

Recording J4, 11th of July, 2011

We trekked through the wilderness to get to the main path that leads from the abandoned Rostok factory. The surrounding grasslands were not as convenient to traverse as the paved road. Even if it is cracked.

I still asked my companion back then about his equipment. A typical mercenary outfit with a vest and gas mask was his attire. On his thigh was a holster that held a Colt M1911 and in his hands was Steyr AUG assault rifle.

We made it to the cracked road. I felt a little better, being on a familiar path. We had some peace of mind before the conflict, which had a good chance of occurring. The soldiers a bit too trigger-happy to my liking.

"I have a question", Tolia said to break the silence.

"Let me guess...", I sighed heavily. "It's probably about me."

"Are you surprised? It's rare to meet someone like you."

"I may look unusual and I may operate a little differently than most folks here, but I'm actually an ordinary stalker."

"Do you know that this is not quite true?"

"Eh... I know. What do you want to know?"

"Are there more like you?", curious mercenary asked.

"Sure. Only if you think there's some colony in the Zone, where you'll find hundreds like me, you'll be disappointed."

"My guess is that there are not many of you."

"That's true, only there are also several types of "human mutants".", I clarified my statement. "For example, there are pseudodogs."

"Really?" Tolia replied with suprised tone.

"Yes. But I do not recommend making contact with them. They usually walk around constantly annoyed."

"And how is it with you?"

"You mean others like me? You certainly can get along easier."

"As long as I still meet someone like that.... Where can you be found?"

"Forgive me, but I can't tell you that. For their safety."

"I understand", he replied, a bit sad. "We got to the abandoned farm."

For obvious reasons, I can not describe what this farm looked like. On top of that, I did not want to ask my then companion about the look of this area. Sure enough, there were several buildings - a house and barns - plus some farm equipment.

"Hide", Tolia ordered.

We went behind the nearest building. It was made of wood, so it was most likely a barn. I was prepared to draw my weapon, but Tolia said there was no need for this at that moment and he would take care of it personally.

I heard him unlock his AUG and assumed he was aiming at the enemies. A shot was fired from him, which was a hit. I heard the jargon that the enemies used and guessed that they were soldiers.

"Do you have a grenade?", mercenary shouted.

"I do", I said quickly. "I can even throw it."

"You won't hit them."

"Just tell me where to throw!"

"Eh... throw it... sixty meters forward?"

I took out the grenade and pulled the pin. I had to concentrate for a moment to hit the target. I swung and threw my explosive tool. The explosion sound was deafening, but I could also hear the sounds of pain in the distance.

"Holy fuck...", Tolia said with shock in his voice. "How's that possible?"

"Practice", I replied indifferently. "Are there more of them?"

"I can't see from here. We need to approach the bodies. We'll get the stuff."

I nodded and began to follow the mercenary. I pulled out my CZ and used my senses to find any threat. I even went a little ahead and had a bad feeling. I stopped Tolia behind another barn. However, I felt a strong sting in my shoulder.

"You got hit...", merc said.

"I know", I growled. "We need to blast them."

"Leave that to me."

Most likely, I thought Tolia leaned out from around the corner of the building and fired at - as it turned out later - more soldiers. I also heard that he had to reload, so there must have been at least a few of them.

The fight was nasty. Not only because I got hit in the arm. We had planned to quietly move on to another group of mercenaries and ended up knocking out a squad of soldiers. Eh... such is life in the Zone.

"Holy shit...", he said heavily.

"We shouldn't get involved in this conflict...", I muttered.

"It's too late. Okay, your wound needs to be patched up."

"It would be good."

We hid our weapons. Tolia pulled an object from his pocket and I guessed from the ripped wrapping that it was a bandage. The mercenary treated my wound. I was even slightly surprised, because he did it professionally. I'd certainly have more problems doing that with my clawed hands.

"Thanks", I said and then nodded.

"We are even", Tolia replied in a warmer voice. "If not for you, this could have ended much worse for me."

"Maybe we can finally get the information we need."

"Yeah... Can you wait here? I'll collect at least some stuff from the bodies."

"Better check if it's safe in the area."

I heard the mercenary started to walk away from me. He was walking towards the bodies to search them. Every item in the Zone can be useful. Even if it is ammunition for a weapon that the stalker does not have at the time.

Considering the time Tolia took to rob the corpses of useful items, he did it remarkably thoroughly. However, I knew that soldiers don't have a lot of expensive items with them. They are not as well paid as some say.

"Okay, I have the stuff", mercenary announced. "Would you like some rifle?"

"No, thanks", I replied.

"Are you sure? I see you're carrying a shotgun."

"Because for a blind man like me, this is the most effective weapon. With AK, I will miss most of the shots."

"I guess you're right. Okay, let's get moving."

I raised my four fingers and followed my companion back then. We were going towards the group of mercenaries. I heard him throwing bolts in front of him to find the anomalies. I could certainly hear the sound of a Burner being turned on.

The route was bumpy. The path was between hills and we were walking uphill. I wouldn't say it was pleasant, but I've been through worse things in the Zone. I don't even want to remind myself of them.

However, I reminded myself of something else. We were walking north, toward another farm and I remembered what location we had to go through. An abandoned habitat, through which several Comets flew. The natives call this place bloodsucker village.

"It would be better, if we'd go around", I suggested.

"I wanted to find some artifacts on the way, but I guess you're right", Tolia replied.

"Judging by the way you operate... You were definitely a stalker."

"I was. However, as a mercenary I have a more reliable source of income."

"So you are only concerned with earning money?"

"I am also curious about the Zone. However, it's hard to do it with an empty belly and no equipment."

"True."

"It'd better, if I'm in front", mercenary stated. "Stay close to me and they shouldn't shoot you down."

"Alright. I won't see how I'll die anyway."

Tolia laughed briefly. I heard him turn to the right, meaning he followed my suggestion. He also quickened his step, so I did the same. He most likely also wanted to put this situation behind him, so he could get back to his own group.

The smells were getting clearer. Similar to the ones I smelled in Wild Territory. I knew we were getting closer to the mercenaries. On top of that, no shots were fired, so this boded well for a good encounter. At least by the Zone's standards.

"Hey!", mercenary shouted. "Who's with you there?"

"He's needed for my job", Tolia replied calmly. "Is Ara here?"

"Wait a minute... Boss!"

We could hear footsteps coming from afar. Or at least I could hear them thanks to my hearing. I heard the local mercenary leader being slightly annoyed and rambling all to himself.

"Who are you?" mercenary with harsh voice asked.

"Tolia Juggler", my companion replied. "From Wolfhound's crew."

"Ah, from that drunkard... He must have important business, because he sent someone to me. And this stalker?"

"He's connected to this case."

"So this is going to be an interesting day, after all... Come inside. And you, stalker... don't do stupid things."

I nodded and began to follow the mercenaries. As for that moment, everything was going quite well and I wanted it to stay that way. We entered the building where the fire was lit and we continued the conversation.

"Go on and say what's going on", Ara said.

"Someone from you made a fuss", Tolia replied. "Do you know Zhora Grim?"

"He wanted to be a mercenary. He and his colleague. My people were supposed to test them."

"Then see this video", I gave him my PDA and waited until he finished watching the video.

"What the...", Ara was puzzled. "Oh, I'll take care of them... Thanks for the info."

"No problem", I replied, taking my device.

"I assume you want to catch this Zhora now?"

"Yes. This case is getting stinkier and stinkier."

"I agree. We don't leave witnesses. And you can stay here overnight, if you want."

"Thanks."

We set up our equipment in the room and sat by the fire. Didn't want to reveal my snout there. Tolia told me that evening was approaching. So we took the opportunity to rest. I supposed that this affair would end the next day. And that I would see the promised forty thousands later.