

Inside

by Reginald Styre

Arkady and Sokol's observation of an abandoned house has unforeseen consequences.

Drip.

Drop.

Drip. Drop.

Stirring from his slumber, Arkady slowly opening his eyes. It took him a moment to remember where they were.

Dilapidated walls of exposed brick, riddled with gaping holes that offered views onto the luscious grassland, gloomy under the overcast. Rotten, twisted wooden beams jutted out above the walls under the half-collapsed roof. Drops of rain continued to patter down onto his head and shoulders, dripping down from his short beard and gradually increasing in intensity. If Arkady could've found a spot to rest under cover, he would've done, but the tiny house didn't offer such luxuries.

His eyes fell upon Sokol. He was sat with his back firmly against the opposite wall, one leg stretched over the other, his arms crossed to cradle his SVD rifle, the barrel resting on the bottom of a rotten window frame. Despite the rain, his eyes remained glued to the sight, the barrel barely shifting with his deep, steady breaths. To anyone else, Sokol's maintenance of this Zen-like state, as the drops fell on his head and tried to run down into his eyes, would've seemed almost comical. But not to Arkady. To him, it was the personification of focus and reliability.

It was his grunting and shifting as he sat up that finally caused Sokol to glance over briefly before returning his attention to the scope.

"Seen anything?" asked Arkady, although he could guess the reply.

"Nothing," came the gravelly response.

Twisting into a kneeling posture, Arkady shuffled over on his hands and knees, slumping down behind Sokol to take a look at what he was so intently watching.

Across the grassland and a road that cut through it, maybe two hundred metres away, was another house. It was considerably larger than theirs with two stories and, seemingly, was in much better condition; the smooth, grey stone walls looked almost untouched, although the windows had been

shattered and only their wooden frames remained, a couple loose and swinging idly in the breeze. Without the aid of the SVD's scope or a pair of binoculars, Arkady couldn't see inside the house from here.

He turned away, pushing his back against the crumbling wall, sighing with despair. Fat chance that Eunuch was gonna pay them much, if anything, for this task if they had little to report back. They'd been here for over twenty-four hours, and so far had nothing to show for it.

Glancing around, his eyes were drawn to the radiation patch on Sokol's right sleeve. It was odd seeing such that patch sewn onto an X-18 suit, but there was no persuading Sokol to use any other outfit. Arkady just hoped that the white and brown colours wouldn't get them accidentally killed by otherwise friendly stalkers.

"Arkady?" Sokol addressed him without removing his eye from the sight.

"Yeah?"

"This Eunuch. Perhaps he is wrong. Maybe there is nothing. Nothing here. Only stories."

It was as if he'd been reading Arkady's mind. Though the jerky, emotionless sentences displayed no frustration, he was clearly also wondering whether this was a perfectly good waste of time. As much as Eunuch could be a selfish, egotistical, profit-centric dickhead, he *did*, however, have his reasons. Besides, it wasn't like many others in the Zone were any better.

"Sokol", Arkady started wearily, "Eunuch deals in information. If anyone knows about things, it's him, and if there's anyone who's more frustrated when he *doesn't* know something, it's Eunuch. Now, he's heard plenty of tales about that place" - he pointed a finger across the grassland at the large house - "that deserve an explanation."

"What tales?" Sokol enquired, still not looking around. "What did he say?"

"Like several different stalkers saying they'd heard noises from the house. One who'd passed by at night said he'd seen light coming out of it. Eunuch mentioned that the place is on Duty's watch list. And if that wasn't enough, he sent one of his most trusted runners this way and the guy never came back. Not a coincidence."

Although he wasn't in the mood to rehash the details that Eunuch had given him, Arkady also wasn't frustrated at Sokol. After all, he hadn't been allowed to join Eunuch's little briefing, since Eunuch wouldn't have anything to do with him. He thoroughly distrusted Sokol's pedigree, and merely mentioning his name was enough to elicit curses and - on a particularly glum day - short rants in his amusingly pathetic, squeaky voice about Sokol's mental capacity, allegiances, conspiracies and the like. Arkady's efforts to make Eunuch realise that he was a valuable asset had been totally in vain.

"All true?" His voice cut through Arkady's thoughts.

"It would seem so. Come on, you've been watching that damn place for several hours, let me take over. You need to eat something."

To his surprise, and unlike the last time they'd been due for a change of

watch, Sokol didn't disagree. He turned around, handed over the rifle and they then swapped places so that he could get to the food rations in the backpack. Arkady made himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Through the scope, he could now see into the house, although the dull overcast and moderate rainfall wasn't helping. All that was visible through the gloom were the odd bits of furniture in view of the windows, such as a tattered wardrobe in one of the downstairs rooms. The swinging window frames kept catching his eye, drawing him away from the rest of the house since they were the only thing moving. Nothing else stirred.

The advantage of having Sokol along, Arkady thought to himself, is that he wouldn't need to keep this up for too long before the man suggested taking over again. Just as well. If he had to keep this up for more than a few hours, there was a chance that he would start falling asleep. He knew full well that he should be observant, cautious, wary. The Zone could catch the experienced out at the best of times. The only things that kept Arkady's eye fixed to that scope were Eunuch's little tales about the very house he was watching.

Stalkers certainly enjoyed tall tales. Some wouldn't hesitate to create some sort of mythos around a particular object or place with little justification. It only got worse when they were believed by a few, who then worked themselves into an easily-achieved paranoid state and convinced themselves that they were seeing or hearing things when they, too, encountered this mythical object or place.

But this? This was different. The people who'd been blabbing about this place weren't nobodies; one of them, Seeker, had been here since 2010, and developed a reputation amongst the traders for being able to get his hands on just about any artifact you could imagine in record time. It was as if he instinctively *knew* where they were going to be at any one moment. And if Duty had taken note of this place? Sure, they *were* rather paranoid on a good day, but dedicating their limited resources to one little house in the middle of nowhere wasn't something they would do lightly...

Staring through the scope, occasionally wiping rainwater out of his eyes and trying not to be distracted by the window frames or the sound of Sokol digging into a tin of Tourist's Delight, Arkady thought he could hear something above the constant pattering. It wasn't loud and he couldn't tell where it was coming from. A sort of...dull cry? He wasn't sure. Straining his ears wasn't sufficient to identify it.

He looked round at Sokol, who had also stopped eating and was staring straight ahead, as if in a trance.

"D'you hear that?" whispered Arkady.

"Yes. Voices."

Voices? Thank goodness Sokol's hearing was better than his. Arkady put all of his focus onto the faint sound, but he still wasn't sure where it was, the rain doing its utmost to drown it out.

"Where?"

"From the north. Getting louder."

To their left, then. Arkady peered round the hollow frame that the rifle was resting on. There was a tree close to the ruined house they were sheltered in, blocking some of his view that way, but further left the view was clear across the grassland.

There they were. Squinting through the droplets, Arkady could make out what looked like a couple of silhouettes. He turned the rifle that way and shifted his body to get behind it, lowering his eye to the sight once again.

Two men, draped in black overcoats and wearing gas masks, were sauntering along the road towards the house. Arkady could see and hear them better as they continued, their voices becoming more distinct over the rain. One was swinging a submachine gun in his hand, the other clutching a Kalashnikov. They didn't seem to have a care in the world, walking leisurely and nattering away to their heart's content, each of them occasionally causing the other to let out a hoot of laughter.

"Who are they?" came Sokol's voice behind him, almost causing Arkady to jump.

"Bandits."

Even though Arkady couldn't quite make out what patches they wore on their sleeves yet, there was no question about it. The overcoats were often a giveaway, but not a surefire identification - others wore them too, including regular stalkers. No, it was the fact that few others would be bold, arrogant or plain stupid enough to skip along the road in broad daylight making such a racket, seemingly without a care in the world.

"Will you shoot them?"

Tempting a proposition as it was, Arkady had a better idea.

"Nah. Let's watch them, see where they go, what they do."

Along the road they ambled, continuing to exchange jokes and let out raucous laughter. Arkady kept them in the centre of the scope. They were getting closer and closer to the house. Would they head inside? In the state they were in, it seemed only natural for them to take a break, and what better place than somewhere right on their path?

With about a hundred metres between them and the building, their laughter faded. They suddenly seemed to be taking their situation more seriously, clutching their weapons and sticking close to one another. Had they seen someone, or were they just healthily aware that something could be lurking within?

They reached the front door, open and welcoming. Arkady was as tense as they were, his arms quivering slightly, jittering the view through his scope. He forced himself to steady up. He needed to clearly see what was about to happen. Both bandits raised their guns and looked inside, sweeping the space. They crept in quietly, disappearing behind the doorframe.

His breathing shallowed. Moments ticked by, the droplets unable to distract him. He thought he saw them pass by a window. There was no ruckus from

within, no signs of distress.

A sudden rustle startled Arkady, throwing his eye off the sight. It was just the wind brushing through the branches. He let out a long sigh of relief and looked back. Still no sight of them.

Then, after what seemed like an eternity - but was in fact probably less than a minute - the two figures re-emerged, apparently not phased or harmed by anything inside.

Arkady was still clenched up, not realising what he was seeing, thinking something was still wrong. But it wasn't. The bandits quickly returned to the road and continued their walk, resuming their jokes.

"You see," Sokol said bluntly once they were further away, "they are fine. Eunuch may be wrong. Perhaps nothing is there."

By this point, Arkady was almost starting to believe him. The two men hadn't just taken a peek; they'd headed inside as well, and out they'd come without a scratch. How could that be if there was something in there? He wasn't any more relaxed; if anything, Arkady was more on edge now.

"No, there has to be," he finally said. "There's no way so many stories can be circulating about this place without at least some being true. Stories from people who know the Zone like the back of their hand."

"But they are okay." Sokol pointed to the bandits, slowly fading into the distance along the road.

"Yes, I know...but...maybe they got lucky." Arkady's words sounded pathetic, even to him. "Maybe they didn't see whatever is in there."

"Maybe there's nothing. Nothing to see."

He was beginning to get frustrated with Sokol. No, not frustrated at him, frustrated at their situation.

"If we go back and tell Eunuch that there's nothing there, we might not get paid. We *need* to get paid, you hear me? We've been stuck out here these last couple of days, waiting around. It can't be for nothing. And I need that money, need it for food and meds."

"What medicine?"

Arkady wasn't willing to divulge that, but now he'd said too much. He needed to give him an answer. A half-truth would do.

"More anti-rad, I'm running low already."

"What do we do?"

They were both staring at the house. As dark as it sounded, Arkady had *hoped* something would happen to those bandits, something he could report back. But it hadn't. He needed *something*, anything, and there was only one way to get it.

"We take a look ourselves."

"What if something is there?"

"First you say there might be nothing, and now you say there could be something?! Make your damn mind up!" Arkady snapped angrily.

Sokol didn't react. He couldn't. Emotion was a foreign concept to him now,

only logic would register. That frustrated Arkady even more, but there was no use in voicing it. Besides, it was unfair. He wouldn't trade places with Sokol if his life depended on it.

"Then we shall look. See what we find. Okay?"

He absolutely hated the idea. Just thinking about going in there was rattling his nerves, but - at least to Arkady - they didn't have much of a choice.

"Yeah, we'll look. Come on, let's pack up the gear and take it with us. We can start heading back immediately once we've finished searching the house."

It didn't take them long to gather their things, fit everything into their backpacks and get them on. Arkady handed the SVD back to Sokol, since he was easily the better shot of the two, and picked up his Kalashnikov, making sure it was loaded. They both pulled on their gas masks, and Sokol then followed behind Arkady as they stepped out of the ruined house that had been their home for the last twenty-four hours and headed towards the ominous building.

The patter and his strained breathing through the filter drowned out their footsteps through the damp grass. The rain was showing no sign of letting up. Both of them kept looking around, wary that they were exposed across the flatlands until they reached the house. The fields stretched around them seemingly for miles, with only the odd tree and patches of forest to break up the overcast horizon.

Arkady kept his weapon up, his attention mostly centred on the windows. Still no sign of movement inside. The bandits' apparent safety should put him at ease, but it was only deepening the mystery. What would they find? Nothing? Striding quite quickly, it didn't take them long to reach the building, now towering over them. They pushed themselves up against the outside wall. He peered inside.

The damp scent was overpowering at first, filling his nostrils and almost making him cough. The room was barely lit, but the scene of utter chaos was apparent. The floor was cracked, debris littering it, upturned furniture scattered everywhere. Amongst the mess, he couldn't see much of note.

"See? Nothing," whispered Sokol.

Perhaps the bandits had searched around for something of value and found nothing. But he wasn't giving up just yet.

Arkady moved along the wall towards the entrance, trying to keep an eye ahead of him and also into the house. He didn't want to be surprised by anything. Reaching the edge of the doorframe, he clutched his Kalashnikov's trigger grip tightly with one hand and held up the other, his fingers splayed to denote digits.

Three. Two. One.

Both men rushed inside, Sokol following behind and sweeping to the left, Arkady going right. After a brief flurry of movement, they stood still. The entrance was empty. His boots rustled and clinked over wooden splinters and broken glass. Only a battered table in here. Nothing else was making a sound. Glancing around the space, looking for *anything* that was out of the ordinary,

Arkady could almost feel Sokol's eyes from behind his mask. Eventually, he let out a sigh, still keeping a low voice.

"Yeah...perhaps there isn't anything here after all."

"Then we shall go?"

To the left of the entrance was a flight of wooden stairs leading up to the next floor. Arkady considered going up and checking it out, but he assumed that the bandits would've already done that...but perhaps they'd been lazy, or sloppy. Maybe there was something still up there, something of value...

"Not just yet. Follow me."

Keeping his weapon up, Arkady switched on his headlamp and slowly walked over to the stairs. Worried about the wood potentially having rotten and breaking under his footfall, he tested the first one with a tentative step. Seemed okay. He put his weight on it and stepped up to the next one. Still no problems, aside from the creaking that caused him to wince. Sokol was close behind; he'd slung the SVD onto his back and drawn his handgun, far easier to control in this more confined space.

As he cautiously put his foot on each step, Arkady felt a little strange. His feet became slightly...faster, taking each step quicker. Perhaps it was just the fact that he was under immediate threat, his confidence slowly taking over...or was it? There was something else, too. Something in his ears that he couldn't quite put his finger on. A slight rush of air? A noise? He couldn't tell.

They turned to keep their weapons on the top of the stairs, the headlamp's beam washing through the metal banister and showing that the landing above was clear. The steps were definitely moving faster under his feet. He felt calm, still determined to head upwards.

As his view crested the top of the stairs, it was obstructed by a wall. There was only a single doorway in it. He placed his back to the wall adjacent to the stairway and swept the area with his headlamp and rifle. With the exception of the wall behind him, the landing wrapped around the stairway, all three other sides bounded by walls and doors that led into more parts of the house.

He shuffled up to the last step. Some of the doors were missing, leaving empty frames, likely either blown in with deliberate force or rattled off their hinges by the violent shakes of constant emissions. He *should* feel slightly uneasy with all of these rooms to search, and yet he didn't. That soothing calmness was fully enveloping him. It was nice.

"Which one?" came Sokol's hushed and muffled voice.

A fair question, but Arkady already knew the answer.

"That one." He pointed to the nearest doorway in front, the first one he'd seen. "We can search the others after."

Forward they went. They moved up to the door, guns at the ready, although Arkady felt that this was increasingly unnecessary. Against the wall, he waited for Sokol to tap him on the shoulder before moving through the door and into the room beyond.

It immediately struck him how dark it was in here. No, not dark, pitch black. All

he could see was what the headlamp could show him. The windows had been completely boarded up, only the slightest chink of light struggling in through the cracks. Odd, but he still wasn't worried.

Aside from the floor up here also being awash with various kinds of debris, this room was bare. Shards of glass twinkled in the beam. Had it always been like this, or had the furniture been removed? He hadn't taken a proper look at the bits and pieces downstairs. Perhaps some of them had originally belonged up here.

There was a dark patch on the ceiling, likely where damp had made it through the leaky insulation. The same musty and wet smell wafted around him, tinged with something else that he couldn't put his finger on. There was another doorway opposite some ten paces away, leading to the next room, likely the last one in this part of the house.

Creeping forward, Arkady noticed something on the floor in front. Was it another shard of glass reflecting the light? No, this was distinct somehow. That faint rush of air was still moving past his ears. Something was being carried on it. He moved closer, creating a path with his boots, focusing in on whatever had caught the beam amongst the rubble.

It was only when he was a couple of paces away that he realised what it was. On the floor, obscured from view by all of the debris, was a dark red pool, surrounded by large spatters. Blood.

He looked at Sokol, who still seemed calm. In fact, Arkady suddenly realised just how relaxed *he* was feeling. They should turn around and get out of here, but he didn't feel the need. He looked up. That patch on the ceiling hadn't been dampness after all. There was an increasingly strong imperative to leave. Someone, or something, had been butchered in here by something else...

...but Arkady wasn't going anywhere. Not now.

"Shall we go? Keep looking?" Although he wasn't showing any sign of emotion - as he couldn't - Sokol needed to know the plan.

Arkady wanted to answer him, but he was distracted. There was something else vying for his attention. Another voice, very soft, somewhere around him.

Come.

"Arkady, what shall we do?" The words were dulled out, as if Sokol were speaking from behind a blanket or the other end of a tunnel, meaning little to him.

He twisted around slowly, the beam lighting up the dark, dilapidated and apparently dangerous room around him. The other voice, the soothing one, was growing stronger.

Come to me.

"Arkady!" No anguish, no stress. Sokol was simply raising his volume in the hope that Arkady might hear him. He felt nothing, but he still very much understood the concept of self-preservation.

"There."

With his rifle swaying from his arm by his side, Arkady pointed limply

towards the next doorway, the one they hadn't yet entered. That was where the mysterious yet enticing voice was coming from, where they needed to go.

"In there? Go in there?"

"Yes," he breathed.

The world around him was becoming hazier, less distinct. His head was swirling slightly, slowly making him nauseous as he ambled in a trance-like state towards the entrance to the next room. He glanced round momentarily, aware that Sokol should be following him, which he was with caution. He didn't seem as relaxed, as happy as Arkady was. Could he even hear it?

I have what you desire, young one.

Mysterious as it was, the voice was friendly, calming, the sort of influence that he sorely needed right now. That he always needed. Sokol was missing out if he wasn't able to hear it, or was choosing not to listen. How could he *not* want to listen, though? It was the nicest thing he'd heard in a long time, sweeter than his wife's caring tone, sweeter than his son's laughter, sweeter than the most beautiful of music.

"Are you sure? About this?" Sokol's voice distracted him, tried to pry him from this lovely fantasy. Arkady curtly threw him a glare, trying to tell him with his eyes that he should stay calm, enjoy the moment.

His headlamp lit the way, guiding him along this path. The doorframe was illuminated in its bright light. It seemed further away than it had done. No matter. He was here now, on the threshold of his destiny.

Just a few more steps, and you will be fulfilled.

The light washed into the room from the doorway. Arkady stopped to take it in. It looked similar to the last one, with the floor largely concealed beneath a layer tiles and glass. But there was more. More crimson. It covered large portions of the floor and even the walls, areas of it glimmering in the beam. Pieces of ravaged clothing and the odd broken mask completed the ensemble. But no one else was here.

And in the centre of the room was what he was here for: a structure composed largely of scrap metal, bars and wires wrapped around one another to create something...strange, but wonderful in its own way.

Yes, come. Come to my embrace.

Gladly, he thought. After making sure Sokol - who looked unusually concerned - was still behind him, Arkady stepped forward, crossing the threshold.

Everything changed.

"*ARGH!*"

In a flash of light, his vision was blinded and his head wrenched back. Arkady yelled out, his Kalashnikov clattering to the ground as he grabbed at his face, clutching it in pain, feeling as though he'd just been hit square in the forehead. But it wasn't over. His head was wracked by an immutable, concentrated agony, as if a hand had reached into his skull and grabbed hold of his brain, squeezing it in its grip.

He collapsed to his knees, ripping off his gas mask. The contorting pain was only intensifying. He wanted to vomit and piss himself at the same time. He could hear himself screaming intermittently, his gloved fingers trying to dig into his head, to rip out whatever was inflicting this torture upon him. It was no use. He yanked off his gloves, tossing them into the dried blood and trying his best to break into his skull. The pain. The *pain!* It was trying to tear his brain to pieces.

He glanced up, moving his hands away from his face and staring through his squinting eyes so that he could see what was happening. Sokol had entered as well and was now standing in front of him, facing towards the twisted structure, having also dropped his handgun to the floor. He wasn't yelling out; in fact, he didn't seem to be in pain at all. But something was wrong. His head was twitching violently, spasming uncontrollably in all directions. What was happening to them?

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH, GOOOOOOOOOOOOOD!"

A dagger was being thrust into his frontal lobe, he was sure of it. He let go of his head, staring at his hands in the lamp's fuzzy light. They were blurry. Red streaks were running down his fingers from under his nails, he could faintly feel the liquid on his skin. He'd been digging into his own face, trying to get whatever was inside out.

The pain was ever so slightly beginning to subside, being replaced with a strangely empty serenity. His vision was growing fainter. The room was turning into a haze of black and yellow. Sokol's head was still twisting around erratically. Arkady thought of Katya and his son, Andrei. Such a good wife. Such a beautiful boy. Their faces were fading now, dimming, just like the room around him.

"Uuuugh..."

Wanting to speak their names aloud, as if that would bring them closer to him, all he could manage was a moan. The agony had dissipated to something of a severe headache. Calmness was enveloping him once more. The floor looked inviting. He wanted to sleep.

At the edge of his obscured vision, he suddenly noticed Sokol's head abruptly stop spasming and snap straight again. His blurry shape turned in the beam from Arkady's headlamp. He couldn't make out many of his features anymore, just his build and the faint outline of the visor on his mask.

"S...So..."

He couldn't even speak the man's name. Sokol's outline moved, walking softly over to him and bending down, appearing to remove his mask.

Just as Arkady felt his torso keeling forwards, the world around him darkened to complete blackness. The last thing he heard before everything faded away was Sokol's unusually comforting voice.

"You shall serve us well, brother."