

A New Start
by Christian O'Kane and Stealthcat

"Where are you taking me?" Stealth asked. "You said we were going to your home?" He was a tall, thin man wearing a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a cloak. All of black. He was carrying a minigun. A small 7.62mm gatling gun powered by a small battery. On his back was something that looked like a backpack filled with some four thousand rounds of ammo for his gun.

The figure the man was following was far from human looking. It was taller than Stealth but a lot thinner weighing barely one hundred, forty pounds. His features were an even mix of human and fox. He walk upright like a man but on digitigrade legs ending in paws like the hind legs of a fox. His body was shaped like a human but was covered with the thick fur of a fox. His head was a classic vulpine one right down to the pointed ears. From his back sprouted a pair of wings with feathers that were jet black at the moment. When spread out the wings had a wingspan of over fifteen feet. This odd figure was wearing the camouflaged clothing worn by army soldiers. In his hands was a massive bow instead of an assault rifle. On his back, tucked neatly between the vulpine's wings was quiver, now empty but usually filled with a lot of high tech arrows. The foxman superhero had led them to the industrial district. An area filled with businesses and industries both working and abandoned.

"We are headed there. Where did you think I lived, a split level in the suburbs?"

"Where exactly are we headed?" the man asked. Still uneasy. The two had met only a few hours ago under less then friendly circumstances. Working from opposites ends of the same case they had arrived on the dock to stop an illegal weapons shipment. Each had assumed the other was a criminal protecting the shipment and a wild fight had ensued. They were lucky that the worst wounds had been to their pride. The real criminals had gone down first. The worst part had been explaining themselves and their actions to the police. Still it had ended well enough. They had received a nice reward and made friends.

Misha pointed up ahead and Stealth caught sight of a massive brick building with a large tower soaring above the entire neighborhood. The building was at least two city blocks long and five stories tall. The tower soared another ten stories above that.

"That's some impressive house you got there," Stealth commented sarcastically.

"It's the old Union train station," the fox superhero explained. "And I don't have the whole thing. Just a small part."

"Who has the rest?" Stealth asked.

"Amtrak has a small part as does the City Transit. The rest is mostly empty."

After a short walk they came to a chain link fence. The two walked along it till they got to a gate which was locked with a padlock. Misha produced a key and opened the lock. After they had stepped through the gate the vulpine carefully relocked it. In front of them was a score of railroad tracks, some filled with passenger cars and others empty. All the rails were rusty and most covered with weeds.

"Not exactly a busy station," the man commented.

Misha shook his head sadly. "No. Amtrak runs dozens of trains past here but only ten actually stop. It's nothing like it was in the past. A hundred trains a day used to stop here. At least until the planes and cars took away most of the passengers."

They hopped across an empty track and then walked parallel to another one towards the station itself. After a moment the end of a passenger car loomed up on the track to their left. Stealth's keen vision caught sight of a small sensor tucked discretely into one corner of the passenger car. He wondered how many others were scattered about unseen but seeing everything that goes on. They walked onward as the massive railroad car loomed over them on their left.

"Does this car ever move?" he asked.

Misha shook his head. "No. they're actually welded to the rails. They belong to a group that runs a small railroad museum here. They were part of a restaurant but that failed a few years ago."

To their right the corner of the station loomed up suddenly and Stealth found himself hemmed in on one side by the cars and the other by the blank, brick wall.

"Be careful where you walk," Misha ordered. "I've disabled the alarms here but they reset after we pass so stick close to me."

A long claustrophobic walk brought them to a small metal door set into the brick wall. Stealth noticed that this door looked old and weathered but it also looked very solid and it had no lock or handle.

The fox removed his left glove revealing a black furred hand. He placed it on the middle of the door. After a moment the door opened inward without a sound. Misha pushed it open and stepped inward.

Stealth stepped up to the doorway but paused there peering into the darkness.

"Well?" came Misha's voice from the interior. "Are you coming?"

"Yes," he answered and stepped inside. The door closed quickly and silently behind him as a bright light snapped on overhead. He found himself in a small, plain corridor that ran straight ahead. A few moments walking and up a long, steep flight of steps brought them to another metal door. Next to the door was a small keypad and a tiny display screen.

"This door leads out onto a balcony overlooking the main waiting room," Misha explained. "There are a few ways up and they are all locked but always check before opening the door. Just to be sure no one is up here."

"This the only way to get to your place?" Stealth asked.

"No, there are several ways to get there. But it does have the best view and I thought I'd give you the tour."

The fox archer peered at the screen above the keypad for a moment and then tapped in a code. The door opened swinging outward silently.

Stealth followed after Misha when he walked through the door. The small corridor behind them had been lined with brick and plastered walls. Now he found himself in a large room lined with granite and marble all highly polished and decorated. The ceiling that soared high above him was covered with a beautiful mosaic depicting the night sky. The room they were in had only three walls. Where one wall should have been was simply a thick stone railing looking out into an open space. He walked over to the railing and looked out.

"Wow!" This is amazing!"

Laid out in front, below and above him was an astounding sight. The place was huge! It was larger than a cathedral. He was standing on a balcony at least two stories above the ground and yet the ceiling was at least another thirty feet above him. Below him was a huge area. The floor was of marble of a dozen colors laid into intricate patterns and was larger than several football fields.

"This was the main waiting room," Misha explained.

"Was? What is it now?"

"Empty mostly. Even Amtrak doesn't use it. They have a small corner of one of the old platforms and that's it. During world war two that floor was always packed with people heading in all over."

"Who owns it?"

"A preservation group. They own the whole building. They've been slowly repairing the place. There is talk of reopening the station as a shopping mall or a convention center. But the idea getting the most support is reopening it as a transportation hub with Amtrak, buses and a local commuter railroad. That's all in the future. At the moment the most action is on the weekend when they run tours."

Misha pointed to a pair of doors set in the far wall. "The one on the left leads down to the waiting room floor. The other leads to a series of offices and store rooms."

"Which one are we going to use?"

"Neither," the fox answered and pointed to another door located on the wall to the left. This door led to a short corridor. A few steps down the corridor brought them to a small room with a set of elevator doors and yet another locked door.

He pointed to the door. "That leads to the main staircase that runs all the way up and down the tower and to the main elevators. We get to ride in our own private elevator." he pressed the call button for the elevator and the doors opened instantly.

"Nice, did you put all this in?" Stealth asked as they rode upward. He could not help but notice all the brightly polished brass all over the elevator.

Misha shook his head. "No, this is all original to the station. It was put in for the sole use of the railroad president and his cronies."

Stealth laughed. "It's good to be rich."

"We're headed up to the top of the tower but the elevator does run all the way down to the lowest sub-basement."

After a few moments the elevator glided to a stop and the doors opened smoothly. They stepped out into a small room whose walls and floor were covered with marble and granite. Underfoot was a mosaic of the state of Rhode Island done in gray, red and green marble. A half dozen doors were on the walls. All were of bronze and highly polished.

"This is the foyer and all the doors lead to various places," Misha explained. He pointed to one off to the left. "That leads to the main stairway. Eventually. The one next to it leads up to the room containing all the elevator machinery. He pointed to another door on the opposite side of the room. That leads to a set of stairs that goes straight down to the passenger platform on track one."

Misha tapped one door with his left hand. "This one is a cleaning closet. Slop sink, mops, brooms and the like." He opened it revealing a small closet filled with a small sink and a collection of cleaning material. The fox patted one wall of the closet. "And this is a secret door that opens onto the elevator shaft." He pointed upwards. "And that opens onto the roof. Also hidden on both sides."

"What type of security do you have here?" Stealth asked.

Misha closed the closet door and stepped back into the center of the foyer. "The walls are armored. All the doors are armored as well and locked at all times. They are coded several ways including by my DNA. The room itself has security cameras with both low light and infrared. Also motions sensors and pressure sensors on the floor. As for weapons it has stunners and for the more persistent heavy pulse lasers. Oh and I can electrify the walls, floor and ceiling."

"You're being awfully trusting of someone you met less than a day ago. Your showing me all the security you have."

The fox paused and cocked his head to one side. "Am I? Just how much of my security am I showing you?"

"Well you haven't given me any key or passwords or whatever but I know several ways into your base and defenses can always be hacked."

He nodded. "True but these defenses are run by intelligent nanites. Get TOO good at hacking and they will come after the hacker and do," he paused for a moment. "Something inventive."

"Nanites? YOU have nanites? For real?"

He nodded slowly. "Oh yes. These little guys changed me into this great form. I doubt there is anything they cannot do if they want to." Misha paused for a moment. "They could even change you. If you want." he said in a soft voice.

Stealth's hair stood on end and he made no comment or gesture but pondered.

"You're quiet," Misha said. "Did I freak you out completely?"

Stealth nodded slowly. "This is a big decision."

"No need to decide right away. Think it over for a while."

Stealth nodded slowly.

Misha walked over to the door that was opposite the elevator door. "And this little door leads to my little home." He touched the door and it swung open silently.

The two of them stepped through the door and into the room beyond. The room was octagonal in shape and the walls rose up at least three stories overhead. There were two levels of balconies going up the wall. All the walls and floors were covered in the same marble and granite as the main waiting room down below. At floor level he saw several doors and several open doorways. On one side close to the wall was a dining table and chairs that could seat ten people. All of a dark colored wood. Hanging from another wall was a large, flat screen television. Scattered in a semicircle in front of that was a large, plush couch, several chairs and a coffee table. Stealth noticed a desk up against another wall. On it was a good sized personal computer, complete with monitor and keyboard.

"Wow! This is impressive! A lot better than I expected."

"Where did you think I lived?"

Stealth shrugged. "I don't know. I sort of expected a secret Fox cave."

Misha shook his head. "You've been watching too many Batman reruns." He pointed to a table that rested next to the door they had just come in through. "Why don't you put your mingun there unless you want to carry it all night."

The man undid the straps that held the mingun on and removed the weapon. Carefully he placed the small gatling gun onto the table trying not to scratch the mahogany the table was made of.

"Don't worry about the wood. It's covered with a scratch proof layer of plastic," Misha said. He walked over to a doorway located near the dining table and pointed inside. "A full kitchen and pantry with enough food and water to sustain me for over a year."

The fox pointed to another doorway, this one had a red cross painted over the door. "A full infirmary with two beds, an autodoc, a regeneration tube and whatever other medical equipment the nanites can think of. There are also two storerooms and three bathrooms. One for each level. One is my bedroom and the rest of the rooms are empty but I have two set up as bedrooms."

"How do you power this place?" Stealth asked as he looked around.

"A fusion generator in the basement," Misha answered. "But there is also a small power cell tucked into a closet for emergency power. First floor has most of the living stuff like the kitchen and the like. Third floor has the bedrooms and the second has all the storage and technical stuff. I think you'll like the next part of the tour."

The fox stood still and suddenly floated off the ground without his wings flapping or even moving. He rose slowly up into the air and floated over to one of the balconies. "I'm taking the elevator but you'll need to take the stairs."

Stealth raced up the nearest stairs to the balcony and stopped next to Misha. "That saves a lot of stair climbing."

"It sure does." The fox was standing in front of a door that had a small sign on it. "Armory."

"You'll like this part!" the fox said and opened the door.

The room beyond the door had walls lined with racks and in the center was a metal table. What caught his eyes was what filled the racks; weapons. He saw a dozen assault rifles, AK47's and M16s, shared space with a dozen different types of rifles, pistols and even a pair of m60 and m249 light machine guns. There was a pair of AT4 84mm recoilless antitank gun and two Stinger surface to air missile launchers resting in a metal rack. Other racks held cans of ammunition, a dozen different types of grenades, cleaning kits, and all manner of accessories. There were several RPG7 rocket launchers quietly resting on a shelf. Misha gently patted one of the rpg's. "I spent a month in the hospital because of an rpg like this. It blew apart the hummer I was in. I also took out a Rikti lander with one."

"You've seen a lot of action?" Stealth asked.

"I've seen too action all over the world and fought a lot of enemies including the Rikti. Fought them several times. Well do you like my little armory?"

"Oh yes! Where did you get all this equipment?" Stealth asked.

"I was in the army and I brought back a few souvenirs."

"A few? You have enough weapons here to fight a small war!"

Misha laughed. "I like to be prepared!"

"Do you actually use any of this stuff? Or just the bow?" the man asked as he waved his hand about.

"I use whatever works," the fox commented. "I do prefer the bow but I always carry a few grenades and a pistol with me."

"Where do you keep your bows all I see are guns."

"Next door to the right."

This room was a little larger than the armory. Racks on the walls held a score of bows of different shapes, sizes and materials. Shelves held all manner of attachments like laser sights, balancing weights, pulleys and bow strings. Other racks held several different types of quivers. One whole wall was devoted to arrows; hundreds of them. All carefully sorted by type and use and stored vertically in special containers that kept the feathers from being bent.

The pair left the archery room and went to the next room on the right. "And here is all my personal gear." This room was smaller than the other two but it was just as filled with items as the others. There was a rack containing a dozen military uniforms with different camouflage patterns for winter, summer, the desert and several all in black. There was a set of armor made of plastic and Kevlar.

The man admired the armor. "This is U.S. military issue isn't it?"

Misha nodded his head slowly. "Oh yes. That's the standard combat armor worn by army troops. And I do have the whole suit including the helmet, webgear and the armored boots. All tailored to fit my new body."

Stealth ran his hands over the breastplate of the armor. His fingers traced several dents and cuts. "This has seen some heavy use."

"Yes it has! That's the armor I wore in Afghanistan. It's saved my life several times," Misha explained. "I had the nanites modify it to fit my new body but it is still my same, old lucky armor. I should have worn that last night."

Now for the best part of the whole place," Misha said as the two made their way back down stairs to the main floor of the apartment. "The view." In one wall as a set of double doors all of the same highly polished brass as the rest.

He paused at the doors for a moment. "These doors are made of the same material found on Rikti warships. The entire apartment is encased in an armored shell that could easily withstand a near miss by a nuke."

"Seriously?"

The archer nodded. "Oh yes! The nanites take security very seriously."

"They did all of this just for you? Why?" the human asked.

"I worked out a deal with them. They keep me up to date and protect this little home of mine and I do work for them."

"What type of work?"

"Work like stopping that arms shipment," Misha answered. What he didn't mention was the data center that was home to a lot of high tech computers hidden under their feet. The same security that protected his apartment also protected their precious servers and databases. Of course the final defense was Misha himself. Another one of his jobs. "They are benign my friend. What they want is to keep the city, the country and the entire planet safe."

The man just nodded his head.

"I wouldn't have gotten involved with them if I thought they were bad. But I won't preach to you. Now for the best reason I live up here and not underground," Misha said and pushed open the door.

The shock of the cold night air made Stealth shiver a bit as they walked through the door. He found himself standing on a balcony and looking out over the city. Laid out below him was the entire city. A magnificent display of lights that twinkled and blinked like a display of Christmas lights.

"Wow! This is incredible! You can see the whole city from up here."

"We're about fifteen stories off the ground!" Misha commented.

Stealth turned and looked back at the door they had just come through. The tower rose up another forty feet before ending in a flat roof. On top he saw an array of antennas and satellite dishes. "Are all of those yours and the nanites?"

Misha shook his head. "No. They belong to various communication companies. The preservation group makes quite a lot of money from renting the tower for antennas. But a few of those dishes and antennas are mine and the nanites."

Stealth turned around and leaned against the railing "You want to put the little things in me?"

"Only if you want them in," Misha countered. "It's strictly voluntary."

"For how long?" The human asked dryly.

"How long?" Misha asked confused. "Till the change is finished of course."

"Good! I don't want to have little dudes in me when I..." He paused, "I like my privacy."

Misha laughed. "There will be a certain loss of privacy but they do understand the need for privacy."

"You said till the change was finished!"

"Well I keep in contact with them all the time," Misha explained. "Sort of like having your private connection to them."

"But I don't want to keep them in me! I like my privacy!" he admitted.

"But if it bothers you to have them in you just ask them to leave. They will leave."

"Oh! Now I feel guilty."

He laughed and shook his head. "Don't be, the nanites are friendly and helpful and they'll understand." He held up a small silver bottle. "Now do you want to change or not?"

Stealth took a deep breath, "They change me into what I want?"

"Yes. You will have to decide all of that with them. They will have some good suggestions but they tend towards the more technical end of things. So your input is very important."

"Then let's do this. Before I change my mind."

Misha handed him the bottle. "Just drink the contents. They'll make contact then."

Stealth took the bottle and opened the lid. When he tipped it up to his mouth the bottle slipped and spilled into his hand and down his wrist.

"Contact made!"

"He was supposed to DRINK us."

"Sloppy, sloppy."

"Insertion successful. Scanning and analyzing."

"Subject : Male. In good health."

The human stroked his wrist and looked at his palm, both were dry. "Was that supposed to happen? Did I just induce hallucinations or something?"

"This one is a bit high strung."

"I can hear voices!"

"FINALLY he notices us."

"This one is a little slow."

"Who's slow!"

"We can work with this one. No real defects."

"None, aside from being a little slow."

"You damn little things!" The man growled to the voices that only he could hear.

"Oh! Now he's getting butch on us."

"Please ignore them. They've been watching those fashion shows again. Back to the matter at hand. Do you want to be improved?"

"Yes! If I'm slow then make me FAST! Turn me into a cheetah!"

"A cheetah morph, I mean, not a cheetah, cheetah" He spluttered.

"We understand. Acinonyx jubatus. Neat. Certainly really fast! We can improve speed to an average of 110 kph with burst speeds of 200kph."

"Is that fast enough?"

"I suppose that will have to do," he answered sarcastically.

"Oh! This one has a better sense of humor than Rawr 2.0. Fun!"

"Now about what else? we can give you a package similar to Misha. Under skin armor. Highly improved organs and communication equipment."

"And built in targeting systems, IR and low light visibility, radar and ladar."

"Ladar?" he asked. "I've heard of radar but not ladar."

"Laser based radar. It is not detectable by conventional radar detectors. It was developed by the U.S. military."

What about stamina? I don't want to stop and rest every 400 meters."

"That is a serious defect in the species. We can give you a sustained ability of 110kph for 6 hours before needing significant rest. Is that sufficient?"

"I'll say!" Stealth answered.

"We can also add in advanced maneuvering software and hardware. You will be able to maneuver and dodge at high speed. Making you extremely difficult to hit."

"Also great for getting thru traffic on the freeway."

"I'll never need a car again!"

"Nope! You won't even need to pay tolls either!"

"Of course we will have to intensely reinforce your skeletal and musculature systems to handle the highly increased stresses involved."

"Your teeth will be able to penetrate several centimeters of armor plating."

"Anything you want?"

"Wings. Retractable wings," the man added.

"Retractable wings? OH that is original!"

A large amount of images flashed across his vision followed by a long string of numbers.

"We can do that! Sustained flight will be a bit strenuous but within limits. Would you desire anything like shooting electricity from your tail?"

He looked at the fox for a moment, "No, that won't be necessary."

"OH! Gas generation. You could emit a cloud of toxic vapor from your. . . "

"Now that's just plain gross."

"Well it works for a skunk."

"I said cheetah, not skunk!" Stealth shot back.

"Well real cheetahs do not have wings."

"They don't talk either. No ass-powers!"

He heard a light giggling.

"We could call it the ass blaster!"

"Sounds like a fat fighting thing on that infomercial."

"Back to the task at hand. Gender is to remain male?"

"Yes!!!"

"Shame! I think you would look good with boobs."

"I warned you to stay away from those porn websites."

The man shook his head. "Is that everything?"

"A huge volume of information flashed in front of his eyes for a moment.

"That's all. Any other changes requested?"

"I want to be able to run on all fours. Be a great way to take off for a flight"

"Walk that way as well or on two legs?"

"I'll walk like a regular biped."

"Making modifications to the design template. Easily done. Anything else?"

"Nothing else, or it won't get done," Stealth answered.

"All right. Locking down final template. No further design changes. Preparing for body modification sequence."

The man felt an odd surge and rush of power run thru his body and he stiffened.

"Ready?"

"Now or never."

"Commence transformation sequence. Now!"

Stealth felt his entire body surge with power as the nanites seemed to be everywhere all at once. Working, changing, adapting his body. Resequencing his DNA to something else entirely.

Stealth felt his bones and muscles shift as his organs changed and moved about. He quickly stripped off his clothes eager to see the change with his own eyes.

He watched as his legs grew longer and changed joint and structure. His skin took on a tan color as it rippled in an eerie way as the muscles beneath were moved and changed.

Stealth saw his arms get covered with a thin fur and smiled as the black spots slowly appeared. He pulled down his underwear to see the change in his genitals.

"PLEASE, I'm still here!" Misha pointed out loudly. *"I did not want to see that."*

"Best you close your eyes for a moment. We need to adjust your vision and that induces momentary vertigo."

"Okay, for a moment I thought you were going to change my thing and didn't want me to see..." He said with his eyes already closed.

"We can also improve that! If you want."

"No! Some things I want to keep."

The changes quickly reached his head and he felt his skill shifting and he felt dizzy for a moment. He saw lights in spite of his eyes being closed. Suddenly he was assailed by a storm of sounds and smells and he had a hard time coping with it.

"He is having trouble adjusting to his enhanced senses."

"That's to be expected. They are far superior to his old senses."

"Making adjustments to hearing and olfactory processing centers in the brain. Enhancing information processing centers."

The level of sounds and smells did not go down but suddenly it was not so bad. He could pick out the smell of the hamburger (with cheese) that he had eaten for dinner. He could hear Misha breathing and somewhere nearby there was a clock ticking slowly and steadily.

"You may open your eyes now. It might take some time to fully adapt to the new additions and the targeting systems."

He opened his eyes slowly. Everything looked the same but somehow everything was different. He could not see beyond the walls yet at the same time he could. He could hear basic background noises the same as always but now they were defined and he could make them out like they were right in front of him. He could smell things as if he'd jammed his head inside a bowl of spaghetti. And somehow, all of it was utterly irrelevant... because by now he'd noticed his new body!

The first obvious sign was when he'd opened his eyes. His nose stuck out further, he poked around it, it was wet and it hurt to touch so his hands strayed lower, to his mouth. His mouth didn't feel right. It felt... furry and wide. Inside his teeth were long and sharp, a moment later he looked at his hand. His hand! It had CLAWS and PAW PADS. Then he looked at his new fur. It covered the area that had once been bare, that he spilled the nanites on. The fur on his wrist was a pale cream color, on the other side it was yellow and covered in black spots. The spots covered his arms and legs but not his chest.

It was then he realized he was naked... at least his genitals still looked the same, albeit covered in white fur. Gazing past his cheetah-man hood he saw something new, a tail. His tail swayed about, back and forth behind him. It was a very long tail that tipped and curved back up at the ground. He also had two new foot paws on the ground with four toes each ending in unsheathed claws that tapped the ground.

"Well? How do you feel?" Misha asked.

"Furry," the cheetah morph answered.

The End