

Old Feuds New Consequences
by Christian O'Kane

Vilnius, Lithuania Modern Day

The summons arrived in an unusual manner. Svetlana Malenchinsky aka Strela was visiting an archery store in Vilnius. The shop was a modest affair tucked into a modern building on a side street. The sign on the window said simply "Vilnius Archery". She was pleasantly surprised to find good sized store stocked with all manner of archery related items. It even had a large, indoor, archery range.

The man who walked into the shop was wearing the uniform of the Lithuanian army. The rank on his shoulders marked him as a Leitenantas - or lieutenant. Without a word he walked over to the super powered archer. "This is for you," he extended his arm and in his hand was a white envelope.

Strela took the envelope and the messenger turned and left without another word. For a moment she considered going after the man but thought better of it. He was just the messenger.

The letter was on plain, white paper and read simply. "Please report to the Gaiziunai Training Area by 0900. Our payment for your service is \$25,000."

"Get me Commander Carlisle on the phone," Svetlana ordered the nanites.

"Now that is good timing," the nanites commented. The microscopic machines in her body allowed her instant communication. *"He's calling you."*

"Put him through," she said coldly.

The little symbol of a phone appeared in her eyesight and then the word, "Connected."

"I don't mind doing work for them but it hurts that they think I will just accept the job for money," Strela said in way of greeting.

"Consider it payback for causing that ruckus yesterday in Vilnius," the Longbow commander responded with a touch of humor in his voice.

Strela couldn't help but smile when she thought of the confusion Iron Wolf had shown when they had met.

"Seriously though," the man continued. "It's about Gaiziunai."

"Gaiziunai?" Svetlana asked slowly as she searched her mind for the reference. She remembered just before the nanites displayed the information directly onto her eyesight. "The Soviet army base here in Lithuania? The Russians abandoned that back in 1993 when they pulled out of the country."

"It's not the army facility that is the problem."

She was silent for a moment. "You mean the old Soviet Defenders of the Motherland base?"

"Exactly."

"I assume Irisa closed and stripped the place when they pulled out," the woman responded frankly. "But i can't be certain. "I left the team almost two years before that."

"We don't know," came the answer. "No one can get inside."

"Why not?" she asked.

"The guns and force field."

"The defenses are still active?" Svetlana asked, genuinely surprised.

"Very much so," came the Longbow officers answer. "The Lithuanian government is worried that the Soviets left behind something truly nasty like a Thunderball."

"If they left something deadly behind you can only hope it was merely a nuclear weapon," the archer answered.

"Merely?" The commander asked nervously. "What could be worse than a tactical nuclear weapon?"

"Now that is a question I'm not sure I want to hear the answer to," the nanites commented.

"Agreed."

"We fought a lot of things over the years," Svetlana answered. "Far worse than Iron Wolf." She rubbed her right leg. "I still have the scars from something that crawled from the Angara river one night. I never did find out what it was. After fighting all day and night the thing crawled back into the river and vanished."

"That is why we need your help," the commander explained. "You are one of only a handful of people who have actually been inside."

"That makes sense," Svetlana responded. "I'll be glad to help out."

"Thank you," the commander responded. "I'll inform the Lithuanians and NATO. One small question. You realize that document you gave to the professor was worth twenty times what they paid you for it."

"It was never about the money," she responded. "Not then. Not now."

"We suggest you land outside the base," the nanites commented. "Unless you want to play tag with an FIM-92 Stinger missile."

The official name of the installation was the Gaiziunai Training Area in Rukla, Lithuania. In reality it was a good sized collection of buildings clustered in one part of a large property. Most of it was forest, fields, dirt roads and dusty trails that seems to go on forever and yet led nowhere in particular.

She had never been really impressed by the place but she had never been impressed by ANY military post. They all seemed to be the same collection of drab buildings located in the middle of nowhere. Only the one above the arctic circle had been different. Instead of dirt and trees that place had been snow, ice and yet more snow.

Getting there was easy. Having the ability to fly meant not having to rent a car. Svetlana decided on the subtle/casual approach. She landed a half a kilometer away from the base in a small group of trees where no one could see her. She stopped in town for a soft drink and took her time walking to the main gate. So twenty minutes later the two soldiers on guard at the main gate saw a woman in her early thirties with brown hair casually walk up the street. She was sipping a soda and eating a bag of cookies. On her back was a duffle bag with her bow and forty arrows and other gear inside.

"I'm here to meet the Base Commander," she said simply to the soldier.

"Your name?"

"My code name is Strela," she answered.

The soldier spoke into a small radio for a moment. Then he looked back to Strela. "Wait please. Your escort will arrive shortly." And with that he took a step backward, ending all conversation.

Her escort arrived exactly four minutes later in the form of a Lithuanian army officer riding in a hummer. The rank on his uniform marked him as a captain. The insignia on his shoulder of a flaming sword on a green shield marked him as a member of the Lithuanian Special Forces. He slowly walked up to her with a scowl on his face. "You always dress like that for a mission?" The officer asked harshly.

"What did you expect me to wear?" She shot back. "Skin tight leather and a thong?"

"I'm sure a lot of the soldiers would like it!" The nanites commented.

"Many female Supers wore outrageous costumes, many so skimpy as to border on

pornographic."

"It seems to be part of the Supers culture for them to wear unusual or strange clothing."

"Or as little clothing as possible."

"A perfect example is Myech," the nanites said. "She deliberately wore very provocative clothing."

"If she wore clothing at all. She was actually accused of wearing nothing but body paint on several occasions."

"Alina was always a rebel. The more the officials complained," Strela commented with a laugh. "The less she wore."

"She is on CIA and Interpol watch lists."

"Why?" Strela asked, concerned. "What did she do?"

"Nothing," the nanites explained. "She's not on there for what she has done. It's more a case of 'Whatever happened to?' She hasn't been seen in years."

"I was under the impression this was to be done quietly," the woman added, ignoring the nanites. "So I dressed inconspicuously."

The officer slowly nodded his head and gave a faint trace of a smile. The officer examined her for a moment. "Follow me."

To Svetlana the base really hadn't changed that much in the decade since she had last been here. She noted a few buildings torn down and a few new ones but most seemed to be the same drab ones as before. It did seem a lot less busy. She that noted some buildings that had an air of disuse about them. Not outright abandonment but the feel of a place unused in a long time. This didn't surprise her. Under the Soviets it had been home to the 76ths Guards Airborne Division and the 242nd Training Centre. Now it was home of the much smaller Lithuanian army units.

Still the walkways were swept clean and the lawns were well kept. At least the Lithuanians had maintained things well.

Her guide didn't take her to the base commanders office. Instead a short ride in a hummer found Strela and her escort on a narrow road paved with concrete tiles. The trip ended suddenly when a chain link fence ran across the road, blocking it completely. Signs on the fences read "Warning, Danger, Do not enter." And one was a red square with a white skull and crossbones and the words DANGER MINEFIELD in Lithuanian, English, German and Russian.

Standing in front of the fence was an army officer. He was wearing camouflaged fatigues and had a pistol in a holster on his hips. He was looking at her with a cold, calculating stare that was

devoid of any warmth.

"For this assignment you'll have an escort and an expert with you," the captain said as they climbed out of the hummer. He pointed to the other officer. "This is Vyresnysis Lietenantas Jonas Saltis. He is a specialist in nuclear, chemical and biological weapons."

"Vyresnysis Lietenantas Jonas Saltis," the nanites explained. "Specialty is NBC but he also has a degree in nuclear engineering."

Strela gave a nod of the head. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The officer didn't speak but gave a slight nod of the head and scowled at her.

"Oh boy is HE a friendly one." the nanites commented. *"He makes Iron Wolf look like positively friendly."*

"To him I represent the worst of the Soviet repression," Strela commented telepathically to the nanites.

"If Iron Wolf was able to accept you," the nanites asked. *"Why can't he?"*

"Some people find it hard to forgive and forget," she responded.

They heard him long before he came into sight. The loud roar of a powerful engine could be heard echoing down the road. In moments a motorcycle roared into view. He sprayed the trio with gravel and dirt as he skidded sideways stopping a mere meter from the three waiting people. The rider got off the bike and removed his helmet.

The man was wearing a jacket, pants and boots all of dark brown and of a cut and style straight out of the 17th century. He even had a three cornered hat. On his belt were two large, flintlock pistols. He reminded her more of some 17th century highwayman than of a modern Superhero. But her well trained senses noticed that beneath his wool and silk jacket was a chest plate of modern, bulletproof armor. "My apology for being late," he said in a suave and confident voice. "I ran into some trouble along the way. I hope I haven't missed the party."

"You're late," the commander said harshly. "Fashionably late. As usual."

Strela examined the new arrival carefully. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm as old as the mountains," he said with a grandiose sweep of his arms. "And as enduring as the trees! I am forever."

She peered at him for a moment. "No you're not. I have shoes older than you are," she said flatly.

He scowled at her for a long moment. "I'm here to keep you from doing anything stupid."

Strela smiled. "Now that I believe. My name is Strela. What's yours?"

"Tadas," the man said as he took off his hat and bowed. "Tadas Blinda."

She bowed in return. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Tadas Blinda," the nanites told her. "A new hero. Only been active for the last 3 years. Considered an independent but with known connections to the Lithuanian Army. There is a 45% possibility he is Special Forces."

"Oh he IS Lithuanian Special Forces," Strela thought quietly to the nanites. "I've met too many specially trained soldiers to miss the clues. The only question is if he is Special Forces or ex-Special Forces."

"Hard to tell," the nanites commented. "The odds are 50/50 either way. If he is not on active duty he has retained close ties to the military. He might be on 'Detached Duty' like Misha is."

"Now that is a strong possibility," Strela commented.

The entrance to Soviet Defenders of the Motherland base # 7 (the correct name was Location 237389) had always been a modest affair. Once past the (lethal level) electrified fence and the minefield there was a large, metal blast door set in concrete on one side of a small hill. Built into the concrete above the door was a small turret with an auto cannon mounted. Both turret and door were protected by a powerful force field. In front of the door was a small parking area that usually held at least one UAZ-469 in it. The small, four wheeled vehicle were used by the soldiers who guarded the fence and the entrance.

She examined the blasted pile of concrete, rubble and twisted metal that had been the entrance. The only things recognizable were the barrel of the gun turret and the faint shimmer of the force field. The doors themselves were buried under tons of concrete. Only a small portion of the top was visible. What does the other entrance look like?"

"It's not there," the officer responded stiffly. "The entrance was blown up and covered with several tons of concrete and rubble."

Strela sighed and shook her head. "When was the last time anyone was inside?"

"Not since November 1992 when the last Russian troops pulled out," the Lithuanian army officer answered. "That's when they did this." He pointed to the pile of rubble. "And blew up all the entrances. But the tunnels were empty for a while before that. The last Super team had left back in March."

"They probably stripped the place bare," Strela commented.

"Like all the other places they left behind," Tadas added sarcastically.

"We cannot be sure," the officer responded. "We are sure they booby trapped it. After we took control of the facility we did a careful reconnaissance and four men were wounded by mines and some sort of automated machine gun."

Svetlana shook her head. "That isn't like Irisa. She may be hot headed and irascible but she would never stoop to such petty vindictiveness. Especially if there was even the slightest chance of some innocent civilian getting hurt."

"Someone did it," the officer responded. "And we need to be sure something more dangerous is not down there."

"To be honest I'm surprised they left anything usable behind," Svetlana commented. "I was sure they'd have stripped the place of everything usable and then just blown up the rest."

"What were the tunnels like?" He asked.

"Nothing exciting really," she answered. "There was one main tunnel that ran completely through the hill. With entrances on either end. Off that were smaller, side tunnels that were broken up for various purposes."

"And the defenses on the entrances?" Came the question.

She pondered her answer for a moment. "I remember a 30mm automated cannon turret and that the doors themselves were electrified and protected by a force field. But a big part of the defenses was the airborne division stationed here."

"That alone would keep most enemies at a distance," Tadas commented.

"We deactivated the electric fences and removed the minefield," the officer explained. "But the cannon and the force field are interconnected and we have to deal with both at the same time."

"It's an AK-230 30mm/63. Two stabilized NN-30 mm water-cooled four chamber revolver cannons each capable of 1000 rounds a minute. They're mounted inside a riveted steel turret. Gyro-stabilized with radar/IR and camera sensors," the nanites commented.

"Certainly they have to run out of ammunition sometime," the man said.

Strela shook her head. "The turret has an ammo magazine with 500,000 rounds."

"Five hundred thousand?" He asked. "A bit of an overkill?"

"Well," she admitted sheepishly. "It didn't seem like too much when we had it installed. You have to understand this was meant to withstand a raid by a NATO team. The walls are of concrete reinforced with steel and several other metals and four meters thick. There is also a metal mesh that protects everything inside from an EMP weapon and it carries a level 12 force

field. Covering all of that is at least ten meters of earth. It will withstand a direct hit by a three megaton weapon."

"Autocannon turrets, force fields and nuclear blast proof walls. Those are some serious defenses," Tadas commented.

Strela shook her head. "Oh no. This was only a minor facility. An outpost really. The base in Petersburg was a primary war base. That was buried over one hundred meters below ground and had three levels of rooms and galleries. It had six entrances each guarded by autocannons, force fields, antitank missiles and a platoon of infantry. There was also laser cannons, an SA-8 SAM battery and an Intermediate range, ballistic missile silo."

"An IRBM silo?" Tadas said nervously. "Nuclear tipped missile?"

"Oh yes! But Irisa - she was called Winter Star then disabled the warhead," Strela smiled. "She said We are here to save people and cities not destroy them."

The officer was taking notes. "What happened to that base?"

Strela shrugged. "I don't know. Probably still there but the missile silo is gone. I know that for a fact. I checked before I left Russia."

"How was this little base powered?" The army officer asked.

"It had a small nuclear reactor," the woman responded. "The same as those in the Delta class ballistic missiles subs. But that was replaced by something smaller and more powerful around 1990. But I don't know the exact details. I stayed far away from it."

The hero smiled. "A smart idea. Was there any backup?"

Svetlana nodded in response. "Two diesel generators. Kolomna 2D42M 2,000 hp diesel engines. Straight out of a Foxtrot class submarine. I remember they still had the labels on them marking them as Navy property. There was also enough batteries to power everything for a ten hours." She was quiet for a moment. "I remember that back at the base in Moscow we had the same thing. A nuclear reactor was backed up by several powerful diesel generators and batteries. But THAT base also had a connection into the regular Moscow power system."

"We discovered the tap into the base electrical system several years ago," the army officer answered. The scowl left his face as it brightened with realization. "We discovered one connection. There might be a second one we haven't found yet."

"What we need is get inside without having to blast our way through. I was hoping you might know of some secret entrance into the place," Tadas said slowly.

"That type of plot device only happens in bad movies and comic books," She said with a sarcastic scowl on her face. "But then again." Strela stood silently there for a moment.

The officer scowled. "You're kidding?" He said incredulously.

"There were four separate, secret exits to the complex," the woman said. "But I'm sure none of them are left."

"Only one way to find out," Tadas commented.

"One entrance was in the bunker in the basement of the Headquarters building." Strela answered.

The officer shook his head. "The bunker is there but that tunnel was collapsed and the entrance filled in with concrete."

Strela thought for a moment. "The second was in the basement of a house in Gaiziunai in the railroad yard."

The officer shook his head. "Gone. They collapsed the tunnel, filled in the entrance and then demolished the house."

Svetlana shook her head. "Irisa always one to do a thorough job. The third was down on the banks of the Neris river. But that tunnel is probably completely flooded. The last was near the Jonava airfield."

"We've searched the Jonava airbase," the officer countered with a shake of the head. "The entire place was carefully searched. We even used ground penetrating radar to look for tunnels."

Tadas nodded in agreement. "I've been there several times. It's been abandoned for years. They use the concrete runway for racing events on the weekends."

Strela laughed. "I don't mean at the Jonava airfield itself. It's near it not at it. And it was just a hatch in the ground a little to the north of the airfield. About a kilometer north of the control tower."

The spot was well hidden. Even with the nanites helping to enhance her memory over a decade had passed and a lot had changed. It took the three of them over two hours to find the spot. Finally she recognized a gray rock sticking up out of the sandy ground. A few minutes of digging revealed a metal hatch set in a small square of concrete.

Tadas ran his hand along the edge of the hatch. "It's been welded shut." From a pocket he took out a small, power saw. "I can fix that."

It took a good ten minutes to cut through the welds. It took considerable effort to pry open the hatch. It squealed loudly. The rusted hinges complaining as it was pulled open. It revealed a dark hole.

Strela examined the hole for a long time without touching the sides or going inside. It smelled of stagnant water, rust, decay and a faint whiff of ammonia. A metal ladder descended down into the darkness. She ignored the ladder and using her ability to fly she slowly lowered herself down inside. After a moment her feet were plunged into water and she was standing in a round, concrete tunnel ankle deep in water.

Tadas followed her, moving slowly down the ladder one rung at a time. Testing each before putting his full weight onto it. "Where are we?"

Strela pointed down the dark tunnel. "The base itself is that way about a kilometer."

"Was anyone stationed there besides the team?" Tadas asked.

"A special infantry squad guarded the place. There were also a dozen technicians who ran the computers and maintained the generators."

"And the pumps," Tadas added sarcastically.

"And speaking of that. We're testing the water now," the nanites commented.

"GET OUT OF THE WATER! GET OUT OF THE WATER! GET OUT OF THE WATER!"

"NOW!!!"

Almost instinctively Strela leapt upward propelled by her powerful legs. But she didn't come down. She floated a few centimeter above the water, held there by the mutant ability she had been born with. "Stay out of the water!"

"What's in it?" The officer asked. He was only halfway down the ladder.

A long string of chemical symbols raced across her vision. She didn't understand most of them but she did recognize the trefoil of radiation. Svetlana muttered a curse in several languages.

"The water is contaminated," she answered. "I'm not sure of exactly what but there seems to be some low level radiation."

She was about to speak when a small object slowly descended into view. It was some sort of plastic/metal device about the size of her thumb. It was attached to a string. She followed the string to its source and saw the officer on the other end.

The small item descended till it reached the water. He dunked the end in the dirty water a few times. Like someone dunking a teabag in hot water. After several dips into the murky liquid the string with its high tech cargo was withdrawn upwards. The officer held the sample small item for a moment.

"High levels of rust, calcium, limestone," the officer commented out loud. "Higher than

expected levels of lead. Higher than expected levels of radiation. Small amounts of uranium, plutonium and cesium. But only in trace amounts. We should be safe so long as we do not consume it and limit skin contact."

"What about asbestos?" Strela asked nervously.

The officer examined his device for a long moment. He reached into a pocket and produced three small objects. He handed one to Tadas who took it. "Put that on."

The small item was one of the cloth, medical masks that were held on with a small rubber band around the back of the head. Reluctantly Tadas put the mask on.

"I have one for you," the army officer said and offered one to Strela.

She shook her head and pointed to her neck. "My filters are built in."

The officer's eyes narrowed. "I see," he said in a cold voice.

"And no," she said with a soft smile. "I'm not going to explain that."

The lieutenant stood there for a moment and scowled at Strela who refused to say anything in response.

Tadas stepped between the two. "You tease!" he joked. "Now can we please get moving. I'm tired of standing here in ankle deep water."

Slowly the small group made its way through the ankle deep water. The tunnel seemed to stretch on forever but eventually they came to a large, steel door that blocked the passage ahead. Tadas examined it for a moment. "They welded this one too!"

It took half an hour to cut the welds and pry open the door. It revealed what lay beyond.

The tunnel was three meters tall and was cylindrical like a water pipe. The walls around them and the floor underfoot were of a rough looking concrete. Water dripped down hitting the ankle deep water or splashing onto their heads with unnerving regularity. The ceiling was covered with countless small stalactites, each no wider or longer than a pencil, dangling down.

"Stalactites?" Tadas said, surprised as he looked at the ceiling. "What caused them?"

"Same thing that creates them in natural caves. The water seeping through the concrete causes minerals in it to dissolve out. It also tells me that there are cracks and that the concrete is starting to weaken. "Be careful of where you walk," the officer said. "There is no telling how dangerous it is."

Strela looked at one wall and saw that the concrete was rough and pockmarked with countless holes. "The walls used to be lined with corrugated metal panels and there were pipes and ducting

hanging from the walls and ceiling."

"They took all the pipes and wiring and the brackets that held them up," Tadas said. "They even pried the panels off the walls."

"That explains the bad shape the walls are in and all the water," Strela said.

"Be very careful," the nanites commented. "The walls have some serious structural flaws."

"And we're not too happy with the floors either."

"Is it safe to continue?" Svetlana asked the nanites with a thought.

"Yes but go carefully."

Eventually the tunnel ahead of them opened up into a good sized room. The remains of brackets on the walls and ceiling told of where cabling and equipment had once been. While holes in the walls told of where cabling and wiring had once run to other places.

"This was the main command center," Strela said as she looked around.

"Was," Tadas said. "There's nothing left here but a big hole in the ground."

Strela laughed. "And this surprises you?" Suddenly something small and alive zipped past her face. She ducked and drew out her bow. "What was that?"

A pair of small objects flew past the Lithuanian hero twisting to avoid hitting the man. "WHAT?" Tadas shouted as he drew both of his high powered pistols.

The air seemed to be alive with small things zipping about them. After a few moments she realized that in spite of all the aerial activity they weren't being attacked.

"Identified!" the nanites said into her mind. "Eptesicus serotinus - common name is the Serotine Bat."

Strela unknocked the arrow and lowered her bow. "Relax," she said with a laugh. "They're bats! Common, ordinary bats."

"Bats?" The officer ducked reflexively as a small, brown object zipped past his head. "They must have gotten in through some of the ventilators."

"We've already identified over a hundred of three separate species."

She looked around and her cybernetic infrared red vision saw small, hot spots all over. In groups on the ceiling and the walls. Each spot was a live bat. "There must be over a hundred in here. They're all over the walls."

"Makes sense," Tadas commented as he holstered his guns. "Bats like caves and this whole complex is one giant cave. It just happens to be manmade."

"I've heard of bats using bunkers and tunnels left from the two world wars," the officer said as he looked around. "But I never expected them to move in so soon."

"Hey," Tadas joked. "Everyone likes to live in a good neighborhood."

Strela laughed. "With a force field and a 30mm autoturret it's certainly the most well protected." She looked to her left and there at eye level was a group of bats hanging from the rough, concrete walls. Some were looking at her but others were ignoring the intruders.

"Phooey on Batman! This is the REAL Bat Cave!"

"Let's not disturb them," Strela said softly. "It seems they own this place now."

"Contacting Professor Petkus of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences," the nanites commented. "He's written several excellent articles and papers on bats."

"This is good," the officer said smiling for the first time. "If the bats are here it means no one else has been."

"Now that is an excellent point!" The Lithuanian hero nodded in agreement. "Let's leave this room to them. I don't see anything else in there."

"Professor Parkus has warned us that if they are in such numbers in this room there are sure to be a lot more bats in the other rooms. He's also wants us to remind you that the bats are a protected species. He wants all of you out right now. Before you cause irreparable harm."

"He's also asking for a map and as accurate a census count as possible."

"Be careful," Strela commented as yet another bat flew past. "There are sure to be more bats here."

They stood in the main corridor for a moment in the dirty, knee deep water.

"The main entrance is that way," Strela said and pointed up the corridor. Then she pointed off to the right at about a 45 degree angle. "But the power plant was in that direction."

"Power plant first," the officer ordered. "Shut down the power to those guns and see if there is any leak there."

A short walk took them to the entrance to a side tunnel. The trio walked up a few steps and were glad to be out of the dirty water. The small corridor opened up into a good sized room. An empty room. In the middle of the room were two large shallow pits. Strela walked up to one of

the pits and looked down at it. "The generators were here."

"The reactor?" The officer asked.

Strela pointed deeper into the room "Further back. But I never got too close to it."

Where the reactor had been was just a large, dark mass that filled the entire room.

"Well," Tadas said slowly. "That explains the radiation. They just left the thing here."

"Confirmed," the nanites added. "The reactor is leaking low level radiation. Not at dangerous levels but don't get too close."

"Keep your distance," The officer said. He was holding a device the size of a small computer tablet and waving it about. "I am picking up low levels of radiation."

The officer slowly walked around the massive shape and examined it both with his eyes and a battery of equipment he took from his backpack.

Strela and Tadas waited patiently at a distance. Finally the man came over to them. He was packing away the last of his equipment.

"Good or bad news?" Strela asked.

"Mostly good," the man answered. "The reactor core was emptied of all fuel after it was shut down. But the reactor itself is contaminated. Thankfully the contamination levels are low. It will have to be removed eventually but not right away."

"How did you get it in here in the first place?" Tadas asked.

"They cut a hole in the roof and lowered it in with a crane," Strela answered.

"That explains why they didn't remove it," the officer commented.

A blinking light off to one side caught her attention. Looking at it she saw a small light attached to something on the floor. The object was square and about a meter wide and meter tall. Several green and red lights blinked on the top and a soft hum emanated from it. A cable ran from the box and up the wall to a small control panel attached to one wall.

"This is why the guns and force field still have power," the officer explained. "They're connected to a small power cell. All we have to do is shut the cell down."

"WAIT!" Strela said suddenly. "The force field actually runs through the walls. If we shut it off what effect will it have on the walls? Will they hold up?"

"VERY GOOD QUESTION!" The nanites commented. A long string of numbers and figures

danced across her vision. She recognized them as the nanites testing the concrete and trying to come to a decision. "We're not able to answer that as some sections are weaker than others. But the field is most certainly reinforcing the structure."

"Like in Star Trek when the Enterprise had a structural integrity field to support the hull when moving at warp."

"That was just a plot device to explain how that weird looking ship didn't fly apart when they went to warp."

"True but the basic concept is sound enough."

The officer slowly nodded his head. "Good point but we cannot leave those auto cannon turrets active."

"WAIT!" Strela said. "If they were petty enough to leave the gun turret loaded and the force field active they are sure to have left some other surprises."

"Agreed," the officer removed his hand from the box. "There is no telling what other sabotage they've done."

"If the bats are in the tunnels whatever is still there cannot be too deadly!" Tadas commented.

"Yes, but we need to go carefully until we are sure we've removed all the booby traps," Strela said calmly.

The excitement soon wore off and the rest of the trip degenerated down to walking through ankle high dirty water in cold, dark tunnels. It was only enlivened when one of the small residents flew past squeaking their annoyance at being disturbed.

Eventually the trio of explorers found themselves back at the entrance by the old airfield. They were quiet as Tadas welded the hatch shut.

"For the moment it is best we keep this locked up," the officer said calmly, without looking up from his computer tablet. "At least till we can find a way to remove the guns and the reactor safely."

"The bats?" Strela asked. "It's their home now."

"They present an interesting complication," the officer said slowly. "As an endangered species that forces certain rules and regulations."

Strela smiled. "I like the idea of the old base being a home for the bats. It's probably the best use the place ever had."

"It is certainly an unexpected complication," the officer commented. "The matter will need to

be handled carefully."

"The commander is calling," The nanites suddenly said. "And Colonel Van De Velde is calling.."

"Who is Van De Velde?" Strela asked.

"Second in command, NSOC - NATO Special Operations Command," the nanites explained. "He sounds desperate. He's already offered you 250,000 Euros."

She shook her head. "If they're throwing around money like that it can't be good. Tell the colonel I'm talking to Longbow now. I'll be with him in a minute. And put the Commander through."

"I'll be blunt," Commander Carlisle of the Longbow organization said in way of greeting. "Gelezinis Vilkas and Snegurochka are at it again. Screaming yelling and about one step away from an open fight."

"So?" Strela asked. "They've hated each other for decades. Those two have been fighting since 1971."

"Let me rephrase it," the man said in clipped tones. "Gelezinis Vilkas an official member and representative of NATO is about to get into a very public fight with Snegurochka a member of the Official Russian Federation Super team. That makes it a NATO issue. Things are already tense between NATO and Moscow over that whole mess in the Ukraine. And the last time they fought it took months to calm things down. This could literally push things over the edge. I don't care how you do it but stop those idiots before they start World War 3."

"He's correct," the nanites commented. "NATO has just ordered a level two alert. And the colonel has just upped the offer to 300,000 Euros."

Svetlana muttered several curses and shook her head. "I thought I was done dealing with that woman back in 1991. All right commander I'll do what I can."

The connection to the Longbow Commander dropped.

"Put the Belgian on," she snapped to the Nanites.

This is Colonel Van De Velde," the voice said. "This is escalating. The Russians are claiming someone attacked a convoy of the 18th Guards Motor Rifle Division. The assailants fled into Lithuania. They've ordered a sector wide alert."

"Confirmed," the nanites added. "There is a 545% increase in radio traffic and they just alerted everything west of Moscow. And quite a bit of the stuff east of Moscow too."

"NATO is also on alert," the nanites commented. "The Americans are dispatching one of their

power suit units."

"This is escalating with frightening speed," the colonel commented nervously.

"Can you slow it down? Stop it?" Strela asked.

"No," came the strained answer. "It was a major attack. At least forty dead. They're calling it an attack on national sovereignty."

"Where is the NATO team?" She asked.

"Busy in Spain with an attack on ROTA," came the answer. "The English are retasking their own team but they will take two to three hours to get there."

"The French?"

"Busy as well."

"The Germans?"

"Helping the French. There was a major Knives of Artemis raid on the nuclear reactor in Sarclay. They are having a difficult time containing the damage and the Knives."

"They're ALL busy? Now that is interesting," she said, surprised.

"I have been studying the confrontations between Iron Wolf and Snow Maiden over the last six months," the Belgian officer commented. "My analysts have noted a pattern. Not only have they increased in frequency but each time one of these confrontations occurred the on call NATO team was occupied elsewhere."

"What does that mean?" She asked.

"I believe someone is deliberately provoking a fight between the two," he answered. "Your orders are to stop this confrontation and find the ones responsible before it escalates into a full war."

"Who would want another world war?" She asked.

"That is secondary at the moment. First defuse the situation between those two immediately."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Strela asked. "I'm not a diplomat."

"You've worked with Snow Maiden," the NATO officer responded. "Try and reason with her. Tell her to back off."

Strela scowled and shook her head. "Are you joking? No one tells Irisa what to do. And in the

ten years I was on the team with her we were never able to reason with her. And don't even bother with threats. They only make her madder."

"I don't care how you do it but stop THEM!" the Belgian officer countered over the radio. "You are the only Super asset nearby. Stop them at all costs before they start a war."

It took Strela ten minutes to make it to the scene. It was a nondescript dirt road in a region filled with a mix of farmland and scattered forest. She was reminded that this area had seen some incredibly bitter fighting in 1945 between the Russians and the Germans. Lithuanians had fought on both sides, some had even fought against both side but most were just caught in the middle.

The border itself was marked on the ground by a chain link fence that had been torn and ripped apart. This left the actual border marked by some ankle high bits of metal and a line of concrete posts.

Iron Wolf stood on one side of the border and Snow Maiden the other. There was barely a meter of open space between them. Both were screaming, yelling and snarling at each other as they waved their arms about. To his credit Iron Wolf had not drawn his sword - yet. And Snegurochka had limited her hostility to yelling. But the ground under her feet was frozen solid.. A sure sign that she was truly angry.

Strela approached the pair slowly before landing some ten meters from them. Neither of them paid her the slightest notice.

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. It was colored the yellow, green and red of the Lithuanian national colors. On his shoulders instead of a normal human head was one of a large, European, timber wolf. Gelezinis Vilkas (Iron Wolf in English) had not changed since she had seen him the day before.

Svetlana had known Irista Perminov for a long time, since the 1980's. Back then the woman had been known as Winter Star and they had both been members of the Soviet Defenders of the Motherland. The Official Superhero team of the Soviet Union. But a lot had changed when the Soviet Union had collapsed. Long gone was the Bright red soviet costume. The woman was wearing a dress that was made up of frills and lace and seemed more appropriate for a movie like Snow White or Frozen than for reality. And it was. The dress was supposed to be that of a figure from Russian folklore - Snegurochka (Snow Maiden in English). Her hair was still the white of new fallen snow and she still had a scowl on her face. Some things never change.

Iron Wolf glanced in her direction for a moment but didn't react. Instead he kept screaming at Snow Maiden (in Lithuanian). Svetlana waited and didn't move but stood there with her arms folded, scowling at them both equally.

Irista was in full swing with an angry tirade (in Russian) and didn't pay Strela the slightest notice. Instead she kept screaming and waving her arms. Finally after a long time Snegurochka glanced in her direction for a second then went back to screaming at Gelezinis Vilkas. After a

moment she turned back to Strela and looked at her. She turned back to Iron Wolf and opened her mouth to speak but stopped. Snow Maiden turned and really intently stared at Strela. "Svetlana?" She asked in a confused tone.

This drew the attention of Iron Wolf and now both Supers had stopped arguing and were now looking at her intently.

That was the chance Svetlana was looking for. "So." Strela said slowly. "Don't you two have something better to do than standing there arguing like two old market women?"

"What are you doing here?" Iron Wolf snapped as he raised his lips in a snarl.

I'm here to stop you two idiots from starting World War Three," Strela answered coldly.

"What are you talking about?" Snegurochka asked.

"This stupid feud between you two has all of Europe up in arms. You've created a major diplomatic crisis. AGAIN!"

The Russian pointed a frost covered finger at the Lithuanian peppering his chest with a light snow. "This is all his fault. It's always his fault."

Strela pointed a finger at Snegurochka. "Keep quiet. I'm not in the mood for one of your temper tantrums!"

Snegurochka's face turned bright red and ice pelted the ground around her. "TEMPER TANTRUM!"

"Irisa, I worked with you for almost ten years." Strela said calmly. "I know how this is going to go. You'll scream and holler and wave your arms and stamp your feet while you pelt us both with snow, ice and hail. Then after ten minutes you'll calm down and sulk. So just go to the sulking part and save us all the screaming and the frostbite."

Snegurochka scowled at her but much to Strela's amazement she didn't speak.

Strela stepped closer to the woman. "The last time you faced each other it created a diplomatic incident that took a month to resolve. EVERY TIME you two meet it causes major trouble."

"Don't you understand? You're being used! They are tricking you into fighting each other," Strela shouted. "Don't you find it suspicious that you two only seem to fight when there is no NATO team to back him up or stop him?"

"No," she said spraying Strela with snow. "He wants to fight me alone. He ALWAYS fights alone."

Strela stepped even close to the Russian woman. "God you are so fucking THICK!"

"What are you doing here?" Strela asked and pointed to the Russian.

Before Snow Maiden could reply Iron Wolf puffed up taller. "I'm defending my . . . "

Strela whirled around to the wolf. "SHUT UP!!" She shouted at the top of her voice. Her face bright red with anger as she waved her arms wildly. "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP! Just for once in three thousand years keep quiet and listen to someone else for a change."

Iron Wolf puffed up even larger and his lips curled back in a snarl that revealed an impressively large set of teeth.

Strela held up one finger and tapped him lightly on the nose. Wait," she said in a surprisingly soft voice. "Wait. You were here during the war. Both World Wars. You saw what happened to your country. To BOTH countries. Do either of you want to see that happen again?" She looked from woman to wolf. "Do either of you want to see another world war ravage this land?"

"This is not just a feud between two people. It's got all of Eastern Europe up in arms. Russia is moving the 18th Guards Motorized Rifle division and NATO is dispatching the Ready Parachute battalion. The Germans are sending their Rapid forces Division and the Americans are planning to send in the entire 82nd Airborne division. They are expected to be in country by tomorrow morning. And let's not forget the Lithuanians. Their army is already deploying to its war positions. If you don't believe me just call someone. I'll wait."

Svetlana turned to the Lithuanian. "I know the colonel has been trying to contact you for two hours. Why don't you call him before the man has a heart attack." Then, before the Lithuanian could answer she turned to the Russian. "And as for you. Have you ever known Moscow to respond with restraint and decorum to any attack from the outside world?"

"So. I will ask you again." She said slowly in a voice filled with anger. "Do either of you want to see that happen again?" She looked from woman to wolf. "Do either of you want to see a war ravage this land? Again."

All Svetlana got in reply was silence.

Irisa didn't speak but there was a pained look on her face and for once she was at a loss for words. The woman had been born in 1950 and had grown up in a Soviet Union that had been still recovering from the utter devastation of world war two. She had also lost two cousins and an uncle in the fighting.

Iron Wolf seemed to grow smaller and he tucked his tail between his legs. "No, no," he whispered in a frightened voice. "Things are starting to look better than they have in centuries."

"I do not expect you two to love each other or to even like each other but you will, you MUST learn to get along," Svetlana said earnestly.

"We were attacked," Snow Maiden said coldly. "Russians are dead in a clear assault. That is no lie." She pointed to Iron Wolf. "They attacked us. The fact he is here tells me he was involved."

"He is here because you are here," Strela answered. "You suddenly charged the border."

"I WAS chasing the monsters who attacked MY People," she snarled, spraying Strela with snow.

"And how is he supposed to know that?" Strela said ignoring the snow and ice pelting her face. "Did you tell him you were coming?"

"What?" Snow Maiden said with a look of genuine surprise on her face. She pointed to Iron Wolf. "Talk to HIM?"

"Although I do like the idea of killing Russians I was not involved with the attack today," the Lithuanian hero said with his lips pulled back in what might be a snarl or a smile. "The government and NATO won't let me. They said it would . . ." He stopped talking and growled softly. "They said it might start a war."

The Russian didn't speak but there was an angry scowl on Irina's face that said far more than words ever could.

Svetlana's eyes narrowed as her face hardened. "Did you get a similar speech from Moscow recently?"

Irina didn't speak but crossed her arms, scowled and snorted a blast of snow and ice at Svetlana.

"Last month someone attacked Lithuania," Iron Wolf snarled. "Seven people died in an attack on a Lithuanian ferry ship."

"Gelezinis Vilkas," Svetlana said calmly. "Do you honestly think she would attack a ship full of innocent passengers? Or allow anyone else to do it? Don't answer me right away. You think on that for a moment."

The wolf slowly shook his head. "No," he admitted. "A warship. Yes. But not a ship of civilians."

Svetlana turned to Snegurochka. "He could not have been involved in that attack. No possibility at all."

"Why?" Snow Maiden snarled, again pelting both people with snow and ice.

"That attack took place in Russia," Strela said calmly. She pointed to the Lithuanian. "He can't leave Lithuania. He's bound by the country's borders."

A look of surprise came onto Snegurochka's face. "I'd forgotten that," she said softly.

"And don't even give me that 'He's conspiring with others' crap," Strela snapped. "He's the original lone wolf!"

"That's true," Irida responded. "He had to be ordered to cooperate with the NATO team."

"I don't need help from anyone," Iron Wolf growled.

"Perhaps," Strela commented. "But it's good to have friends. NATO has been studying these attacks, Longbow has been studying these attacks and I have been studying them," Svetlana said calmly and paused for a moment.

She looked at Iron Wolf. "The attacks upon Lithuania were not done by, condoned or planned by Russia in any way or form."

Svetlana looked to Snow Maiden. "The attacks upon Russia were not done by, condoned or planned by Lithuania or NATO in any way or form. NATO doesn't want a war with Moscow and Moscow doesn't want a war with NATO. There are too many nuclear weapons pointed both ways to even consider the idea."

Several seconds of silence told Svetlana that her words had struck home.

"Someone is deliberately trying to get you to fight each other. ALL the attacks were done by one group trying to ferment a war."

"Who would want that?" Iron Wolf asked in clipped tones.

"I can think of several," Svetlana answered. "Arachnos - just causing trouble, The Malta group who still won't admit the cold war is over or perhaps the Sky Raiders."

"No," Iron Wolf growled. "Arachnos hasn't been active here in years. Not since I beheaded that Arbiter two years ago."

Snow Maiden's face broke into a rare smile and she actually laughed. "That was nicely done!" Her face turned cold and serious again. "It is not Malta. They would want to overthrow the governments of Russian and Lithuania. Not start a war between them."

"The Sky Raiders limit themselves to whatever high tech they can steal and fly away with," Iron Wolf added. "They burn steal, kill. They remind me of the Mongols."

Snow Maiden nodded in agreement. "They would attack Vilnius or Petersburg not an army unit. They'd never attack anyone who could actually effectively fight back."

There was several moments of very profound and deep silence.

"What of the Belaya Gvardiya," Snow Maiden said slowly and hesitantly.

Iron Wolf turned around and looked at Snow Maiden. "The White Guard? I thought you wiped out those terrorists several years ago."

"No," Snegurochka slowly shook her head. "No matter how many of them I kill or arrest they keep coming back."

"I fought them last year," Iron Wolf said in an off handed manner.

Snow Maiden looked at Iron Wolf with a puzzled expression. "You fought the Belaya Gvardiya?"

"When they attacked an army depot looking for weapons to steal," the lupine hero responded. "But I think that was just bait to draw me out so they could kill me."

"Why?" Snow Maiden asked.

"I had the feeling they were still mad about 1918," the wolf commented.

Strela opened her mouth to say something but stopped and turned to the Lithuanian Super. "What?"

"In 1918 Lithuania gained its independence for the first time in over two hundred years. And the Romanov dynasty was overthrown."

"The Russian empire collapsed," Strela answered. "For a lot of reasons. None of which had anything to do with Lithuania."

"The Belaya Gvardiya are terrorists," Snow Maiden snarled. "They don't let a little detail like the truth stop them."

"It was chaos then," Strela commented. "Everyone was fighting everyone else." She fell silent for a moment. then cursed loudly in several languages.

"What?" Snow Maiden asked. Iron Wolf didn't speak but just scowled at Strela.

"The Russian empire collapsed in a world war," Strela said slowly. "Perhaps the Belaya Gvardiya believe that another world war can restore it."

"That's insane," there was a look of horror on Snow Maiden's face.

"War brings change," Strela answered.

"War bring death and destruction," the Russian countered.

"It also brings change. World War One saw the end of the Romanov dynasty, the Ottoman empire and Austro-Hungarian empire," Iron Wolf Said slowly. "And World War Two saw the destruction of the Fascists and the rise of the Soviet empire."

Both Russian and Lithuanian nodded in agreement.

"I have always wondered why I always seems to face you alone," Iron Wolf said calmly. "Whenever we face each other NATO always seems to be busy elsewhere."

"Do you think they were doing it deliberately?" Strela asked.

"Yes," Iron Wolf answered. "Abandoning me the same way the Allies abandoned Lithuania to the Soviets in 1945."

"Wow, does he hold a grudge," the nanites commented. "I bet he's still mad at the Mongols."

"A lot of Russians still are," Strela commented silently to the nanites.

"OH! we've hit one of those sensitive subjects that Stealth warned us about. Change the subject!"

Strela looked around nervously. "Where's the kid?" She cursed loudly in several languages.

"Who?" Snow Maiden looked all around.

"Tadas Blinda," Strela answered.

"You arrived here alone." Iron Wolf commented.

Strela cursed loudly and in seven languages. She pointed to the two supers. "You two stay here and BEHAVE!" With that Strela shot into the air.

It hadn't been hard for Tadas Blinda to find him. When he heard that Snow Maiden was again approaching the border he launched six drones. The small robotic planes had spread out and searched everywhere. One found what he wanted: a heavily camouflaged object hidden under some trees.

It was a short, high speed ride to the place pushing his powerful motorcycle to its limits. By the time he arrived the camouflage nets had been removed. That revealed a large, flat platform made of metal and plastic that was floating a meter off the ground.

He smiled broadly. "I've been dying to use these!" Tadas aimed the cycle at the flying vehicle

and pressed a button on the handlebars.

WHOOSH!

A pair of rockets leapt out of the body of the cycle and raced off towards the platform. One raced right past the target and slammed into a tree. The second stuck dead on and exploded with a roar sending debris and wreckage flying in all directions.

Smoke poured from the platform as it wobbled and fluttered for a moment. Then it crashed to the ground.

Tadas stopped the cycle and climbed off to examine his handiwork. Smoke and flames wreathed the twisted wreckage that that used to be a flying machine.

"Going somewhere?" Tadas snarled. "I don't think so."

The wreckage suddenly shifted and a figure stood up. The figure was over seven feet tall. Flat angular armor covered the person completely making it impossible for Tadas to tell if it was another robot or something else was hidden inside. The coloring of the armor was the red of fresh blood and the eyes glowed with an unnatural red glow.

"Lithuanian filth. You'll pay for that," the figure shouted in imperfect Russian. The villain pointed to Tadas. "KILL HIM!"

Four objects floated out of the wreckage. They were each about the size of a person and seemed to be all metal and plastic cut into angular shapes with hard edges. Like an unfinished machine. The four robots hovered for a moment then turned and raced towards him. Guns blazing and laser beams zipping through the air.

Tadas took a large yellow colored grenade off of his belt and tossed it at the robots. The grenade exploded with a soft thump covering one of the robots with white, sticky strands. The drone dropped to the ground with a loud clunk. The other three robots raced right past the disabled one.

He drew out his twin pistols. The large weapons looked like 17th century flintlock pistols but they were far from that. Made of the latest materials they were fully modern pistols firing 10mm (NATO standard) rounds, both auto and semi auto. They even had 30 round magazines. Years of training and experience paid off. The Lithuanian fired a dozen rounds into one of the robots.

The robot stopped and fell to the ground showering parts and bit of flaming debris all over.

His radio suddenly blared to life blasting noise into his ear. "Where are you?" A voice asked.

A robot charged straight at him. He fired his pistols at it and was rewarded with the robot stopping. Smoke started to seep out. "Who is this?"

His reply came in the form of the caller cursing in Russian, Lithuanian, English, Spanish and what might have been Portuguese. "This is Strela. Where are you? Why didn't you tell me where you were headed?"

Tadas dodged a red laser beam that cut a good sized hole in the tree next to him. He replied to her with several choice curses in Lithuanian. "I don't work for you Russian," the Lithuanian snarled as he fired at another robot.

"Never mind I've pinpointed your location." Strela answered. "I'm not the enemy Tadas. I'm here to help. What's the rule about going out? What did they teach you in special forces training?"

A sarcastic answer came to him but then he also remembered his training. "Never go out alone and always tell somewhere where you're going." The words of his instructor rang in his mind.

Tadas, with the speed born of long training and adrenaline fueled excitement swapped the magazines in his pistols. Out came the ones with regular ammo. They were replaced with ones filled with red tipped bullets - incendiary rounds.

The Lithuanian concentrated his fire on one of the three robots the deadly missiles ripping through the thick armor. Smoke started to pour from the metal and plastic attacker which simply stopped moving.

He didn't mind his previous target but looked at the other two robots attacking him. Two laser beams burned through his clothing and armor and he gasped at the pain that seared him. Tadas tried to ignore the pain and grabbed another web grenade and tossed it right at the robots.

The grenade exploded catching the robots in a web of sticky strands. It wouldn't hold them for long but it was long enough. He emptied both his pistols at the two. A rain of bullets ripped into the two robots, puncturing the armor and ripping through the electronics inside. One of the machines burst into flames and the other exploded sending debris flying in all directions.

Tadas saw the blast coming at him just before it hit. The beam of red light struck him in the shoulder and sent the man tumbling to the ground. He didn't try to stop the tumble but went with it and rolled across the grass for a few meters before coming to a stop.

The man jumped up with his pistols in hand and simply sprayed bullets in the direction of his attacker. Most of the bullets seemed to miss the person ricocheting off in various directions.

His opponent was standing about two meters from him. The figure had a large, wicked looking weapon cradled in his hands which was pointed straight at Tadas' heart. A faint green shimmer filled the air in front of him. Tadas recognized it as some sort of force field.

"You attacked that ferry last month," Tadas said coldly.

"Not my best work," the figure responded in flawed Russian. "Only killed seven of you

stinking Lithuanian dogs."

"Will you stop with the fake Russian," Tadas snapped. "You're about as Russian as my sneakers!" He shot at the figure, his powerful pistols barking loudly each time they fired. But most of the rounds hit the green force field and ricocheted harmlessly away.

The armored figure raised his weapon and pointed it at the Lithuanian. There was a flash of light from the muzzle. A ball of light raced out and leapt towards the hero.

Tadas Twisted his body and danced to his left and the ball of energy sizzled past. A searing flooded him as the ball burnt through the armor on his right side. "You missed." He brought both pistols up and emptied them both at his attacker in a fusillade of bullets.

The sheer weight of the fire sent the metal covered figure stumbling backwards for a moment.

The Lithuanian reached into a pocket and removed a green, colored sphere. He pulled the pin and tossed the hand grenade at his enemy.

BOOM! The grenade went off with a roar. Debris and shrapnel went flying in all directions.

Blinda didn't look at the explosion but with years of practice and skill reloaded both pistols in record time.

When the smoke and flames died away the figure was still there and still surrounded by that green force field.

The hero scowled. "You're starting to annoy me." He took careful and deliberate aim at the figure. His first, few rounds bounced off but the shimmer of the force field flickered and then vanished completely.

The bullets struck home biting deeply into the armor and into whatever lay beneath. The figure seemed to stagger backward a few steps. Then he brought up his weapon. There was a flash of light from the muzzle. A ball of light raced out and leapt towards the hero.

Tadas dodged to the right but there was a blinding flash of light and a roar filled his ears. He was flung backwards along the ground for two meters before coming to a halt. He shook his head to clear away the confusion.

The Lithuanian didn't hesitate but brought up his weapons and emptied both pistols into his opponent, reloaded and fired again emptying those as well. When he swapped out the empty magazines for full ones he held his fire. The figure lay stretched out on the ground and didn't move. Either too hurt or too damaged to do anything.

Tadas leaned against a tree and tried to regain his strength. He never heard her arrival. He closed his eyes for a moment to rest. When he opened them Strela was standing there.

"Looks like I missed all the fun," she said softly as she stood next to him.

"You'll be all right," She pulled up his shirt with one hand and slapped something onto his bare skin with the other.

He looked down to see a large blue patch about the size of his hand there. Tadas recognized it as a healing patch, meant to accelerate healing. Already he felt the rush as the medicines, chemicals and nanites started to do their job.

Then there was a flash of light and four people were suddenly there. They were all standing back to back with weapons aimed in all directions. Each was at least eight feet tall, covered with thick plates of armor and seemed to bristle with weapons of all sorts. They were colored with a black, brown and green spotted camouflage. All were carrying massive two meter long weapons. Each one weighed more than Tadas. Two were carrying M127 rapid fire railguns in their hands and the others M137 pulse lasers.

"You're late," Strela snapped. "But then again so was I. This fight's over."

One armored, power suit stepped forward. On the chest plate in barely legible black lettering was the words "U.S. Army." The double black stripe on the back of the helmet marked him as a captain. "Report!" The American snapped.

Tadas Blinda stood up straight. "When we were alerted that Snow Maiden was headed for the border again. I took a chance and didn't go there. Instead I remained behind and waited for the Drones flying overhead to find something. When they did I moved to engage him."

"Engaged who?" The American asked.

"Him," The Lithuanian pointed a finger at the man he had just defeated. The figure was stretched on the ground with a soldier in powered armor standing over him. "He attacked that Russian convoy and the ferry boat last month."

"That answers a lot of questions," Strela commented. "And brings up others."

"Who is he?" The American asked.

The Lithuanian smiled and walked over to the villain. "Let's find out!"

Before anyone could stop him the Lithuanian reached down and removed the helmet. The face that was revealed was surprisingly mundane. Short, black hair framed a face with gray eyes and an aquiline nose.

"Doctor Robotnik," Strela commented. The knowledge given to her by the Nanites.

Tadas laughed. "Doctor Robotnik? He must have played too much Sonic the Hedgehog. He should watch out or he'll be sued by Sega."

"Robotnik," Strela said calmly. "In Russian it means worker."

"He's not Russian or Lithuanian," Tadas Blinda said with a shake of the head. "Although he pretended he was Russian."

"What I want to know is who does he work for?" Strela asked.

"An excellent question."

The two old adversaries stood there and watched as Strela disappeared from sight.

Neither spoke or even looked at the other but kept their eyes focused on where they had last seen the archer.

There was a long silence that lasted for several minutes.

"Do you believe what she says about us being tricked?" Iron Wolf finally said in a surprisingly soft whisper.

Snow Maiden was quiet for a moment and she seemed lost in thought. "Yes. I trust Svetlana," the woman said in a surprised tone.

"You sound surprised by that," Iron Wolf said with a touch of humor in his words.

"I am. That woman keeps surprising me."

Iron Wolf gave a yip of laughter. "That's something we both have in common. What she says makes sense."

"We've both been tricked," the woman said slowly. "They played on our emotions and almost started a war."

Iron Wolf let out a deep, guttural growl and his body shook with anger. "I WILL KILL THEM ALL!"

"Not if I get to them first," Snow Maiden snarled in a tone as cold and killing as a howling blizzard.

"We need to be sure they don't trick us again," the Lithuanian said coldly.

"And to coordinate our attacks on them. To make sure none of them escape," the Russian

added. "That means staying in contact."

"How do we stay in contact?" He asked hesitantly.

"I'm sure we can work something out with NATO," Snegurochka responded.

Iron Wolf let out a low growl and shook his head. "Too formal. Too slow."

"Well," Snegurochka said slowly. "Do you have a cell phone number?"