

Valery teetered on the edge of consciousness. His pain-filled body and mind were begging him to give up and rest, and his limbs lay sprawled out over the instrument panel. The delicate flesh of his muzzle and exposed tongue pushed into cracked cockpit glass, while his lungs gasped every laborious breath like it would be his last.

He swore he was going to slip away at any given second, surrender his body and die here with his bird, Olga 3, but with every minute, the fox held on. It wasn't so much determination as adrenaline mixed with subtle, influential instinct, but as he stared blankly at the aqua blue panel in front of him, the difference was anything but discernible.

They had shot him out of the sky, but against all odds, he was going to survive. For himself, for Eva, and for his country, he would crawl out of the wreckage and live to fly again, live to come back to his sweet vixen, but most of all, he would live to once more destroy the hated rebel bastards that had tried to kill him.

That was a promise; and its fulfillment would start the second he escaped his once proud Natasha.

Valery planted his forepaws against a nearby surface and forced his body up against the seat. Every second he bit his tongue as a stiffened body cried in protest; things felt worlds worse the instant he began to move, and he tried to stay still as he leaned back into the fabric and blinked his eyes.

He was greeted with cold, calculating death. Nearly all of the cockpit was destroyed beyond recognition. Shrouds of twisted, sharpened metal pierced up through the surface like a deadly growth of weeds, and the cracked glass surrounding him was covered with dirt and mud that created eerie, translucent patches of sunlight. It almost felt like a miracle that he was still alive in this shroud of quiet despair, and the fox quietly thanked his country's engineers and their improved safety systems; five years ago, he wouldn't have been so lucky.

With a flick of his paw he toggled his emergency radio to a beacon broadcast and stuffed it back into his uniform. That should let the rescue operation know their exact location, provided the rebels didn't get to them first, and on that thought Valery quickly felt for his pistol and pulled it out of his hip pocket. He stared at the black, compact Makarov and rapidly pushed back the slide with a smooth click; hopefully, he wouldn't have to use it...

After a few more seconds, Valery heard a low, muttering voice near the front of the aircraft and almost dropped his weapon in surprise. Amidst all the confusion and pain, he had completely forgotten about his gunner, Dmitri, and if he was still alive their odds more than doubled. The wolf could hit almost anything in a firefight.

"Dmitri!" Valery spoke as loudly as he could and slapped a paw against the glass, "Are you alive down there, comrade? Thank god!"

"Of course I'm alive!" after a few seconds the cockpit roof swung open and the gunner's grey-white face popped out with a wide smile, "It's going to take a little more than that to kill us, eh? At least with flying like that, of course. I think it's pretty safe to say you saved our pelts back there."

"Did I?" Valery scratched his head, "I can't remember anything about the landing."

Dmitri placed a paw against the metal and leaned forward, "Good. The fewer stories you can tell Eva

about this, the better.”

Valery managed to get out a small choked laugh and agreed. Dmitri always managed to make him feel worlds better.

“I’ve already radioed command,” the wolf continued, “From what I can tell they have a small armored infantry division already headed this way; we’re in good shape, and thanks to us, they think the assault on the district tower is going to be successful” he paused, suddenly becoming a little hesitant, “But uh... Valery, can you move?”

“I think so,” he grunted, “Why?”

Dmitri paused, thinking over how to phrase his next words, “Well, I’m not sure if you’re aware, comrade, but we had the misfortune of landing a little north of friendly lines. Command advises we leave the crash site and move south as soon as possible.”

“Are you... are you serious?” The fox stuttered in fear and disbelief. He was hesitant to inform his gunner, but he didn’t feel like he could move in this state, much less through rebel-infested territory. They’d be gunned down in minutes, maybe even sooner.

“Valery, if you can’t, we can stay,” Dmitri began, “It was just a suggestion from command. You and I both know how our enemies respond to a helicopter crash, and they estimate that they’re getting faster at it by the day.”

Valery finished for him, “Then we are dead men if we stay here. I can move, comrade. Don’t worry about me.” They had to leave or risk getting overwhelmed, and as an extra show of assurance he forced his legs across the cockpit floor. His pain was restricted to little more than a small whine, “Let’s go.”

The pilot pushed a paw against his cockpit door, but as he unlocked the handle and tried to force it open, it didn’t budge. Closer examination revealed that the glass on his right was completely blackened with debris, and his senses slowly began to inform him that the entire helicopter was tilted upon its side and the door with it. How damaged was his body that it had taken so long for him to notice that?

“There’s only one exit for you now, comrade,” Dmitri spoke up and gestured to the left side of the pilot’s cockpit, “I’m going to try and break the glass. You gather whatever you need and then I’ll help you through.”

“Understood,” Valery nodded. A spider web of cracks was clearly visible beneath the dirt, and the once nearly impenetrable material now looked extremely fragile. Freeing him would not be a problem.

The wolf took a long look at the nearby streets and then hopped out to the ground. There didn’t seem to be any rebel activity left, and the only people still here were a few civilians cautiously eying them and walking away. That was good; if there were still natives here, the enemy might hold off their attack for a few more minutes.

Dmitri stepped around a few scattered pieces of debris before pausing next to the left passenger window. He bent down, scooped up a hardened piece of concrete, and then wiped away the dirt from the window.

“Relax,” his young face shone through the grime-speckled view port, “This won't take longer than a minute, comrade.”

His pilot grinned and inched away from the glass, “If you hit me on accident...”

“Hey, like I said, relax.”

The concrete smashed against the window with a loud, solid hit, and the surface began to cave in. Dmitri began hitting harder and faster, gaining an inch or two with every successive strike, and Valery quickly began to dig through the cockpit for the few things he'd need.

He clicked open the emergency hatch and tossed out a few bags of food supplies and survival gear. Staying fed and warm was the last of their issues right now, and after a few more seconds he quietly unsnapped what he was looking for, an AK-74 automatic rifle and one extra magazine.

The fox frowned and tried to hold back his thoughts. He had barely managed to pass basic firearm training, and every time he held a rifle dared not dive into the implications of that in a firefight. Instead, he told himself that if he had to fight, he would fight, bravely and courageously like Dmitri and his comrades at the front.

His mind refused to take things farther than that.

“Almost there!” Dmitri shouted and with two more hits the glass shattered into hundreds of pieces, “Freedom for the fox!”

Dust and beautiful sunlight flooded into the damaged cockpit and over Valery's body. He squinted and smiled, fur growing even dirtier, “Thank you, Dmitri, thank you.”

He handed over the weapon, and the gunner leaned it against the helicopter, “Now if you're ready, I strongly suggest we begin moving,” he glanced behind and squinted, “I don't think we have much time left. Grab my arm and I'll pull you through.”

Valery was just about to agree when he paused and turned back to the cockpit, “One second, I forgot something.”

He quickly dusted off the map holder and twisted it open to retrieve his photo of Eva. He couldn't leave Olga 3 without it.

His nose quietly brushed against the vixen's warm scarlet fur, and Valery whispered a few quiet words before placing it back into his pocket. He would return to her, no matter what happened, she would see his face once more, and he secured her photo and wrapped his leather-gloved fingers around Dmitri's arm.

“Ready.”

“She'll see you again, Valery. We **will** make it through this. I swear it,” the wolf whispered. He deeply respected Valery and his love, and he would do anything if it meant ensuring that they would be reunited.

"I know. Thank you, friend," Valery replied, "Thank you."

Without another word, Dmitri began pulling Valery through the window. The pilot's legs scrambled up over the metal, boots grasping for anything that would allow him to escape that much faster, and after a few more seconds his torso was completely out with the rest of him following soon after.

The fox slid down a few feet of metal and down onto the ruined concrete built up around their Mi-24. The aircraft's lower side was almost completely buried, creating a gradual mound up around the vehicle, and Valery quietly limped back to take in the remains of what was once his mighty Natasha.

Only the front of her was still almost wholly intact, and the gunner and pilot's cockpits had somehow managed to avoid the blunt of the damage. Valery's was almost structurally intact aside from warped glass, and Dmitri's was crumpled up just to the point that he had managed to walk away unharmed.

The rest of Olga 3 hadn't been so lucky.

Smoke and a few small flames rose up around the torched, blackened aircraft, causing the pilot to stray even farther from his beloved bird. She was almost damaged beyond recognition. The fuselage was torn in two right down the center, and the area between the passenger compartment and cockpits was now a gaping maw of wrecked metal and razor-sharp fragments. Parts from across the tail were scattered across the road, and the remaining rotors on the main blade limply hung like a symbol of defeat.

Valery watched with a sad, wounded expression. His home and vehicle to the beloved skies was gone forever, and now he would leave her, abandon her, here in this forsaken enemy territory. The rebels would likely pry her apart and salvage whatever they could, and even worse, turn parts from such a loyal machine against Valery and his nation.

The thoughts sickened the fox, but he had no other choice. If Olga 3 were to die, then her crew would have to live at the very least. Such a brave death would not be left without soldiers to wreak vengeance.

"She was a good bird, Valery," the wolf spoke and gave him a firm pat on his shoulder, "But we should move on; we don't have much time left."

"Agreed. Let's go, comrade."

Dmitri walked over to the aircraft's side and snatched up the two AK-74s. For the sake of speed, they were going to travel light with only the rifles and the equipment on their body, nothing more. Valery grabbed the weapon, tucking the extra clip into his pocket. He clutched the gun closely in his paws and slid the charging handle back before lowering it to his side. The safety was switched to full automatic fire.

"We go South, that way, and try to stay off the main streets," Dmitri waved a paw and began moving, "The rescue team is heading to Olga 3, but I plan on intercepting them far before that."

"Understood, lead the way and I shall follow," Valery replied and trotted after the wolf. His head was pounding under a splitting headache and his legs were crippled, fiery lumps that threatened to collapse any second. But he forced his body to keep closely behind Dmitri; the fox was a good and loyal soldier, and was more than capable of muffling complaints about things as trivial and temporary as pain.

The pair continued on a few more meters before Dmitri pulled out his radio, "Command, this is Olga 3-1 and Olga 3-2. We are moving out away from the crash site as we speak, I repeat, we are moving away from the crash site and towards your position. No resistance, over?"

Valery was unable to hear the response, and instead cautiously checked every corner, window, and street he could see. The civilians had completely abandoned the intersection, and it had descended into an eerie, unnatural quiet broken only by the crackling fire of Olga 3 and a few birds overhead. Sunlight fell in unnatural streaks between alleyways and skyscrapers, illuminating every second street while pushing the others into shadow. Street and vendor carts littered the sidewalks next to half a dozen trees and parked cars. It was almost beautiful, and if it hadn't been for the long, dirty streak Olga 3 had made during her crash, the square would have been perfect.

But that was the least of Valery's concerns. The pain was just barely keeping the fear from taking over, and his body was overflowing with anxiety and adrenaline. His fingers squeezed on the grip and weapon barrel and he pulled the AK-74 closer to his body, double-checking that it was armed and the safety was off. He may have been a poor shot, but it didn't take much skill to put holes in somebody with an automatic rifle.

"Roger that, command, Olga 3-1 and 3-2 out," Dmitri replied to their commanders and turned back to Valery, "Our recovery team is about five minutes out from us. If we manage to keep this pace up we may be able to cut that down to 2 to 3 minutes, okay? Hang in there, we'll make it out of this."

Valery nodded to the wolf and bit his tongue. He had no time to speak; the pain was beginning to spike, and Dmitri could see every bit of the suffering his friend was enduring.

But there was little he could do. Dmitri was no medic, and even if he had been, there wasn't any time. He would be shot to pieces before he could begin to apply aid to his friend, and all he could do was push Valery on.

"There, see that alleyway to the left, Valery? We're going to go through there. It's faster and gets us off the main streets," he quickly glanced back over his shoulder and squinted, "With luck we'll be long gone by the time they make it to Olga 3."

"Sounds good, Dmitri." Valery weakly replied and glanced up at the alleyway in question. It was roughly 50-100 meters away from them, and he began to follow the wolf across the street, "I'll be right behind you."

The pair weaved through vendor carts and scattered debris as they continued on across the street. Neither one of them noticed the rebels taking aim in the next window.

"Almost there, Valery," Dmitri spoke, "From the alley it should be a clear shot to our evacuation team."

"Good, the sooner the better," the fox replied before adding, "And how do you think our men over at the District Party Building are doing? I feel rather poorly about getting knocked out of the action that soon, eh?"

The wolf grinned and turned back. It was good that his friend felt well enough to talk, "I think you're forgetting the part where we took down nearly everyone in their way, comrade Valery. Plus, what we

left unfinished, our brave aviators and their mighty Sukhois can take care of. We saved many lives.”

“And claimed even more, I hope. Fucking rebel bastards.”

“Indeed, Valery, if only...”

The wolf never finished his words; they had worse problems than completing sentences.

A glimmer of light flashed from a nearby building, and his eyes shifted up and locked with those of a rebel jackal. The creature had an assault rifle pointed directly at his chest, and was surrounded by several other freedom fighters, each prepared to inflict cold, brutal death to these invading murders.

Dmitri scarcely got a chance to respond; within half a second, the bullets began to fly.

“VALERY GET DOWN!”

The gunner wrapped an arm around the fox and forced him into a concrete trench before leaping down beside him. Several dozen rounds shredded over their position, shattering against the nearby vending carts and cars, and foreign spoken voices burst from across the street.

Valery lay crumpled on his back, arms protectively pressed down against his face with the rifle resting atop his chest. Bits of debris and glass from the nearby carts ricocheted through the trench, and the gunfire and shrieking, murderous voices pierced the former silence.

Dmitri suddenly popped up above cover and fired off a couple of quick bursts. Two rebels went down instantly, blood and screams erupting from their bodies, and the wolf dove back down just as the advancing group began to return fire.

The fox's arms flew back across his head the second the more bullets whizzed over the trench, and he watched in rampant, panicked horror. He was tired, in pain, and delusional, but the fear refused to rest. He would not die like this.

He began fumbling with a pocket and quickly snatched out his emergency radio. Support had to be close by, it had to. Command didn't allow brave crews such as them to perish so senselessly at the hands of this traitorous scum. Their brave comrades and their APCs had to be just mere moments out!

“Olga 3-2 to command, our location has been compromised!” Valery screamed at the top of his breath and swore as more rounds hit the dirt trench, “I repeat, we are currently heavily engaged with hostiles and request immediate support! We need reinforcements or we are going to fucking die!”

His voice was choked and the words barely made it out. He quietly watched Dmitri with wide, panicked eyes as the wolf returned a second salvo of shots, and dove back on the radio the moment command's reply crackled in. He was clutching it for dear life.

“Command to Olga 3-2, situation understood. Our evacuation and recovery team is inbound, ETA 4 minutes. You'll have to hold out until support arrives, copy?”

The fox almost puked, and coughed in utter disbelief, “Negative... n-negative, sir! We need assistance now! I repeat, we need support now! We are overwhelmed and out gunned!”

“Olga 3-2, your orders are to hold out until support arrives. We have no further resources available, I repeat, hold out until your retrieval team arrives!”

“No, no, no sir! You don't understand!”

There was no response, and the fox stared blankly into the radio. This was command, the best of his country's strategic minds, there had to be a better answer than that! Any second now there would be a Sukhoi bombing run, or maybe even a fellow Mi-24; his courageous nation never left its soldiers to die!

“Command! Command! This is Olga 3-2!” he called into the radio, but again, there was nothing but static.

Valery had never felt so alone, abandoned, and betrayed, and he tucked the radio back into his pocket with a miserable, defeated stroke of his paw. He was a nearly perfect party member, but he could not help but lose faith in his country in that brief moment. They had left him to die at the hands of his enemy like little more than a discarded piece of trash, and such transgressions left long, lasting scars.

“Forget about them, Valery!” Dmitri screamed and stared into his eyes, “The evacuation team is too far out, we have no one but ourselves now! If you're able, grab that rifle and return fire!”

The fox scooped up the weapon and hesitantly shifted up on his legs. He could scarcely stand, much less shoot, and he watched his friend before forcing a fang into his tongue and suddenly popping up above the trench like Dmitri. He was a soldier, and he was going to fight like one.

He was met with roughly half a dozen rebels staring down at him, and the fox shouldered his rifle and took aim. Valery immediately plunged a finger into the trigger and sprayed nearly half a clip in the direction of his hated enemy. His rifle barrel tore up and around the hostiles, rounds flying nearly everywhere in front of his weapon, and several rebels went down before he dove back into the trench.

Shrieking screams from the dying soldiers pierced the gunfire, and Valery's heart felt like it was going to burst from his chest. He stared at the dirt in front of his face, rifle barrel smoking in his paws, and rapidly glanced over to his friend. Things were even worse now that he had looked. There were too many, and both of them knew it.

“Dmitri, what the hell are we going to do?” his voice quaked with panic, “I don't want to die down here...”

The wolf bit his lip and blind fired a quick burst up above his head. This was not how it ended. They would make it out of this, he would not let Valery die and have Eva forsaken by war!

“Just, just keep shooting, Valery! Support is not far out! Hang on!”

The gunner popped up again and shot off a long, rattling burst. Another handful of rebels went down, but the return fire came much faster this time; he barely moved before bullets hissed right past where his head had been. Dmitri was good, but they were hopeless outnumbered, and skill only went so far.

Valery kept huddling in the trench, listening as the rebels advanced even closer. Was this how they were going to die, overwhelmed by their hated enemy in this scumhole of a city? They had survived the

crash, survived this much of the war, how could it end in such a horrible, meaningless way like this?

Valery pulled his rifle closer and wondered if he should fire another burst; it would likely be his last.

Dmitri took a glance up over the trench and whipped his head back to Valery, suddenly shattering the fox's thoughts, "Comrade, we have to move now. I want you to make a break for the alley and I'll cover you as best I can. I'll be right on your tail."

Valery weakly nodded. Any plan was better than staying in this trench, even if it meant momentarily risking exposure to gunfire.

"Okay, I'm going to try and fire again. On the count of three, run Valery, as fast as you can."

"Understood, Dmitri."

Valery shifted up onto his haunches and crouched opposite of the enemy position. Even if it meant destroying his legs in the process, he was going to make it to that alley no matter what. He could not fail his nation, Dmitri, and Eva.

"3..."

Dmitri slapped a spare clip into his rifle and ripped the charging handle down with a snap.

"2..."

Valery stretched out on all fours, rifle in paw, and readied himself for the leap out of the trench and into cover. He planned his escape through the vending carts and vehicles, and kept his eyes fixed on the alley. He would not stop for anything.

"1! Go Valery, go!" the wolf shrieked and waved him on, "GO!"

Bullets rang out through the trench and Valery glanced to Dmitri one last time before he moved.

But it was not the wolf who was shooting.

Two rebels stood perched on the trench's edge, rifles carefully aimed, and a torrent of bullets ripped from their weapons. The gunner turned just as the rounds hit. Trails of blood spurted from his chest and legs, and one tore straight through his head and out into the sand behind.

"DMITRI!"

Valery screamed and fired his weapon up at the rebels. A dog went down immediately and the other quickly sprinted away with a murderous howl and a few random bursts. An invader was down; the second would be easy prey...

The fox watched them carefully before lowering his weapon and staring at Dmitri. The wolf's body was spread-eagled across the dirt, cold, lifeless eyes staring up into the sky, and blood flowed out of his nose and mouth, dying the sand a ghastly dark red. Pink raw flesh peeked out from the torn, exposed parts of his uniform. It was absolutely unbearable.

The panic took over from there. Valery let out an animal scream and leapt out of the trench on all fours, clumsily scrambling towards a nearby car. Enemy voices and gunfire echoed in the distance, and bullets whizzed past and cracked into the vehicle glass. He had to keep moving or he was going to die just like Dmitri. The rebels left no time for remorse.

The fox dove behind the car as bullets shattered into the metal beside him, and he quickly eyed the alley. It was only 100 or so meters away, and his paws trembled on the rifle as he planned out the next few moves. There were enough vehicles and wreckage to give him cover in short sprinting bursts, and he began to carefully reload his weapon.

Valery only had the one extra clip before he had to fall back on his short-ranged Makarov; the next few shots and moves had to be as effective as he could make them. Just like Dmitri had done, he would try and fire in quick, suppressive bursts and blind fire from cover whenever the enemy attack grew too thick. Hitting his targets didn't necessarily matter; all he needed was a 2-3 second window of ceasefire...

The second the weapon was loaded, Valery threw his plan into execution. The pilot spun around the hood of the car and fired off several controlled, crouched bursts into the rebel group. A few of the men dove for cover in the concrete trench, and the rest fired a few wild return shots and sprinted behind anything they could use to block the incoming rounds.

That was his cue. Valery ducked back behind the bullet-ridden car and kicked off against the side in further retreat. The rifle clattered against the concrete as his front paws scratched the ground, and he leapt over the road barrier and scrambled behind a truck. So far, so good...

He stared up at the vehicle, mind racing as he began to evaluate his options. It was wide enough to block most of the enemy fire from the front, but the alley was several meters to the right and the rebels were closing in from all directions. There would only be a small window of cover as soon as he moved, and he estimated that only had one more chance. His next run had to be from here to the alley.

Valery panted and tried to steady his breaths. There were enough cars parked on the opposite street curb to give him protection as long as he stayed low enough, and he closely gripped the AK-74. The rebels would be coming out from their cover soon; now was the best time to fire.

The fox quietly edged towards the front of the truck and leaned against the tire. He started shooting three seconds later.

Rebels ducked back into their holes before savagely returning fire from protected positions, and this time Valery could only fire half a dozen rounds before he was forced back behind the truck. He swore loudly. That had just made things worse, it seemed, and he quickly eyed the alley one more time. It was only 20 meters now.

Bullets whizzed through the truck's aluminum cargo body, and Valery huddled behind the protection of the hood and tire. All he needed was another burst before making his final move, and from there it would be a straight shot to safety.

The fox muttered a few quiet words and then whipped around and began firing over the truck's engine. With luck, it wouldn't be his last.

Valery got off two bursts at a nearby desert fox and then dove back behind the truck. He hadn't stayed up long enough to see the results of his attack on the rest of their forces, but it sounded like it had been far from enough. Bullets were now pelting the vehicle's engine harder than ever, and whizzed above and around the vehicle's body. There were just too many, and time was running out.

But the cars on the opposite side of the street were so close; and so tempting. He didn't have any other choice; as dangerous as it was, he would have to move now.

As he predicted before, the truck would protect him from a majority of the rebel fire, and all he had to do was worry about any rebels trying to flank him on its sides. Valery paused; that meant he would have to face backwards and defend himself by trading speed for safety.

The fox wiped a pair of leather-gloved fingers across his brow. It wasn't much of a plan, but at least it was better than getting a bullet in his back as he tried to run. Provided he made it across in one piece, of course...

He crouched up to his paws and gnashed his fangs together. For now, that was all the plan he needed.

Without a second's more hesitation, Valery snapped his jaw closed and spun around. He began quickly trotting backwards, rifle stock firmly resting against his shoulder, and rapidly eyed both sides of the truck. The occasional stray bullet still skipped across the metal, but for now, it was silent.

He was about ten meters halfway now, and the rifle barrel bobbed as he began to move a little faster. The fox glanced backwards and began shifting towards an opening in the line of cars. He was almost to safety, almost out of this hell, and he turned forward and checked his corners one final time.

The bullets came mere moments after.

Two small groups of rebels jumped out of their positions and began firing immediately from both sides. A sudden torrent of enemy fire whizzed towards the fox, and Valery began to shoot back towards his attackers, causing a few to duck for cover. Incoming rounds shattered against the buildings and cars behind him, and his senses were drowned out beneath the chaos. It felt like bullets were coming from every and any possible angle, and he could barely see the rebels, much less hit them! Fighting back was idiotic; there were only mere moments left before he took a round and he had to move now!

Valery shifted his rifle and made a short sprinting dash to the right, wildly returning fire with each step. Fire whizzed back and forth around him, and he fired one last burst before turning away. He was just two meters from the hood of a car, and his body prepared to make one last leap to safety.

But a split-second later, one of the enemy bullets hit home.

Valery let out a wild, piercing shriek and the force of the impact caused his thin body to spiral wildly. Blood splattered against the car glass, and the fox's head and neck violently snapped into vehicle metal as he collapsed onto the ground.

Pain arced throughout his body as he screamed again and stared up into the sky. His heart beat wildly as newfound stimulants pulsed through his system, and his brain struggled to process everything beneath the shock.

This couldn't be happening; it was like something straight out of his worst nightmares. His life wasn't supposed to end like this; he wouldn't die here to be tortured at the mercy of the rebels. They still had a war to win, Dmitri had to be avenged, and most of all, Eva was still waiting for him.

But as the fox laid there, he quietly realized that none of those would ever happen. No pilot had ever escaped the rebels. He was going to be dead soon, that was the only certainty, but if he was going to die in this shithole, he would at least die a soldier's death. He would never let them get to him, force him to utter words that betrayed his beautiful motherland, and as the enemy soldiers began to advance, Valery reached for his Makarov pistol with his right arm. They would die for what they had done.

But nothing happened. He couldn't feel the pistol on his chest or see his paw moving to grasp it, and Valery's blood ran cold as he remembered exactly where the bullet had hit.

Valery looked right, no longer able to bear the oppressive dread. He had to confirm his fears, and his eyes stared blankly at his empty shoulder and across the dust-ridden pavement and crimson pools of blood.

The arm lay somewhere in between. It had been cleanly blown off right at his shoulder, and bits of red-soaked bone poked out from the muscle fiber and torn flight jacket. The paw's fingers were slightly curled in a puddle of blood, almost as if still stretching for the rifle another meter away, and Valery loudly whined and shifted his gaze back up to the sky. He could no longer bear the sight.

He was losing enough blood to kill him in minutes, regardless of what the rebels did to him, and he was too far from a field hospital to have any chance of survival, even if the recovery team arrived before his death. The same as before, there was only one other thing the fox could do...

Valery reached to his chest and unstrapped the pistol. He would continue what his country, Dmitri, and himself had started, right to his very last breath, and he flipped the safety off and extended his arm.

The pilot squinted and gnashed his fangs; he could make out three, maybe five advancing enemies beneath the foggy haze of vision. His paw trembled wildly as he took aim, causing a few screams among the rebels, and without another moment, he squeezed his finger into the trigger.

This was for his motherland.

"Rawrgh!" without warning, a snarling growl burst from behind the top of a nearby car. Valery rapidly turned his head; he was just fast enough to see the boot before it connected with his jaw.

Thousands of white-hot stars erupted across the fox's vision and he let out a piercing yelp. His head snapped violently and collapsed against the sand as his body fell limp, and the Makarov slipped out of his paw and onto the ground.

Valery's half open eyes stared up at his attackers. His senses were swimming beneath the sudden pain, but he could make out two or three rebels hovering directly over him. All of them were heavily armed with rifles, grenades, and knives, and a few long cloth decorations and other accents hung across their makeshift combat gear. At least one of them wore a helmet and carried an RPG, and the fox began to quietly wonder if that was the one who had shot him down...

Quick, unintelligible chatter battered his ears and the rebels exchanged a few hateful glances down at

him. Rifle barrels passed off and on his body along with constant sweeping shadows, and his head fell parallel to the sand. He could no longer bear to watch this scum.

Valery blinked his eyes and stared out at the nearest soldiers legs. His mind could barely focus beneath the pain, and he kept staring until he noticed the brief glint of metal on the sand. The Makarov pistol was just a meter away.

The fox didn't react at first. He hadn't quite realized how close it was, much less that he even had another chance, and he began to slowly shift his paw out towards the pistol, centimeter by centimeter, until it was in reach. His gloved, trembling index finger scratched the weapon's barrel, causing it to slowly, painfully, near the rest of his paw.

Almost... almost... there! Valery's fingers wrapped around the weapon and he began sliding it back as quickly as he could.

It was almost close enough to use when a boot suddenly slammed down on top of his paw with brutal force.

“ARRRRGH!” Valery shrieked in pain as he felt bones violently snap and twist under the lethal pressure. His flesh ground against the weapon's metal edges, shredding his leather protected skin and fur into a bloody red pulp, and the rebel stomped his boot a few more times before deciding it was enough.

By the time he was finished, the pilot's paw was beyond recognition. The fingers were now useless, twisted lumps of bone, flesh and fur, and half of his palm was still pushed between the grooves and metal of the pistol. The fox's jaw hung limply open. That was it; it felt like they had already broken him along with his thin, beautiful paw, and and he just kept staring out in disbelief.

And this was just the beginning...

A jackal swung back around to his side and knelt down by Valery's face. He stared at the fox, large slanted eyes showing disgust and undeniable interest, and Valery just blinked back. The rebel was young, his face yet unscarred by the war. He couldn't be any older than he was, but this was his nation's hated enemy. There could be no sympathy, and whatever pain the fox endured in the next few minutes was only a temporary inconvenience along his passage to death.

The pilot snarled and hissed, “Fuck off, you bastard.”

The rebel jackal frowned and spit on Valery's face before beginning to pry the fox's fingers away from the pistol. There was no resistance, half of the paw no longer functioned, and the sticky, damaged flesh slowly peeled away and popped as the last bit of the pistol was removed.

A thin smile swept over the rebel's face as he inspected the Makarov. He seemed to consider it quite a find, and slapped a fist down onto Valery's paw after he was done to cause even more pain.

“Thank you, comrade,” he spoke in Valery's language, it was not uncommon, nodded and stepped away. One second later the rebels began barking orders among each other, no doubt with him at the focus.

Valery coughed. He had half expected the jackal to end him with one or two rounds to the head; that would have been so much easier for all of them.

But then again, you couldn't torture a dead man.

A pair of gloves dug into his body, rapidly searching for weapons or anything else dangerous or of value, and ripped open a few zipped pockets. Valery didn't resist. He didn't have anything of value on him, and turned up to watch the same jackal pick up his radio and toss it aside. The rebel went through a few more loose papers and items, and then suddenly dove into the fox's breast pocket.

Valery didn't react until he felt the soldier's fingers scratch against his chest and remembered what was inside. The jackal rummaged through for a few seconds, and the suddenly snatched up a small piece of paper: Eva's photograph.

The instant he realized what it was, both of their faces lit up in instant surprise. The rebel immediately burst out in wild, mocking laughter, and Valery fearfully snarled and weakly lunged with what was left of his paw. "You scum!"

All that succeeded in doing was giving the wild jackal one more thing to laugh at.

The reverse face of Eva faintly shone through the thin paper, almost like she was begging Valery to come rescue her, but seconds later she was eclipsed by a bulky rebel dog. The soldiers crowded around, all of them trying to get a peek at this thing their hated enemy held so dear, and all of them shared the jackal's reaction. Within seconds, the circle of rebels was filled with hooting laughter and vulgar, nasty remarks that were all too easy to understand.

All Valery could do was look on in horror as they mocked him and his sweet, sweet vixen, but that was merely the least of his problems. After a few more seconds one of the more senior rebels began shouting and clapping his paws, and the photograph disappeared into an unknown pocket as the group disbanded. The 'commander' pointed to Valery and then the nearby truck, and the rebels spread out, devilish smirks still on their faces. Apparently even they had discipline.

After a few more seconds, a pair of paws wrapped around Valery's legs and he began to slide across the dirt. They were moving him away from what used to be safety, away from the alleyway and the precious recovery team, and the fox let out a shallow, barren scream that echoed across the street. Suddenly, everything was sinking in. He could almost see the grisly photos of past survivors captured by the rebels, almost feel the wet, sticky blood stains and fleshy remnants on the pavement, and now it was more terrifying, and more personal, than ever.

Two of the fingers on his left paw uselessly groped at the rough, sharp dirt, the leather now circling the bloodied black fur like a shroud. A small, pathetic trail carved out behind him as the dirt built up under his nails in tight, gritty balls, and his paw kept trailing behind. As useless as it was, the fear made him act. These few movements were all that separated him from the fellow pilots within the photographs.

But worst of all, they were absolutely fruitless.

The shadow of the truck swept over Valery's vision, and the fox blinked and stared upwards. Surrounding rebels looked down at him on all sides and were accompanied by an equal number of knives and weapon barrels, and a few spit and kicked their boots down on top of his paw. Mocking

jeers echoed across the wreckage, and he cringed as a soldier suddenly forced him up into the sitting position and threw his body against the truck chassis.

Searing pain screeched through his head as his skull cracked directly into the vehicle's frame, and Valery's body crumpled into a small shallow heap. Rebels burst out in laughter. The pilot of the hated, devilish Mi-24s now looked like little more than a bloody cloth toy, and a few of the rebels screamed out in terrible joy.

This would be rewarding indeed.

Valery's eyelids hovered in a weak, half-open position in response to the noise. He was greeted by about a dozen rebels surrounding him in a shallow semicircle, and the closest ones stood poised with vicious grins and readied knives. The fox whined quietly, his lungs desperately struggling to take in their last breaths of air. His fur and uniform were soaked in blood, and his face was torn from the impact with the car.

His head tilted upwards, entire body shaking as shock began to sink in, but Valery was determined to watch this for as long as he could. He couldn't turn away from his fate even though fear rushed through every inch of his body, and the fox continued to whine and pant under the seemingly endless layers of pain. This was it; all he could hope for now was a swift death...

It didn't look like the rebels would make him wait. Without a second's more hesitation, one of the nearby rebels kneeled down beside Valery, putting a gloved paw on the nearby truck for balance. It was a dog, this one with brown spotted fur and short floppy ears that seemed out of place with his thin fanged grin. The rebel glanced down into his eyes, long narrow face just inches from the pilot's, and slowly raised a combat knife up to the fox.

The surrounding rebels went wild, bursting into broad smiles and fits of laughter, and the dog slowly traced the blade's point up Valery's muzzle, and across his eyes before pausing on his cheek. He took his other paw off the truck and grabbed Valery's jaw, forcing him to stay still, and stared straight into the fox's eyes, knife point trembling upon his skin like a predator waiting to make the kill.

He was waiting without a single sign of his next action, carefully trying to judge a response, and despite Valery's attempts at holding it back, he was giving him an absolute feast. His eyes were wide with fear and whatever energy he had left, and the fox glanced nervously at the blade, tongue quickly panting in long, raspy breaths.

Valery's response guaranteed the next move; it was clear to all of them that this one would suffer vividly. Without another moment of hesitation, the dog slowly dragged the knife down the fox's face, tracing his cheek and the underside of his muzzle. His victim flinched and whined, exactly like he wanted, and the rebel released Valery's face and suddenly pulled back his knife.

The pilot watched quietly and looked at the surrounding rebels. They all seemed to be waiting for something, every one of them was captivated by unknown anticipation, and he turned back to the dog. The rebel was paused, eyes still locked with his, and Valery was just about to ask himself if the rebel was finished when the knife was suddenly rammed right below his stomach.

The fox gasped and his eyes went pale in response to the impact. His paw shook violently and tried to get one or two fingers on the blade, but they only made it as far as the dog's gloves. Valery began

clawing at the rebel, his claw just barely scraping the protective cloth, and the dog grinned and pushed his thumb on top of Valery's fingers. He may as well have the pilot's own actions would play a part in death.

Cheers exploded from the surrounding group, and the rebel bared his fangs. He began to tighten his grip on the blade, causing Valery to hiss and wince, and the dog started to slowly turn it at the tip of his fingers. Bone and flesh squished and tore with every second, dark scarlet blood running deep over both creature's paws, and the dog suddenly jabbed the knife into a sharp, twisted angle.

With that came the screams. Valery's jaws snapped open into a desperate dying shriek and his body shuddered violently as the knife went deeper and deeper still. The bloodied bits of bone and claw on his wretched fingers pried at the knife with every bit of strength they had, but all they accomplished was raising more rooting cheers for his torturer.

How much longer could this possibly continue? He was a dead man now, a wretched husk that scarcely felt the new twists and turns of the knife beyond the cries of his wounded body and ruined arm, and he tilted his head back in one last, feral shriek as the dog forced his the blade all the way in and up to his wrist.

The crowd erupted into a climatic burst of cheering and foul profanity, and the dog took his thumb off Valery's fingers and spit into his face. The fox barely noticed. He was too busy breathing in rapid, unconnected gasps, and slowly lowered his head back towards the ground as the fresh pain suddenly seemed to slow.

Valery glanced at the dog and then the blade. He was just quick enough to watch the dark crimson metal slither out of his flesh and out into the warm sandy air. He almost gagged, the smell of his own blood and whatever other fluids released in the attack was absolutely overpowering, and Valery blankly stared as the dog paused before him.

The rebel wiped the dirty blade across Valery's muzzle, and then backed away. The fox blinked in disbelief. Was he really finished that soon? He couldn't tell. His dry, sticky eyes were barely able to focus on the nearby rebels, and his consciousness was even foggier. Everything was fading away as all he began to be able to sense was pain or the absence of it. Valery felt a small trickle of blood flow down his nose, and his tongue immediately lapped some of the blood away from his lips without a second thought. The sharp coppery taste burned in his mouth.

Nearly all of the rebels had broad smiles upon their faces, and a few muttered, almost inaudible words could be heard beneath the wild cheering. Despite their enthusiasm, there was an air of uncertainty among a small few, almost as if they were fully aware of the inbound support troops, and after a few more seconds one of them raised his voice and the others parted to allow yet another burly, nasty looking dog come to the front.

There were even more cheers that immediately drowned out any uncertainty. Valery cringed as the rebel bent over to scoop up a large, broken piece of concrete and continued closer to him. Even under his muted stupor he could predict what was happening; ugly, misplaced precision had failed to kill him. They were now going to finish with calculating, barbaric force.

Without another second's wait, the second dog knelt by Valery's side and immediately wrapped his grubby, fat hands and fingers around the pilot's muzzle. The dog turned the fox's head left and right,

almost as if examining the victim, and then yanked his jaw open with a hideous snap.

Valery's eyes trembled wildly as his jaw was extended to its limits, and he squirmed, whined, and tried to snap his fangs on the attacker's fingers, but all to no avail. His small tongue and blood-soaked fangs glistened in the small ribbon of sunlight, and the dog held him in that position for a few more seconds before removing his paws and letting Valery's muzzle fall shut.

He turned back to the other rebels and muttered a few words that were met with a few enthusiastic nods and yells. This one would do very, very well...

The rebel dog suddenly snarled and threw his paws around Valery's muzzle again, causing the fox to violently whine with whatever air he had left. This was absolutely terrifying, and Valery let loose a shallow, muffled shriek. He couldn't breathe, the dog had his paws right over his nose and mouth, and after another second he slammed Valery's face back into the side of the truck.

The shadow of the concrete descended across the pilot's face, and the dog kept his other paw around Valery's neck in a vice-like grip. Valery choked violently for air, bloodied fingers weakly clawing against whatever skin they could reach. He managed to scrape some skin, draw just a few drops of blood but suddenly, the crude weapon came down across his muzzle in a sudden shattering blow.

Every single rebel could hear the dull, sharp thud of concrete against tooth and bone, and every one of them watched in eager anticipation. Blood began running down from the pilot's teeth like spilled crimson wine, and their hated enemy struggled madly beneath their fellow soldier's grip, but there would be no escape.

With just a second's pause, the concrete came back down on the fox's jaw with sickening, brutalizing force. Valery weakly yelped as the concrete made contact time and time again and the dog's face was an expression of blinding, spiteful hate. Valery gasped madly for air, his own blood clogging his throat, and bits of concrete and dust covered his face and burning, damaged eyes.

But still the blows continued. About every three seconds the concrete brick was forced down into the side of Valery's jaw with the same sickeningly dull thud. Blood began to soak the side of his muzzle, and soon the entire side of his mouth was searing hot with the pain. The fox could feel his once-useful fangs begin to swish inside the blood-filled saliva of his mouth, and his muzzle was slowly twisting down with every successive impact.

With another hit, his face was ruined, forever curved and broken from the savagery. But the dog couldn't care less. After another hit he immediately flipped the fox's face to the other side, and rammed the concrete down again and again, the wet blood now deadening the noise to little more than a soft, almost harmless thud.

Despite every ounce of his chilling brutality, the dog could tell when the job was finished. After exactly five more strikes, he dropped the concrete block and threw his paws back onto Valery's face. He pried the fox's jaw open just enough to form a small opening on the side, and tilted the mouth so that the blood and saliva ran down into his paw and trickled through his fingers. After a few more seconds, most of the fangs fell into a small heap atop the dog's fur, and he hit Valery's face until he retrieved half a dozen more.

Valery's sharp, small teeth glistened in an ivory pile atop the dog's fat, curled paw, and the rebel gave

them one closer look before nodding to himself. That was all he wanted. The dog dropped the teeth into a small pouch by his side and silently stepped away, just like the rest of the fox's torturers.

Valery quietly wondered how many more rebels he would have to endure. It almost looked like every single one of them would be given a chance at his injury until the last was allowed to deal the final killing blow, and the fox could almost hear the next set of boots approaching from the ground.

Already they had stolen his teeth for their own primitive decoration, how much more could they possibly do before the rescue team arrived? Valery's mind churned at the question for a few more seconds before he quickly realized that he did not want to know the answer.

There was no more time for such thoughts; the sheer brutality of the concrete had made sure of that. Valery was little more than a hollow shell now, a small, ruined fragment of what was once the pilot Antonov, and he knew it more than anyone.

His face had been beaten down to the bone. Bloodied white stood out across half his face and mingled with shredded, matted scarlet fur. The muzzle was deformed beyond recognition. It curved left and downward along the path of the truck's metal, and his jaws now held nothing but deflated robbed gums. Every one of them was overflowing with blood, and his ears hung limply against his head, defeated. He no longer thought. All his consciousness could do now was beg, for mercy, death, anything to break away the suffering, and his head slumped down to the ground, causing yet another shower of blood to fall across his body. His body followed closely. Whatever strength Valery had left was rapidly fading, and he began to slip down the side of the truck until he crumpled into a small heap on the red-covered ground. There was no master but pain.

Valery cringed and stared down the street in a near-lifeless trance, mouth frozen in the hollow crack of a breath. He could see shapes, a few silhouettes a little farther down the truck, and he tried to focus his eyes on the nearest patch of darkness.

It looked like there were a few crouched figures huddled around something on the ground, and Valery squinted with one eye as he tried to make it out. There was a subtle, barely audible chopping sound, and the fox kept watching as one of the figures stepped away and the object in the center came into clear focus.

The second he realized what it was, Valery wished it hadn't.

A body with snow white fur and a flight uniform lay a few feet away. It was hard to tell, but Valery figured it must have been Dmitri's corpse, sprawled out on the sandy ground with every one of his bullet wounds visible. Rebels were crouched all around him, making quick, movements with their arms, and Valery slowly blinked as he realized what they were doing.

The rebels were taking trophies. Already it looked like Dmitri's paws were gone, and the pilot watched

in silence as one of the rebels dashed away with the wolf's severed tail. It was disgustingly unruly. The rebels shouted and argued like scavenger birds over the corpse while chopping away at anything they could reach, and he watched as one of them ran away with the weapon holster and bits of clothing.

Valery squinted closer in morbid, panicked fascination as the soldier darted away. He couldn't see his comrade's head, let alone any other part of the wolf's once strong body from beneath the uniform, and the fox's brain suddenly ran cold as he realized why.

Rebels had already taken the wolf's most attractive prize; his head. All that remained now was a bloody stump that ended right at the neck and a few inches of exposed spine, and the fox continued to watch quietly, unable to look away.

Dmitri's was a fate just like his own. What had once been a promising young fighter for Valery's nation was now nothing but a picked over collection of fleshy meat for the vultures. The pilot shouldn't have been surprised at it. He had been shown the photos as much as anyone else, but seeing this in person, experiencing it in person, made his entire body quake with fear and disgust.

The shadow of a rebel group began to gradually close in around Valery like a noose, and it was more than obvious that he was about to experience what Dmitri had mere moments before. He was too weak to defend himself at this point, and his consciousness barely registered the significance of their presence. He was beyond emotions and thought itself. All he processed was the rebels rapidly circling his thin broken body until their bodies completely blotted out what was left of his friend, and from there, it was nothing but passive, almost distant observation. He could barely even feel his body anymore...

One of the rebels moved first, rapidly swooping in on the fox's body and bending over to slice off a bit of Valery's clothing with a knife. He shrieked out in immediate joy, holding the small fragment like the trophy it was, and raced off into the crowd with it high above his head.

From there, things went to hell. A second rebel dashed up to Valery and was quickly followed by another, and in a flash, the entire crowd was on top of him. One of the rebels forcefully flipped Valery's body over as he attempted to snatch off the bloody jacket, and in seconds, the soldier sprinted away with an Mi-24 pilot's clothing on his shoulders.

Condition didn't seem to matter, the rebels took anything at any size. Outside of Valery's vision one of the rebels sliced fingers from his 'good' paw off the severed arm, and the closest rebel took his chances with one or two fragments of fur and bone from the ruined one.

Valery's paw was reduced to nothing but a stubby, fingerless blob, but Valery didn't even feel the loss. The pain was slowly giving way to some sort of distant solitude, and the fox's eyes continued to watch as rebel paws and boots danced before him. Let them take whatever they wanted. Soon, this body

would be his home no longer.

The rebels were more than happy to do just that. With every next second, more and more of him was quickly stolen, piece by piece, until the soldiers resorted to cutting random bits off his clothes and fur to satisfy their craving. Men argued violently over whatever scraps they could get their filthy fingers on, sometimes going so far as to battle over a single scrap, and one dog suddenly dashed in and hovered over Valery's body. His eyes were fixed on the fox's fluffy, perfect tail with intense fascination. Such a prize would look absolutely wonderful hanging from his uniform...

Silence suddenly fell upon the unruly crowd as the men noticed the soldier's fascination, and the rebels quickly shuffled away into a small semicircle. None of them dared challenge the soldier face to face, this was a superior officer, but that didn't stop some of them from watching with envious glares. The rebel leaned down over the fox's legs, blade in paw, and pulled out the pilot's tail to its full length before making two rapid slices with his knife.

The severed tail swept up into the officer's paws with a quick splash of blood, and the soldier cradled it in his arms with a smile, softly fingering the dirty, unharmed fur. But there was still more to reap from his prey. The man barked a few rapid orders, pointing at the fox's head next, and a soldier scrambled to work on Valery's ears. The serrated blades managed to get them off in mere moments.

The subordinate rubbed the thin furred ears between his fingers and scowled at his commander, irritated that he hadn't been allowed to claim the scarlet-black prizes as his own. His officer just smiled, flopped the tail over his shoulder and held out an open paw. With a loud grumble and half a dozen curses, the soldier dropped the ears and shuffled away to leave the officer beaming at the sight of his newest decorations. Parts from your enemies were better than any medal.

The officer stared at the trophies for a few more seconds, and then glanced to what little remained of Valery's body, still unsatisfied. His bastards weren't finished collecting yet...

The dog let out a harsh sharp bark and snapped in rapid, foul language at the retreating soldier who had brought him the ears. With a frightened jump, the sorry rebel came up to his commander with his tail between his legs and ears flattened completely against his head; he listened quietly as the officer shouted his new set of orders.

The rebel nodded with vigorous enthusiasm. The new instructions were truly unpleasant, but anything was better than displeasing his superior.

With a slap on the head from his officer, the subordinate quickly shuffled over to Valery's body, knife drawn. He paused over the enemy, quickly glancing at the fox's half-open eyes and the blood slowly trickling out of his mouth, and knelt next to his face. From the slow breathing, he could tell the pilot was still alive, but that merely made things better. The more the fox suffered, the more bearable this

action was.

The officer let out another series of rapid barks and shouted the orders again, causing the soldier to nearly drop the knife. He shouted a few profanity-laden sentences in reply, and tapped the long, broad knife to Valery's neck. Damn his officers and their desire for the victim's fucking heads; weren't the rest of the trophies good enough? He didn't want to be sitting here vulnerable when the recovery team unleashed hell on their position, and the soldier repositioned the knife on Valery's neck and took a deep breath.

Now.

With a thundering boom, the sudden burst of a 25mm LAV cannon shrieked at the edge of the street and a nearby car erupted into flames. Half a dozen more bursts skipped into the concrete, creating showers of debris that peppered against the scattered rebels, and follow-up machine gun fire spat against the buildings and cars with murderous efficiency.

Opposition was thrown into immediate disarray. Tens of rebel soldiers were cut down before they even knew what had hit them, and without a second more, the officers shrieked maddened orders for a hasty retreat.

The men didn't need to be told twice. Orders or not, the mass of the rebel force immediately turned tail and ran, dashing for retreating cover behind whatever cars or trucks survived.

The motorized infantry squad followed hot on their heels. Professional soldiers gunned down their retreating enemies with ease, and the cannons tore through whatever protection the few handfuls had managed to find. The two heavily armed and armored LAVs ripped up the street, every available weapon firing at full automatic, and as soon as the bulk of return fire ceased, the soldiers transitioned into a slow, steady sweep for any possible survivors, friend or foe.

Valery stared into the truck wheel, bloody, unfocused eyes observing the hell that unfolded around him. A gored leg bled out at the corner of his vision, and he watched as rounds hissed overhead. He wasn't sure who it belonged to. The soldier tasked with his decapitation now lay a few feet away, head blown cleanly in two by gunfire, and corpses of fellow rebels randomly circled his position in a deathly sort of halo. But the leg's owner wasn't important; to the fox, all dead men now looked the same.

What mattered was the rescue team. Even beneath his semi-conscious stupor Valery knew the significance of what was happening. The sudden, random chaos could only mean the arrival of friendly troops, his brave comrades.

They were finally here, at long last ready to take him back home to his motherland and his darling Eva. The field medic might even enable him to gain a few extra hours of drug-induced life, maybe just enough to allow him to remain conscious as they took him back to the firebase and his fellow pilots.

Valery blinked. That would be nice. At least now he would die a recognized death for his country, maybe even get a medal or two declaring him a people's hero and officially confirming his status as a skilled pilot. Maybe that would be able to gradually ease Eva's pain. The medals would go next to her photographs and his old uniforms, reminders of her loved one's bravery in combatting this vicious and hateful enemy.

But it wouldn't be enough. He had failed her on half a dozen promises that all swore he would return safely home. Even though they had both accepted the danger, it was failure nonetheless, and Valery quietly watched his few moments trickle away.

He didn't even notice the friendly soldiers approach. His ears were only giving him a dampened, painful ringing and his brain no longer cared about what his eyes had to say. Shadows swept all around him, paws pressed against his body, and a concerned, saddened face stared down into his.

But all Valery saw was Eva. Here he died, in the service of his nation, and he wasn't even able to return to his sweet, sweet vixen. What a tragic fate indeed. The fox coughed violently and blood spat up into the medic's face, and a sudden wave of distant nothingness began to sweep through him.

There wasn't very long now, and the medic stood up on his paws, head shaking in pained despair. He had watched too many pilots die like this, the rescue crew never arrived in time this late into the war. All the men were tired, weary, and the enemy's resolve seemed to stiffen with every hour.

What had their motherland gotten itself into with this snare of a war?

The pilot's dead, wounded eyes almost seemed to agree with him, and his breaths began to slow until all that was left was a single, quiet whisper.

Two minutes later, Valery Antonov, now declared an official people's hero by the commander of the rescue team, died for his country. If only it had instead been with Eva at his side.

That would have made it almost... bearable.