

The Tunnel

by Reginald Styre

Viking is desperate for a worthwhile job. When Vice offers him a chance to benefit from his rival's recent failure, none of them can predict the outcome.

“Oi!”

The voice yanked Viking's attention away from the cracked window and back to the small, rickety wooden desk. Beyond the playing cards, Ritter was looking at him with his arms spread, evidently confused.

“You in this game or what?”

Wearily, Viking regarded the cards. He couldn't decide whether to hit or surrender – as his focus had slowly drifted, he'd found himself on a losing streak. This hand probably wasn't going to be any better than the last.

“Nah, I'm out.”

Ritter put his hands on the table, staring with incredulity.

“You've got two Gs on the table and you're just walking away?!”

It was a fair point. After all, money – or rather, how to get more of it – was what had been sapping his attention in the first place. Still, Viking was beyond caring about the game...and the cash.

“Yeah. Got to go and talk to Vice.”

“About what?”

“About how we're going to pay for our gambling!”

He got a scoff in response.

“We're fine, come on, man, we've got plenty.”

“That's bullshit and you—”

“We've got enough that you can just throw two Gs away!”

Viking rolled his eyes. Two thousand roubles would hardly buy you anything in the outside world, let alone here. He leaned in, holding Ritter's still incredulous gaze.

“I'm not talking about this crap.” He waved his hand at the loose change on the worn table. “I'm talking about a REAL score, and you know it.”

“And I’ve told you that we’d get there, but we have to play the long game,” Ritter said firmly.

“Oh, do we? You think Britva got here by ‘playing the long game?’” Viking spat the name out contemptuously.

“Ach, come on, you know he has the advantage. He’s got contacts and friends here that we can only dream of having. We just have to keep looking for what we can find, we’re not doing badly right now.”

“No.”

Rather than simply disagree, Viking pushed back his chair, stood up, leant down and picked up his AK, which had been resting against the desk. It was almost a shame; both were so equally worn that they suited each other.

“So you’re going to go and beg him for work, is that it?”

“Yeah, I am,” he replied, frustrated. “We’re getting a *real* job for *real* money, I’ll make sure of it.”

The dilapidated industrial complex may not have been that large, with only a couple of office buildings and a main assembly area, but it served well as a base of operations, or so Viking thought. Although admittedly less comfortable than Dead City, there was a certain excitement in being at an isolated outpost smack in the middle of unfriendly territory, such as this place here, or the waste processing station up in Zaton. He and Ritter had frequented that area before in the hopes of cashing in contracts in the Pripjat area, but to little avail. Between the operations of other mercenary groups – none of whom were exactly willing to share, although not that he blamed them – and the hordes of all kinds of mutants, ever-changing anomaly fields and the constant, seemingly unstoppable tide of Monolith fighters, Pripjat these days was too much risk for too little reward...or, at least, it had been for them. They’d needed to cut their teeth somewhere further, but not too far, from the action.

Reaching the bottom of the exposed stairwell, he strode down the corridor until he came to a door from which most of the sound in the building was emanating. It opened into a large space that, once upon a time, had been the cafeteria. Most of the long wooden tables, accompanied by similarly aged benches, had been separated into little islands across the room, each illuminated by gas lamps or, very

rarely, a battery-operated light. The floor was a mess of dust and debris. The lifeless strip lighting on the ceiling had been functionally replaced by caged bulkhead lights fastened to the decayed walls and wired up to a generator in the kitchen area. And behind the barren food counter, perched on a chair and pouring over a clipboard covered in lists, was Clerk. His soft face always looked upbeat – even when taking dwindling inventory – and always at odds with his depressing surroundings.

It wasn't his eye that Viking caught first, though. Hunched over one of the tables opposite, scowling at him with a crinkled, roughed up mug that couldn't be more different from Clerk's, was Britva. Viking glared back disdainfully at the ex-Spetsnaz operative, whose scowl was added to by those of his lackeys sat around the table with him. It was quite sad, he thought, that these veterans had left the servitude of military life and struck out for their own gain only to end up lapping around that bloodthirsty animal like his disposable packmates.

“Looking for the boss, Viking?”

The American accent broke the deadlock. Glancing down, Clerk was looking up at him with his characteristic grin. He was almost the polar opposite of what constituted a mercenary and, thinking about it, of Viking: he ran his own little operation in the form of this canteen, as well as keeping stock of the makeshift warehouse out back, and he was contented. His positivity was so infectious that Viking couldn't help but jest.

“Maybe I just wanted to come down here for a drink?”

Clerk sniggered.

“Yeah, like that ever happens. He's just through there.” He jabbed his thumb at the door behind the counter and then called out. “Vice! Viking's here for you, needs a job.”

“How did you know I want a job?”

“That's all you ever want, dipshit,” he replied jokingly, although there was the faintest hint of cynicism behind the smile.

From the doorway emerged a burly Russian, one hand wrapped around the pistol grip of his 416 to steady it on its sling, the other clutching an opened Iskra with equal affection.

“Can't give me no break for lunchtime, eh?” If it weren't for the fact that his accented and broken English occasionally led to important details of jobs being improperly communicated, it would almost be charming. “What you want?”

“Work.”

“Already?” He continued chewing as he spoke. “You came back with artifact yesterday, was good job, got good pay.”

“And now I need another job. Something that pays better,” Viking said, not bothering to hide his disagreement with Vice’s last statement.

“Ohhh, artifacts not good enough for you?” That hadn’t gone down too well. “You want more, eh?”

“Yes, whatever you’ve got, just give it to me.”

Vice had his eyes narrowed. Viking knew the look well by now; Vice regarded him as the new guy, and a foreigner at that (not that he wasn’t either, but that hardly mattered to him). A foreigner who couldn’t speak any Russian, let alone Ukrainian, and was too big for his boots, always trying to leapfrog ahead of the competition. But he also knew that such arrogant recklessness could, when used right, be incredibly useful to him in getting things done.

“How much?”

‘Twenty Gs’ was the first answer that came to mind, not including any loot that they could scavenge. Before he could blurt it out, however, something stopped him. He was looking at Vice’s near-pristine 416, hanging elegantly from its sling. Glancing down at his 74M, the comparison wasn’t remotely fair: it wasn’t exactly rusted, but it had seen enough use that it was showing. He’d already had to replace several parts and it still wasn’t looking any healthier.

“I need something better,” he said, holding up the rifle.

Vice barely needed to think before motioning towards himself.

“Come.”

Walking around the counter and exchanging another brief scowl with Britva, Viking followed Vice through the makeshift pantry and into their general storage area. Given the difficulty of transporting pallets and crates into the Zone, all sorts of boxes, Soviet-era crates and more modern cases that could be found were being used to store everything from weapons to industrial parts to canned goods. Whatever had been taken out, or at least wasn’t sealed away, was on display in the same harsh light from the rigged-up bulkhead lights when Vice hit the switch near the door.

His attention was immediately drawn to a nearby crate, upon which an assault rifle was lying. The large, unusual muzzle device and canted magazine, sticking up

from the crate rather than resting upon it along with the rifle, had caught his eye. He pointed to it.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Vice produced a grin.

“Britva and his dogs find it on military stalker. You are third person to ask.”

Viking looked at him, somewhat surprised.

“So it *is* a 94?”

“Yes. You want it?”

For a second, the thought of why so many had already asked about it, but none had bought it, crossed his mind. He knew the answer, though. Besides the likely extortionate price Vice would have slapped on it, finding spare parts for it would be virtually impossible – without finding another one – and maintaining that internal pulley system would be no easy task. Still, by all accounts, it was an excellent rifle, and the rarity of it alone was irrationally attractive.

“What do you need me to do for it?” Viking finally asked with some trepidation. It would surely take quite the job for Vice to part with it.

The Russian smirked and started to amble back into the pantry as he talked.

“You know the machinery plant? Southeast?”

“Yeah,’ Viking replied as he followed. It was a couple of clicks away.

“Near plant, there is...how you say...big hole in hill, train goes through.”

He had to contain a laugh as he watched the merc mime a hole that he put this index through.

“A tunnel?”

“Yes, yes, tunnel. Need you to look there, find useful things.”

“What things?”

“Interesting things, documents, supplies? Plant made things for X-labs, must be stuff.”

“Hmm, well I—” And then it came to him. In his excitement over the rifle, he’d almost forgotten. “Wait, wasn’t Britva down there recently with his guys?”

“Yes, I want say: Britva was there day before yesterday, they get into fight, one of his guys die, they take stuff from factory but don’t check tunnel.”

“Why didn’t he go back?”

Vice let out a reluctant sigh as he looked Viking in the eye.

“Monolith.”

And there it was. That was the price. Viking swallowed.

“How many?”

“He said ten, maybe more. Dead now, but maybe they come back soon.”

That would certainly explain why they lost a guy, and there’d been, what, four of them?

Vice seemed to be reading his thoughts.

“You going alone? Maybe take more guys, if they happy to join.”

Sound advice, but Viking had made up his mind. If the rifle was payment, he’d have to pay whoever else joined him for the job out of his own pocket.

“There’ll be two of us.”

“Ah, the German, yes?”

The building anxiety was suddenly sidelined. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

“I’ve told you before, he’s not German, he’s Austrian.”

Vice snorted.

“Bah...how they say in English? Same difference?”

Having not known him long enough to tell if he was being serious or making a joke, Viking just smiled and shook his head. Vice’s chuckle suggested it was the latter. He gave Viking a smack on the shoulder.

“Good luck, you need it. You bring interesting stuff back, gun is yours. Maybe I have something for your friend, too.”

Hmm, that would be generous. Under no illusions as to the task before them, Viking still found himself holding that smile. Finally, an interesting job for a good reward. This is what he’d come here for.

But as he walked through the door to the canteen, gave a nod to Clerk and went to leave, there was a face that wiped his smile away, one that unnerved him.

It was Britva’s, grinning slyly at him.

“I still can’t believe you sold us out for that...toy!”

Viking stopped and turned around, his boot sinking slightly into the muddy track. He looked at Ritter through his eyepieces, who was lagging by maybe ten paces and – at this moment – happened to be checking behind them, as he

should...although he wondered if he'd also looked back in this instant to avoid Viking's inevitable reaction. They'd been on the move for a bit over half an hour now and this was the third time he'd complained.

"I told you, and I'm not saying it again: you're getting paid. I offered you a figure, you agreed to it, and now here we are. Vice said he might also cut you in. Stop crying, we still have to get through the forest."

Some people were borderline religious about having no idle chat when they were outside the relative safety of the industrial complex. Back when he and Ritter had been the new kids on the block, they'd been shown the ropes by an ex-Bundeswehr sergeant who they'd tagged along with for a small (no, pathetic) cut. He'd go for the entire trip, sometimes hours at a time, without saying anything that wasn't a command, and would immediately silence anyone who tried to stike up conversation. The Zone always listens, he'd say in that coarse voice. It wasn't a sentiment that Viking shared – a bit of chat helped pass the time and wasn't dangerous, provided it wasn't too distracting. He knew that Ritter would always cover his sector, as would he. What he *did* take issue with was constant whinging,

"Alright, fine," came the muffled response through Ritter's mask. He turned forward again, taking a hand off his rifle to motion for Viking to keep going. "I just hope you haven't screwed us for that stupid thing."

Viking resumed the brisque pace. He didn't have a good retort. The thought that he might have signed them up for more than the two of them could handle had been silently gnawing away at him since he'd walked out of the canteen. Monolith were never to be trifled with. If they'd taken out one of Britva's men, how would just the two of them fare? It all depended on how quickly they'd sent reinforcements to the plant.

"Wonder how Eliza is doing."

This guy. Ritter's innate ability to broach absolutely any topic, regardless of how inappropriate it may be, was something Viking had become so accustomed to that he didn't even turn around to give him a look. He'd been forced to get used to it when they'd both worked for Aegis in Iraq. He simply sighed to himself and wondered yet again how, with his lack of tact, Ritter had made it through officer selection in the first place.

"I'm sure she'd doing just fine without me, if that's what you mean."

"You think she has a new boyfriend yet?"

...yeah, no, this wasn't going to happen.

"Did you get offered anything by Vice or Broker?"

"Eh, Vice didn't have much since we took this job." The saving grace was that he could at least take a hint. "Broker said something about a job for the eggheads, think they need more people to protect their research teams."

When did they not? The Ecos always seemed to be short on manpower for protection duties. Probably because most of their ranks were academics, not soldiers.

"And you didn't take it?"

"Nah. We'll get this done first, then I'll look for work."

The track was firming up a bit here. Rifle against his chest, Viking continued checking left and right as he plodded along. A seemingly endless veil of trees stared back at him from both sides. All things considered, they looked fairly healthy. The same could not be said for the undergrowth; it was a patchwork of scorched earth, pools of mushy waste, flattened leaves, dying flowers and shattered branches. Where there were stumps, little remained of the fallen trunks, often disintegrated and in small pieces about the forest floor. He didn't need to peer hard to see the glowing, hissing puddles and visible disturbances in the air. The Anomalous Forest had more than earned its name, ravaged by all variations of unnatural phenomena and shifting with every emission. Navigating off the tracks was near suicidal, which is why he wasn't too concerned about anyone hearing or sneaking up on them. All of them were used to it by now – you couldn't head east from the complex without passing through the forest, and the track was marked by numerous boot prints. It provided a protective barrier. The only thing that still shocked him was that the trees were still just about able to get enough sustenance.

As his boots trod on firmer soil, Ritter's answer was stuck in his mind. Something about it was bothering him.

"Why didn't you take Broker's job? Someone else will have taken it by the time you get back. Protection duty is easy, pays quite well, too."

"Not that interested right now. We've got other stuff to do."

"Yeah, but we should be stacking jobs, you know that." Irritation crept into his tone. "Can't just have one at a time for both of us. We're out here to earn money, man."

He expected a reply, something along the lines of not needing all the money right now, all the work, or perhaps something about wanting different contracts to what was currently on offer...but it never came. Without stopping this time, he glanced back. Through the mask, he caught Ritter's eye. He knew that look. Involuntarily, he came to a halt. Not that he wanted to stop again, but a sudden sense of dread had taken hold.

"What?"

Ritter lowered his head. His breathing lengthened.

"I'm leaving."

Viking hadn't heard him right.

"Say again?"

"I said I'm leaving."

What? What did he mean?

"Leave...the factory? Leave the mercenaries?"

"Leave the Zone."

He also stopped, staring him straight in the face. Viking couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You're just...gonna leave? Leave the Zone? How?"

"Clear Sky has a route through the perimeter. I can ask one of their guides to get me out. I've got the money."

"And go where?"

"Back to Austria, probably."

Viking's jaw stiffened.

"Hmm, okay...back to what?"

"Don't do this." Ritter's tone was grave. He'd been holding back on this, not wanting to reveal it, but now it was just coming out. "I knew you'd be like this. Please, don't--"

"No, no, no. Back to what? Your sister?"

"Fuck off. You know—"

"Then what?!"

The two men stood, squaring up.

"I'm tired of this. Tired of...doing all this shit just to have enough to eat, tired of watching our backs from our own people, let alone the Monolith, the free stalkers,

Duty. And who are our enemies, huh? Why do we target the free stalkers? What have they--”

“It’s us or them, you k—”

“BULLSHIT!” Ritter exclaimed, sending a shiver down Viking’s spine. “It’s so we can take their shit from their cold, dead hands and sell it ourselves, or because someone has a contract on them. We’re no different to the bandits!”

“That’s the game, you knew that when you came here with me. They’ll do the same to you!” Viking was also raising his voice. “They’re trying to make money, same as us, and they’ll kill you for it just like we would.”

“I came here to make money and to watch your back while you tried to get rich. I always wanted to go back once I’d made enough, you know that, we talked about it. But there’s nothing for us here. It’s not enough. It never will be.”

“Don’t forget who you are, what you are,” said Viking, jabbing a finger into Ritter’s plate carrier. “This is you. This is what you do.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t,” Ritter shot back. “It’s not you either, or it wasn’t. Forget about Eliza, you’ll find so—”

“Stop talking about her!”

That had done it. Ritter had touched a nerve that he should know not to touch...but it was also the truth. Viking hated it. He hated that she was the reason he was here. He hated that Ritter understood that. Fuming, he wanted to scream at him, to tell him what an absolute bitch she was. But he didn’t. He didn’t want to lose his cool. He changed tack.

“What’re you going to do?”

“I don’t know, I’ll figure it out?”

“And how’re you gonna explain it? Coming here? You going to pretend that you were somewhere else?”

“Probably. I’ll make something up. I’ll start again.”

It was almost absurd to him that they were having this out here, amongst the trees, with their masks on.

“You said that when I asked if you’d come with me, and now look at you.”

“Oh, just fucking drop it, then.” For Ritter, they’d come to the end of this road. “Let’s just get going. We’ll talk about it later.”

Viking wanted nothing more than to argue, to shout at him, to tell him that he was wrong, that there was, realistically, no way back. Everyone knew once you

crossed into the Zone, there was no going back. It wasn't that you couldn't *physically* make it back; it was the psychological grip that it held on you. He just had to convince him of this truth...but, loathed as he was to admit it, Ritter was right. They needed to get moving.

He started to take up the pace behind his only remaining friend, but just as he went to check behind, something shimmered out of the corner of his eye. On the track ahead of them.

“STOP!” he yelled.

Ritter froze immediately. It was a command that they'd grown accustomed to. For a long second, Viking stared down the track, searching for whatever he'd noticed. The leaves fluttered slightly in the mild breeze, the branches shivering with them. Then he saw it again. The air shimmered a few paces in front of Ritter, ripples betraying an otherwise invisible sphere.

“Bolt.”

Reaching into a pack on his webbing, Ritter produced what was actually a spent cartridge casing, but it would do the job. He tossed it in front of him and, as expected, the disturbance responded with a burst of energy, kicking up soil from the track, knocking Ritter back a pace and sending little stones careening in all directions. Springboard. Not the most dangerous, but it could've done some damage had either of them wandered into it. The most recent emission must've shifted some here.

As he chucked another couple of casings and stepped to wherever they didn't provoke a response, Viking slowly came up and followed closely in his boot prints, putting a gloved hand on his shoulder and squeezing.

“Don't lose focus. We've got shit to do.”

He didn't like it. Not that he'd been expecting sunshine and rainbows, but now that he was staring it in the face, as it were, the reality was really hitting home.

With his masked face just over the brow of the ridge, the yawning mouth of the tunnel seemed to be staring back through Viking's eyepieces. The rails of the train track headed into it before quickly disappearing into impenetrable blackness. Its

concrete shell, jutting out of the hill it bore through, reminded him of an event horizon. If they went in, could they get out?

“Still seems quiet,” came Ritter’s whisper from next to him.

They’d been perched behind the ridge for a little while already, observing the plant. The slope ran down to the tracks and a tarmac road, both of which had seen better days. Stretching from left to right, a section of track split off before it reached the tunnel and curved with the road into the plant’s loading area. Several rusted KAMAZ trucks were parked neatly in a row adjacent to a small crane assembly suspended above the track and a short platform. To the left, the large rectangular concrete slabs, dotted with many partially opaque glass panels, of the plant’s main buildings dominated the view.

“Just hope it’s as quiet as it looks.”

The question they both needed an answer to was whether the Monolith – or anyone else – had reoccupied the facility since Britva’s incursion. No sight nor sound wasn’t much of an answer, since stalkers or mutants could be holed up inside somewhere, but it was all they had to go on for now. One open door to the loading area in particular was making Viking nervous.

“Look, I don’t like it either, but we’ve got to move. It’ll be dark soon,” Ritter urged. Indeed, the dull sky was already showing the faintest traces of orange that lit up the many grey clouds as the sun fell closer to the horizon. “You’re sure about not searching the plant first?”

“Yes.”

Although Vice had said that Britva and his men had stripped the plant of anything valuable, the two of them had considered clearing it again to make sure nothing and no one would interrupt their search of the tunnel. It would’ve also been an opportunity to recover the tags and gear from the dead mercenary. He may have been Britva’s lackey, but he was still one of them...and his gear had, from memory, been quite good. Viking hadn’t even known his name. However, with time not on their side and hoping to avoid contact if possible, they were going to risk heading directly for the tunnel, hoping that the plant was indeed as empty as it looked.

“Alright,” he sighed, “let’s go.”

They cautiously got to their feet, crested the ridge and, with their rifles at low ready, made their way down the slope towards the tunnel. Behind Ritter, Viking was watching the open door and the other entrances with an attentiveness bordering on

paranoia – if anything with a gun emerged, they'd have mere seconds to put them down before they were cut to shreds out here in the open.

Tunnel. Ritter. Doors. Trees to the left. He kept scanning right to left. Nothing emerged. Tunnel. Ritter. Doors. Trees to the left. They edged closer and closer to the gaping mouth, closer and closer to something approaching safety. Tunnel. Ritter. Doors. Trees to the left. His heart was beating quite fast now. What would they find inside?

After an excruciating thirty seconds, they'd made it to the concrete shell. Ritter stacked up closest to the mouth whilst Viking stood behind him, still watching the plant.

"What can you see?" he whispered.

A pause and a shuffle.

"Nothing."

"Clear of anomalies?"

"Seems so."

He kept his eyes on the loading area.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's clear." The unease was palpable in his voice.

"Alright, let's go."

Finally turning around, he clicked his weapon light on and followed Ritter inside. The darkness that greeted him almost made him stop. Their lights almost seemed to reflect off of it, only illuminating a metre or so of the track. But into the black went Ritter, and Viking had no choice but to follow.

Inching along, it did mercifully seem that he'd been right. There were no signs of anomalies, no ripples, no tell-tale rumbling, hissing or crackling, no arcs of electricity. It would've been quiet, were it not for the crunching and scraping of their boots on the gravel and sleepers, overlaid with Viking's breathing in his ears. Surprisingly steady breaths. In fact, the most apparent danger, at least for now, was tripping over a sleeper and falling face-first onto the rails.

"Door to the left." Ritter's voice almost made him jump.

Viking shone his light to where Ritter had pointed his. Sure enough, there was a recess in the wall for a service entrance. He quickly glanced behind them. The tunnel's mouth was no longer visible, obscured by the wall as the track curved into

the hillside. If anyone was following them, they were being discrete about it. Come on, man, don't think like that, you'll—

AAAAAAAAAAAAAH, HUH-HUH-HUH!

Almost leaping into the air with shock, Viking spun around so fast that he nearly lost his footing. Ritter was frozen in place, rifle trained on the recess.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH, HUH-HUH-HUH-HUH!

He had to force himself to take a breath. The sound was almost deafening inside the tunnel. And although he already knew the answer, his voice couldn't help but instinctively whisper:

“What...the fuck...is—”

AAAAAAAH, HUH-HUH-HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

He squeezed his eyes shut briefly, as if it would ease the toll on his ears.

“It's...crying,” came Ritter's reply between the screams, in a tone that Viking had rarely heard before. A mixture of dismissiveness (probably at such an obvious question), confusion, sympathy...and fear.

Perhaps most disconcerting, however, wasn't that somebody in there was crying. It was that that someone was clearly a little girl.

“Check it,” he urged Ritter, who was understandably apprehensive about moving forward. Mutants such as burers and controllers were known to imitate the sounds of infants to lure in victims.

He glanced behind them once again as Ritter started to edge towards the recess. Although he hadn't noticed it the first time, the light from the entrance was glowing ever more orange. They needed to get moving.

The crying continued, the wails and sniffles echoing out from the recess and down the walls. His stomach felt as though it were turning itself inside out. The light from Ritter's torch reached the recess, both of them peering into the spot that it illuminated. There was indeed a service door, and it was open. Viking tapped him on the shoulder, signalling him to enter. The sobs kept Ritter in the doorway. Not wanting to speak, he urgently tapped again. Mustering the courage and knowing that time was against them, Ritter finally moved past the recess and across the threshold.

The room was quite large. Through the dusty haze of the torchlight, Viking first saw another doorway to the right, which was closed. As he rounded the threshold, a bunch of electrical boxes appeared on the wall to his left.

But as he barely registered these observations, his attention became firmly fixed on the opposite corner. He blinked, not quite sure what he was seeing, or rather, not believing it.

In the corner, hunched over and facing the wall, was the figure of a girl. The light red dress with a white floral pattern was almost sickly in the surroundings. Pale arms wrapped around equally pale legs, short blonde curls down to her shoulders shaking as she wept, her cries hardly muffled by her knees. His gaze transfixed, he saw Ritter in his peripheral vision similarly frozen.

How had she gotten here? How had she made it through – or over – the perimeter fence? She couldn't just be lost, no one wandered into the Zone by accident...or did they? Was there a fence blocking *all* of the possible entrances? How long had she survived the anomaly fields? How long had she been here? Maybe she's run away from somewhere, from home? And now she was clearly regretting it, which is why she wa—

“Hello?”

Ritter's voice derailed his train of questions. He'd had to raise his voice in order for her to have some chance of hearing him over her own wails.

No response. She continued crying into her legs. How had she not seen the glow of their torches lighting up the gloom surrounding her, heard his voice?

There was a scrape of boots as Ritter wearily closed the distance, one small step at a time, his rifle pointed at her back. Viking felt *extremely* uneasy. Was she so upset that she didn't know they were there, or didn't care?

Slowly but surely, Ritter was getting closer. Viking's heart was crawling its way up his throat with each stop his comrade took forward. It was too surreal. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't think anything of going over and asking her what was going on, how she'd gotten here, why she was sobbing. But these circumstances were anything but normal.

He watched through his Kobra optic as Ritter reached her. She *must* know by now that he was there – his torch light would be too bright to ignore, as was his frame standing over her. Evidently, it didn't bother her. She continued to weep into her knees.

His heart was in his mouth as Ritter took his hand off the foregrip of his rifle and, stiff with fear, bent his knees to reach down. His movement seemed to speed up as his hand drew closer – the tension was becoming so unbearable that he

simply wanted to break it. The fingers of his gloves were about to make contact with her pale shoulders.

And she was gone.

“AH!” Ritter let out a yell and flinched backwards.

Viking shook his head, blinking rapidly.

She wasn't there.

There was nothing in front of them, only a small space between him and the corner, now fully illuminated. The crying was gone. Now it was just the thump of his heartbeat in his ears and their frantic breathing. He expected to wake up in a cold sweat at any moment.

After a few seconds to confirm that this was actually happening, Ritter spun around. In the light of his torch, Viking could see his eyes wide behind the mask.

“Oh fuck, no,” was all he could say, his voice faint, quivering. “I don't like it. I don't *fucking like it.*”

“Easy.”

Viking couldn't believe he'd just said that, given that his heart was still in his mouth. He turned his rifle to the other doorway. Had she vanished, or...moved elsewhere? He instantly regretted entertaining the thought – he was close enough to a heart attack as it was without the prospect of her lurking elsewhere in the tunnel. Waiting for them.

“We have to go. Now.” Not that many people would notice it from the way he was holding it together, but Ritter was in fact starting to panic. Probably suffering the same thought.

“No.” Viking knew what was coming. “And we're not arguing about it. We must keep going. We've got this.”

Despite trying to head it off, he expected some back and forth. Ritter would try to tell him that this whole escapade was fruitless and dangerous, that they should go back and warn the others about this place. He'd tell him that they needed this job, that they'd be called cowards if they went back empty-handed, that Vice would never give them a decent job again. Ritter would ask if this was worth it for whatever could be waiting for them ahead. Viking would say they didn't have a choice.

But it didn't happen. He looked at Ritter, standing at the edge of his beam as he kept his rifle on the door. As their eyes met, it was as though this argument played

out telepathically in a matter of nanoseconds. Ritter knew that it was pointless. Sympathetically, Viking simply uttered:

“Please. Let’s try to find something, and then we’ll go back.”

His breathing coming under control, Ritter reluctantly nodded. He brought his rifle up, advanced to the closed metal door and carefully pushed on it. To Viking’s surprise, it swung open with ease a creak.

They shuffled through with Ritter still leading. The pipes of various sizes coming out of the walls and running off into the darkness told them that they were in a utility tunnel. It was calm. None of the machinery was running. Viking was suddenly hit with a strange feeling: without the ear-piercing sound of the little girl’s wailing, he was now even *more* uncomfortable in the stillness. In a place like this, having some sound – even those of distress – was often preferable to ominous silence, he supposed.

With only one way to go, they slowly followed the pipes along the corridor. It was barely wide enough for the two of them, but it didn’t matter because Viking was keeping a few paces behind Ritter anyway and checking behind them. His teeth were clenched. Every time he glanced back, he was afraid he would see that little girl.

His body hair prickled as he heard a hushed voice.

“Hopefully there’s an office ahead somewhere, maybe some documentation we can take.”

Ritter had broken the silence not to argue, but to be optimistic. In spite of things, Viking couldn’t help but grin slightly. The Austrian was probably the most pessimistic optimist he’d ever come across. Then again, without any optimism – or at least, forced optimism – it’d be impossible to make it through the day here. Even Britva must have some.

“Yeah, if we’re lucky.”

But what else could be in here? This was the ideal lair for all manner of mutants. And where the hell was the girl? Was she still in here, somewhere, ahead, behind?

He turned to check behind again, his stomach completing yet another rotation as he did so, just as Ritter continued:

“I just hope it’s worth it, man. We’ll really need s—”

It was about a half a second and a couple of steps back before Viking's brain caught up.

He froze.

Silence.

There was nothing behind them. No sound. Ritter hadn't just stopped talking, he'd stopped moving, *breathing*. The disquiet was deafening.

He didn't want to turn around. Didn't want to look. Ritter must've seen something, or someone, and frozen up. But he had to. He had to look. Had to help with whatever he'd seen.

Viking turned around very slowly on the spot, the light scrape of his boots causing him to wince in the stillness, his torch coming around with his rifle to light up the corridor – and whatever Ritter had seen – ahead of them.

Nothing. No one.

Ritter was gone.

He stood there, peering into the darkness. He must've gone on ahead of me, he instinctively tried to tell himself, knowing it was complete crap. The pipes ran off beyond his light. The lifeless ceiling lights followed. Dust swirled about him in the torchlight.

He was completely alone.

No.

No.

No, no, no, no...

Viking couldn't even call out for his friend. He was rooted to the spot. His voice didn't work. What the fuck had...

Something moved at the edge of his vision. The faintest flicker. He swung the torch down there, searching, only to find himself staring at the floor. Nothing there.

There it was again. To the right this time. Instead of moving his rifle, Viking moved his head this time. He stared blackness itself, not into it, looking for any trace of...*something*. It seemed to stare back at him.

And then, the tiniest flicker of light. It was gone in an instant. A ripple of whitish yellow on the surface of the darkness, maybe a metre in front of him. Viking stared at that spot, waiting, not daring to move. Up and to the left, another brief shimmer danced away from his view. He stayed still.

No. Please, no...

Unmistakably, an anomaly. Finally moving, he took a step back, still not bringing his rifle up, fearful he was still too close.

No...no...not *this*. He knew what it was, but he was begging for it not to be. Please, anything but this.

He knew what he had to do. Carefully, he stepped back once more and reached into the bolt pouch on his belt, and – with reluctance, resignation and remorse – he tossed it in front of him.

It vanished.

It was what he'd feared. Couldn't be anything else.

He lost it.

Taking his hand off the foregrip, he yanked up his mask. It felt as though it were smothering him. He didn't give a shit what he might breathe in anymore.

"FUCK!"

He stepped further back, his rifle arm limp by his side.

"FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!"

Nothing answered his shouts, so he screamed into the floor.

"NO, FUCK, FUUUUUUUUUUCK, FUCK THIIIIIIIS!"

His only friend was gone. Forever.

Rifle and torch pointing at the floor, he let the darkness envelope him. It could take him. He closed his eyes. Maybe something else would come and finish him.

Quiet, only punctured by his rasps of utter despair.

The light shimmers continued, but the anomaly wasn't making a sound, at least not that he could hear. Fucking bastard! The Zone surely had a life of its own – it was too convenient a spot for it to hide in here. In the light from Ritter's torch, the shimmers would've been invisible.

He could jump in. Yes, he could follow his friend. They could be lost forever. The more Viking thought about it, the more tempting a proposition it became.

No. There was no way of knowing what was on the other side. Ritter could already be dead. He had to tell someone. They needed to know this was here. This couldn't happen again. Ritter would want him to do that, too.

And then, his mind landed on it, connecting the dots. Someone *did* know. Britva. He and his men had been here. They'd lost a man, but Britva had never said how, or where. That smile when he'd watched Viking set off to come here.

He'd known. The *fucker* had known!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH, YOU FUCKING FUUUUUUUUCK!”

Viking screamed into the void.

He gripped his rifle, getting it ready, and turned to head back down the corridor to the room they'd come in through. He wasn't following his friend. He had to go back.

“Where's Britva?”

Corpsman's face was a little confused. If the others had heard about Viking's trip, he was probably wondering what Britva had to do with anything...or where Ritter was.

“I-I'm not...he might be in the canteen? But why--”

Viking was already past him and taking long, rapid strides down the hallway. Fucking typical. The prick goes out for a day with his buddies, hovers up all of the artifacts and items of interest they can carry, tells no one about the anomalies and mutants they encountered, and then let's the others venture to their deaths so that there's less competition whilst they gorge themselves on all of the rations in the canteen. That was the game they were playing, but Viking hated how he wouldn't share information – even by merc standards, that was low, and now it had cost Ritter his life.

There was a thump of boots behind him. Not saying a word, Corpsman was following. He evidently wanted to see what this was all about.

Reaching the canteen doors, Viking burst them open in a rage. Sure enough, Britva was sat at this usual table with his lackeys. The slamming doors got their attention.

“YOU FUCKING KNEW!”

Viking was practically catching up to his own words as he made a beeline for the table. Britva quickly rose to his feet, his men following suit and blocking the way. But Viking wasn't stopping. He brought his shoulder forward, intending to clear the way to the absolute shithhead who could've prevented his friend's death. However, the mercenaries absorbed his charge and grabbed him by the arms, dragging him back.

“YOU FUCKER! YOU FUCKING CUNT!”

He stomped with his feet, trying to break free, but another pair of arms locked themselves around him. It was Corpsman.

“Easy, man, easy!”

“FUCKEEEEER!” was all Viking could scream. Despite his struggle, he couldn’t free his arms and his legs weren’t getting him anywhere without them. Before long, they had dragged him back and down onto his knees. His growls of protest slowly lessened into pants of exhaustion as he was forced to accept that he wasn’t reaching Britva, who had come around the table to stand before him.

“Disarm him,” he grunted in his thick accent.

The words spurred him to resist again as they pulled the sling from his shoulder and tried to prize his fingers from the rifle grip.

“No!”

He wasn’t having his weapon taken. He gripped it for dear life, but then a knee came hard into his side – the physical shock caused him to loosen his hand just for a split second, which was all they needed to wrench the 74M from it. He felt a tug at this right leg as his pistol was also removed from its holster.

Now disarmed, he looked up to see Corpsman next to him, who it turned out was the one who’d taken his Glock. The two of them usually got along well, shared drinks and stories of their time in Iraq here...but not today. Today he was taking Britva’s side. Why? How could he be siding with this utter prick?

A shadow fell over him as Britva bent down to glare into his eyes. His gritty, pockmarked face was scowling. In his gruff voice, he muttered something in Russian. Unlike Vice, he couldn’t - or just didn’t - even speak English. Despite his own inability to speak Russian, it made Viking all the angrier.

“He’s asking what’s going on,” Corpsman translated.

“You fuck! You knew! The tunnel, by the plant. You lost a man in there, didn’t you? To the space anomaly.”

As Corpsman translated, the scowl softened. Britva’s brow creased. He leaned back slightly before responding.

“We never checked the tunnel.”

What? Had he prepared for this accusation?

“Liar! He walked into the fucking anomaly, didn’t he? You didn’t tell anyone, you pretended it was the Monolith to keep people away!”

To his left, he saw movement beyond Britva's men holding him there. Vice and Clerk had appeared from the pantry door to see what was going on. They didn't say anything, they just watched with curiosity. This was good. He wanted everyone to see what a piece of shit Britva really was.

The scowl had returned.

"We never went into the tunnel. Badger was killed by Monolith in the plant. There were too many, we had to get out...He asks if his body was still in there. Did you check it?"

Viking wasn't buying it.

"That's what you said so you could go back there and find a way through the tunnel to loot it for yourself!"

Britva was halfway through an angry response when he suddenly stopped. He held up his hand to Corpsman, signalling for him to disregard what he'd been saying before asking a question that Viking didn't need translating:

"Where is Ritter?"

It was like being stabbed in the stomach. Viking's jaw clamped shut. He didn't want to talk about it...

...and he didn't have to. Britva had figured it out. He sighed and his expression loosened. He started speaking again, pausing intermittently to allow Corpsman to keep up.

"We didn't tell anyone about the tunnel, because we didn't know about it. We never went in there. We are mercenaries, we compete, yes, but we are..." Corpsman paused. "I think he's saying that we are on different teams, but still on the same side." Britva continued. "If I'd known there was a space anomaly in that tunnel, I would have informed Vice so that he could pass it around. That's a nasty way to go. I'm sorry about your friend, as I am sorry about Badger, but this is the Zone, brother. Nothing you can do but get used to it."

Viking's eyes were locked into his. He almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. Not because he doubted Britva's sincerity anymore – as he stared at him, Britva's eyes were relaxed, sympathetic even – but because he'd not once seen this kind of person in him.

Britva turned to the table and pulled a bottle of vodka they'd been enjoying closer. He grabbed one of the shot glasses, filled it up and placed it at the edge before looking back at Viking.

“Drink for your comrade.” He even made the effort to force it out in English.

With a wave of his hand, his men released Viking. The one who’d taken his rifle handed it back to him before they sauntered out of the canteen.

Still not getting up, Viking looked at Corpsman. The ex-Marine regarded him with pity. Saying nothing, he gripped the Glock by the slide and held it out for him. As Viking took it and replaced it in its holster, Corpsman patted him on the shoulder and followed the others out.

Viking watched him leave. He’d made a fool of himself. An utter fool. Even someone like Corpsman, with whom he had an amicable relationship, had helped Britva restrain him from doing something completely rash. He’d lost his cool, lashed out, found someone to blame. But there was no one to blame...other than himself.

Clerk and Vice had also left, but the latter soon reappeared and walked over to him, carrying something. It was the 94. He placed the butt on the floor and leaned it towards Viking, who was taken aback. He met Vice’s eyes.

“But we didn’t find anything.”

“I know,” Vice said softly. “You do next jobs for free. Take.”

The sight of the weapon was making Viking sick, but nonetheless, he took it. Vice then made an exit as well, leaving Viking staring at the shiny new rifle in his hand. This was what his best friend’s life had been worth.

The canteen was empty now. Even those who had been drinking had gotten up and left. Viking looked around. Ritter had just wanted to leave, to give all of this up. It should’ve been Viking who’d been on point, but it hadn’t been. They shouldn’t have gone to that tunnel, but they had because he’d wanted to, urged Ritter to come with him for a cut. Now he couldn’t even write to his family. Britva was right. This was the Zone.

The shot glass sat there as it were waiting for him. He should drink it, it was the least he could do. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t move. He was angry. He’d been angry at Britva, but now he was just angry at himself.

With no one else left to blame, Viking dropped both rifles to the floor, put his face in his gloved hands and began to sob.