Loners to take his side. The ensuing brawl resulted in a few bruised noses and blue eyes on either side, making Tarasov wonder if these self-proclaimed conquerors of the New Zone would begin killing each other as soon as they reached it.

The boring and uncomfortable flight took a heavy toll on Nooria. She became sick twice, using the empty wrappers of the last US-made rations they had as a vomit bag. A Stalker who was about to scold her quickly changed his mind upon seeing the scorn in Tarasov's eyes.

At least they had their own corner close to the cockpit, separated from the Bandits by Ferret, Buryat and the few Stalkers on their side. As time passed, Nooria and Hartman looked out of the bullseye window more and more often, hoping to at last see the ochre, undulating terrain of the New Zone's northern reaches appear.

Together with the airplane's sudden descent, Tarasov's watch tells him that they must be really close when the head of the Belarusian radio operator appears in the hatch leading to the cockpit.

"Hey, you guys from the New Zone! You better come and see this!"

Thinking that the crew member only wants to show them the New Zone, Tarasov and the Top follow him indifferently.

"Termez," the navigator says, pointing forward in the glass cupola on the airplane's nose.

What they see causes the two men look at each other with deep concern. The town appears to have been swept over by a tsunami of destruction; giant waves of sand have buried a long stretch of the Amu-Darya river and the refugee camps next to the town. Smoke rises from the airfield where the runways appear broken, as if torn to pieces by a massive tremor. A long column of vehicles is blocking the road to the north, probably cars trying to escape the disaster-stricken town. Mi-24 gunships are circling above. They appear to fire at targets on the ground.

"Holy mother of Jesus Christ," the Top murmurs.

"What the hell happened here?" the Belarusian pilot asks in English. His accent is so heavy though that Tarasov seriously doubts if any ground control could understand him. Judging by his white hair and equally white moustache, he is not a regular aviator anymore but rather someone hired by Sultan's cronies; probably eking out his meager pension by flying dangerous and usually illegal missions.

"That was a dust storm," Hartman tells him. "My guess is those Hinds were shooting at mutants who crossed the river in the storm's wake."

"Good God!" the pilot exclaims. "Is that like a... *vybros* in the Exclusion Zone?"

"Yes," Tarasov says. "The local version of emissions."

The veteran pilot slowly waves his head. "Last time I saw destruction like this was over Chernobyl, back in '86!"

"You better climb higher and keep clear of here," Tarasov suggests. "There might be airborne anomalies!"

"Are you kidding?"

"Trust me, I'm not!"

"*Blyad!*"

Cursing, the pilot pulls on the yoke.

"It was not just a dust storm."

Tarasov and Hartman turn away from the sight below to see Nooria standing behind them white faced.

"What's going on?" Tarasov asks.

"Come... I have to tell you something."

Once back to their place, Nooria grabs at Tarasov's hand. She sounds concerned, if not terrified. "It wants *me*."

"Are you okay?" Tarasov asks.

"No. I am not okay. I am scared. And this sickness—oh, how I hate it!"

"We'll land soon, Nooria," Tarasov softly says. "If that's why you're feeling bad—"

"No."

"Then what?"

"Our child."

"Uh-oh," Hartman says. "You better be prepared for worse than a little sickness."

"You don't understand! The New Zone wants me because—my child. It wants my child."

All fell silent. Pete whispers something to himself, but his voice is suppressed by the deep drone of the four turboprop engines.

"Mikhailo—our child will be stronger than you and more powerful than me. It is our child is who can destroy evil ravaging this land."

Fear, disbelief and joy are all mixed on Tarasov's face as he looks at Nooria.

"My son! He can end—all this?"

"No, Mikhailo. *She* will."

"But how? How you know?"

"I just know. And she also wants to get to the New Zone. She didn't let me kill Sultan."

"Pete," the Top says under his breath, "give me a thermometer from your first-aid kit, will you?"

Nooria's eyes are flashing with anger. "I am not ill!"

"Okay... okay," Tarasov reassuringly says and caresses her pale face.

"Don't worry, Nooria. As long as I can lift a weapon, I will protect you."

"Not to mention me," Pete adds.

"You don't want to leave me out of this," Hartman says.

"See? With the three of us around you'll be safer than anyone."

"I am scared," Nooria says, but her fear makes way for sadness. "New Zone is in range—it was reaching out for me. Its evil will try to defeat us."

"Business as usual," Hartman says and gives her a reassuring smile.

"What do you want us to do?" Tarasov asks.

"I must talk to my mother. Please, please take me back to our valley. Quickly!"

"I have an idea," Pete says. "We've hijacked a train and stolen a car. What about hijacking this plane too?"

Tarasov gives him a smile. "Not a bad thought at all. The Alamo does have a landing strip after all."

"Forget it," Hartman says with a wave of his hand. "AA defenses would down us before we could say hello."

"Ain't there a radio on this junk?"

"Son, you're as smart as an Army general," Hartman says with a snort. "Let me tell you something. Two weeks before the nukes went up we were already busy fortifying the Alamo. Then one night a Chinook appeared. Said it took an RPG hit, has WIAs on board and needs to make an emergency landing. Okay guys, we said, come down, we won't hurt you. Turned out to be full of Ranger boys coming after us. Since then, the fighters manning the anti-aircraft batteries are under orders to shoot first, ask later."

"And what happened to the Rangers?"

"What's your guess, Pete?"

"Jesus! You killed American soldiers?"

Hartman shrugs. "So did the Rangers, son. Our corpsmen running up to their Chinook to assist the alleged WIAs were the first they killed.

Usually we don't take prisoners but had eventually captured their commander with two of his men. They were given the chance to join us."

"Or death, I guess," Tarasov dryly observes.

"Leaving in shame and defeat. They stayed."

"It was Driscoll, wasn't it?"

"Told you already he'd been with us to the catacombs! It was Joe Collins. He's one of the very few to be made Lieutenant even though joining us after we'd been touched by the Spirit. As a former Ranger captain he's our SR, ambush and airfield seizure expert."

"SR?"

"Special reconnaissance, avoiding direct combat and detection. Anyway, point is that everything that's got wings avoids our little airspace except flies and mosquitoes!"

"What about Bagram?" Pete asks.

Tarasov waves the suggestion off. "The runway is blocked by wrecks and debris."

"Bottom line, we'll have to use our feet to get to the Alamo," Pete observes.

Tarasov caresses Nooria's hand discreetly. "Can you do that?"

"I am just worried and feeling weak. You won't need to carry me yet!"

"Dunno about you but I can barely wait to feel solid ground under my feet again," Hartman says. With anticipation all over his face, he stares through the window to the snow-capped Hindu Kush range and the dark Shamali plains beyond where their destination lies.

75

Abandoned airfield, New Zone

"Ubiytsa Odin. Namechennoe vremya pribitiya – pyat minut."

"This is Hitman One, ETA five minutes," Mac translates the pilot's transmission.

"Uzhe slishim kak vi priblijaetes," Bruiser replies, feeling very uncomfortable with Lieutenant Collins' Beretta held against his nape.

"We can already hear you approaching."

"Chista li zona prizemleniya?"

"Is the landing zone clear?"

"Da. Ubiytsa Odin, prichodi."

"Yes. Hitman One, proceed."

"Prinyal, zhdem."

"Roger, standing by."

Bruiser clears the channel. "That's it. Will you let me go now?"

Collins doesn't respond him and turns to Mac instead.

"Watch this scumbag." Then he calls on his two team leaders. "Two and Three, report status," he says on the radio.

"Two. Barrack ruins. West. In position."

"Three. Eastern ruins. In position."

"Stay low until they start disembarking. Commence firing on my command. The word will be Bighorn."

He opens the radio shack's door ajar and peeks outside.

A tiny dot appears in the northern sky and slowly takes on the easily recognizable silhouette of a four-engine transport airplane.

"One to Sniper."

"Standing by," comes Ahuizotl's reply through the radio.

"Watch out for the Charlie Echo. Neutralize tangos with heavy weapons like RPGs and machine guns. Report when done, over."

"Roger."

"Teams One and Two are in position. The command for moving in will be Bighorn. Point out targets once we move in. Over and out."

"Roger Wilco. Out."

"Welcome to Afghanistan," Collins says, watching the descending airplane. Then he frowns. "What is that plane doing?"

Instead of continuing to descend, the low-flying Antonov performs a turn westwards and begins to climb.

"They're turning back!" he shouts. "What did you tell them, you prick?"

"Nothing!" Bruiser nervously replies. "I mean, I told them to land!"

Mac nods. "He didn't warn the pilots."

Collins is about to give Bruiser a smash with his rifle butt when he sees a grenade box next to the crate on which the Bandits' radio is placed. He quickly opens it.

"Smoke grenades?" he angrily asks. "You forgot to tell us about that!"

He takes a grenade, rushes out and pops a smoke. In a minute, purple smoke is rising from the middle of the dirt runway.

Back to the shack, he gives Bruiser an incapacitating blow and anxiously watches the airplane from the door. To his relief, it turns back and begins to approach the landing strip once again.

In a few minutes, the huge airplane touches down on the runway. The dark exhaust of the engines mixes with the purple smoke and the brown dust swirled up by the propellers.

Collins realizes that he might have made a mistake by arranging his own team behind the radio shack; with all the dust, the area around the Antonov's tail and ramp is not clearly visible from this position. He hopes that the sniper has a better view from his vantage point. Even through the

dust, Teams One and Two will lay down a deadly crossfire once he gives the word. The Bandits who will inevitably scatter around will give his own team still enough work.

All he has to do now is to wait for the sniper to finish off the Bandits' leader to ensure disarray. Then his riflemen can begin their grizzly work.

"Glory to the Tribe," he whispers in anticipation.

76

Antonov AN-12, approaching the New Zone

Bandits might be a reckless bunch, but when the pilot at last announces their impending touch-down even the most dashing among them has anxiety mixed into his excitement. Rifles are checked, balaclavas and helmets fastened, assault vests pulled over the light jackets.

"Time to revenge Bruiser's boys at Ghorband," a Bandit says pulling over the hood of his leather jacket. "I wanna kick some Tribe ass!"

"Can hardly wait to bag a bear," boasts another one working the safety on his AKS-74U assault carbine.

Hearing all this Tarasov and the Top exchange a grin.

"Yeah, yeah, manchildren," Hartman grumbles. "The more poop in your pants, the louder you boast."

Buryat gives Ferret a grin. "Reminds me of—"

"Cut teasing each other for a minute," Tarasov interrupts him in a low voice. "We're all set?"

"Yes, boss," Buryat nods. "But... what the hell is the pilot doing?"

Suddenly, they all feel the airplane climb. Hartman pulls a Bandit from the nearest window and peeks out. "He's turning away!"

"Watch Nooria," Tarasov barks. "Pete, on me!"

They dash into the cockpit. "What's happening? Why don't you land this damned plane?"

The pilot gives Tarasov an anxious look. "Something's not right. Bruiser told me to land but he was supposed to pop smoke. Told him I'm standing by for the confirmation but he just said 'roger' and cleared the channel!"

"I don't care. Land the plane!"

"Put that gun away, you stupid Bandit! I don't want to piss off Sultan by risking this flight!"

Tarasov puts his pistol to the pilot's head. Pete follows suit and aims his rifle at the co-pilot who watches the scene with his mouth wide open.

"No, captain, it's me you don't want to piss off," Tarasov barks at the pilot. "Land the airplane now or I'll fucking shoot you!"

But the pilot is a veteran of many perilous flights with illegal cargo and not easy to intimidate.

"And who will fly my machine then, eh?" he shouts back. "Go back to your place, you bloody passenger!"

"I see the smoke," the navigator shouts from his position. He repeats to make sure that his trembling voice is understood, "I see the smoke!"

"See, captain?" Tarasov says with satisfaction and holsters his pistol. "You've almost pissed off Sultan *and* me."

Grumbling something in Belarusian about Bandits being sons of bitches and out of their mind, the pilot steers the Antonov back to landing approach.

"Guess that idiot Bruiser just forgot about the smoke," the radio operator says from his seat behind. "I'm glad it came to his mind at the last moment!"

"Don't worry, I'll punish him for that with my own hands," Tarasov responds with a grin. He holsters the pistol and waves to Pete to follow him.

"What happened?" Ferret asks him when Tarasov and Pete are back to the tail.

"We had a problem with ground control but everything's fine now," replies Tarasov. "Stalkers, get ready!"

Ahuizotl lies on his stomach behind the shrub covering the hilltop. He opens the flap covering the front lens on the scope of his M107. For the next minutes, his sight will be limited to what appears in the reticule. He wishes Mac were next to him watching over their position. However, his last scan of the surrounding area detects nothing.

He watches the airplane land and curses the dust swirled up in the process. All he can see from the Bandits swarming out through the lowered ramp is the long shadows they cast in the rays of the low sun.

The tribals will have a hard time hitting anything in this dust, he thinks.

Even so, he can make out his designated target: one Bandit stands out of the rest by a head, barking commands and holding a weapon that appears to be an RG-6 Bulldog grenade launcher.

The sniper grins.

Just like expected—the biggest son of a bitch with the biggest gun.

The reticule slides over to the head of his target. The Bandit leader appears to him particularly reckless because he is not wearing a helmet; he

doesn't even the hood of his armored suit pulled on. He is waving and shouting at the Bandits running down the ramp.

Ahuizotl narrows his right eye as he looks through the scope. Reading the Bandit's lips it appears that the Bandit is barking English commands, as if shouting *move, move!* instead *davai, davai!* that a Russian-speaking leader would shout. He gives his doubts a mental shrug—there is no way to hesitate and even less so to consult Collins, nor is there a rule that Bandits can only be from the former USSR.

His ears perk as they detect a muffled noise, like a stone falling to the ground.

Relax... it must be the wind. Saw nothing moving a minute ago in a two hundred meters radius. Must be the wind.

Now he can make out his target's grey hair and dark eyebrows too. Ahuizotl places his finger on the trigger. He forgets about seeing a human face; his mind reduces the spot on the grey temple to nothing but a target.

Exhaling long, he empties his lungs and waits for a clear pause between two heartbeats. Then he softly pulls the trigger.

"Bullseye!"

Startled by the voice behind him, Ahuizotl wants to jump but a rifle barrel pressed to his head forces him to stay prone. Looking up from the corner of his eye, he sees something completely unexpected. The sight of a Spetsnaz watching the airfield through his binoculars fills him with as much surprise as fear.

"Sorry to interrupt your concentration, Stalker, but we take over from here," the Spetsnaz says without putting his binoculars down. "Sergeant! Position RPK to the left flank, PKM to the right. Let's wait for the dust settle a bit. Then unleash hell on my command."

"Yest, komandir."

"You! Secure the sniper and give me his rifle."

The sound of gunfire exchanged erupts from the airfield.

"Such a mess," the apparent commander says. "Now those scumbags have started killing each other! One could've expected the Bandits to turn on each other, but so soon? Anyway, that makes it easier for us."

Someone steps on his back, making Ahuizotl emit a whimper of pain. Two strong hands force him to cross his arms behind his back. In a moment his hands are tied.

"A Barrett M82," the Spetsnaz commander says eyeing the rifle. "Lovely."

"It's an M107, moron!" Ahuizotl groans and looks up angrily. Now, with the Spetsnaz' binoculars lowered and the eye protectors pulled up to his helmet, the face of his captor is visible. Before a boot presses against his spine and forces him to lie motionless with face to the ground,

Ahuizotl makes out hardened features and a black eye patch over the left eye.

“Shut up and have more respect for the Captain,” says the soldier holding him down. “Right, Captain Maksimenko?”

“Glad you learned your lesson, Bronsky.”

Bolt action rifles are nothing new to Captain Maksimenko. He assumes a perfect position to fire the weapon while kneeling and scans the airfield. His hand stops in motion at a point and he makes a low whistle.

“I can’t believe our luck, Vlasov,” Maksimenko tells his sergeant. “Look who’s dragging that body into cover.”

“Holy God!”

“No, it’s just Tarasov’s bitch. That means he’s also somewhere there... Let’s wait until they decimate each other, then we kill the rest. Hopefully our friend won’t get himself killed before we get to him... and yes, there he is, talking to another scumbag! Look – next to the ramp!”

“That’s him! Shoot him, Captain, and we’re on the way home!”

“I want him alive.”

Captain Maksimenko’s aim closes in on the target, wondering how he and several others could lay their hands on armor and fatigues which, though heavier, resemble those of the United States Marine Corps.

“We must take action now,” Sergeant Vlasov impatiently says.

“Relax, Vlasov, relax. Don’t spoil my pleasure of firing such a fine bolt-action rifle after all those shitty Dragunovs!”

Captain Maksimenko exhales and fires the rifle.

A smile plays around Sergeant Major Hartman’s lips when the ramp slowly begins to lower and the sunshine of the New Zone lights up the dim cargo bay. He gives Tarasov a wink.

“We’re back at last! All ready?”

Mikhailo Tarasov looks back at Pete and Nooria, whom the Colonel’s son was tasked to protect at any cost, then glances over to the Stalkers picked for the advance team. Ferret looks excited and clutches his G36 with white knuckles. Next to him like always, Buryat grins with self-confidence and pats his light PKM machine gun. The rest of the Stalkers aim their AKS-74Us, AKMs and shotguns, twinkling in the sudden light. Some have their gas masks on to protect them from the dust swirling outside and making its way into the airplane through the lowering ramp. The sinister Stalker called Molotov is among them. His face is hidden by the exoskeleton’s full helmet but he bows his head to signal his readiness.

Hope this SOB doesn't shoot us in the back, flashes through Tarasov's mind.

The ramp hits the ground. Clouds of engine smoke and dust swirl up. He waves his gloved hand forward.

"Davai vperyod, bratya! Forward, brothers! Forward!"

The team moves out, fast but not enough for the Top who has already dashed outside. He holds his Bulldog grenade launcher in one hand and waves with the other, yelling commands in English in all his excitement.

"Come on, you lame pussies! Move, move, move!"

Then he lets go of his weapon, gasps at his throat and falls.

Tarasov's lips move faster than his thoughts.

"Ambush! Zasada! Spread out, spread out!"

"Back to the plane!" he hears a Stalker shouting through the deafening noise of the Antonov's engines. It is Dima Molotov. Tarasov shouts him down.

"No! Spread out!"

Suddenly, he hears the noise of a rifle – it is not a Kalashnikov's bark but that of a US-made assault weapon. It is coming from their flank.

"Get down!" he screams, *"ambush from our right!"*

As soon as he had shouted this, more rifles start firing from the left. A machine gun joins the fire from right, followed by more assault rifles from the same direction. Two Stalkers fall immediately.

"Get back to airplane!" he hears Nooria screaming. With Pete in tow, she appears right at Tarasov's side.

"You get the hell back to cover!" he shouts desperately. *"Now!"*

But Nooria is already at the Top, trying to move the body that is more than twice her weight. Pete grasps the other arm.

"How was I supposed to hold her back?" he yells to Tarasov. *"Knock her out?"*

Pete drags Nooria away and back to the relative safety of the airplane. Held by his arms, Tarasov drags Hartman's body up the ramp. A glance at the Top's wound is enough for him to realize that he must have met death even before he collapsed.

"Go and help the Stalkers!" he yells at the Bandits inside.

Pinned down by hostile fire from three sides, they are in a desperate situation. Tarasov makes out the quick bursts of Buryat's PKM but knows that he has barely a chance to fire the machine gun effectively without seeing the enemy, while the still unseen attackers don't even have to aim properly to hit—any one of them is a target now, anywhere on the dust-covered landing strip.

"We're sitting ducks!" he hears Ferret yelling, *"do something, for God's sake!"*

Half a dozen Bandits try to rush to their help, only to be mowed down by the hostile machine gun fire.

“Back to that fucking plane!” Dima Molotov screams lying on his stomach and firing the Vintorez. “Now!”

Overcome by rage over his own helplessness, Tarasov fires a long burst from his rifle and is about to shout a command calling everyone back inside the airplane when he is almost kicked off his feet—not by a bullet but a jackal. The mutant that showed up from nowhere amidst all the confusion is not attacking him, however. It jumps up at him, yelping like a dog who sees an old friend. What appears even more astounding is that after a second, the hostile fire ceases.

Tarasov has no time to feel relieved, however. Someone shouts a command in English.

“Lay down your weapons!”

“Slozhit oruzhie!”

The voice repeating the command in Russian is that of a woman. The jackal is still jumping around Tarasov when he puts his AKM to the ground. Any further resistance would be not only in vain but utter suicide.

“Don’t shoot!” he shouts back in English and adds in Russian, “*Bratya*, lay down your weapons!”

“Fuck no!”

The defiant voice is that of Buryat.

“Hold your fire!” Tarasov shouts back. Through the dust that slowly settles with the propellers now standing still, he can make out the man who commanded them to surrender—it is a Lieutenant of the Tribe, aiming his M16 at him. Next to him, a Stalker kneels, holding an F2000 ready to shoot. The jackal jogs to the Stalker who pats its neck as if after a job well done. Seeing them together triggers distant memories in Tarasov’s mind. He repeats his command. “Lay down your weapons, brothers! It’s the Tribe!”

“One more fucking reason to fight to the end!”

“Don’t be foolish, Buryat! Put that weapon down!”

Reluctantly, the Stalkers and Bandits do as ordered.

“Identify yourselves!” the Lieutenant commands.

This is it then, Tarasov thinks. Oh Gospodi... and their Sergeant Major lies dead in the airplane. Such a fuck. Such a clusterfuck!

“Major Mikhailo Tarasov, friend of the Tribe, back from a mission given by the Colonel,” he exclaims. “Nooria is with us. So is the Colonel’s son, Corporal Peter Leighley, USMC.”

“What?!”

The Lieutenant sounds dumbfounded beyond measure. “Where’s the Top?” he asks walking to Tarasov. “He left with you!”

“What the hell are you talking about with the *pindos*?” a Bandit asks. He is standing with his hands held up, even though no such command was given.

Before Tarasov can reply to either of them, a faint whizz sounds for a split second, then another bullet from the sniper’s rifle takes a ricochet on the Lieutenant’s helmet and makes it fly off his head. The fighter staggers for a moment, then throws himself to the ground.

“Sniper!” shouts someone behind the ruins. It must have come from one of the Lieutenant’s men. “Sniper at six o’clock!”

It is not another shot from the sniper rifle that follows but a spray of bullets from two well-positioned, Russian-made machine guns on the hill. The bullets hit the already bloody ground around them – the Bandit with raised hands is the first to fall, then a Stalker screams.

“One to all teams,” the Lieutenant barks, “concentrate fire! Hilltop, six o’clock! Fire! Fire everything you got!”

The Tribe fighters, until now hiding behind the safe cover of the ruined buildings that line up along the runway, return fire. But now it becomes apparent how few they are, and both Tarasov and the Lieutenant realize in an instant that what firepower had been enough to wreak havoc on the Stalkers in the open is far from enough to fight the new enemy who has the higher ground.

“Grab your weapons!” Tarasov hollers. “Fire at the hill!”

The Antonov’s engines howl up and the ramp is raised—the airplane is apparently preparing to turn around and take off.

“Pete! Pete!” he screams, hoping that he can make himself be heard in the gunfire and the growing howl of the engines. “Stop the airplane! Hold it back!”

A Tribe fighter fires a grenade but it falls too short of the hilltop position. A Bandit goes down without a sound as another bullet from the sniper rifle hits him.

Bandits, Stalkers and Tribals, who have been fighting each other just a few minutes ago, now try to fight off the new enemy together.

“One down!” Dimitry Molotov’s voice almost sounds calm among all the confusion. “*Patsan*, I told you to get back the airplane, huh? What about *now*?” He reloads his Vintorez and makes a dash for the nearest cover.

The Antonov has almost turned into take-off position with its pilots having no regard for the dead and dying men scattered on the ground when it suddenly halts. The ramp is lowered once more.

“Ferret! Buryat!” Tarasov yells to the two Stalkers relentlessly firing at the hilltop. “Pass the word—fall back! Move back to the airplane!”

“Bring up your men!” the Lieutenant shouts. “We will storm the hill!”

“That’s just madness,” Tarasov shouts back. “Take your men to the airplane, Lieutenant, and get out of here with us!”

“No! We will kill those motherfuckers!”

The female Stalker’s F2000 fires a long burst from the cover of the radio shack. Ejected cases rain from the rifle’s front.

“If he says so, Collins, we go!” she yells.

Tarasov’s dry mouth opens in surprise. “Mac?!”

“Yeah, pleased to meet you again! Now let’s all haul ass to that damned plane!” Aiming through the built-in scope she fires two short bursts. “Scratch one, but there must be more!”

“What the fuck happened to your sniper buddy?”

“I don’t know, Lieutenant! I’ll worry about him as soon as I’m done surviving this shit!”

“Fucking traitor,” Collins curses and barks a command into his radio. “All teams! Fall back! Get into the airplane!”

Tribe fighters appear from the ruins, some of them firing their weapons as they drag a fallen comrade with their free hand.

“No one gets left behind!”

Tarasov shouts the same command in Russian. “*Nikomu ne ostavit!*”

He sees Ferret helping Buryat to the lowered ramp; the former Dutyer appears to be wounded in his leg. A Stalker from the advance squad crawls behind. He grabs and pulls him to his shoulders.

“Help me, brother!” another wounded man screams. “Give me a medikit!”

“Get one yourself once we’re off here,” someone yells back at him. Tarasov looks back and sees Molotov lifting the wounded Stalker.

“Don’t know about you, *patsan*, but I don’t want to stay here! Move!”

With most of the men still alive back to the airplane, the attackers’ machine guns begin to target the Antonov itself. The bullets tear through the wall of the fuselage, killing men who already believed themselves in safety inside. Tarasov immediately thinks of Nooria.

“Here!” Pete yells waving his hand. “Into the cockpit!”

But first Tarasov has to help up a Stalker and a Tribe fighter up the ramp that slowly closes as the airplane, still slowly, moves on the runway.

Having pulled the last man aboard, the two officers share a look of both pain and relief as they battle for breath. Tarasov gets to his feet first.

“On me, Lieutenant!”

Collins follows him forward but when he sees the body that caring hands have put on the conveyor belt and covered with a trench coat, he cries out in despair.

“Oh dear Lord Jesus, this ain’t happening, man—this can’t be happening, man! This isn’t happening!”

“Let’s focus on those still alive!” Tarasov snaps at him. “Mac! Molotov! Keep your eyes on the Bandits! Lieutenant, I want your men do the same!”

“Watch these fuckers,” Collins barks to his fighters. Three of them lie wounded on the floor, but thanks to their better armor they are in better shape than the Stalkers and Bandits.

More bullets hit the airplane.

“Tell that damned pilot to pull her up!” Collins shouts.

“Lieutenant, do any of your men know how fire the tail gun?”

“I do,” Molotov says.

“Get to the turret and suppress those damn machine guns on the hill!”

The Lieutenant yells at his two corpsmen. “Sorensen, Gajda! When you’re finished with our own, see what you can do about the scavengers!”

“We are Stalkers! Not scavengers!” Mac angrily remarks. She has her rifle pointed at the surviving Bandits. Her jackal gives the Bandits a threatening growl.

The aircraft slowly accelerates. Bullets pierce the fuselage and Tarasov’s nose suddenly detects a pungent smell.

“Shit! They must have hit our fuel tank!”

At this moment, the hill gets into the tail cannon’s fire angle, at last enabling Molotov to return fire from the twin 23mm cannons. “That’s it, man!” a Tribe fighter shouts over the earsplitting rattle. “Blast them! Blast those motherfuckers!”

At last the aircraft lifts off. Tarasov and Collins make their way to the cockpit where an appalling sight awaits them: the co-pilot is covered with blood. For a second, Tarasov thinks he might have been hit by a bullet that pierced through the fuselage but then notices the a knife-cut wound across his throat.

“He wanted to leave without you,” a very pale Nooria says. “Old pilot was smarter and listened to me.”

“It’s good to have you back, Nooria,” Collins says and bows his head to her.

“Sure he did,” Pete says. “He had a choice between my bullet in his brain and Nooria’s blade cutting his throat.”

Collins gives Pete a curious look. “Are you—Pete? The son of Colonel Leighley?” Seeing Pete nod, the Lieutenant salutes him. “Welcome to the Tribe. It is an honor to meet you.”

“Yeah. That’s what the Top said when I first met him.”

All fall silent. Their moment of silence is broken by the pilot’s voice.

“Back to Odessa for refueling and then Minsk, I guess?”

The weary question puts Tarasov’s mind back to their current situation.

"No. Lieutenant—Collins, right? Tell him the Alamo's coordinates."

"But Hartman said they're gonna shoot us down!" Pete observes.

"Maybe not if the big man hears your voice on the radio," Tarasov responds. "We have about two dozen men in the back, half of them friendly, the others secured. No danger to his stronghold."

Collins buries his face into his palms. "Good God, you don't know."

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?" Pete asks with a tone of authority.

"It's bad news all over," Collins says with a sigh. "Ragheads and mutants, horrible mutants have wiped out one of our squads. José... Lieutenant Ramirez is dead. The Alamo is under siege. Our main force under First Lieutenant Driscoll is blockading Bagram."

"Why?" asks Tarasov, perplexed.

"Stalkers began attacking our patrols. The Colonel wanted to punish the Stalkers by putting a blockade around their den at Bagram but as soon as our main force was deployed, the ragheads hit us hard. The big man insists he can handle the situation, even though the ragheads managed to breach our outer defenses. He gave direct orders to Driscoll not to return, and he would never question those. It's a matter of honor for both of them. We'd hoped for the Top to return soon and talk sense into Leighley, or at least make Driscoll listen to his own better judgment, take the reasonable decision and lead the main force to relieve the Alamo—and now he's gone!"

"I will talk to my father," Pete defiantly says. "Enough blood has been spilt."

The Lieutenant gives him a look of doubt. "I'm not sure if he'd agree."

"That wouldn't be the first disagreement between him and me," Pete responds with a dire smile.

"Sorry to interrupt but we can't even make it to Odessa," the pilot says eyeing the instrument panel. "Our underfloor tank was hit. We're losing fuel. You better find a place to land within two hundred kilometers or we'll have to crash land. Make up your goddamn mind and give us directions, people!"

"Is the airfield at Bamyan marked on your GPS or whatever navigation system you follow?" Tarasov asks the pilot.

"Sure, but I hope that's not where you want to go."

"Follow the course leading there. Keep a low altitude. Our destination is about thirty kilometers east of Bamyan. You will see a landing strip atop of a mountain."

"Let me use that radio," Collins says. "Major, I suggest you team up with my men and disarm the Bandits. Just in case."

"Done already," comes a voice from the hatch. It is Molotov.

“Good job,” Tarasov nods his approval. “I’m glad the Dutyer was right about you after all.”

“Why, what did he say?”

“That you’re with the Stalkers.”

“I work alone.” Molotov takes his helmet off, prompting Tarasov to give his sooty face a gaze as if he would be seeing a ghost. “I am Alexander Degtyarev, Security Service of Ukraine.”

In any other situation, their reunion would have been a gleeful one. However, aboard a damaged airplane filled with wounded men, on their way towards a besieged Alamo and with Sergeant Major Hartman dead, only a few simple words come to Tarasov’s mind.

“Now I understand the strange look you gave me, Alex,” he says.

“You’d make a horrible undercover agent, Misha. I recognized you from far by the way you walk.”

“You guys know each other?” Pete asks puzzled.

“Very well,” Degtyarev nods.

“You are Alex?” Nooria demands with eyes wide open from surprise. “And you have been with Sultan’s men all time?”

“Yes. And you must be Misha’s legendary girl, I take?”

“Legendary?”

“I got the frequency,” Collins interrupts them. “Corporal, it’s your turn.”

Tarasov needs a moment to understand that the Lieutenant was meaning Pete.

“I’d better be back to the cargo bay,” Degtyarev says. “Swapping stories can wait till we’re out of this mess.”

He gives Tarasov and Nooria a faint smile and leaves through the hatch. Meanwhile, Collins has taken the headset from the radio operator and is already talking on the radio.

“This is Lieutenant Collins calling the Alamo... Alamo, I know you have a copy on me. Come in.”

“Our call sign is Bravo Lima Charlie Four Seven Nine Tango,” the pilot says. “At least that’s what appears on radar screens.”

Collins transmits the call sign on the radio. “I repeat, I am aboard a cargo airplane, approaching the Alamo from...”

“Just say west-northwest,” the pilot observes.

“...west-northwest. Alamo, I know you have a copy on me and have direct orders not to respond, but you’d better listen to this transmission.”

Having said this, Collins hands the headset over.

“What am I supposed to say?” Pete asks the Lieutenant putting on the headset.

A smile appears on Collins' face. "Maybe *hi, dad* would do for a start?"

"That would send him the wrong signal," Pete says wrinkling his forehead. "I always had to call him *sir*."

77

Abandoned airfield

"Haha!" Bronsky snorts watching the chaos on the runway. "We are triumphant!"

"Who told you to stop firing?" Captain Maksimenko angrily shouts back at the Spetsnaz.

Bronsky continues to pepper the already scattered Stalkers with sustained fire from his PKM. On the right flank. Volkov does the same with the heavier RPK machine gun. The heavy bullets take a horrible toll on the coverless Stalkers.

When the Spetsnaz realized that a few men return fire from the cover of the ruins, Maksimenko let the two automatic weapons shift their fire to deal with the new enemy. The 7,62mm cartridges easily penetrate the brick walls. However, hitting the defenseless Stalkers is more rewarding and the machine gunners soon shift their fire back to the runway; well-covered by the rocks on the hilltop as they were, their enemy had no chance to effectively fight back at them anyway. The battle is going well.

Captain Maksimenko watches the onslaught below with a victor's smile. But when he sees the tail turret rotate and the twin-barreled autocannon take aim at their position, his smile turns to a scowl.

"Fall back!"

The Spetsnaz have barely time to leave their positions before the Antonov's twin autocannon begins to pound the hilltop. Splintering rocks and spraying earth where they hit, the devastating burst of 23mm armor-piercing incendiary rounds rip the dilapidated radar truck to shreds and set its rotting electronics ablaze.

The Spetsnaz run down the hill. When they reach the slope and have the hilltop between them and the airplane, Captain Maksimenko tears his helmet off his head and smashes it to the ground.

"*Pizdets!*" he cusses looking after the climbing airplane, "fuck, fuck, fuck!"

If Sergeant Vlasov is equally frustrated, he is more level-headed than his captain to let himself be carried away by it.

"Spetsnaz, report status," he shouts.

"Tokarsky's bought it, sarge," reports Wargo, the former officer. "Maslak and Kushnik suffered light wounds. Brechko is patching them up."

"Where's the Stalker?"

The Spetsnaz look at each other.

"Crap," Bronsky says. "He's either dead or..."

"What are you waiting for?" Vlasov snaps at him. "Back to the hilltop and find him, *davai!*"

He walks to Maksimenko who is kicking around loose rocks and cursing Tarasov with such foul words that make even the hard-boiled Spetsnaz grimace.

"*Kapitan*, there's no reason to be upset," Vlasov says. "We can report that our secondary goal is accomplished. No more Bandits will fly in here, that's for sure."

"This is not fucking happening to me!" the still enraged Maksimenko shouts. "I had that bastard right there and again—"

Vlasov shrugs. "Kiev doesn't know that he was on that plane. So far so good, I'd say. I suggest we move to that facility and establish a perimeter. Then we see what's next."

Still tense, Maksimenko is about to snap him when a howl comes from nearby.

"Did you hear that?"

"Sir, I suggest we move quickly."

Bronsky arrives.

"No trace of the sniper," he reports, fighting for breath.

"Screw him," Maksimenko snaps. "He can't get far with his hands tied anyway."

Another howl comes from much closer, followed by several more.

Bronsky pales. "Mutants?"

"Must be coming for the corpses on the airstrip," Vlasov observes anxiously. "We better get ready!"

"Shit!" Captain Maksimenko takes his helmet from the ground and straps it back on. "Get back to the hill and prepare for defense!"

78

The Alamo

Smoke rises from the ruined mud houses in the Alamo's living quarters, concealing the mountain across the valley from the Colonel's sight.

He doesn't see the besieging enemy but knows they are out there, probably preparing for a last assault to break the Tribe's battered defenses.

At least that's what he would do if he were the attacker and the defenders pushed back behind their last line of fortifications.

It all comes down to a last stand, he thinks.

In the years past, everything had been done to turn the ancient citadel into a stronghold that could easily withstand any attack from outside. In hindsight, the trick of the attackers appears so logical and easy, but then no one could have suspected that anyone knew about the underground vaults. Apart from the Tribe, the only ones who had ever seen it were Tarasov's Stalkers on their way to the City of Screams. The Colonel would never believe that they betrayed this secret to the Taliban, or the dushman as the Stalkers call their mortal enemies. Money could always prevail over enmity, of course, but knowing of their weak point would not have been enough – one needed the perfidious idea of using that strange creature to find a point where the underground walls could be broken through. Even so, the attack could have been easily repulsed if their human enemies hadn't been supported by the smiters.

But Colonel Leighley knows that all speculation is in vain now. Soon, the smiters will charge, followed by the human waves of ragheads that will sweep over the Tribe's last defenses like the rising tide would sweep away a sandcastle built on the seashore.

His room is only dimly lit by a nick in the boarded up window and a lamp on his field table. He steps to the sink and glances into the shaving mirror fastened to the wall to check his combat armor, then adjusts the bars holding the ribbons of his decorations. Today is the day to wear them all.

Below the Navy Cross with two award stars, the Navy Distinguished Service Medal and the Silver Star, four rows of ribbons – several with award stars and valor device – tell about a more than distinguished military career; they include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart and the USMC Good Conduct and Expeditionary Medals. The lower rows hold ribbons for service and several campaigns.

It's been a long way from Parris, he thinks. Today it will come to an end.

The thought of this battle probably earning him the button, as Marines refer to the Medal of Honor, makes him give his own reflection a grim smile. Nobody will know of this last stand, yet for him and his men who are about to die, it will be a fight for honor indeed – a very much unneeded proof of their valor. And anyway, what's good in a posthumous award to a soldier, a real warrior, who dies with the thought that his honor needs not to be confirmed by politicians and generals?

A freshly cleaned M4 and a pistol lay on his field table. He shoulders the carbine and takes his sidearm too. It is a MEUSOC, the standard-issue

firearm of the USMC's force recon units. It has none of the extra components usually found on these weapons and looks like any of the over 2 million M1911A1s produced in the past century, save for the white lettering on the slider: *To Colonel James W. Leighley for 25 years of faithful service. SEMPER FI.*

The shadow of a smile plays around his lips as he glances at the pistol. The black gun metal bears the promise of faithful service to the end. He lets the magazine eject and removes all bullets inside except one.

"That should suffice, should need be," he tells Lieutenant Bauer who is patiently waiting at the door. "How are the warriors feeling today?"

"We all are eager to fight, sir."

"Do they think they'll die in vain?"

"No, sir. They know that no man dies in vain who dies for his ideals."

"Too bad our enemy thinks the same."

"Permission to speak freely, sir? It is not our enemy who beats us, sir, but this land itself. The ragheads will not enjoy victory. They know that if it hadn't been for the smiters they would have never bested us."

Seeing the Colonel's agreeing nod, Bauer carries on.

"As to us, there is no shame in falling to a superhuman force. As to our enemies, there's nothing honorable about using such power to overcome us. No sir, our enemy shall not rejoice."

"Is that your opinion, Lieutenant, or that of the rest as well?"

"Sir, this is where we all stand."

The big man bows his head. Silence descends over the two men. Suddenly, the Alamo's anti-aircraft battery reports in the radio.

"This is Hawkeye."

Colonel Leighley takes the headset and mike. "Hawkeye, proceed."

"Reporting an airplane identified as a Belarusian cargo carrier. Approaching fast and attempting to contact us."

"Break contact. You know the drill, Hawkeye."

"Sir—with all due respect, I suggest you listen to this."

The Colonel frowns. "Have it transferred it to my radio set."

"Right away, sir."

After a few seconds of crackling radio noise, a young male voice comes through the channel. The Colonel turns pale upon hearing it.

"Corporal Leighley aboard BLC 479T calling Colonel Leighley. Come in, over... BLC 479T, Alamo, come in, over..."

"Sir! It's—" Bauer wants to shout but a flash of the Colonel's eyes shuts him up.

"Calling Alamo, come in. BLC 479T inbound. Alamo, come in, over."

Leighley emits a sigh that makes his nostrils tremble, then clears his throat.

“Alamo to BLC 479T. You must break off your approach.”

The reply on the radio sounds relieved.

“Sir! We are low on fuel. Need Alamo runway for emergency landing. Aboard are Major Tarasov, Lieutenant Collins with his SR squad, Nooria and a friendly force. We have several WIAs and POWs.”

“What is the Sergeant Major’s status? Why is it not he who reports?”

“The Top is KIA, sir.”

Watching his commander, Bauer is certain that if by a major miracle he still had a long life ahead he would always remember the pain appearing on Colonel Leighley’s face.

Yet it takes only a second for the big man to recollect himself.

“Corporal, Lima Zulu is hot, I repeat—Son, you must not come here! The enemy is about to overrun our defenses. Turn around and do whatever you can to join First Lieutenant Driscoll’s force in the Bagram area!”

“Negative. You must also tell your henchman not to attack the Stalker base.”

“Corporal! Let me talk to Lieutenant Collins. Now!”

“Sir, with all due respect but fuck the chain of command. This is between you and me.”

“Son, listen to me! Our enemy cannot be beaten this time. Coming here would mean the death of all of you. Do what I say and turn back!”

“No, sir, negative—absolutely negative! You will not give up on me so easily. Not this time! Shoot this plane down with all of us aboard if you want but we are rolling in. Over and out.”

The Colonel stands like a statue, his hand clutching on the mike with a force that is almost crushing it. His lips are trembling as he replies.

“Welcome to the Alamo, son.”

A moment of silence falls, then the affirmative clicks on the radio, by which the AA battery confirms the unspoken yet clear command, is suppressed by the thundering battle cry and mutant roar outside. The final charge is about to be launched.

The big man unholsters his commemorative sidearm once more. He takes one more of the discharged bullets from his table and loads it into the magazine. He grabs the radio mike but hesitates before giving his next command. Then, with a sigh, he presses the button to open the channel.

“Put me through to the First Lieutenant.”

79

An-12 approaching the Alamo

“And I thought dealing with drunk air control in Lagos was bad enough,” the pilot says when the conversation is terminated and Pete gives the headset back.

Degtyarev arrives from the cargo hold. “We better land quickly. It’s like a slaughterhouse back there.”

“Landing approach approved as requested,” the radio operator reports.

On the top of the mountain around which the Tribe’s defenses are laid out, the rocky outcrops and ancient ruins have been cleared off to make place for a runway. The pilot shouts out a Russian curse but it is not the sight of the perilous landing strip that scares him.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Where the Alamo’s medieval-looking living quarters were, now smoke is rising from smoldering ruins. The lower ramparts appear intact but there is devastation everywhere as if a hostile force had appeared right inside the stronghold. Up to the last line of fortified positions and ramparts crowning the mountain, every square meter bears witness to heavy and desperate fighting in which the attackers slowly gained the upper hand.

A mass of humans is storming down the slopes of the mountain across the valley. Tall, humanoid mutants move ahead the assaulters like boulders carried by a wave crashing on the shore. Tarasov sees the tracers of the defenders’ fire raining down on the assaulters but it can’t stop them – their first ranks, led by the huge mutants, have already reached the ruined living quarters and continue to press forward and up the mountain.

“Oh my God,” groans Tarasov, “oh God!”

“Napalm,” Collins says, “all we need is napalm! Good God, how I wish we could burn those motherfuckers!”

“Holy Christ!” the pilot yells. “Our fuel’s not leaking but pouring!”

Kerosene. Second best to napalm, flashes to Tarasov’s mind. The memory of the Top’s gung-ho joke gives him an idea that could turn the tide of the battle raging on the ground.

“Captain! Dump the kerosene!” he shouts to the pilot.

“We’re flying on jet fuel, not kerosene!”

“Burns all the same, right?”

“If one ignites it, yes!”

“Then dump all the fuel! Let it rain on the attackers, then Alex will light them up with the tail gun!”

“Are you out of your mind?” the pilot protests. “If you fire that, it will incinerate the fuel vapor and kill us all!”

But Degtyarev gets the idea. “Yes! Dump the fuel over them, captain! Do it, now!”

Seeing him drawing a Makarov pistol the pilot hisses a swear. “I’ll do it, goddammit, just keep that shooter away from my head!”

Tarasov grabs the radio mike. "Alamo! We need an HIE mortar fire emission! Alamo, come in!"

"Major, we don't have enough firepower to—"

"Listen, Alamo! Prepare incendiary shells, watch the airplane and you'll know what you've got to do!"

Probing his way through the thin air, the airplane quickly descends at 2000 feet per minute, dodging peaks and ridges with 90 degree turns.

"How long is the runway?" the pilot asks.

"3200 feet, unpaved," Collins responds. "Enough for a C-130!"

"Gonna be rough but we should make it," the pilot says.

"That's suicide!" the navigator shouts.

"If these crazy cowboys can land with a Herk there, so can we!"

"Your bragging will kill us all!"

"Shut up and get into Yuriy's seat, Stepan! Hey, yankee, move to the nose and tell me when to begin the dump! And you guys make yourself useful and get that body out of my cockpit!"

"Sorry about him," Tarasov says as he and Degtyarev drag the copilot's body from the seat.

"He was the worst flying bitch I ever had," the pilot coldly observes. "But who's that woman with the knife?"

"My wife."

"Oh boy. And I thought *I* was in deep shit!"

"Descending at 2000 feet per minute," the navigator reports from the copilot's seat.

Probing his way through the thin air, rapidly descending and dodging peaks and ridges, the aircraft roars over the valley.

"Dump it over the eastern ridge!" Collins shouts from the navigator's position in the nose. "Port, 90 degrees!"

"Stepan, read speed!"

"Two five twenty—two five zero—"

A voice from the besieged stronghold calls on the radio. "*Alamo. Fire mission is Sierra Bravo.*"

"Fasten your seatbelts," the pilot yells. He crosses himself and glances at the icon fastened to the instrument panel. Then he steers the plane into a sharp port turn and works several switches on the overhead panel.

80

Siege camp, east of the Alamo

Commander Saifullah studies the Alamo's smoke-covered ruins. Forcing the hitherto unbeatable Tribe to retreat behind their last line of

defense would have been reason to rejoice and praise God. However, looking at the hulking smiters who now are waiting for Skinner's command to unleash their final charge, he feels a certain bitterness.

Saifullah has no doubts at all that eradicating the Tribe will please God – but with such an ungodly ally? The Prophet's flag will fly over the Alamo soon enough but in God's eyes, this victory will be spoilt. The thought of entering into a pact with these hellish creatures and their master, this half-mutant abomination, makes him feel guilty and unclean.

There can be only one way out, and Saifullah calms himself with the thought of all this being done for God's greater glory. Skinner might be an abomination, but his plan was perfect: without their stronghold and probably already decimated by the infidels at Bagram, the remaining forces of the Tribe will be no match for God's holy warriors. They will take the Alamo today, and the rest of these lands too will soon be purged of foreign intruders. How great is God indeed – even the creatures of hell work to promote His will!

"You don't look happy, dushman."

Saifullah hates the irony in Skinner's voice but while he still needs him, he has no choice but to force a smile on his face as he turns towards the grinning half-mutant.

"I will rejoice once I see the Prophet's banner flying over the infidels' lair," he lies.

"Shall we wait till nightfall?" Skinner asks. "My friends have a better sight in darkness than the Tribe's NVGs. Could give us another advantage."

"We will not wait." Impatience lingers in Commander Saifullah's voice. "As soon as my warriors finish their prayers, we will strike and finish the infidels, once and for all!"

"Suit yourself," Skinner replies with a shrug. "All the better, actually. We're getting hungry."

Saifullah leaves him in a hurry. The thought of relying on these man-eating monsters makes his stomach turn and he can hardly wait to cleanse his soul by leading his warriors in prayer.

When the Talib has left their lookout, Skinner spits on the ground.

You will never see your flag over the Alamo because I will eat your eyes first.

He waves to the smiter next to him. Looking into the mutant's eyes, he senses its hunger.

Soon we will be feasting, brother. Soon.

In reply, the smiter's eyes flash with anticipation but Skinner senses the creature's anxiety as well.

"Their bullets. They hurt. Fire hurts."

I know, but they must be running out of ammunition. We will revenge our fallen brothers.

“And then no human will ever hurt us again?”

Then this land will be ours, brother.

The mutant’s reaction would be just an aggressive growl to anyone but Skinner.

Yes. We will exterminate them all. Now go and gather the brothers.

The voice of prayer comes from the Taliban’s camp where Saifullah’s warriors have gathered. The many rows of several hundred fearsome warriors make an impressive sight, and the human deep inside him cannot deny a certain beauty from the scene and the chant of prayer carried by the wind.

He watches Saifullah deliver a short sermon. Though he doesn’t understand a word, Skinner has no doubt that it’s to encourage the warriors, telling them what a great victory they will score and how happy those will be who go to Paradise today.

His stomach rumbles. Skinner pats his abdomen.

That’s where you all gonna go, not Paradise.

Saifullah’s warriors begin to cheer. Their voice echoes in the valley and there’s no doubt that the renegade Marines must have heard it too. All the better—they know that their time to die has come.

Through the cheer and rifle shots fired into the air, Skinner’s sensitive ears detect a low drone.

An airplane? What the hell?

“Did you hear that?” he shouts to Saifullah who has just finished addressing his men.

“What?”

“An airplane is approaching!”

“Maybe it’s coming to evacuate them!”

“You should know by now that the Tribe never runs away,” Skinner snaps.

“One more reason to push the assault. We are ready.”

“Let’s finish what we came here for,” the half-mutant replies indifferently, giving a loud whistle.

Three dozen smiters take up position among the Taliban, ready to lead the charge. Saifullah climbs up a rocky knoll where he theatrically points to the Tribe’s stronghold.

“Bismillahirrahmanirrahim!”

In reply, the voice of hundreds of his warriors thunders.

“Bismillah!”

Shaking his head, Skinner looks at the smiter that is still wearing rags of Clear Sky armor.

That idiot better get into cover, lest he wants a sniper to shut him up.

But with the waves of Taliban beginning to march on the Alamo, any fighter behind the battered ramparts has something better to do than that. The first volleys of .50 calibers are already being fired. The Talib sharpshooters return the fire in an attempt to give their assaulting brethren cover. Ahead of the assaulters, smiters charge forward.

A lonely airplane appears from behind the northern ridge. To Skinner's relief it is no combat aircraft, not even American, just an Antonov cargo plane.

The first smiter reaches the Alamo's gate. Acting as a self-propelled bullet shield, it keeps the dushman behind it safe from the small weapons fired from the ramparts above. In a few minutes they will reach the upper fortifications.

For an instant, it appears to Skinner that the airplane is about to smash into the host of assaulters – it is flying directly at them at an extremely low altitude and apparently not even trying to approach the Alamo's airstrip on the fortified mountain. Then it just roams over, as if it could do nothing apart from scaring them.

Though surprised, the assaulters don't let themselves be distracted by the airplane that must be flown by crazy or suicidal pilots. Relentlessly, they keep streaming through the ruined lower quarters towards the hilltop fortifications.

"Saifullah," Skinner yells. "What the hell are you waiting for? Shoot that crazy plane down!"

"All our machine guns are pinning down the infidels!" the Talib commander replies. "Never mind! It's flying away!"

Indeed, the airplane begins to climb once more but then, instead of receding, turns back at an even lower altitude. Suddenly, it begins to release thick streams of brownish vapor from its four engines and the fuselage. Skinner and Saifullah can barely exchange a bewildered look before it thunders over them, so low that they can even see the crew member in the nose cupola, the bolts in the fuselage and the patterns on the wheels of the lowered landing gear. In a moment, they are covered with sickening, oily vapor.

It only takes a second for Skinner to realize the danger.

"It's kerosene!" he screams. "Scatter! Scatter, everyone! Do not fire your weapons!"

The vapor bites his nostrils and windpipes, forcing him to pull over his gas mask.

The assaulting Taliban can either not hear him or don't understand him, and the slow-witted smiters can only sense his fear but don't realize where the danger is coming from.

The airplane turns back once more, this time roaring over the narrow alleys of the lower fortifications where the assaulters are thronged in so tightly that they couldn't scatter even if they heard Skinner's desperate command. Helplessly, Skinner and Saifullah watch humans and mutants alike look up at the airplane, coughing and trying to wipe the noxious substance off their skin.

Then several bold but stupid dushmans fire their weapons at the airplane that is now ascending and turning away. Their muzzles flash. A split second later, they go up in an orange ball of detonation that quickly engulfs the ruins and the assaulters among them.

Sensing what's coming next, Skinner grabs the arms of the two smiters still at his side and begins to run towards the hillside where the caves offer the only way to escape their impending doom.

Saifullah helplessly watches them run away, brutally pushing the men around them and crushing those who don't make way fast enough. He wants to scream but falls to his knees with a cough that turns into vomiting. Even in his wretched state, he can hear the whizz of incoming mortar shells.

For a second, he sees the hilltop fortifications standing out from the smoke and fiery inferno like an island in a stormy sea of fire. Now he knows that the Prophet's banner will never fly over the accursed infidels' stronghold. He shakes his fist in a last, threatening but powerless gesture.

Then a full volley of high explosive incendiary shells impact, fired just a few seconds ago from the Tribe's 81mm mortars. Saifullah wants to die calling on his God and emits a ghastly scream – but it comes without any meaning, since it is just the air being sucked from his lungs a split second before the earth trembles and the whole valley goes up in a thundering firestorm.

When it is over, his grisly corpse is still standing in the same position: burnt to the bones, the skeletal fist raised and the jaws on the blackened skull peering out from the charred flesh, resembling a horrifying grin – like a statue sculpted by the devil itself.

81

Airstrip, the Alamo

"How's your wound?" Ferret asks Buryat after the airplane has landed on the Alamo's airstrip. To everyone's surprise, the pilot has managed to touch it down safely – no crash landing, no runway overrun but a landing almost as soft as the last minutes had been rough.

"Hurts," the Dutyer says with a painful grimace. "Tribe medic said it's gonna be all right, but I won't be able to dance for a while."

Ferret gives him a helping hand as they walk down the lowered ramp. “Too bad! I’m sure you’d make helluva sight wearing ballet stockings.”

“You Freedomers are so gay.”

“We do love raping Duty in the butt if that’s what you mean.”

“See? You just admitted it. Now stay away from me or I face punch you.”

“Nah, handsome,” Ferret replies patting his back. “*You* stay away from *me*, or prepare your buttocks.”

But Buryat keeps holding on his shoulder as he drags his wounded leg and staggers to the runway.

Next to them, lined up and blinking in the sunlight, the disarmed Bandits obediently leave the airplane under the watchful eyes of Lieutenant Collins’ scouts.

“Move, trench coats, move!” team leader Walker shouts. “Keep your hands up! *Ruki ver* or whatever it’s in Russian!”

In the cockpit, the relieved crew exchange handshakes before beginning the process of powering the airplane’s systems down.

“Phew! I’m done flying missions for Sultan,” the pilot tells the navigator. “The last moments reminded me of Kamran, back in ’89.”

“Wasn’t that an Antonov like this crashing and burning out?” the radio operator asks.

“My point exactly,” the pilot responds. He kisses his fingers and touches the icon fixed to the overhead instruments. Then he pats the yoke, giving thanks to the airplane itself. “Good girl!”

“Made in Ukraine,” the navigator says with a grin.

“Thank you, captain,” Tarasov says exchanging a handshake with the pilot. “Hell of a flight.”

“I guess you had a hell of a journey too,” Major Degtyarev says.

Before replying, Tarasov gives his old comrade a bearish hug. “Alex—how bloody good to see you! What the hell were you doing among the Bandits?”

“Covert mission. I was to find out where they are all migrating to in the Zone. I could inform the SBU about the Container Warehouse and their destination, but they wanted to catch Sultan red-handed, while still in Ukrainian airspace. Gunships and fighter jets were already in the air to intercept them but he outsmarted us by using Belarusian helicopters. We couldn’t touch them. So I decided to join his horde and see what they were up to in the New Zone.”

“I knew you’d make it here sooner or later.”

“Where are we exactly?”

"You remember the briefing you gave me? You mentioned renegade Americans. Looks like we've just saved them," Tarasov triumphantly says. "Makes it easier for me to vouch for you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Tarasov wants to laugh but then just gives Degtyarev a sad smile.

"That you may live. You are SBU, Alex, and if I did this by the Tribe's book I'd have to treat you here as a potential enemy. You will see many secrets. If I vouch for you and you ever get loose-lipped about what you'll see here, I'll forfeit my honor and probably my life too. Got it?"

"Did you actually join them, Misha?"

"I'm a free Stalker now but a friend of the Tribe."

"And I am a friend of Stalkers. You know that."

"I have your word of honor, then? That of an officer and gentleman?"

"You have."

"Good. Now let's go and see Colonel Leighley."

"Who is he?"

"A version of Colonel Kruchelnikov that actually makes sense."

Tarasov turns to Pete, who was listening to the Russian conversation with growing impatience.

"You're talking about my father?" he asks.

"I had to give Major Degtyarev a crash course on Tribe ethics. Honor and all that. No one in the Tribe would ever break a word of honor, right Nooria?"

"Right," Nooria replies, turning away from the compartment window where her eyes were sucking in the familiar lights of the New Zone, appearing so much welcoming to her despite all the devastation.

"Cheer up, big sister," Pete says. "We did it!"

"I am sad," she replies unfastening the seat belt. Avoiding Tarasov's look she wipes tears from her eyes. "But also happy to be back."

"I know what you mean," Tarasov says. "But knowing what the Tribe is capable of, I'm sure everything will be rebuilt. Life will be back to normal soon, too—if it ever was."

"It never will," Nooria sadly replies.

In the cargo compartment that smells of a noxious mixture of vomit, kerosene, cordite and blood, Lieutenant Collins and Mac are standing next to Sergeant Major Hartman's body.

"I still can't believe it," Collins says, slowly shaking his head.

"One thing I'm sure of is that Ahuizotl would never betray us," Mac sadly but defiantly says. "He didn't recognize your comrade. How could he? How could you? Ahuizotl was the only one with a visual on him. Then whoever attacked us must have overcome him."

“True. Had it not been for your jackal who recognized him we would have killed Tarasov as well, let alone the big man’s son and Nooria! Jesus, had that happened I would’ve put a bullet in my brain!”

Mac tries to distract the Lieutenant from his grief. “What happened to Bruiser?”

“He got bruised,” Collins coldly replies.

“Glad to know that. Once we’re done here I go and find Ahuizotl. He’s is a tough SOB and unless they killed him right away, he’ll make it. Right, Billy?”

Tarasov appears with Pete and Nooria from the crew compartment and gives the mutant a pat on the head.

“It’s the second time that a mutant saved my ass,” he says. “How embarrassing.”

“He’s not a mutant but a dog.”

“Good to see you again, Mac.”

“You too, Major.”

“I’m no longer a major, I’m afraid.”

“Things are changing.”

“So I see,” Tarasov says looking at her open face and loose hair.

“Is Ilchenko still around?” Mac asks Tarasov about his earlier squad member.

“Sergeant Zlenko killed him.”

“Oh gosh. What about Zlenko?”

“I killed him.”

Mac stops asking questions. Looking at the Top’s body, Tarasov sighs with sadness. “He will be dearly missed,” he says. “Poor Katie Stone.”

Collins bows his head.

“Dearly indeed,” Pete sadly observes. “He was a real badass even for a Marine.”

“He’d probably want that as his epitaph,” Collins says.

“Well, Pete,” Tarasov says gently arranging the coat covering the Top’s face and torso, “guess if he were still alive, he’d be bitching at me for not bringing you to your father at last. Let’s go.”

“I get the creeps when I think of telling the big man about this,” Collins says darting a last glance at the sergeant major’s body.

Not surprisingly, they can already see the Colonel’s tall figure approach as they descend the ramp. He is flanked by two Lieutenants and several fighters, several of them wearing bandages and those without helmet the trace of dry blood on their foreheads. Nothing on his face reflects that his Tribe has just been on the brink of annihilation, and he is about to see his son again.

Tarasov salutes him. So does Lieutenant Collins. Pete stares at his father, though with a half-smile that would have been unthinkable had he been brought here right after Tarasov and the Top picked him up at that junkies' den a few weeks before, on that rainy night in Los Angeles that now appears as if it had been a thousand years ago.

"Mission accomplished, Colonel," Tarasov reports.

"Thank you, Major. Good initiative with that firework."

"Couldn't have convinced the pilot without him," Tarasov replies pointing at Degtyarev. "He is Major Alexander Degtyarev, Security Service of Ukraine. I vouch for him."

"Do you know what that means?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Very well, Major. Now I want to know how the Sergeant Major died."

In a few words, Lieutenant Collins tells about the ill-fated ambush. While Collins reports, Tarasov hesitates between admiring the Colonel for giving full attention to the report of his soldier and scorning the father over apparently ignoring the presence of his son. After all, Tarasov and the Top had brought him here through so many perils and now Pete is just standing there, staring at his father who has barely looked at him yet.

"Friendly fire," The Colonel slowly shakes his head. "The only comforting about his death is that he wasn't killed by the enemy. He was invincible to the end. Such a fateful day, Major! You bring me an old friend dead—and my son alive."

"It was about time you realized I was here," Pete snaps. Hearing the youth's proud tone, so much characteristic to Pete since his mind had cleared, Tarasov has to bite his tongue to prevent himself from smiling. "Please try to act like an ordinary father and tell you're happy to see me!"

The Lieutenants look at each other. A few of the fighters behind them cover their mouths to hide embarrassment over such disrespect—or perhaps a smile.

But the Colonel himself is smiling.

"Why? Are *you* an ordinary son?" Seeing that the unexpected reply leaves Pete perplexed, the big man carries on. "The boy I last saw had been an ordinary son. Rebellious, disrespectful, judging his father over things he didn't understand and trying to piss him off by any means. What I see now is a man—daring, strong and with a hint of wisdom in his eyes. I am happy to see you, Pete."

"Hell yeah!" Pete shouts happily. "It's all because of the Zone. Tarasov's Zone! Listen, there was Finn Sawyer who threw a swag into an anomaly and then the Doctor, he keeps a mutant for a pet and can talk to

him, I mean in Russian of course, and he uses swags to dung his vegetables and then we were cutting wood and he—”

“You can tell me all that later but first things first. We’ve to mop up the area and then, when all enemies are hunted down, give the Sergeant Major his last honors. Last but not least, we have to give back Nooria to the Beghum.” The Colonel turns to Nooria. “My child, words are not enough to express how happy I am to see you back safely.”

It must have been the big man’s sixth sense or just exact timing, but as soon as he said this a colorful group appears from the passage leading down to the ramparts. The strong wind on the hilltop blows the women’s yellow, blue and orange garments; on the featureless hilltop and among the desert camouflage of uniforms and body armors, the blazing colors are a pleasure to look at. The Beghum though, who walks in their middle, wears black. She stretches her arms out and Nooria runs up to her and throws herself to her mother’s bosom. The women encircle them as if forming a protective circle, and Nooria disappears from Tarasov’s sight.

“Where are they taking her?” he asks.

“You will see your woman soon enough, Major. And you, Pete—you’ll still say *sir* to me, at least when we’re wearing this uniform,” the Colonel says. “Is that clear?”

Pete smiles. “Clear, sir.”

The big man nods to the Lieutenants. Followed by a half dozen fighters, they enter the airplane with a stretcher, carefully place the Top’s body on it and lift it to their shoulders. Without bothering to ask, Tarasov and Pete join them. None of the former Marines has a word against it.

“Our Sergeant Major has returned, here he comes!” the big man shouts as the men carrying Hartman’s body descend the ramp. He salutes. “Attention on deck!”

Tarasov doesn’t know much about Marine rituals, nor has he witnessed anything like that before in the Tribe. Looking at the solemn faces of the saluting fighters, he nonetheless understands that Colonel Leighley has just given Sergeant Major Hartman the greatest honor a simple command can convey.

82

Bagram

A dozen Stalkers stand around one of the makeshift tables in the Antonov bar. Their faces are somber like that of men attending a funeral, but what they have fixed their eyes on is not a coffin but a single bottle of vodka.

"Me last bottle," Ashot sadly says. "Brothers, we have a difficult choice. Either you let me water it, using only purified water of course, and then we have two bottles. Three, maybe."

"Forget it," Shrink says.

"Or we could give each bro a little sip and then die of dehydration."

"De-vodkation," a Stalker adds.

"Damn," says another, "I can't shoot straight unless I've had some vodka!"

"Is it really the last bottle or are you just trying to hike the price?" a Stalker asks, drumming his fingers on his AKS-74U assault carbine.

"I swear to God it is!" Ashot huffily replies.

"Bullshit, you're lying!"

"Let the Zone take me if I am!"

"What about charging and breaking the siege?" another asks.

"Go ahead, Ahmed Turk," Ashot says. "Go and charge them tribals. We gonna share your vodka ration with great pleasure!"

A sudden detonation shakes the dilapidated airplane. The concussion makes the bottle quiver.

"Shit!" Shrink shouts and grabs the bottle before it could fall. "Not those damned mortars again!"

"*Still alive*," one of the Stalkers manning the defenses reports on the radio.

"They're just playing with us," the Stalker nicknamed Turk grumbles. "If we still had the men who went out to search for Stalker paradise, we could just run them through! This blockade is driving me insane!"

"Well, our last dose of remedy to that is here in front of us," Shrink says. "I would offer it to the bravest Stalker but since we're just sitting ducks here I don't know what to do."

Another mortar shell detonates, this time much closer to the Stalker bar. Instinctively, the Stalkers duck.

"I'm fed up with this!" Ashot yells angrily. "They gonna destroy me bar! To hell with them tribal idiots! Just because they don't drink they want us to die of thirst! Ashot says no, fuck you!"

"Why, what can you do about it?" Ahmed Turk asks. "Blowing your big Armenian nose at them?"

"They had it coming!" Ashot shouts back at him. "If that's not gonna make 'm go away, I will just shoot 'em all!"

Then something happens that only the most veteran Stalkers have ever seen, and even they only a very long time ago: Ashot grabs an AKS-74U and storms out of his bar.

"Hey!" a Stalker shouts. "That's my rifle!"

"Is he nuts?" Ahmed Turk asks.

“Sure he is!” Shrink says. “Damn, my worst patient is loose!”

He runs after Ashot but the barkeep is already up on the container wall.

“Now listen to me you crazy tribals!” he shouts into the wilderness. “Get the fuck out of here or I will kill you all! This is me base and me bar! Why do you want ruining me business? Did me bar ever hurt you?”

“Ashot! Get the fuck down!” Shrink shouts from below. “You want to get yourself killed, you idiot?”

Ashot fires a burst into the air. “Go away or face me wrath, you cowards!”

“*Shrink!*” The sound of the Stalker in the lookout tower sounds anxious. “*I can see dust rising. The Tribe is preparing for attack!*”

“Man the machine guns,” the Stalker leader yells. “Let’s bring this to an end at last!”

A Stalker tries to drag the reckless barkeep into the safety of the sand bags lined up on the steel containers but Ashot pushes him away.

“Come and get some you bitches! I fire me rifle at you! When I run outta bullets, I blow my nose at you! Then I give you worse and fart at you! Now come and be men, and dontcha dare hide from me rage!”

“*I see them moving. They are about to go around and attack us from the rear!*”

Hearing this, Shrink climbs the ladder to the nearest machine gun nest on the container wall and peers through his binoculars. The lookout was right—heavy vehicles are swirling up dust all around the besieged Stalker base. But if it is an attack, it’s a strange one. No more mortars are fired, no heavy machines guns pin down the defenders on the wall where the barkeep continues to taunt the far away attackers.

“I will turn you to bloodsucker food! You don’t believe me you bitches?”

Ashot fires the assault carbine in the direction of the dust clouds. Then, still at a safe distance from the base, the vehicles take a turn to the west and accelerate.

“*Wait a second... looks like they’re leaving,*” the lookout reports.

Shrink frowns. “What?”

“*They’ve gone around the base and... yes! They’re moving to the west, all of them! It’s over! They move away!*”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Ashot shouts. “Run! Just run, you cowards! Scared of me, huh? Take this!” With the magazine in the carbine empty, he draws a pistol and fires after the Humvee column. “How about that?”

“Ashot for the win,” a bewildered Stalker says.

“This will teach them not to come to places they aren’t invited to, haha!” another laughs.

The crazed barkeep looks down from the wall at the Stalkers and grins triumphantly. "You all owe me twenty dollars!"

"Oh my goodness," the Shrink says watching the Tribe's siege force drive through the western forest and take the road leading to their stronghold. "I've never seen such a thing!"

"What? Is it true that Ashot's ugly face scared them away?" an excited Uncle Yar asks as he comes up in a hurry.

"I don't know how he managed that," the Shrink says waving his head, still not entirely believing what he has just seen, "but he more than qualifies for our last bottle of vodka!"

Yar laughs. "Ashot the brave—I never believed I'd ever say those words in one breath!"

"You owe me twenty dollars too!" Ashot cheerily shouts.

83

The Alamo

The echo of the three rifle volleys fired by seven warriors rolls across the valley beyond. Nearly a hundred freshly dug graves line the runway on the top of the mountain, joining many older ones. The salutes, the Colonel's short speech, the grim looks of the hardened faces appear to Tarasov like any military funeral; only the presence of grieving Hazara women, many of them lamenting over a fallen husband or lover, tells that this is not just any military unit burying its fallen but the Tribe.

Sadness is over Mikhailo Tarasov's face. Seeing Sergeant Major Hartman's body being lowered into his grave was sad enough, but when he looks at Pete at his father's side, he knows that he is about losing, or at least being separated, from another friend as well. During the time they spent together since he and the Top found Pete in the state of a wasted junkie, he came to like him; but no bond between travelling companions, no matter how many perils they had been through together, could match that between father and son. Knowing that Pete would have never gotten his proper schooling of life in the Exclusion Zone without him is no comfort; thinking about being separated from the Zone for good only adds to his sadness, because Tarasov knows that returning to his native land would be utterly foolish.

"Quite impressive friends you found here, Misha."

Degtyarev's words, who has watched the honors being given to the Tribe's fallen in silence, reminds Tarasov that he has not much to regret about his place in the New Zone. Indeed, it is here that he found new friends and a woman who, at least Tarasov is sure of it, would sooner die than let him down.

“Yes,” he says with a sigh. “Come, let’s see what mischief Ferret and Buryat are up to.”

“Who are they?”

“Two good Stalkers. I think I might have my own Lieutenants now. Two’s a good start.”

“Don’t tell me you want to have your own Tribe.”

“I need a drink first.”

“Me too. I saw a few crates among the Bandit’s cargo.”

“Then we’d better hurry before the Stalkers finish it all without us.”

“But there’s just the two of us.”

“Indeed, one bottle needs three men.”

A female voice comes from behind them. “Mind if the third is a woman?”

“Hey, Mac!” Tarasov greets her. “Not if you can drink like a man.”

Mac gives him a confident smile. “You bet. The problem is that Billy also wants to drink and that brings us once more to even.”

“Your jackal drinks vodka?” Degtyarev asks. “Mutants are weird here.”

“By the way, Mac... I have a message from Strelok,” Tarasov says as they stroll to the airplane.

“What? Strelok? Is he alive?”

“More than ever. He lets you know that... uhm, *never say never*.”

“Oh, that means he might come here after all. Until now this would have made me happy,” Mac pensively says. “Very happy, actually. But now that handsome guy with you puts me in a difficult position... I mean, he has something special about him that I can’t explain.”

“You mean Pete?” Tarasov asks, smiling. “The big man’s son? Oh girl, you’re in for some trouble.”

“Yeah... my kind of trouble,” Mac says returning the smile.

The captain and his crew are busy checking the damage done to their trusty old Antonov. The lowered ramp is guarded by two Tribe fighters who keep their eyes on the Stalkers inside. They appear relaxed, and even salute Tarasov as he approaches the airplane.

“Will this bird ever fly again?” Degtyarev asks the captain who is standing next to one of the engines, going through a long checklist of things in need of repair.

“She’s not a bird, you non-flying lay!” the pilot snaps. “Call her a machine for Gods’ sake. And of course she will fly. Do you think we want to stay here forever?”

“I’m afraid this was a one-way trip,” Tarasov says. “But then I guess the Tribe wouldn’t say no to a pilot of your abilities, captain.”

“But *I* would say no to an employer with a competition like those beasts we saw. Now if you excuse me, I have more important things to do than gum-beating!”

“He doesn’t know it but he’ll either fly for the Tribe or... well, we’ll see what to do about him,” Tarasov says to Mac and Degtyarev as they walk to the ramp. “Which brings us to the question—what about you, guys?”

“Yeah, it really makes sense for them to be so secretive,” Mac says sarcastically. “After all, by now nobody knows about the Tribe’s defenses but every dushman in the New Zone!”

“Actually, I was asking what you will do next? Because you could join me on a good old-fashioned Stalker raid.”

“What do you mean by that, Misha?”

“Crossing the whole New Zone for the sake of a foul-smelling, moldering, underground science facility and find all kinds of weird stuff and creatures inside who want to eat your face.”

“Where?” Mac curiously asks.

“Some old Soviet lab in Panjir valley.”

She smiles. “Always wanted to go there. But, but, but – promise me that we’ll search for Ahuizotl on our way. What happened was not his fault!”

“Sounds like a deal.”

“As for me, I’m ready right now!”

“Still bitten by the travel bug, I see... *Ne boysa*, Mac. We’ll leave soon enough but I need a little rest.”

“I too would love to see an underground I haven’t been to yet,” Degtyarev says.

Tarasov gives him a grin. “Alex, I still don’t know what to do about you – kick your butt for Operation Haystack or be excited about a chance to kick ass together with you!”

“I was actually afraid that once I told you who I am, you’d just punch me for Haystack,” Degtyarev replies.

“You have that still coming, but for now your punishment is to see how the New Zone is. You will deeply regret not having come here earlier.”

“Matter of fact, I could use a change from the Exclusion Zone. Winter is not a good time for exploring it—and there’s not much left for me to explore there anyway.”

“It will be for ever, Alex.”

Degtyarev has no time to reply. When they enter the cargo bay, they expect to find gloomy prisoners but instead they see the Loners-turned-Bandits-turned-Loners celebrating.

“What the hell is going on here?” Tarasov asks.

“Five crates of vodka, and they ain’t going anywhere!” a red-nosed Ferret yells cheerily. “All belongs to us now, all!”

Buryat stumbles forward and puts his arm around Ferret’s neck. “Cossacks vodka! Makes me love everyone. Even this bastard of a Freedomer!”

“Glad to see you two didn’t kill each other in the end.”

“You see, I decided to spare his life... for now,” the already drunk Dutyer says.

“Nay, man. You tried to shu-shu... shoot me but missed from two meters,” Ferret says, as drunk as Buryat. “Or was it *by* two meters? Ah, never mind. Duty rifle skills are crap, either way...”

“I didn’t shoot you. I just showed you the muzzle of my gun and told you, this side of it there ain’t no *gomiks!*”

“Come on, handsome, didn’t you just say you love me?” Ferret says and gives the Dutyer a kiss on his cheek who is too intoxicated to push him away – at least that’s how it appears.

“So *that’s* your team,” Degtyarev says grinning and takes a bottle of vodka from an open crate.

“A real challenge, yes.”

“I guess it makes no sense to count odd and even now,” Mac says. “Let’s just drink!”

But with most of the Stalkers being Russians or Ukrainians, everyone is demanding a toast – even if they already had more than they could count.

“Let’s drink to a steady hand!”

“To work progressing!”

“To a good raid!”

“May we suffer as much sorrow in the New Zone as drops of vodka we’re about to leave in our bottles,” Tarasov says raising his vodka bottle. “May we remember forever all friends we lost on our way here. But first of all – let’s drink to the living. God bless you, Stalkers—we have arrived!”

84

Northeastern areas of the New Zone, several days later

Cold wind blows and swirls up brown sand that tastes like defeat on Skinner’s tongue.

He has been marching for days without any apparent aim. All he knows is that Bagram is no longer a refuge to him; not even the greenest Stalker would believe him anymore.

The dushmans are scattered; the few who made it back to the deadly areas to the south could still count themselves lucky while the Tribe, the cursed, yet once more triumphant Tribe mercilessly hunts down the rest.

His mutant brothers are gone, too; those who had not perished in the inferno beneath the Alamo's walls were scattered, each of them trying to survive on his own.

During sleepless nights, when the cold forced him to seek shelter in caves or ruins and the howls of jackals were his only company, he kept asking himself the same question again and again: where did he fail? His plan was so perfect and all going so well until that damned airplane came. Who was aboard? It didn't matter—Skinner was certain about one thing only: should he ever find out who it was, and should fate ever give him a chance to get to that man, he would deal him a thousand deaths.

If he was fully mutant, he could just exist on; hunting, feeding, maybe even finding a way to breed. He grins at the thought of a naïve female Stalker trying her luck in the New Zone and what he would do to her. Still half human, he has the ability to hope, even though he curses hope; he would find it so much better to live the stupid, single-minded life of a mutant and let go of thinking of his future. Because thinking of this leads to despair—alone, having even discharged his now-useless rifle and clad in rags, he has nothing left to hope for.

Such gloomy thoughts keep occupying Skinner's mind when he navigates his way to the Panjir valley. He has no particular destination there; he will lead no more greedy Stalkers into the depths of the secret facility to turn them into smiters, and never again will he have at least a pack of mutants to help him fulfill any plan he still might have. For the time being, though, it is dusk and with temperatures soon falling below zero, he'd better seek a shelter for the night.

He sees a ruined farmstead on a hill not far and makes his way towards it with exhausted, slow steps. The wind becomes stronger as he approaches and he pulls his gas mask on to protect his face from the biting cold.

"Stoi!"

Obedying the command barked by an unseen sentry, Skinner stops and holds his hands up.

"Stalker coming through!" he shouts. "Don't shoot, brother!"

"Stay where you are!"

Two armed men appear out of nowhere. Skinner notices with surprise that they are neither Stalkers nor Bandits but well-equipped Spetsnaz commandos. The only thing more surprising than their appearance is that they hadn't already shot him.

"He's unarmed," a Spetsnaz reports.

"Bring him up, Vlasov," the sentry responds.

Skinner can see him now. He appears to be an officer, armed with—yet another surprise—a US-made sniper rifle.

He is led to the nearest ruin. A campfire burns inside and several commandos are warming themselves at it. They appear tired and beaten.

"You come from Bagram?" the marksman asks. He takes off his helmet and sits down at the fire. A black eye patch covers his left eye.

"I've been everywhere," Skinner replies. He forces himself to be calm. Talking is not easy with the barrel of an AKM assault rifle pointed against his ribs.

"You know this area?"

For a moment, Skinner thinks about just unleashing his wrath on them. He doesn't need their weapons and ammunition, but there is a smell around the men that makes his stomach rumble.

The Spetsnaz behind him bashes Skinner in the back.

"Answer Captain Maksimenko's question, Stalker!"

"It's all right, Sergeant," the half-eyed Spetsnaz replies. "Come, sit down. You look like you could use food, Stalker. Answer us a few questions and we'll give you some. Be stubborn, and we kill you."

"Why don't we kill him right now?" another commando asks. "Look at how big he is. He'll eat for two!"

"Shut up, Bronsky," Captain Maksimenko replies without looking at his soldier. "We could use an extra rifle and this fellow looks like one who's been around here for a while. Right, Stalker?"

"One could say that," Skinner says.

"Do you know the way to Panjir valley?"

"Depends," Skinner cautiously replies. "It's a big place. Dangerous, too. Full of wolves this time of year."

"Fuck those wolves," a Spetsnaz groans. Both of his arms are covered with bloody bandages. "Thought they were like blind dogs, and then one just tears the AK from my hands and another bites the head off the guy next to me!"

"I wish I was still be dismantling irradiated submarines," another soldier moans. "This job is worse than *strafbat*."

"Stop whining, maggots," Sergeant Vlasov grumbles indifferently. "You're fucking Spetsnaz. Act like it, for God's sake."

The captain shows Skinner his PDA. "We are looking for an electric substation, about two day's march from Bagram. Supposed to be in this long valley, here. You ever been there?"

Skinner is glad his gas mask hides the grin that is now coming to his face. Could it be that his bad luck is just about to turn? His heart starts pounding faster. He feels an urge to take his Orthodox cross and kiss it—

right at this time of dire luck, fate is about to give him a chance to gather new followers. All he has to do is to guide these unsuspecting soldier boys into the depths and let the abandoned facility do the rest.

“Yes, I know it,” he says.

“Firsthand or just heard about the place from a drunk Stalker?” Maksimenko inquires.

“Been there myself, yes.”

“Can you guide us there? We’ll give you food rations in exchange and if you don’t do anything stupid, a rifle as well.”

“That sounds great,” Skinner says with his eyes shining. “Believe me, I know that place very well... like the back of my hand!”

Maksimenko and Vlasov share a frown. Neither of them know why he is in such a good mood all of a sudden, and even less so why his chuckle has something uncanny about it that gives them the creeps.

Food or smiters? That’s what I call a choice!

Skinner’s chuckle grows into bellowing laughter.

Welcome to the New Zone, boys!

Epilogue

It is late at night.

In one of the many tents erected to accommodate the Tribe's women and children who lost their homes in the siege, Nooria and the Beghum are warming themselves at a small fire.

There is a timeless feeling over their scene: the fire casting their shadow on the canvas; the daughter resting her head on her mother's shoulder; their dark eyes reflecting the orange flames; the soft wind stirring the tent flaps.

"Madar, man besyar khoshhal hatsam ke be khane bargashti!" The words flowing from Nooria's lips, spoken in her native Hazaragi language, are eloquent and powerful. "I had hoped that giving my word to a robber and bandit would be like writing on water. But no matter what a scoundrel Sultan is, he did keep his promise. He lured me in a trap like a hunter would a deer, and now the harder I try to get out the tighter it keeps me. Honor binds and requires me to kill the man I love. *Madar*, please, tell me there is a way out of this, for my heart is bleeding and my soul is torn between love and honor!"

"How is she?"

"Very good." Gently, Nooria puts her mother's hands to her belly and smiles. "I can feel she is sleeping now."

"I am glad to see that my judgment was right," the Beghum says. "He got you with child and proved strong enough to protect you. Protect *us*, even. Nevertheless, the role of your man is limited, just like that of my man. What they provide are all but small steps on our long way—protection, care, seed. Ultimately, *dokhtra*, we won't be needing them."

"Maybe Leighley knows and that's why he is no longer with you, *madar*."

"What could a lonely man in the desert do when he sees the storm rising, knowing there is no way to escape?"

"Run or try to ride the storm."

"How futile! But he still thinks he can ride it. Even if all this was just a breeze heralding the impending storm."

"Madar, I met a wise man during my passage through the northern lands which Mikhailo calls the Zone. He believes that everything happens there by the will of that Zone. Are the Spirit and the Zone the same? Mikhailo and some Stalkers believe they are."

"This fire lights up our tent but just a few steps away, darkness prevails. So is human wisdom – it cannot see beyond the next day. Only

we have the power to see beyond. Mark my words – *she* will be the connection, born from parents marked by both lands. She will break the evil that has appeared here and to the north. The world will tremble when she challenges evil, and all human concerns will be like sand in the storm.” The Beghum takes a pinch of sand from the ground and blows it off her palm. “Until those days come, we are bound by honor, for honor is our compass through these dark times. It always was.”

“So I do have to kill him?”

“You know the answer, *dokthra*. There wouldn’t be much about honor if we kept it only till it pleases us, and without it we wouldn’t be much better than the mindless fiends who have attacked us.”

Nooria gives her mother a sad smile. “I know, but—”

A band of fighters passes by their tent, chatting and joking. Nooria looks at her mother. She cuddles closer to her and mentally continues the interrupted sentence.

But he is such a decent man, madar. What a cruel twist of fate! For so many years we have been waiting for the right one, and now I have to take his life!

Comfortingly, Beghum Madar strokes Nooria’s hair and gives her a closed-mouth smile.

Yes, dokthra. He is quite decent. And handsome too... for a human.

THE END

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Balázs Pataki