

... FRIENDS AND FOES ...

Ivan's face broadened in delight when he saw the street witch. "Alexandra, priyatenisha! It is so good to see you again!"

Alexandra smiled briefly before gasping for air in the Russian ork's embrace. She had forgotten after all these years how strong Ivan's cybernetically enhanced clutch could be. "Aw, you know I couldn't stop in Seattle without paying a visit, you old gangster. So how's retired life treating you?"

"I survive, somehow. It is a struggle to get through the day, when you don't have to worry whose price is on your head today." Alexandra smiled in genuine gladness at her old friend's humor. The luxurious decorations around the office told her how Ivan was truly faring.

*"Please, Alex, do sit down. Let me pour you a drink." As Black Ivan turned to the cocktail tray on the table behind him, Alexandra's eye caught a glimpse at the ornament on his desk. It was a dragon claw, now converted into a small basket for holding small items. "Ivan, don't tell me you've still got *that* eyesore around?"*

"A trophy of battle, won by fair means," protested Ivan with mock indignation. The street witch chuckled quietly as she accepted her glass. "What shall we drink to, dear Alexandra?"

"To old friends."

The twinkle in Ivan's eyes dimmed, as the memories of departed comrades crossed their minds. Ivan turned away briefly.

"—and new opportunities," Alexandra hastily added. She silently cursed herself for re-opening old wounds.

The ork smiled again as he clinked his glass. "Za vashche soodba."

The alcohol blossomed in flavor as it passed down Alexandra's throat. This was genuine Rodnik vodka, imported from the Russian motherland, not the cheap soy rot one would find on the streets. Considering Ivan's connection with the Russian Vory mobs in Seattle, Alexandra expected nothing less.

Ivan's breath exploded in a loud pah as he savored his drink. "So, Alexandra, what brings you back to Seattle?"

"Actually, Ivan, I need a favor." Alexandra swirled her glass as she carefully chose her words. "I'm laying over en route to some biz in Vladivostok, and I was wondering if you could hook me up with some people you know over there?"

"But of course," answered Ivan, as he pulled out his commlink. "After all, what are friends for?"