

Feature

The Last One Standing

by **Cat**

Have you noticed, my friends, that it is only when you are in the midst of a very good kip that trouble comes looking for you?

I am something of an insomniac, I fear, and sleep is something any soldier prizes highly. Imagine the irritation when the light shone in my face and the orderly whispered that I must come at once. The only thing I could think to mutter at first was that I no longer had the duty, it was Dmitri from the 503rd tonight.

But the rebuke I had ready died at once when I brushed the fuzz from my mind and realized that it was the Commander's summons that called me out of my bed! It was shortly after midnight, and the moon lit Sochi-Adler airfield outside my windows. I hurriedly dressed, and grabbed the bag with my white helmet and maps. Something was in the wind.

Outside, the GAZ jeep waited, nonchalantly idling, dully reflecting the moonlight. Even so late at night Sochi is bustling. Toward the ramp, the arms trucks were rolling and soldiers hurrying to and fro.

I ungracefully clambered in over the jeep's side and motioned to the orderly to proceed, stifling a yawn.

The strange thing was meeting Vasily at the door to the operations center. He and two of our comrades were coming out, on their way to another jeep parked nearby. He waved to me and sprinted over.

"Have you heard, Sacha? The cursed mujahids are rebuilding their air force!"

This, we expected.

"And so we fight? But little falcon, why do you fly without your wingman tonight?"

"I do not know."

Vasily was nonplused.

"The Commander is sending us in groups of two and three; we patrol deep into the Black Sea. Strangely, our route does not take us south to Suhumi base, though. I do not know why. And you were not mentioned in our brief."

I rolled my eyes and groaned.

"Not grounded again. It must have been the RBK cluster series I dropped on the convoy last week, Vasily. Their latest propaganda on the Internet named me a war criminal for that, did you see?"

Vasily nodded.

"Yes. But I do not believe that is what the Commander is thinking. He was not angry; he seemed worried, and impatient. And your peacock and his toady Dmitri were just in with the American Colonel Martin, and that Major Grachev of theirs a few hours ago. You should hurry. He is waiting especially for you."

I turned to go as Vasily grinned and cracked, *"He probably wants you to be there to wipe Karmarov's nose for him! He seems to need a nursemaid, eh?"*

I looked back over my shoulder and winked.

"I can think of better things than that, little falcon. Now go and drill great holes in the sky."

As he turned to go I stopped, with concern; I am unused to flying without my trusted wingman.

"Take care, Vasily. Do not let these rookies get you shot."

He grew serious.

"And you, Shoura. I fear the Commander has a difficult task in store for you."

Inside, I found our leader pacing behind his desk, pausing only to light a new Turkish cigarette as the old one burned down in his hand, chain-smoking. He scowled out the window into the moonlit night.

I stood before his desk, quietly at parade rest, for what seemed like an eternity before he noticed me. Immediately his hard, craggy features softened as he fastened his cool, grey eyes onto me.

"Ah. Alexandra Dimitrievna, I have been waiting. We have important business to discuss. Be seated."

He indicated the plush armchair positioned in front of his large wooden desk.

The Commander busied himself with papers for a moment, and behind me the door opened and the Commander's valet noiselessly entered, pouring large tumblers of hot, sweet tea before leaving as quietly as he came. The Commander unrolled the large map of Suhumi sector on his desk and drank deeply.

"Here, Sacha, is where I want you to go."

He pointed to the mountains south of Suhumi, and continued.

"The cursed IRLF is flying new aircraft into Suhumi base. They have obtained Mirage 2000-5 aircraft. I do not know how this was done. The GRU briefing indicates that the aircraft were purchased by an Arab nation through the Dassault concern, ostensibly for defense, then sent to Muqtadeh."

He pushed a series of photos across the table.

I sipped my tea and reflected on the photos. The Mirage 2000-5 is one of France's latest interceptors. It is the equal in almost every way of the American F-16 with which I am familiar, and that the Turkish air force flies so well. And they can carry MICA missiles which can in some conditions outperform our R-27 high-energy missiles as well. Even the superb RVV-AE is not totally superior.

The Commander broke into my reverie.

"We do not believe the mujahids are equipped with MICA, Sacha. But it is only a matter of time. At present, they fly from an advance base in northeastern Turkey, near the Georgian border. They have only two that we know of. They are heavily guarded on the ground, so they must be taken from the air."

His features hardened again.

"And so I have a mission to assign. The Rodina needs a rated sniper pilot for this, for it is most dangerous. I believe it may even be suicide. Are you prepared to give your life for the Rodina, Sacha? But of course you are."

His face twisted, and he lit another cigarette.

"I will follow your commands to the letter, sir."

"Good. Now, attend."

He placed his finger on the map.

"Here, at Gantiadi, hides a Buk surface-to-air missile system. It is most secret. Make note of its location on your knee-card."

As I did so, he continued.

"I have sent the squadron out, far over the Black Sea, as if we are searching in the wrong place. I remain here, on five-minute alert in my 88-Red. This leaves you."

"Me?"

"Da. You will select an air combat loadout, and proceed south to Suhumi. And wait there for as long as your fuel holds. The mujahids will come. You will flirt with them, Sacha. You will draw them in. They wish you dead, greatly. You personally, and especially. They have not forgotten your escape from their custody. And when they come, you will lure them over the Gantiadi SAM site, to their death."

"Sir, how do you know they will come?"

I was puzzled. How could he be so sure? My MiG 11-Red looks no different from the others, save those with the shark-mouth, like Vasily's jet.

"This is not your concern. Rest assured, they will be there. Plan your flight accordingly." He raised his glass. "Za Rodinu, Sacha."

I raised mine in return. "Da. Za Rodinu!"

I went first to visit Kolya, the meteorologist, before consulting with Lt. Kulikov and the Armourer. Kolya was as cool as always; nothing perturbs him. Over cucumber slices in his cramped office, he informed me that the 503rd would also be in the air, and an American helicopter as well, flying south.

This he knew because he had briefed the American helicopter crew and Major Grachev on the weather in Suhumi district for the coming day. They would depart soon after I was scheduled to, and Kolya found that most odd.

"And it seems you will be there all alone, Sacha. Take care that you do not stray too far toward Tkvarcheli; Major Grachev was particularly concerned about the area near the train station, where you and Lt. Sandakchiev bombed the train station last spring. I saw photos of a HAWK missile system in his papers as well. I would not stray from the coast, were I you. Other than that threat of... precipitation...", he winked, "your flight will have marvelously clear weather and twenty-eight degree temperatures. You will not have turbulence, either, as long as you stay away from the mountains."

So. This is why the Commander is so sure of the mujahids' plans. We have laid a trap, and it is not only that I am the bait, but a mission flown by our comrades as well. Alexei and Dmitri, I am sure. I can put the pieces together,

you see.

I was preoccupied as Lt. Kulikov and I went over the loadout for 11-Red. I ordered a 1500 liter centreline tank, for endurance. One R-27RE missile, and one R-27TE. They are longer-ranged than the Matra MICA or Super-530F and will give me first engagement. As insurance, I order two of the new R-77, the RVV-AE. This is a better missile than the American AMRAAM in close combat and deadly at what the Americans call "Rne," no-escape range. I carefully clean my helmet optics; I may need to use my R-73 close-combat missiles in this scrap. The Mirage is fast and if I do not work quickly I will have to fight them.

Lt. Kulikov and I walked around the spotless 11-Red, gleaming orange-blue in the sodium-vapour lights of the hardened aircraft shelter. The lights gave an odd, muted reddish tint to the polished whiteness of the missiles our gloved, sweating technicians carefully fitted under the wings.

My crew helped me into the cockpit and tightened the straps over my shoulders. I secured my helmet over my head, and drew on my flying gloves, and reset my watch; my father Dmitri sent me his old Strela chronograph last week that he wore in the War of Attrition when he flew the MiG-21 against Israel with the fathers of the very people I now fight. War changes us all, and not for the better. The Strela (it means "Arrow" in your English tongue's) golden hands and numbers winked at me in the orangey light.

The APU wound up and Kulikov gave the signal to start my right engine, then my left. The air conditioning came on, cooling me in the hot cockpit. I saluted my crew-chief, and closed the canopy, nosing 11-Red into the morning sun.

Down ramp, I could see bombs being armed on a grey-painted Su-33 — Alexei's from the look of it. I would show him something, this time. My MiG can dance, he is not loaded down with bombs that will make him wallow in the mud like the pig. Not today.

I taxi to the hold-line at Runway 22 and wait for clearance.



When it is given, I push the throttles against their stops and feel 11-Red rocket down the runway on full afterburner

lifting smoothly...



...into a screaming vertical climb at less than one third the distance!



Slammed against my seat, I cannot help but squeal, just like a young girl, at the feeling, it is like the roller-coaster that the younger Americans talk of so much! I have ridden one of those, though, and it does not compare to the

MiG.

"Destiny Angel, clear to 3,000 meters as filed. Push channel 2 for Captain Scarlet."

Adler tower ceding control to the NATO E-3 prowling the skies to the west.

I change channel and thumb the mike button on my throttle.

"Captain Scarlet, Destiny Angel out of Adler for one-eight thousand, entering your zone."

It has not been so very long since I last worked with the E-3. One follows American-style procedure with the Westerners. I will show them once again that we are professionals too.

The clipped British tones of the NATO flight controller greet me.

"Hallo, Destiny Angel. Clear for your mission as filed. Set IFF according to plan and squawk, please."

"Roger."

I settle down for what I think is a long cruise. But it is not to be. Briefly, my SPO-15 beeps, the Buk system registering me. Its crew will be watching with their optical system. Nothing must give them away.



I approach the Gudauta cape, cautiously, overflying Gudauta airbase and heading into the bay leading to Suhumi.

Approaching Suhumi, I hear a familiar voice checking-in with the E-3.

"Captain Scarlet, Nevsky requests air picture."

So! It *is* Alexei — *I was right!*

Alexei and Dmitri were tasked for the mission to Tkvarcheli. It is they — as well as I — who are the bait for the mujahids and their cursed Mirages.

Over the Gudauta cape, I will be in position to protect them. Here, I will not fail. I will let no harm come to my friends. The E-3 responds, the picture is clear. I must not allow this to put me to sleep. I must be ready.



The waiting is the hardest part. As I told Vasily, "drill the holes in the sky". Were I flying an F-15, I would have to dance with the KC-10 tanker. I have done air refueling, in the American F-16 when I trained at the Red Flag exercises, after Ethiopia. Our aircraft are not usually fitted for air refueling, other than the Su-27K, which you call Su-33. Alexei's plane is so fitted, I am sure, as is the Su-27SK that Frontal Aviation flies. I miss the Sukhoi fighters, but my old Su-27P would have to land for fuel as well. However, the Crane has much longer range than my MiG has, and I would feel better if I were flying it today.

I tune to the division tactical channel as I lazily circle over Gudauta field, and I have guessed right; Alexei is on it, talking to someone he calls "Hawk 23" as he presses his attack on the ground targets. I do not hear Dmitri. Strange. *Is Alexei alone?* This concerns me. From the transmissions, Alexei is trying to extract from the target and cannot defend against the mujahids in the air and escape at the same time. Configured as a bomber, his lone Sukhoi may not have radar missiles to ward off the Mirages, with their Super 530 or MICA! He needs air cover, quickly! I disengage 11-Red's autopilot, intending to set course for Tkvarcheli, and my main radio crackles, a warning from Captain Scarlet.



"Destiny Angel, snap 130."

The mujahids? I come alert, my blood runs cold. Alexei must be their target!

I thumb the mike button and reply.

"Ready to copy."

I will provide the Sheikh's minions with something more interesting to divert their attention, while Alexei makes good his escape.

"Bandits, bandits, bearing 133 for 92, angels low, hot. Confirm two, repeat, two hostiles. Weapons hot."

"Roger. Master arm on."



My SPO-15 begins beeping, ominously. Two air-search radars. In front, and growing in intensity. The two beeps each second tell me that there is no lock, but there are definitely two aircraft. The Mirages, I am sure. As my Commander foretold.



The 9-13 is fitted with the same command-link as the Sukhoi fighters. With it, once the datalink is established, I can

see the enemy through the AWACS' own radar. I am now in DVB mode for beyond-visual combat and I have selected R-27TE. It is best, I have learned, to salvo one IR missile with one radar missile where possible. It doubles one's chance to strike. The IR missile must fire first, however. Else, it will follow its brother and not the contact. My RP-29 "Zhuk" radar system can send telemetry to both missiles in flight as long as I keep one target locked up. Later MiGs like the 9-15 and 9-17 can salvo on two targets.

I can see the triangle-shaped targets at the top of the MFD now. IFF identified, enemies. My own radar has not acquired. It would be advantageous to switch to EOS so the French-made, efficient RWR cannot see me. I am sure the mujahids are watching my approach even now. It is nearly time for me to turn, and lure them north.



Suddenly, a solid tone! The lead Mirage has locked me!

I abandon all thought of the lure now, and instantly choose to fight. I will not present my tail to these fanatics, and run like a scared child! I flip the toggle for my jammer, and smile into my oxygen mask as the tone falters. Jammed.



I have the edge, until he burns through. Now, we are about fifty miles apart and I see them on my HUD, a single dashed line, enemy.

I slew the TD box and try to lock but cannot. I too am being jammed. But my RP-29 is more powerful. I will burn through first.



I try again, and at 48 nautical miles I lock the enemy lead.



At 2000 meters, I am too low to fire the R-27, however. I must risk it and close — if I override the computer and launch, the R-27 will not have the energy to close target at this altitude.

At thirty miles the Mirage locks me again, and just as he does I get the "NP" launch authorization! Take this, my bearded friend!



The R-27TE/AA-10D screams off the rail...



...followed by its R-27RE/AA-10C partner, as fast as I can select it.



Now, the dance begins.

On the MFD, I can see the wingman, ten miles behind, and below the leader, edging out in a pincer movement, angling to fire a radar missile at me.



I am in the f-pole joust with the lead, though, and cannot deviate. I can only wait.



The R-27TE goes wild. I do not know why! But the enemy's maneuvering has brought it into planform, a perfect target!



The R-27RE flies true, the enemy explodes in a bright flash.



Now, I roll hard left, into the wingman, and realize he is close.



He has chosen to engage me with the excellent R550 "Magic" IR missile in basic fighter maneuvers, rather than to take me with the Super-530 or MICA.



I select Close Combat mode, and slam down my visor for the "Shlem" target reticle, should I need it.

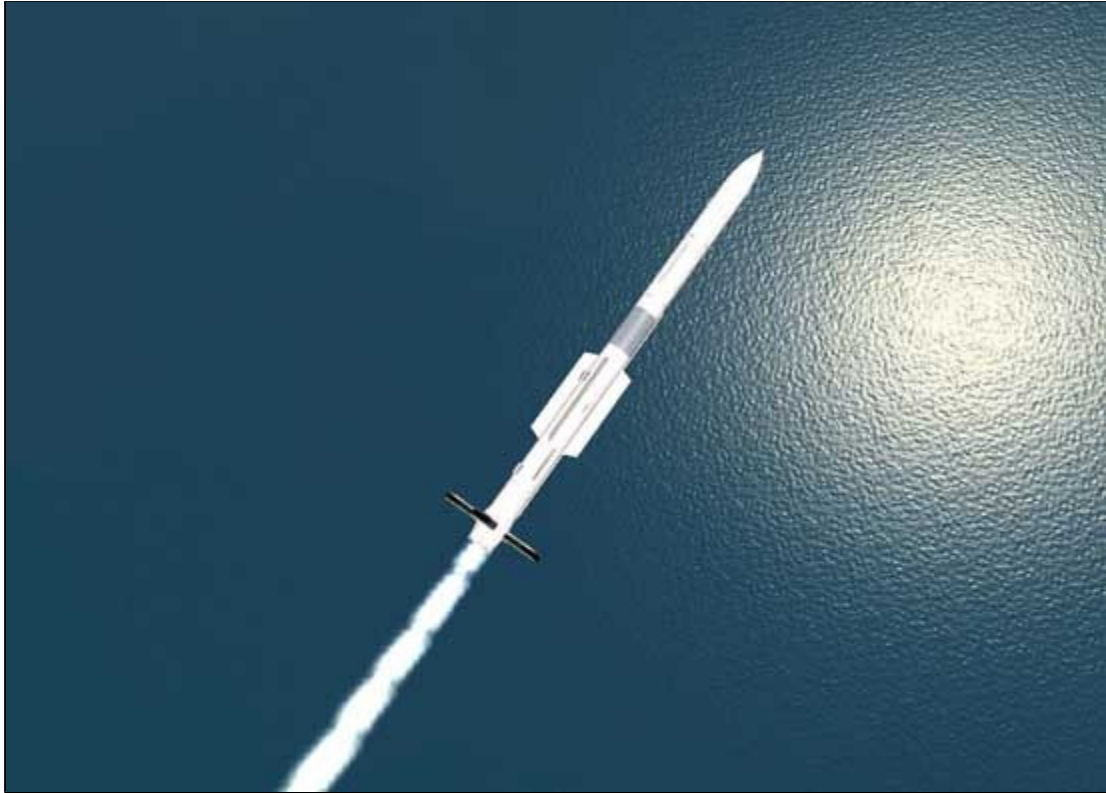
The Mirage is silhouetted against the morning haze, eleven kilometers distant, and I see it is in the vertical scan path of my radar.



I lock it, and the R-77 flashes its "NP" launch cue!

I have what you call "the drop" on him!

"Fox three!"



Quickly, I activate helmet mode and ready an R-73, but it is not needed. The RVV-AE is deadly at such close range, and the Mirage cannot escape despite his frantic maneuvering.



I see the pilot eject, his chute opening.



"Captain Scarlet, Destiny Angel, splash two, repeat, splash two. Request Sandy scramble my coordinates."

"S.I.G., Destiny Angel."

The Englishman was still cool, as if nothing had happened.

"Sandy enroute with escort. You are cleared off the range."

S.I.G.? I must ask my American friends about that, when I return to Sochi. Surely, it is some sort of Western insider's joke that I know nothing of. The British sense of humour is, frankly... how do you say it? *Inscrutable*? I do *not* understand it.



My flight home is uneventful. As I center onto Runway 06 for the landing, I consider the mission, shivering a little. The Commander would have been most cross if my gambit had failed.

One hopes I will not have the duty all over again, for depriving the SAM crew of their kills! And I am sure Vasily will have words for me about my flight as well. No doubt he will call me impetuous again.

In the rush to defeat the Mirages, I have lost touch with Alexei, and of course, he is now maintaining radio silence. I know that a HAWK battery was near, perhaps even his target.

I cannot help but worry.

"Nevsky, Destiny Angel. Report status."

I key my mike and speak in Russian, so the E-3 will not guess why I call. I should have known better — the British controller is multilingual. I should not be surprised.



"Calling Destiny Angel. Your friend Nevsky was cleared for your alternate field, and has arrived safely."

I respond in English. I fear somewhat sheepishly. This, my squadron-mates will not soon let me forget. Nevertheless, it is good to see home again.

"Spasibo, Captain Scarlet. Returning home base."

It is good to see home again.

System Specs

- AMD Athlon 3000+ processor
- MachSpeed N2PAP-Lite motherboard with onboard Aureal AC97 sound
- PNY Technologies Verto GeForce FX 5950 Ultra
- 1GB Kingston PC2700 DDR DRAM
- Creative 12x CD-ROM
- Maxtor 40GB main drive
- DirectX Version 9.0a
- Windows 2000 with SP4
- Thrustmaster Fox2 Pro USB joystick

