

The Phony War
by Christian O'Kane
&
Stealthcat

"It's not my fault that your plan failed!" Strela snarled. "I did my job," the woman was only five feet, three inches tall. The jacket and pants she was wearing were covered with a black and gray camouflage pattern. Any help that pattern might have given her was ruined by the bright red color of her hair.

"Your task was to stop the super protecting the base and that you failed to do," came the answer. The person talking wore a blue jumpsuit and combat boots and resting on the table next to him rested a battered helmet and chest plate, both belonging to the light armor of a Sky Raider officer. She noted a deep dent in the chest plate about the size of an arrowhead. It was right over the wearer's heart. The lieutenant had missed being killed by one of Misha's arrows by mere millimeters. She made a note of that information in the back of her mind.

The trip back to Rogues Isle from New Mexico had been made in silence. No one felt like talking. The only ones who made any sounds were the wounded, who moaned in pain. She had spent the last 24 hours arguing with the Sky Raiders trying to get them to pay her the money they owed her. The woman had reluctantly limited herself to arguing since attacking a group of mercenaries as large as the Sky Raiders was suicidal. On the other hand she was starting to think that anything involving the Raiders was suicidal.

"Don't try that crap on me, Jackson," she snarled and waved her arms about. "I WAS dealing with him when one of your Skiffs blasted us both with rockets. YOUR damn skiff did more damage than the fox did! And what about the apache gunships?" she shouted. "I warned all of you that they would be a problem. The woman paused for a moment and got her rising anger under control. "Say, where is Alvarez?" the woman asked coldly. "Did he manage to survive?"

"The chopper pilots proved better than expected," the officer said coldly.

"Meaning you underestimated them," Strela snapped. "You expected that with all your high tech toys you'd easily shoot down the choppers. Sloppy. Never underestimate an enemy."

Lieutenant Jackson scowled at her. "We do not need the advice of a freelancer."

"Of course not," she answered sarcastically. "So give me my money and I'll leave."

"Half," the officer answered firmly. "Seeing as the operation failed."

Slowly she nodded her head. Half was better than nothing. "Agreed. Next time no more sky skiffs."

Stealth was glad to get back to the base. The feline superhero landed on the balcony at the very top of the train station. At first it had seemed odd to call the tower of the Paragon city train station home but now it felt normal. It had all the he could want and the view from the balcony was amazing; you could see the whole city. He made his way from the balcony and through the hidden, armored door that led into base proper.

He pricked his ears at the sound of a TV playing and he followed it across the large open space of the main room. His svelte humanoid, feline body moved with the subtle grace of a cheetah as he walked. Stealth made a note about getting a carpet for the floor. The marble looked great but it was as slick as glass sometimes. He used his sensitive feline ears to follow the sound to its source; the kitchen; where he was greeted by an amazing sight. On the table was an impressive array of food; Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, toast, muffins, pancakes, waffles, French toast, a small bowl of fruit, English muffins, a large mug of tea and several glasses of orange juice. On the wall next to the door hung a large, LCD television that was playing an old, Three Stooges episode. On the opposite side of the table sat Misha. The fox wore a worn bathrobe that at one time may have once been dark blue. His fur was twisted, knotted and snarled into a shapeless mass. It looked like squirrels had been nesting in it. In several spots the fur had been burned away revealing bruised and battered flesh beneath.

"Are you eating all this?" Stealth asked with amazement. "Or have you invited all of Sweden over for breakfast?"

"I'm hungry!" Misha answered between bites of food. "Very hungry. The nanites need a lot of energy to heal me up after yesterdays fight."

"Babbage must have really knocked you around," Stealth commented as he sat down at the table with a bowl of cereal, a cup of tea, a glass of orange juice and another of black current juice. "You slept for 12 hours straight. You didn't even get up to pee."

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "I took care of that problem after I woke up."

"I do not want any details." Stealth shook his head as took a strawberry from a bowl filled with fruit. The feline cut the fruit with a sharp claw and dropped the slices into the cereal. "How badly hurt are you?"

"Lots of broken bones and injuries." Misha answered. "I've been grounded for at least another 2 days. Did I miss anything important while I was out?"

"Not much. I captured some fool villain who tried to rob a bank in the Steel Canyon neighborhood."

"Who?" the fox asked as he devoured several sausages.

"He called himself the Howling Blades of Death," the feline explained.

Misha gave a yip of laughter. "That sounds like the name of a bad video game."

Stealth nodded his head slowly. "He put up a good fight but not good enough. How did your guard duty out in the desert go?"

"Rough. Military intelligence was right. The Raiders staged a major raid on the place and they brought super backup."

"A super villain?" Stealth asked and took a drink of orange juice. "Who?"

Misha finished off a pile of pancakes and started on a pile of waffles. "A woman archer going by the name of Strela. She used a bow like I do and she used it very well."

"Never heard of her." The cheetah leaned forward, over the table, "So who won the fight?"

"It was a draw," Misha answered. "We were still fighting when some idiot in a Sky skiff blasted us both with rockets. Sending us both flying." Misha waved his hands about recreating the explosion and spraying Stealth with bits of waffles and syrup.

Stealth brushed a bit of waffle off of his arm. "Sky skiff sounds like a floating garbage truck," he joked. "I can picture it floating around emptying dumpsters."

"It feels someone dropped a dumpster on me," Misha said and rubbed his side where a large bruise was visible through the singed fur. "Several of them."

"So who was winning up to that point?" the feline asked.

"I like to think I was!"

"Are you sure of that?" the cat asked with a tinge of doubt in his voice.

"Yes, that's my story and I'm sticking to it."

The feline gave a chirp of laughter and shook his head.

"And no sooner do I get back," Misha commented. "than I get a call that Babbage was up and in a Skyway. So I headed out to fight him!"

"That fight made the news!" Stealth said. "TV and radio featured the fight. Photos, videos and the obligatory interviews with witnesses."

"Was I mentioned in any of them?" Misha asked without stopping his eating.

"Oh yeah! They even spelled your name right."

The fox nodded and wagged his tail energetically. "Cool."

"What is that stuff?" Stealth asked pointing to a glass full of black liquid that sat in front of Misha. "It looks like ink."

"I don't know what it is but the nanites want me to drink it."

"It's packed with protein! Drink it!!!" the nanites explained suddenly to both of them.

Stealth bent over and examined the glass and its contents at close range. All he could make out was a black liquid with small unrecognizable bits floating in it. "What's it made from?"

"Vitamins and essentials! Drink! Drink! Drink!" They insisted and cheered on in a sing song chant. *"Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!"*

"For all we know it's made from insect eggs," The feline mumbled.

"You are not helping things Stealth," Misha commented and shot the feline a hard glance.

"Oh just drink it!"

It took her six phone calls and three hefty bribes to get the address she wanted. A short time later Strela found herself moving slowly and carefully through an industrial district on Shark Head island in the Rogue isles. Even at the best of times this was not a place one went lightly. Various neighborhoods were controlled by different gangs, including the Skulls and the Hellions. This was made worse by the workers who seemed to be in a constant state of agitation.

She turned and walked down a garbage strewn and rat infested alley dodging the piles of refuse. It smelled of rotting garbage, urine and even worse things that she did not want to identify. The alley widened into a large parking lot surrounded by tall brick buildings in varying states of decay and disrepair. In the middle of the lot was a large tractor trailer. The trailer had its sides folded down to form a large platform. On the platform was a hodgepodge of tables, racks and benches of all shapes and sizes. All were battered and grimy. A small crowd was scattered around the platform examining all the items that were displayed for sale.

Strela spotted a tall, heavily muscled man dressed in a three piece business suit. She dodged around the various shoppers noting each one and what they were doing. The black market was used by all and was generally considered a neutral area where everyone behaved themselves. Still she did not let down her guard.

"I need hand grenades, stun grenades and a good pistol," Strela ordered by way of greeting.

The man left and after a moment returned with two large boxes and a smaller one, all of which were placed on the counter. He opened the smaller box revealing a black pistol. "A Russian made 9mm Makarov pistol. It comes with 2 clips. More clips and ammo are extra."

He opened one of the two large boxes revealing that it was filled with dark green colored, metal spheres. They looked like the grenades she had used back in the Soviet Union.

"Russian F1 model hand grenades," he said. "Brand new and ready for use!"

Strela picked one up and examined it closely. The grenade looked all right but on the bottom where there should have been Cyrillic writing was nothing. "Russian?" she said and pointed to empty space with a long fingernail. "Where's the maker's stamp."

"An Afghan copy of a Russian grenade," the dealer admitted. "But still in perfect condition. The Afghans are the finest weapon makers in the world."

She nodded her head slowly. "I see," the woman said dubiously.

The man opened the last remaining box revealing a score of black colored cylinders similar to the stun grenade Misha had used on her two days before. She could not read the white lettering on the side but she did recognize the writing as Korean.

"Korean?" She asked, surprised. "North or south?"

"They are exact copies of the American M81 stun grenade," he explained.

"North or south?"

"Does it matter? They're cheap and they're available," was the blunt answer.

"You can't get any of the real American grenades?" Strela asked as she turned one over in her hands, examining it. The grenade itself did seem to be of a high quality.

A shake of the head was her answer. "No, the Pentagon keeps tight control on all of that stuff. I can obtain them for you but it will cost a lot more. I can get my hands on some German stuff."

"These will do fine," the woman answered and patted the box.

Strela heard the protest coming long before they came into sight. The growl of voices raised in protest. The woman stepped back into the shadows of a small alley and nocked an arrow to her bow. A large group of people marched into view. Tough and burly men wearing the plain clothing of miners marched into view. Some were carrying signs with slogans like 'Strike! Fair wages!' on them. Others carried torches. All were carrying hammers, knives, wrenches and all manner of tools. They were shouting as they marched. Unions were banned in the Rogue Isles under punishment of death but that did not stop the workers from organizing. Most considered the Scrapyarders to be just another gang but they had a noble purpose at heart. Something missing elsewhere in the Rogue Isles.

The woman couldn't help but feel sorry for the miners. The conditions they worked under were terrible. Archanos troops kept them down by terror and murder in a repressive state that Stalin would have admired. Arachnos was a brutal organization partly terrorist and partly an army. They controlled the Rogue Isles using methods that reminded her of the KGB back in the Soviet Union.

Strela rubbed her eyes and looked at the man leading the strike. At the head of the protest was a tall solidly built man wearing battered jeans and a plaid shirt that stood over 7 feet tall. What caught the woman's attention was that she could see right through him! She shivered and stepped backward. Strela had heard of the Ghost of Scrapyard but never expected to actually see him. The original Scrapyard had been a Super, who had led the workers for a while. At least until he had been brutally murdered by the villain Mako. The part shark - part man had slowly and brutally ripped the man apart leaving Scrapyard's blood and gore scattered over the pavement. But it seems death did not slow down the strong spirit of the man and he still tried to fight the decadent bourgeoisie controlling his people.

Old slogans drummed into her mind when she was a child came up again. "Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!" The old quote from Karl Marx came back to her unbidden.

They didn't stand a chance of success. They would only get so far before the Rogue Isles police and Arachnos troopers would fall on them. Then there would be a wild and bloody melee before the miners were all killed or scattered back to the shacks and hovels they called home.

"Better to die on your feet than live on your knees," a long dead revolutionary had said once. The line coming back to her from an otherwise forgotten political class in the army. It was a bit dated but the line was still right. It was better to die fighting than live in the abject misery they had now. With nothing to lose the miners had no choice but to fight.

She shook her head trying to dispel the old slogans and words of her youth. That was the past, when she believed all that propaganda and empty words. Her mother and grandmother had believed those words. Both had fought long and hard to protect their homeland. All she had done was protect the thieves and crooks who had controlled the Soviet Union. People who spouted off the same slogans those miners were now shouting.

The woman watched a dozen of the strikers beating a pair of Rogue Isle Police officers with calm detachment. The RIP was infamous for being cruel, brutal and corrupt and she had more than a few scars inflicted by a sadistic monster in an RIP uniform. Strela idly wondered if it was true that the RIP hired from Paragon city prisons.

Getting involved would not help. They would just keep throwing in more and more police and Arachnos troopers till all the miners were dead or had scattered. Still before that happened they could do a lot of damage and drive home the point that Arachnos did not fully control these islands. And besides it would be fun.

She took aim at a group of 10 RIP running towards the miners nightsticks up and pistols drawn. Her bow snapped and the arrow slowly arched through the air before landing in the midst of the officers. There was a loud, sharp explosion and the RIP were sent flying in all directions. Strela felt exhilaration rush through her body. This was fun!

"DEATH TO THE OPPRESSORS!"

"Did I just shout that out loud?" she asked herself.

"FEEL MY WRATH ALL YOU CAPITALIST, BOURGEOIS PIGS!"

Strela snarled in anger at the laptop that rested table in front of her. "How can there be nothing on him?"

"I got you considerable information on him," came the voice from the laptop. The owner of the voice was located somewhere else in the world. Exactly where she did not know.

"So is Misha Brightleaf his real name or not?"

"No," the hacker responded. "All rangers, special forces and commandoes have used pseudonyms since 2001 to prevent terrorist attacks on their families. And do not ask me to try and hack into the Special Operations Command database. They have very tight security and tend to react a lot more aggressively to intruders."

"Aggressive?" she asked. "How so? You're one of the top hackers in the western hemisphere."

"The last person they caught had his house attacked by a ranger platoon who blew it up along with the three buildings around it. Another one was on the receiving end of a hellfire missile."

"Wow, talk about overkill," Strela commented.

"They take security very seriously," the hacker explained. "The only ones who stand a chance are the big groups like governments or the Council."

"What of the Sky Raiders?"

"Those pirates?" the voice asked contemptuously. "They're better at stealing technology than developing it."

She laughed pondering the failed theft of the day before. "True but they do pay well."

"Oh yes!" the hacker answered cheerfully. "But don't trust them or their security."

"Of course not," the woman answered. "About Brightleaf, give me what you do know about him." In a moment the screen was filled with an assortment of files, pictures and various bits of information.

She found a picture of a rather plain looking, white skinned man with dark brown hair in an American army dress uniform. "He's human in these pics. How did he get to be part fox?"

"No idea," came the answer. "I've found no information on that. His only comment on the subject was that he had a few improvements done."

She laughed and shook her head slowly. "He does have a good sense of humor." Strela searched through the various files before pulling up an official biography obviously taken from some Paragon city web site.

Alias: Misha Brightleaf

Known Affiliations: U.S. Army/Department of defense

Rank: Staff sergeant

Powers: Archery, devices including mines and grenades.

Military Service: Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Kenya, Germany, Ethiopia and Serbia. Ranger, Purple heart, Distinguished service cross, Silver star, bronze star, Wounded six times. Twice by the Rikti. Combat infantryman badge, parachutist badge, Military Freefall Parachutist badge, Afghanistan campaign ribbon, Iraq campaign ribbon, Kosovo campaign ribbon, Rikti war ribbon.

"He served in the Rikti war?" she asked the hacker.

"Yes," he answered and paused. "In New York city. He was wounded twice. Credited with helping destroy a lander. Impressive."

"Wow. I never knew that," Strela answered in a surprisingly soft tone.

"You served," the hacker said, both commenting and asking at the same time.

"Yes!" she said sharply. "In Kiev with some good people."

"I lost a brother in Brussels," the hacker admitted softly. "I'll do more research on him for you but it will cost you a lot more."

She shook her head. "Never mind. I have the feeling that this one defends himself a lot better than most."

"Then I am off," the hacker said. "I've got more money to make." There was the sound of a door closing and she knew the hacker was gone. He had given her a large amount of information to sort through; battles fought, criminals defeated and captured. All of it helpful but nothing jumped out at her. There was little about the person, what he was like. She would have to examine it one bit at a time and slowly build up a picture of the man. Looking through the news reports from Paragon city she spotted Misha's name.

"Babbage rampage in Skyway stopped by assembled heroes," the headline read. "A rampage by the monster robot Babbage this morning was stopped by an assembled group of Superheroes." Listed among the names of people involved was Misha's.

Another site held pictures of the battle that ranged in quality from mediocre to good. Most were blurry and distorted showing fleeting glimpses of figures amidst flames, ice and debris. "Why is that woman wearing all green?" she asked staring at one image. "She looks like a refugee from a St Patrick's day party." Behind the green clad woman you could clearly see Misha. The fox was in the midst of aiming his bow at the monster. The head of the arrow he had nocked in his bow and ready to shoot was glowing a dark red.

Another picture caught her attention. It was taken on a train somewhere, probably one of the monorail cars the city had. Misha was slumped down in a seat, arms and legs spread out into whatever position they had come to rest when he had dropped into the seat. His head was resting on his chest. Laying on his knees was a large bow and quiver. The fox's eyes were closed, his ears and tail dropped down. Every single square inch of his body was covered with dirt and soot. His clothing was battered, ripped and torn and large parts of it were burnt and melted. The armor over his legs was gone completely revealing burnt fur beneath. The caption under the picture said simply; "Exhausted. After a long fight with Babbage the superhero Misha takes a much deserved rest in an unusual place."

She smiled as a humorous thought came to mind. "A hero deserves a reward."

Misha walked through the hallways following the police officer. He had been in city hall only a few times, preferring to keep his distance from the local government. "When did it arrive?" he asked.

"This morning," the woman answered. The policewoman was wearing a helmet, a full battle vest and had a pistol holstered on her belt. Even in city hall you had to be prepared for anything.

"We had it scanned several times. No explosives, no poisons, no nanotech and no magical curses or spells. It's harmless," she explained. "We get a lot of junk here all the time for various heroes so it's not surprising that you got stuff."

"Where did it come from?" Misha asked as they turned out of the corridor and into a large room.

"There was no return address on it," was the answer. "That caught our attention."

The package was resting on the table in front of him. The top already opened and folded back out of the way. Folded neatly next to the box was a large, thick blanket. Next to that was a fluffy pillow. Both pillow and blanket were dark green and had cute, little foxes embroidered on them. He ran his hands over both and he enjoyed the soft warmth. These were well made and very expensive.

"We did find this message with them," she extended her hand in which was a folded note. Misha took the piece of paper and slowly opened it. He read the paper and the short message on it.

"Pleasant dreams, my cute Foxy. Strela."