

Olga 3 raced across the desert sky, the distant chop of her propeller blades echoing across the sand several hundred meters below. The Mi-24 was roughly three minutes out of Sarmanian, and the city's dozens of skyscrapers peered out over the hilly horizon, sunlight sparkling off the glass.

The city was so beautiful, like a literal oasis in the desert, and it truly was a pity that the war's worst fighting had come to taint it. It was this country's one and only gem, built with funding from both here and Valery's motherland in an attempt to revitalize a stifled economy, and even despite this nation's ultimate and cowardly betrayal, you couldn't help but admire what those efforts had made. His country's aspiring engineers and architects had labored so long to erect beautiful Sarmanian, and Valery watched proudly as it came closer and closer into view, a slim grimace of determination starting to wipe across his face.

This was his country's nation, his motherland's city, and nothing else; the rebels had thrown that given right away. To Valery and his people, nothing was punished more swiftly and brutally than treason, and thanks to brave soldiers like himself and his comrades, Sarmanian would soon be returned to their control.

The rest of the nation would not be far behind.

Olga 3 transitioned into a sweeping banked turn and adjusted her angle of approach. Several tanks and vehicles crawled along the thin road below, and Valery was careful not to stray too far off his route. Rogue SAM crews had become a menacing pest in every corner of aircraft operations, and even the small convoy underneath brought nothing close to guaranteed safety.

Dmitri's eyes scanned the unanimous orange dunes and darted on and off the infrared scope at the front of his cockpit. It made the dunes pale into a bleak, black and white display where warm targets glowed bright white, and he kept watching for a few more seconds before pulling away. Everything looked clear today, but he kept an eager eye on his safeties just in case. Either way, they'd be off as soon as Olga 3 hit Sarmanian.

"All clear by my watch, comrade," Dmitri stretched his shoulders and turned to the city, "I'd say we get blessed today by one more minute of peace."

Valery traced the route line on his map and made a minor adjustment, "I'll agree to that; we're coming in right on time, and it's dead-quiet. How nice of luck to smile upon us today."

Sarmanian's skyscrapers and the city's beauty began to shift as they edged closer, and after a few more seconds, there was no mistaking the scars of war. Battle-torn buildings peered up from beneath the skyscrapers, half of them blackened and bombed out countless times, and these stood defeated among rubble-filled, shredded roads littered with wrecked cars and countless other debris. Shattered glass windows hung like graffiti from a few of the towers, and some of them had entire stories reduced to nothing but a darkened roof and a floor.

As soon as they crossed the city limits, flashes of gunfire and explosions could be seen bursting randomly on the city streets, and Valery frowned as he watched the ensuing battle. The fighting seemed to be coming from the political district, something that was supposed to be well under their control, and he toggled his radio frequency and calmly requested his orders.

"Command, this is attack bird Olga 3 coming in from approach vector 2, 3, armed and ready for fire support. Requesting orders for engagement, over?"

Valery nervously shifted his paws on the cyclic stick and glanced over at the photo of Eva. He hated this part, he was damn sure they were going to dive right into the political district, but he never knew

exactly what grid he was going to get until the very last second. It both thrilled and terrified him at the same time, and he nervously bit his tongue before the command reply finally crackled in.

“Command to Olga 3, we have numerous squads and mechanized infantry engaged in heavy combat in grids 2, 4 2,5, and 3, 7, you are cleared to offer support as necessary. Friendlies in the area, it’s going to be danger close.”

“Roger, comrade commander,” danger close meant that friendlies were nearby the strike area, and Valery glanced down at the fighting and prepared to set up his strafing run. It was still too far to tell, but the fighting looked like it definitely could have been worse in the handful of political districts he had been assigned to. Overall, the enemy didn’t seem to have much more than a few enemy tanks and several light armored vehicles along with a few pockets of infantry, and he made one final curve before gliding Olga 3 down into the maze of skyscrapers.

That part always scared him, and the rush of adrenaline was like nothing else. One wrong move, and his Mi-24’s tail would smash against a building, and he tried to keep his path as centered as possible. He’d done this plenty of times, but that was little assurance the second Dmitri started swapping bullets...

Skyscrapers and intersections raced by, and Valery toggled his radio frequency and began to broadcast his attack, “All units, this is attack bird Olga 3 coming in from grid 2,3, providing fire support in all surrounding areas, over,” he paused and grimly added, “Point out some targets before we swallow a SAM, over?”

It took a few seconds, but soon the requests began pouring in.

“Olga 3, squad Ivan Echo in grid 2,4, requesting immediate gun run from 2,3, 2,5, 2,3, over? Repeat, support from 2,3, 2,5, 2,3.”

Gunfire from the request pounded into the headphones as Valery adjusted his course and leveled the helicopter, “Roger Ivan Echo, fire run from bearing 2,3, 2,5, 2,3,” he paused, “Danger close.”

“Targets are confirmed,” Dmitri muttered into the headset and adjusted his scope. He could clearly see his comrades in Ivan Echo dug in among whatever rubble they could use as cover, and he then switched his gaze to the enemy, “Target grid acquired; weapons armed,” he flipped the safeties off, “Five seconds.”

“Ivan Echo, Olga 3 incoming from requested bearing, over!” Valery shrieked into his headset and throttled up, “We have your targets! Danger close, I repeat, danger close!”

His heart felt like it might burst, and his paws were frozen to his controls. Valery was a crack pilot, yes, but dreaded this part with every inch of his being. He had his Eva to return to at home, they needed each other more than anything, and there had been too many close calls lately, too many scrapes with death. Only the truly insane or truly invincible thrived in this environment...

Dmitri was a little bit of both.

“IVAN ECHO, WEAPONS AWAY! WEAPONS AWAY!” the wolf screamed into the headset as he announced the attack and punched in two triggers. Instantly, a pair of Spiral AGMs and about a dozen rockets tore out from Olga 3’s wings and blazed towards the rebels. The projectiles hissed towards their target, ripping right above Ivan Echo, and exploded in several fireball shards of twisted, burning vehicle and lethal, rapid-fire bursts right in the middle of infantry teams.

Dmitri immediately switched to the nose cannon and began tearing through the nearest group of

survivors as Olga 3 soared over the wreckage with a massive roar. The western-made tanks and LAVs were reduced to little but burning hulks, and blood-soaked pools and body parts lay scattered across where the infantry pockets used to be. The strike had been violent, brutal, and merciless, but that was exactly what Olga 3 and her pilots were made for.

“Clean strike, comrade,” Dmitri eased off the trigger and armed the next pair of Spirals, “Positive effect on armor; I’m seeing only a handful of infantry survivors. Nothing our soldiers on the ground can’t handle.”

Valery acknowledged and toggled his radio frequency, “Olga 3 to Ivan Echo, we are seeing clean strike on priority targets, I repeat, a clean strike. Please advise.”

The pilot pulled Olga 3 up away from the streets and began to circle the combat grid as he waited for a reply. A stationary helicopter was extremely vulnerable, and he wasn’t taking any chances with rebel rooftop machine gun or rocket propelled grenade fire.

The ground troops quickly replied, “Olga 3, we confirm a clear strike, but have positive visual on multiple surviving enemy squads. Request second pass and cover for our advance, over?” gunfire crackled with every third word, and Valery swore loudly. There had to only be about 15-20 survivors, and Ivan Echo had mechanized infantry. Mopping up should have been child’s play.

“Shit, can’t these guys do anything by themselves?” he didn’t want to make a second pass, but he couldn’t argue with command’s orders. Valery started to bring the helicopter out of rotation and prepared to line up a second run, “Dmitri, confirm a visual on enemy stragglers and get ready for a strafing run. I want to make this quick.”

“Aye, Valery,” Dmitri checked his scope as their Mi-24 curved back into the narrow streets and was swallowed by skyscrapers, “Positive visual on roughly a dozen hostiles, Ivan Echo is already engaged.”

“Copy that,” Valery muttered and throttled up. He dreaded making this run again, the delay between this and the first pass had given the enemy ample time to prepare a SAM and RPG team, and the city streets allowed little room to maneuver. If they encountered a missile, there was little more between life and death than a few dozen flares and several meters of space to dodge.

Valery gulped and unbuttoned his jacket. He was burning up under the anxiety, and envied Dmitri’s cool more than anything. The wolf was just getting warmed up...

“Ivan Echo, Olga 3 coming in for gun run at bearing 23, 25, 23, we have your targets!” he screamed into the headset and prayed that the area was free of missiles, “I repeat, we have your targets!”

The helicopter rushed over the friendly soldiers and Dmitri flipped the safeties off. Already the rebel bastards were beginning to dash for cover as the massive helicopter neared closer like a harbinger of death, and Dmitri trained his weapon sights. They weren’t getting another chance at survival.

“WEAPONS AWAY, WEAPONS AWAY!” he shrieked and fired another salvo of rockets as the nose machine gun ripped through the closest group, “Go to hell, rebel scum!”

Rockets burst like oversized firecrackers among the infantry squads, tearing apart whatever flesh the explosions made contact with, and the nose gun shredded through the bodies of the retreating rebel dogs and foxes to leave another string of long, bloody death before the gunner finally eased off on the trigger.

Olga 3 tore over the rebel’s intersection for the second time, and Valery judged that they had taken out the last of the resistance. His view from the pilot’s seat was slightly obstructed during gun runs, but he

was able to judge from the explosions; and the drawn out, howling screams.

“That’s the last of them, I think,” Dmitri muttered and glanced down at the strike area, “Survivors extremely limited, nothing Ivan Echo can’t handle, comrade Valery,” he paused, “I suggest we request permission to break away while we still can.”

“Roger that,” Valery sighed and hesitantly adjusted his radio frequency. That should have been all the support the troops needed, but Ivan Echo was a supposedly valued squad with a captain who was essentially their superior. Plus, ground soldiers seemed to be extremely generous when it came to requesting air support.

But regardless of how he felt, command’s support orders meant that they couldn’t pull out until Ivan Echo said so or their orders started bordering the insane.

Valery hoped it was the former.

“Olga 3 to Ivan Echo, we report positive effect on targets, I repeat, all hostile ground threats have been eliminated, over? Please advise.”

The squad leader’s voice came in over the headset once more, “Olga 3, we confirm neutralization of hostile threats, over,” Valery’s heart leapt into his throat as he waited for the next words, “Request cover for our advance into the party headquarters, over?”

That was just what he had dreaded, and the second Valery heard the sentence he switched off the radio and swore for five whole seconds before calming down, “Fuck this! I’m not covering Ivan Echo until I get a confirmation from command. We’re not doing something suicidal unless it’s seriously important.”

“Agreed...” Dmitri replied. The wolf honestly didn’t care what way things went, but pulling out sincerely was the sanest choice here. Keeping a bird in one place was never a wise idea; it gave the enemy too much time to react, and they had both seen the result of that countless times...

Valery pulled Natasha up away from the combat grid and switched the channel, “Olga 3 to command, request confirmation on Ivan Echo’s orders, over? Squad in question is requesting extended close-range cover in area very lethal to air activity. All current threats to Ivan Echo have been recently eliminated and squad is advancing now. Please advise.”

Yes... Valery begged as his paws shifted on the cyclic. Please advise us to get the hell out of here while we still can...

He slowly stroked Eva’s picture and stared into her beautiful eyes while he waited. Thinking of her calmed her down, but it could never take away the dread. Fate wouldn’t be so cruel as to separate them, would it? It couldn’t... it just couldn’t...

The calm, cool voice of a female dispatcher cut the question for him. “Air command to Olga 3, Ivan Echo is currently tasked with retaking the district political headquarters. We lost this building two days ago, and advance scouts have suggested it is being used as a forward command base by the rebels, and could be the location of multiple high value targets” she paused, but Valery already knew what was coming next, “Command has designated this as a high priority objective, I repeat, a high priority objective, and another squad have been ordered to converge on Ivan Echo to assist in the operation. Your orders are to provide close air support as Ivan Echo has requested, I repeat, your orders are to provide the air support requested, over. Command out.”

“Olga 3 confirms, out.”

Valery's trembling fingers reached out to the radio and changed the frequency. He felt sickened for it, but half of him wanted to turn his helicopter around and return back to base because of an 'engine problem.' He groaned. That excuse wouldn't last ten minutes. They would shoot him for disobeying orders; Dmitri might even fire the bullet himself, and Eva would be in disgrace.

The fox sent his response seconds later. He had no choice.

"Olga 3 to Ivan Echo, Ivan Echo, do you copy?" Valery's voice was shaking uncontrollably, and he felt like he might puke, "Request for air cover has been authorized," he gulped, "Where... where do you need us?"

"Olga 3, is everything okay up there? I can barely hear you."

"Affirmative, Ivan Echo, no problems," his bird began to descend down to the city streets, and Valery's heart felt like it was drowning, "Awaiting orders."

There was a reason why he dreaded flying close air support, and it was completely justified. Essentially, Valery's new orders were to hover defensively over the infantry formation, providing cover fire and support if the situation arose, but it was more like providing a juicy target just begging to be shot at with everything and anything the enemy could muster.

He wiped a paw against the front of his face and continued to dread. In an ambush, helicopters were always the last to shoot and the first to go down, and he stared blankly at his instrument panel as cold, dark death mercilessly stared back. He could honestly die here; there was no question about it. His most recent mission flying support had been the one that had really shaken him up, shattered the image of youthful immortality that Dmitri had miraculously retained, and all it took was one well placed rebel RPG to bring them down in a fireball of twisted metal and airplane fuel.

Ivan Echo radioed back their orders, and Valery robotically replied and began to dive back down into the city streets. There was no going back. He might as well try not to worry and increase his chances of staying alive.

"That building better be just as fucking important as they say it is," Valery cursed and tried to forcefully clear his head, "Weapons free Dmitri," he mumbled and gave the wolf permission to fire wherever he saw fit, "I want to kill them long before they can kill us."

"My thoughts exactly," Dmitri acknowledged and began scanning the area, "Olga 3 is weapons free."

The Mi-24 slowly descended over the mechanized infantry like a noisy, watchful specter and started crawling forward with the men and their APCs. The district party building was about half a kilometer ahead of them, and Valery began to wonder why the rebels hadn't put up a stronger resistance. After all, there was a limit to how many men could be used in the ambushes the rebels held so dear, and you couldn't win a war without fighting through conventional means.

The fox licked a cheek with his dry, sticky tongue and tried to stay calm. So the rebels were either extremely stupid or lying in wait with an ambush larger than anything they'd seen. It was too bad only the deadly scenario had any merit...

"Does Ivan Echo have any idea what they're doing?" Valery growled, "Those idiots are strolling right into an ambush, and they're dragging us along with them."

Dmitri chuckled, "Why do you think we're here? Decoration?"

Valery didn't respond and instead stared quietly into the instrument panel. Normally Dmitri's humor

gave him a laugh or two; this time it just made misery feel even worse.

The infantry column continued to shift closer to the district party building, and Olga 3 hovered closely along. They were only several hundred yards away now, and the ground soldiers began to nervously check every corner and window for any sign of waiting rebels. Everybody knew what was going to happen, all of them had fought here long enough for that; ambushes were not a question of if, but of when.

“Hold up!” Ivan Echo’s leader suddenly barked into the radio and every soldier came to a halt, “Friendlies coming in, East side!”

“I see them, Valery,” Dmitri confirmed, just as the pilot brought them into a steady hover, “Multiple groups of soldiers and vehicles coming in just past the south side of the party building,” he paused, “Right on time. We’ll need all the help we can get.”

“Copy that.”

The Firecross Armored Infantry group weaved through the wreckage and cars about a kilometer or two away, their soldiers and vehicles little more than contrasting colors against the ruined city. The reinforcements were about the same size as Ivan Echo, and Valery imagined that both teams would stack up on opposite sides of the building before beginning their approach.

“All units continue advance,” the leader muttered and the column shifted back into gear, “We’ll wait for Firecross at the next block.”

Valery slowly tilted Olga 3 forward as the squad leader continued to send a few other orders and confirmations to command. From what he could hear, it sounded like Ivan Echo had managed to get approval for air support by a few pairs of Sukhois, and the fox leaned back into his flight harness. He was still sweating his pelt off, but with every passing second, it almost felt as if they were actually going to pull this off.

“Firecross, Firecross, do you copy?” Ivan Echo’s leader broke radio silence again, “Ivan Echo approaching rally point and waiting for your mark. I repeat, approaching rally point and waiting for your mark.”

“This is Firecross, copy that. Approximately 30 seconds to objective. District tower is in sight with no sign of hostiles. Estimated time to attack, 60 seconds.” he paused, “Christ, things are going well today.”

“Ivan Echo copies. Waiting for your mark.”

That was it, then. In 60 seconds at the sign of a flare, both teams would charge the district tower with everything they had, hoping to get enough men into the first floor while the armor and Olga 3 attacked the upper levels and any outside attackers. It was a simple plan and almost a little suicidal at best, but the lack of apparent defenders was luring everyone into a false sense of fragile, unnerving confidence.

“Do you see anything, Dmitri?” Valery mumbled and tried to stay calm, “I can’t believe we’re still alive at this point. Something is very wrong...”

“Negative, there’s nothing here, visual or scope,” Dmitri replied, “Maybe the rebels are retreating and the force we encountered earlier was just to distract us?”

“I doubt it. They don’t think like that,” Valery gulped, “A lot of our guys are going to die very soon, Dmitri. I don’t like this...”

“Ivan Echo, hold up,” the leader spoke again, “Firecross, we are in position, I repeat, Firecross we are

in position.”

“Roger that. Olga 3, this is Firecross, do you see anything from up there?”

Valery fumbled with his radio before getting the settings correct. He didn’t expect them to ask his opinion. “Negative sir, area seems clear from a bird’s eye view. However, I advise extreme caution. An ambush is extremely likely, commander, I repeat, extremely likely. I would send a scout or two, first.” that was far too weak a way to put it. All things considered, they were all already dead in Valery’s eyes, and he was beginning to wonder if he’s even have a chance to get Olga 3 out before all hell broke loose...

“Suggestion noted, Olga 3, but I think it’s a little too late for that. They already know we’re here, and there’s damn little we can do about it. Keep on your toes; we’re counting on you.”

“Copy that sir,” Valery replied with the little enthusiasm he could muster, “We’ll do whatever we can.”

Firecross reached their rally point a few seconds later, and the two groups waited at their positions for the commander to give the signal. Valery glanced left and right at the surrounding skyscrapers, trying to peer through the blackened reflective glass for any signs of rebel activity, but all he could see was Olga 3 and his own face staring back. He imagined an RPG team crouched inches behind, bodies and fur dyed black as they waited for just the right second to fire, and he nervously watched for a few more seconds before turning back forward.

“I already did a thermal scan,” Dmitri replied as the fox voiced his concern, “It’s as empty as it looks, comrade Valery.”

Too bad it didn’t look empty at all, the fox thought.

“All groups, I repeat, all groups, 15 seconds until operation start,” Firecross’s leader burst over the radio, “All troops wait until my signal.”

“Roger that,” a few replies were swapped in response.

“10 seconds,” the leader spoke again, “9...”

Valery scratched at his flight gloves and nervously scraped his face. The man may as well been counting down to their own deaths. The pressure was worse than anything, and all Valery could think of was his last time flying close air support.

He could see the gunfire, hear the RPGs whizzing just yards from Natasha, and Valery forced a fang against his tongue and tried to get his shit together. That was almost two weeks ago, and they were much better reinforced this time. For once... for once the rebels would be the ones burning up in flames.

Valery perked up his ears. What a glorious sight that would be...

“6...5...4...”

The fox’s eyes drifted downwards, but then suddenly leapt up to the district party building as a flash of red burst from one of the windows. It looked liked some sort of ridiculously large flame, and for a second he was certain that it was just another past-based illusion, but the longer he stared at it, the clearer it got. There really was something there...

“Dmitri,” Valery stumbled as his heart skipped a beat, “I...”

The fox never finished his sentence.

With a quiet, distant pop, the far end of both streets burst into a string of explosions that bathed the concrete in fire. Small, frequent blasts began to race down both sides of the street towards the infantry columns. The massive soundwave and light of the explosions instantly sent the formations into chaos, and men lunged for buildings and any bit of cover they could find, but before they could flee, the veritable massacre of explosions raced past to paint the streets blood red with twin columns of fire and death.

Dozens of soldiers were instantly incinerated or roasted alive in their vehicles, and dozens more dropped to the ground, uniforms and flesh alight with torturous fire. Screams and long, murderous howls pierced the air, and the explosions continued to race past the columns until they met about 100 yards from the district party building. The rebels had effectively covered every inch of possible attack, and their attackers were paying the price for their foolishness...

The few that managed to survive the initial onslaught immediately began spraying their automatic rifles at the district building and rushing out of the wreckage to escape the flames. Return sniper fire whizzed down and ricocheted off the concrete and burned out APCs, and cut down any soldiers the rebels could hit. It was madness, sheer, hellish madness, and Valery sat numbed in the cockpit of Olga 3, unable to believe what he was seeing.

He scarcely heard the desperate, pained cries from both squadron commanders, merely observed the string of machine gun fire coming from his own helicopter, and quietly watched his face reflect into the blinding fireballs. It was so numbing watching the world, his world, explode around him, and he kept watching, fingers beginning to slip off his controls.

“What the fuck are you doing, Valery? Do you want to die at the paws of these sick bastards?”

The wolf rammed a heavy fist down on the control panel and Valery took a choking, gasped breath before snapping back into alert. His training immediately took over, and he mechanically veered Olga 3 parallel to the party skyscraper as Dmitri launched the rest of his Spirals at the sixth floor.

The nose cannon blazed into the glass as thousands upon thousands of shards rained down the building's side, and the AGMs rammed into the skyscraper's core in a concrete-piercing burst. Half a dozen dogs were instantly thrown out of the building, and the rest were blown to pieces by the anti-tank charges as the floor was reduced to a blackened, burned out husk.

“Valery, hostiles two floors below!” Dmitri screamed out and aimed the turret. The sound of small arms against Olga 3's fuselage pierced the cockpit, and Valery pulled the helicopter into a rapid drop and lined up the rockets for his gunner.

Another torrent of projectiles hissed towards the hated rebels, and Valery pulled backwards just as the floor and its contents were reduced to a smoking crisp. So far so good, he grimly thought as bullets smacked against the cockpit glass, as long as he was still airborne, they would be fine...

With another flick of the pedals and cyclic, Valery gritted his fangs and began a strafing run on the lower floors.

“All units, I repeat, all units report your status, over?” the voice over the radio was panicked; one of the squadron leaders must have died in the attack, “I need an immediate situation report, now!”

“OLGA 3, CURRENTLY ENGAGED WITH HOSTILES, OVER!” Valery shrieked with his spare breath, “I REPEAT, OLGA 3 ENGAGED WITH HOSTILES!”

He was just about to request orders when a 50 caliber sniper round rammed into his cockpit, leaving a



threatening spiderweb of cracks.

“Valery, left, left!” Dmitri shouted as the pilot brought the aircraft around, “Hostiles on a nearby building!”

There were several small groups of rebels perched on window overlooks, and the wolf opened fire as small arms rounds pinged against every inch of their bird. This was bad, they were taking damage from nearly every direction, and there was only so much a helicopter could withstand.

But bullets were nothing in comparison to what the rebels had in store. The moment Olga 3 turned to the other building, a small RPG team had stacked up on the second floor during the lack of suppressing fire. They only had a few precious seconds to bring down this hated, demonic enemy, but a few seconds was all they needed. This only took one shot...

A fennec fox carefully took aim with his weapon, fingers trembling as he tried to perfect the action that would save so many of his freedom fighters lives. RPGs were only improvised anti-aircraft weapons, and using them effectively could be maddeningly difficult as range was severely limited, but this creature had made the act into a science. He carefully traced the helicopters path, firing arcs racing through his brain as he waited for just the right second, and the rebel then squeezed in the trigger.

His body shuddered as the rocket screamed out of the launcher, and he mechanically threw the tube on the ground and was handed another. He may have been one of the best, but he was wise enough to know that even masters made their mistakes...

“RPG RIGHT! RPG!” Dmitri shrieked out in alarm and watched powerlessly as the blazing rocket dashed towards the cockpit, “EVASIVE MANEUVERS!”

Valery didn’t hesitate for a second before throwing his Mi-24 up into a rapid climb. All it took was one RPG to kill them both, and he wasn’t taking any chances...

Just a split-second after Valery had maneuvered, the missile sped mere yards below the vehicle’s fuselage and exploded against a nearby building. Both of them watched in disbelief; nothing had ever come that close.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Valery screamed and looked for the shooter, “Get return fire on that missile team now!”

“Copy that!” Dmitri began firing random suppressive bursts back into the district party building. If the rebels couldn’t move, they couldn’t shoot.

But moving was the last of the fennec’s problems. The Mi-24’s hated gunner had yet to spot him, and the rebel carefully lined up another shot. This time, there would be no mistakes.

The rocket whizzed out of the building and blazed straight at the helicopter’s body, the orange-yellow flames reflecting off the fox’s eyes. This missile had been fired in their blind spot; the death of the crew would only be another pair of lives he had to claim in the name of his nation and people; nothing more.

“Damn it, Dmitri, where are they?” Valery cursed and tried to stay calm. He was losing it, despite everything he tried to tell himself he was losing control to the mind-numbing fear, and he started to turn the helicopter just as the missile crashed into one of their wings.

And from there, everything dissolved into pure, mindless hell. Half of the helicopter’s rear fuselage was instantly lost in the explosion, and parts and wreckage tore into the rotors. Vicious fuel fires and explosions ripped dozens of holes in critical parts of the airplane, frying wires and electronics, and

Olga 3 began to spiral out of control.

With a hideous crack, Valery was thrown against the cockpit window and his vision began to swim in a blurred daze. Dozens of red lights from his instrument panel flooded across his vision in a hazy crimson waterfall, and he desperately tried to pull his senses together. He could hear alarm bells and sirens, voices shrieking with deafening volume, and everything was fighting for the little consciousness he could still use to fly his helicopter.

He yanked the cyclic against the direction it felt like they were spinning while rapidly alternating the pedals to try and level out his bird. All he could see was the mental image of Natasha's flight path, that was all he had now, and he began to snarl and growl as the helicopter fell deeper and deeper down.

Valery was losing her. With every second the controls became less and less responsive as Olga 3 burned through her final seconds in the air, almost as if the warbird was determined on how to spend her dying moments. The fox kept fighting, flames and debris beginning to wrap around the helicopter like a cocoon, and the Mi-24 made one final twist before crashing sideways into an intersection.

He scarcely felt the impact, and Natasha rolled over several times before coming to a final halt at the base of a small building complex. Dust and shredded concrete thickened the air like rain, creating a darkened veil around the helicopter and her occupants, and within seconds, the radios erupted with screams and orders regarding their situation.

But Valery heard none of them. His body hung limp in the chair, head falling sharply against the side of his cockpit. The endless string of chatter pounded his ears, causing intense, numbing throbs across his brain, and he weakly unstrapped his helmet and let it slip onto the cockpit floor.

He wouldn't need it.