

Trail of Thieves
by Christian O'Kane

Everything on Sharkhead isle seemed to be old, worn out and rundown. Even the people who lived and worked there looked old and used up. In the years she had lived in and visited the Rogue Isles she had never seen anything new there. It's as if any new building was constructed already old and rundown.

Even by the standards of Sharkhead isle this was a really rundown, decrepit warehouse. The dirt and grime covered walls were of corrugated steel so corroded as to be more rust than metal. The steel I beams supporting the roof was so corroded and rusted that that the only thing holding up the building was force of habit.

But for all the air of decay about the place it was pretty busy. There were a half dozen people standing guard on the roof as a dozen more loitered outside the only still working door.

All of these details were carefully noted by a woman hidden in the shadows of a nearby warehouse. A building as rundown as the first. The roof was so decayed that Strela had to move carefully to avoid falling through. Several minutes of careful maneuvering brought her to a skylight. She would have pried open the skylight but the glass was missing leaving only a large rectangular opening.

Peering through the shattered remains of the skylight Strela saw a debris strewn floor far below. She stepped over the opening and slowly lowered herself down towards the floor. Her bow remained at the ready as she descended.

She found herself standing in a dirty and rubbish filled room. The twisted remains of a desk and a tall, battered filing cabinet told her that it might have once been an office.

Strela walked to the only door leading from the room. She listened at it for a moment but heard nothing. The woman carefully opened the door just a crack and looked out.

Standing a short distance down the hallway was a pair of figures that only vaguely looked human. They seemed to be equal parts flesh and machinery. Strela had seen cyborgs before. Usually they were a blending of human flesh and bone with highly advanced technology. But these figures were more like escapees from a junk yard. One had an artificial left arm but instead of being of smooth metal and plastic this one was made of bits and pieces of metal roughly hammered together and ending in a long, wickedly sharp hooked blade. On his head was a Mohawk made up of equal parts red spiked hair and metal spikes. The rest of his clothing was the punk leather clothing that seemed to be the standard uniform for all gang members and criminals in the Rogue Isles. The other person had a large Mohawk hairdo of dark blue. His shirt was lime green and the leather jacket was the brightest shade of red she had ever seen. His pants were a deep purple color and had patches of sheet metal attached in several places. In his hands he carried an axe that looked to have been roughly cut from a piece of thick metal. She had seen

and fought members of the Freakshow gang but she never could get used to their freakish looks. They were like something from a mechanic's worst nightmare.

The woman archer slowly opened the door till she had enough room to use her bow. She carefully chose one of her flash arrows and brought it to the string on her bow.

"BAM!" A shot suddenly rang out and the gang member with the hooked hand tumbled to the ground as a bullet ripped through his chest. A moment later a grenade went off sending the remaining Freak flying into a wall. A long burst of machine gun fire ripped through the cyborg's body before it even hit the floor.

Strela didn't shoot but waited to see what developed. At first all she saw was a flickering/shimmering that was roughly human shaped.

"You might as well come out," a voice said suddenly. "I see you there." The words were spoken in a deep tone with an odd accent that she could not place.

Reluctantly she stepped out into the hallway still with her bow ready and the flash arrow still nocked.

The shimmering figure moved down the hallway and stopped about three meters from her. The shimmering stopped and the woman finally got a good look at the person.

The figure in front of her was slightly taller than she was and was vaguely human in outline but the blue scales and long tail matched the reptilian head with its impressively sharp teeth. His body was covered with the same tough metal/plastic alloy armor that Misha tended to wear. In his hands was a long barreled rifle of an unknown design which was aimed at her.

"Who are you?" The reptile asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Who are you?" The woman asked with her bow still aimed directly at where she thought was the reptile's heart.

"I asked you first," the dragon said in a surprisingly warm tone. "But I'm always courteous to a beautiful lady like yourself. My name is Draco Crepitus which in English translates as Snap Dragon."

She smiled. "You're named after the flower?" Strela looked at him for a moment then lowered her bow. "You're no Freakshow. You're one of those naive heroes from the U.S."

"Hardly naive," he countered. "You are not a Freakshow either. So who are you?"

"I am Snegurochka," she answered. "Which means . . ."

"Snow maiden," Draco said, interrupting the woman. "A figure from Russian mythology. Why are you here? Certainly you're not working for these villains."

"Work for the Freakshow? Never," she snarled. "They've been harassing friends of mine and I've been asked to persuade them to back off."

"Persuade? You mean kill lots of them don't you? Who are your friends?" The dragon asked sarcastically. "Crey? Cage consortium?"

Her eyes narrowed and there was a look of anger on her face. "The Scrapyarders," she snapped. "And what are you here for?"

"I'm here to recover something the Freakshow stole," Draco answered. "The Jade mask of Hexacutol."

"I see," the woman said slowly. "I heard about that robbery. Why do you think it's here? The robbery was done by some super villain after a big battle over Charleston's harbor."

"The villain Shadow's Edge was ambushed by the Freakshow who took it for themselves. I've tracked the mask all the way to here."

"What will you do with it if you get the mask back," the archer asked coldly.

"Return it to the museum of course!" Draco answered as his broad tail lashed back and forth.

"So you're going to return it to the museum. But didn't they get it from a dealer who himself had stolen it from a central American tomb?"

"Where would you prefer it be?" Draco asked. "In the museum or in the hands of villains like the Freakshow?"

"I'd prefer to see it back in the Guatemalan tomb it was stolen from," was Strela's harsh response.

"Now who is being naive?" the reptile asked. "Do you honestly think it would stay there for very long?"

She slowly nodded her head. "All too true, but it seems wrong to take from one group of thieves and give it to another group of thieves."

"If I did not trust the Charleston museum of History I would never have taken this mission," Snapdragon explained. "And on display in the museum it will expose millions to the rich culture and heritage of the Maya. Have you ever seen the museum where it was displayed? It was the centerpiece of a large exhibit on the Maya."

"I haven't been to Charleston yet," the woman responded.

"Someday perhaps," the reptile answered.

"Why don't we join forces," Strela suggested. "You get your mask and I get to kill lots of Freakshow. And when it's done we can both go back and paid handsomely by our employers."

The dragon gave a small snort and nodded. "All right."

There was a loud shout off to the left and both looked and spotted a half dozen Freakshow charging at them.

"Showtime!" she shouted and loosed an arrow at the attackers.

The Freakshow had put up a good fight but like everything they did it was ferocious, confused and uncoordinated. Now the two found themselves in a cavernous room filled with used car parts, old appliances, signs, furniture and a large amount of just plain junk.

Ten minutes of searching among the clutter and junk that the Freakshow considered valuable turned up an amazing assortment of items. They found enough parts and pieces to make four complete pc's, two dozen televisions all of different makes and models, radios, stereos, lights, an entire neon sign advertising a place called "The Floating Vagabond," along with a bewildering assortment of bits and pieces that defied identification. Mixed into this mess was a vast amount of money in paper, coins and credit cards. Among the coins she found a dozen silver ones with the letters C.S.A. on them. Those she pocketed. Strela knew little of the American civil war but she did know that anything from that war was worth a lot of money. The strangest item was a wooden cabinet the size of a small refrigerator. Set in the front was a small television screen that was only slightly larger than her hand! There was no doubting that it was a TV but it was the strangest she had ever seen. Finally they came upon something wrapped in a wool blanket.

Slowly and gently Draco unwrapped the bundle and revealed a mask of the deepest and most incredible green jade. It had a face of strong firm lines that looked out at them. The deep set eyes and boldly thrust jaw gave the mask the look of a fierce warrior who was scowling at them.

"Beautiful," Draco said softly.

"He looks mad," Strela commented.

"That is the face of the great warrior Hexacutol," the reptile answered. "A great warrior who died one thousand three hundred years ago. It is suspected that he was a super."

"Not every hero in history had super powers," the woman commented. "A lot of good ordinary people did heroic things."

"True," he said and slowly rewrapped the mask up in the clothe. The bundled mask he placed carefully in a pouch on his hip with one hand. The other slowly tightened its grip on his rifle.

Strela stood there for a moment with her bow in hand and an arrow nocked and ready.

"Well?" Snapdragon asked . "What happens now?"

"What does happen now?" Strela asked herself. "I fight him and get the mask. Then what? I sell it to a dealer who'll wind up selling it to a museum or even worse a private collector. I'll get a lot of money out of the deal but that would make me no better than the Freakshow and Shadow's Edge. Just another thief in a long line of thieves."

"Nothing," Strela said finally and relaxed her stance. "We both go and get paid and the mask goes back to the museum."

"It's worth HOW much?" She asked, surprised.

"The offer was for \$15,000," came the answer from her laptop. The voice belonged to a familiar contact located halfway around the world. Someone she worked with all the time but had never met face to face.

"It is the only known surviving example of that model of an RCA television from 1939. RCA themselves offered that amount."

She shook head. "It's amazing the things people will buy. What about the coins?"

"They are not original Confederate coins but they're still worth a thousand dollars," the contact on the computer responded.

"Get the most you can for the coins," Strela ordered. "And agree to RCA's terms."

"What about getting the TV to them? It's not something that can be easily exchanged in some bar."

"They'll have to come here," Strela responded. "I can't haul that big box all the way to the U.S. It was hard enough just getting it here!"

A loud laugh came from the laptop. "I bet it was!"

It was a small thing that caught her eye. Strela was searching the internet for information as she chatted. A simple search for "Jade mask of Hexacutol" pulled up several hits. She pulled up the first link and found an article in the Charleston Post and Courier. There she saw the image of

Snapdragon shaking hands with a blonde haired woman. Displayed proudly on a table between them was the mask. "Mask Returned!" The headlines announced. "The superheroes Snapdragon and Snegurochka recovered the mask in a dramatic chase that led all the way to the Rogues Isles. Chairwoman Becky Raintree also announced that the mask would be the centerpiece of the museum's new exhibit 'Stolen Treasures, Stolen History' which she hopes will raise public awareness on the criminal trade in stolen art."