

Settling Accounts
by Christian O'Kane

They were right in a sense. Strela didn't have to go back to the Rogue isles. She could just take up the offer by Longbow and leave her old life behind. But she couldn't just abandon everything and leave. She had some debts that needed to be paid and some scores to settle. Still it was with some trepidation that Strela stepped off the ferry and onto Mercy Island.

"This place looks even worse than the last time." The nanites commented. The sagging piers looked to be only a few days away from total collapse. The buildings that lined the street were rundown and derelict. Everything had the air of neglect and decay. The only sign of life was a pair of Arachnos soldiers who were standing guard on either side of the ramp up from the ferry.

Strela stood there for a moment and slowly and carefully looked around. Not only was she looking with her eyes but also with the enhanced and cybernetic senses. "No one will attack while we are here. Too much of a chance of hitting the Arachnos troopers. But someone might watch and follow me."

She made her way away from the ferry. Strela skirted around the run down but inhabited neighborhood of Mercy. There were just too many places for an ambush and too many people to worry about. Soon the woman had left the walled neighborhood behind and made her way into Darwin's Landing.

While Mercy was run down and dangerous, it was still alive. People walked its streets and patronized its shops. But Darwin's Landing was different. The streets were filled with the rubble and debris that had cascaded down from the burnt and destroyed buildings. The only ones who lived in Darwin's Landing were the infected, the mutated, the desperate. or some like Strela who wanted a place where they could be assured of privacy.

Strela was slowly making her way down what had once been a main street when slowly snow started to fall around her. It was light at first. Just a few flakes floating through the air. But quickly it grew strong and soon the air was filled with snow coming down hard. Quickly the ground was covered with white as vision was blocked by a wall of white.

"Snow?" Strela asked. "It doesn't snow here. When was the last time it snowed here?"

"November," the Nanites commented. *"1732."*

Her first reaction was to take to the air and fly as far and fast as possible but she resisted the urge. Instead she looked around and nocked an arrow.

She felt the attack before she saw it. A searing pain burned through her right leg and she cried out in pain. For a moment Strela teetered but didn't fall.

BAM! There was a loud explosion and a bright flash.

"Sensory overload," came a warning voice in her mind. "All she could see was spots and a loud ringing in her ears. Then after a moment the nanites in her body compensated and her vision and hearing started to return.

Suddenly an arrow came racing out of the snowy mist and sank into her side. With a speed born of long training and experience Strela spun around and loosed an arrow in the direction the other had come from. A searing pain lanced through the back of her right shoulder.

BOOM! There was a loud blast and Strela was thrown through the air for twenty feet before she landed. She hit the ground and tumbled before coming to a rest against the twisted remains of a burnt out car. She ignored the searing pain as the nanites suppressed it. The woman leapt into the air and raced away without bothering to know what direction she was going.

A pair of arrows zipped past her as a third one sank into her leg. Strela dropped low to the ground and the shattered brick and stone rubble flashed by mere inches below her. She flew under an overhanging beam and through the window of an half tumbled down wall. A laser beam melted a fist sized hole in the beam next to her. She paused for a moment and loosed an arrow and was rewarded with a shout of pain from the distance. Then she weaved and dodged through the ruins moving as fast as possible.

"Behind you," the nanites warned. *"150 meters on a bearing of 187 degrees. 10 meters off the ground."*

Without stopping Strela spun around, nocked an arrow and drew the bow back all in one motion. Her target was dressed in a green toga trimmed in gold filigree. Her golden hair held up in long, elaborate braiding. She wielded a large, composite bow and was aiming it at Strela.

The Russian archer slowed to a halt. She loosed her arrow and it raced off to its target. The projectile hit the woman's chest with a Whomp. The arrow exploded sending strands of tough sticky webbing all over her. Entangled, the woman dropped to the ground with a solid thump.

"Ground level at 166 degrees," the nanites warned. *"110 meters. Trying to hide behind a wall."*

Strela looked in the direction the nanites mentioned and caught sight of a flash of blue poking out from the edge of the half tumbled down brick wall of what once had been a hotel. "Trying and doing a bad job of it."

She loosed another arrow this time aiming for the ground just beyond the edge of the wall. The arrow had a large, cylindrical warhead. When it hit the ground the explosive went off with a roar that sent flames, shrapnel, brick and dirt flying in all directions.

Without waiting for the result Strela leapt up and ran away. She vaulted over some rusted I beams and concrete that lay in the middle of what had once been a road. Looking down Strela found what she was looking for; a manhole cover. Using her enhanced strength the woman picked up the manhole cover. It revealed a dark hole from which came a world of vile and

disgusting smells. For once she regretted the enhanced senses the nanites had given her. Quickly she lowered herself into the hole and replaced the cover.

The super cast a glance upward at the cover to be sure it was in place. Then she raced off down the tunnel.

It was twenty minutes and two miles later before Strela slowed and finally came to a halt. It was a small junction where several tunnels came together.

Strela took a deep breath and tried to gather her thoughts. "Ok. who were they?"

A stream of images flashes across her vision. She recognized the fight she had just been in. The nanites had recorded it all. *"Cross referencing Longbow and Department of Defense records."*

She reached down to her right side where an arrow had sunk into her flesh. Strela grabbed hold of the shaft and slowly pulled the arrow out.

The one in the toga is 95% probably Diana. "Her powers mimic your own; Archery with Trick arrows."

"One had some sort of beam weapon," the nanites commented. "That wound in your right leg was done by an energy weapon. Probably a beam laser."

"But I didn't get a good look at him," Strela said.

"Neither did we," the nanites responded. "But his powers might have some ice or storm component."

"That would explain the snow," Strela added.

"Please hold still there is an arrow in your back we need to eject," the nanites commented.

She looked behind her and saw the shaft of an arrow projecting out of the armor covering her back. The nanites had so successfully suppressed the pain that she hadn't realized it was there. There was a soft noise and the projectile popped out and onto the floor.

The woman picked up the second arrow. Strela held up the two arrows and compared them. One had a green shaft with gold fletching and the other had a blue shaft and white fletching. "They're different. That means I'm dealing with two different archers."

"And don't forget the one with the laser," the nanites added.

"That means I'm out numbered three to one." Strela looked at the wound on her right leg. The nanites were already hard at work healing the damage. But there was still an ugly hole and burnt skin. "Put me through to Misha."

After a moment the word "Connected," appeared in here eyesight.

"Strela," came the cheerful voice of Misha. "How are you doing?"

"I need some help," she answered honestly. "I'm outnumbered three to one."

"Where are you?" He answered.

"Mercy Island, Rogue Isles," she answered. "Knee deep in sewage. It seems someone doesn't want me to leave."

"I'll get there as fast as I can. It might take me a while to get there," Misha responded. "What's the closest friendly teleport?"

"Fort Darwin," she answered.

"All right. I'll call in some favors and get there fast," Misha responded. "Please stay alive till I get there."

Her sensitive ears picked up the sound of careful footfalls coming from one of the tunnels towards her. "I will."

Mercy Island was a large island but it was still an island and there were only so many places to run. With countless buildings and ruins and a complex maze of streets alleys and paths there were plenty of places to lay an ambush.

Strela remained motionless, standing on the small, meter square wooden platform that was all that remained of the third floor of an apartment building. She had been waiting for the last twenty minutes.

She caught sight of some movement off to the left and down at ground level. Two people were making their way down the alley. The man was almost a meter and a half tall and had dark brown hair. He was wearing a body suit that seemed to be a mix of bullet proof cloth and padding covered with large patches of plastic armor. Cradled in his hands was a large weapon over a meter in length. It was shaped vaguely like a rifle but seemed to lack and bolt or magazine. He was moving slowly along one side of the alley looking all around.

"We do not have an ID on him but the weapon he is carrying is a German made ALD12 beam laser weapon," the nanites explained to her.

Walking near to the man was a woman who was slightly taller and had light blue hair that matched the silk blouse and skirt. In her hands was a large, modern, military grade compound bow. She was surrounded by a light mist that seemed to come from her. Oozing from her very pores.

"Who's the bitch in blue?" Strela asked the nanites.

"Initial identification is Snow Squall," the nanites answered. "Her power are archery with some weather related abilities."

"Any more information on her?" Strela asked.

"No. She's wanted for a bank robbery in Fort Lauderdale and a kidnapping in Paragon city," the nanites added. "Oh. She's also wanted for four counts of murder. CIA and FBI believes she is probably from California. That's based on the voice patterns and word usage from the only known sample of her voice. The CIA is asking for a larger sample and the FBI is asking for a DNA sample and fingerprints."

Strela placed several arrows on the window ledge. Then she nocked and drew a flash arrow. After several moments of aiming she released it. Quickly she took up, nocked, drew and released two more arrows in quick succession.

The first arrow went off with a roar and a blinding flash of light that was intended to confuse and disorientate. The second arrow went off moments later and clouds of stinging green smoke billowed up. The third arrow wasn't so friendly and it exploded with the power and deadliness of a grenade. Flames and shrapnel flew in all directions sending the three flying.

They reacted faster than Strela expected. Diana was sent flying into a wall and dropped to the ground. But she jumped off in an moment and loosed an arrow at Strela. The projectile sliced through the armor covering her shoulder as a second arrow skimmed past, narrowly missing her chest.

Strela cursed under her breath and leapt off the little platform. She landed easily on the floor below. Without looking back she ran through the ruined building chased by arrows and explosions.

She had been waiting for the last hour. This was the third time she had turned on her pursuers and they had learned caution. But then again, Strela had learned caution too. The three had chased her all over Mercy island. She had a half a dozen wounds that the nanites had healed or

were still healing. But even they had their limits. She needed to rest and have a large meal to replenish the energy in her body had used up. Strela could contact the commander but she couldn't keep having Longbow get her out of trouble. She had to win this fight herself.

The Russian archer was ensconced within a two meter high pile of brick and rusted metal that might have once been a building. There were several tall buildings nearby that dominated the open ground but she had rejected them as being too obvious a hiding place.

Strela heard a noise off to her left. Looking in that direction she spotted one of her attackers. The man with his powerful weapon in hand was slowly walking over the rubble and debris that covered the area.

She didn't attack the man. He was bait, meant to get Strela to expose herself. Instead she looked around trying to spot her other two opponents. Finally she spotted a flash of green in a window in the building opposite her. On the far side of the open area was a roofless building with blackened brick walls. Two floors up in the shadows behind the opening was a barely discernible figure. Another minute of searching brought her the shadow of a person hiding in a corner of an alley at ground level off to her right.

This ambush didn't go off as she had hoped. She was tired and as she took aim at Diana she let the tip of her arrow poke out the opening. In a moment an arrow slammed into her stomach as another arrow hit the berm of bricks she had in front of her. The arrows exploded sending clouds of stinging green gas billowing up into her face.

She wiped her eyes to try and remove the stinging as she stumbled back. Strela loosed an arrow at Snow Squall. Then she tossed a hand grenade in the general direction of the man. An arrow zipped past her ripping through the armor on her hip and tearing into the flesh beneath it.

Nearby hidden amidst the shadows of a taller building a figure was hidden. None of the combatants knew he was there. A fact the new arrival worked hard to achieve and maintain. He drew out an arrow. He carefully and slowly nocked it. He took his time aiming. Making sure his shot would strike where he wanted it.

His aim was true and the arrow struck Diana dead square in the chest and it sank in deeply. A moment later he loosed another arrow and this projectile sailed through the air before striking the man in the chest. The high explosive warhead went off with a roar sending shrapnel flying in all directions and knocking all three attackers to the ground.

Misha walked out of the shadows and up to Strela. He gave a deep bow. "You called for a hero m'lady?"

Strela smiled. "No, I called you. You can be a hero when we've won."

Misha hugged her tightly. "Are you all right?"

Strela slowly nodded her head. "I'm a little battered and bruised but I'll be all right."

"Sorry I'm late," the vulpine said. "I had to use a DOD teleport to go to Agincourt island and then use the Longbow teleport network to go to Fort Darwin."

"I'm just glad you're here! Late or not," she said.

The man started to get up. Strela snapped out several arrows and saw them sink into the chest of the man sending him to the ground again.

Snow Squall stood up and looked around in amazement. Her two companions were down. She waved her arms about and then pointed to the ground. Fog started to billow up. Thick blinding fog that spread out with remarkable speed. In moments all three were lost as the mist enveloped everything.

The two heroes stood there for a moment with arrows nocked waiting for trouble. Trying to use their enhanced senses to pierce through the thick clouds that enveloped them. Misha pushed forward through the fog. He closed his eyes as they were useless in this fog. Instead he listened with his vastly enhanced hearing.

"Radar and ladar are getting a 75% reflection," the nanites explained. "Also getting many false echoes."

His hearing picked up the faint whisper of the wind as it whistled through ruins. Off to his left he heard the skittering of little paws that he took to be a rat. All sorts of smells came to him. The smell of sewage and decaying flesh came from behind him but he tried to ignore it.

Then he heard it; the faint crunch of stone and rock under foot off to his left. Misha spun around drew his bow back and released the arrow all in one smooth motion. There was a flash and the loud report of an explosion. Then he heard a shout and an arrow zipped out of the fog and sliced into his side.

"Gotcha!" came Strela's voice came from behind him. He saw several arrows flash past and off into the fog. There was no explosion this time just a soft whump and brief flash of light.

Without hesitating both heroes charged through the fog which was starting to dissipate. They found the three villains. Diana was standing over the prostrate form of the man. She nocked an arrow and slowly took aim at the two approaching her.

Prostrate on the ground was the form of Snow Squall. She was tightly bound up with large strands of sticky material like a spiders web. They bound her so tightly that she couldn't escape. It didn't stop her from trying.

Misha quickly pulled a pistol from the holster on his hip and aimed the 9mm Baretta at Diana's face. The muzzle was pointed dead square between her eyes. "Stop that!"

Diana scowled a moment and then slowly lowered the bow and placed it on the ground.

With one hand Misha pulled a set of bright red colored handcuffs. He locked them around the woman's wrists. The moment they closed around Diana's wrists they started to glow.

Strela walked up to the struggling woman on the ground and pointed her bow in the Snow Squall's face. "Hold still or I'll put this arrow into your brain."

Snow Squall stopped struggling but glowered at Strela.

Misha raced up and put the woman into a set of handcuffs. They too glowed when they locked closed. "Power Cuffs. Don't even bother to try breaking out of them. They're strong enough to dangle an Abrams tank."

Strela looked at Misha for a moment. "How do you know that?"

"Well," Misha admitted sheepishly as he checked the still prostrate man. "Things got kind of boring in garrison sometimes." The fox examined the man closely.

"Is he dead?" Strela asked.

"No," Misha responded as he pulled an arrow from the man's chest. The fox pulled out a first aid kit and slapped the healing pad onto the worst wound. "He'll live." Lastly he put the man into a set of power cuffs.

"I've contacted Longbow." Strela said. "They'll risk a transport out of Agincourt. ETA 5 minutes."

Misha nodded his head as he checked the handcuffs on Snow Squall who glowered at him.

The man gave a groan and slowly sat up. He looked around with bleary eyes and cursed several times in Russian. "I knew taking this job was a mistake."

Strela looks at the man for a moment. Then she walked closer and examines his face. "Arkadi?" She asked, surprised.

"You know him?" Misha asked.

"We were in the Soviet Defenders together," she answered.

"You deserted and left us to die," he snarled.

"Oh please," Strela answered sarcastically. "Don't be so overly melodramatic! Are you mad because I left the team or because I left the team before you did?"

"You left us to deal with that damn wolf," the man snarled.

"Oh not this shit again," Strela shook her head in disgust. "I just got done with this argument. We shouldn't have been in Lithuania and his name is Gelezinis Vilkas. Well now you'll have a few years in prison to think things over."

Strela leaned close to the prisoner. "Who actually hired you Arkadi?"

"Sky Raiders," the man answered.

"I know it was Sky Raiders," Strela snapped. "It's always the Raiders. Who did you talk to?"

"The man's name was Chalmers," Diana said. "Lieutenant Chalmers."

"Chalmers," Strela growled. "Of course."

"You know him?" Misha asked.

An angry grimace crossed her face. "Oh yes. He claims that Supers are a menace and need to be destroyed but he routinely hires them."

"Chalmers, Heathcliff, Lieutenant, G3, Senior Coordinator," the nanites commented. "He WAS Lieutenant Chalmers, SAS until a year ago. Wanted for desertion, hijacking, theft, assaulting a soldier and two counts of murder."

"Another traitor," Misha muttered and his pulled his lips back in a snarl.

"The Longbow transport is five kilometers out," the nanites commented.

"One last question," Misha asked. "How much?"

"What?" Arkadi asked.

"You didn't attack her just because she left the team," Misha commented. "How much did they offer you to kill her."

"300,000 Euros," the man answered. "For her and 250,000 for you."

"I'm worth more," Strela commented in a mix of humor and nervousness.

"I'm just the enemy," Misha commented. "You betrayed them."

"They betrayed their oaths and openly attacked their own countries," Strela growled. "And I'M the traitor?"

"There you go bringing common sense into the argument," the fox joked.

"You were on their side and then turned against them," Misha said in amused tones.

She slowly shook her head back and forth. "I was never on their side. I was just stupid enough to take their money."

"Let me leave you with one thought," Strela said coldly to Diana. "Remember that there is a reward for killing or capturing a Raider. A large reward. I might be worth 300,000 Euros but Chalmers is half a million Euros."

The loud whine of jet engines heralded the approach of the aircraft. In moments a squat, white and red plane came into view. The VTOL transport came in low, skimming just over the roof tops. It dropped down and landed only a few meters from them. The tail ramp dropped down and a half dozen of the red and white clad Longbow soldiers came boiling out. At the front was a tall, well armored Longbow sergeant carrying a powerful, advanced assault rifle.

The sergeant took a look at the three people on the ground who were bound and handcuffed. "How many this time?" The woman joked.

A scant five minutes later the transport powered up its engines and lifted off. At full power the engines pushed the fast transport along at a fast clip. In moments it was just a fading dot in the sky leaving the perils of Mercy island far behind.

"What now?" Misha asked as they watched the Longbow airplane fly away in the direction of Agincourt island. "There's a good reason why we're not on that transport?"

"One more stop," she said, coldly. "A person to kill."

Misha tilted his head to one side. "Who?"

"Lieutenant Heathcliff Chalmers."

"Groovy. But you're in no shape for a fight," Misha responded. "You need to rest up and recover your strength."

She leaned against a street lamp. "I'd argue the point but I'm too tired. I have a place where we can go and rest up. ." Strela stood up and pointed to the south east. "It's that way."

The two made their way quickly through the ruins putting as much distance between them and where they plane had landed. They kept off the main streets and stuck to the countless back alleys and trails that wound through the ruined city.

Up ahead a massive building loomed up. The tall, black structure stood tall and cast a shadow over the entire neighborhood. At the top was a clock tower who face had hands that were bent and twisted.

Misha paused and pointed to the large building in front of them. "What's that?"

Strela shrugged. "I don't know it's real name but everyone calls it the Clock Tower. I've no idea what it was before the plague, the Rikkti and the Snakemen."

He walked up to a wall and brushed it with his hand. Years of grime and dirt came away turning the black and dingy material to a warm, highly polished gray marble of the highest quality.

"Look at that doorway. The decorations." The fox pointed to a nearby doorway and the highly ornate, carved stonework surrounding it.

Strela ran her hands along the ivy and flowers carved into the stone around the door. Easily visible was every wrinkle and tear. There was even the veins delicately cut into the stone. Someone had spent a long time and great skill carving them. She had passed over and by this building a thousand times and yet only now was she really seeing it. For the first time she saw past the dirt and the grime and saw the REAL building with all its fine stonework and decorations.

"This was once a very fine place," Misha said softly. "A truly beautiful town. As fine as New York or Paragon city. What happened to it?"

"Arachnos is what happened to it," Strela answered. "First the Rikkti attacked and then the snakemen. The fighting I'm told was across the entire island. They were cleared from the upper, southern part of the island but Recluse left this part alone. Left it and everyone in it to rot."

"That's terrible!" The nanites said. *"Such a terrible waste of people and resources."*

"It's a training ground," Strela said calmly. "All new supers arriving in the Rogue Isles are dumped here. If they live they're allowed to go to the other parts. If they die well he doesn't even have to worry about cleaning up the dead bodies."

"Now we understand why Longbow invaded," the nanites commented. *"It's where they are needed the most and it's Arachno's weakest point."*

"How did he respond to Longbow openly invading?" Misha asked. "I haven't seen a single Arachnos trooper anywhere."

"Nor will you see any in the Northern part of the island," Strela answered. "He moved in a few Arbitors and more troops to control the southern part of the island but he still hasn't done anything for the rest. Not even when Longbow took over Fort Darwin. Well," she paused. "Not officially but I've seen a lot of attacks on the fort and the Longbow people lately but various supers."

"Undoubtedly egged on by Arachnos," Misha commented.

"Arachnos never does anything directly when he can trick or bully someone else into doing for them," Strela commented sarcastically.

It took a full two hours to get inside her little base. They spent a full hour slowly circling the entrance door. Carefully examining each possible ambush point and potential snipers nest. Only then did they look to the door itself. Finally they opened that and descended. They spent the next hour slowly working their way down and past the doors and locks that led to her apartment.

The two carefully searched the entire apartment with their weapons at the ready. They opened every door and looked in every cabinet. It was only when Strela was sure the place had not been entered that they relaxed.

"A nice little place you have here," Misha commented. "So what do you want to take?"

Strela went to the kitchen and took down several boxes of cereal. This revealed a safe that was physically mounted into the brick of the wall. There were no less than four locks including a Securetech 2400 that had a force field and a 24 key encryption code.

Inside was surprisingly empty. A small stack of money in a mix of dollars and Euros, a photo album and a small red, leather case. With great care and tenderness she slowly opened the case. Inside was a gold, five pointed star attached to a small, red ribbon.

"I didn't know you had been awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union," Misha said, surprised.

"This isn't mine," Svetlana said softly. "It was awarded to Iryna Alexandrov on August 12, 1944."

"Wow!" Misha said softly and with awe in his voice. " May I touch it?"

"Certainly," she said.

Misha gently touched the medal, running his hand along the crisp edges of the star. "I've never actually seen a Hero medal from a real hero. I know the Soviets later handed out the award like free popcorn at a movie theater. But not this one. This was well worth coming back for!"

"She was a real hero," Strela said in a voice filled with emotion. "I've spent my whole life trying to live up to her."

Misha hugged her gently. "You've captured villains, defeated monsters and you stopped a major terrorist attack on Leningrad. Saved thousands of lives. And you helped prevent a war between NATO and Russia. I think Iryna would be proud."

Strela smiled. "Thank you."

Set into the wall of her bedroom were two doors. Strela walked over to the closest one. This door was a steel one and closed with a electronic lock with a keypad. After entering the correct code she opened the door. This revealed a large walk in closet that was lined with assault rifles, pistols and four bows. At the back of the closet was a metal cabinet that held no less than five

quivers and a hundred arrows. One rack held a score of arrows of six different types. She filled one quiver full with the special arrows. The other four quivers Strela filled with all the remaining arrows.

She went to the second door. This one was an old wooden one without a lock. As she opened the door it revealed a walk in closet that was filled with racks of clothing and random bits of gear. From the closet floor she pulled out a duffle bag and began to fill it with clothing.

When she had taken all the clothing she had wanted Strela had filled two duffle bags and placed her laptop and a large assortment papers and books into a large briefcase.

Strela looked up and found herself looking at her own reflection in the mirror. She looked at the human woman looking back at her. "I think it's time for a change."

"Tired of being a plain old human?" Misha asked. "What are you going to change into?"

It was a surprisingly short time to make the change. In moments Strela the human was gone and Strela the lioness morph was there. "How do I look?" The new feline looked at herself in the mirror.

"Very catty," Misha joked. Then he leaned closer to her. "And kind of familiar."

The feline suddenly reached into the briefcase and removed the laptop she had placed in there only a few minutes earlier. She opened it up and started using it.

Misha cocked his head to one side. "What are you doing?"

"Confirming something." Strela looked at herself in the mirror and then to the image on the computer screen. She looked back and forth several times. Suddenly she let out a long string of curses in several languages. "I really do look like that cartoon lioness!"

"I told you we shouldn't have used those movies for reference."

"They based your looks on the lioness from a Disney movie?" Misha asked, amazed. "Which one?"

"Vitani," she snapped. "From Lion King 2."

He looked at her for a long moment. His eyes scanning her feline body. Then he nodded his head slowly. "I can see that."

"Well Vitani was a villain who became a hero when she came over to the good guys."

Misha looked down at the floor and put a hand on his muzzle to suppress some laughter. "At least it's not Simba!"

She laid her ears back and scowled at him. Her tail flipped back and forth.

"Perhaps a new form would be in order," Misha said quickly. "One not already associated with Strela."

Suddenly a wave of weariness swept over her and she leaned against the doorframe.

"You need to eat. After that fight your body needs lots of energy to heal." Misha gently placed Strela into a seat at her kitchen table. "You sit and rest. I'll cook you something to eat."

The vulpine rummaged through the refrigerator and the various cabinets while Strela closed her eyes and rested. Her body welcomed the needed rest.

"Wakey wakey! Eggs and bacey!"

Strela opened her eyes as Misha placed a plate piled high with scrambled eggs made from at least a dozen eggs, in front of her. Along with that was six slices of toast and a half pound of bacon. That was accompanied by two mugs of hot tea. For himself he placed a slightly smaller pile of scrambled eggs at the table along with more bacon and a cup of hot tea.

Strela yawned and stretched. "How long was I out?"

"Several hours," Misha said. "You needed the sleep."

"Indeed," the nanites responded. "Your systems are now at 100% but energy levels are at 35%. So Manga! Eat!"

Svetlana picked up a fork and started to eat. The eggs were cooked just right and she detected a hint of several spices and cheddar cheese. "Not bad. What is it?"

"I call it a New York Omelet," Misha answered. "I learned it in New York."

"New York?" She asked. "Were you stationed there?"

"No," he answered with a touch of humor. "I was born and raised there. Near New York city."

Strela eat a fork full of eggs. "I never figured you for a city boy."

"Suburb actually," Misha responded between sips of tea. "What are you going to do with all that?" He asked and pointed to the closet with its array of weapons using a toast filled hand.

The woman stopped eating for a moment. "I'll give it to the Scrapyarders. I'll give the whole place to them. Those people need all the help that they can get."

"Good idea!"

Strela used the communications gear built into her to dial a specific number. The word "Dialing," appeared in her eye sight for a moment. That was soon replaced by the message "Connected."

"Hello Boris," Strela said cheerfully. "I have something to give you."

"Oh?" the voice on the other end said.

"I'm leaving the Isles," Strela explained.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You've been a great help to us."

"Well. It's time for me to move on. I want to give you my base. It's small but secure and comes with a good array of weapons. I also have a contact for you," She explained. "Someone who can help you even more than me. Longbow."

"Longbow?" The voice answered, surprised. "Those amateurs?"

"They're heavily armed amateurs," she responded.

She heard a chuckle of laughter. "Are they good?"

"Very good," Strela answered. "I trust them with my life. And they can help."

"That's good," the voice answered. "You take care and be well Svetlana."

"I will and if you need me just call," Strela responded and the connection dropped.

Strela was very quiet for a moment. "He called me Svetlana," she finally said out loud.

"So?" Misha answered. "It is your name."

"I've never told him my real name."

Misha shrugged. "So? You've not particularly hidden it."

"Still," Strela said slowly. "It is odd."

"Agreed," Misha commented. "I have the feeling you haven't seen the last of her."

"That's for certain," the lioness morph said. Strela made a second call to a different number. "Hello? Commander?"

"This is him," came the answer.

"This is Strela and I've got a new contact for you before I leave," Strela said. "Scrapyarders."

"Scrapyarders?" the Commander said. "We've tried to contact them a few times but with no success."

"Well I have a good contact with them," she answered. "Boris."

"Who's Boris?" Commander Carlisle asked.

Strela shrugged. "I don't know. Never actually met him face to face. But I have the feeling I HAVE met him in the past. Does that make sense?"

"It does," he responded. "Something in his speech is familiar to you."

"All I know is he's a good person, doing good work in a really bad place," she added. "And he's an enemy of Arachnos."

"That's good enough for me," Carlisle answered.

It took three phone calls to some of Strela's contacts before she had to admit that she wasn't going to be able to find Chalmers.

Misha contacted his commanding lieutenant at SOCOM with a request. She contacted her commanding officer. That captain contacted the CIA who forwarded the request to MI6. That took all of five minutes. The nature of the request took a lot longer. Four hours and fifteen minutes later Misha received a call.

"Oh this is good," the nanites commented. "In the handshake information for the call are actually the words Don't trace this call. Level 6 security."

"Put the call through and don't trace it," Misha ordered. "Please. If you try I'll get yelled at later and they are sure to freak out. Especially if you succeed."

There was a soft click and the word 'Connected' appeared in his vision. "Hello?" He asked.

"The object you are looking for," a voice replied in a flat, neutral tone. "Will be at Sharkhead isle, Port Recluse, pier 32, structure 1224 in three hours. He is supposed to be expecting a person with information on the new Queen Elizabeth class carriers but he is sure to be expecting a trap."

"Thank you," Misha said. "Do you want him alive?"

"Kill the bloody bastard," the voice said angrily, betraying emotion for the first time. Then the connection was dropped.

Structure 1224 turned out to a half mile long, twenty meter high structure of covered conveyor belts used for loading bauxite onto freighters. It was surrounded by a lattice work of catwalks and steel I beams. It was tall, brooding, skeletal thing that reminded Strela of the fossilized bones of some long dead dinosaur.

Careful reconnaissance at first revealed only a single figure standing on a walkway about four stories off the ground. He was dressed in the dark blue jump suits that was a standard Sky Raider uniform. A large machete hung in a leather sheath from his belt. He had an assault rifle cradled in his hands.

"Confirmed that is Chalmers, Heathcliff, Lieutenant," the nanites responded.

"I don't need the blue jumpsuit to tell me he's a Raider," Strela joked. "The arrogant condescending look on his face is enough."

"Was he actually SAS?" Strela asked as she watched Chalmers from the cover of a nearby warehouse.

"He was until last year when a security check uncovered 'unhealthy' political views and connections," the nanites responded.

Misha stopped looking at Chalmers and scanned the area around him. "I wonder how long he was giving information to the Raiders before they caught him?"

"I bet MI5 is still trying to work that out," Strela commented.

"That's the problem with intelligence work. You can never really be sure of anything," the fox added.

"So far I see at least a dozen Assault Raiders, six Inferno Raiders, three Raider Engineers and a pair of Sky Skiffs," Strela commented.

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "You think they'd at least make it difficult. We'll take the skiffs first, then the infernos and engineers. And the assaults whenever they get in the way."

"And Chalmers," Strela snarled. "Him we save for last."

Twenty minutes later Strela landed on the catwalk some ten meters from Chalmers. She slowly walked towards the Raider officer. "Chalmers you stinking fascist. I'm back for you."

The man looked at her and sneered. There was the loud whine of jet engines and a pair of Sky Skiff popped up from behind a warehouse. They pivoted and aimed their impressive array of missiles and cannons at Strela.

"Did you think I was stupid enough to be here alone?" Chalmers snarled.

Suddenly a missile raced across the sky and slammed into one of the Sky Skiffs. The plane exploded into flames and burning wreckage tumbled to the ground.

Strela smiled. "I was going to say the same thing."

This was going to be a hot pickup. The plane would come in low and fast. Skimming just about the lower buildings and swerving to avoid the larger ones. Doing it at night and with no lights added to the excitement. The transport would only be on the ground for a few seconds.

Unlike Longbow who simply bribed the local Arachnos commander to leave them alone the American military wouldn't resort to bribing Arachnos. Not that they wouldn't bribe people. After all the application of enough cash could prevent a lot of problems. It was different and simpler here. Arachnos was the enemy and you didn't give money to the enemy. You killed them.

The transport that landed this time was similar to the Longbow one. To be honest it was exactly the same model and equipped the same. Except instead of being bright white and red this one was painted a dull, black designed to be hard to see. It being late at night meant that all that was visible to the naked eye was a large dark shadow. It also had two attack helicopters as escort. Just in case. You could never be sure with Arachnos. Sometimes they would attack anything entering their airspace with incredible ferocity. And yet other times they left it completely alone. But often they would send a few out to just harass and annoy. For all their nervousness the pickup went off perfectly.

This time when the transport took off from the Rogue isles there was no one or nothing left behind.