

His name was Valery Antonov, and for the eleventh time that month, he had realized his greatest dreams. The fox strode out of the unit barracks, scarf wrapped closely around his neck with his helmet at his side, and hopped down the grainy stairs and off onto the ground. He calmly surveyed the firebase with hawklike precision, eyes taking in every detail, and then set off in a brisk pace towards the aviation strip.

For once again, his paws would pass down the dusty, sand-ridden runway towards the neatly lined rows of Mi-24 attack helicopters and once again, Valery Antonov would take to the skies.

Things hadn't always been as simple as this. He had wanted to fly since he was just a kit, but most of his prior life had been a long period of tortured existence on the ground. His eyes had always been on the sky in one way or another, but even when he had finally made it into the aviation academy he wasn't airborne for a fraction of what he had craved. They had held him back for so many of those four long years, wasting almost every ounce of his potential by insisting that whenever he flew it would always be under the careful eye of an instructor and a dozen more meddling supervisors on the ground, but that was nothing in comparison to his days flying air defense.

Those had been nearly three years of soul crushing boredom. Mundane patrols, constant cycles of takeoffs, landings and flight patterns; every day in defense was nearly identical, every hour consisted of the sheer, mind numbing restrictiveness that flying so deep in his homeland demanded. It almost drove a pilot insane...

Valery smirked. No, it wasn't flight that he craved so badly, it was all the freedom that came with it, and here... here he at least had that.

And like so many blessings in a soldier's career, it was all thanks to war.

He would have transferred the second the rebels' first shots were fired if it hadn't been for all his ties with his former position, but in hindsight, it was for the best. At the very least, it had given him more time to spend with his sweet vixen, Eva, and more than anyone, she had needed that choice. She had missed him so dearly during his years away at the academy and air defense, and their short time together before he was fully transferred had been wonderful for her.

But now she missed him even more. At least flying air defense was relatively safe; sweet Eva now lived with the fear that everyday, her love could return home in a coffin.

Valery frowned as that thought occurred to him; he always had felt guilty about that. He needed to write to her again, but he kept losing track of days in the sheer excitement of combat life. How long had it last been since he last mailed her? Two weeks? Three? A month? They had promised on one a week, both knowing that it was unrealistic, but for the first few months at least he had tried. Now all he had to show for that was the stack of unanswered letters and stationary on his bunk...

He swore under his breath. Was he already forgetting her? No, no, it couldn't be that. Distraction was normal for soldiers on the front, and he'd be damned sure to get a letter out as soon as he finished today's flight mission. They had a lot to catch up on: his promotions, activity on the front, a few of the friends he'd made... and he was wholeheartedly determined that she'd share every last detail with her- that was a promise to his lovely little vixen.

A pair of Sukhoi-17 fighters suddenly tore over the firebase and curved into a wide sweeping turn near

the end of the landing strip. Dual rocket pods and AGMs glistened beneath their wings, and Valery watched as the flight raced towards Sarmanian city until they disappeared into little more than a glimmer of metal. He frowned. Sarmanian was supposed to technically be under their control, but within the past few months that had become little more than a cynical joke among his fellow soldiers. The city was a rebel infested hell more miserable than anywhere else in this miserable excuse for a country, and worse, the enemy guerrillas had become devilishly good at disguising themselves as civilians.

His country was no longer fighting the enemy they had at the beginning of the war. Every day, the rebels received Western equipment, vehicles, and tanks, was flowing into enemy hands, and because of it, their attacks had been steadily becoming more frequent and effective. Casualties on both sides had risen beyond command's worst expectations, and if they were sending in Sukhois, then his comrade soldiers must have gotten into one hell of a firefight...

Valery groaned and flattened his ears; by some twisted stroke of misery, Sarmanian was just where he was headed next.

The fox wrapped his flight jacket around his body and trotted across another runway, tail hanging close behind his legs. Those rebel bastards were getting too ambitious lately, and if those Su-17s had been any indication, he was going to have his paws full. He didn't mind flying Sarmanian on a calm day, it beat his air defense years one thousand to one, but today was obviously something else. You had to be insane or suicidal to want to go to Sarmanian on a 'hot' day, and today looked very, very hot indeed.

Valery shrugged. What was he supposed to expect? Flying face first into shit was just what they paid him for, and he forced a slim grin onto his face. Good thing he was one of the very best.

Warm, sandy desert wind began to sweep across the flat airfield and washed up against the rows of waiting Mi-24s. Valery wrapped his scarf across his muzzle and pushed up through the dust. His helicopter was just a few more meters away, and after several more heavy steps, he stopped before his aircraft, Olga 3. He couldn't help but beam with pride.

As far as attack helicopters went, the Mi-24 was an ugly bird. Built to fill the role of a gunship carrier, the body of the aircraft didn't seem able to make up its mind about which one it would prefer to be. The bulging, two-person cockpit was positioned right above a Yak-3 gatling gun and other sensory equipment, and dominated the front nose of the aircraft. Twin rocket launchers sat close behind next to a rack of Spiral AGM missiles, and mounted on stubby wings near the aircraft's rear. Combat wise, the Mi-24 was as fearsome as any other bird, and the mere sight of one was often enough to send most rebels scurrying for cover.

But the aircraft's offensive half ended there. The rest of the Mi-24 was built around a windowed transport compartment capable of holding around 8 soldiers, or in this case, a double load of extra munitions. This gave the aircraft's rear a fat, sluggish appearance, and made the Mi-24 even uglier than it already was; admittedly quite a feat.

Indeed, she may not have been much to look at, but to Valery, this Mi-24 was his, appearance and all. He had nicknamed Olga 3 'Natasha,' after a particularly bitchy aunt from Eva's family. He figured it was a fitting title for such a machine, and it had even allowed him to share a precious laugh with his love over a letter or two. Natasha had been his for as long as he'd been stationed here, and by now he

could probably fly her blindfolded. Valery smirked; that'd be quite a bet if his superiors would allow him to do something that stupid, and best of all, he was pretty sure he'd come out the winner.

The pilot ran a tender paw against the cockpit glass and leaned over to begin his preflight checks. Half out of superstition and the rest out of habit, he always arrived early to examine his bird. Olga 3 wasn't scheduled for takeoff for another half hour or more, and the fox waltzed around the helicopter with the grace of a dancer, carefully checking down to every last inch. He continued for about 15 more minutes before giving the helicopter a satisfactory pat with the conclusion that Natasha was as air worthy as ever.

Well that was that. Valery opened his jaws in a wide yawn and leaned against Olga 3's fuselage. Now all he had to do was wait...

His eyes lazily turned up to the cloud-dotted midday sky as his thoughts began to wander. At least the weather was nice. Any day where you didn't sweat your pelt off was practically heavenly in a wasteland like this, and the cooling, sand-filled breeze was more than welcome for it. He could even leave his jacket buttoned.

He started drawing patterns out of the clouds before the distant, almost muted rumble of diesels began to echo across the airfield. Valery raised an ear; they were moving more troops into the city, no doubt. Those sorry bastards at the front could use all the help they could get, and he watched as a few transport trucks and APCs started rolling past several runways away.

He counted five trucks, two APCs, and a few more assorted vehicles before one of the transports took a sudden, hasty turn onto his airstrip. Valery checked his watch. That would have to be his gunner, Dmitri Rodinski, right on time at ten minutes before takeoff, and he shifted back on his boots just as the vehicle came to a squeaking halt in front of Olga 3.

"Thank you, comrades!" the gunner's voice called out from the rear of the truck, and a pair of legs emerged from the canopy. Dmitri shuffled to jump down, but right when he was halfway out the driver rammed the vehicle in gear and mashed the pedal, causing the wolf to tumble out into the sandy road.

A roar of laughter burst from the truck, and Dmitri sprung up to his paws and raced after them, a massive smile on his face. As usual, it was all a good joke.

"Damn you, Sergey!" he yelled after them, "That's the last time I'm taking rides from you!"

Dmitri kept up the chase for a few more seconds before the soldiers disappeared in a cloud of thick black diesel and the truck accelerated away. He kept jogging for a few more seconds, then stopped and turned to walk back to Olga 3. Valery watched with a thin smirk. Dmitri certainly did have a way with the ground soldiers...

"I can only imagine how drunk you were when you agreed on transportation, Dmitri," the fox joked, "You should try walking next time. Much healthier."

"And miss inspiring our brave comrades on the front? Never!" Dmitri gave a small patriotic salute and swung up next to his pilot before lowering his voice, "Besides, I could have almost sworn they'd let me fully dismount that time. Clever little bastards."

Valery snorted, "The day Sergey let's you reach the ground in peace is the day we win this war; no sooner," he gave the wolf a hearty pat on the shoulder and began preparing Olga 3 for takeoff, "Mark my words."

Dmitri laughed and began rifling through his equipment. He had been on the front the day the fighting had begun, and had hopped across several helicopters and pilots until finally settling down with Valery. The two worked fairly well together, and by some rarely shown stroke of wisdom, command allowed good teams to stay that way.

But as far as wolves' appearances went, Dmitri was on the lower end of the spectrum. He had cloud-white fur and a strong, slender body, but his long face and muzzle were dominated by a very large square nose and rounded off with a pair of oversized blocky ears. He sometimes looked like a giant puppy with that innocent, youthful face, and admittedly, Valery wasn't above imagining him as such. The fox was a few years older and pilots were always the superiors in a two man helicopter; it was only natural.

But Dmitri quickly proved he needed none of that. What he lacked in looks, he made up for in sheer, calculating skill. He was without a doubt one of the finest shooters the fox had ever had the pleasure of flying with, and could shoot those other snot-nosed, twitchy-fingered idiots out of the sky with one finger.

Yes, Dmitri could hold his own in the gunner's seat against anyone or anything, period. Was it any small amount of luck that he'd managed to get paired with one of the squadron's best pilots?

"So we're going to Sarmanian, eh? Looks like we'll have our mouths full." Dmitri called out from the other side of the helicopter. That was just a guess; it was the pilots who received the briefing orders informed their crew.

"Where else? It's the normal stuff: search and destroy and ground support," he paused, "If only we could go somewhere quiet, today, comrade. If I didn't know any better, I'd say I'm getting tired of being shot at."

"Psssh," Dmitri loudly jeered, "How do you expect us to win a war with an attitude like that? Just be happy you aren't riding to the front with Sergey and his boys, eh? We've got it lucky."

He was right, of course. War wasn't more hellish for anyone than his courageous comrades fighting face to face with those enemy savages. The pilots did indeed have it 'lucky,' even if that meant going up against ground fire and SAMs in a several ton flying brick. Valery paused and chuckled. He always had such nice thoughts to cheer himself up.

He checked his watch and shouted over the Dmitri, "Five minutes until takeoff, everything ready over there?"

"Yah, I think so," Dmitri popped open the gunner's cockpit and tossed his helmet in, "How about you?"

"Just keep Natasha's Yak-3 blazing the second we enter Sarmanian, and I'll be better than ever," Valery grinned and pushed open his cockpit door. Both the gunner and the pilot entered on opposite sides, and Dmitri was hidden from view. The fox gave the helicopter body one last sideways glance, and then wedged his boot into an added foothold and pulled himself up into the pilot's seat. As an emergency

precaution, only two people were required for takeoff, and Valery closed the door before snapping on his helmet, placing the flight map in its holder, and running a few final pre-flight checks.

"Comms check," he muttered into the headset, "You hear me, Dmitri?"

"Loud and all too clear, comrade," the wolf smirked and held a paw up for Valery to see. The rest of him was hidden behind the aqua blue instrument panel, and Valery gave his palm a gentle squeeze before slipping on his gloves and readying Olga 3 for takeoff. They wouldn't see anything else of each other until the end of the mission.

"Almost ready..." Valery muttered and quickly scanned the instruments. Everything looked normal before takeoff, and Olga 3 would be airborne in moments. There was just one last thing before that...

The fox unzipped his breast pocket and pulled out a faded and well worn piece of paper. It was a photo of Eva at the forest they'd visited a year ago, and she was perched on a fallen tree with her tail folded neatly over her legs. Valery cradled it in his paws for a second, softly taking in the vixen's thin beautiful face and raven black hair before he quietly touched it to his nose and slipped it into the corner of the map holder.

The pilot flipped a few switches and gave her another glance, smiling at her while she smiled back. Eva was so young and beautiful with that soft, gentle face, and Valery ran two of his gloved fingers down the glass. Did she still look so perfect? It had been almost five months, and she hadn't sent a new photograph since...

He bit his tongue and turned back to his controls. Of course she did; this was his Eva, his angelic beauty, and he'd be absolutely sure to get working on that letter the second they touched down, even if it meant skipping a few of the after flight vodkas...

"Weapons systems checking green, comrade captain," Dmitri broke his train of thought, and Valery heard the Yak-3 turret whirring at the aircraft's nose, "How is everything looking up there?"

"Engines on... auxiliaries on..." Valery muttered and flipped a few switches, "Instrument readings are normal, pressures are normal, hydraulics and electrics are good." The dials and indicators on the instrument panel flared to life and he waited a few seconds before pushing down on the starter, "Ignition... on."

With a mighty throb, Olga 3's engines suddenly burst into a deafening roar and the helicopter's blades started spinning up. Dust began blowing out over the airfield and surrounding helicopters in a wide halo, and after a moment's pause, the helicopter rotors accelerated to idling speed.

"Olga 3 to tower, prepared for takeoff and ready to depart. Requesting takeoff permission." Valery half yelled into the intercom and checked a few more dials as dust and sand whipped against the helicopter's canopy.

"Tower to Olga 3, permission granted. I'll be sure to tell the SAM teams not to blow you out of the sky," the flight commander's usual wry humor crackled into their helmets, "Good hunting out there, and get home in one piece, Antonov," he paused, "You too Dmitri."

The commander was right to caution them. Helicopter losses had been high ever since the rebels had

received the newest shipment of Western-made man portable SAMs, and all it took was one single mistake to blur the lines of life and death...

But Valery and Dmitri had faced every threat the rebels could throw at them a dozen times over, and they were still alive, still able to rain hell down on the hated rebel enemy whenever his comrade soldiers needed it. Today would be no different.

The fox would return back to base safely, even if that meant landing in the burning hulk of an Mi-24. He had to; his darling Eva depended on it.

"We will, comrade commander," Valery throttled the engines up and gripped the cyclic control stick, "Olga 3 leaving base."

The helicopter blades raced up to full speed and the aircraft held still for a few more seconds before starting to shift on the ground. Valery steadied the throttle, and Olga 3's body slowly surged up and out of the sand. The fox made a few minor adjustments, and steadied the machine before punching the throttle and pushing forward on his cyclic.

In a single, almost gracefully clumsy swoop, the Mi-24 tilted forward and suddenly shot over the airstrip. Valery took her right over the barracks and maintenance quarters before making a wide loop and exiting out to the north over the desert sands. They would reach Sarmanian in roughly ten minutes. Until then, they could enjoy the view.



A few of the ground crew watched the helicopter fade away into the distance, their faces showing neither excitement or boredom. Mi-24 flights were too routine to be considered entertainment, and after a few more seconds the group disbanded with a quiet, disgruntled murmur as they returned to work. Once again, Natasha was away.

She was never coming back.