



By Michael Burke

“Where the hell is he, and why did I listen to him?,” she murmured under her breath.

She shouldn’t have let him stay behind. But she always listened to him, she couldn’t help herself. He was *always* right in these situations, and *always* knew what to do. It didn’t matter though. She was pissed. She knew he was alive, she could still feel him. She never could explain it, she just knew. And right now, in this moment, she knew he was running.

“Come on babe, hurry up.”

Through her headset, she could sense the pilot’s urgency, repeatedly telling her they could not wait. “He will be here, I know it. He’s coming, just a few more minutes,” she frantically declared over their obvious frustration and disbelief.

Then she heard, “Just another minute, my love.”

She had met Zane several years before the Fall. The connection was instantaneous and something neither of them could deny. From the beginning, she could always sense him and what was going through his head, she remembered when he broke his hand and hers had swollen up. People told them they were crazy, but who cared, they knew the truth. It was love at first sight.

A distant crack of gunfire, high caliber, snapped her out of her daze, “Come on Zane, hurry up.” She briefly glanced through the open fuselage of the plane. *Thirty-two, not bad for one day.* Nowadays, any life saved was a big deal, but dammit, not at the expense of his. *Where are you?* She brought her rifle to her shoulder and scanned the wood line. *Nothing, dammit.*

“Sasha,” the pilot clamored over the radio, “you know they are going to be on us, we have to

go.”

She let out a sigh and stepped off the ramp onto the cold, wet mud. She wasn't leaving without him, and was about to tell the pilots to take off when she heard one of them in her headset again, “Get back on plane!” She whirled around and scanned the woodline one more time. There he was, 500 meters away and hauling ass. She could see by the fear on his face that he was running for a reason.

She stepped back onto the C-130J ramp, crouched down, and scanned the woodline behind him. *Motorcycle, two combatants.* She led them with her modified FN SCAR and fired. *One down.* Zane stopped mid-sprint to help her stop his pursuers. *Not enough time, run babe, I got it,* was all she thought. He turned and started running again.

“He's coming, start your roll!” she yelled to the pilots.

Sasha brought the rifle to her shoulder again as another vehicle began to emerge from the wood line. Zane had always taught her to go for the driver first. She took him out with a quick, three round burst as the vehicle swerved and came to a stop.

The C-130J started picking up speed on the dirt runway. Zane was 200 meters out now and she needed to make sure nothing would slow him down. She started to pick off the combatants one by one, reloading as she scanned for her next victim. It was amazing how good she had become at this. Early on in their relationship, he had said she was a natural, she just refused to believe it.

He also told her more times than she could remember that he wanted no one else protecting his ass when the shit hit the fan. The plane was picking up speed and she could see he was running out of steam, who knows how long he had been running. God, he hated to run, he would complain about that later. She couldn't help but smile.

He was less than a hundred meters now, but the plane was starting to pull away. Sasha focused on her task and knew he would find the energy to cover the distance. *You can do it babe, I will jump if you don't get to this ramp.* She then heard him yell “dammit!” even over the roar of the engines, she loved how she could do that, like she had said it to him.

Zane found a renewed burst of speed and was within a couple feet of the ramp; she could have reached out to help him, but instead chose to let him finish his mad dash to the finish line on his own. She wanted him to know she wasn't happy about this situation he had gotten them in. As he made the final leap and walked towards her she could tell what he

was thinking.

“Brat,” Zane mumbled, not entirely under his breath.

Zane simultaneously grabbed the aircraft with one hand, Sasha’s waist with the other as the plane rotated airborne...it was now entirely up to the pilots to get them out of this mess. They were safe, for now.

Still holding her tightly, he pulled her in closer and gave her a deep kiss. Sasha could feel the heat coming off of him and see the steam rising from his shoulders and neck. His lips were parched, his mouth dry. She reached into her cargo pocket and pulled out a bottle of water, took the lid off and handed it to him. He quickly glanced around the aircraft while gulping down the water, counting under his breath.

“Thirty-two,” he mouthed.

She nodded, “There was a lot more.”

She hated how he did that. It didn’t matter the number, it was never enough. He motioned to her to hand him the handset cable. Plugging in, she could hear him say, “Thanks for the ride, boys.” He always said that, without fail. After saying a couple of other things she couldn’t hear, he unplugged and stored the cable on the side of the aircraft. Grabbing her hand, he made his way to the front of the plane, stopping a couple times to talk to the rescued passengers.

As they walked hand-in-hand to the front of the plane, Sasha amazed herself with how surprisingly comfortable she was with the pilot’s combat maneuvering just above the treeline. She remembered a time where she hated flying. Vividly recalling a time in first class on a transatlantic flight to Ireland, she nearly had a panic attack over minor turbulence 40,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean. Humorous now, but certainly not at the time, she especially recalls Zane haphazardly saying, “Don’t worry love, one way or another the plane will land, even if in a couple pieces.” Sasha gave him the cold shoulder the rest of that flight.

Now, she barely noticed. Sasha knew they were flying hundreds of miles per hour, barely over the trees and mountains, turning violently to avoid the hunter planes and radar systems looking for them. Zane’s rescue cost them thirty-five minutes on the ground, they had drawn a lot of attention.

As they continued to the flight deck, she could visibly see that his late-night run through the

forest had not been kind to him or his uniform. His pants were torn in several places and his plate carrier was soaked through with sweat. The team had gathered around the steps to the flight deck, passing around what she assumed was a canteen full of whiskey. Mark extended the cup to Zane, he naturally waved it off with a flick of the wrist. He did, however, slap all of them on the shoulder and give them words of encouragement.

Sasha watched everyone on the team intently as he did this, in disbelief of all the things this team, no, this family, had been through together. She trusted every single one of them, even stubborn Jason, who had planted his feet against her joining when she was brought onto the team. During one heated exchange, he made the mistake of calling her a “dumb bitch.” She resolved that quickly by breaking his nose in two places. Since that day, they tolerated each other personally, but respected each professionally...she knew he would have her back when push came to shove. Equally, she learned a valuable lesson that day, this team respected two things: independent thinking and strength.

As they got to the base of the flight deck ladder, Zane stepped to the side so she could go first, grabbing a handful of her ass as he helped her up, whistling as he did. Even after seven years, it never failed, he still grabbed her ass whenever he got the chance.

The copilot glared back at them as they stepped onto the flight deck. Sasha could tell he was none too pleased. “Sorry Justin,” she mouthed as he turned and looked back at the controls. Zane entered the already cramped space behind her and bent forward to get a look out of the forward windows. Even though it was pitch-black outside, they could see the silhouette of trees and hills. *We are so low.*

The pilot didn’t even notice their presence, too focused on keeping them alive, working the pedals and the yoke. She asked Justin how long until they would be safely back on the ground. “About 1-hour, *or*, a couple minutes if they get a lock on us,” he retorted. Grabbing Zane by the arm, she motioned for him to follow her through the door at the back of the flight deck bulkhead, he followed and stopped to say something to Justin, replying that they were safe, for now. Thanks.

Squeezing through the door, she motioned to Zane, and he sat with her in a corner of the cargo compartment, out of sight and away from the rest of the team. He reached under one of the seats and pulled out a metal box. Grabbing the box, he handed it to Sasha and opened another. “Always have your magazines full,” he frequently told her and the kids. She knew he was right, he was *always* right, but all she wanted to do in this moment was wrap her arms around him.

She sat down beside him, mimicking him and pulling out the empty mags. They sat there loading the mags, lost in their own thoughts. Suddenly, he stopped what he was doing and leaned over to give her a kiss, "Good shooting back there," he said, "I love you." Smirking, she replied, "Thanks, love you too." As they finished loading their magazines, she could not help but be a little disgusted by his words, "good shooting," as if they had just left the shooting range and not taken human lives.

What a world they live in, sitting here on a C-130, loading ammunition into a magazine after rescuing thirty-two people from slavery, or worse.

When he was done, he stood up and flipped the tabs on the side of his armor. She stood up with him, knowing he needed help getting the armor off his shoulder. It had to be sore as hell. After pulling it off and setting it on the floor, she moved over to his right shoulder to have a look.

"I'm fine," he protested.

"Sure you are, just let me look," she replied sarcastically.

As she rolled up the sleeve, she could see the bandage was covered in blood and sweat. She opened the locker on the bulkhead and grabbed the first aid kit. As she pulled out new gauze and tape, almost mindlessly, she couldn't help but notice how commonplace this routine had become. Pulling off the old bandage, she could see the muscle, "You ripped it again." He nodded and sat down.

Sasha reached back into the locker and grabbed out the sewing kit, long gone were the days of proper medical supplies. She heard him grunt as she poured some rubbing alcohol on the wound. Trying to thread the needle, she realized how much the plane was moving. She leaned into the light to try and see what she was doing. As the plane banked, she lost her balance a little and he grabbed her by the waist. Reaching over her shoulder, he took the needle and thread, setting it on the desk, "Later, not really up for this right now." Zane resolved to putting a bandage on it, fastened with a couple shreds of duct tape.

Following suit, Zane reached up and undid the tabs to her armor, lowering it to the ground. Sasha racked their rifles on top of one of the countless cargo crates as he sat back in a seat and motioned her to join him. Sitting in between his legs, wrapping his arms around the front of her, they just sat there enjoying the embrace as the plane turned and banked. She knew the hum of the engines would put him to sleep almost instantly, so she turned her head and gave him a kiss. Moments later, she felt him twitch and fall asleep.

Normally, she would be jealous...if he stopped moving for just a minute or two, he was guaranteed to rack out. It always amazed her. But nowadays, she would find herself doing the same. Not tonight though, she was lost in her thoughts, wondering when a good time to tell him was, she knew she needed to but in doing so, it would make it real. Something she had wanted so bad in the past now seemed to be a sentence, something that did not seem as special in the world they currently lived in. They had each other though, had the kids, and they were alive...too many people were not so lucky, hell, no one was so lucky.

That did offer Sasha comfort. That, and being wrapped in Zane's arms once again. She knew that no matter what happened, she would be safe, he would take care of her...he had done so countless times over the years. She smiled as she heard him snore a little, and readjusted against him so that his pistol would stop digging into her hip.

She must have drifted to sleep without noticing. The next thing she remembered was the landing gear cycling down and the aircraft starting its descent. They lucked out today, no excessive evasive maneuvers or unexpected surprises. As the lumbering Hercules skidded across the runway, Zane woke up and instinctively wrapped his arms around Sasha.

"You help the team get the cargo unloaded," Zane announced, "I'll go back to HQ and check in... meet you at the house in thirty?"

"Ok," she said. Even though she hated being separated, she knew that it was the best use of their time. She hated going to headquarters, even more than she hated the separation. Jacob would be there and she hated how he talked to her man.

"Think Francis is there?" he asked.

"Of course, he always is when we are out."

"Okay, I'll bring him home." As the engines slowly cut out on the tarmac, he opened the side door and turned, "I love you, 'hot stuff', see you in a little while."

Mike S. Burke is a regular contributor to FTGN and hosts a weekly podcast with guests who are striving to be better humans in a variety of disciplines, titled "Always in Pursuit." Find him on Instagram @alwaysinpursuit20.

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