

After Shocks
by Christian O'Kane

The border of Lithuania and Kaliningrad 2012

Colonel Vasily Silanov was the first of the major officials to arrive. His MI-8 Helicopter landed in open ground some one hundred meters inside Russian territory. With him was a trio of aides and six heavily armed bodyguards. His official title was Colonel Vasily Peter Silanov, Senior Commander Special program 173. His unofficial title was Super Babysitter. He had the unenviable task of working with the Valiant Defenders of the Motherland super team. That meant working closely with Irisa whose code name is Snegurochka (Snow Maiden in English). It was never easy working with the stubborn and irascible woman but he was up to the task. The scar along the right side of his face and the artificial right hand (both a result of fighting the Rikkti) told that this was a man who had seen combat. There was a scowl on his face as he stalked towards Snow Maiden. He left muddy footprints in his wake, in spite of the fact that it hadn't rained and the ground was dry.

When he was within arm's reach the colonel and Snegurochka started arguing. In moments a light snow was falling around them. As the argument grew louder the snow and ice came down harder and thicker.

Well," Strela said in an annoyed tone. "They're at it again. Some things never change."

"You've seen this before?" Tadas asked.

Strela nodded her head slowly. "I worked with them both for over ten years."

"How long will they be like that?" Tadas asked as he looked at the two figures. The two were locked in animated discussion while snow fell around them.

Strela shrugged. "Probably not too long. They'll have it settled by the time the snow stops."

"That colonel looks familiar," Iron Wolf said slowly and calmly. "I've fought him but not in that uniform."

"He has the code name Rasputitsa," the Russian explained. "He was on Team Two for a long time. After the fall of Communism he became head of all the teams since General Filitov backed the coup. Her powers are all cold based. His are weather and cold based. Their home is the only one I've ever seen with weatherproof siding on the INSIDE."

"Their home?" Tadas asked. "They're married?"

The archer smiled and nodded her face. "Oh yes. Been married twenty years this August."

Colonel Silanov may have been the first high ranking officer there but he wasn't the first military person there. A Lithuanian infantry platoon and a Russian infantry company had arrived first (At the same time ironically). The two groups had deployed close (but not too close) to the border and had dug themselves in. Both were under strict orders to do nothing provocative. Not even to make wild gestures or talk loudly. They did have orders to fight but only if the other side attacked them first. Since neither was willing to shoot first both groups scowled at each other and dug in a little deeper.

A single U.S. Army Kiowa OH-58 Scout helicopter hovered several meters behind the Lithuanians, in plain sight. Aside from the infantry platoon it was the sole NATO unit visible but its presence hinted at other helicopters nearby, hidden. In this case two AH-64 Apache gunships hidden behind a grove of trees a kilometer back. Ten kilometers further back a pair of A10 U.S. Air force, ground attack planes flew large, slow race track shaped patterns while they waited for the order to attack.

A half kilometer behind the Russian border two MI-24 helicopters (NATO code name Hind) helicopters each with a full squad of Spetsnaz. Nearby a pair of MI-28 attack helicopters (NATO code name Havoc) hovered. All four were fully loaded with rockets, missiles and cannon shells.

The arrival of the NATO leader wasn't as flamboyant as the Russian's. A hummer came up the road moving at a modest pace. With it were a pair of Stryker armored cars each with a squad of infantry.

The actual commander of the unit was German; Lieutenant General Johann Schneider but with nationalist tensions running high already NATO thought it best to leave the Germans out of this. So the figure who stepped out of the four wheeled vehicle was British. Commander Eric William Wilkinson (Royal Navy) Second in Command NATO Special Operations unit number three. The man had earned a knighthood and artificial leg fighting the Rikti. He was wearing the camouflage fatigues common to all soldiers. Only the markings on his collar revealed his rank. The first thing Svetlana noticed was his skin color; black. Not the dark brown of someone whose ancestors came from Africa but true, fully, black as black ink black. His hair (what she could see of it under the helmet) was a shade of gray. He reminded her of a figure from some old fantasy novel. With a strong deliberate stride the Englishman made his way over to them.

Strelna stood at a respectful distance while the officer met first with the captain of the American Powered armor team. Then he met with Tadas and Iron Wolf together. Tadas explanation of events involved a lot of arm waving and bodily motions. Iron Wolf did so moving only his mouth.

Time seemed to drag on interminably. Finally the snow around the two Russians slackened and stopped. The RN officer finished listening to the Lithuanians. "Thank you," the man said.

The two colonels approached each other and stood within arm's reach. Their conversation lasted a long time and was done in soft tones that no one else could hear.

Tadas looked at the two nervously. "What are they doing?"

"Comparing notes and negotiating," Strela explained. "After that they'll split and everyone will go home."

"How do you know it will go that way?" Tadas asked without taking his eyes off the two officers.

"That's how it always happens," the Russian born archer explained.

Iron Wolf tilted his head to one side in puzzlement. "They've done this before?"

"Yes. Twice that I know of," Strela answered. "Just not so publically." She turned and looked at the Lithuanian Hero. "You think this is the first time someone has tried to start a war between NATO and Russia? The Chinese tried it back in the 60's. During the cold war Russia and the U.S. worked out certain rules," the Russian archer explained without taking her eyes off the two officers. "If fighting between the supers got too hot or personal they would have a meeting before it led to a full war."

"Your Cold War seemed to have a lot of rules," Iron Wolf commented. "Wars aren't supposed to have rules."

"The whole idea of the rules was to prevent a war," Tadas commented. "And it succeeded."

"Barely," Strela muttered. "With so many nuclear weapons aimed both ways there was no choice. Learn to get along or wipe out millions and turn Europe and North America into radioactive rubble. During the 70's Minute Man on the U.S. team and Bereza in the Soviet Defenders turned the cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union into a personal feud. They fought each other almost daily. One such duel escalated and wound up involving all the members of both teams. It also laid waste to a full city block in Emden Germany. At that point a secret meeting was held between the Russian commander and the American one. A few minutes of talking, yelling and arm waving and an agreement was reached. The Russian was reassigned to Siberia and a spot as far from the Americans as possible. Minute Man was sent to the desert training base in New Mexico with the understanding he wouldn't be sent to Europe for at least five years."

"It's a wonder that we avoided a nuclear war," Tadas commented.

"They came VERY close several times," Strela said calmly and shook her head. "Humanity has always been its own worst enemy." She looked back at the two officers.

The Russian colonel produced a computer tablet. He tapped on the screen for several moments before showing it to the Englishman.

Commander Wilkinson looked at the screen and read it for a moment. Then he pointed to a part of it and nodded his head. The officer reached into a pocket and produced a small memory stick which he handed to the Russian.

"Strela!" Tadas said excitedly and pointed past her.

Strela turned around to see the form of Snegurochka stalking towards her. There was a cold, angry look the super's face and wind whipped about her body.

"You never answered my question," Snow Maiden said coldly as she walked up to Strela. "What are you doing here?"

"I did answer it," Strela said keeping a few steps back from the other Russian. She ignored the snow that started to fall around them. "I'm here to keep you two fools from doing something stupid."

"How much did they pay you?" Snegurochka snarled. "Mercenary. Rogue."

Svetlana leaned closer. "Irisa, do you honestly think I did all of this just for money?"

"Yes," Irisa answered flatly.

Ten years ago she would have punched the woman or at least slapped her but time had given Svetlana wisdom. She sighed deeply and shook her head slowly. "It was never about the money. Not now, not yesterday, certainly not eleven years ago."

Irisa stepped back and waved her arms about, sending ice and snow flying. "What was it about? Why did you turn your back on your country?"

"My country?" Svetlana responded with more force than she had intended. "YOU MEAN THOSE BASTARDS WHO RULED RUSSIA LIKE THE CZARS?" She shouted as the anger rose up in her suddenly. "The government that cheated, lied, stole and killed anyone who opposed them?"

"YOU BETRAYED RUSSIA," Snow Maiden shrieked and the wind started whip up around them both.

In unison the soldiers guarding the two colonels (both Russian and NATO) all turned and looked at the two arguing women. Slowly they moved, putting themselves between the officers and the two Russians. Nearby the American powered armor team slowly started herding people back out of the way.

Commander Wilkinson's eyes grew wider as a nervous look crossed his face. Colonel Silanov rubbed his forehead as he shook his head slowly. There was an annoyed look on his face.

Tadas took a step toward the two women but Iron Wolf put a hand on his shoulder stopping him. "No. Don't get between those two. They need to work this out themselves."

"The Soviets betrayed Russia," Svetlana growled. "I got tired of working for those thieves and killers. If I was going to steal I was going to do it for myself."

"You took an oath," Irisa said.

"I took an oath to protect RUSSIA," Svetlana responded. "Not the Soviets." She leaned closer to Snow Maiden. "They betrayed Russia. Not me. I got tired of working for the thieves and murderers in Moscow. Iron Wolf opened me to the truth. Watching him defend his people."

"You betrayed your country because of that wolf?" Snow Maiden snarled.

"IT WASN'T JUST ABOUT HIM!" Strela screamed and pointed to Iron Wolf. "It was about all the people of Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia. People who were murdered by the Communists."

"During the Great Patriotic war the people of the Soviet Union lost 13 million dead," Svetlana tapped Irisa on the chest. "Do you know how many were murdered by the Communists? Twenty million. TWENTY MILLION! THEY KILLED MORE THAN THE FUCKING NAZI'S!" She shrieked her face bright red with rage as her whole body shook. "AND WE HELPED THEM!." Strela took a few ragged steps backward as the anger left her. Replaced by shame and guilt. "And we helped them. We helped them stay in power," she said in a surprisingly soft whisper. "We took their money, we took the fancy cars, the dachas, the western clothes."

The older Russian's face lost its hostile look and seemed calm. Like a snow covered field after a snow storm. "Someone had to protect the people even if the government wouldn't or couldn't. What would it have been like if we hadn't been there to protect the people? Who would have stopped that snow elemental that attacked Kirovsk if we hadn't been there?" Irisa said in a surprisingly soft, clear tone. "How many would have died if we hadn't stopped that lunatic in Petersburg? How many would have died from that nerve gas?"

"If we had wanted to truly protect the people we would have gone after the real criminals in the Kremlin," Svetlana responded. She took a deep breath and tried to control her emotions. "I never gave up on the people themselves. I fought FOR the people and NOT for the Communists. I protected the people."

Irisa didn't respond but scowled at Svetlana for a moment. "Where were you when the Rikti attacked?"

"Kiev," Strela snapped.

"We needed you in Moscow," Irisa said.

"I was needed in Kiev more," Svetlana answered.

Snow Maiden scowled then turned and walked away without another word. She was some three meters away when the woman stopped. "I see that you captured Mahrk last week," she said without turning around.

"Yes I did," Strela answered a little confused and still very mad.

"It was well done," Snow Maiden commented. "It settled many old scores."

"Thank you," Strela said.

Snow Maiden started walking again without saying another word.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I took him alive?" Svetlana asked the back of the Russian super. "Everyone else has."

Irisa turned her head and there was an amused smile on her face. "I already know why." With that she turned and walked away.

Svetlana stood there for a long moment watched the other woman walk away. Irisa quickly made her way over to her husband. The two talked in soft whispers for a moment. Then they kissed and hugged. The two headed towards his waiting helicopter.

Svetlana watched Irisa as she got into the helicopter and the door closed behind her. Only then did Strela relax and the atmosphere in whole area lightened noticeably. She felt her anger slowly melting away.

The MI-8 took off in a swirl of rotors and a blast of air. It turned and headed off south. Soon it vanished from sight. Next to go were the MI-24 and MI-28 helicopters followed by the OH-58 and her attendant AH-64's. The A10's kept up their holding pattern for a few minutes before being ordered to return to their Lithuanian air force (ex-Soviet) airbase.

The Russian infantry company and the Lithuanian platoon (by agreement) both pulled out at the same time amidst the clatter of treads. the roar of powerful engines and the smell of diesel smoke.

Soon only Svetlana, Iron Wolf and Tadas were alone in the clearing. "That went better than I expected it to," Strela said as she looked in the direction the MI-8 had gone as if to reassure herself that Irisa was really gone.

"Is anything with her ever easy?" Tadas asked.

"No," Both Strela and Iron Wolf answered in unison.

"But there was no fighting and a minimum of screaming," Strela commented. "That was a definite improvement."

Iron Wolf nodded his head in agreement. He too was looking in the direction of the MI-8.

Tadas had a confused look on his face. "You were expecting a fight?"

"Oh yes," Strela answered. "A big one. Nothing with her is ever easy. I've never had a conversation with her that didn't involve some sort of confrontation. This one was louder than most but not as violent."

The sound of jet engines filled the air and an A-10 attack plane came into view flying barely thirty meters above the tree line. It flew over them keeping just inside the Lithuanian side of the border. This close to the ground it was easy to see the massive 30mm cannon in the nose and that both wings were fully loaded with Maverick, Hellfire missiles. A pair of the new Coyote class missiles were tucked close to the fuselage.

"So," Iron Wolf asked slowly as he watched the large, ungainly looking but deadly aircraft fly past. "What next for you?"

"What?" Strela asked. She looked away from the departing plane and back to the two Lithuanians.

"Russia is no longer your home even though Snegurochka refuses to admit that." Gelezinis Vilkas said slowly. "You are welcome in Lithuania but I don't see you staying here either."

She gave a wry smile. "True. I'm not sure where I want to go. The Rogue Isles never felt like home no matter how hard I tried."

"NATO owes you a debt, Lithuania owes you a debt, Russia owes you a debt and Longbow owes you a great debt," Tadas said. "I'm sure one of them could arraign safe passage to anyplace you want."

"Where will you go?" Iron Wolf asked.

Svetlana pondered for a moment then her face broke into an enigmatic smile.

SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe), Casteau Belgium

General Joseph Stavros SACEUR listened quietly till Colonel Van De Velde finished his report. The U.S. Air Force general was Supreme Allied Commander Europe (Also known as SACEUR). As such he was the highest ranking officer in charge of NATO's military forces. Twenty years as an officer in the American military in general and the air force in particular had not prepared him for this command. It was not the task of dealing with the militaries (and

governments) of 28 countries. Although that was difficult at times. What really hit him hard was the sheer responsibility involved. He commanded Europe's military. Literally. Under him in the chain of command was 3.5 million active duty soldiers and airmen of twenty eight countries. Decisions he made (even the most trivial seeming) could affect the world for decades. Worse it could change the course of civilization.

People still talked and criticized how one of his predecessors General Fullerson had badly handled the Rikti invasion back in 2002. When the portals had appeared he had placed NATO on full alert but had recommended to the NATO council against blindly attacking them. He opted to wait and see. That proved to be a mistake. These were not friendly aliens. They were here to attack and conquer. But he wasn't sure how else Bob could have handled it given the limited information. And he wasn't the only leader who took a wait and see attitude. Still the memorial out in front of the headquarters was a harsh reminder of what happened if SACEUR made a mistake. He put such old arguments out of his mind and turned to the task at hand. "What about this mercenary you hired?"

"She is not a mercenary," Van De Velde countered in clipped tones. The Belgian officer was standing a few feet from the American. Unlike the general who was wearing a standard dress uniform the black haired, Belgian officer was dressed in camouflage fatigues.

Standing next to the colonel was a brown haired man wearing the uniform of a German army Lieutenant General Johann Schneider. As Commander, NSOC (NATO Special Operations Command) he lead all of NATO's special units. These included not just the British SAS, German Kommandos and American Rangers and Green beret but also the official NATO Super team. All reported to him.

"If she isn't a mercenary than what is she?" Stavros asked.

The Belgian officer smiled. "Blue side or Red Side. She hasn't figured that out yet."

The American scowled at the Colonel. "That is not an answer," The general said in clipped tones.

The colonel's face hardened. "Svetlana Malenchinsky was born in 1964 into a world of contradictions," Van De Velde said calmly. "She was brought up in a world that told her how perfect and fair the Soviet Union was. How great it was and how everyone was happy. She was told that the Soviet Supers protected the innocent and fought the evil capitalists. When Svetlana became a Super she found out the truth. The Soviet Defenders were supposed to uphold justice and punish criminals. But the biggest group of criminals was the Soviet government itself. At some point she decided to stop stealing for the Soviet Union and steal for herself. She's actually said that. Used those very words. Several times."

"After leaving the Soviet team she robbed a bank in Minsk," the colonel explained. "A week later she helped rescue people hurt in a train derailment. A month later she smashed a terrorist attack on a museum. When the coup was attempted in Moscow she was there fighting against it. Protecting people. She is wanted for several bank robberies, a jewelry store robbery and for

hijacking a tractor trailer. And yet she was recently involved in rescuing a score of people being held hostage and destroyed a Council base in the process. Strela also gave us the information that let the American navy capture a Council Q ship last month. And Strela was the one who brought down The Fist last week. That settled a lot of old scores. The Russian government is offering a large reward to get their hands on him."

"She took him alive!" Lieutenant General Johann Schneider commented speaking for the first time. Till now the officer had been content to let his subordinate speak. He shook his head. "Not sure why. I would have killed him."

The American looked at the German with a puzzled expression. "I've never heard you talk like that. You've always shown mercy."

"The Fist had another name before the coup," the Germans said coldly. "Soviet Justice."

General Joseph Stavros stiffened. "I know that name. He was the one who killed those people during the coup attempt?"

"Yes sir," the German answered. "Strela was the one who stopped him back then. She is credited with saving many lives."

The American looked at the Belgian officer. "Why did you hire her? Certainly there were other freelance Supers around."

"We did not have the luxury of time," Van De Velde responded calmly. "Strela was available and she is actually acquainted with both Gelezinis Vilkas and Snegurochka."

"Strela had met peacefully with Gelezinis Vilkas the day before," the Belgian man explained. "And she was on the old Soviet Defenders team with Irisa before it broke up. She actually talked the two of them out of a fight. That's more than anyone else has been able to do."

"That is an impressive accomplishment," the American said with the faint trace of a smile. He turned and looked out the (armored, bullet proof, blast proof, category 6 energy weapon proof) window at the courtyard beyond. In the center of the courtyard stood a tall flagpole with the blue flag of NATO flying from it. Around it were flagpoles flying the flags of all its member nations. Also visible was the tall, granite monolith that honored all those killed in the Rikti invasion. "Do you believe someone is trying to provoke a war between NATO and Russia?"

"Yes sir," Lieutenant General Johann Schneider answered. "We had a most helpful exchange of information with Colonel Silanov. It confirmed what we already suspected. More importantly now both Gelezinis Vilkas and Snegurochka understand that. Thankfully."

"Who is responsible?" SACEUR asked coldly. "Who is trying to start world war 3?"

"We are not sure about that," the German responded. "But Snegurochka gave us a good lead with the Belaya Gvardiya."

General Stavros tried to remember what he had learned during his Russian language course several years ago. "White Guard? Who are they?"

"A radical terrorist group sir," the German answered. "Bent on restoring the Czar to power in Russia."

"CZARISTS?" The American exclaimed, amazed. "As in a have a czar rule Russia?"

"Yes sir," The Belgian responded.

The American closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed the back of his neck. "Czarist Russia was just as bad as the Communists that replaced them. Why would anyone want them back?"

"There is a great nostalgia," the German responded. "For what they see as 'The good old days'. Some people want to go back to what they saw as a mystical golden age before world war 1. It's all fantasy but some people are willing to kill to see their dream of the throne restored to Moscow."

"Terrorists are always willing to kill for whatever their cause is. Why haven't I heard of this particular group before now?" The commanding general asked.

"We thought them a minor threat," the Germans responded. "We've not had a confirmed attack outside of Russia. Till now."

"And here I thought the Supers were the strangest things I've seen." The American's face hardened into a cold, iron stare that could make even Iron Wolf flinch. "Find the bastards responsible for this, whoever they are and stop them. Kill them."

NEW BAT SANCTUARY CREATED!

The president of Lithuania released the following statement today: "It is my great pleasure to announce the creation of the Gaiziunai National Bat Sanctuary. It is my hope that this will help and protect our endangered species. So that our children and grandchildren can enjoy a world with these fascinating creatures in it."

In these times of great tension and threat of war it is a pleasure to see that the people of Lithuania have spared the time to see to the precious wildlife they have been gifted with. Exact numbers are unknown but it is believed that one to two thousand bats have taken up residence in an old Soviet Defender Supers bunker located in Gaiziuna. The entire facility has been closed to all visitors. Seeing as the old Soviet force field and automated gun mounts are still active local officials are not seriously worried about people breaking in and disturbing the bats.

World Wildlife Fund website

NATO confirmed today that in spite of the recent tensions Exercise Saber Strike 2012 will take place on schedule. "We will continue the exercise to show our determination to support and defend all our member nations from any threats. Regardless of who or what they are. But as always NATO remains committed to keeping the peace," General Joseph Stavros Supreme Allied Commander Europe said today in a press conference.

SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe), Casteau Belgium