

Bottom Rail
by Christian O'Kane

Governments change - greed doesn't

"Item 12274A Natural Baltic amber cross inlaid with gold and silver. 12.34 cm tall. edged with silver and with a Wolf head inlaid in gold on one side. Believed to be Lithuanian. Bidding starts at 12,000 Euro. Auction# 789458DR."

The building looked as decrepit, run down and abandoned as the rest of the neighborhood of Mercy Isle. But looks can be deceiving and in the Rogue Isles they usually are. Most of this building was stripped and rotting but one floor had been repaired and was a snug and secure home. It's walls were armored and the windows bullet proof. Its one resident was stretched out on her battered but comfortable couch and just relaxing.

Her real name was Svetlana Malenchinsky but she was better known as Strela. She had once been human but that had changed recently. She still had two arms, two legs and a head but Strela's body now seemed to be a mix of African lioness and woman. The tawny fur that covered her body did nothing to hide her sleek and well muscled form.

"You have a call coming in over your cell phone," the nanites said.

Having the atom sized, self aware machines inside her had it's bad points but the benefits were amazing. The least of them was never having to worry about losing her cell phone. "Who is it?"

"We are attempting to trace the call but it is proving difficult."

"The voice is male but we cannot define it any further. He calls himself The Contact."

"That's my contact," Strela explained. "Put him through please."

The nanites didn't make the connection. *"Who is he? Where is he?"*

"I've no idea," she answered honestly. She only knew him as The Contact. He was only a voice on the phone or over the internet. She assumed it was a he due to the male voice he usually used. But whoever or whatever he was he had proven useful both for obtaining work and for selling and buying things discretely. "Now let me talk to him."

"Do you trust him?" The nanites asked without establishing a connection.

"No," she answered. "But he has proven useful so put him thru to me. Now PUT HIM THRU! Please."

In her eyesight a little green symbol of a phone appeared telling her she was speaking on her cell phone connection. "Hello?"

"Do you know someone is trying to trace this call?" A male voice asked harshly in way of greeting.

"I know," Strela answered. "My friends are paranoid about my security but I trust them."

"Oh this one is very good! He's already blocked 46 attempted traces."

"I don't like people trying to find me," the contact said angrily.

"He has attempted 14 counter traces." The nanites commented.

"Who are they? Longbow? You've been working with them lately," the contact answered.

"Correction - 16 traces. Oh this one is real good!"

"Tell them to back off!" The contact ordered.

"BOTH OF YOU BACK OFF!" Strela ordered out loud. "I need you both so stop feuding."

"He started it," the nanites countered in an almost apologetic tone.

"We have had a very profitable arrangement over the last few years," the woman said earnestly. "Let's not ruin that. We can both make a lot more money together."

"All right," the voice said slowly. "But from now on I'm on my guard."

"You are always on your guard. Do you have something good for me?" She asked, changing the subject.

"We are stopping our attempted traces," the nanites said. *"But we are keeping the contact numbers. He could prove useful in the future."*

"You were interested in certain amber artifacts," the voice said slowly. "Gave me a list of specific items you were looking for."

"You found them?" Strela asked excitedly. Her previous anger forgotten.

"Four of them," her contact answered slowly. "All are listed separately and supposedly from different sellers but I've traced them to the same IP address."

"*You want to buy them?*" The nanites asked.

"I want the person selling them," She snarled in reply.

"That will be expensive," the contact responded cautiously.

"Whatever commission he is offering I will triple it," Strela responded calmly, without missing a beat. "And of course I will give you your share of the reward."

"Reward?" The contact asked. A hint of interest showing in the voice. "Who do you think is selling them?"

"I know who is selling them but does it matter?" She answered. "I'll split the reward with you."

"Fair enough so long as it's not traced back to me," her contact said.

"Set up a meeting like normal to buy them," Strela responded. "And leave the rest to me. It wouldn't be the first meeting to go bad. For that I'll give you \$300,000 after he is dead."

"Why do you want him so badly?" The contact asked.

"It's personal. He tried to kill me."

"So it's just revenge? Is there more to it than that?" The faceless male voice asked.

"Does it matter? You'll be paid well," she countered.

"Money is useless if I'm dead," the contact answered.

"*What are you worried about?*" The nanites interjected. "*If we can't trace you no one else can.*"

"Never fear him finding out," Strela said. "Marhk was never one for such subtlety."

"He was a friend?" The contact asked in an oddly sympathetic tone.

"No," the woman answered. "We fought the same enemies but we were never friends. Or even allies."

Vilnius, Lithuanian Socialist Republic, Soviet Union, January 1991

The group slowly moved down the street narrow winding street. Soviet Justice and Molot were walking side by side spaced about five meters apart. Strela and Winter Star were a few paces behind, moving slowly and watching for their target. Night Witch was hovering in the air cradling her powerful beam rifle.

The streets of the old town district of Vilnius were narrow and twisting with the buildings lining them huddled close together. Everywhere they looked were a thousand places to hide.

"Where is he?" Soviet Justice asked. The man was a little under two meters tall and was wearing just a red polyester jumpsuit without the armor Strela had on. His mutant powers meant he didn't need any protection.

"He has to be nearby," Strela answered. This woman was wearing a chest plate with coverings on her shoulders and arms. All were made of a plastic/alloy that was bulletproof and had saved her life many times. Her brown hair was cut short and tucked under a helmet of the same material as the armor. All of this was colored the same bright red that was so synonymous with the communists that some Americans called Russian Red.

"Wolfie can't hide forever," Myech said. The woman was trailing behind Strela and Winter Star. She had her black hair at shoulder length but tied back in a pony tail. Her clothing was the standard polyester jumpsuit that was at least two sizes too small. It clung to her like a second skin and showed every bump, line and curve of her supple, graceful and sexy body.

"He's not hiding from us," Kometa commented. "He's waiting to ambush us. Again." A stranger looking at the brown haired man in the red jumpsuit would think he was just an average person. He looked just like the type of person you'd see working on a factory or in a mine. The only thing unusual was the tattoo on his right arm of a flaming comet. But he did have the ability to generate a powerful bolt of energy to attack his foes or create a force field to defend his allies and friends.

"Like he's done five times before," Night Witch commented. The black haired woman was wearing the brown jumpsuit and boots that was the standard uniform of a Soviet bomber pilot of World war two. But in spite of her ancient looking clothing the laser rifle she was carrying looked modern.

"75.23% of the encounters he has initiated with us have begun with an ambush." Molot commented. The robot was a marvel of Soviet science and engineering and was over two meters tall and half a ton of metals, plastics and exotic materials. The original plan had been for the robot to be equipped with a wide range of rockets, missiles and guns. Unfortunately obscenely high cost overruns forced some cut backs. Thankfully Molot was very effective just using its raw strength, helped by the ability to generate a very powerful electrical charge.

"Enough of the idle chatter," Winter Star said. The woman was taller and thinner than Strela but looked older. Her hair was as white as her skin and a light snow slowly drifted off of her body and each footfall left prints of ice and snow in their wake. "He is wounded and has to be tired."

Strela kept her eyes moving, looking from one potential ambush spot to another. "We're, all tired." She took a moment to touch her right hip. Iron Wolf's sword had sliced her good the day before. Opolchenie had used his technology and had healed the wound but her hip was still sore and tender.

Two days of chasing and fighting the Lithuanian all over the city had taken a toll on all of them. They were all battered, bruised and wounded and three other members of their team were still in the hospital. Opolchenie himself was among them. The man was now resting in one of his own regeneration units.

The street widened into a small plaza that was dominated by a large church that stood on one side. Its tall spires cast a shadow on the centuries old paving stones. Strela saw a group of policemen frantically moving a large crowd of people to safety.

Night Witch let out a loud curse. "We were here yesterday. I recognize the cathedral."

"Why did he come back here?" Winter Star asked. The woman was standing still in the middle of the square looking all about.

"He's on familiar ground," Kometa said. "He knows this entire city down to its smallest brick."

"I don't care why we're here," Justice snarled and clenched and unclenched his fists. "Where is he?"

Strela slowly scanned the crowd as the people scattered in all directions. "He won't be around the civilians." She said slowly. "He doesn't want to see them hurt." She took her eyes off of the departing crowd. Instead she looked into the buildings that lined the square. Her vision wandered over the windows that looked down on them but she saw nothing.

Quickly the square emptied leaving just the Soviet supers looking all about. Lining the open area were numerous old buildings, most held shops of one sort or another but at least one proudly proclaimed itself as a tourist information center.

The loud clatter of a moving vehicle came up a side street and a large bus slowly entered the square. The vehicle was packed with people and came to a sudden halt when the driver saw what was in front of them.

Behind her the woman suddenly heard the sound of glass shattering. Strela let out a curse and spun around in the direction of the sound. The massive figure of Gelezinis Vilkas had burst through a storefront and was charging straight at Molot. The male figure was over two meters tall and weighed at least 190 kilograms. He was dressed in thick chainmail armor that had been obsolete for centuries. On his shoulders instead of a normal human head was one of a large,

European, timber wolf. In his hands was a massive broadsword, its blade was over a meter long and was strong enough to cut through the armor on a battleship. The armored wolfen had the sword over his head and was less than five meters away.

She brought up her bow with it drawn tight with an arrow ready to shoot. Suddenly a man stepped in front of her, blocking her aim. He wore the plain clothes of an ordinary citizen and was close enough that he was almost touching the arrowhead.

"GET OUT OF THE WAY!" Strela ordered in Lithuanian.

The man just stood there with a cold, hard look on his face. And behind that face was a soul of steely resolve. This man was not going to move. She would have to kill him before he would get out of her way.

"You're crazy," the Soviet archer snapped in Lithuanian. She roughly shoved the man out of the way.

Iron Wolf had reached Molot and swung his massive sword tearing a large rent in the chest plate of the man shaped robot.

A blow from Molot's powerful fist sent the Lithuanian super flying across the square and into the side of the bus. The vehicle was toppled over and hit the pavement with the shriek of tearing metal and the screams of terrified passengers.

Iron Wolf climbed out of the vehicle and stood there for a moment too stunned to move. People boiled out of the bus and scattered in all directions blocking Strela's aim. She couldn't hit Iron Wolf without the chance of hitting one of them.

Strela hesitated as the people scattered out of the way. It only took a moment but in that time Iron Wolf had recovered. He leapt off the vehicle and charged straight at Kometa. The wolf brought that massive blade of his down onto the Russian. The man cursed and leapt backward but not fast enough. The old blade sliced through the armor on his arm and cut deep into the flesh beneath it.

Kometa balled his fist and sent a bolt of energy straight into Iron Wolf's face. The wolf staggered back a few steps and rubbed at the burnt fur on his muzzle. Then he snarled at the man and hit Kometa dead square in the face with the hilt of his massive sword.

The man dropped to the ground without a word.

Myech leapt over the prostrate form of Kometa without so much as a second glance at her teammate. She danced backward suddenly and her opponent's massive blade missed disemboweling her by mere centimeters.

Svetlana finally had a clear shot and she loosed an arrow at Iron Wolf. The missile hit him in the chest. It exploded in a dazzling flash of light and with a deafening roar.

Myech raced forward, her two swords flashing as the blades sliced through the armor around his neck.

Iron Wolf's head tumbled free of its body and hit the ground with a sickening, wet thump. It rolled along the pavement for a short while before coming to a stop. His body stood there as if unaware that decapitation was supposed to be fatal. Then it slowly sank to the ground with an oddly graceful move. As if he was laying down for a nap.

Myech slowly walked over to the still warm body and examined it. "He's dead."

"Again," the archer added.

"Now stay that way!" Winter Star snarled.

Night Witch landed next to the prostrate form of Kometa and tended to the wounded man.

"How is he?" Winter Star asked as she walked towards her wounded team mate

"He has a concussion and a broken nose." came the answer.

Winter Star pointed up the street to where a VTOL aircraft was landing. "Get him on the transport and into the autodoc,"

Strela turned and looked in the direction of the bus and in a few steps reached it. She was grateful to find it empty of any bodies. Sensing something she looked to the right and found herself standing at the bottom of the steps leading up to the church's main doors. She noticed painfully the new damage done to the centuries old doors by her arrows the day before. Thankfully it seemed the damage was minor. The woman turned her attention to the body that lay at the bottom of the steps.

Soviet Justice walked over to the corpse and knelt down next to it. He rummaged around the body for a moment before taking something from around what was left of its neck. On a thin gold chain was a crucifix of golden amber about the size of the palm of her hand. He placed the treasure in a pocket on his belt.

"You're just going to steal that?" Svetlana said coldly.

The man pulled his lips back in a snarl. "That villain is dead and it is now the property of the Soviet Union."

She glowered at him. "Which is an excuse to steal it, like all the other things you've stolen."

"Stolen?" He snarled, with a look of anger on his face. "I am simply requisitioning it for the greater good of the Soviet Union."

A woman stepped in front of Strela breaking her view of the man and ending their argument. "Why didn't you shoot immediately?" Winter Star shouted sending a spray of ice onto the archer. "Your delay got a team member hurt."

"I didn't have a clear shot," Strela shot back. "I could have hit one of the civilians. I told you facing him in the city was a bad idea, too many bystanders could be hurt."

"When did you start caring about innocents being hurt?" Winter Star snarled.

"When did you stop caring?" Strela replied coldly.

"Of course I care about them," Winter Star said. "These are our people."

Svetlana looked down the street where in spite of the danger a good sized crowd had formed. She could hear them cursing and shouting.

"I'll clear them out," Soviet Justice snarled and stalked towards the crowd.

In an almost instinctive reaction Svetlana reached for an arrow and started to nock it. Her eyesight never left Mahrk. "Don't go near them," she snarled in a voice as hard as the cobblestones she was standing on. A few quick steps put her between Soviet Justice and the crowd.

"I'm tired of your snide comments," the man pulled his lips back in an almost feral snarl.

Strela slowly brought her bow up but didn't aim it. "I am tired of you stealing and hurting people."

"Stand down," Winter Star order harshly. "Both of you."

"They're revolting," Justice snarled and pointed towards the crowd. "We need to remove them and crush this rebellion right now."

"By remove you mean kill," Strela countered without lowering her weapon.

"The police and the soldiers will deal with them," Winter Star said. "Our orders were to kill Gelezinis Vilkas. We've done that. Now we pull out."

"We cannot leave those rebels," Soviet Justice said and pointed to the crowd which seemed to grow larger by the minute.

Winter Star scowled at him with a look as cold as the ice that dangled from her hair. "I gave you a direct order. Are you disobeying it?"

He stood there for a moment with a look of anger on his face and with his fists balled up in anger.

Suddenly the sound of singing came to them. Svetlana looked up to see that the crowd had grown significantly and all were singing as one.

"Lietuva, Tėvyne mūsų,
Tu didvyrių žeme,
Iš praeities Tavo sūnūs
Te stiprybę semia.
Tegul Tavo vaikai eina
Vien takais dorybės,
Tegul dirba Tavo naudai
Ir žmonių gėrybei.
Tegul saulė Lietuvoj
Tamsumas prašalina,
Ir šviesa, ir tiesa
Mūs žingsnius telydi.
Tegul meilė Lietuvos
Dega mūsų širdyse,
Vardan tos, Lietuvos
Vienybė težydi!"

"What are they singing?" Winter Star asked in a nervous manner.

"The Lithuanian national anthem," Strela answered simply.

"Those word do not match the lyrics of the Anthem of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic," Molot said as he walked up to the pair.

"That was the Lithuanian NATIONAL anthem," the archer explained. "Before the Soviet takeover."

"You mean when they voluntarily joined the Great Union of Soviet Socialist Republics?" Molot asked. The robot kept his eyes on the crowd which was continuing to grow in size.

Strela didn't answer at first but looked at the robot and pondered her answer. "We say they joined voluntarily," she pointed toward the crowd. "They seem to think something else"

"Do you believe those lies?" Winter Star growled again sending a spray of snow over Svetlana's face.

"Which lies?" Strela asked in a soft voice, ignoring the light snow. "Do you honestly believe anything the Soviet government says?"

The ice woman didn't answer at first but scowled at the archer.

"Go home!"

Both women turned in the direct of the voice. Just in time to see a rock come sailing out of the mob. It hit the pavement a short distance from them and sparks flew off as the missile tumbled and skittered across the century's old paving. It came to a stop in the space between the two women. Svetlana looked down at the missile to be sure it was only a rock and not something more deadly.

"These aren't our people. Never have been. Never will be." The archer looked at her leader. "We should be back in Russia dealing with the threats there and not causing trouble here. What are we doing here?"

"Because it's where we've been ordered to be," Winter Star countered in a tired tone. "Now get that body onto the transport quickly and we'll get it back to the base."

Rogue Isles modern day 2002

The island of St. Martial was a place of contrasts. The glittering, golden pyramid of the Golden Giza casino towered over everything. It's bright and gaudy lights illuminated the waters around it. This contrasted harshly with the blackened, broken and rundown slum of the Black Mariah neighborhood nearby. Those with money and good luck lived in Jackpot with its new buildings and well patrolled streets. For those down on their luck or who had too much badly spent time in the casinos, the slums of Black Maria were their homes now.

Strela never liked the neighborhood of Jackpot. For all its glitz and glamour there was a shallowness to the place. Behind the fine clothing, expensive cars and glamorous shops was a rot and evil far worse than the most filth covered street of Black Maria or The Hard way. The people here were every bit as vicious, ruthless and greedy as the worst street thug - they just covered their greed with glitter. Just walking the streets of this place made Svetlana feel dirty. Certainly she was in a lot more danger than back in Cap au Diablo.

"Does that woman know that diamond ring she is flashing is gold colored brass with a cubic zirconium?" The nanites asked.

"Doesn't bother anyone that you are an anthropomorphic lioness carrying a longbow?"

"No," Strela responded. "There are things a lot weirder here."

"Now that's a scary concept."

"Let's not stay here too long. Within a 1 block radius I have recorded some 775 structural problems that in Paragon city would see the building condemned."

"Try to keep away from those giant dice hanging from that casino on your right. I estimate a 32% chance that they will fall within 14 days."

"Don't they have building codes?"

"This is the Rogue Isles," Strela responded. "Why spend money building to code? It's cheaper to just bribe the building inspector."

"You know," the nanites commented. . "I think I prefer Mercy island."

"I prefer Paragon city."

"So do I." Strela made her way down the street passing the gaudy buildings and their even more gaudy inhabitants. She weaved around the people crowding the entrance to the Ice Palace casino and turned down a side street. Here the people on the street weren't as flashily dress and the buildings were darker and more dingy. It took her ten minutes to find 1010 Royal Flush road. The building was a tall concrete and glass covered ten story apartment building. It wasn't the most expensive place to live but it was still costly.

"All in all I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

As she walked past the front door she noted the bored man standing guard with a assault rifle slung over his shoulder. she also saw the two security cameras and that the door had a magnetic lock with a keypad.

"This can't be where he is hiding," the nanites commented. "It looks too poorly defended."

"Looks," she countered. "The guard at the door is just window dressing. Meant to scare away the common criminals. I'm sure the real defenses start after you get past the guard."

"Now that makes sense," the nanites commented.

"I've attacked such places before," Strela commented. "My problem is up or down?"

"Huh?"

"He is sure to have some large and luxurious apartment way up at the top," the woman explained. "What I need to find is his hideout. His well fortified little base where he keeps all his stolen loot and where he can hide if someone comes after him."

"That could be anywhere on the island."

She shook her head. "No. It will be close."

"Down," the nanites responded. "His best bet for a safe place to hide is a nice, deep, concrete lined bunker."

"With at least two exits."

"Now that makes sense," she commented. "If he gets to that hideout I'll never get to him."

"Don't go to him," the nanites recommended. "Make him come to you. He has to come forward to sell those items."

"He'll cheat you," the nanites commented. "He wants to keep the money AND the amber."

"That's for certain," Strela responded. "To be expected here in the Isles but even more so with him."

"His CIA profile describes him as prone to excessive violence and devoid of subtlety."

"The exact quote is He's as subtle as a brick through a plate glass window."

"He will not trust this to any underling," Strela commented. "He'll do it himself. Not just out of paranoia but because he wants to be in a fight. Mark always loved a fight."

The location for the exchange was a suitably dark and dingy alley in Black Maria sandwiched between two rundown, abandoned buildings.

Strela arrived three hours early and spent an hour carefully examining it and the area around it. The Rogue Isles Police were nowhere nearby and the \$5000 she had paid to the local police captain assured it would stay that way. The alley was long and narrow with either end opening onto quiet side streets. The buildings that lined the alley all had barred windows and steel roll down shutters. Several had no openings, just patterns in the brickwork that told of where long bricked up windows and doors had been.

After making sure the alley was safe she then spent the next hour carefully placing the explosive charges. It had cost her extra to get genuine American C4 and milspec detonators. but it was well worth it. She hadn't worked with explosives since her days with the Spetsnaz but it went well.

Once she was sure everything was set as well she climbed to the roof of one of the buildings and settled in to wait.

One hour, thirty minutes later a figure slowly walked into the entrance to the alley. He was a little under two meters tall and had brown hair that was carefully cut and set. The expensive, hand tailored suit he was wearing enhanced the well toned physique of his body. But in spite of

the different clothing she easily recognized his face. It had a few more scars but it had the same cold and hostile stare and that annoying smirk. And he walked with the same arrogant swagger.

"The Fist?" She said out loud without revealing herself. "That's the name you're using now. What was wrong with Soviet Justice?"

The figure looked around for the source of the voice. "An old name. From the good old days."

"Good old days?" Strela answered incredulously from her hiding spot. "I don't remember them as being so good."

That took The Fist off guard and he looked surprised, lowering his guard. For a moment the smirk was gone.

It was the opening Strela had been waiting for. Without hesitating she brought up her bow and snapped off an arrow.

The heavy headed stun arrow slammed into the man's crotch sending him stumbling backward for a moment. Another arrow hit him in the chest and exploded with the power of a hand grenade. The blast threw him through the air and into the wall.

Strela put three more arrows into the man before he stood up. The Fist shook himself like a dog and bits of brick and debris flew off of him. The man looked around for his assailant and was rewarded with a pair of arrows that slammed into his chest. One missile just bounced off but the other sank in deep enough to draw blood.

"Hello Marhk," Strela said cheerfully. She stepped onto the ledge and leapt down to a fire escape some two stories down but still two stories above the alley. "Good to see you again."

He followed the voice upward and saw a strange lionwoman dressed in red, plastic armor that seemed oddly familiar. She had a massive bow in hand and he spotted her just in time to see the feline lose another arrow at him.

The arrow lodged in his arm and the man casually pulled it free. "Who are you?" He grabbed a garbage can and tossed it up at his assailant. "What are you?"

Strela easily avoided the impromptu missile and returned one of her own but her arrow simply bounced off of his chest.

She leapt backwards off the fire escape, did a full flip before landing on her feet in the middle of the alley. Some ten meters of open space separated the two. "You don't recognize me?" The woman asked sarcastically in Russian. "Has a decade change me so much?"

He peered at her, examining the woman closely and look of intent concentration on his face.

"Maybe I should call you Soviet Justice," Strela suggested. "That's the name we called you."

The man was confused for a moment then his face brightened into recognition. "I know only one Russian archer. Strela?"

She gave a wry smile baring her sharp teeth. "It's nice to be recognized."

"You've changed, woman."

"You haven't," she countered. "You're still the same greedy, little creep I remember."

"What are you here for? Certainly not for a few bits of gold and amber," he questioned.

She shook her head. "I knew you'd sell it someday and when you did I'd find you."

"And you're here to take it back?" He laughed derisively.

"No," she said and loosed an arrow. "I'm here to finish what we started back in Moscow in 1991."

The arrow struck him in the chest and exploded with a roar sending fragments flying in all directions with a large blast.

The man seemed unhurt. The only damage was to his clothing. His tailored jacket and shirt were burnt and torn. He almost absent-mindedly patted out the burning bits of clothing. "You're here about the coup? I should have killed you in Moscow."

"You tried and failed." Strela leapt up and over him, her cybernetic enhancements carrying her easily over his head.

Fist spun around with his leg extended. The limb sweeping the air around him with his leg raised just right to catch her in the side of the face if she had been there. But the space behind him was empty.

The man looked around for a moment, confused. Then he heard a sound above him and he looked up. There was Strela, floating in the air upside down with her massive bow pointed down at him.

"I can fly you idiot. Remember?" Then she loosed an arrow dead square into his face.

There was a large explosion and the man was sent tumbling across the pavement and slammed into a wall. After a few moments he stood up and seemed none the worse for wear except for a bleeding cut on his forehead and a bloody nose. "You stupid bitch," he cursed. "We had everything. Money, cars, dachas and power! And you gave it up. The coup would have succeeded if you hadn't interfered. Russia would have remained communist, like it should be. All you had to do was support the coup."

"Just? We were supposed to help the Russian people," she snapped. "Not keep the corrupt criminals in power in the Kremlin."

"Oh give it a rest," Marhk snarled. "And being in the Rogues Isle stealing and killing is helping Russia how?" He rushed at her with surprising speed and Strela had to dance backward to avoid his powerful swinging fists. His right fist caught her on the shoulder and a ball of pain shot up her arm.

Strela jumped up and barely missed a powerful kick to her shins. She hastily snapped off an arrow and had to dodge his powerful fists as the man tried to shatter her jaw.

The arrow missed the Fist and hit the wall next to him. It exploded with a soft whump and green gas billowed out. The cloud enveloped the villain, filling his mouth, nose and eyes with a cloying, stinging gas. He paused for a moment and tried to rub the chemicals from his eyes .

Without hesitating Strela grabbed a trio of arrows and hastily fitted and loosed all three towards him at the same time. Two of the arrows simply bounced off but the third sank into his left arm.

He lunged at her and swung at her with his right arm, moving it in a massive sweeping right hook.

The archer leapt backward but caught a glancing blow on her left side. It spun her around and sent her stumbling into a pile of garbage cans. She hit the ground hard amidst broken cans and scattered garbage. Pain seared through her left side and her head was spinning. Almost instinctively she pulled a pair of grenades off of her belt and tossed them in the direction she thought her opponent was.

The two grenades went off with a ear splitting blast and sent flames and debris flying in all directions.

"Hold still for a moment," the nanites ordered. "You have four broken ribs and three fractured ones. Also lung damage. Repairing."

"That last punch had almost 25,000 pounds of force in it. Be glad you wore your armor. Be VERY glad we reinforced that armor."

Strela collected her wits as the pain subsided. She cursed loudly in several languages. "I'd forgotten how hard he can hit. Where is he?"

"Two point five meters to the north. He is not attacking."

"The grenades really shook him up but we recommend getting up. He won't stay that way long."

Strela slowly got to her feet and leaned against the wall for support. The woman stayed that way for a moment till the pain subsided. Then she took a deep breath and stood up straight. Slowly the archer brought her bow up and nocked an arrow as she looked around..

The villain was some two meters away leaning against a wall and holding his hands to his head. His pants had been shredded and bits were burning. The legs underneath were pockmarked with small cuts and wounds. Those were the only signs of a fragmentation grenade and a stun grenade having gone off at his feet.

"It didn't matter which side won the coup;" she shouted at her opponent. The anger was rising in her and she fought to control it. "The reformers or the old guard communists. I don't see the present government in Moscow being any less corrupt and greedy than the old, communist one. What mattered was that you attacked innocent people. You supported the coup by charging a crowd of two hundred people and trying to kill them."

He shook his head as if to clear his ears of the ringing from the stun grenade. "They were enemies of the state! Capitalist counterrevolutionaries who had to be removed to protect the state!"

"Still quoting the old slogans?" She taunted, keeping out of reach of his powerful fists. "Why? You never believed them."

He stepped toward her. "Did you?"

"No, I don't think any of us did," Strela answered as she danced backward, trying to keep out of his reach. "But that doesn't matter. The Soviet Defenders of the Motherland were supposed to defend all the people! Not just the ones who bribed us."

Strela drew a special arrow from her quiver. In place of a sharp arrowhead it had a cylindrical head about the size of a small flashlight. She loosed the missile and it hit the pavement at her opponent's feet. It exploded almost silently sending out a spray of thick, sticky cords like the strands of a spiders web. The strands wrapped around his legs and feet bringing the large man to a halt. He snarled and ripped at the sticky cables wrapping his legs.

"You're a thug and a goon," she said coldly. "No better than the fascists my Grandmother killed."

Without another comment he charged straight at her, his face a mask of cold anger and hatred. His anger giving him the strength to burst through the webbing holding him.

Svetlana bent the bow with all her cybernetically enhanced strength pulling the arrow back. She took calm and deliberate aim at the villain charging her like an oncoming freight train. Her aim was first at his head but then it drifted down to his chest and to his heart. The bow string twanged loudly as the missile raced from it and towards The Fist.

The arrow hit him in the chest and sank in all the way up to the fletching. With a shout of pain the man fell to the pavement.

"Now," she ordered silently sending a simple commend via radio.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Looking up Mahrk saw the top of the buildings on either side of the alley explode outward. He had a moment of sheer surprise before tons of bricks and steel rained down and buried him.

Svetlana stood at the mouth of the alley and watched as the bricks and debris piled in front of her. A cloud of smoke and dust bellowed up and poured out of the alley like smoke belching from a chimney. A single brick tumbled out of the debris and skittered and rolled along the pavement. She put out a boot covered paw and stopped it "Boom."

Strela leaned against the wall and took a moment to recover. "Blue star one four," she announced over an encrypted radio frequency. "Immediate pickup."

In spite of the relatively warm weather there was a cold edge to the wind that blew across the roof of the building. Even with her enhanced strength it had taken great effort to get the man's body up to the roof.

It was five minutes, twenty two seconds before an unmarked, MI-8 helicopter settled for a landing next to her. It's powerful rotor blades whipping up a windstorm, blowing dust and dirt everywhere. The blades didn't stop moving but wound down to a slow movement that only lightly stirred up the air and created a strong breeze.

The cargo of the helicopter slid open. The figure that climbed out was dressed in the red, white and blue jumpsuit that was the standard uniform of the Longbow organization. He was wearing body armor over the jumpsuit and was carrying a high powered, advanced assault rifle. "We need to move quickly," the Longbow officer ordered. "I bribed the RIP to leave us alone but there is no telling how long the Rogue Isle police will stay bought."

The Commander turned and walked over to the figure that lay stretched out on the ground. He noticed that man was wearing the burnt and tattered remains of a very expensive suit. The villain was handcuffed, leg cuffed, gagged and had both legs and arms wrapped in heavy gauge chain. The captive glowered at him and tried to escape in spite of all the bindings.

"You took him alive?" The Longbow asked, surprised.

"Why does that surprise you Commander Carlisle?" Strela responded.

"I didn't think the Fist would let you take him alive," came the man's answer as he looked at the bound villain.

A pair of Longbow soldiers hopped off the helicopter. They were carrying what looked to be a stretcher. This stretcher was made all of metal and had metal loops that were meant to be hand and leg cuffs. They placed the item next to the helpless villain. After several moments of pondering they carefully picked up The Fist by his shoulders and his feet. He was none too gently placed onto the stretcher. His hands and feet were locked into the appropriate cuffs.

Strela scowled at the officer. "He didn't have a say in the matter." She walked over to the now helplessly bound villain and reached into the pocket of his shirt. The super pulled out a small plastic bag. Carefully she opened the bag and one item tumbled out onto her hand.

The item was cross barely five inches long and was made of pure, golden amber. It was edged with silver all around and inlaid into the front in gold was a wolf's head. She held up the little cross and examined it closely. The amber seemed to glisten in the light. "Beautiful."

"What are you going to do with that? It's probably stolen," the longbow officer asked.

"It was stolen," Strela answered. "And I'm going to give it back."

Vilnius, Lithuania 2002

Vilnius was lively when Strela arrived. The trip had been long and boring but being a regular commercial flight she was able to sit in a really comfortable seat and even had an in flight meal.

"Is coming here a wise idea?" The nanites asked as she made her way out of the airport.

"No but it's something I need to do," she responded. She was in full human form at this point looking like an ordinary brown haired woman. It had taken considerable effort to keep the nanites from adding some improvements like a tail. For this trip she could not draw any attention to herself, at least not at first.

The airport terminal itself was a leftover from the Soviet Union and was done in the standard Soviet design. It even had the usual communist decorations outside of sculptures of soldiers, workers and aviators. At least they had removed all the hammer and sickle emblems that used to adorn the walls.

A short train trip saw the super powered woman deposited in the main train station in downtown Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. No one paid any attention to the black haired woman who carried a backpack down the street.

"Shouldn't we be doing this late at night when things are quiet? No one around?" The nanites asked.

"You're joking right?" She asked. "With all these people around who will notice one more person?"

"What's the best place to hide a book?"

"In a library. The police are less likely to notice you."

"It's not the police I am worried about," Strela replied. "It's Gelezinis Vilkas who I don't want to meet again."

"AH! Iron Wolf. The local superhero."

"I'm not sure I can kill him again," she commented in a mock casual manner.

"Kill him again?"

She pointed to a large church steeple that rose up in end of the street. "The last time I killed him was in front of that church," Strela said casually.

"How many times DID you kill him?"

"Fought him a dozen times over but only killed him 3 times."

"ONLY? Isn't that something along the lines of 'Aside from that Mrs.' Lincoln how was the theater?'"

She openly laughed. "Good point. He seems to literally be un-killable. No matter how many times you kill him, he never stays dead. He is also one of the reasons I left the Soviet Union."

Gaiziunai Training area, Rukla, Lithuanian Socialist Republic January 1991

Svetlana hated this place. The bunker was located in the center of a heavily forested area in a Soviet base that was home of the 7th Guards airborne division. The division was officially there to protect the Lithuania SSR from attack by NATO. But really it was there to make sure the Lithuanians behaved themselves. But that was no longer working. As hard as the Soviets pressed the Lithuanians the Lithuanians stood firm and were starting to push back. So many things were changing in the Soviet Union. And not all for the better.

The underground structure had been dug deep into the earth and was a maze of drab, cold, concrete tunnels and chambers. The complex reminded her more of a tomb than an active military installation. She half expected to turn a corner and find a mummy shuffling along. Still the walls were strong and the only entrances were well defended. It allowed unit 'Soviet Defender of the Motherland Team Four' a place to relax and recuperate. And after their long and bloody fight in Vilnius they needed the time to recover.

The object of that fight now lay stretched out on a table in front of the woman. The body was battered and torn and had wounds all over but the worst injury was the head - it was no longer attached to the body! Resting on the table next to the shoulders was a large wolf head. They had fought him before and had seemed to have killed him twice. She wasn't sure what had happened before - how he had survived those two times but decapitation WAS fatal. He had to be dead now.

Being alone with the body in this dark and damp room gave her time to think. Too much time. She thought of all the good and bad times since she had joined the official Soviet Union Super's team Soviet Defenders of the Motherland. Svetlana remembered the tough fight to defeat the villain Ice Bear. Even the American ambassador had called them heroes after that. There was the Chemostra who had tried to dump a toxic nerve agent into the Leningrad water supply. She still has scars from the thing that had crawled from the Angara river and tried to smash the Ust-Ilimsk dam. And so many skirmishes with the Americans, the French, the British and Chinese that she had lost count.

But Svetlana also remembered the bad times. How many so called 'enemies of the state' they had fought had been just good people? The dangerous, capitalist counter revolutionary they had defeated in Irkutsk in 1983 had been in reality a local fighting Soviet domination. In the west he had been called a freedom fighter.

The illegal arms smuggling operation in Baku they had taken down had turned out to be smuggling food into an area hit hard by a crop failures. Crop failures caused by Soviet mismanagement and over reliance on growing cotton. Then there was the villain Hayk who was attacking a construction site in Armenia. It turned out the sports complex was being built on the site of a thousand year old church and an important, Christian holy site. Ironically even after defeating him the complex hadn't been built. The locals had rioted and caused so much chaos that Moscow had to back off and move the site elsewhere.

And what was Gelezinis Vilkas? To the Soviets he was a dangerous bandit and counter revolutionary. But to the Lithuanians he was a legendary hero fighting Soviet and Russian domination. She looked upward. All that was visible overhead was the concrete and steel reinforced ceiling but she was looking upward past that to the soldiers on the ground above. An entire airborne division stationed in Lithuania for the express purpose of frightening and terrifying the populace into submission. It wasn't working. How long before beating people and smashing TV stations and newspaper presses turned to open warfare? How long before they got the order to move in to 'Restore order and remove the Fascist, Hitlerite, reactionary, counter-revolutionary hooligans financed by the imperialist west' who were supposedly causing the

chaos. Just like they had been ordered into Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in '68 and Afghanistan in '79.

Strela wasn't a fool, she could see the signs. Troop buildups, special training and the arrival of soldiers from the elite Alpha unit. All told her that in a day or two they would move against the Lithuanians. No more subtle threats and arrests, just point, blank, mailed fist, Stalinist brutality. That was why they had been ordered to kill Gelezinis Vilkas. This was not a new order. The team had tangled with the Lithuanian super several times over the years. But these orders had been more blunt than before. almost frantic. "KILL GELEZINIS VILKAS IMMEDIATELY. He is to be removed no later than 10/01/91." Sometimes the government tried so hard to keep a secret that it was funny. That order pretty much told her something important would happen on 11 January 1991. That had led to the fight in the city square.

A sudden thought occurred to her. Back in Vilnius he had charged straight at the group. After two days of hit and run guerrilla tactics Iron Wolf had frontally assaulted the group. A complete change of strategy. She hadn't really thought that through till now. Why the sudden change in tactics? What had been the result? He had been killed. And once dead they had taken the body here for safekeeping. Taken it past the soldiers, tanks, minefields and electrified fences guarding the base and right into its heart. Then the team had moved the body past the 30mm chain guns and the force field that protected the massive bunker entrance and into the center of the bunker itself. The base was well defended to protect against an attack from outside. But how well would it stand up to an attack from the inside? When you want to destroy an enemy you take out their supplies and their base denying them a place to rest. Svetlana suddenly realized he had WANTED to get into the base and the team had obliged him.

Strela heard a noise and turned to the body on the table. She was staring straight at the head when she saw the eyes open and look at her. The supposedly dead body started to move. Arms reached up and grabbed hold of the head and firmly seated it back onto the neck where it belonged. Then Iron Wolf sat up and looked around.

To the woman he seemed fine and healthy, hardly the battered and torn corpse she had just been next to. Her training kicked in and the Soviet super grabbed for the bow that was strapped to her back. She pulled out the weapon and reached for an arrow but didn't draw one out.

The wolverine figure climbed down from the table and stood in front of her. His eyes scanned her harshly but he didn't attack. Neither attacked. Instead they both stood there for a moment in surprised silence.

"You are still here?" He asked in a cold, clear voice that had a tinge of surprise.

"Yes," she managed to reply. "For the moment."

"Why?" Iron Wolf asked calmly.

"What?" Strela asked, confused. She had expected all sorts of threats from him but never that simple question.

"I am protecting my people, my country. that is why I am here," Iron Wolf said calmly. He pointed a gauntleted hand at her. "What are you doing here? What are you doing in MY country?"

She was caught by surprise by her own inability to answer. Several overused, patriotic slogans came to mind but they sounded hollow, empty of meaning. She had stopped believing them long ago.

Of all the things that came to her it was the man in the square. He had stepped in front of her deliberately, not accidentally. It was a point blank act of defiance and it was not an isolated incident. At the moment it was limited to demonstrations and groups of people singing hymns and the old Lithuanian anthem. But she could see the signs. She didn't need a two meter tall sword wielding wolf to tell her where this was going. Today it was just one man, one ordinary man and a few hundred agitators. All easily avoided. But what would happen when the tanks and apc's attacked? When they were called out. She was sure the crowd would swell to the thousands. They couldn't just push them all out of the way. Strela would have to decide what to do. Svetlana had no doubt that at some point people like general Svedlov would order her to 'disperse' the crowd. The result would be bloody. Would she follow those orders? Was she ready to do that to protect her pampered life? Was she ready to kill people who just wanted their independence? Would she kill innocent people?

"I don't know. I used to be protecting my country," she answered honestly.

He leaned close to her and she could smell the hardy musk of a wolf. "Who are you protecting now, Soviet Defender of the Motherland? The people? Or an unjust government?" With those words he turned and calmly left the room.

She didn't try and stop him.

Vilnius - present day 2002

Getting to the museum proved easy if laborious. Strela had to resist the temptation to simply fly there. That would attract far too much attention. So she used the local bus system for part of the trip and walked the rest of the way.

The structure had been given many different names over the years but now it was known as the National Museum of Lithuania. The guards at the door had the same glum and dour expression that seemed to be a job requirement worldwide.

For a moment she wondered if there was some international school of glum looking guards. "I'm here to see Professor Laukaitis," she said to the first guard she met.

The man's face brightened into a smile immediately. "You're Svetlana Malenchinsky?"

"Yes," she responded. "And I have an appointment."

"Good, this way please, he's waiting for you," the man pointed to the door.

Professor Petras Laukaitis moved across the room at a firm, steady gait in spite of the bad limp in his right leg. His blonde hair was now showing gray and framed a face weathered and scarred by time and injury. Five years in Siberia had hardened the man but had not dimmed his enthusiasm for his country.

The woman that walked into his office didn't look extraordinary, in fact she looked like any of a hundred people he had passed or talked to that day. Her brown hair was shoulder length and tied back with a ribbon. Her clothing nondescript; a simple blue blouse and a pair of American made, blue jeans. And yet he instantly marked her as different. She moved with the subtle confidence that reminded him of the guards back in the gulag. The woman paused in the doorway and examined the room before entering. Her gaze fell upon the Lithuanian and she broke into a smile that seemed genuine. "Doctor Kajus Laukaitis?" Whatever this woman was she had never been a guard in a gulag. They never smiled. And she spoke flawless Lithuanian. No trace of an accent. Her name was Russian but that meant little in a country with a good portion of its population being of Russian decent.

He nodded in reply. "Are you are Miss Malenchinsky?"

The woman walked over to the desk and placed a small suitcase on it. "And here it is."

The curators face lit up with excitement and he smiled broadly. "May I see it?"

Strela opened the case and carefully removed a bundle wrapped in rags and bound with no less than four steel cables. "You do remember the agreement; complete anonymity."

"Of course!" He said excitedly. "Please open it. I need to confirm if it is the real thing."

Removing all the wrappings revealed a large picture frame. In the frame, safely under glass was a document, brown and worn with age.

"What is it?" She asked.

"I hope it's an original copy of the proclamation of 1303," the man answered. "And signed by the first grand duke of Lithuania. At least what's left of it."

A group of people encircled the table and quickly set to work with all manner of rulers, cameras and other measuring devices. They were comparing the item to a large pile of papers and photographs. Several others were using laptops and one even took a picture with her cell phone. VERY gently they turned the picture frame over and with the care of a man defusing a nuclear bomb removed the cardboard backing.

The group ignored her but the more they examined the item the more excited they became. This told her they were starting to believe it was real. "It matches. It matches perfectly," one of them said excitedly. "There are a few new marks and tears but all the ones on the original are there."

"You going to tell them you got it from an art collector in Archangel?" The nanites asked. *"And that it's been hanging in your bathroom for the last seven years?"*

"No, why spoil the mystery."

The professor broke away from the group and walked over to her. There was a broad smile on his face. He peered at her intently for a moment. Then a puzzled look crossed his face. "Have we met before?"

Svetlana didn't answer for a moment but suddenly she realized they had met before. The man had aged noticeably in the 11 years since their first, brief meeting in front of the cathedral. In spite of the time that had past there was still the look of determination in his face and a passion in his eyes. "No. No we haven't."

Svetlana slowly walked down the street. With the document delivered Svetlana had nothing urgent to do so she took a stroll through the city. "Vilnius has changed a lot since last I was here."

The super powered woman stopped at a street corner and he looked up at a brown and white signs attached to a signpost. The names were in Lithuanian instead of Russian like they had been during her last visit. But even translating from Lithuanian back to Russian she realized the name of the street had been changed. It read "Volunteer Ave."

"Did they change all the street names?" She asked silently. Communicating directly to the nanites.

"No," the nanites responded. *"Just the ones the Soviets changed."*

Svetlana looked at the signpost for a moment and shook her head. "They didn't like Red Army avenue?" she asked, partly joking. "It was named that to honor the Red army that liberated the city from the Germans."

"The name honors those who died freeing Lithuania in 1918. And it's the name it had before the Soviet's changed it."

Svetlana put her thoughts aside and made her way down the street. She had a specific destination in mind. It took a good amount of time to wind her way through the busy streets of the city to reach it.

The monument was in the middle of a small park in the middle of the city at an intersection where several roads crossed. The trees and shrubs seemed better tended as she walked along the path. She remember it was made of dark stone and depicted a Soviet soldier with rifle in hand. It memorialized all those killed fighting the fascists in the Great Patriotic war as the Russians called world war two. To her it was too large, too grandiose, too propagandized. Still it memorialized people like her Grandfather Vasili and her uncle Taras. Both of whom had died fighting the Germans. The woman came to the spot where the monument had last been and came to a sudden stop. Whatever thought about what the monument had been like were all academic as the monument was GONE.

It was clear where it had been. The pathway leading to it was the same down to the trees lining it. But where the pathway opened up into a plaza the statue of the Russian soldier in its center was gone. In its place was a tall square pillar of gray stone with the words "To Those brave people who died to free Lithuania. 1918 - 1919."

"They tore it down?" Svetlana snarled her mind filled with a mixture of anger and surprise. "THEY TORE IT DOWN!" Her hands clenched in rage.

"Yes," came a voice from behind her. "Yes they did."

She wheeled around and found herself looking at the professor. He was standing some five meters away. "But you must understand that monument was created by bulldozing an older monument to those killed in 1918 in the war of Lithuanian independence."

"It honored all those who died fighting the fascists," The woman answered with a snarl on her face. She struggled to control her anger.

"To you and to the Russians it represented those killed in the war," the Lithuanian answered slowly but with an edge of anger in his words. "But to us it represented fifty years of brutal repression, torture and mass murder at the hands of the Soviets."

An anger started to rise in her and she had to keep it in check. "They died to free the world of fascism."

"True," the man said. "But all that occurred for my people in 1945 was we switched domination by the Germans for domination by the Russians."

The woman shook her head. "So while trying to avoid being conquered by the Soviets your people let the Fascists take control. "Weren't there two Lithuanian SS units?"

The Lithuanian winced noticeably. "There were people who fought both the Russians AND the Germans."

"Would you have rather they left the fascists in charge here?" Strela said coldly.

"NO!" He said hurriedly, surprising himself. "They had to be destroyed. We did not want the Germans in Lithuania. But we didn't want Russia either. We wanted Lithuania to be Lithuanian. We wanted to be left alone."

She smiled and gave a humorless laugh. "Wasn't going to happen. You had Stalin on one side and Hitler the other. You had to fall into the sphere of influence of one or the other. Even now Lithuania is not neutral. After leaving the Soviet Union they joined NATO. From east to west," Svetlana said as she gestured with her hands.

"True," the man responded. "But we did so on our terms. We chose it. We weren't forced into it by the Germans or the Russians."

"Are you so sure?" Svetlana leaned towards the man. "Perhaps you were so eager to get away from Moscow that you ran right into the hands of the Germans and NATO."

"For the crime of trying to preserve Lithuanian history I spent five years in Irkutsk and came home with this limp," he tapped his right leg lightly.

Svetlana was quiet for a long moment as she looked at the new monument. When she spoke it was in a soft, tired tone. "My Grandmother fought honorably against the fascists," She turned and stared at the man with a hard look on her face. "She never killed any Lithuanians."

"But other Russians did," the man said in a flat tone. There was a hard look on his face.

Strela let out a long, slow sigh to calm herself. "So you are going to blame all Russians for what some did?"

"Is this one of those 'sensitive' moments Stealth warned us about?" The nanites asked themselves.

"It is."

"What do we do?"

"Ah . . ."

"My Grandmother talked with great pride of helping to defeat the Fascists," Svetlana said slowly. She stiffened and there was a look of pride on her face and in her next words. "My great uncle Fedya was among the troops who liberated Auschwitz."

The man looked surprised. " . . I did not know that! You must be very proud of him."

"I am. But history doesn't remember the liberators of Auschwitz," the woman said sadly. "They remember the butchers of Tuskulėnai."

"I'm sure the survivors your uncle rescued were grateful," the Lithuanian said.

There was silence between them for a long moment before he spoke again slowly. "Perhaps. The good done by your people has been polluted and obscured by the communists trying to rewrite history."

"Suddenly," she said slowly. "I am painfully reminded of why I left Russia and the Soviet Union."

The professor was quiet for a moment seemingly lost in thought. "Nothing can stain and corrupt the good your Grandmother and Great uncle did. They helped defeat a great evil. And no one can take that away from them."

"Now there is true wisdom," the nanites commented.

"They did not destroy the monument," the man said in way of consolation. He pointed off to the north. "It's merely been moved to a smaller location. Outside of town. At least till emotions calm down. And it is still carefully tended."

Svetlana gave a small smile. She heard a commotion behind her as the level of background talk rose suddenly.

"We have company," the nanites warned. *"Just arrived and is two hundred meters directly behind you."*

A crowd had already started to form around the new arrival by the time she turned around.

To Strela Iron Wolf had not changed much in the years since she had last seen him. The only real change was that the chainmail armor he was wearing was colored yellow, green and red. The colors of the Lithuanian flag.

"You aren't surprised by this encounter?" The nanites asked.

"Of course not. I wanted this meeting," Strela responded. "Or else I wouldn't have given the professor my real name."

"What makes you think you can defeat him alone?"

Svetlana smiled without taking her eyes off of Iron Wolf. "I said I wanted to meet him. I didn't say anything about fighting him."

"What makes you think HE wants to talk?" The nanites responded. Already they displaying onto her eyesight estimates of his abilities. Not that she needed such information. She was already well aware what he could do.

Strela rubbed her right hip where there was still a scar from his sword. "That's the hard part." She stood there for a moment and looked at the crowd that separated her from Iron Wolf. There was no way to get close without pushing through the crowd.

Looking around she spotted several police officers standing to one side. In a moment she located one in particular. The markings on his shoulders of his black uniform marked him as a commander. She pointed right at him until the man looked at her. Then Svetlana motioned him to come to her with a wiggle of her fingers. The woman pointed to the crowd separating her from Iron Wolf. Svetlana moved her hands as if trying to part the crowd with just those motions. Finally she pointed to herself and then to Iron Wolf.

The police officer just stood there for a moment and stared at her calmly.

Svetlana pointed at him with a violent, bold gesture and again beckoned him forward.

The officer just looked at her with an air of disdain and still didn't move.

Strela slowly lifted off the ground using a mutant power only a Super would have. That got the reaction she wanted.

The man's eyes widened with surprise as he realized what she was and he started barking orders to the other police and to the crowd.

Svetlana waited patiently as the crowd parted between her and Iron Wolf..

"If you wanted to get his attention you most certainly got it," the nanites commented. *"The Vilnius police just declared a class two emergency. They've ordered an alert for the NATO team."*

"No worry," Strela said. "He wants to do this himself."

"And Iron Wolf just told them to stand down."

"How did you know?"

"Iron Wolf is strong, courageous and very stubborn," Strela responded. "And he is also as predictable as a winter storm. He's worked alone for over a thousand years and he won't change now."

Iron Wolf drew his sword and brought its massive blade up with a flourish. Slowly and confidently he strode toward Strela until he was within a meter of her. He brought the weapon to within a hand span of Svetlana's chest. Its point was aimed straight at her heart.

Her reaction was surprising. She reached into her pocket and pulled out something on a small gold chain. Svetlana extended her hand towards the Lithuanian hero. "This is yours." She looped the chain over the point of his blade and it quickly slid all the way down to the hilt.

The wolf looked at the item dangling from the chain for several moments before recognition came to him. It was the small amber and silver cross. His ears perked up and the tail wagged a few times. "I didn't expect to see that again. Why are you returning it to me?"

"It's yours," the woman answered calmly.

His eyes narrowed. "What do you want? How much will it cost?"

"I am giving it back to you," she shot back. "I don't expect a reward."

"This is some trick," he curled his lips in a snarl. "The Russians sent you."

She laughed, loudly and openly. "I despise Winter Star or Snow Maiden or Snegurochka or whatever name Irina is using now a days. I didn't like her in 1991 and I still don't like her. I don't care how many Rikti she killed back in the war."

From her pocket she took a small plastic item the shape and size of a playing card. Deftly she impaled the card onto point of the blade. "I suggest you read that before things get messy."

The wolfen hero stepped back. Slowly and cautiously he moved the point towards him till he could reach the card. Pulling the piece of plastic off his weapon he examined it for a moment. He looked from the card to her and opened his mouth to speak.

"No," Svetlana said, answering him before he could even ask the question. "It's not a fake."

"When did Longbow take to hiring mercenaries?"

"I am no mercenary," she snarled.

"*Commander Carlisle is on the line,*" the nanites said suddenly, distracting her attention for a moment. "*He is talking to Iron Wolf. Explained your recent incident with The Fist* "

"How did he know I was here?" She silently asked the nanites.

"We didn't tell him," the nanites responded. "But he is not a stupid man. When the NATO alert went out he probably realized it was you."

"Or he was already keeping me under surveillance," the woman countered.

"Perhaps. Does that idea anger you?"

"Not really. A smart leader watches out for trouble rather than waiting for trouble to find them," she explained.

The armored wolf was still for a moment, talking on a small cell phone. It was odd to see someone dressed in armor from the 12th century using a 21st century phone. After a long moment he snapped the phone closed and dropped it into a pouch on his belt. He looked at the woman for a moment. "You are the one who took out Soviet Justice. You did not kill him? You took him prisoner?" Iron Wolf asked, surprised.

"Why is everyone so surprised about that?" She griped.

"Why did you do it?" The Lithuanian asked sharply. "For the reward?" His voice was thick with sarcasm.

"Do you honestly believe I did it solely for the money?" She asked.

The Wolf kept his blade aimed at her. "Yes."

Svetlana simply sighed. "To be blunt. I don't care what you think," she countered and pointed to the card that Iron Wolf still held in his hand. "That says I am protected by international law so long as I behave myself."

Slowly and reluctantly he sheathed his sword. "You will behave yourself here," the wolf growled and poked her in the chest with a gauntlet covered hand. "I WILL be watching you." With that he turned and stalked off.

Strela slowly let out her breath. "Well, seeing as the last time we met we were trying to kill each other that went better than I expected. Neither of us was injured or killed and nothing is burning or in ruins."

"Well," the professor said. "He's never been one for talking. And he will be watching you," the man commented.

Strela nodded her head. "Oh yes, him, the Vilnius police, the Lithuanian army, NATO and Longbow."

The professor looked at her with a puzzled expression. "You like causing chaos?"

She shook her head. "No, but chaos and trouble always seems to find me. It comes with having super abilities. I'm used to it."

A good sized crowd had again surrounded Gelezinis Vilkas and he seemed to be signing autographs. Still he always kept himself facing in her direction and looked up at her every so often.

"It's ironic," Strela said softly. "Last time I was here he was hiding from me. I was the super with Soviet government backing and he was the outlaw rogue. Now the government is Lithuanian and he is the government sponsored hero."

"Times change, people change," the nanites commented.

"Bottom rail on top."

Strela stiffened. "What?"

"From the American civil war. A slave escaped to the north and later joined the Union army. As a soldier he found himself guarding a group of confederate prisoners. He recognized his old master among them. 'Bottom rail on top this time'. He told him."

The End