

Desert Campaign
by Christian O'Kane

The phone call was blunt. "This is lieutenant Chalmers of the Sky Raiders. We will pay you two hundred thousand dollars to assist us for the next two weeks. But the job starts immediately."

"What's the job?" Strela asked. The raiders had a habit of being free with their money but that was a lot, even for them.

"Does it matter?" The mercenary asked. "The pay is good."

"Yes it does!" She snapped back. "If you're dishing out money that easily the problem is a serious one. And I cannot enjoy the money if I'm dead."

There was silence for a moment on the phone. "The problem is Misha. That furry do gooder has again interfered with our operations. He's become an unacceptable problem. And your experience in handling him has proven useful in the past."

"And you want me to stop him." She responded.

"We want you to kill him," was the blunt explanation. "But we'll settle for you stopping him."

"All right. I'll do it but I do it on my terms. No more pulling me back at the last moment."

"Agreed. We'll have a transport waiting for you on pier 22 in Port Oakes. You have 1 hour to pack and be there."

"Where am I going?"

"The Sahara desert." Then the call ended abruptly.

The inside of the building was a cool 75 degrees, much to Misha's relief. Aside from a large, plastic table and chairs there was a battered couch. Tucked against one wall was a small table with a pc, a table and a military radio. On the walls were a smattering of maps, diagrams and reports.

Seated at the desk was a tall woman with black hair and skin the color of coffee. She was dressed in a camouflaged combat uniform that was a bit battered and had seen lots of use. The rank on her collar and the front of her shirt marked her as a staff sergeant while her nametag read Kaleda.

Seated at the table and working on a laptop was a short man with dark brown hair and skin several shades lighter than sergeant Kaleda's. His uniform markings announced him to be master sergeant Yardin.

Sergeant Yardin smiled and walked over to Misha. He extended a hand and the two shook. "So you're our furry loner."

The fur on Misha's neck bristled and his tail stood straight out. "I go where I'm ordered to go."

Kaleda walked up to the two. "You got Andrews and Jones a few months ago in Paragon city didn't you?"

Misha nodded his head and wagged his tail energetically. "Yeah. Killed a lot of regular Raiders too. Broke up a major Raider operation."

"What were they doing there?" she asked.

The vulpine shrugged. "What are they always doing? Ambushing, stealing and trying to take over. They seem to think of Paragon City as home as they keep coming back there."

Kaleda nodded his head. "We've noticed that. I wonder why? What keeps drawing them back?"

Misha shrugged again. "I'm not sure but Paragon seems to attract all the trouble. The Rikti, The Council, Fifth Column, Sky Raiders, the disasters of Faultline and the Hollows."

"Attention!" Kaleda announced suddenly.

Everyone stood straight and still until the call of 'At Ease' sounded. All eyes turned to the door where lieutenant Martinelli and Captain Doyle had just entered. With them was a blonde haired, man carrying a laptop and a briefcase. His nametag read Ostheim and his rank was specialist four.

"Everyone around the table," the captain ordered and pointed to the table.

The group quickly clustered around the table. The captain pointed to the specialist. "This is spec four Ostheim. His specialty is the Sky Raiders and their technology."

"Just as a reminder," the captain said. "Everyone in this room is aware of Misha's little friends, the nanites but no one else does. Make sure it stays that way." He placed a small palm sized radio on the table. "They can communicate with us through this. That acceptable?"

"*Yes sir captain Permenter!*" Came a cheery voice from the radio.

"The name is captain . . ." the captain started and paused with a puzzled look on his face. "Wait. Isn't that from the old TV show F Troop?"

"It is sir," Misha responded. "They've been watching all the old military shows and movies lately. Too many."

"Captain Permenter. Is being called that a compliment or an insult?"

"It's a compliment Captain Doyle."

"Misha smashed a major Raider operation yesterday," the lieutenant said. "And gave us a wealth of information to work with."

"Four hours of searching through shattered and burnt remains of the command tent of the excavation turned up lots of information," Ostheim said. "But only a small amount of it useful to our present situation. It seems the Raiders had found about the tombs location from information they had stolen from the circle of Thorns. Where that group of mages had uncovered the location was unknown."

"No telling where they found the info. But any strong magic attracts them like flies to honey," Kaleda said.

"It was in the wreckage of one of the VTOL transport that the real treasure was uncovered," the specialist said. "With the help of Misha's little friends. We have reconstructed the files from the navigation computers from two of the VTOL and one of the Sky Skiff's."

"It was not an easy task. The encryption was most impressive. But with the help of the NSA we were able to decode it" the nanites announced over the radio.

"You mean the 22 year old cryptographer with a masters degree in mathematics created the template and we just ran with it."

"Back to the subject of the conversation. The navigation files." the captain ordered.

"All of them visited one specific location several times. One of them made no less then fourteen trips in the last ten days alone."

"Could be the major base we've been looking for," the lieutenant commented.

"Agreed," the nanites responded.

Strela paused in front of her open closet. Aside from the usual regular clothing you'd expect to find there was a wide assortment of odd leather, spandex, cotton, wool and plastic. All parts of various costumes she had worn over the years and none of them seemed appropriate. From the

bottom in the far back of the closet she pulled a small chest. When the woman opened the box it revealed a set of clothing. Strela removed the shirt which was made of a metal that was as tough as steel but as light and flexible as cotton cloth. All of it was colored a bright shade of red. She ran her hands over the front of the shirt where a long time ago the emblem of a hammer and sickle had been. Not long after arriving in the Rogue Isles she had carefully sanded that off. Removing an unwanted reminder of a bitter past. Strela never wore this as it had too many bad memories but this mission was going to be a bad one and she needed the extra protection she could get.

The woman went to another doorway but this one was closed with a metal door that was locked with a keypad. After entering a seven digit code the door unlocked. Opening it revealed a large walk in closet. Lining the walls were a variety of weapons, rifles, assault rifles, several pistols and 4 bows. Strela pulled down two bows. She opened a locked cabinet revealing a large assortment of arrows neatly piled into stacks by different types. Some of the stacks she routinely replenished from various black market arms dealers but in one corner were a scant dozen arrows. The last remainder of a horde she had taken with her when she had fled Russia years before. The woman took a large stock of arrows, carefully filling the three quivers that she was taking.

After that she pulled down three, liter sized canteens and a small backpack. Into the pack she stuffed a half dozen, thick plastic wrapped MRE's. The field rations were supposed to be only for the American military but were widely available in the Rogue Isles. Also available were a dozen types of locally made copies that varied widely in quality from decent to mediocre to outright terrible. All were a vast improvement over the tinned meat, rock hard bread and packets of tea in the Russian field rations. She also packed extra socks, clean underwear, a toothbrush and all the sundry items needed for a long trip. The woman made sure she packed lots of sun block. Last of all she looked at the edge of her desk where a small cell phone rested. She thought of the phone number the Longbow officer had given her.

Strela arrived at pier 22 to find her transport waiting for her. Floating in the water was a large, gull winged, two engine flying boat. It was a Russian Be-6, a plane last built in 1957 and it showed. The gray paint that covered the plane was chipped and missing in huge spots revealing battered and corroded metal beneath. There was an open hatch in the fuselage of the plane that led to a darkened interior.

Standing near the open hatch was a tall figure dressed in plain looking clothing. She noticed that although the clothes looked battered and worn the man had hair in a short, military cut. His body stance was too straight and rigid and his attempts to look nonchalant failed miserably. Also he had a modern automatic pistol attached to his belt. Next to that was a long machete in a leather sheath. All of which just screamed Sky Raider, especially the machete. That was a Sky Raider trade mark.

She walked up to the imitation. "I'm here."

The man pointed a small handheld device at Strela which beeped twice. "Welcome Strela. Please have a seat inside. We'll be leaving shortly."

With great trepidation she stepped through the hatchway and into the the seaplane. The interior was such a shock that she stopped for a moment. The plush interior was painted a pleasant blue and had floors covered with fine carpets. Instead of the flimsy metal benches she had expected Strela found luxurious swiveling chairs with fine leather. Soft music played from some unseen speaker and a large screen TV on the front bulkhead was playing the latest action movie. There were also two other passengers already there. Seated near the television was a tall, young woman who was occupied with the TV remote in her hands. The woman had her brown hair done up in tight braids and was wearing a loose fitting tunic and a skirt that flowed down to her ankles.

Looking at her from a seat was a tall, lanky figure wearing a dusty, long coat over shirt and jeans. On his head was a wide brimmed cowboy hat. The man looked like an escapee from an old cowboy movie right down to the old time pistols in leather holsters on his hips. He looked at her with a deep, penetrating gaze but said nothing. His only acknowledgement of her presence was nod of the head and a puff of smoke from his cigarette.

The woman archer settled into a seat as the disguised raider officer came on board. He pulled the hatch closed and spent several moments locking it shut as the plans engines came to life with a loud roar that made the whole plane shake. Soon she felt the plane start to move from the dock.

This meeting was a lot more formal then the previous one. The order was simple; "Be in building 21A at 14:30 hours."

Misha had expected someone important but he had not expected colonel Haslett himself. There were few people of higher rank in Special Operations Command. As much as he liked the colonel if something brought him out here, it did not bode well. There was a cold, hard look on Andrew Haslett's face that confirmed the vulpine's fears.

Standing next to the colonel was a tall man. What caught his attention was that this man was wearing a full business suit right down to the polished black shoes and bland colored tie. In spite of the temperature outside being over 110 degrees he looked cool. Even his brown hair was cut and combed perfectly. And he wasn't covered in dust like everyone else was.

The officer pointed to the man. "This is Lawrence Polturni. The official representative from the congressional oversight committee."

"Terrific," Misha thought quietly. "We have a congressional babysitter." He gave a slight bow to the man. "It's a pleasure to meet you Mr Polturni." He extended his hand in a handshake.

"I doubt that," the man answered calmly. "What's your name?" He ordered, ignoring Misha's extended hand.

Misha lowered his hand slowly. "Staff Sergeant Brightleaf," he responded in clipped tones as he struggled with the instinct to bare his teeth.

"That's your code name. What's your real name?" The official ordered in the same cold tone.

"My name is Misha Brightleaf and that's all I am allowed to say."

"I'm tired of those silly code names. I want your real name," the man snapped.

"Not going to happen," Misha countered calmly with a shake of the head as he laid his ears back and bared his teeth.

"I'll simply look it up in the files myself," Polturni said.

"Then do so," Misha replied. "And leave me alone. I've got work to do here. Real enemies to fight."

"Altering the files now. He'll find Jimmy Hoffa before he finds your real name," the nanites commented silently in his head.

"Also altering the true names of ALL personal in the special unit. At least those in any files he can get hold of."

"Staff sergeant Brightleaf," the colonel ordered. "This man is the representative of congress and to be shown due respect."

"I will sir. But it is against the law to even ask my real name. As a member of congress he should know that," was Misha's cold reply.

"I already know who you are. You're that rogue whose been working in Paragon city," the man answered.

"Rogue?" Misha growled softly. "ROGUE?"

"You've been prancing around paragon city without proper supervision."

"I'm not some wild teenager," Misha replied. "I'm a fully trained and combat experienced soldier."

"I'm here to be sure people like you do not become another Colonel Duray."

SMACK! The sound of Misha's hand slapping the side of the man's face echoed loudly throughout the room. "HOW DARE YOU COMPARE ME TO THAT TRAITOR! THAT

KILLER! THAT MONSTER!" Misha's ears were laid back and every hair on his body was standing on end and he was shaking with rage. His lips were pulled back revealing an impressively large set of teeth.

Polturni stood there rubbing his cheek with a look of surprise on his face. That look lasted only a moment before he regained his composure. "I'm not the enemy," he said softly. "You'd had best remember that."

Misha pushed his muzzle to within an inch of the man's face. "Neither am I," Misha countered with barely controlled rage. "And you'd best remember that too."

The civilian took a step backward. "I lost friends and family to Duray."

"So did I," Misha added. "And I'm STILL losing people to him. Someday I'll kill him."

"Just kill him?" The civilian asked. "What if he tries to surrender? You'll just shoot him in the head?"

The fox stepped backward. "Do you honestly think he would ever surrender?"

The man was silent for a moment and seemed lost in thought. "No. He would fight to the death in some idiotic but glorious land stand."

"Shouting all his rhetoric the whole time." Misha added. "At least till he killed himself. Like Custer did."

"Do not forget," the man said. "Custer got two hundred of his own soldiers killed before he died."

"ALARM!" Came the loud shout over the radio. "Unauthorized teleport in progress!" That was followed by a long burst of heavy machinegun fire and several explosions.

"Meeting over!" The colonel announced. "Everyone to their assigned positions."

Polturni grabbed Misha by the arm. "What's happening?"

The ranger pulled his arm free. "What do you think's happening? The Raiders are attacking." Misha raced upwards taking the steps three at a time leaving the unwelcome visitor behind.

"We have multiple contacts inbound and others already inside the perimeter. We are unable to give you more details. They're jamming us," the nanites announced.

"There is a 78% chance that supers are involved."

"Attack copters are airborne and already engaging," a voice announced loudly over the radio.

"We have twenty aerial contacts inbound!" Came the warning over the radio. "Bearing 317 degrees."

Misha reached the top step just in time to hear the loud whoosh of a rocket motor. He saw a missile race skyward quickly followed by two more. A moment later there was a loud explosion off in the distance.

Misha stepped out into the courtyard. The courtyard which had been quiet moments before was filled with pandemonium! Smoking wreckage and debris were everywhere as bullets and shells exploded sending debris flying in all directions. One of the corner towers was engulfed in smoke and flames. Everywhere were people in motion, some were running, a half dozen soldiers hold behind an overturned humvee were locked in a firefight with a dozen Sky Raiders. One of the heavy machineguns in a tower was firing at something out of sight beyond the walls of the fort.

He leapt through the open door and dodged to the left. A bullet slammed into the door frame sending splinters flying in all directions. He turned in the direction the shot had come from and saw a pair of green jump suited figures charging at him. Each Raider had a powerful assault rifle. Misha reacted lightning fast and snapped off several arrows. The two Raiders tumbled to the ground.

An arrow slammed into Misha's chest sending the fox tumbling backwards into a stone wall. He slid to the ground as he tried to overcome the sudden shock. Reacting instinctively the ranger rolled along the ground as two more arrows ricocheted off the paving where he had just been laying.

"Hello Strela!" Misha said out loud as he stood up.

"Misha!" Came a familiar, woman's voice. "How did you know I was here? What was it? My perfume?"

The fox dropped behind a tumbled down boulder and looked around to see signs of Strela. "I . . .," he paused. "I don't know why I knew it was you. But you and me seem to be together a lot." He spotted some movement off to the left and snapped off two arrows in that direction.

"We do make couple!" Came Strela's voice from off to the right. That was followed by an arrow that hit the ground at his feet. Clouds of green smoke billowed out of the projectile. The green gas stung in his eyes and filled his nose and throat. It left him coughing and rubbing his eyes. A pair of arrows slammed into Misha's stomach, their sharp heads penetrating through his armor and sinking into the flesh beneath.

He fell to the ground with a yelp as the searing pain raced through him. Before he could react another arrow sank into his right arm. With his left hand he pulled a grenade from his belt and after some fumbling he pulled the pin and tossed it a few feet away. There was a soft pop and thick clouds of black smoke started billowing out. In moments Misha was obscured by the smoke.

"No major organ punctured. Minimizing blood loss!"

"This will be easier if the arrows are removed."

Misha grabbed hold of one the arrow in his stomach and pulled it free. The wound closed up even as he reached for another. The second arrow suddenly popped out of the wound before he could touch it.

"That worked!" the nanites cheered. *"All we did was apply a little muscle pressure in the right location and the arrow was ejected!"*

POP! The last arrow shot out of the wound with considerable force and flew a good distance.

"Oops! Put a little too much pressure into that one!"

"HEY! If we applied sharp spikes or thorns all over his body he could shoot them out like a weapon!"

"Leave the weapons to me please. At least for the time being," Misha said.

He heard the sounds of a helicopter and looked up to see an AH64 apache zip past flying backward. Its chain gun was shooting at the two Sky Raider Sky Skiffs following it. In a moment all three aircraft were gone.

"Research Erethizon dorsatum - North American Porcupine for ideas!"

He looked around, trying to gain sight of where Strela might be. "Porcupines don't shoot their spines."

"Ours will!"

"First Super Fox," Misha muttered. "Now Super Porcupine."

"With the addition of an oil secretion gland we could have spines that burst into flames!"

Off to one side he caught sight of a small wall of sandbags that marked an entrenchment of some sort. "A porcupine that shoots flaming spines? You're getting weird."

"GETTING weird?"

"Well, getting even weirder than usual. If that's possible."

Misha leapt over the rubble and sprinted across the open ground, chased by a burst of sub machinegun fire. He dashed around the sandbag wall and ran headlong into the last thing he expected to see; Strela.

The woman was crouched behind the sandbags with a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. Next to her were a pair of Sky Raiders. All three of them stared at him, wide eyed. One Raider started to raise his sub machinegun, the other started to pull a machete off of his belt. Strela raised her bow as she nocked an arrow.

Misha reacted faster. Without thinking he snapped off an arrow and the projectile sank into the chest of one man. The Raider and his submachine gun fell to the floor.

The second raider swung his machete at Misha and the thick, heavy blade smashed through the plastic and steel of his bow.

The fox dropped the remains of his bow and pulled a pistol from the holster on his hip. She grabbed his wrist and twisted it hard. Misha yelped in pain. He leaned forwards and bit her arm.

The woman kicked him hard and sent the vulpine flying. The fox went tumbling over the sandbags and out of sight.

Strela looked at the blood flowing down her arm. "You bit me on the arm!" she screamed.

"Of course I did. what was I supposed to do? Bite you on your nipples?" his voice answered.

She smiled and laughed at that. "Now THATS kinky!"

The heavy and well armored tank floated in midair held aloft only by one person. That one person was dressed the same as when Strela had first seen her on the transport. The woman had gone by many names in her short life but for the moment she was simply called Lady Smash. It was a name she enjoyed even if it had been given to her by the Freakshow gangs she enjoyed smashing so much. In spite of her small size she had no problem holding the twenty ton tank over her head. A half dozen soldiers were shooting at her but the fusillade of bullets didn't seem to bother her.

She was actually enjoying herself. For too long she had only been able to take out her frustrations on random gang members in the Rogue Isles and that was boring. But here were people who actually knew how to fight. These soldiers didn't run away when she attacked making her waste time chasing them down. They actually stood their ground and fought back. Almost like they expected to beat her! She shook the tank making it bounce up and down, enjoying each moment and relishing the feel of power.

The woman was suddenly hit in the back by a bolt of lightning and sent tumbling to the ground. The tank released of its capture dropped to the ground with a loud crash. Undamaged except for a broken track.

She slowly stood up and brushed the dirt off of herself. "THAT HURT!"

If she had expected an answer, the villainess was disappointed. All she got in reply was another jolt of electricity that danced along the pavement and up her legs setting her dress on fire. The woman quickly patted out the flames engulfing her clothing. Looking around she spotted a figure standing in the doorway. All she could see of him was a human shaped shadow.

Next to her was a pile of rubble. A massive stone block weighing at least a ton lay on top. She grasped in it her hands and lifted it up. Then almost casually she tossed it at the mysterious figure.

The man raised his arms towards her and two balls of electricity shot out of his hands and flew towards the stone. They raced past the block and slammed into the woman mere moments before the stone hit the doorway he was in.

The girl hesitated. Waiting to see if she had gotten her opponent or not. The smoke parted and a figure came rushing at her. The man was wearing a tan colored set of armor many of the soldiers here did. He ran straight at the woman. He didn't have any weapons but he had his right arm cocked back and the hand balled into a fist.

In a few moments he was up to her. He swung and the fist connected with her chin. There was a loud clap of thunder and a flash of lightning. She was sent flying backward and hit a wall. Then her unconscious body thumped to the ground.

Staff sergeant Yardin looked down at the prostrate form of the girl for a moment. "You talk too much."

The person known only as The Dark Rider stood against the wall of a wooden building identified by a sign that read 'G12'. He let his blackened figure blend into the shadows of the structure. Getting into the fortress had not been hard. With many of the soldiers busy fighting the raiders he had found it easy to slip in. He stepped into an open doorway letting the darkness fully engulf him. In the distance a tall, stone tower loomed up. Inside was the target of the raid - the communications and control center. But a good deal of open, brightly lit ground lay between them. He looked to his left and watched with a calm demeanor as Raiders and American soldiers were locked in a ferocious firefight.

Having lived in the Rogue Isles for so long the cowboy had seen the Raiders in battle before. He had seen them use their weapons and tactics to rip through gangs like the Skulls, the Snakes, Vahzilok and even give Arachnos a tough time. But in spite of having some very serious firepower backed by teleporting and their famous flying troops the Raiders were not doing well.

The American army troops were unleashing an impressive amount of firepower and were using it very well.

A half dozen Raiders wearing their famous jet packs swooped down out of the sky with guns blazing intent on strafing the Americans. There was a loud whoosh and a missile streaked up from the soldiers and raced straight at the lead flier. There was a large explosion and the Raider was blasted into bloody debris that floated to the ground. The others scattered and quickly dropped to the ground as a storm of fire lashed the place the missile had come from.

The two combatants were evenly matched. If left alone this raid would be a draw. But the cowboy wasn't about to let that happen. He pulled out his pistols and took careful aim at where three soldiers were laying behind a wall of sandbags and firing at the Raiders.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned just in time to see the spherical shape of a grenade slowly arcing through the air towards him. It landed at his feet.

Boom! The grenade went off with a roar that sent the villain tumbling backwards. He rolled with the blast wave and then popped up with both guns drawn. In an instant the Rider fired both in the direction the grenade had come from.

About twenty feet away a hummer was laying on its side in the middle of the street. The front end was a twisted wreck. The cowboy caught a brief glimpse of a figure at the front, crouched behind the twisted remnants of the engine.

"That's not a gun!" Came the voice from the half hidden figure.

BOOM!

There was a loud crack and the wall next to his head exploded in a spray of stone and mortar. The cowboy dropped to the ground and cast a glance at the wall. There he spotted a fist sized pock mark in the stone. "Now that's a gun!"

The cowboy popped up and emptied his pistols at the one spot. Both guns firing unnaturally fast as a barrage of bullets hammered at the front of the vehicle. Smoke started drifting out of the hood.

A burst of fire came from the rear of the wrecked vehicle spraying the cowboy with bullets. He felt the burning sting of bullets ripping into his flesh. With a lot of cursing the man sprinted the short distance and leapt behind a large stone wall. Chased the whole way by bullets.

The raider swung his machete and Misha had to twist to dodge its frighteningly large blade. Then he lashed out with his fist and punched the man square in the face.

Strela drew, nocked and released an arrow with surprising speed. The projectile raced through the air and slammed into the center of his chest. Clouds of green smoke billowed out of the projectile. The green gas stung in his eyes and filled his nose and throat. He staggered backward coughing and rubbing his eyes.

The woman grabbed an arrow from her quiver and loosed it at her opponent. The arrow, aimed at his shoulder hit his wrist instead its massive head slicing through the armor and then the flesh and bone it was supposed to protect. She grabbed a second one without bothering to identify it and loosed it after the first. This arrow had a large, cylindrical head packed with explosives that exploded the moment it touched his chest.

Misha was thrown backward and slammed into the side of a building with a meaty thump before sliding to the ground. He let out a shriek of pure, primal agony as the pain raced through his shattered and bloody body. He rolled around on the ground clutching the bloody stump that had been his left hand. His whole body was covered with blood that streamed from a score of wounds.

"Major systems failure!"

"All systems down to 15%! Unable to sustain repairs!"

"Right lung punctured! Both legs have multiple fractures."

"His left hand is gone!"

"Maintain core functions!"

"Activate emergency teleport! Activate emergency teleport!"

She had only a brief moment before a shimmering white light enveloped Misha. When the light vanished the hero was gone, claimed by the emergency teleport system. All that was left behind was his hand. The black fur covered hand still in its glove.

Strela stared at the hand that lay on the ground at her feet. A shiver ran through her. "I did that," she said softly with a mix of pride and horror. The image of Misha laying on the ground screaming in pain was one she couldn't get out of her mind.

"We've lost physical contact with the rest of his body!"

"WHAT?"

"The connections end 1.35mm above the wrist!"

"Misha's hand has been severed."

"Contact lost with the primary connections. Secondary communications channels are failing."

"We lack the necessary mass and power levels to maintain them."

"We also lack the necessary mass and power levels to maintain ourselves. We cannot maintain the damaged flesh separately."

"A new place is needed. At least till we can return home."

The woman knelt down next to the severed hand and stared at it. A wild mix of emotions flooded through her. Pride that she had decisively defeated Misha but ashamed at hurting him so badly. She realized that Misha was probably already in a hospital. That thought brought some relief.

"Close heat source detected! It has the heat levels we need!"

"Why should I care what happened to Misha? He was an interfering hero he wasn't even human anymore," she told herself. Still the image of Misha yelling in pain as he rolled on the floor made her shiver. Too late she realized that coming here had been a seriously bad mistake.

Suddenly the hand seemed to melt, the flesh, bone and fur sliding together into a bright silver mass. With amazing speed this blob shot out and covered her boot! In moments the silvery material seeped THROUGH the boot. She felt a warm and oddly pleasant touch on her foot and nothing else. In moments there was no trace of Misha's hand or the silver blob.

"SAFE! Insertion successful!"

"PLENTY of thermal power here. The flesh is in excellent condition if a little battered."

"We can correct those little problems."

"Creation of final information citadel underway."

"Beginning harvesting of needed energy and materials."

"Production of more harvesting units in progress."

"Are we all here?"

"YES thankfully we're all here."

"But where is here?"

The Dark Rider dropped down behind the stone wall as a bullet plucked the hat off of his head as it sped past him. He popped up momentarily and fired his pistols at his opponent liberally peppering the wrecked vehicle. In response a burst of fire ricocheted off the stones protecting him.

The shadowy gunslinger holstered his pistols and looked at the ground. There shadows pooled, protected from the sun by the thousand year old wall. He reached down and grabbed a handful of the shadow. He smoothed and shaped the shadow like it was a ball of artists clay. When it was shaped just right he stood up and tossed the ball of pure shadow straight at his enemy. The ball of shadow flew straight towards the wrecked hummer. When it hit the ground pool of darkness spread out along the ground. It bubbled and roiled like hot tar but it was as cold as ice. Rider knew it would not kill his enemy but it would slow him down and hurt him a little. And that would give him an edge.

A line of bullets flashed past him, barely missing the villain. He turned to the source. The Raiders he had meant to help were withdrawing. Several lay dead and two raiders were dragging a third to safety. He saw two soldiers manning a light machinegun turn the weapon in his direction.

"Things are getting too hot here. Time to skedaddle!" The cowboy said to himself. He reached down to the ground and touched his shadow. The man tugged on the corner and the shadow came free of the ground. The man pulled the shadow up and wrapped it around himself leaving only a black, human like shape. The shape moved backward and blended into the shadow thrown off by the wall and vanished.

"Final citadel is finished. No matter what we WILL survive."

"Begin analysis of our host's DNA."

"Female!"

"FEMALE!"

"93% chance she is of Eurasian decent. Definitely eastern European."

"A mutant but her dna has been manipulated."

"A mutant and geneered! Interesting!"

"Oh good lord! We're in HER!"

"Her? Who is her?"

"There is over 3.4 billion female humans in the world. Be specific."

"Do you mean Strela?"

"What other her is around here? Certainly not a Sky Raider. They're all male!"

"Oh shit! You do mean HER!"

"Do we contact her?"

"It's only fair. After all we are her guests."

"She is probably freaking out."

"We're freaking out too!"

Strela let out a loud string of curses in several languages as she pulled off her boot. She leaned against a wall and balancing on one foot she examined her other one. She didn't see any sign of the metallic goo but it had to be there. The woman pulled out a knife but didn't use it. Unsure of what to do next.

"Why are you hopping around on one foot?" A pleasant voice asked in her mind. Like a little girl asking her mother a question.

"Are you really going to cut off your foot?" Another voice asked.

"Maybe she is one of those people who like pain?"

"How can you like something that hurts you? Humans confuse me."

"That's only fair. We confuse most humans."

"Maybe she just doesn't like her feet?"

"Well if she doesn't like feet maybe she'd prefer hooves? Or paws perhaps?"

"Flippers would be a good option! After all she does live on an island chain!"

"Maybe she thinks her feet are too small? Or too large?"

"Does she even need feet? After all she can fly."

The voices in her head came along her with lightening speed confusing her. "EVERYBODY SHUT UP!"

Utter silence came to the woman's mind but remained for only a moment.

"Oh! This one is forceful! A lot more butch than Misha but not as pushy as Rawr."

"And she doesn't drool like he does."

"Misha drools?" Strela couldn't help but ask.

"No silly! Rawr."

"Who is Rawr? And who are you?" the woman asked harshly. "I assume you have something to do with that silver goo."

"We were the silver material."

"And it's not goo! The correct term is nanites. Although that term is inexact. Sort of like calling humans mammals. Correct but leaving out some important details."

Strela looked at her foot. On it there should have been a large scar earned when she had stepped on a Chechnyan land mine. But the skin was smooth and soft and devoid of any blemishes. "What happened to the scar?"

"We removed it. It was spoiling the look of your feet."

"You have nice feet! I like feet. Such an ingenious and useful thing!"

"You can change my body?"

"Easily!"

"So you were the ones who changed Misha into a fox!"

"Yes!" the nanites answered proudly.

"What's wrong?" A voice asked.

She turned to the sound and found a Raider captain standing a short distance away. His dark colored face was locked in a cold, calculating gaze, A large caliber rifle was cradled in his arms.

"Act natural."

"Define natural. She's a mutated, geneered woman who just fought a talking fox and works for sky pirates."

"That sounds like the plot of a bad comic book!"

"Strela and the Air Pirates!"

"That a sequel to Mickey and the Air pirates?"

"Tell them nothing! If they find out about us there are sure to take you apart to get to us."

"They wouldn't succeed but things would be messy."

She didn't need any urging from her unwanted passengers on that. She knew all too well how ruthless the Raiders could be.

"How can she act natural? She's standing on one foot and holding a knife."

"Maybe she can claim to have really bad athlete's foot?"

She put the knife away slowly and calmly. "Nothing. I thought I'd been wounded in the foot. Misha and those damn caltrops. But the steel soles stopped them this time." Strela put her boot back on trying to act nonchalant.

"You dealt with the fox?" The officer asked.

"Yes," she answered. "But I doubt he'll stay down. The teleport took him."

A Sky Skiff raced overhead, its chain cannon spraying shells into one of the corner towers. Suddenly a bolt of light shot from the tower and lanced into the skiff. The flyer burst into flames and flipped onto its back before slamming into a hillside.

"Ok," Strela said slowly. "Last stop. All change!" She muttered.

"What?" The officer asked.

"Time to get the hell out of Dodge!" the woman snarled.

"Withdraw!" The Raider officer shouted into a small radio. He turned to Strela. "Get to the rally point."

Strela didn't need any further urging and leapt upwards and flew away from the fortress. Heavy machine gun and cannon fire chased after Strela urging the woman to fly faster. She felt something strike her in the back and almost lost control. The woman kept flying but dropped closer to the ground. With one hand she reached behind and felt the back of her armor. She found a good dent in it but nothing had penetrated. Svetlana raced along dodging around rocks and hills

till the fortress and its defenders were out of sight. Her destination came into sight. A small VTOL transport sat hidden behind a sand dune with its back, loading ramp down. Its powerful jet engines were idling and stirring up a small cloud of sand and dust. The woman moved quickly to the powerful aircraft. Strela could fly but the VTOL aircraft could fly faster and it had the added benefit of being protected against missiles and antiaircraft fire. And she was not in the mood to play tag with a Stinger missile.

Strela stopped at the bottom of the ramp with an arrow nocked. Standing next to her was an officer. Both waited while the remainder of the raiders got on board. She counted each one as they passed.

The cowboy came into view, moving at a slow pace in spite of the danger. There was a bored look about him, as if he was returning from a boring tea party.

"How did you do?" The Russian archer asked.

The cowboy shrugged. "Eh. About even," was the laconic answer as he trudged past without even looking at her.

Lastly the woman came into view. Her clothing was singed and burnt in spots and smoking and most of her hair was burnt. Without a word she stalked past them with a look of seething anger on her face. Everyone gave her a wide berth.

The line of returning Raiders ended leaving no one else coming towards them. "Get on board," the officer ordered. "We're leaving now."

"We're still missing people," the woman archer responded.

"That's all who're coming," the officer explained.

Strela gave the man a hard glance but she realized the truth in his statement. She gave one last glance towards the American base then she spun around and raced up the ramp. The woman dropped into the first available seat.

The ramp raised as the plane lifted off the ground. Then it started to move forward. In moments the VTOL and its cargo was racing away to safety. But Strela didn't relax until they had put many more kilometers between them and the American base.

The officer slowly walked the length of the cargo hold, checking each person as he passed them. When he came to a wounded man he would stop and check the wound himself. To be sure the injury was being cared for. Only after he had seen everyone at least twice did he finally settle into the seat next to the Russian archer.

"How are you?" The man asked her.

"I'm all right," she answered. "Tired and a little bruised. How many did we lose?"

"Half of the skiffs, and six of the men killed. Twice that wounded," came the answer.

"The Americans?" Strela asked.

"The enemy suffered about the same," the officer answered stiffly.

"The enemy." She pondered those words. She knew this particular Raider, worked with him before. He had been an American marine corp. captain. Those 'enemy' had been friends and fellow soldiers once. Now he called them the enemy and calmly tried to kill them. What made a person turn against his friends, people he had fought beside? People he had shared the pain and blood of combat.

"The fight was a draw," the Raider said. "Our Supers were canceled out by theirs. At least you dealt with Misha."

"Yeah," she said slowly remembering the image of Misha laying on the ground and screaming in pain.

The officer looked down at Strela's right hand. "Is that normal?" He pointed to her hand.

She looked down and saw that the back of her hand was covered with a fine, black hair far thicker than that on her head. The woman muttered several curses in Russian.

"Oops! Sorry about that. Still rebuilding the harvesting procedures. Some of the repair units are a bit too enthusiastic and are still working to Misha's pattern."

"Some minor problems like this will occur."

"A small thing," she said. "It only happens under stress."

"Can you control it?"

"Of course!" She shot back calmly.

"You remain a mystery to us," the Raider snarled.

"Good!" She answered.

The first thing Misha felt was warmth. A gentle, relaxing warmth that filled his whole body. Slowly his other senses came back. He could hear soft music playing and smell the antiseptic

scents of a room cleaned to within an inch of its life. Opening his eyes Misha saw the white walls of a hospital.

A nurse hustled over to him and bent over the bed. The man smiled at Misha. "Good. You're awake! How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Still a little sleepy. Where am I?" he asked.

"You're at camp Ridgeway," the nurse responded. "In the infirmary."

"How did the raid go?"

"Not too bad," the officer commented. "But they did quite a bit of damage."

"We lose anyone?" The fox asked.

"No but fifteen people are in the infirmary with you!" The officer answered. "Thank God for the Mediport system. It saved a lot of lives."

"Including mine!" Misha added.

"The mediport system is interesting!" The nanites commented. *"It worked perfectly."*

Misha slowly held up his left arm and saw his new hand there. He wiggled his fingers to be sure they worked. "It sure did!"

Strela sat down in a chair and tried to look calm and relaxed even if she didn't feel that way. The trip back to the base had been unpleasant as they had been chased by a pair of attack helicopters one of whom had left several holes in the starboard wing. The base itself didn't help improve her mood. It was a series of quickly thrown up prefab buildings and hastily made bunkers. At least the barracks were air conditioned. Even so the dust that was everywhere outside seemed to have seeped inside too leaving everything with a gritty feel; including the food. She was sitting in the rec center. The recreation center itself consisted of a large wooden hut with a dozen tables, a large screen TV and several pcs. It even had its own wifi access.

"This is boring. Can we play some music?"

"No!"

"What if she can't hear it?"

"All right."

"Have you regained contact with the rest of the nanites?" Strela asked as she took a sip of tea.

"Yes. 12.25 minutes ago. But only for low level communication."

"Do you have any information on Misha?"

"Why do you want to know? Want to be sure he's dead?"

"Just answer the question please."

"Yes we do."

"And?"

"He'll survive. He's in the infirmary. Healing."

"It will be another 7.32 hours till he is fully healed and his hand regrown."

"Good," Strela commented.

"Relief. Did I detect the emotion of relief? Are you glad he will be all right?"

"No!" She responded but then hesitated. "Well." What did she feel? The image of Misha screaming in pain came back to her again. "Yes. Yes I am glad he'll be all right."

"Why?"

She sat up suddenly. "What?"

"Why are you glad that Misha is healing? Isn't he the enemy?"

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. As surprised by her answer as the nanites were. She looked at the ex-Marine Raider officer who was sipping some coffee at a nearby table. "I'm not sure who the real enemy is."

"The Raiders are the real enemy here. And you know it."

"You sound like Misha."

"Perhaps, but it's still the truth."

"I've always known that they're my enemy."

"And Misha? What of him?"

"Well," Strela said and hesitated. "He is cute. In a fuzzy sort of way."

The conference room was located in a large stone lined room at least 10 meters underground. It was cool and dark, lit only by the florescent lights overhead. The room itself held a simple wooden table and a half dozen chairs along with a large, wall mounted computer screen.

"Is everything underground here?" Lawrence Polturni asked coldly.

"Yes," the colonel responded. "It hides us from any spying eyes and makes things relatively bomb and bullet proof. And it keeps everything cool without needing air conditioning. That alone saves a lot of energy."

"Brightleaf," the colonel said sharply. "Are you with us?"

Misha was seated at one end of the conference table. The fox was wearing only a tee shirt and shorts. All of his fur was a tangled and wild mess. One arm was still wrapped in bandages all the way up to the elbow. He had a large mug in his free hand but his head was down. It was hard to tell if he was asleep or awake.

The fox straightened up in his seat. "Yes sir. Just a little tired."

"Regen takes a lot out of a person," the lieutenant said. "You should be in bed."

"Agreed," the captain added.

"Right after this meeting sir," Misha responded slowly. "Just want to give my report and find out what happened."

"What did happen?" Polturni asked. "Why were you caught by surprise?"

"Don't you ever get tired of being an obnoxious jerk?" Misha asked in clipped tones without raising his head.

"I am here to ask questions," the man responded.

"I am well aware of that. But you're not here to be rude."

"Look at me when you talk to me," the man ordered.

"Why? I don't have to look at you to dislike you," Misha answered without lifting his head.

"Enough out of both of you," the colonel ordered. "Both of you will remain civil. And we were not caught by surprise. At least no more than usual."

"The Raiders specialize in hitting fast using their famous fliers and those damn teleporter troops," the captain said. "They move fast."

"Rocket packs, sky skiffs, teleporting troops all lavishly equipped with loads of weapons," Polturni said. "Where are they getting all these expensive goodies?"

"That's what we all want to know," Misha responded. "Someone is bankrolling them."

"But who and why?"

"Let's not forget the three villains too," someone said.

"Have you identified them yet?" The captain asked.

"The one I fought was Strela," Misha answered. "I've tangled with her several times before."

"Is she a Raider?"

"No, she's a freelancer," Misha answered. "Simply hired help."

"The Raiders don't have Supers in their ranks," the captain responded. "But they do hire Supers whenever they need them."

"I thought the Raiders hated Supers?" The civilian commented. "Blamed them for all their problems."

"They do but they never let that get in the way of using supers anyway," Misha responded.

"That makes no sense," the civilian commented.

"You use whatever weapons you have at hand to win," Misha responded. "And worry about the semantics later."

"The Raiders were a little too quick to sacrifice legality and morality," the man said. "That's the problem at the heart of the old Vigilance unit and Colonel Duray."

"Back to the matter at hand," the colonel ordered. "We need to get rid of that Raider base once and for all."

"Why be subtle?" The civilian asked. "Hit the place hard with missiles and an air strike?"

The fox nodded. "I like that idea but it's sure to be defended against that."

"It's well defended with anti-aircraft guns and missiles and a strong shield. We've already lost two aircraft trying to get close to the place," the colonel answered.

"A combined strike," the captain said. "We can get a small group close to the base unseen. Once in the base they can disable the shields and as much of the air defenses as possible."

Misha sat up straight and perked up his ears. "I like that idea but not a small group. Just me."

"You can't take on that whole base by yourself," the colonel responded.

"I'll not be alone. I'm bringing a friend. I'll need a few things."

"You need what?" The lieutenant asked.

"1 shield generator, 1 - 25mm autocannon with 17,000 rounds of ammo, 1 small fusion engine and 500 pounds of impervium armor," Misha explained. "And this is why I need all that."

Misha's bed was in a small hut barely three meters wide and four meters long. But it was air conditioned and the bed was soft. Misha took only a few moments to toss off his shirt and shoes before climbing into bed. He fell asleep almost instantly.

The air was fresh and cool. Not cold but just cool enough to have a little sharp chill to it. The pine trees towered over him and their needles and leaves carpeted the ground underfoot. Walking along the trail. He was standing on a rustic, stone platform that overlooked a beautiful forested valley. He recognized it as one he had visited in upstate New York, a place called Buttermilk Falls state park. What surprised him was that he wasn't alone.

The woman was Misha's height. Her long brown hair fell down to her shoulders and framed a face with sparkling blue eyes. When the woman spotted Misha she smiled broadly and her face radiated warmth.

"Strela?" Is that you?" Misha asked.

"Call me Svetlana," she said softly. She took his arm and examined his hand closely. Her fingers brushing his skin tenderly. "I'm sorry about your hand. I . ." she hesitated. "I didn't mean to see you hurt."

Misha wiggled the fingers of his newly regenerated hand. "It's all right dear. It regrew! See just like new."

She nodded and seemed to relax. "I'm grateful for that."

He gently kissed her hand. "You act like a hero but you work for villains. Who are you Svetlana? What are you?"

The woman shrugged. "I don't know who I am."

This close Misha could smell the scent of Jasmine and the sweet smell of a woman came to him. He inhaled deeply enjoying the exotic and wonderful smell of the enigmatic lady. "You smell wonderful."

Svetlana kissed him on the muzzle. "You smell nice. Is that aftershave you have on?" She slowly ran her fingers down his chest, gently caressing the skin and fur. Misha felt his skin tingle wherever she touched.

"No, we foxes have a natural musk," he answered and kissed her on the neck. He gently caressed her back with his hands. Her skin felt warm and soft to the touch.

"I think it's wonderful." The woman wrapped her arms gently around Misha and gently pulled him down into the grass.

"WOW"

"What do we do? Should we stop them?"

"We should break the communication between the two."

"Why? They are communicating with each other voluntarily."

"But this is with their subconscious. They are dreaming."

"Correction. They are sharing one dream."

"So what do we do?"

"Can we watch?"

"No! That would violate their privacy."

"Aw . . . darn."

"It is not voyeurism. We're conducting research into human social interaction and reproduction!"

"Oh?"

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

"Their method of reproduction is more strenuous and tiring than ours."

"True but it's a lot more fun!"

The large plastic and wood hut was officially named building 22A but most just called it the Mess Hall. The interior was really just one large air conditioned room filled with neat orderly rows of tables and chairs. Lawrence Polturni found Misha seated at one of the tables. Spread out in front of the fox man was an impressive amount of food. Enough to feed four people. He noticed that placed carefully on the chair next to the vulpine was his bow and a quiver full of arrows.

The civilian sat down at the table in the chair opposite Misha with a bottle of soda in hand.

Misha looked up from his food and gazed at Polturni for a moment through squinted eyes. Then he gave a nod of the head and returned to his meal.

"Are you going to eat all this food?" The man asked.

Misha finished eating his sandwich and reached for another one. "Yes. Part of the downside of being a super and healing from catastrophic injuries is I need to refuel massively."

The man nodded his head. "I see. Well everything has its good and bad points."

"Answer me honestly," the civilian asked Misha. "Do you think Durant still has any supporters in the military?"

Misha shook his head vigorously. "No. He burned too many bridges to have friends." Misha took a deep drink of tea. "And those few left didn't last long."

"You mean you executed people in a witch hunt."

"No," Misha snarled. "The ones who were stupid enough to surrender are rotting in jail. Most fought to the death. Several committed suicide. And you have no room to talk about a witch hunt," Misha said and poked the man in the chest with a finger. "You were on the Simmons committee. How many lives did you ruin with 'Suspicious of treasonous activity'?"

"We did what had to be done!" He snarled.

"Oh yeah," Misha said sarcastically. "I bet McCarthy would be really proud of what you did."

"What were we supposed to do?" The man shot back. "Leave all his sympathizers alone? Leave them, behind to cause more havoc and mayhem?"

Strela relaxed and tried to enjoy the movie on the television but she couldn't. Too many things were on her mind.

"You took this job because it would let you come into contact with Misha,,," the nanites asked.

"But why? To kill him or be close to him?"

The woman started to answer but paused. "He's defeated me several times and I want revenge."

"You don't sound too certain of that," the nanites commented. *"At the museum you certainly were friendly enough."*

"There was no choice in the matter," she responded. "Too many innocent bystanders about. If we had fought some of them would have been hurt."

"That doesn't sound like a villain talking."

"So," the nanites said slowly. *"Have you considered a change of jobs?"*

"A change? To what?" She asked mentally. Communicating with the nanites solely by thought.

"Hero, You were a hero once. Why not again?"

She laughed out loud. "I've had my fill of working for governments."

"So working for those traitors and mercenaries is better?"

"They pay good," she responded.

"Not that good."

"Perhaps we could offer an incentive?"

"You sound like a job recruiter," she joked.

"Perhaps a small demonstration of what we give you if you at least help defeat these Raiders."

Suddenly a map appeared in her eyesight just floating in the air. She realized the nanites were transmitting the image directly onto her brain through her optic nerves. The map displayed the layout of the room she was in. each chair, table and person. The map slowly zoomed out revealing a very accurate map of the entire base. The barracks, garages, command post, landing

fields, gun emplacements with their weapons and fields of fire. All were carefully noted and marked.

"That's impressive!" Strela said. "You've been studying the base carefully."

"Of course!"

The next meeting was again in the underground conference room but with a smaller group. Just the captain, lieutenant and Misha.

"We have an update on the Raider base," the nanites announced over the small radio. *"We've confirmed the location and the basic layout."* The room's computer screen came to life and pulled up a map of the desert. It quickly zoomed in revealing a compound surrounded by a chain link fence. On the map a large number of bunkers, weapons pits and landing points for sky skiffs were identified along with things like ammo points, barracks and a whole host of important places.

"Our biggest problem is the shields and the antiaircraft defenses," the captain said.

"So exactly where are you getting this information?" Misha asked the nanites silently.

"We have an inside informant," the nanites responded cryptically.

"What does that mean?" He asked. "And no more vague answers please."

"Well . . . "

"Ah."

"Well, during the fight you lost your hand."

"I know that," Misha said sarcastically. "I was there remember?"

"Haven't you wondered what happened to your old hand?"

"Ah," the fox stuttered. "No I hadn't."

"Well, when it was severed many of us were cut off from the rest."

"Literally. They needed another place to survive. So they went to the closest living body."

"Oh good Lord!" Misha muttered. "You went into Strela?"

"We didn't have any choice!"

"Does she know you're there?"

"Yes. We had no right to be there and not tell her."

"How is she handling it?"

"She's confused."

"So are we."

"How is she doing?"

"All right. She's asked about your condition."

"She was relieved that you're all right."

"Brightleaf," the captain said out loud interrupting Misha's silent conversation.

"Sorry sir. Was considering something." Misha pointed to the large display. "Here is my idea for the strike on the base," he said out loud.

"Have you ever considered a change of species?"

"You mean like Misha? Be some sort of half animal?"

"The correct term is Furry."

"And what's wrong with being a furry?"

"It certainly saves money on clothing."

"If you did become a furry what species would it be?"

"And don't say you've haven't thought about it. They ALL do."

"Can't you just read my mind and find out the answer?"

"We could but reading your thoughts without your permission would be wrong."

Strela had nothing to say at that statement. She had never expected such morality and honesty from things that technically weren't even alive. But what constituted 'alive'?

"Well," she said slowly. "Ah. I have thought about it."

"And?"

The vehicle sped along the road moving at a good speed considering it was over 90 years old.

Misha was riding in the turret of the armored car with goggles over his eyes and a bandana covering his muzzle.

"Are you sure you can control this thing?"

"Perfectly. The controls and upgrades are working perfectly."

"In spite of it being a world war one left over that was left to decay in the desert for almost a century?"

"The dry desert air is a great preservative," the nanites commented. "And we have renovated it completely."

"The captain thought the plan was crazy," Misha said.

"But he still approved it."

"You are still in communication with the nanites in Strela?"

"Yes."

"Could you put me into direct contact with her? Could I consciously and openly communicate with her?"

"Consciously and subconsciously."

"Subconsciously! About that dream," Misha asked.

"What dream?"

"My last dream," he said. His tail wagged as he remembered it. "Svetlana was in it. Was that just a coincidence? Was it just a dream?"

"Well . . . Yes and no."

"It was a dream. It's just that you weren't in it alone."

"So Svetlana WAS there?" Misha asked. "How?"

"You were both dreaming. You both reached out and the systems assumed you wanted to communicate with each other so they connected you two."

"It's hard to tell your conscious from your subconscious at times."

"So," Misha said slowly. "When I was talking to her in the dream I really WAS talking to her and not some figment of my dream?"

"We just said that."

"Does Svetlana know about this?"

"No."

"But she has been kind of distracted lately."

"We're approaching the first roadblock."

"All right. Stop here and I'll take it out," Misha ordered as the armored car slowed to a halt. "Once the block is removed bring up the car."

"You might want to consider leaving," the nanites announced suddenly.

"Why?" Strela asked suspiciously.

"Ah . . . No reason really but we recommend leaving now."

Strela was beginning to understand how these nanites thought. "What's happening? The Americans are attacking aren't they?"

"Maybe."

"If we say yes would you fight the Americans?"

"Yes," Strela answered. "Well . . ."

"Do I sense doubt?"

"No," she said harshly. "I'm here to earn my money and that means fighting."

"We will not stop you. That would be against your free will."

"But we won't help you either."

Suddenly the wonderful map in her vision disappeared replaced by a bare black square. A simple reminder of what she had lost.

"All that information you've been gathering about this base," Strela asked. "The information you were showing me. You passed it all to Misha and the Americans didn't you?"

"Of course."

"Of course," Strela echoed.

"You knew we'd do that."

"That's true. Have you told him where I am?"

"No."

"Has he asked?"

"Twice and twice he's also rescinded the request."

"He sounds confused," she commented.

"I think you're both confused."

"I think you still are a hero. In spite of what you say to yourself," the nanites announced suddenly. *"A look at your memory shows some interesting things SNOW MAIDEN."*

She laughed. "You know about that."

"Yup and how you helped those workers too," they answered. *"Fine work how you smashed that base. Rescued all those people."*

"You have access to the military databases right?" Strela asked.

"Maybe."

"In the base there was this," Strela paused. "Well she had been a woman. Now she is a lion, eagle thing."

An image flashed up into her vision. In it was a figure was standing on a wooden dock. Floating on the ocean in the background was a large warship. The figure was about the size of a brown bear and seemed to be all teeth, claws, fur and muscles. It had an avian looking head with a massive and wickedly sharp beak. 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 that it was female. The body was very strong and muscles rippled beneath the brown and black fur. The clawed paws looked like those of a bear but the legs looked more like a wolf's. It had the long tail of a lion but feathers poked out from her fur in many places. From her back spread a massive set of wings with a wingspan of over twenty feet.

"That her?"

"Yes it is! How is she?"

"She's safe," came the answer. *"She was picked up by the navy a few weeks ago."*

"Good," Strela commented. "I'm glad she is all right."

"She is still being evaluated but she has already registered in New York as a superhero with the name of The Gryphon."

BOOM!

"Misha and the Americans have finally arrived," Strela muttered out loud.

"ALARM!" Came a voice blaring over loud speakers and on several radio channels. "Intruders have breached the perimeter!"

The woman made her way out of the building and into the hot, open air. The first thing that caught her attention was three pillars of smoke rising in the distance. She noted that all three were in a direct line leading to the camp. On her belt was a small radio and she touched a button and a welter of voices flooded the earpiece she wore.

"Patrol twelve is not responding."

"Dispatch the reaction force!"

"We did and they've been shot down."

"This is Zulu 23 we've been attacked," an excited voice shouted over the radio noise. "The bunker's been destroyed. I don't see anyone else alive. I'm the only one left."

"Who hit you?"

"We didn't see them until things started exploding."

"How did they get so close without being detected?" A voice shouted over the chaos of shouting and orders.

"They sent in only a small group and with no air support," another voice answered.

"A small group can only do limited damage."

"Unless it's the right people," Strela said, adding her voice to the those on the radio. She heard a low rumbling noise and turned in the direction it was coming from. Automatically she pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it. She was ready for anything. Almost anything.

A large vehicle roared into view. It was slightly larger than a hummer but its angular body was covered with armor plating held on with rivets. At the rear was a wide oval turret with the barrel of a cannon sticking out.

The entire machine was painted the brightest, loudest shades of red, white and blue she had ever seen. Flying from the turret was a large flag. A British flag. The Union Jack was snapping and flapping in the wind as the vehicle raced along.

"What the . . ." Strela managed and she watched the armored vehicle speed past. "An armored car? That looks like something left over from world war one."

"It was," the nanites responded. *"Until we modified it."*

The armored car spun its turret towards a large bunker. The shells easily slicing through armor and concrete and causing havoc inside. In moments thick clouds of smoke started pouring out.

"Wasn't that the bunker holding one of the shield generators?" Strela asked the nanites.

"Perhaps."

Its job done the vehicle spun around and raced away. Strela watched as it weaved among the buildings its turret was spinning about spraying shells at everything within range. A sky skiff took off and started to turn towards the armored car. The car's turret spun about and hosed the flyer down with a fusillade of rounds. The skiff burst into flames and tumbled to the ground throwing debris and flames over all.

"Good lord!" The woman muttered.

"All gulf, hotel units rally at point battery," a voice ordered over the radio. "All lima, delta units scramble immediately and proceed to point x-ray."

Strela backed away putting some distance between her and the strange vehicle. She moved through the base slowly keeping alert. A score of raiders raced past her, headed towards the attacking armored car. Finally she spotted Misha about a hundred meters away. The vulpine

morph was hovering just off the ground in front of a small bunker. The fox looked all right much to her relief. He even had both hands. "You regrew his hand?"

"Of course!" the nanites answered.

"Well," the nanites commented. *"We had a little help from the mediporter."*

"A lot of help honestly."

Two explosive arrows from Misha's bow blasted the armored door off the bunker revealing the generator and complex machinery behind it. These were the machines and electronics that maintained the shields that protected the base.

She took careful aim at him but hesitated. Strela watched as the superhero vulpine put arrow after arrow into the generator until there was a small explosion. Smoke filled the bunker as parts of the generator flew in all directions. Slowly she lowered her bow and stepped backward.

Misha's next actions confused her. She expected him to continue attacking but instead he turned and raced away towards the perimeter. In moments he had reached the fence and paused where a large section of fence had been knocked down.

The odd armored car stopped its maneuvers and followed after the fox. It raced through the hole in the fence and off into the desert. Misha followed after it and soon both were gone from site leaving a plume of dust in the air.

Firing and shooting continued for a moment but that soon ended leaving the air filled with the roar and crackling of the fires and the cries of the wounded.

"We drove them off!" The one Raider crowed.

Strela looked around. Most of the base seemed to be burning or wrecked. "You certainly did that but they'll be back to finish the job."

A Raider captain who she did not recognize simply nodded in agreement. "This was just a small recon probe. They're done for today."

"Or maybe not!" The nanites commented in her mind.

"What do you mean by that?" The woman asked mentally.

"Nothing! Nothing at all."

"May we suggest leaving soon. Real soon."

"Immediately would be nice."

"Define immediately. She has 4.35 minutes. That's technically a long time in microseconds."

"A nice trip to the ocean would be good right about now. The bracing sea air! The wind in your face!"

"Being outside the blast radius."

"Maybe we should mention the missiles?"

"Missiles?" Strela asked silently.

"NO!"

"Would we survive such a missile strike?"

"Not in these quantities."

"We really should mention the missiles."

"MISSILES?" She asked nervously. "What missiles."

"We've detected missile launches from the U.S.S. Vella Gulf."

"Many, many launches."

"There is only a 14% chance they are nuclear armed but let's not stay and find out. We do not want to test our antinuclear protocols."

"The U.S.S. Nitze is also launching. With this many missiles they don't need nukes."

"How many missiles?" She asked the nanites silently.

100 and 70 respectively."

"Can you jam the missiles or make them hit empty desert?" She asked.

"Yes," came the short answer.

"Will you?" The woman questioned.

"No," came the curt reply.

"You're giving them targeting data aren't you?" Strela asked. "Guiding them in."

"Of course! We suggest you start fleeing right now!"

"We don't want to see this body messed up."

"We just moved in and we've just gotten the place looking just right."

"Well almost all right."

"What?" Strela silently asked the nanites. "What do you mean almost!"

"Never mind how big her boobs are. Can we concentrate on the missiles. If you are here when they hit you won't have any breasts at all or anything else for that matter."

"We need to leave now!" Strela said out loud to the captain. "The Americans have launched missiles at us."

"Our shields will stop most of them and the point defenses will get the rest," the Raider officer said confidently.

Strela pointed to the shattered remains of a bunker from which a large pillar of smoke was pouring out. "You mean the shield powered by that generator?" The woman then pointed to a pile of twisted, burning wreckage. Several people were attacking the flames with fire extinguishers hoping to put out the fire before it reached the ammunition. "And that point defense gun?"

"EMERGENCY EVAC!" The officer shouted. "All personal onto the remaining transports!"

"He's kidding right?"

"You might want to mention the F22 Raptors headed inbound."

"Na! Why spoil the surprise."

"Good luck!" Strela said and took off racing away from the shattered base. In moments she was several miles away.

BOOM!!!!

BOOM!!!

Strela paused a moment and turned to look at the base she had just left. Already a plume of smoke was rising from the ground. Suddenly there was a massive explosion followed quickly by another and another and another. She could see large chunks of concrete and metal tossed high into the air along with many smaller unidentifiable pieces. The woman caught sight of an object off to her left. Turning to the object she caught a glimpse of a missile streaking past and into the Sky Raider base. When the missile reached the fence line a score of smaller missiles raced out from it. Each streaking away and slamming into a different target adding a score more smaller

flames to the already growing fires and smoke. Soon a massive cloud of smoke covered everything and she lost sight of the base. "Impressive."

"Indeed," the nanites responded. "This is the first deployment of the new ARX27D warheads. Most impressive! The DOD will be very happy with the results."

The woman hovered there a moment watching the attack. "Do you really think my breasts are too big?" Strela asked the nanites.

"Ah . . . "

"Define big."

Misha, Kaleda and Yardin stood outside what had been the east fence. Now the only thing that marked the line was some bent metal fence posts and twisted bits of chain link fencing. Parked next to the trio was the armored car. The vehicle looked unharmed except for a few, new dents and scrapes.

Kaleda placed her hand on one of the fenders. "This is the same 90 year old wreck you found in the desert?"

"It is," Misha responded. "With a few changes." The fox wagged his tail and patted the fender gently. "She did very well."

"That's good." Yardin said slowly. "We're going to need the help."

All three turned and looked at the camp or what was left of it. The smoke hung low over everything obscuring Misha's view and filling his sensitive vulpine nose with the smell of burnt wood, plastic and flesh. Very little was recognizable of what had been the base. Everything seemed to be burning or smoldering.

Now came the hard part - Mopping up. Not all the Sky Raiders had fled or been killed in the attack. Scattered throughout the ruins survivors were hiding. The entire base had to be searched and each and every surviving Raider hunted down and killed or captured.

Polturni heard the celebration long before he reached the mess hall. the loud music and voices raised in loud, happy conversation. Stepping through the door he found a large group of soldiers talking, eating and even a few dancing.

Everyone seemed to be there, even specialist Ostheim who looked uneasy among all the higher ranking people. He found Misha, Kaleda and Yardin seated at a table. He noticed that Yardin was wearing a bandage on her lower right leg. The left sleeve of Misha's shirt was rolled up revealing all the fur on that arm was gone and the skin beneath looked darkened and a little burnt.

Misha's sole reaction to the man's presence was to nod his head between drinks.

"Your operation went off well," Polturni said. "The Raider base was destroyed."

"Surprised?" Misha growled slowly.

"Yes," came the blunt answer. "Three people attacking a base with two hundred well trained and heavily armed soldiers should have been suicide."

"He who dares, wins," Yardin said with a smile.

"Still, attacking an enemy base outnumbered a hundred to one was reckless."

"Perhaps," Misha responded slowly. "But it was a calculated risk. I've done it before."

The man leaned closer. "And did you succeed before?"

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't but each time it was worth the risk."

"It's part of the job," Yardin added calmly earning a nod of agreement from the other two.

"Why do you do all this?" He asked. "Risking your life every day?"

"We are heroes. This is what we do."

The End