

# Chance Encounter on the Battlefield

I hate this part of the job. The waiting. Can't sleep because that's one sure way to end up dead. Can't let the guard down even if you know you've got quite a while before your target arrives. I've been lying low in this low area on the hillside for about an hour, waiting for Godot it seems. But, unlike the characters in the play, I know my target is coming. Two weeks of Intel gathering and scouting and picking the exact spot where I can lie in wait and still give myself a shot at surviving the aftermath.

I'm not alone though. Scattered about the abandoned buildings, treetops, rubble, and hillsides are about 50 more local gorilla fighters... also waiting for our inevitable rendezvous with our future fates.

I made sure to bring friends... well... company at least. No sense in me having to deal with around 100 soldiers, and maybe even a tank or two, by myself. Thin odds of walking out that alive. So I cajoled the local commander to spare some lads and maybe strike a blow to our enemy. Of course I said, "Our Enemy" because that's how you get on the good side of such local commanders. Me? I'm getting paid for this. My enemy is whoever at the time and, today, it's a one star General that's along with his boys as they're on their way to flatten another village. I kinda don't care about their objective. Stopping them isn't my job, it's the gorilla fighters. It's their land and their villages and they're not who hired me. Maybe amoral to use them this way but I reckon it's a mutual back scratching thing so I got no qualms. And so we wait.

My ears pick up on sound slightly behind me and to my left. Why people think they can sneak up on a wolf is beyond me but... whatever. Their issue, not mine. Scanning the treeline I finally spot the movement of one person... hmmm... it's a fox but he's not an advance scout for the enemy... he looks like a local but his clothes are in much better shape. My hackles rise slightly. I keep tabs. He's definitely heading towards me. No damn way he can either see or smell me so this is just bad, blind luck. A knife is the tool here. Can't risk giving my position away. While I can't see the enemy, anyone that thinks lackadaisically in the field is worm food soon enough.

As he gets closer I can see he's actually looking intently about. Not the kind of looking one does when worrying about what hides behind the next tree but the kind where you're actually looking FOR something... or someone. Maybe he's been sent by the gorilla commander to find me and dispatch info. The knife goes up my sleeve... hidden but rapidly available if needed. Finally he sees me and smiles. Smart enough to not wave like an idiot but he's also clumsy enough to not be as stealthy as he should be. My hackles rise a bit more. He drops down into the depression about 5 feet from me. In a low whisper he asks,

"It's clear you know? They're about 4 miles out, down the east road."

I take a moment to digest this info then reply,

"Thanks. Vlad send you?"

"No. I'm not with the local militia."

My hackles rise a bit more. His scent. Something about it is very familiar but I can't place his face. In my business I meet a lot of fellow warriors and various employers as well as countless local militia and military so this could be any one of thousands of faces I've crossed paths with over the decades. Still, I trust my senses and my senses tell me this ain't no local and he ain't quite trust-able either. He's got first move... of he wants an early exit from this world. Silence for a while as he lies back and relaxes. Hmmm... well. My eyes keep track of my target area but every bit of me is aware of every little breath he takes. After a bit of silence I decide to push the agenda a little,

“You stickin around to see the carnage or just passin through?”

“Oh! Well, kind of both. I have work here myself but I won’t be able to stay here with you for it all. I’ll be gone before then.”

I nod. My first thoughts are he might be another merc... maybe even one whose path has crossed mine. But that’s quickly gutted as I realize he has no weapons at all. I can’t smell explosives or gunpowder or even cold steel like the knife still hidden up my sleeve. Now that raises my hackles a touch more. By now it’s gotta be visible to even a half blind bat. With a fox like him? No way he doesn’t know. But he says nothing and so neither do I. But anyone who says they have ‘business’ in a war-zone but bring nothing at all to fight with other than their own paws? Either that’s one helluva bad-ass dude or his agenda is a strange one. Still his scent... close enough now I can’t ignore it... I know that smell and I generally can tell you everything from memory just from a scent... but, this time, I draw blanks. I don’t like that at all.

Right about when I reckon it’s time to really get ready... maybe 15 minutes before combat... he gives me a smile and silently starts to rise into a crouch,

“Well then. Almost time. Thanks for the chat. See you soon.”

With that, he silently slides out to the right and into the trees, disappearing so quickly that even I’m impressed. My hackles drop to half mast but remain up because I’m now totally focused on preparation. I survey the area and pick out what I believe will be the range and location of my target and shot. I sight in and do dry runs then settle down to wait. I hate waiting.

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It’s been about a week since I fulfilled my contract. A couple of quick photos of the body and I’m a hundred grand richer. It’s not that I need the money... I got plenty form decades of merc work... but this is what I do and getting paid is part of the job as well. I have a couple of days before my next assignment happens so it’s time to relax and unwind, my way. Some good rum and a fine spliff and some good mangeaille. Too bad they don’t have any écrevisse or chevrette. Hell... not even good gumbo here... even in this slightly better and not too destroyed town. So it’s local food which ain’t the first time I’ve had to suffer this way. I find a table and ask the waitress for an empty glass then ask her for the house special. I’ll survive. I fill the empty glass with some rum I always carry with me wherever I go. Can’t trust local liqueur. I fire up my spliff and prepare to eat. Looks okay stuff. Not exactly meat and potatoes but close enough.

No sooner do I get my first bite into my mouth then I see him enter. The same fox... the same smell... just vraiment bien dressed. My hackles don’t rise. Nope. Because I figured it out. He approaches my table and I nod. He gestures at the seat across from me and I nod again. He sits.

“Rum?” (I offer)

“Thank you.” (I pour)

“Wasn’t sure if you drank or not.” (he laughs lightly)

“Oh, occasionally. Just some left over habits and tastes from my former life.” (I nod)

“Guess you were a busy man that day.” (he nods)

“Oh yes! Quite. I see you figured it out.” (I nod)

“Damn glad you weren’t there for me. But... you gotta realize that, when you do come, I’m not goin quietly.” (he nods)

“That’s why I’ll wait until you’re really ready. Sometimes it’s that way. Some fight, some don’t. Some know and others are confused. But we know in advance what to expect.” (my eyebrow raises)

“We?”

“Oh yes! One could not do this job alone. No no no! There are thousands of us because there are so many that happen all the time there is no way one person could do this job alone. In a way, we get the

same false picture as Santa Claus. It's not a one man job at all." (I nod... makes sense. Next question...)

"So I gotta ask..." (he smiles and gives that light laugh again)

"Why the suit from the 1988 and why not the shroud and scythe?" (I nod)

"Well, it's totally our own choice. There are a few that dress up as fantasy ideals have depicted throughout history... we call them 'traditionalists'... but we're free to do our job in whatever comfortable fashion we prefer. Some of the newer members tend to still have a heart for the living and so they try and present themselves in a manner to not upset their clients. As the decades pass, we eventually lose that sense of caring. Not that we're heartless but, like you, we have a job to do and it's best done without excess baggage of emotional ties." (I listen and nod. Again... makes sense. But I gotta ask...)

"So... is this time now?" (he smiles)

"Oh no. And, yes this is rare in two ways. One, we hardly ever tell anyone before the event. Very rare but, for you, I would. Call it 'Courtesy'. And two, so very seldom do we ever make contact like this but you sir... you are a most incredible exception. Very seldom do we ever get a chance to get assigned to a legend!" (Again... my eyebrow raises)

"Legend? Assigned?" (he nods. I continue to eat and enjoy my spliff and rum but I'm all ears)

"Legend because you are. You are listed in the top ten of solo artists. Understand that there are several categories. For example, Hitler occupies his legendary status in the top ten but he qualifies as an effector, not an artist. He's responsible for far more numbers than you but his own personal number is very low. He had others do his work mostly. By his own hand? So very few. You, on the other hand, have hundreds. Totally by your own hand! And in so many different ways! A true artist and, absolutely a legend. I both bow to you and am humbled in your presence. I have no doubt you'll be offered a job when you finally cross over."

It takes me a while to digest all of this info and I shake my head. I knew I'd been at my job for a very long time. By most accounts I'm considered too old for the field and the work and I only know of maybe two others my age or thereabouts. Still, I had never considered myself an 'artist'. I do good work... that I know. I'm damn good at my job. That I also know. But hundreds? That's some kinda number to process. Dinner is gone so I wipe away any residue from my muzzle and shake my head as I work on the last of my glass of rum and my smoke. I ask another thing...

"So. Do you know when?" (he shakes his head as he finishes his rum)

"Oh no. That's control central. They know and send us where we need to be when it's time. That's how I ended up with you that day." (I nod... once more... makes sense)

"Explains a few things for sure." (he nods and rises to go... I ask one last question...)

"I know you know my name... but, what's yours... besides Death?" (he laughs as he begins to leave)

"I'm Jack. A legend here but nothing but a trifle on the solo artist list. A nothing, as it were. Humbling experience to say the least! Ta for now!"

And, with that, he was out the door and gone. Hmmmm... guess we'll meet again. Suddenly... I'm not so bothered by waiting.