

The Great Raid
by Christian O'Kane

The message was delivered to Strela in an unusual way. There was a bright flash of light and an envelope dropped onto the table in front of her.

In the envelope was a single coin and a small block of aluminum. She examined the coin and got a surprise. It was a soviet 1 ruble coin. Not a coin from the modern Russian federation - those bore a double headed eagle on one side - the old Czarist royal emblem. No this coin bore the image of a hammer and sickle surrounded by two sheaves of wheat. This was a coin from the now defunct, communist Soviet Union.

She picked up the metal block and examined it. There was writing on all six sides. Each side was numbered and held a message. The lettering had been neatly etched into the metal in a long, flowing script. The message itself was blunt and to the point.

"Strela,

Your services are requested. Recently during an altercation between friends of mine and the Rogue Isle police you assisted them most ably. For that I am grateful. Watching your actions brought back many memories. It has been a long time since I've heard the old revolutionary slogans."

The woman paused for a moment and had to think back. The week before she had come upon a Scrapyarder protest march. The over worked and poorly paid workers had been protesting the poor conditions and terrible pay. When the RIP and Arachnos thugs had attacked them she had almost without thinking thrown herself into the fight on the Scrapyarder side. They had lost eventually but not before a long and exciting fight. Just thinking about it brought a smile to her face.

"Some people of mine were arrested during that altercation and are currently being held by the repressive regime in one of their brutal prisons. Free all twenty five of my people and lead them to the place marked on the map. There my people will escort them to safety. Do this and you will be handsomely rewarded. Enclosed is a list of those being held and the location of the prison. If you agree please say so."

Sincerely,

Alexi Bolden
The Hammer of the Proletariat"

Strela looked at the message and the odd stationary it was written on. "My people," She said slowly. This person was someone who cared about the workers. The name Alexi Bolden did not

mean anything to her but it sounded oddly normal. No one used their real names, they all used some pseudo name, the more outrageous the better. Even she used the name Strela which meant arrow in Russian.

She looked at the cube, unsure of what to do. Attack an RIP police station would not be easy but the pay would be good. And she would be truly helping oppressed people and not working for some greedy overlord who spouted empty phrases. "I'll do the job. Attacking a police station is not easy so I'll need a few items. A dozen stun and frag grenades."

The cube disappeared, replaced by a large wooden box resting on the floor in front of her. The box was painted a dark green that reminded her of the boxes that Russian army ammunition came in. She looked closely and saw Cyrillic lettering printed onto the top and sides. This WAS a Russian army, ammo box. Opening the box she found a dozen black grenades inside. Strela took one out and examined it closely. It was a brand new stun grenade, a Russian made grenade. Beneath them was a score of fragmentation grenades. Brand new and fresh from the factory in Kiev. "I like these!"

Tucked in among the grenades was a map and a small piece of paper. The map was of the police station and the area around it. On the paper was a twelve digit phone number and the words "Call when done."

Police station, militia post - the title meant many things. To people in Paragon city it was a place where the overworked and underpaid police worked to keep the city safe. A place with battered furniture and dingy walls and smelling of stale donuts and old coffee. There was a waiting room filled with all manner of people reporting crimes ranging from noisy neighbors to robberies. In back there were offices and a range of cells. The lowest cell was simply a room with bars and a door for the local drunks. From there the security ranged upwards to the most secure with a solid metal door and walls secured by a force field. It was a place the average American or Russian citizen did not want to visit but they were not particularly afraid of.

In the Rogue isles a Rogues Isle Police station was not a place to visit. It was a place to be feared. A place where people who were dragged in all too frequently never came out alive. The RIP was a travesty. Just mentioning the RIP could get a police officer or Russian militia soldier to snarl and curl their fists in anger. The RIP was most well known for brutality, cruelty, corruption and just plain ineptitude. Rumors abounded how they hired dirty ex-cops, soldiers gone bad and every gun toting paramilitary nut from around the world. More than one thug or criminal on the run from some other legitimate law enforcement had wound up as a Rogue Isle policeman.

The station itself was built of brick and stone and the doors were of steel and covered with wire mesh. It could easily withstand an assault by an angry mob and most had at some point in the past. There were only two ground entrances - front and back. Both were guarded by police

carrying submachine guns. A third entrance was a pair of large loading doors that were only opened to move large numbers of prisoners in or for moving 'evidence in or out. There was also suspected of being at least 2 secret entrances including one leading into the sewer that allowed for the easy unseen disposal of bodies.

Strela noticed some serious security flaws immediately. There were two people each at the front and back entrances and no one at the loading doors. A single man who was supposed to be guarding the roof was seated in a chair and was sound asleep. The guards at the back door were busy playing cards while those at the front seemed more interested in harassing any girl that passed than in actually protecting the station. There were places all over where security cameras were supposed to be mounted but most were obviously broken or missing completely.

The motor pool where the police cars, trucks and armored cars were kept should have been protected by a strong, chain link fence patrolled by armed police. But the chain link fence around the place had large holes in it and the two police who were supposed to be guarding it were leaning against the hood of one car playing cards. The security was so bad it was almost embarrassing.

What did worry her was that they were all heavily armed and carrying an amazing amount of weaponry. All of them carried a large 10mm pistol and a knife. But many carried more, a lot more; shotguns, submachine guns, assault rifles, new military grade advanced assault rifles and several had fragmentation grenades. Just the ten RIP she could see had enough weapons to do credit to an infantry platoon.

The roof was an obvious entry point. Perhaps a little too obvious. There was only 1 door leading from the roof and that was steel with a keypad lock. It was probably booby trapped somehow.

Strela took careful aim at the single man sleeping on the roof. Making careful adjustments for the wind. She loosed her arrow and the projectile arced silently through the air. A moment later it slammed into the chest of the sleeping RIP making his sleep a permanent one. Strela held still counting on her covering shadows to hide her location. There was no noise or commotion. Her attack had gone unnoticed.

The woman spent five long minutes moving slowly and carefully getting into a position overlooking the motor pool better. Finally she was perched on a roof top overlooking the small parking lot behind the station.

Strela paused for a moment and looked herself over one last time. Her naturally brown hair was dyed black with a white streak down the center. Covering her body from the top of her neck to the boots on her feet was a metallic armor. The suit was a little too tight and it squashed her breasts tight against her chest but it was bullet proof. Strela usually found such armor too confining and restrictive but after her last fight with Misha she remembered why people wear armor. The fox like super had survived being shot and having a burning building fall in on him. The obviously fake ears on her head looked as silly as the fake cat tail but they would do their

jobs by disguising her true looks. If one was going to take on a group as powerful as the Rogue Isle Police it paid to make it as hard as possible for them to indentify you.

Assured that everything was in place including her disguise Strela turned back to the task at hand. There was several ways of getting inside most of which involved moving stealthily. "Let's do the direct approach and go in through the back door!" She said in her mind. "And see what happens." She nocked an arrow that had a cylindrical head. On the top was a small, flashing green light. She snapped off the arrow and it soared through the air towards the back door where the two Rippers stood guard. When the arrow struck the door it exploded with a loud, ear splitting crack and a blinding flash. The flash arrow was quickly followed by three arrows. One of the guards went down but the other spun around and emptied his assault rifle at the woman. There was a stabbing pain in her side but she ignored it and quickly nocked, drew and shot two arrows in quick succession. The second Ripper went down hard with a pair of arrows in his chest.

She waited for a moment, an arrow nocked and ready. she expected a dozen Rippers to come boiling out through the doors but nothing happened. Even the guards in the motor pool didn't look up from the card game. The two were arguing loudly over something. Probably one of them had been cheating and gotten caught. Strela turned to those two guards and after a short fight they were no longer a problem. None of the would ever hurt an innocent again.

The female archer slowly walked through the motor pool moving stealthily; sticking to shadows as much as possible. The woman walked around what had once been a patrol car but was now just a burning pile of metal and rubber. The woman came to the rear door of the station carefully avoiding the bodies and parts of bodies that were sprawled all over. She leaned against the blood splattered brick wall next to the door. The archer took a quick peek around the door frame and just as quickly pulled her head back. A fusillade of fire erupted from the end of the corridor as a dozen, tiny messengers of death zipped past her face.

Strela waited a moment before popping around the doorframe, snapping off an arrow and then pulling back out of sight. From through the doorway came the sound of a pistol firing. Then there was a soft thump and the pistol went silent. The woman looked down the corridor and saw a figure sprawled on the floor about twenty feet away. The corridor itself was fairly plain; just dingy gray walls that once might have been a light green. The floor looked to be made of the cheap linoleum tile often sold in bargain stores. There was a hodgepodge of a dozen different patterns of tiles laid down randomly.

Slowly the woman made her way down the corridor, mindful of exactly where each foot went and that there were no booby traps or other hidden surprises. A few steps took her to a pair of doorways, one on each side. She caught a flash of movement off to the left and pivoted and sapped off two arrows into the doorway. A Ripper tumbled to the floor amidst a pile of boxes. She paused for a moment to examine one of the large cardboard boxes and found it contained a particularly expensive television set. An examination of a shipping label glued to the front showed it was supposed to have been in Antwerp a week ago. She wondered what ship they had been stolen from. Strela took a knife off her belt and carefully removed the label. That she

tucked into a pocket for safe keeping. The woman was sure that someone would be willing to pay good money to know what had happened to their shipment of TV's.

Strela paused at the doorway and peeked around the door frame and looked both ways before stepping into the corridor. The woman had gone only twenty feet when the corridor opened up into a large area. She had a moment to take in a large room filled with a variety of desks and tables. A storm of fire roared at her from the doorway up ahead. A hundred bullets zipped past her and she felt the sharp bite of a wound to the leg. Without a moment's hesitation she grabbed a grenade off her belt, pulled the pin and tossed in the direction the fire was coming from. She followed that up with a flash arrow.

Figures were sent flying and fragments of the grenade pinged off the armor she was wearing. Strela didn't notice. She fell back on her training and the arrows flew fast and accurately. She worked hard; nocking, aiming and loosing arrows. A Ripper with a assault rifle was first, going down with an arrow to the chest. Next was another RIP kneeling behind an overturned desk. He seemed to be randomly spraying his submachine in her general direction. Even though he had little chance of actually hitting her the man was still a threat. So two arrows sent the man tumbling backwards. Two figures sprawled on the floor in front of her were ignored. Two figures were crouched on either side of an open doorway on the opposite side of the room. The woman snapped off an arrow that hit the door frame and exploded with the power of a grenade; sending splinters, shrapnel and body parts flying in all directions. Standing next to a large coffee machine was another Ripper who was blazing away at her with a shotgun. The pellets mostly pinged off her armor but several found openings and stung badly as the pellets penetrated through to the soft flesh behind the plastic. An arrow to the chest sent the shotgun and it's wielder to the floor.

Slowly the woman walked across the room taking in everything she could see. Looking for any evidence and for the slightest sign of any trouble. Opening a wooden door brought her into a small closet piled high with all sorts of sledgehammers, pickaxes, shovels and axes. All were battered and many had blood on various edges. These were undoubtedly the weapons taken from the striking workers.

Strela stopped in front of the coffee maker. It was one of those massive affairs usually found in restaurants. She could hear it bubbling and gurgling and the scent of fresh coffee came to her nose in spite of the smoke, dust and smell of blood in the air. She found a cup that was reasonably clean and filled it from the machine's spigot. The woman sipped the contents of the cup and instantly spit out the vile liquid. She cursed several times in Russian. "What's in this crap?" A quick look inside the machine found the usual pile of coffee grounds but sprinkled on the top was a grayish white powder. "No wonder you fools couldn't hit me. All of you were high!"

She walked through a blasted and shattered doorway being sure to step around the remains of the two Rippers. The woman found herself in a small hallway lined with cells on either side. The cells were filled with a large group of men all wearing the rough clothing of workers. The doors to the cells were old but made of steel and were still solid.

The woman raced back to the small closet and returned with a short handled sledgehammer. A few swings of the massive tool and the locks on the cell doors shattered instantly. Quickly the prisoners pushed their way out into the hallway.

Strela decided to hold onto the sledge as it might come in handy later and she tucked the sledge's short handle into her belt. The archer took a fast count of the men in front of her and came up short. "There's only 18 people here. Where are the rest?"

A tall and well muscled, dark skinned man stepped forward. His nose was bent and obviously broken. His face was a mass of cuts and bruises and he was cradling a right arm that was covered with a crude bandage. In spite of the beating the RIP had given him he walked straight and there was fierce pride in his eyes that Strela liked. This was a leader. "They took them away," the man said in a cold tone.

"Where? When?" She snapped.

"Twelve hours ago," was the answer. "I don't know where."

"I know who does," Strela said. "The station captain. Nothing happens without him taking his cut."

That earned a nod of the head in agreement from the Scrapyarder.

"Let's get you out of here and then I'll go after the captain."

Strela heard the man before she actually saw him. The sound of heavy boots crunching on the debris warned her. She spun around, bringing her bow up at the same time.

Standing in the doorway and blocking the only exit was a tall, light skinned man. The dark blue police uniform that covered his heavily muscled body had blood splattered across it. There was small flecks of blood on his bald pate and in his van dyke beard. His face was in a dark scowl that spoke of anger and hate. "Thank you," the woman said in a cold voice. "You've saved me the trouble of having to track you down and kill you."

"You are not stealing my valuable merchandise," the Ripper snarled.

"That's all they are to you?" She asked contemptuously.

"They're just meat," came the answer.

She waved a hand towards the dead and wounded policeman who lay scattered about. "Why didn't you help them when I attacked?"

"Them?" The captain said contemptuously and pointed at a corpse. "Why bother? I can easily get more fools like them. And now I can keep all the money for myself."

Strela shook her head. "That's a shame. You might have beaten me if you had." She brought her bow up and loosed an arrow aimed straight at his head.

The projectile flew towards the Ripper, bearing down on him like a lightning bolt. At the last moment he twisted his body with a speed and grace someone so big should not have and the arrow missed him.

He flipped his hand towards her and a mass of chain shot out towards Strela. The end of the chain had a sharp dagger on the end and the blade easily cutting through the armor over her stomach. The blade puncturing her body hurt but the real pain came when he pulled it out. A towering wave of pain roared through her threatening to engulf her like a title wave. She stumbled backward and grabbed at the bleeding hole in her stomach. Strela looked up to see the Ripper flying through the air with his hobnailed boots first. She caught those boots dead square in the chest with a force of a freight train. The woman was sent flying across the room, smashing through desks and chairs before slamming into a wall and coming to a halt.

She pushed away the broken furniture and other bits of debris and stood up slowly ignoring the pain that lanced through her whole body.

Her opponent was standing some four meters away looking utterly confident. "Even dead your body will fetch a good price from the right people," the man said with a sickening smile on his face.

The man charged her and Strela grabbed the sledgehammer off her belt. She waited till the last moment and dodged to her right ignoring the pain that lanced through her body. The woman swung the sledge throwing all her weight behind it. The solid hunk of steel that was the head hit the villain in the chest. The man tumbled backwards slamming into the coffee machine sending scalding hot coffee flying in all directions. Strela grabbed a pair of grenades off her belt and tossed them at her opponent. There were a pair of loud explosions and flames engulfed the Ripper.

She didn't waste a moment but pulled on a thin rope that was tied to her wrist. The other end of the rope was tied to her bow. In an instant she drew, nocked and loosed an arrow at the man without bothering to identify what it was. The arrow struck the ripper and burst into flames. The flames spread onto his clothing. Strela worked fast shooting arrow after arrow at the man with the speed and precision of a machine gun.

Ignoring the flames that were licking up his legs the man staggered to his feet. Still dazed by the stun grenade he stood there a moment as his opponent sank another shaft into his chest. Then he looked at her with eyes filled with madness. He let out a guttural snarl and charged straight at her.

The woman nocked and drew an arrow and took careful aim. She released the projectile and saw it sink into the man's skull between those madness filled eyes.

The Ripper captain stood there for a moment as if unwilling to believe he was dead. Then he stumbled backwards and fell to the ground.

She didn't relax her stance but remained ready with an arrow aimed at the captain. Strela could feel the pain from her stomach wound but tried to ignore it. Slowly she relaxed her guard as she felt the warm blood flowing from the wound and down her legs. The woman pulled open her damaged armor revealing a good sized puncture wound in her stomach. From a pouch on her belt she took a small plastic wrapped object about the size and shape of a candy bar. She ripped open one end and pulled out a gray bandage. Strela squeezed on the small bandage until she heard a soft snap and the bandage turned from gray to blue. Quickly she unraveled the bandage until it was the size of a piece of paper. When she pressed the bandage against the injury Strela felt a warmth seep into her body driving away all the pain. After a long moment she took a peek at her wound and could see that it was already starting to heal. In a few minutes all that would be left was an ugly scar. She spent a few moments making sure the sticky edges of the healing patch adhered to her skin before gingerly putting her damaged armor back on over it.

Strela knelt down next to the captain and searched the body carefully. Along with three knives, a steel baton and a hidden pistol she found a very expensive watch and four gold chains. But it was in the man's wallet that she found the real treasure trove; four thousand dollars in cash, no less than twelve credit cards in nine different names and one, all white credit card. The only thing on the card was a phone number. A quick slide of the unmarked card through a car reader showed it had twenty one thousand dollars. "That works out to three thousand dollars a person." The woman looked down at the dead body of the ripper. "So that's what a human life was worth to you?"

The woman pulled out her cell phone and dialed the number she had gotten with her grenades. There was a soft click, then another. "Yes?" a male voice asked in a strong Russian accent.

"I got eighteen of them but the Rippers sold seven to someone," she said.

Several soft Russian curses came from the phone. "Who?"

"All I have is a phone number," the archer answered and read off the number.

"It will take some time to trace that number," came the voice on the phone. "Also my people have been watching the station and we know who has entered or left. Get the rest out. My people will be waiting exactly one hundred meters to the south west. Speed is essential. RIP reinforcements are in route."

She closed the phone and dropped it into a pocket. "We're leaving now!" She ordered. "There's more Rippers headed our way."

The rest of the mission was surprisingly easy. Out the back door and across the parking lot. There the small group was met by a score of Scrapyarders who swarmed over their rescued brethren instantly.

"Who are you?" the leader asked. "We all owe you our lives." the man was standing next to her with a broad grin on her face.

"Snegurochka," she said without thinking.

"Snegurochka?" the man asked.

"It means Snow Maiden," she explained. "A figure from my homeland's mythology."

A soft beeping noise alerted Strela and she fished the cell phone from a pocket. "Yes?" She said into the phone.

"I have traced the number and my scouts did observe a small truck leaving the station," the voice said bluntly. "The results are both good and bad. The vehicle was followed to a pier where something was loaded onto a boat called the Setting Star. But where it went is unknown. The phone number I have traced to a switching station in the Nerva archipelago. That is all I have."

"Give me the location of the pier and I'll scout it. Someone there will know where the boat went," Strela ordered.

The location the voice on the phone sent her to was in an area that was even more decrepit than the rest of Sharkhead Isle. The piers here were too small for the massive containerized cargo ships that now handled most of the world's freight. The ships that did dock here were the older, smaller ones. Most were in almost as bad a shape as the run down piers they were tied up to. The Setting Star was an old, grimy, worn out coastal freighter that should have been scrapped decades ago. She was plying the waters of the Rogues Isle because it was the only place the captain could bribe the safety inspectors to let the ship still sail. Also the officials there would (for the right price) ignore things like revoked captain licenses and warrants for arrest.

The single sailor standing guard at the gangplank was armed with an assault rifle which was normal for the Rogue Isles. But the man standing guard on the bow was wearing body armor and carrying a high powered rifle. He was walking back and forth in a pattern that betrayed some military training. And the man on guard on the bridge was dressed in full combat armor and carrying a flamethrower. All of them moved with the strong ease of people used to such weapons.

Obviously the ship was being used by some group but which was not easy to discern. They weren't Hellions, Skulls or Warriors since they were too well dressed for those gangs. None of them were green or rampaging around destroying things so they couldn't be Trolls. Sky Raiders and Gold Brickers preferred to fly everywhere even when it made them very conspicuous. They were all too military in bearing and mannerisms to belong to one of the underworld gangs. The Cage consortium would never bother to disguise who they were and besides they would have

bribed the RIP to guard the ship. Perhaps Council, 5th Column or the mysterious Malta group? They could also be some unknown group. Strela hated going against an enemy she knew little about but she had no choice. At least she didn't have to take the entire ship, just obtain some information about its last destination.

Now was the time for subtlety. Instead of charging the ship Strela decided to slowly work her way on board with as little fuss and fighting as possible. A long slow examination of the ship and its guards found even more security. The gangplank to the ship had at least one section rigged with a pressure sensitive mine as did quite a few sections of the railing and some parts of the gangways. Those sections of the ship not guarded by a sentry were watched by television cameras that covered the ship's sides all the way down to the water line. Impressive security for what was supposed to be a tramp steamer. Finally after a long examination she spotted a flaw on the port side which was the side tied up to the dock. Although there was a man walking the length of the rail for the entire length of the ship he couldn't see down along the side because of the dock, it blocked his view of the lowest row of portholes. And the camera covering that side was blocked as well.

The woman made her way down the pier till she was out of the sight of the ship. Then Strela climbed down over the edge of the pier. Holding up the massive concrete covering of the pier was a maze of concrete columns and steel beams. It was not easy going for her. All of the beams were slimy with water and algae. And most were underwater at high tide and were also covered with seaweed, clams, lichen and a thousand other sea creatures that liked to live on hard surfaces.

It took over two hours to slowly make her way under the pier to where the ship was docked. Another twenty minutes was spent moving along the hull looking for an open porthole but they were all closed tight. She slowly and carefully examined each porthole till she found one that showed promise. The porthole was shut but the rubber and metal around the edges was badly corroded. Twenty long minutes of work with a knife and a screwdriver and Strela managed to remove the seals around the window and then scrape a small opening. Then she forced a knife blade through and gently pushed up the latches holding the porthole closed. She didn't push the window open immediately. Instead Strela spent a long time carefully examining the opening, looking for any booby traps. She found what she was looking for. Stretching between the edge of the port hole frame and the port hole itself was a very thin wire no thicker than a human hair.

The woman fished a roll of wire out of a pouch on her belt. She cut off a two meter long section and dropped the roll back into the pouch. She carefully attached both ends of the length of her wire to the one in the porthole. Then she cut the section in between and opened the window all the way. A careful search of the inside of the porthole and the floor beneath it turned up nothing.

The porthole was a lot smaller than it looked and it took some effort to slip through. She had to take off her belt and still her chest scrapped along the edges of the porthole making a noise that seemed to echo through the entire ship. She dropped down to the deck and looked around.

Strela found herself in a small stateroom. The entire room was neat and clean. The bunk beds that filled one side of the room were neatly made and the floor had been waxed and polished. The beds had been made with an almost military precision.

She could feel a slow rhythmic thump thump, thump through the deck beneath her feet and echoing through her whole body. Somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship a pump was slowly and steadily doing its job.

The woman checked her armor and saw the scrape marks on the chest plate. She was thankful for wearing the tight fitting armor and oddly enough thought of Misha and his comments back when they first met. She couldn't help but smile. Then she noticed a good sized dent on the chest plate, right over her heart. That blow would have probably killed her if she hadn't been wearing that armor. She didn't have time for such ponderings, later perhaps when she was back in a safe place.

The room's only real exit was a door that was on the wall opposite the porthole she had entered through. Strela examined the door carefully but didn't find anything. It did not mean that there was no trap or alarm, just that she couldn't see it. Strela listened at the door but didn't hear anything. She opened the door just a little and peered out through the crack. No alarms sounded and nothing exploded, thankfully. She caught sight of a narrow passageway of clean walls and highly polished floor. She looked about but didn't see any cameras or guards. The floors seemed to be devoid of traps or sensors. Certainly there was no sign of a sentry. The woman opened the door and with her bow ready looked both up and down the passage. All she saw was an empty passageway with doors like the one she had just opened lining both sides. Most of the crew it seems was ashore leaving the ship almost empty.

Strela paused at a door with the words 'Radio Room' painted on it. A survey of the door turned up nothing dangerous. She listened at the door for a moment before stepping inside. A neatly made bed rested in one corner while the other was filled with an impressive array of electronics. She recognized military grade communication gear including a radar and radio jammer and a satellite uplink with seven layer and 5000 key encryption. All controlled by no less than four computers. Very advanced equipment. But everything was locked. A check of the various screens showed all were locked and she didn't have the time or skills to crack the codes but she didn't need to. On the desk in front of the equipment was a large notepad filled with a lot of notes and information scribbled there in haste by the last operator. These papers should have been burned right after use instead of being left laying around where anyone could find them. She scooped up all the papers and placed them neatly into a pouch on her belt. Later she would go through them all for any important information they might hold.

The radio room had been a useful sidetrack but it still did not tell her anything immediately useful. She needed to find the bridge and would be forward and above where she was now. She stepped back into the passageway and made her way forward. At the end of the passage was a set of steep stairs lead upward into the darkness. Placing each step carefully Strela moved upward until her head was just above floor level. She found herself standing on what could only be the bridge.

The entire wall of the room opposite her was lined with windows that looked out over the forward cargo hatches and the bow beyond. The ship's wheel was in the center of the room. Strela had expected a large wheel attached to a column but the wheel was smaller than the one on most cars. It was attached to a large rectangular box with a monitor and keyboard on top. All of it looked very high tech and far too modern for such an old ship.

She noted that the cameras on the bridge was aimed at the doors on either side wall that led to balconies and gangways outside. At the head of the steps mere millimeters from her face was a hair thin wire stretched across the doorway. A trip wire. Strela didn't know what it was connected to and did not want to find out by triggering it. Placing each foot carefully Strela slowly made her way up. She stepped carefully over the tripwire being careful not to disturb it. Strela made her way over to the ships wheel.

A few taps on the keyboard brought up a map on the display along with the word "Autopilot". She instantly recognized the map as one of Sharkhead isle and the surrounding waters. A bright red line led from the dock she was at now to an outlying island and back again several times. She made a careful note of exactly which island and where on the island the ship docked.

In one corner of the bridge Strela found a desk and a map table. She carefully searched through the mountain of papers that lay scattered on both. The woman noticed that the ship's log recorded fourteen visits to "The Base" including one the day before. In a drawer on the desk she found shipping invoices listing no less than four separate ship names. The woman took a small, hand held scanner from a pouch and carefully scanned each page of the log and every piece of paper she could find. Later she'd download it all and see if there was any useful information.

On the opposite side of the bridge was a very modern looking radar control. Strela was not an expert on electronics but she recognized it as the fire control radar of a surface to air missile battery.

The sounds of footsteps on metal cut short any further examination. She could hear someone walking outside on one of the walkways leading to the bridge. Quickly Strela made her way back down the stairs and into the heart of the ship. A quick and quiet trip back along the route she had taken coming in and Strela was soon dropping through the porthole and making her way to safety.

She stopped in the cover of an abandoned warehouse and dialed the same phone number on the cell phone. The same male, Russian voice as before answered. "Yes?"

"The ship belongs to some well armed group," Strela commented. "But I'm not sure who. The ship is certainly well armed with surface to air missiles. I do have the location they probably took the captives to. It's a small island 3.5 kilometers south west of Sharkhead island. They've been making repeated trips there over the last few weeks."

"I see," the voice on the phone said. "I believe the people involved are Council or Fifth Column."

Strela spit onto the pavement. "Those fascists? It will be a pleasure to kill them."

"Remember your mission is to rescue my people."

"Of course but if I can kill a lot of fascists along the way then so be it!"

The voice on the other end chuckled. "Da but remember your mission."

Strela flew fast and low skimming along just above the water at high speed like a missile racing to destroy a ship. Up ahead was her target, a small lump of green and brown which slowly grew larger and larger as she got closer. The information from the Setting Star told her that the only dock was on the west side of the island. So naturally she approached Bird island from the east side. Officially the island was owned by the Antrolian Company who were using the island to produce pharmaceuticals. They were supposed to be manufacturing various over the counter drugs but Strela took it for granted that they were also making a lot of other drugs all of them addictive or banned as too dangerous.

As she got close to the island the woman slowed down and got even closer to the water. Details of the island grew more clear to the woman in spite of the darkness. Being a mutant meant that there was never a darkness so complete that Strela was blinded. She slowed down even more and scanned the shoreline ahead. The woman saw white, sandy beaches and behind that rough piles of rock and debris. Strela was just barely moving now, just creeping along until she came to the shore. Without touching the sand she super skimmed over the sand and rock till she came to a particularly large pile of boulders and then softly touched down amidst them.

She had her bow out in moments and was scanning the area around her looking and listening for trouble. All she saw was sand and rocks and all she heard was the roar of the wave and the cry of gulls. After several minutes of waiting she was sure that no one had noticed her arrival.

The woman made her way carefully and slowly towards the plant. She didn't run into any real obstacles until she came to a two meter high chain link fence. A careful examination of the fence and the ground in front of it turned up a mine field and that the fence itself was electrified. Neither would prove much of an obstacle. The security guard who walked by every few minutes looked bored and certainly wasn't pay much attention to anything but his cell phone. That was the problem with guard duty. Long hours of mind numbing boredom led to inattentiveness.

Strela waited till the guard was out of sight and then flew over the wall low and fast. She came to rest behind a large boulder and waited there. The guard returned and walked past without slowing down or even looking up. She turned and made her way into the complex.

The plant itself was a score of large and rambling buildings interspersed with various tanks, all connected by a maze of pipes and walkways. Everything looked dirty, dingy and rundown. Rust and corrosion covered the pipes and tanks which all seemed to be leaking something nasty. Rubbish was piled up in every corner and was blowing around at random. She had no problem easily avoiding the guards that patrolled the place. The workers seemed oblivious to everything going on around them but she avoided being seen by them as well.

Four hours of carefully exploring the complex brought her to an armored door locked with a keypad and guarded by a pair of sentries. Unlike the other armed guards who walked the plant with nothing more deadly than a pistol and a dirty brown uniform these were wearing battle armor complete with helmets and armored boots. Their weapons weren't the usual battered assault rifles and pistols. Instead they were carrying advanced combat rifles. This was undoubtedly the place she wanted. Now all the woman had to do was wait for someone to bring her the key to unlock that door.

Strela waited patiently until a man wearing a white smock over a white dress shirt and pants walked up to the door. He walked past the guards without a word and tapped a four digit code into the keypad. The door slid open and he stepped through. As it slid shut Strela smiled and put away the binoculars she had used to read the code the scientist had used.

It took a flash grenade and four arrows to dispose of the guards but the bodies had barely stopped twitching before she was stepping over them and up to the door. She tapped in the code the scientist had used and was relieved when the door slide silently open.

The sight that greeted her on the far side was a brightly lit corridor whose sparkling clean plastic walls and floors were in sharp contrast to the dirty and dark factory on the other side of the door. Strela slowly made her way down the corridor watching for signs of ambush or traps but all she saw was the clean floors and walls and all she heard was the hum of the neon lights overhead.

Strela paused at a doorway and peered inside quickly. She found a room with boxes and supplies piled up haphazardly all over. All of it, the woman noted was medical in nature. Oxygen tanks stood in a corner next to a box labeled bandages. Next to that were several large refrigerators all clearly marked with a biohazard symbol. Piled opposite the refrigerators were boxes filled with beakers and containers of various sizes and shapes.

Continuing down the corridor she came to a room over dozen meter long filled with four, large plastic tanks. Each of the massive tanks could hold thousands of liters of liquid. The chemical symbols painted on the sides meant nothing to her but she took a picture of them anyway. An idea suddenly occurred to her. She raced back to the other storeroom and quickly took several vials, water tight containers and other items.

Strela returned to the tanks and walked up to one. At the base of the plastic tank was a small spigot. Probably used for taking samples to test the quality of whatever was inside. She put a vial under the outlet and turned the handle ever so slightly. A thin stream of a glowing blue liquid

came out and started to fill up the vial. After a moment the vial was filled and she closed the spigot. She made sure the lid was tight and secure on the vial. Then the woman wrapped the top with tape also found in the storeroom. The first vial was then put into a second, larger container along with some wadded up paper for padding. That too was carefully sealed and taped before going into a third container. That plastic container was carefully placed into a pouch also with some extra padding. With her precious sample secured she continued on her way.

Turning a corner Strela found her way forward blocked. Standing in front of her was a man of medium height with brown hair and wearing a white smock over a white dress shirt and pants. Behind the man was a massive, armored door. Strela recognized the man as the person whose code she had borrowed. He stared at Strela for a moment and then smiled revealing a mouth filled with long, pointed teeth. "Dinner!" The man snarled in a deep and guttural voice.

From a pocket he pulled out a large bulky looking pistol and pointed it at the woman. Strela dodged to one side as a white beam shot from the pistol and struck the wall. A large patch of ice covered the wall with a crackling noise. She shot the man twice in the chest with her bow and he stumbled backwards a few steps.

The doctor looked at the arrows protruding from his chest for a moment then he calmly pulled both of them out without a sound or any sign he noticed the pain. The projectiles clattered to the floor. From his pocket he took a syringe filled with a red liquid. Before she could stop him the man jabbed the syringe into his leg and emptied the liquid into himself. His eyes narrowed as they turned red. His skin turned the color of blood as his arms and legs grew longer and larger with scales covering sinews and muscles like steel cables. The skin on the man's back split open and a pair of webbed wings ripped free in a spray of blood. His face pushed out slowly with the loud crackling and crunching of bones as his face reset itself into something more feral. Razor sharp, steel talons broke through the skin on his fingers turning them into weapons that could kill with a single swipe.

She pointed a finger at the snarling monster that had moments before had been a man. "I will enjoy killing you."

The monster picked up a chair and threw it up into the lights and shattering them in a spray of plastic and metal and throwing the entire room into pitch black darkness. Strela looked around. With her mutant enhanced eyesight such darkness should have been as brightly lit as twilight. Instead she could barely see beyond her arm's reach. There was a strange chill in the air and all she could smell was blood and the stench of rotting flesh. This darkness was not natural. Part of her wished she had worn a crucifix. She had heard rumors that the Council had vampires but demons too?

Without a sound the murderous creature loomed up out of the darkness and leapt straight at her. She snapped off an arrow at the onrushing monster before it was on her. The woman tried to dodge out of the way but she felt a burning pain along her side as the creature's claws ripped through armor and flesh.

Reacting more on instinct than thought the woman took an arrow from her quiver, nocked it to her bow, drew it and loosed the projectile at her enemy. She heard the arrow sink into flesh just as the monster disappeared back into the darkness. She fitted another arrow to her bow and looked all about trying to catch sight of the thing attacking her. She caught a glimpse of movement off to her left. Without hesitating she shot an arrow in that direction but she heard the projectile harmlessly smash into the plastic walls of the room.

The sound of something scraping along the floor behind her caught Strela's attention and she spun around and shot an arrow without even waiting to see her target. She saw the creature for a moment before it vanished from sight. When she drew another arrow from her quiver she saw blood oozing from four deep slashes on her arm. She had never felt the wound and still didn't but that would change when the fight was over and the adrenalin rush wore off.

She was tired of this hide and seek game. From her quiver she took an arrow with a large cone shaped tip with the small point attached to the shaft. These arrows were harder to come by than her flash and exploding arrows so she didn't use them much but now was the time. The archer held still and looked around trying to catch the slightest glimpse or sound of the thing in the shadows. Off to the left something loomed up and rushed at her. Without hesitating the woman snapped off her arrow. The odd shaped projectile raced out at the monster and when it struck the creature a thick nylon mesh net exploded out entangling it. The monster came to a halt just out of reach of the woman.

Strela wasted no time and used the respite wisely. Arrow after arrow sank into the struggling creature's flesh. The monster let out a blood curdling roar and ripped the nylon netting to pieces. With a snarl the bloody creature flew straight at the woman and slammed her into a wall. His foot long teeth punctured her armor and sank into her left arm as its claws shredded her armor and ripped into the flesh beneath.

The woman screamed as the searing pain lanced through every fiber of her body. With her right hand she pulled a grenade off her belt and jammed it into the bloody maw that was inches from her throat. She pulled the pin and shoved the deadly sphere as far down its throat as she could.

There was a earsplitting blast as the whole world exploded with a searing light. Strela felt herself tumbling for a moment before slamming into something hard with a bone breaking crunch and falling to the floor.

She struggled thru the pain and fought back the unconscious that threatened to swallow her. Slowly she stood up ignoring the pain that seared her body. A few moments fumbling with the rope tied to her belt brought her bow back into her hands. Strela looked around for her enemy and quickly found him.

The creature was still alive even with a gaping wound in its throat that dripped blood and gore with the slightest movement. It snarled at her and slowly moved towards her.

Strela cursed loudly. "Why won't you die?" She snapped off arrow after arrow as she quickly backed away from the thing attacking her. The woman shot a flash arrow aiming for the gaping wound in the thing's neck. The loud bang rang in her ears as the bright flash lit up the room driving away the darkness.

With a snarl the monster lashed out with its claws and Strela had to dodge backward to avoid being disemboweled .

Without missing a beat the woman snapped off an explosive tipped arrow and it exploded in the monster's chest sending it stumbling backwards. The woman loosed another arrow that burst into flame as it flew through the air. It hit the creature in the throat and the flames spread quickly across the throat and neck until the head was engulfed in flames. the monster screamed and shrieked as it batted at the flames. She drew another explosive arrow and took careful aim at the monster before releasing it. The projectile raced through the air and sank deep into the creature's chest. There was a muffled thump and the vile thing's chest exploded spraying gore everywhere. The monster collapsed to the floor with a sickening crunch. The woman put four more arrows into the creature's body before she was sure it was dead.

It was then that the pain started to register and she could feel the strength start to seep away. Strela leaned against a wall and slumped down to the floor hard. Looking at her right arm Strela realized just how badly the arm was hurt. The armor was missing completely and she could see the deep wounds and mangled flesh and muscle. Quickly she took a bandage and placed the gray parcel of cloth on the floor. Strela banged her left fist onto it and was rewarded with the cloth turning blue. After opening the bandage up she slapped it onto the worst part of her right arm. Then she took out another and put that onto the arm as well. She lay sat there for a moment allowing the chemicals and the nanites in the healing bandages to do their job.

It was almost twenty minutes before Strela felt strong enough to stand up. She slowly collected all of her belongings being sure to not leave anything behind. Then the battered archer made her way over to her defeated enemy. A search of the torn and bloody rags on the monster's corpse turned up a plastic ID card with the name Albert Kuhn on it. Stepping around the bloody corpse Strela walked up to the door and calmly inserted the card. She heard a soft chime and the door slid open soundlessly. Carefully she peered through the door and into the room beyond.

The room was a large one - at least the size of an American football field and was filled with an enormous variety of items most of which Strela did not recognize. Others were all too familiar to the woman.

The worst mistake Strela had ever made in her life was revealing herself as a mutant. Svetlana Malenchinsky had always known she was different. Even as a child she had always been stronger and faster than the other children but this was information she kept to herself. The communist government had mandatory checks of all its citizens to locate mutants. Any mutants detected

were instantly whisked away to special training camps to serve in one of Glorious Revolutionary Action Teams. But she had always managed to worm her way past such tests; bribing officials to avoid really being tested.

She was already a well known and highly respected sniper when an officer approached her with all sorts of flattery and talk of the glory of fighting for the revolution. Svetlana had been brought up on the tales of her grandmothers exploits in the Great Patriotic war (which is what the Russians called world war 2) and she easily fell for the major's sweet talk. In a few days she found herself snatched away from a normal life and deposited in a lab like this one.

She recognized the large table with straps and chains as a medical table used for operating on and examining unwilling patients. The items clustered around it were scanners for examining all parts of the human body. Strela shook her head in an attempt to dispel all the bad memories but with mixed success. She turned and walked hurriedly away from the table.

In the center of the far wall were a dozen cylinders each over a meter wide and three meters tall. They were made of a clear material and she could easily see the glowing blue liquid inside. One held more than just liquid. Floating in the liquid was a creature about the size of a brown bear that seemed to be all teeth, claws and fur. Covering the face was a large mask with tubing coming out and running up into the ceiling. In spite of the breathing mask it was easy to make out the massive and wickedly sharp beak on a feather covered face. What was it? Some parts looked like a lion or a wolf, while others parts resembled an eagle's. And yet obviously it walked upright on two legs, something no animal ever did. What it was now Strela didn't know. But what she did know for sure that it had once been human. The body had two arms and two legs and had the general shape and stance of a human. It's slim, trim figure and the two well formed breasts on its chest told her this had once been a woman like herself. Strela turned away from the female in the cylinder and looked around for the ones she had come here to rescue.

To her left was a closed metal door with only a card slot on one side. Again using Albert Kuhn's card she opened the door easily. This revealed a short hallway lined with a dozen prison cells. A quick count of the occupants brought her to the needed number seven. The battered and bruised men looked warily at her and as far from the cell bars as possible.

"I've been sent to rescue you," she said sounding calmer then she felt. "You'll be back with the other Scrapyarders by morning." Sharp blows with the sledgehammer soon had all of the cell doors open. The prisoners slowly filed out and into the main lab still keeping a distance between themselves and her.

"We need to move fast," Strela explained. "Before reinforcements arrive. I'm sure to have set off some alarms on my way here."

"What about her?" One of the prisoners asked as he pointed to the occupied cylinder. "She deserves to be free too."

The archer slowly nodded in agreement. "You know anything about her?"

All she got in response was shaking heads. "No," one of them added. "She was here when we arrived."

"Stay in the cell hallway while I let her out," Strela ordered. "You should be safe there." The woman walked up to the occupied cylinder and examined the small display and keypad attached to one side. Written above the display was "Emergency patient extraction procedures," and clear, concise instructions on how to open the cylinder without killing the living being inside. Strela typed in the necessary code onto the keypad and unplugged the four required cables. There was a loud gurgling noise and the blue liquid drained quickly out of the tube. Then there was a loud click and the cylinder rose up off its base leaving its occupant dangling from cables in the air.

Nothing happened at first, but then the figure started to stir. Limbs moved randomly, almost imperceptibly at first but then with more vigor and certainly. Her eyes opened and they darted about rapidly trying to take in the world around her. A vigorous shake of the head sent her mask flying. The creature took a deep breath of air. Her first breath of freedom in a long time. The monster looked at the cables that held her in the air. A fast swipe of a clawed hand and the creature dropped to the floor. She lay there for a moment before slowly standing up. The figure stood a foot taller than her and at least a hundred pounds heavier. The creature's tawny colored fur rippled with each movement of her body revealing the incredibly powerful muscles underneath.

Strela took a step toward the creature and the monster hissed and waved a hand at her that was tipped with some very impressively long and sharp claws.

The woman stepped backward and pointed off to the door. "The exit is that way."

The creature looked at her with an intense gaze that made the woman want to flinch but she stood still. Then the creature walked past Strela and down the corridor. In moments it had disappeared from sight.

The Scrapyarders slowly filed into the lab again. "What happened? How did it go?"

"It went," Strela said and paused looking for the right words. "Oddly. She'll not bother us but heaven help any Council troops she runs into."

"Forget about her. A super that strong will get free all by herself. Let's get out of here," another one of the prisoners said.

"Agreed!" The archer answered. "But I need to do something first. Go into the corridor and warn me if anything comes." The woman waited till all of them were out of the room before walking over to the lab computer. She pulled a very small laptop pc from her backpack. Barely larger than a notebook it wasn't intended for surfing the internet or watching movies. A thick, black data cable came out next. One end was plugged into the laptop and the other into a port on the lab computer. In moments the woman was seeing all the files stored on the computer. Strela carefully downloaded everything from the computers she could but she was far from an expert and could only guess at a lot of what she found.

When the little laptop was safely back into a pouch Strela set about destroying everything. The computers she smashed with the sledgehammer till nothing was left but pieces scattered all over. A pair of well placed hand grenades quickly reduced the examining table and scanners to burning rubbish but each of the cylinders took a pair of explosive arrows to destroy spraying the bluish liquid all over. Strela kept smashing and exploding things till nothing was left intact and the air was filled with smoke that caused her to cough. Only then did she turn and leave the room.

Getting the people out was far easier then she expected. The creature had ripped the exit door (frame and all) from out of the wall and gone off into the plant itself. They stepped out into a plant in utter chaos. Flames and explosions were everywhere and people were running around in a panic. They walked calmly though the panic and confusion avoiding the security people who were thankfully too busy to bother them. A dozen council troops raced past them without giving the group a second glance. Strela stopped and looked off to their left in the direction the troops had taken. There she saw a score of security guards and Council troops fighting the creature and loosing. She couldn't help but smile at the mayhem the monster was causing.

"Your new friend is causing a lot of trouble!" one of the Scrapyarders said looking at the battle being played out in front of them. The female creature was ripping through security guards, council troops and robots with an easy that was almost frightening.

She smiled and laughed. "She certainly is!" Strela watched the mayhem for a moment. "She has power and speed but no real training," the woman commented. "With more training she'd be truly unstoppable." Strela turned from the fight and shoed her group onwards.

The group made its way quickly away from the fight and out of the plant entirely. Going over the fence and minefield was not an option. They moved along the inside of the fence till she found what she was looking for. In front of them was a gate guarded by a single security man. Two quick arrow shots and the guard was out of the way and the gate open for use.

A few minutes later the group was on the eastern shore of the island, not far from where she had first landed.. Strela took out the cell phone and again dialed the number. "I've got all the people," she said simply.

"Pick up is en route," the male voice said. "Any trouble?"

"No but the Council was using the plant as cover for a research lab. I ran into a lot of Council troops. I also found a lab where they were obviously trying to alter people. I also ran into a test subject there."

"What exactly was this subject like?" the phone asked.

"I'm not sure exactly what she was but it seemed to be a mix of a half dozen different species," Strela responded.

"Probably trying to create some sort of super soldier," the voice on the phone said. "They are always trying to do that. Where is it now?"

"Last time I saw her she was rampaging across the lab and the entire plant," the woman answered. There was a loud explosion and a huge pillar of smoke and flames shot out the roof of one of the buildings. "She's still at it too."

"Good. That will distract the council while we remove our people. The boat should be there shortly."

All they could do is hunker down and wait. Hoping the darkness and the distraction of the rampaging creature would keep them safe. In the distance they could hear explosions and gunfire constantly. The fires seemed to be spreading to more and more of the buildings creating a glow that lit up the whole island.

It was ten, long minutes before a small boat came speeding out of the darkness and headed towards the beach. The rescue boat was motor launch of the type you could find in plenty at any harbor or large body of water. It was old and battered but it was large enough to fit everyone and it ran well.

They all piled into the little boat and in moments it was racing away from the island. The darkness swallowed up the little craft. Behind them the island continued to burn.