

Guard Duty
by Christian O'Kane

It was almost dawn by the time Misha reached the area. The desert at night was a wondrous thing. For a place that was so hot during the day at night the desert got very cold and made him glad to have fur. Most of the state of New Mexico was like this, rolling desert devoid of any signs of civilization. Even the native Americans avoided these areas.

The figure was only five feet, four inches tall and thin, weighing barely one hundred, forty pounds. His features were an even mix of human and fox. He walked upright like a man but on digitigrade legs ending in paws like the hind legs of a fox. His body was shaped like a human but was covered with the thick fur of a fox. His head was a classic vulpine one right down to the pointed ears. From his back sprouted a pair of wings with feathers that were jet black at the moment. When spread out the wings had a wingspan of over fifteen feet. This odd figure was wearing the camouflaged clothing worn by army soldiers. In his hands was a massive bow instead of an assault rifle. On his back, tucked neatly between the vulpine's wings was a quiver filled with a large number of arrows.

Up ahead he could see the lights of the facility he was looking for. The official name for the place was complex 24. It was on a military reservation and technically part of Camp Marrow but the camp covered an area of several hundred square miles. The main post of the camp was so far from complex 24 that the usual means of getting between the two was helicopter. It meant that they could conduct their research there with little chance of being bothered by people just wandering by.

Projected onto his sight by tapping directly into his optic nerves were a series of displays. They gave him a map of the area, what was around him as well as his speed, height and the direction he was headed. Suddenly a small, yellow light came on, flashing slowly. Below it was a direction and distance. It was telling him that a search radar had picked him up as well as the direction and distance of the radar.

"Attention," came a voice broadcasting over a radio channel. "This is restricted airspace. Identify yourself."

He came to a halt. Hovering in midair, twenty meters above the desert floor. "This is Wagon wheel 22," Misha responded. "Transmitting the ID code now." The fox like super called up a small file with the needed code on it. The code itself was merely a series of letters and numbers chosen at random.

"Confirmed," the voice on the radio responded. "Please land on the marked helipad."

"Thank you," Misha replied and started flying forward again. He could see the facility better now. It was a dozen buildings of various sizes and shapes all surrounded by a barrier of two lines of chain link fence. In one corner he saw a tall concrete pylon that towered over everything. In the center of the compound was a large section of concrete with a large letter H in yellow.

Around it was small blinking, red lights. Standing off to one side were three people he took to be the reception committee.

Misha flew over the fencing noting the coils of razor wire that decorated the top along its entire length. He banked around a tall tower covered with various antennas. He folded his wings and slowly powered down the gravitic module that allowed him to fly. The super neatly landed in the center of the helipad.

He walked to where the three people were waiting. A tall, dark skinned woman wearing the camouflaged clothing of an army officer walked towards him. The field cap on her head had the bars of a captain. Misha came to attention and gave a crisp salute. "Staff sergeant Brightleaf reporting as ordered."

"The officer returned the salute. "Captain Waters," she answered.

"*Waters, Andrea, Captain U.S. Army. Masters degree in optical physics,*" came the soft voice in his mind. That voice belonged to the nanites who had given him his powers and even now moved through his body.

Captain Waters pointed to an older man dressed in a business suit. "This is Jamie Walden, head of the facilities here."

Walden, Jamie, no military service but has been with DARPA for fifteen years. He was until three years ago on the analytic team studying Rikti technology. Has degrees in electronics and optics."

Next to that man was another dressed in a shirt and jeans that had faded and had seen better days. There was a pistol on his belt and with police baton.. His athletic body, the tough, calm manner and the hard look in his eyes spoke of a professional soldier or a policeman. "This is Adam Bednar, chief of security here."

"Bednar, Adam, Gunnery sergeant U.S. marine corp, retired. He has a long and distinguished career. DSC, three purple hearts, Navy cross. Marine recon and served on Guam and Hawaii during the Rikti war."

Misha extended his hand and shook hands with both of the civilians. "Thank you." then he turned to the captain. "Captain. We served together a few years ago in Africa."

The woman had a puzzled look on her face for a moment. "We have?"

"Operation Toaster," Misha explained. "It was before I acquired all this fur."

She smiled and her face brightened. "Of course! Good to be working with you again."

"Have you been briefed on the situation here?" Bednar asked bluntly.

"Some," Misha answered. "The exact nature of project Crabgrass was not revealed to me but I was briefed on the general layout of the facilities and the place looks pretty tight."

"Let's go to my office where we can talk without anyone over hearing us," the head of the facility ordered.

"What makes you think someone will make an attempt to break in here?" Jamie asked. The small group was now in his office which seemed no different than any office Misha had ever been in."

"I recently staged an attack on a Sky Raider supply base. Most of the bases database was wiped but we did find some very detailed information on the complex and project Crabgrass."

"So you think the Raiders will strike here?" the captain asked.

Misha nodded his head. "I'm sure of it. The data I have is incomplete unfortunately but probably soon."

"That doesn't help," the captain commented. "A lot of groups could be interested in the work we do here."

Misha pointed to the computer that sat on the directors desk. "Show them the information we recovered," he ordered silently.

"Already working on it," the nanites answered. The computer screen came up and after a moment of showing a blue desktop screen an image came up.

"I'm sure you recognize that map," Misha commented.

All three peered at the image for a moment. "That's a pretty accurate map of the facility," the chief said softly.

"There is also a partial guard schedule," Misha explained. "I believe they've had this place under surveillance for several months."

Bednar nodded his head slowly. "That makes sense."

"What do you have here to work with?" Misha asked.

"The complex is protected by a fence line twenty feet high that also extends just as far underground. Outside that is a belt of several different types of sensors that extend for a quarter mile. In addition we have radar working. The exterior fence is electrified but we keep the power

down so it only issues a mild shock. When an alert occurs," the chief explained. "The power level on the fences is boosted to stun levels and can be boosted to fatal levels. In addition all the doors and windows lock and stay that way unless specifically unlocked with a code. For actual firepower there are five twin Gatling gun automated turrets. One at each corner and one at the main gate itself. They are capable of engaging ground and air targets. There is also a 2 launcher battery of MIM-120 surface to air missiles."

"What about personnel?" Misha asked.

"I have thirty people all handpicked by me and Mr. Walden. All of them are ex-military and have a level 3 security clearance," the chief answered.

"Thankfully the teleport network is up and working," Misha commented. "I noticed the teleport pylon on my way in."

"Yes," the chief answered. "It's connected to the main post teleport network. And if there is a problem we can have a response platoon here in under 30 minutes."

"Thirty minutes is a long time," Misha commented.

The man nodded. "Agreed but there is a limit to what I have. Camp Marrow is a big place with lots of things to defend. I would have preferred the project be closer to the main post but that was not my decision," he snarled.

"That decision was made by others," Jamie said in a cold tone. "It was placed here because the main post has far too much traffic in it for security."

Misha realized he had stumbled into an old and long running argument. Isolation was preferred because it meant less worry about people just randomly going past. This far out in the desert meant that the only people who came out here were here solely for the complex. But in a city or a crowded military post there were countless people wandering past; headed to lunch, headed home, walking the dog or just out for a stroll. Each one had to be watched carefully. But being so far out meant that the complex was alone. If they were attacked those 30 minutes could feel like forever.

"Has the post teleport system been checked?" the super asked. "The Sky Raiders have a nasty habit of hacking into it almost at will."

"We have beefed up the security considerably and it is at a military grade," the captain explained.

"There is still a weakness," the nanites added silently. "but if the Raiders do use the teleport system we will know it instantly as will everyone else."

"ALARM!" came the loud shot throughout the room followed by the loud shriek of an alarm whistle screaming in the darkness. "Unauthorized teleport in progress! We have weapons fire and explosions in sector four!"

"At least fifteen Raiders have already used the network and are inside the wire!"

Misha raced through the doorway without bothering to opening it, turning the door into an impromptu shrapnel blast. He already had his bow up and an arrow nocked, ready for a fight. Looking around he heard gunfire and saw tracers flying through the air. There was a firefight going on off to the left. "Sitrep!" he ordered.

The vulpine sprinted towards the sound of gunfire and came to the corner of a building. He stopped and carefully peered around the corner. Misha saw a half dozen of the security guards crouched behind a concrete barrier about thirty feet in front of him. They were shooting at someone about twenty feet beyond the barrier. His own computer and the nanites displayed a lot of information onto his eyesight. Every person within sight was carefully identified along with the range to them and their estimated threat level. Also in his vision was the temperature and wind direction. Suddenly Misha heard a loud whooshing sound and a ball of light appeared behind the guards.

The archer took careful aim at the light, adjusting his bow slightly to improve the shot and waited. He knew exactly what was coming as he had fought the raider teleporters before. The light grew wider and a figure appeared wearing the blue and white armor of a Skyraider. The raider raised his weapon and took aim at the guards back. Misha's arrow buried itself in the raiders back and he tumbled to the ground.

"They are jamming us. We are picking up extensive ECM activity but we are able to burn through it. We now have at least twenty intruders inside the wire," came the report from the nanites and his own computer. *"They snuck in close and then teleported inside. Security reacted very quickly!"*

"They have already breached the north line," came Bednars voice over the regular security communications channels. "All fences are now at alert power levels so stay away from them. We have already contacted the main post and they are scrambling support."

With the Raider ambush defeated Misha nocked another arrow, this one with the thick cylindrical head packed with explosives. He looked in the direction that the guards were firing and quickly picked out seven figures. The fox loosed the arrow and watched it arc through the air before it landed with a loud explosion that sent raiders and debris flying in all directions.

It was his enhanced senses and reflexes that saved him. He caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eyes and saw something coming at him. Misha twisted out of the way and an arrow raced past. Missing his head by mere inches. the super looked in the direction the arrow had come from and caught a glimpse of a figure ducking behind a building. The archer snapped

off an arrow which disappeared off in to the darkness. The vulpine super opened his wings and flew off after his attacker.

"Alarms have tripped at building 237. Someone is attempting to cut open door 3."

"That's the main lab."

"Also in building 232 we have someone attempting to access the system from a pc."

"I'm headed to 237 now," Misha answered. He banked sharply to the left and headed for the lab building. "Are they getting into the system?"

"You're joking right? It's insulting to even ask. We've blocked access and we're taking measures to be sure this hacker does not try again."

Misha raced along the ground barely a foot above the pavement. He dodged past a garbage pail and around a bicycle rack. "We need prisoners so try not to kill him."

"No problem. We'll just put a little scare into him!"

"Now I am worried. Try not to traumatize him too much."

In a small building which bore the number 232 in one of the countless cubicles that filled it was a man wearing a blue and white jumpsuit. Slung across his back was a powerful assault rifle whose design had been stolen from the American military. He was seated in front of a computer. Already he had broken the simple log on password and was busy exploring the pc's hard drive and what he could access over the network. The man smiled as he broke past another password and got into a secure database.

"Hurry Philips," another raider ordered. This one was standing behind the hacker and was looking all about. "We need to get out of here fast."

"I know that," Philips answered without stopping his work. "But this takes time. The security is top rate." Suddenly the mouse in his right hand exploded with a loud pop covering his hand with hundreds of small spots. The spots grew legs and in moments his entire arm was completely covered with a horde of spiders. This living, black mass crept up his arm headed for his shoulder, neck and head. His screams of terror brought the guards attention to him. That man let out a curse and ran, leaving his struggling and panic stricken friend behind.

On the radio Misha could hear Bednar shouting orders. He was only half listening aware that the nanites would inform him of anything important that he missed. His own internal computer was constantly displaying a small map for him that gave the exact situation. The fox slowed

down as he approached building 237. A quick look around revealed three men crowded around a steel security door. Two were standing guard and the third was using a laser cutter to try and cut through the door. He stopped and landed, tucking his body deep into the shadows of an overhanging roof. One of the guards spotted him and fired a burst from his weapon. The bullets bounced off of Misha's body armor. He snapped off three arrows in quick succession and the two raiders on guard dropped to the ground. The remaining one swung around and fired the laser straight at the super. The beam hit his armor and burned a hole through it and into the flesh behind. Misha ignored the pain and shot an arrow at the man. It caught him in the chest and sent him tumbling backward. A second arrow made him collapse to the ground.

"Do you always treat guests like that?" a woman's voice said suddenly.

Misha turned to the voice and spotted a figure thirty feet away and partially hidden by an overturned car. An arrow slammed into his chest sending him tumbling out from underneath the overhanging roof. He rolled on the ground for a moment. "That wasn't nice," Misha growled as he grabbed his bow and stood up.

"It's the fantastic Mr. Fox," the woman's voice said cheerfully. "I've heard all about you."

"Thank you," Misha said as he looked around for the woman but was unable to find her. The raiders were jamming all the complexes sensors and he had to rely on his own senses. "I think."

"MY, what a big, long tail you have," she said in a sultry voice. "Are you compensating for something else being small?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Misha answered as his ears swiveled about trying to locate the source of the voice.

There was a moment of silence.. "Perhaps I would!"

From above. The words were coming from above him. Misha scanned upwards using infrared and spotted a figure hovering just above the roof of the building. On the roof below her were a group of raiders clustered around a skylight. He picked out the attacker with a laser cutter in hand and with two quick arrows sent his body tumbling off the roof and to the pavement.

A storm of fire roared out chewing up the ground around him and the wall behind him. Bullets ricocheted off the armor covering his chest, arms and legs and an arrow buried itself in his stomach. Misha ignored them all, the cybernetics inside cutting off the pain and already working to stop the bleeding. He just kept shooting arrows as fast as he could. Body after body tumbled down off the roof like the first one until it was empty. Misha took hold of the arrow in his stomach and calmly and slowly removed it. Misha examined the projectile for a moment. Then he fit it to his bow and shot it back at the woman.

His target was already moving by that time but his aim was true and she let out a curse as the projectile buried itself in her own leg. She dropped low to the ground and disappeared behind a burning building.

Misha took off after her but stopped himself after flying a short distance. His job was to keep the secrets here secret and not a one on one duel like something out of an old western movie. He turned back to the building and spotted six figures crowded around a door. The fox snapped off an explosive tipped arrow and watched the raiders get flung in all directions by the blast. Only four of them got up and three of those did not get far before more arrows dropped them. "Aren't we persistent," he muttered out loud.

"Foxes are supposed to be friendly little creatures," came the woman's voice.

"Are you here to kill me or talk me to death," Misha countered as he looked around for her.

"Neither," she explained. "I'm here to steal some top secret equipment. Which would be easier if you wouldn't keep getting in the way."

"Never happen," Misha growled. He was still unable to locate her. "This equipment is for my friends on active duty. Not traitors and thieves like you."

"So you were a soldier."

"I still am. My orders are to stop you and those traitors," he explained. His contempt all too apparent. The fox tucked himself against a building, his human like form blending into the shadows.

"The main airborne sensor tower is down. We've lost radar and ladar," came security chiefs voice over the radio.

"We are rerouting readings from the sensors at the main camp. The details are vague but it's better than nothing," came the nanites voice over the radio for all to hear. "Be advised we are picking up aerial targets that are probably Sky skiffs."

There was a loud laugh over the radio. "They've had to commit the heavies," came Bednar's voice. "That means we're hurting them badly."

"We have picked up an explosion inside building 237," A voice said over the radio.

"All right," Misha replied. "I'm there already. I'll take care of the issue." With those words he raced along the wall till he came to the corner. He paused a moment and then peered quickly around. Just as quickly pulled his head back as bullets ripped through the wall. He closed his eyes for a moment as splinters peppered his face.

The vulpine reached down to his belt and pulled off a small green colored metal globe. Misha pulled the pin and then tossed the grenade around the corner. There was a loud explosion and flames and shrapnel shot past him. He was unhurt, protected by the corner of the building. Without hesitating he charged around the corner and into the smoke. All he found was bits of debris scattered around an open door. Of the man who had shot at him there was no sign.

Misha looked through the open door and then ducked swiftly inside moving away from the doorway as fast as possible. The inside of the building was one large open area with a few rooms along the walls. Arraigned neatly around the room was a wide variety of equipment and machinery.

Misha spotted a figure standing near one of the doors along the left wall. The Raider was carrying a large bulky looking weapon that he suspected was a flamethrower. The fox was sure while he only saw one but there were certainly others nearby, probably in one of the rooms. Misha reached into a large pouch that hung on the back of his belt. The fox opened it with one hand and took a big handful of the items inside. Their sharp points dug into the material of his gloves but did not puncture his skin. He gave a swing of his arm and scattered several dozen of them all over the floor in front of him. Each one of the little items was just small bits of razor-sharp metal twisted so that however they landed at least one sharp point was facing up, just waiting to rip into an unwary foot. It was one of the reasons Misha always wore boots with steel toes and soles.

The super reached into his pouch again and pulled out another handful of caltrops and scattered them in front of the doorway leading back outside. He wanted no unpleasant surprises from behind.

The vulpine archer nocked an arrow in his bow and took careful aim at the raider. The bow snapped and the arrow slammed into the raider who dropped to the floor without uttering a sound. There was a lot of shouting and a half dozen men came boiling out of the door.

Misha greeted the first one through the door with an arrow in the chest. The fox worked fast, nocking and loosing arrows as bullets zinged past him or bounced off his armor. One of raiders rushed at him swinging a machete. Misha blocked the sharp edged blade with his left arm, its armor protecting him from any wound. He lashed out with his right and with a powerful blow sent the man to the floor. Two more came right behind the first and a sharp kick to the stomach sent the hero stumbling backwards.

Misha snapped off an arrow into one of his attackers sending him to the floor. The other raider swung his machete at the vulpine and its sharp edge cut through his armor and the flesh and blood behind it. The fox pulled the knife from his belt and jabbed the blade into the man's chest several times before he realized his attacker was dead. "Next time I carry pistol and a sword!"

He picked up his bow from where it had fallen to the floor and examined it a moment to make sure nothing was damaged. The metal and plastic of the weapon was none the worse for wear. Slowly and cautiously Misha made his way towards the door and the room the raiders were so interested in.

The room was a mess. Someone had blasted open the door with too much explosives demolishing the door and a good portion of the room beyond. Misha walked into the room and looked around. He quickly recognized what they had been after. Along one wall was a large, locker. The thick metal door of which had been crudely cut open.

Inside the locker Misha found a suit of armor. It resembled the plastic and alloy armor worn by all army and marines. The materials used in those were a mix of many things both human and Rikti inventions. He himself was wearing a similar suit but one enhanced by the nanites. The super gently ran his hand and the breastplate of the armor. "It looks the same as regular armor but the surface is definitely different."

"Analyzing. It is different. There is a new layer on the top covering all the exterior surfaces."

"VERY interesting. The layer is made up of very advanced LCD's and has a very complex control system."

"So what is it?" He asked.

"Accessing the control program. OH! This is amazing!" came the nanites voice, filled with delight. *"Optic camouflage. When working properly the system scans the areas around the suit and uses the LCD's to alter the suits looks to match."*

"Are you saying that this would make it's wearing invisible?" Misha asked, amazed.

"Not total invisibility but perhaps 75% coverage. The power usage is very high as is the computing power needed."

"No wonder the Raiders want this system. We cannot allow them to get hold of this. They are a big enough problem as is without these enhancements."

"We could easily adapt this to you!" the nanites commented. *"Your own power plant and processors can handle the load. You could have your own cloaking device!"*

"Cloaking device?" the fox asked. "I think you've been watching too many of the old star Trek episodes."

"And what would you call it?"

"What does DARPA call it?"

"The Active Adaptive Camouflage," was the nanites response. *"Yuck."*

"Good lord. That spells Aak!" the fox said and gave a yip of laughter. "That is bad. Cloaking device sounds better."

His sensitive vulpine ears picked up a noise behind as the scent of a woman reached his nose. Acting more on instinct and training then rational thought Misha leapt to one side propelling his cybernetically enhanced body diving behind a desk. A pair of arrows slammed into the locker wall missing him by inches.

"You are really starting to be an annoyance," came a voice from behind him.

Misha looked around for his bow but could not see it. He reached to his belt and ran his hand among the six grenades there. He went past the spherical, high explosive ones till he came to a grenade that was shaped like a small, thin cylinder. The super pulled the pin and tossed the stun grenade over the desk. He heard it hit the floor and rattle around for a moment before it went off with an ear ringing blast and a blinding flash of light. Misha leapt out from behind the table, his powerful, cybernetic legs propelling him across the room. The air was filled with smoke but he spotted the woman, she was stumbling backward with her hand over her ears.

The woman was only an inch or two taller than he was. The clothing she was wearing seemed to consist of long strips of cloth and fine lace that left most of her skin exposed and barely covered her in the important places. Misha had known strippers in bars to wear more. Her hair was colored a bright red and fell straight to her shoulders. The bow in the woman's hands was a large thing of plastic and Kevlar with a series of pulleys.

The woman looked up just before he reached her and reacted with surprising speed. She blocked his punches and lashed out with a flurry of short, sharp kicks. Misha had to dance backward to avoid getting a shattered leg. He stopped just out of reach of her legs.

She peered at him, her eyes narrowing for a moment before a look of surprise crossed her face. "You really are a fox!" the woman said in a shocked tone.

"You just noticed this?" Misha said sarcastically. He was so surprised by her reaction that he didn't attack.

"Well when they said you were fox like I assumed they meant a costume or a battle suit of some sort. Like that hero Flying Fox," she explained. Suddenly the woman lashed out with her leg aiming for Misha's legs.

He leapt up and her attack flashed below him harmlessly. "No. this is all flesh and blood. Or is that fur and blood?"

"Ah!" she said and smiled as she dodged his own kick at her stomach. "So you're the result of some super secret government project?" The woman tried a quick flurry of punches which Misha easily deflected.

The fox backed off a step and gazed at her. "Please," he responded in an annoyed tone. "You've been watching too many old reruns of Super League on TV."

She gave a bright smile and laughed. "And you've never seen the show?"

"How do you know all about me?" Misha asked, changing the subject. He looked about and spotted his bow lying out in the open. Just out of reach. "The Raiders?"

"Of course!" the woman answered. "They have a rather hefty reward for killing you. I was hoping we'd meet here; it saves me the effort of tracking you down." She crouched down getting ready to leap.

"I'm flattered," the fox answered. "You do know the government has a large reward for killing and capturing Raiders."

The woman paused in her attack. "There is?" she asked with a trace of excitement in her voice.

"Oh yes," Misha explained. "How much depends on who you kill."

Suddenly she let out a loud string of curses and hopped about on one foot.

Misha dropped to the floor where his bow was laying. And in one swift motion he picked it up and loosed an arrow at her and she leapt through the open doorway. Still cursing and swearing. "What the fuck did I step on!"

"My apologies my dear," Misha said cheerfully. "Mind the caltrops."

"They had better not be poisoned," she warned.

"I would never use poison!" Misha growled. "That's a nasty thing to do."

"But effective."

"And also impersonal," Misha answered as he carefully made his way towards the door. He moved slowly wary of a sudden attack by her. "Anyone stepping on them would be poisoned including my own people and civilians. Besides I dipped them in something better! Crap!"

"YUCK! That's just plain gross!" she shrieked. An arrow flew through the door punctuating her point as it sailed past him. "You didn't really dip them in shit?"

"No of course not. That would lead to a very nasty infection."

"I see," she commented from the other side of the doorway. "It's all right to kill me but not to poison me or give me an infection."

"Ah. I never thought of it that way," Misha paused a few feet from the doorway and knelt down looking at it. Through the doorway he could see the ground outside and hear the sounds of gunfire in the distance. A truck was somewhere nearby was burning fiercely and the smoke drifting in and tickling his nose. He detected the faint scent of the woman and knew that she was nearby, unseen. Scattered about was a large amount of unrecognizable debris. "You know," he said as he scanned the area for his assailant. Close to the door was an overturned bench and a small bucket filled with sand and cigarette butts. "I've noticed something about your breasts."

"There's nothing wrong with them," came the shouted answer. The words echoing off the walls around him.

Misha moved to the door and knelt down beside it using the wall for protection as he looked about outside. He caught sight of something moving off to his left and loosed an arrow. The projectile raced off into the darkness. "They are all out of proportion to the rest of your body. You have a little too much padding up top, girl? Are YOU overcompensating for something being too small?"

The fox caught sight of something racing out of the darkness. There was a bright flash and thunderclap. Misha stumbled backward cursing. "Sensory overload," came a warning voice in his mind. "All he could see was spots and a loud ringing in his ears. Then after a moment the nanites in his body compensated and his vision and hearing returned.

"Good lord woman how can you fly straight when you're so top heavy! They are just too big."

"I have an athletic bust you stupid man," she snarled and snapped off an arrow.

Misha twisted his body and the arrow slid past leaving a deep gouge in the armor almost like a claw. "Well, if I were you I'd give it back to the athlete."

She shook her head. "God help me I'm trapped in a Three Stooges movie."

Misha was about to release an arrow when bullets slammed into the wall next to him. He spun about and saw a raider twenty feet away aiming a large machine gun at him. He loosed the arrow and sent the raider flying backwards. Then he spun back towards the woman.

"Don't you just hate interruptions?" she said cheerfully and shot an arrow at him.

Misha released his own arrow a second before her arrow slammed into his shoulder.

"There are two attack helicopters inbound, eta 2 minutes.

Misha pulled the arrow out of his left shoulder and carefully placed it in the quiver on his back.

He heard the sounds of powerful turbine engines and looking up for a moment he saw an oddly shaped machine race past. It was long and box shaped with a massive engine located on each side. Odd shaped wings and protrusions sprouted in various places carrying ordinance of various types. The Raiders called it a sky skiff. It was a formidable little airship; fast and agile and carrying a lot of firepower. The machine unleashed a fusillade of rockets straight at Misha. He managed a single curse before the world erupted around him in a mass of flames and explosions. Misha felt his body being thrown through the air. His body slammed into a wall and he fell to the ground.

"ALARM! Catastrophic damage. engaging emergency repairs. Lungs working at 14% capacity. Heart beat irregular due to injury. 5 ribs and three segments of the spinal column damaged. Attempting to stabilize body functions. Attempting to stop blood loss."

"Repair base systems first. Heart, lungs and brain."

"He's unconscious."

"Bypassing damaged spinal nerves till repairs are finished."

"Should we active emergency medical teleport?"

"No! Systems are stabilizing and repairs are going ahead."

The first thing Misha heard upon waking up was the sound of someone cursing loudly and fluently in several languages. He recognized the voice as belonging to his beautiful opponent. "Whose side are you idiots on?" she shouted. "When I catch you I'm going to rip off you head and shit down your neck!" Slowly he stood up feeling the ache and pain with even the slightest movement.

"Go easy you are still only at 25% strength," the nanites warned.

He looked around and took stock of what was happening. The end of the building he had been standing by was a mass of flaming debris. "So much for stealing things from the lab," he muttered.

"The main lab has suffered only minor damage but the adjacent one has suffered major damage. We have activated the fire suppression system in both structures. The attack helicopters have arrived and are engaging the Sky Skiffs."

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Unknown. That explosion overwhelmed your sensors and the complexes are still down. Our last contact had her being thrown to the northeast by the explosion."

"Would you please shut up!" he shouted out. "It's bad enough my ears are ringing without you cursing."

"Foxy!" came the woman's voice. "You're alive! I was sure you were dead. Or teleported far away from here."

"She is to the northeast about one hundred and fifty meters away."

"I'm not that easy to kill!" he snarled. "I'm surprised you are still alive."

"I'm too tough to be killed. A little thing like a rocket won't slow me down."

"That voice is moving away," the nanites informed him. "We estimate that she is close to the perimeter fence. The surviving raiders are also retreating."

"The ones that survived."

Misha sent the mental command to activate the gravitic modules that allowed him to fly. But a message in flashing red letters appeared in his vision. "Gravitic systems down." The fox cursed loudly. Their fight was over.

"I don't even know your name!" he shouted out, trying to gain even the slightest information.

"Strela," came the faint answer.

He heard the sound of turbine engines and looked up. Overhead Misha watched as a Sky skiff suddenly pivoted to the left and fired a long burst from its cannons at some unseen target. A moment later a small missile slammed into the wing of the skiff blowing it completely off. The raider tipped over and spiraled into the desert floor. Just before it crashed a figure shot out of the cockpit. The figure slowly drifted downward landing on the ground a few feet from Misha. He walked slowly over to the figure and aimed his bow at the man sprawled on the ground. "Hello. Welcome to Camp Marrow."

Misha found a dozen people crowded around one of the cubicles. "Make room!" he ordered loudly. The crowd parted revealing a figure seated at a desk. He looked to be a Sky Raider as he was wearing a typical raider uniform but his right arm from finger tips to shoulder was covered with a black mass. The man looked at him with fear on his face. "The voices told me not to move or they would cover me completely."

He lightly tapped the black mass and it shifted under his touch. "Spiders. Why did you have to use spiders?" Misha asked the nanites.

"Because of the fear factor. And we have not actually harmed him."

The super nodded his head slowly. "You'll be all right but you will be answering a lot of questions for us."

"Yes sir!" the raider answered in a terrified tone. "Just get them off of me."

Mercy Island, Rogue Isles, later that night

It was not exactly a palatial residence. The walls were cracked and the entire building leaned slightly to one side. But the walls were of brick and the floors and roof were of stout wood. And in spite of the look from the outside the structure was sound. Inside the woman had cleaned and repainted to make it a fine place to call home. Upstairs in the bedroom, behind locked doors and windows the woman stood in front of the mirror. She was wearing her costume which had been cleaned and repaired. Scattered on the bed and floor around her was an assortment of blouses, jackets, pants and skirts. The woman stood facing the mirror for a moment, then turned to the right and examined her reflection for several minutes. Then turned to the left.

"Damn that fox," she snarled.