

Neutral Ground
by Christian O'Kane

Stealth found Misha standing in front of a mirror wearing his full dress uniform. The army uniform was freshly cleaned and pressed. The shoes on his paws had a shine that glistened in the light like polished glass.

"Where are you heading all dressed up?" The feline superhero asked as he examined his friend. The feline was wearing a faded pair of jeans and a black tee shirt.

"The metropolitan museum of art," the fox answered as he gently removed some almost invisible lint from his shoulder. "I'm there as part of the opening of the new Archery Through History exhibit."

Stealth gave a short chirp of laughter. "So you're there to look good and be friendly to all the voters and potential army recruits."

The fox nodded and wagged his tail back and forth. "Oh yes! The colonel gave me a list of politicians I've been ordered to be friendly to." He shrugged. "But the real reason I'm going is it's an exhibit on archery," Misha explained. "They have several real long bows from the Mary Rose!" He said excitedly.

"Never heard of her," the feline joked. "Is she an old girl friend?"

"No! The Mary Rose is an English shipwreck," the fox replied with a laugh and a shake of the head.

"So you're going to see some pieces of waterlogged wood?" The feline asked.

The fox stopped and looked at the feline for a moment. "The warship Mary Rose sank in 1545 and it's a time capsule into the forgotten past of the Tudor age," Misha said excitedly. "These bows are genuine English long bows over 500 years old!"

"So not only are they soggy but they're old too?" He asked jokingly.

"Don't you have any sense of history?" Misha asked as he adjusted his tie one last time.

"I'm using a pair of two thousand year old swords," the feline superhero responded. "But the idea of wandering around a room filled with several hundred total strangers and paparazzi doesn't sound like fun."

"True," the vulpine ranger responded. "But at least I do get free food and drinks. And as an invited guest I get a goodie bag."

Stealth tilted his head to one side in a puzzled look. "A goodie bag?"

"All invited guests get a tote bag filled with all sorts of free stuff," Misha explained as he checked the alignment of the medals and ribbons on his chest.

"What sort of stuff?" The feline asked.

"Well . . . ah," the fox stuttered. "I don't know. I've never gotten one before. Probably some cheap souvenirs and a tee shirt or two. I'll bring you back a tee shirt unless you want a cheap souvenir or two."

The Paragon Museum of Art crowded, even for a Saturday. Everywhere he looked were large groups of people wandering about. All of them were dressed in expensive clothing. The men had tuxedos and the women expensive dresses from the latest designers. Everywhere there were the paparazzi with cameras taking pictures and video of everything and everyone.

The museum was popular but what was drawing the real crowds today was the new Exhibit on Archery Throughout History. It was well known that many items from various supers would be displayed. Anything to do with a super drew large crowds. And many super heroes would also attend the opening surely drawing even more people. Rumor was that Manticore himself would attend. It certainly seemed that everyone else was there.

Misha worked his through the crowds and up to the entrance. There the fox had to show his invitation to a man dressed in full combat armor and carrying an assault rifle. After being cleared he stepped through the museum's grand entrance and into the main hall. Pushing past a bank of photographers and reporters and up some stairs took him into one of the exhibit halls. The large room had a ceiling that soared thirty feet overhead. Lining the walls were display cases and in the center was a score of life sized figures. A half dozen of the figures were dressed in medieval armor and carrying weapons. Misha recognized them as recreations of English archers like those at the battle of Agincourt.

Standing near one of the displays was a tall, fit man with brown hair and a straight, upright stance. He was wearing a tweed suit complete with a gold vest, brown pinstriped pants, white dress shirt and matching black tie and shoes. Clutched in one hand was a brown top hat. Clutched in the other was a large crossbow that was all metal and full of gears, pipes, pulleys and pistons. It seemed to be steam powered as small plumes of steam were leaking from everywhere.

"A *steam powered crossbow*?" The nanites commented. The intelligent machines that had altered Misha into his current, super form were always present in his body.

"*Is that possible?*"

"*Evidently it is but it can't be practical!*"

"Practical or not it works!"

"That is the Gentleman Archer. He's from dimension R13299W commonly known as the Steam punk dimension."

"It has great similarities to the technology the super villain Nemesis uses," the nanites commented. "But put to a far better use."

"Thankfully!" Misha muttered. The fox noticed that a thin cloud of steam was escaping from the man's collar. "Could he be steam powered too?"

The vulpine posed for a photographer who claimed to be from the New York Times. He was standing there holding his bow in one hand and trying to look heroic when a voice spoke from behind him. "That's a cute costume you're wearing."

Misha turned in the direction the question had come from. Standing there was a gray haired, elderly woman wearing an expensive gown that looked to be several years out of date. "No Mam," he explained. "This is not a costume. I really am an army ranger and a staff sergeant."

"My uncle Philip was in the Rangers in Korea. He always told me how he helped destroy a North Korean Headquarters," the woman said proudly.

Misha's tail wagged. "That was the first Ranger company. They destroyed the 12th division headquarters. Helped stop an major NK drive."

The woman's face brightened immediately. "You know him?"

"I know all the great man who served in the rangers before me," Misha responded.

Misha spotted a tall, black haired man wearing a buckskin jacket and pants decorated with fringe and beads. The man was wearing a pair of moccasins and had a red, wool cap on his head. "He looks like a 19th century frontiersman," Misha commented. On his back was a quiver that was of the same buckskin and beads as his shirt and pants.

"He's the Frontiersman," the nanites explained. "Claims to be the reincarnation of an 18th century western frontiersman named Jacque Labeau."

Talking to the Frontiersman was another person that caught Misha's attention. The man was well dressed. In his hands was a bow made of black colored, high tensile metal. The blue and gold colored quiver full of arrows on his back seemed incongruous to the tuxedo he was wearing. His face had the tanned look of a man who been spent much time in the sun and his body had the lean, well muscled look of a predator.

"Is that William Highcastle?" Misha asked.

"Who?"

"Who?" Misha responded. "The person I'm looking directly at."

"Ah."

There was several seconds of silence and no answer.

"Well?" The fox snapped. "Is that Highcastle?"

"Perhaps," the nanites responded slowly.

"I think you really want to go back the other way."

"Why?"

"Ah . . . No reason."

"WHY?" Misha snarled. Usually the nanites were overflowing with information. Now suddenly they were silent.

"Well."

"Ah. Well as you know he is a designer and manufacturer of many things."

"Yes and so?" The fox answered. "Get to the point."

"Particularly sporting and hunting paraphernalia. But he has sold a wide range of items to the military."

"Stop avoiding the issue and answer my question," Misha countered. "Why shouldn't I meet him?"

"We sort of borrowed some ideas from him," the nanites admitted almost sheepishly.

"Meaning you stole from him," the fox responded.

"Stole is such a harsh word. We prefer creatively obtained."

"What did you steal from him?" Misha asked.

"Creatively obtained!"

"Borrowed!"

"Whatever! What did you get from him without his permission?" Misha questioned. Sometimes trying to get a straight answer from the nanites could be harder than fighting some villains.

"We were unable to obtain the needed information any other way. With your help we were able to access legally the extensive Department of Defense databases. We had access to many weapons designs."

"MODERN weapons. Thousand of MODERN weapons."

"Rifle and assault rifles designs."

"1,235"

"Shotguns."

"973."

"Submachine guns and machine pistols."

"457."

"Pistols and revolvers."

"1,257 and 2,523 respectively."

"With all of those modern designs what did you go with? Did you go with assault rifles? Laser or other energy weapons. No! You went with archery! ARCHERY! Why archery? This is 21st century Rhode Island. Not 15th century Agincourt," the nanites whined.

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "I've done quite well with it so far. But you are changing the subject. What did you obtain from him?"

"Forty five bow designs and one hundred, ninety three arrow or arrow related designs."

Misha shook his head. "You never do anything in a small way do you? So you stole all those designs and never gave him credit or payment?"

"No," the nanites responded. "But we have considered it."

"Have you considered paying him a lot of money?" Misha asked. "No one will turn down lots of cash."

"How? Even if we do it anonymously people are sure to ask questions."

"Well, what if we get him a nice, fat, government contract?" Misha asked.

"Oh! Now that would work! we could easily arrange that. His designs are quite good in some respects."

"Well not all his designs. We have already cataloged 2,137 improvements that can be made to his designs."

"And there are the improvements that we already made to his data and communications security."

"Let me get this straight," Misha asked. "First you broke into his computers and stole his designs. Then you improved his security?"

"Of course! Do you really want every villain on the planet to have access to them?"

When he had first announced to the army his change and the nanites that had done it the military had been unhappy. Very unhappy. The only reason the Dept of Defense hadn't completely freaked out were the modifications and changes the nanites had made to the DoD database and communication systems. Over seven hundred thousand changes to security protocols, firewalls and anti-intrusion software that had revolutionized the DoD systems. He knew that the nanites used an encryption system for their own communications that even the NSA couldn't crack. Not for lack of trying. But when the National Security Agency - professional cryptographers couldn't break the code that impressed everyone. Then people really did freak out!

Misha understood that the nanites were not fully trusted. And neither was he. Which is why he was working alone in the middle of a city and not assigned to an active army unit. Misha was certain that more than a few people were probably monitoring him.

"Let's go say hello!"

The woman was wearing a long, dark red dress that flowed all the way to the floor. Her brown hair fell to her shoulders in long, flowing locks. The hair was a different color and she was wearing more formal clothing but he recognized her instantly. "Strela."

Almost reflexively Misha pulled out his bow. His hand reached for an arrow and stopped. Misha looked at the people who were crowded around the himself and Strela. This was no place for a fight.

Strela looked at him and then at the young boy standing next to her. The young boy was excitedly chattering at her. She relaxed and then smiled at the boy. The boy handed her a small book and a pen. The woman signed her name in it and gave it back.

Misha slowly relaxed his own stance as his hand dropped to his side. "Hello Svetlana," he said trying to sound calm.

The woman visibly flinched. "Hello Misha. I should have realized you'd come here."

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "I never expected to meet you here."

"Why?" She asked and smiled. "A girl's not allowed to visit the museums? I even paid admission!" The woman pointed to the small metal button attached to the collar of her blouse. On it was a large white letter M on a blue background.

"I'm an invited guest so I didn't have to pay!" He joked.

"One of the benefits of being a hero?" The female asked teasingly.

"Yes," came the answer. "Yes it is! That and the occasional free cup of iced tea."

"Tea?" She teased. "What no coffee? I thought all police and superheroes drank coffee and ate donuts."

Misha stuck out his tongue and shook his head. "Yuck! I hate coffee." He looked at the floor and there was a moment of awkward silence. Then he tucked in his tail. "Thank you for the blanket and pillow," he said softly but honestly. If Misha had still possessed a human face it would probably have been blushing.

She smiled softly and was surprisingly happy about him enjoying her gift even if she had meant it to be a joke. Or had she meant it to be a joke? "I'm glad you liked them."

The pair was standing in front of a display case holding a pair of bows, a quiver and a score of arrows, all darkened with age and long submersion. On the wall behind them was the image of a sailing ship and the words "Mary Rose. Time capsule to the past."

"Amazing that they survived so long underwater," the woman said.

"It was the mud," Misha explained. "The deep, oxygen poor mud preserved all the wood. Until they raised the ship they had no idea what a real English long bow looked like. They only had one old, decayed bow. They found over a hundred on the Mary Rose."

"137 to be exact," Strela responded.

Misha gave a yip of laughter and wagged his tail. "Are you interested in history or archery?"

"Both," Svetlana answered.

"I've always enjoyed history," Misha commented. "I almost became an archeologist."

"Really?" Svetlana said surprised. "I find it hard to see you digging in the dirt with a brush and trowel."

"I love history but it just never worked out. I didn't want to spend four years taking college classes. That seemed boring and I liked the military."

"You certainly did well with it!" The woman exclaimed.

"Thank you," Misha responded.

A waiter came by carrying a tray filled with a variety of drinks. Misha grabbed two glasses that he hoped were filled with juice. He handed one to Svetlana and kept one for himself.

"Thank you," she said as she took a drink.

Misha sipped his and found it was filled with an odd mixture of grape, orange and strawberry juice that tasted pretty good. "Why are you working for those traitors?" Misha asked between swallows of juice.

"Which traitors?" She responded. The woman took a sip of her drink and seemed to like it and took a deep drink. "The Rogue Isles is full of traitors and rogues."

"Sky Raiders," he spat out harshly.

"Those idiots?" She asked. Svetlana covered her surprise by taking a drink. "They pay very well."

"They could never pay me enough to even consider working for those criminals," Misha snarled revealing a set of impressively sharp teeth.

"I can't be so picky Misha. A girl needs to eat and pay the bills," she responded.

"But why do you have to work for them?" He asked. "There are other groups that pay well."

"But none pay as well as they do," she joked.

"Once a traitor always a traitor," the vulpine muttered harshly. "All they deserve is death."

"Why don't you think of me as a traitor?" Strela asked. She had never seen the fox this mad. Not even when they had been battling each other. "I abandoned my oaths to protect the Soviet Union. Both me and the Raiders are in the Isles stealing things. Often the same things."

A waitress appeared bearing a tray filled with a wide variety of pastry. Misha took a large, brown muffin that smelled deeply of chocolate. Strela took another tan colored muffin that smelled highly of corn.

Misha took a bite of the muffin and was rewarded with a massive taste of deep, dark chocolate. He chewed silently and both waited till the waitress had left. "When you left Russia how many in the Spetsnaz and in your team did you kill?" The fox asked.

She was confused for a moment. "Kill? None. Things were pretty nasty but we all survived." The woman broke off a piece of muffin and popped it into her mouth.

"When Duray and his people went rogue," Misha said. The disgust in his voice plain to hear. "They killed twenty people in the process. Three of them were shot in the back of the head. Two others had their throats slit. These were fellow soldiers. Rangers, Seals. Friends."

The woman's face showed surprise and anger. "I heard they deserted but I didn't know that they killed other soldiers like that."

"The next time you work for those monsters remember that," he warned her earnestly. "They'll always have a bullet for you."

"Da," she nodded her head. "I know how to deal with such mercenaries. That's all they are now. Well equipped ones but they have none of the élan of the unit who fought the Rickti. I'd like to know who is bankrolling them. No matter how much equipment they lost there was always plenty of money to buy more."

"Any idea who it is with all the cash?" Misha asked earnestly.

"Nyet," She responded. "That one always remained hidden."

"Shame," Misha said. "That's a question I want answered."

"So do I," Strela added. "I want to know who can spend such money so freely and why."

The fox nodded his head slowly "So do a lot of people."

Walking along they came to another exhibit. This one had a squat, oriental figure wearing an ankle length robe of silk that was dyed the deepest blue he had ever seen and edged with a bright white stripe. On his head was a simple hat of the same color and material. In his hands was a bow made of a composite of wood, horn and animal sinew. The letters over the figure read "Mongolia; Horse Archers Supreme."

Svetlana scowled and drew her face into a snarl. "Those monsters devastated Russia. Robbed, raped, murdered and destroyed whole cities."

"They left no eyes open to weep for the dead," Misha commented as he looked at the brightly clothed figure.

"You've studied Russia?" She asked with a surprised look on her face..

"I've been studying it lately. Since we first met," he admitted.

She smiled broadly. "You mean the first time we tried to kill each other?"

"I've had dates that were worse than that," he joked as his tail wagged back and forth.

She shook her head. "I can't picture you as a wild party person."

Misha's ears perked up and there was an amused twinkle in his eye. "Oh?"

"You seem more like the quiet geek type to me," was her reply. "Not the usual macho type."

"Not all Rangers are over sexed, hard drinking macho type. That's just a stereotype," Misha answered.

"I met a lot who were!" Svetlana countered. "In the Spetsnaz."

Misha gave a yip of laughter as his tail wagged back and forth. "Rangers, Royal Commando, GSG9, Spetsnaz all have the same types."

"I should have remained in the Spetsnaz," she said. "Those were happy times."

"Answer me one question Svetlana," Misha asked without looking away from the display case. "Why?"

"Why what?" She asked without looking at her companion. The woman already had a good idea of what Misha meant but refused to acknowledge it.

"Why did you go rogue?" He questioned in soft tones.

Svetlana didn't speak at first but when she did her answer surprised him. "What do you mean go rogue? I never was a hero. I was always committing crimes." She said in a sarcastic tone. "Our team was supposed to be upholding the law, helping the needy and freeing the oppressed. All we did was to keep the same petty, greedy elite in power regardless of what the people wanted or needed. As communist control started to fail, things got worse. The monsters in charge became more desperate and more brutal. They had always been willing to kill and terrorize people to stay in power but they became even more ruthless and cruel. Whatever it took to stay in control; killing, stealing, destroying."

"Worst was the hypocrisy. They were claiming to be fighting corruption and the evils of capitalism." The woman's face twisted into a snarl that took Misha by surprise with its intensity. "All the time we were merely working for whoever paid the most. One time we were ordered to attack a warehouse that supposedly contained illegal weapons," she paused for a moment. "We fought through a score of guards and destroyed the place but all we found was machinery, worthless, worn out, canning equipment. When we confronted our leader he finally admitted that

there was no arms shipment. A businessman had paid the colonel to have the team to destroy the equipment." The woman clenched her fists. "He rented us. RENTED US out like you'd rent a car or a horse for a day's ride."

"What did you do?" Misha asked. Surprised.

"Nothing," she spat. "We were very well paid. I was rewarded with a brand new sports car. That was the first time but not the last. Nothing we did was good." She sighed deeply and leaned her head against a display case. "When I fled to the Rogue Isles I simply went from stealing, kidnapping and smashing for a government to doing it for myself."

"Not everything you did was evil," Misha commented. "You fought the Rikti."

She stood up straight and smiled for a brief moment. Then her face darkened in a scowl. "Fought them and lost. They destroyed most of Kiev."

"New York too," the fox added softly. "But we made them pay a high price."

The woman nodded slowly. "Those were good times," she said slowly. "But most of those I fought were good folk trying to free their people from communist oppression."

She sighed deeply. "The Mongols, the Czar, communism and then the chaos that came after the collapse of communism. Russia seems to go from one bad government to another."

"The present government isn't that bad," Misha said in way of response.

"Are you so certain?" She asked coldly. "They are still fighting in Chechnya, the crime and corruption is still rampant and the great Russian army is a badly led, poorly equipped joke."

"Things have changed there. They have real, honest elections there now," the fox responded.

"It only took one hundred years to achieve it," she commented sarcastically.

"Times change, countries change and people change. Even if very slowly," he said.

It was almost midnight before Misha returned home. "So how was the opening?" Stealth asked as Misha walked into the complex of rooms they shared. The feline was resting in a lounge chair, playing a game on the wide screen TV.

"Good! I brought you a tee-shirt!" The fox held up a bright blue tee shirt with the image of a bow, quiver and arrows on it, all in gold. He handed it to the feline.

Stealth took the shirt and examined it. "Thank you!"

"The food wasn't too bad and I met a lot of people. Including one I didn't expect."

"Who?"

"Strela," Misha answered simply as he sat down next to the feline. "She came to the opening." he said in a slightly dazed tone.

The feline froze for a moment. Then he turned and looked at his friend, trying to judge if the fox was joking or not. "What happened? I didn't hear about a fight on TV and our little friends have been quiet all evening." Stealth asked.

"With all those people there? Fighting was out of the question. Too many people would get hurt. So we talked."

"Just talked?" Stealth asked, confused. "The last time you two met she tried to kill you!"

"But that's what made it so interesting!" Misha joked.

Stealth opened his mouth to speak but then shook his head and closed his mouth without saying a word.

"No comments?" Misha asked.

"You two confuse me," Stealth responded.

The End