

Shelter

by Reginald Styre

Returning from a tasking gone wrong, a chance encounter offers Sergeant Alexei Bagan a new perspective on the Zone.

Although Alexei knew full well that he should be concentrating on his surroundings, he was still struggling to rationalise what he'd seen in the bunker. His mind folded the images on themselves, turning them over, trying to see if anything was hidden amongst them.

It was no use. He couldn't explain it...but he'd better hope he could think of something to explain how his subordinate had literally been split in half. The lieutenant wasn't the sort of man to take "I don't know" for an answer, reluctant to chalk anything up to "unexplained phenomena". He'd been here a long time, thought he knew the Zone better than the likes of Voronin, but Alexei was willing to bet that even the general had yet to set eyes upon many of the Zone's secrets.

Rostok wasn't far now, but his progress was slow. With only the rasp of his breaths through the mask and the crumple of grass under his footsteps to keep him company, Alexei couldn't help but feel that it was *too* quiet. He wasn't used to being alone out here.

He'd taken extra precautions to be less conspicuous, such as electing to stay off the road and move through the undergrowth parallel to and a distance from it. Now he just had to worry about blundering through the bushes straight into an anomaly. At least the relative silence would assist him in picking up the sounds of mutants or the unmistakable hum of anomalous disturbances. He'd get back on the tarmac when he was closer to the industrial complex.

With little else in the present to occupy him, his mind kept involuntarily

flicking back to that godforsaken bunker. Unusually amongst his peers, Alexei was the God-fearing type, although he most definitely kept it to himself. Probably a legacy of his upbringing, more than anything. Places like that bunker and the things he'd seen, though, they really challenged what little faith he carried with him. Perhaps that was what really separated the Zone from the outside world: if God was taking a hands-off approach to humanity, he'd totally abandoned this place.

Something was off. Alexei stopped in his tracks, his heavy boots sinking slightly into the soft ground. He scanned around, listening intently, trying to block out his breathing, peering through the fogged visor. All quiet.

In the light of the dull afternoon, he saw that the road curved off to the left past a small, dilapidated stone structure, too small to be a house. A storage building? For what? The doorway gaped open, but there was no light inside.

He glanced behind him. Nothing. His eyes wandered onto the building. No sign of movement. But *something* was wrong, he could feel it, he just couldn't—

CAW! CAW! CAW!

Alexei spun around with a start, instinctively raising his Kalashnikov in preparation. A flock of crows ascended from a large tree next to the road a short way behind him. He strained out a heavy sigh of relief...

...but wait, it wasn't just them. Across the horizon, he saw more flocks taking flight, littering the sky with little black, fluttering shapes, all heading upwards and cawing incessantly.

Before he noticed the sky darkening and the clouds beginning to twist into a disturbing spiral in the distance, Alexei already knew what was happening. He cursed himself. How hadn't he known it was coming beforehand? The notification, it had *said* there were still a few hours...but how long ago had that been?

He frantically looked around. The landscape was largely empty, with only mounds, bushes and a few trees. His gaze again fell upon the little building ahead. It was untested, but it was his only chance around here.

Throwing caution to the wind, hoping and (ironically) praying that nothing would stop him, he broke straight into a sprint. The weight of his gear, the rough ground, a controller, a Whirligig, they all paled into irrelevance. Nothing was going to stop Alexei from reaching that building.

The rustle of his boots through the grass was quickly matched and then drowned out by the ever-loudening roar. The sky was alive, the dark clouds swirling behind him towards the centre of the Zone, a bright yellow-orange glow consuming the horizon.

He dashed across the road. Panting heavily as he sprinted, Alexei registered a faint beep amongst the din. No doubt it was his PDA telling him to seek shelter. Good thing he was already nearing the building, since the message had come through late.

The ground began to shudder under his feet, the air itself vibrating around him, causing him to trip periodically. But Alexei kept up his pace and never fell. He couldn't afford to.

After what seemed like an eternity, he made it, rushing through the doorway with his weapon raised, ready to gun down anything that might be unwelcoming.

He needn't have worried. It was empty inside. The door was swung inwards, hanging off its hinges. The bright glow poured in through the doorway and the single window, illuminating the bare walls and wooden shelves, which were occupied by only the odd few boxes. They rattled more violently as the jarring increased. This would have to do.

Alexei glanced out of the window, witnessing the spectacle with which he was well familiar. It never failed to awe him. Blinding shocks of lightning ripped through the dark, dense clouds, emanating from the bright glow that hid the source of the emission, silhouetting the trees and buildings in the foreground.

And it was this light that revealed the lone figure on this side of the road, desperately sprinting through the grass just as Alexei had been. He was heading this way.

Without hesitation, Alexei's rifle was shouldered, and he was looking down

the optic at the unknown figure. The man stopped. He was armed, clad in an armoured vest with a few pouches, his face hidden - like Alexei's - behind a respirator. Who was he? Another Dutier?

Another flash gave him the answer. For just a moment, the colours of green forest camouflage were lit up in the gloom, the green wolf on the sleeve just visible at the edge of Alexei's field of view through the optic. He drew in a short breath, his heart jumping slightly. But his aim was steady. His finger curled around the trigger. He was ready to blow this anarchist away right here.

A low, piercing rumble suddenly ripped through the air, reverberating in his ears. Although he'd been subconsciously expecting it, Alexei still flinched, his gaze broken from the sight as he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to block out the harsh rumble assaulting his eardrums.

In the next second he'd reopened them and was looking down the optic once again. The figure was on his knees. His weapon dangled from its sling, his hands reaching for his head, clutching it in evident agony. A muffled scream of pain and helplessness spilled through his mask. Alexei's finger was ready and willing to apply pressure to the trigger, the kneeling Freedomer positioned neatly in the centre of his sight. He couldn't ask for an easier target.

The rumbling ceased. The man removed his hands from his head, panting with momentary relief. Alexei began to squeeze...but something was holding him back. Best get it over with, he told himself. After all, the guy deserved it and would've already done the same if the tables were turned. It wasn't about the prestige or the thrill of putting an enemy of your cause into the ground. It was about survival.

Instead of looking up, the figure quickly pulled himself to his feet, fighting to keep his balance as the ground shuddered, and glanced behind him. His finger still hesitating on the trigger, Alexei followed his gaze. A bright curtain of yellow-orange chaos had engulfed the horizon...and it was heading this way, accompanied by a steadily increasing roar.

The figure snapped back to Alexei. If he didn't shoot him down there, the

Freedomer was going to experience his nervous system being fried to a crisp in about fifteen seconds. Putting a bullet in his head was definitely the more humane option.

Alexei took aim, his heart in his throat. He'd killed in self-defence and under orders, but neither of those applied now. Now he was going to kill out of survival...or was he? The terrifying curtain of light was drawing closer, consuming more and more of the landscape behind the doomed figure. Did he need to do this? Was taking this man's life really warranted? The question swirled around in his mind as the seconds ticked by, holding him back from applying that final bit of fatal pressure to the trigger. He had to make a decision, and quickly.

"PLEASE!" The Freedomer let out a desperate cry for clemency.

Alexei released the trigger and looked past the rifle at the shuddering figure, constantly glancing behind himself at his fast-approaching end. As much as he knew he should, he couldn't do it. Neither his conscience nor his faith would allow it.

Not fully aware of what he was doing, Alexei lifted his rifle and raised his free hand, motioning the figure to come to him.

"Get in here, *now!*"

The man needed no further encouragement and promptly began sprinting up the slope towards the doorway. Alexei quickly sat down and pushed himself against the corner, his weapon trained on the entrance. The figure came barrelling inside, his momentum carrying him into the opposite shelf, smashing into it with a clatter that was barely audible. He reeled backwards and let himself drop to the floor, landing next to the opposite corner beside the broken door. Getting his bearings, he saw Alexei pointing his rifle at him, his own weapon slumped in his lap.

The deafening roar prevented either man from speaking as the wave rolled up to their structure. Alexei was extremely tense, gripping his rifle so tightly that, were it a living thing, he would've crushed the life out of it. His heart was

pounding. He thought of his parents, out there in the world, not knowing where he was. Was this little building safe? If it wasn't, they were both about to suffer a truly agonising death.

The roar reached a crescendo. The shelves rattled furiously as the ground shook even harder. Bright light burst in through the gaps in the roof. The Freedomer yelled out in fear, throwing his hands over his visor and curling his legs in. His rifle still raised, Alexei couldn't help but squeeze his eyes shut and grit his teeth. Please, God, let it be over quickly.

And then the crescendo began to taper off, slowly but gradually decreasing in volume, the light through his eyelids fading.

He opened them. They were both still inside. The rattling subsided to about the same level as when Alexei had first entered. Another wave would be on its way shortly, but now they knew they could survive it. He looked over his rifle at the Freedomer, who was likewise staring at him.

"Huh." Alexei involuntarily let out a relieved grunt, immediately feeling silly and clamping his mouth shut.

"Hehe." The Freedomer echoed.

They both started to chuckle, the pressure and fear of imminent death lifted from their minds with loudening, genial laughter, the weight of circumstances suspended for a brief moment.

But after this moment of relief, they both fell silent again. Alexei still had his gun raised, trying to hold it steady amidst the tremors. Just because the emission hadn't killed them didn't mean the Freedomer wouldn't hesitate as he had. Likewise, the Freedomer was no longer sure of his own safety.

"If you're gonna shoot me, please just get it over with," came his voice, mildly high-pitched and carrying a nervous quiver. He had to speak up over the rumbling.

The guy sounded young, Alexei thought. Maybe not a teen, but not far off either.

"What's your name, kid?" he asked.

There was a pause. The Freedomer was considering whether to answer.

"Misha Astinov," he eventually offered, practically spitting the last word at Alexei: "Freedom."

"Well Misha, are you going to try to kill me?"

Although he couldn't clearly see his eyes, Alexei could feel the hostility from the other side of that visor. And yet, that hostility was tempered by something. Was it fear? Gratitude?

"No..." He didn't sound deceitful, just defeated, but perhaps it only sounded that way because Alexei had grown too trusting. He lowered his rifle.

"Good."

Still keeping an eye on Misha, he stood and looked out. Another thundering roar signalled the approach of the second wave, which had already manifested on the horizon. Nothing else out there. Anyone or anything was either huddled up under shelter like them or had died in the first wave. Misha was peering out too, but he quickly turned his attention back to Alexei.

"Why not?"

Alexei sat down again.

"Why not what?"

"Why haven't you killed me?"

Under normal circumstances, it'd be a fair question. Despite his beliefs - or, perhaps, because of them - Alexei was more than willing to put any threat to himself, his fellow Dutiers or humanity at large in the ground. But this wasn't like that.

"Been enough dying today," was all he could say.

From behind Misha's respirator came a snigger.

"Funny, coming from a Dutier."

"Why's that?"

Misha checked his Geiger counter, ensuring it was safe in here before pulling up his mask. He was pretty much as Alexei had expected: a thin, smooth face with hair cut down to the scalp and the dusting of a moustache. Couldn't

be older than his early twenties, and that was pushing it.

"Because death is what you deal in. You're all about killing things. People, mutants, this whole place if you could."

Ugh, another misguided youth. Just what he needed.

"How would you know, kid?" he replied wearily. "You ain't part of Duty, dunno who we are, what we do, the lengths we go to keep people safe."

"Oh yeah?" Misha leapt up in return. Alexei initially gripped his weapon, but Misha made no effort to reach for his. It swayed on his sling as he became animated with frustration. "Is that why you lot killed my friends? To keep people *safe*?!"

"If your friends were threatening people, then yes," Alexei shot back quickly.

"*Threatening* people?" Misha stepped towards him in anger. "They were no threat to anyone! They never hurt anybody, at least not those that didn't deserve it! Understand, you brainwashed shit?!"

Alexei also scrambled to his feet now, gun in hand but not aiming it at Misha. He'd heard these sorts of insults about Duty before, but having them spat directly at him was different. His temper was beginning to flare. Nevertheless, he kept his cool – he wanted to see if the Freedomer was genuine, or just mouthing off.

"Really? They didn't hurt anyone, you say? So what happened to them? How did they die?"

Misha composed himself a little. He waited for the thundering wave to pass by before explaining:

"Near the Barrier. They, they were on duty, taking their turn to defend it. My friends, Pavel and Arkady. They had another with them, that Bulgarian, Dimitar. He..." It was a struggle to recount what had happened, the pain still fresh. "He was the only survivor."

Alexei frowned. Near the Barrier? No reason for Duty to ordinarily be over that way. Misha must be mistaken.

"The Barrier, huh? What happened to them? You sure it was Duty?"

"Yes, I'm sure!" Misha shouted angrily. "Dimitar, he told me later, when he got back. They'd been...they'd been getting high..."

"Aha, well then..." Alexei couldn't help but smirk slightly, feeling vindicated. The Freedomer hadn't deserved the chance he'd given him after all. "Obviously they were in a clear state of mind."

"*Fuck you!*" Misha jabbed a gloved finger at him. He shuffled on his feet, staring Alexei in the eyes with rage. "You know why?! There'd been an attack on the Barrier the day before. Damn zombies from the north, lots of them. The three of them had fought them off, killed all of them. You killed zombies before, Dutier?"

"Quite a few. Like shooting fish in a barrel."

"Yeah, yeah, if the fish have guns and some of them you know! Some of them were our friends, Freedomers and loners we knew who had headed north and never came back, or-or were captured and dragged away by the fucking Monolith into the psy fields. Pavel, he'd...he'd had to kill one of his friends in that attack, a guy who'd come with him to the Zone."

Anger was giving way to grief. Misha stopped shuffling and slumped down on the stone floor once more. Despite his uncertainty over what had happened and the belief that Misha was mistaken, that Duty hadn't attacked this Freedomer's friends, Alexei felt a pang of sorrow in his heart. He stood in front of him, letting go of his rifle and letting it dangle, hooking a gloved hand into his plate carrier.

"So, what happened to them?"

"I'm not sure." Misha admitted. "I only know what Dimitar told me, but it was Duty. It was late, they'd been getting high around the fire, like I said, when there was a shot and Arkady fell. The others ran to hide and see where it came from, but they didn't know. Dimitar said he'd tried to run from the sandbags to the long pipes to make them shoot at him. Then Pavel could see where they were and shoot back - he had night vision goggles, been bragging about them ever since he got them off Skinflint. Dimitar didn't."

Alexei's curiosity was piqued now.

"Go on."

"Anyway, Dimitar ran, but no one shot at him. It was weird. He said Pavel might've seen them, saw him put his gun over the bags to try to shoot them then..." He lowered his head. "...when there was another shot and he went down, too."

"But they never shot at Dimitar?"

"No. He ran away, tried to get back to the base, but...they stopped him." Misha looked at Alexei. His expression was both angry and confused. "One of them asked Dimitar to take back a message."

"What message?"

"That Freedom at the Barrier aren't safe from Duty." Anger was taking over now. He spat through clenched teeth, his eyeballs bulging out of their sockets with rage. "Y-you killed them! You killed them for *fucking sport!*"

Alexei, meanwhile, was thoroughly taken aback.

"What?! No, i-it can't be..."

"It *WAS!*"

"We've got orders, orders from Voronin not to attack Freedom unless it's absolutely necessary or we have to defend ourselves. No one is going out and shooting your guys for fun!" He was becoming agitated.

"You expect me to believe you?!" Misha yelled. "That you've got 'orders'? How do I know that you're not lying, not coming after us? And even if you're telling the truth and Voronin *did* give you orders, it's not like you all have to follow them..."

"Listen, kid," Alexei looked into Misha's widened pupils. "You don't understand. You're not in Duty. I know that Freedom can be well-organised when it wants to be, but it's different. Orders for us? They're sacred. They dictate our operations and our behaviour out here. They aren't suggestions. If orders come from the general, they are not to be ignored. Remember Colonel Skull?"

"I...no, I wasn't here then," Misha admitted. "But other Freedomers have said about him."

"Right. Voronin ordered us *not* to attack Freedom, but Skull disobeyed and tried anyway. Had he come back alive, he'd have been shit-caned and kicked out, guaranteed. Maybe it was a good thing for him that he didn't."

"Then why? Why did your men kill my friends?!" See-sawing between anger and grief, tears came to Misha's eyes.

"Maybe it wasn't us. Maybe it was someone pretending, someone who wanted to..."

He stopped. Suddenly, it had come to him.

"Who? Who else could it be?" Misha cried out. "The mercs? They've got no beef with us. Bandits? Sure, they're some fucked up arseholes, but we both get along and stay out of each other's way. You ever seen Renegades this far north?"

"No, it wasn't them..."

"Then who?!"

Alexei's expression was both grave and resigned. Just saying the name aloud made him feel disgusted.

"Malashenko."

Misha cocked his head to one side, a couple of tears trickling down his face.

"Who's Malashenko?"

"Freedom don't talk about Captain Malashenko?"

"No, I...I don't think so."

With a sigh, Alexei sat down next to him, lifting his mask to lighten the burden on his breathing and more easily explain. By this point, he felt confident that Misha wasn't going to try anything.

"Captain Malashenko used to be in the army, like me. And I think, like me, he left because he felt the army wasn't doing enough to contain the Zone, and was instead wasting our time – and our lives – chasing after loners. Just people who're trying to make a living in this goddamn hellscape. Not what I signed up

for when I joined."

"You and this Malashenko ran off to join Duty?" Misha sat up, wanting to know more.

"Oh no, I left first. Malashenko came later. If I'd known he'd join, I might've had second thoughts..."

"Why? Is he a prick?"

Alexei looked at him, not sure if this was genuine curiosity or he just wanted to understand what had happened to his friends. The surrealness of the situation at hand wasn't lost on him, chatting to a guy whose acquaintances - and, under other circumstances, this guy himself - he would kill without hesitation.

"That doesn't cover it. In the army, Malashenko had a reputation. Arrogant, determined, cruel. He was a real bloodhound. The higher-ups liked him - you gave him a job, he'd get it done, no questions asked. Was known to, uh, 'play with his food', as it were. Complaints about him were ignored 'cause he was reliable."

"'Play with his food'? How?"

Alexei sighed.

"Like torturing people he captured before executing them. Forcing prisoners into anomaly fields at gunpoint to watch them get electrocuted, fried, ripped apart for his own amusement. Used to lead a group of military stalkers who enjoyed it almost as much as he did. Bastards," he spat. "Commissioned stalkers are the lowest of the low, guys who have turned on their own for money, worse than the damn mercs."

"He did that to everyone, loners as well?" Misha sounded slightly horrified.

"Actually, that was one thing we usually agreed on: the loners didn't deserve being hunted. He didn't hate them, just thought they were lowlifes, people for whom a bullet wouldn't be a bad thing. But bandits and mercs were a different story, and they're enemies of the loners as well, so those military stalkers enjoyed his antics with them."

"And I guess he hasn't changed since he joined Duty?"

"Not a bit. Don't think he enjoys staying neutral with the loners, but he just avoids him. Some of them even know of him, but being in Duty gives him protection from them...or at least, it has so far. I don't think Voronin or Petrenko like him, but it's the same deal as before: no one turfs him out 'cause he's good at what he does."

"So..." Misha brought them back to what had started this. "...you think *he's* the bastard who killed my friends?"

Alexei looked at him with resignation. He felt embarrassed, sad and a bit guilty. But why? He hadn't done it. Was it because he was part of the same outfit that Malashenko now also represented?

"I can't be sure, kid, but it definitely sounds like him. It's his style all over. As I said, we're under orders not to tangle with you guys unless we have to. But Malashenko? He wouldn't give a shit about that, he'd go and collect scalps for fun." He was fairly convinced now. "That's why he's not bragging about it - he can't let the general or the colonel know he's doing it, or he's out for disobeying orders. He's keeping it quiet, the sly piece of shit."

Misha's face creased up in an irate fashion, angry at the thought that his friends had, quite possibly, been killed for sport. His eyes welled up again.

"The...the fucking..."

"I'm sorry, kid," Alexei found himself saying without meaning to. "I'm sorry about your friends. But this isn't Duty. We don't go killing people for fun, it's not our way."

"But what about *him*? What about that piece of shit Malashenko? You're not stopping him!" Misha coughed through his tears.

"I'll talk to Petrenko. He's heard the rumours about Malashenko, I can tell him I've heard about him killing some Freedomers from someone else and ask him to look into it. And you," Alexei pointed a finger at him, "you don't tell anyone when you get back that this happened. Don't want my lot hearing that I had some heart-to-heart with a damn hippie."

Involuntarily, his mouth curled into a warm grin, and through his sadness and anger, something in Misha made him weakly return the smile.

"Okay, I won't."

The shaking had long subsided, but the clouds that Alexei could see through the window were still dark. They both peered out of the doorway. The sky towards the CNPP was ruptured by a sea of yellow and orange light, forking off into long arms that split the clouds apart. Although he'd seen it many times before, the terrific beauty of the scene never failed to strike him, something so terrible that was also extraordinarily captivating.

"Man," Misha sighed in awe, pointing at this terrific display. "How do you guys ever hope to defeat that? What hope do you have of destroying it?"

Alexei's response was both conciliatory and resolute.

"Honestly, I don't think we can. But we have to try, at least prevent it spreading. We can't let that happen. Can't let it endanger people out there. Even as a member of Freedom, I'm sure you can understand that."

Misha looked at him with a curious expression.

"Sure, we have to fight some things here. Mutants, Monolith, people that try to kill us. But we can't destroy it...and we shouldn't!"

"Why not?" Alexei could feel that they were heading towards a point where he'd have to agree to disagree.

"Because the Zone is a gift for some of us. It's dangerous, sure. There're lots of things here that aren't good," Misha reflected. "Bandits stealing from those who already have nothing. Bloodsuckers tearing our patrols apart after dark. Those fanatics massacring anyone who isn't one of them, trying to turn the Scorcher back on. Life here is hard. But..." He looked at Alexei sincerely. "...it's a chance, you know? Our chance for us to be something here that we weren't out there. A chance for something new. Lots of us in Freedom, we owe our lives to this place, away from the problems out there. I guess it's the same in Duty, no? I mean, *you* left the army to do something different here."

During his time in Duty, Alexei had never thought of it like that. His military

service had lost him several things, namely his marriage and his children. Although he'd certainly not requested it, the posting here was what he'd needed. Something to keep him away from the outside world, away from the emptiness that awaited him outside his military life. But now? This was his home. The Zone had given him something that he'd struggled to find outside: purpose. Misha, to his surprise, was right.

"Well, kid, I can't argue with that." He looked at him and smiled. "Anyway, why d'you come to the Zone? Why join Freedom?"

Misha's temper had mellowed now. He looked more relaxed, but his eyes were still solemn.

"There was nothing left for me back home in Odessa. Struggled to find work after school, met some people, did what I had to do to make money. Or, what I *thought* I had to do. Got caught. My parents didn't want to know me when I got out of prison, so I used what money I had left to come here. A land of opportunity, people say. A place where you can get rich, become whoever you want to be...if you survive. I wasn't worried about living anymore. If I die? No problem. If I live and earn myself a living? Great, I'll finally have a life of my own."

"You don't miss your family? Girlfriend?"

The question did make Misha pause for a moment, but he found the answer quickly.

"Not enough to stay, or give this up and go back. Not that I can anyway, don't have enough money." His face drooped a bit. "My family probably don't care where I am."

"That's not true." Alexei couldn't help but snigger.

"And how would *you* know?" Misha snapped at him.

Alexei, however, was totally unphased. He understood that kind of emotion.

"They'll always care about you. Your parents are probably worried if they don't know where you are...and if they do know, they'll be even *more* worried! They were angry at you, at what they thought you'd become. But they still care."

Misha dwelt on his words, turning them over in his mind.

"Hey," he eventually exclaimed, "maybe if I make enough money, I can get out of here and start over. Show them that I've made something of myself. Maybe they'll accept me again!"

He looked at Alexei with newfound optimism, who shrugged. He didn't want to get Misha's hopes up.

"Maybe...but what would you do with the money once you had it?"

The optimism dulled slightly.

"I dunno, maybe...maybe open a shop in Odessa?"

"Like what?"

"Like...a sex shop?"

This prompted Alexei to snort with laughter.

"A sex shop?! Who dreams of opening a sex shop???"

"Hey, people need that kind of stuff, alright?" Although defending his idea, Misha was likewise chucking at the thought. "You know, there're so many Maxims and Playboys going around here, I wouldn't even need to stock up on them! Could just take back what I can collect here...but I suppose I'd still need...well, toys."

Alexei was cackling uncontrollably now. He put a glove to his brow.

"Dear God, Misha, the Zone certainly does things to people."

"Yeah, sure does..." Also chuckling slightly, Misha cocked his head once again. "You still haven't told me your name."

"Sergeant Alexei Bagan." He held out his hand. "Duty."

Hesitantly, Misha took it and gave it a firm shake.

"Can't believe I'm saying this, but good talking to you, Alexei...or, *Sergeant*," he added sarcastically.

It suddenly occurred to Alexei how bright it had become inside. He glanced out of the window. The dark clouds had cleared, replaced with a blue sky blemished with white streaks.

"We'd better get going. You go first. I'll wait for a bit and then head back to Rostok, so we're not seen together."

Misha's smile straightened into a more serious look.

"Thanks for not killing me, Alexei."

Unsure what to say, Alexei smirked slightly.

"Don't mention it, kid...but, um..." He felt a bit awkward having to bring it up, but it needed to be said. "...it's probably best if our paths never cross again. Might not recognise you anyway." He gave him a friendly nod, struggling to hold back a snigger. "Good luck with your family, and the...sex shop."

Misha flicked his head in return.

"Good luck with...whatever, I guess. Have fun saving the world from us 'anarchists' and bandits."

"Yeah, yeah, don't push it," Alexei waved a hand in dismissal. "Get out of here."

Pulling down his mask and poking his head outside, Misha checked that the coast was clear before stepping outside. Alexei looked around at their little sanctuary one last time. He lifted his Kalashnikov, pulling the bolt back partially to make sure it was loaded and ready to go.

"STOP!"

The next few seconds passed in front of Alexei's eyes at a glacial pace. He snapped to the door. Misha was on the damp grass, no more than several paces from the building. It wasn't his voice. Startled by the sudden shout, he whirled around, bringing his weapon up.

CRACK, CRACK!

The shots made Alexei shudder. Misha was thrown like a doll to the ground with a stifled gasp. Alexei rushed forward and hid himself behind the broken door. The shots had come from the left side of the structure. Very close. He pulled himself into the corner, careful to stay out of sight through the entrance. There was another noise. The mechanical thunking and hissing of an exoskeleton. *Shit*, that wasn't good...

...but before he reached for a magazine of armour-piercing rounds on his plate carrier, a thought came to him. There was no reciting of Monolith prayers

or chants...and they weren't far from Rostok...

"D-Duty?" he tentatively called.

The thinking stopped. The only sounds he could hear for several seconds were Misha's sporadic wriggling on the soft earth and his choked gurgling. Then the voice spoke again.

"Whoever's in there, come out slowly, arms raised."

A wash of relief came over Alexei for the briefest of moments before a chill shot down his spine.

He knew that voice.

"Captain Malashenko?"

Another pause.

"Who is that?"

Alexei squeezed his eyelids and clamped his mouth shut. Why, God, why him...

"Sergeant Bagan," he reluctantly replied.

"Hmm," the voice grunted. "Out you come, Sergeant."

He didn't want to...but there was no escaping this. Alexei edged round the door, keeping a hand on his rifle's trigger grip but holding it low, barrel down, the other hand away from the weapon. Three figures stood over Misha, who was still squirming and struggling to breath. The nearest one was clad in the distinctive red and black colours of a Duty exoskeleton. The captain. The other two were wearing standard combat suits. With helmets and masks covering their heads, Alexei didn't recognise them.

"Well, well, Sergeant." Muffled by the exo's mask, Malashenko's voice was tinged with his characteristic malevolence. "We were wondering when - or if - you'd be back at Rostok."

Alexei wasn't really listening to his words. All he could hear was Misha's desperate gurgling for air. One bullet had been stopped by his body armour, but the other had caught him in the neck. Blood was pouring out of the wound and soaking into the grass around him as, with less and less vigour, he vainly

gasped for life.

"Sergeant!" The captain rose his voice, causing Alexei to look back at him. "Could you please explain what happened here?"

What should he say? What could he do? It was painfully obvious what had happened. Malashenko would, of course, inform Petrenko. What would happen then? Would Alexei be kicked out of Duty for what Malashenko would likely describe as 'fraternisation'? Or would Malashenko decide to kill him here himself, make it look as though Misha had killed him? No, no, as much of a twisted individual as he was, he wouldn't do that...would he?

"Mama..." was the only thing Misha could utter hoarsely. His wriggling had become little more than spasms and only the faintest breaths were audible. Through the eyepieces, his eyes were on Alexei. He could see the pupils emptying.

Could he inform Petrenko or even Voronin about Malashenko's 'hunting' activities? It'd be their words against one another, and Malashenko's pals here would back him up. He couldn't afford to have rumours swirling around about some friendship with a Freedomer, either.

"You know?" Malashenko's voice yanked him back to the present once again. "This is great. I always thought you were a weak link, Bagan. Someone with ideals and morals way above their station. Someone who loved to look down on others when, in reality, you didn't have a leg to stand on. Now I know that to be true."

The thinking accompanied the captain as he ambled over to Misha, watching him expire with what appeared to be grotesque interest...and enjoyment.

"I could tell the colonel or even the general about what I saw here today...but where's the fun in that?" He turned back to Alexei, looking him square in the eye. Although it couldn't be seen, his mouth was probably curling into a smirk. "No, I'm going to keep this to myself. You'll always know that I'm holding your little secret, and you'll hate me for it, which is just wonderful. And should you

ever try to cross swords with me, I might let some people know about it. What do you say?"

Still silent, Alexei looked at the other two Dutiers beside him. It was hard to keep his eyes off Misha, who was now chillingly still.

Not quite able to believe he was contemplating it, he thought about killing Malashenko and his lackeys, raising his rifle and blasting away for all it was worth, hoping against hope that he could catch them unawares and take them down before they could react. But his Kalashnikov wasn't loaded up with that armour-piercing ammunition, and normal rounds would do little to that exoskeleton. What if he pretended to walk away, load them up and try to get them from afar? It was a tempting possibility...

...but no. As much as Alexei wanted nothing more than to gun them down where they stood, he knew that it wasn't right. It would go against his convictions. Besides, even if he somehow succeeded – which would take a miracle – the bodies would be found, and the colonel knew where he'd been today. It wouldn't take much to figure it out.

"Sergeant?" the captain enquired coldly. "You're quieter than usual today. Bit of a new experience for you, is it not? Being the one under scrutiny?"

There was only one thing to do, one method of releasing Malashenko's grip over him and never having to see the bastard again. He didn't want to do it - Duty had been Alexei's family, and he'd gone through hell on occasion to carry out their work, something he believed in...or at least, he had. But that family would turn on him if Malashenko ever let slip, and it would only be a matter of time before he did just that.

No, he didn't have another choice.

With his free hand, Alexei reached over to the patch on his right arm and, with a sharp and forceful tug, yanked it free. Under the curious eyes of the others, he did the same with the left arm.

"What're you doing?" Malashenko wasn't just confused. There was an uncharacteristic quiver in his voice. Nervousness had suddenly crept in.

Alexei tossed the patches onto Misha's body, as if they were a parting gift to take with him to heaven. Then he simply turned his back on all of them, looking towards Rostok, and began to walk away.

"You...you can't walk away from this, Bagan!" Malashenko called after him loudly and irately. "You're a sergeant of Duty, man!"

His boots thumped softly against the grass, stained on the edges by Misha's blood, as he left them all, his life in Duty and maybe even his very existence behind. Alexei closed his eyes, his heart throbbing in his ears and butterflies in his stomach, acutely aware that he may imminently hear the crack of rifles and bullets piercing his back. He muttered more to himself than to Malashenko:

"Not anymore."