



# COMRADE VASILII GOES TO WAR

Pierz Newton-John

**S**trike a match out here at night and it's the only light in a hundred miles at least. That's if you don't count the stars, which is a good idea, because if you did, your head would start to spin before you got to ten. You'd drown in stars out here if you were tall enough. Our generator died four months ago and we've been without lights or heating ever since.

We thank God it's summer and pray that Captain Sviatoslavich comes good on his promise to send out a repairman before the snow starts to fall. But frankly we don't hold out much hope. We never believe a word he tells us.

There's about fifty metres between our outpost and theirs, just a bare patch of dust. No barbed wire or boom gates mark the border. To tell the truth, we've no idea where it is. Sometimes, when we're particularly bored, we play this stupid game, drawing a line through the dust with our rifle butts and taunting each other—*step over that line, Comrade, and you're a dead man! This here is Uzekhstan!* And Vasilii—he's the one that started this shit—he'll step right over and draw another line ten metres further back and declare that that is the true border, and that we are in fact invaders on the sovereign territory of Ozakhstan! And so it goes, until we get bored with it all and decide to go inside and get pissed on Vasilii's vodka.

To avoid confusion, I should point out that I, too, am Vasilii. Well, it's a common name. Not that he is anything like me. He is intelligent, handsome and tall and reads Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. He even reads some English writer called Shakespeare. When he's drunk enough he stands in front of the window looking as tall and desperate as Rasputin and booms out sad English words that make all our hairs stand up, even though we don't understand a bit of it. I, on the other hand, am stupid, ugly and short, and the only things I read are letters from Raisa, the girl who for reasons I cannot justify, loves me. I've been reading the same letters for months, because that's how often the mail truck bothers to come by.

Vlad isn't a much better specimen. He's fat as a pig and has flat feet which stink, so I never let him take his boots off, even at night. Every now and then I tell him to wash them, and then I cross the border to play poker with Vasilii and Anton so I don't have to be there when he does. Actually I shouldn't order poor Vlad around like that. Technically he's my superior officer, but even though I am stupid, he is really stupider. Vlad has no Raisa, or any other girl. He reads letters from his mama and cries. He is such a baby.

We got sent out here to the border because we were the very worst soldiers in the academy. We weren't cut out to be soldiers, but everyone has to be a soldier in Uzekhstan. Vlad should have been a pig farmer or a panel beater. As for me, I wouldn't have minded working in a bar selling beer to Western girls in tank tops and short denim skirts who want to ficky-fick with an Uzekhstani boy. Sorry Raisa! I am having dirty thoughts again. It's this cold, lonely steppe. After a while it starts to turn a man into a wolf.

Captain Sviatoslavich told us the situation was this: we don't want their bastards coming over here, and your job is to stop them if they try. This was stupid. Ozakhstan is exactly the same as Uzekhstan. Everybody knows this. Escaping from one to the other is like slapping your left cheek because you're tired of slapping your right. But because we built a border post, *they* had to build one too. To stop *our* bastards going over there.

Which is Vasilii and Anton's job.

I don't know about Anton, but I don't think they sent Vasilii out here for being a bad soldier. It is obvious to everyone he should probably be a general and lead the whole Ozakhstan army. I think he was sent here for being overheard calling the Ozakhstan president a vodka-pickled, nepotistic, barnyard-animal-fucking, corrupt lick of fat Western arses. When a nice secret policeman visited him to ask him about this indiscretion, Vasilii swore he was referring to the president of Uzekhstan (which is incidentally quite plausible) but a week later they sent him here anyway.

When they first arrived, we were such prigs. Refusing to say good morning when we happened to be out having a piss at the same time, spitting at the Ozakhstan flag and all that nonsense. But Vasilii wore us down with his charm and his stupid pranks. He was forever wandering around in the abandoned space between the outposts smoking a cigarette and gazing into the sky like he was working out some problem of astronomical measurement. It drove me crazy that he acted like there was no border there at all, so one day I went out and drew a line in the dirt and told him never to cross it. You can guess what he did. It made me laugh, but I was too angry to show it so I turned my back on him. And then I heard his voice purring right behind my shoulder. *Are you laughing, Comrade?* That was how he won.

Sometimes I think he only did it to supplement his miserable wages by luring us into those dreadful all-night poker games. I don't know how he does it, but it always goes the same. Every time I pick up my cards and there's a sweet row of queens or something, he folds. In the end you get so sick of it you bluff him, and he pushes you all the way over the edge and rakes in the pot with a pair of tens or something. Vlad gets so furious his face goes purple and he throws his cards and storms out. Then five minutes later, he'll stick his big sheepish head back in and beg to be let into the game again. Vasilii is always willing to forgive him.

This morning our radio suddenly blared. It was Captain Sviatoslavich. *The crisis has escalated!* he shouted at us.

*What crisis would that be, Captain Shitoslavich?* I asked, winking at Vlad.

*The political crisis, you idiot!* screamed the captain. *We are at war with Ozakhstan!* Vlad and I looked at one another, our mouths gaping dumbly. *You must act swiftly to engage the enemy!*

I breathed a sigh of relief. We were off the hook. I'd thought for a moment we were getting a recall. But for once Vlad was actually smarter than me. *What do you mean by 'engage the enemy', Sir?* he asked.

*What do you think I mean, you lard-arsed dolt? Shoot them! Now! Over and out.*

Then I understood, and the dawning realisation of our situation hit me like a fist to the guts. I went to the window and looked out over the dusty no-man's-land of the border. I could see Vasilii and Anton playing cards as usual. Obviously they didn't know we were at war yet, but it would only be a matter of time. We had to act swiftly.

I threw Vlad his gun, which he held at arm's length like it was a poisonous snake. I could see he was about to cry so I knew I had to take control. Why they promoted him above me I will never understand. *We're not going to shoot them, alright?* I said. *We're just going to take them prisoner.* I looked him in the eye. *Okay?* He nodded, wide-eyed like a child.

It was only fifty metres from one door to the other, but that lugubrious march seemed longer than any of the exhausting forced marches from our academy days.

When we stepped into the room, Vasilii looked up from his card game and gave me his easy handsome grin. *So Vasilii, have you come to shoot me now?* he asked, raising an eyebrow.

In such stupid situations as this, it is impossible to be a real human being, so you read from a script, like a moron robot.

*Comrade Vasilii, I am taking you prisoner of the State of Uzekhstan,* I said, pointing the barrel at his chest. Vasilii's smile stayed on his face, but I saw his eyes change as the reality of the situation dawned on him. He looked cool as my grandmother's cucumbers but a drop of sweat ran down his brow and into one of his eyes.

He stood up slowly and as I stood there shaking, he unholstered his pistol and pointed it straight at my heart.

*Comrade Vasilii,* he said, *I am taking you prisoner of the State of Ozakhstan.* I don't know if he thought this was funny. He might have been smiling about anything.

Anton was now pointing his gun at Vlad, and Vlad was pointing his gun at Anton.

Things were getting over my head, so I turned to my superior officer. *What do we do now?* I asked.

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Pierz Newton-John spends a day a week tearing his hair out at a keyboard and trying to 'emerge'. Occasionally he actually writes something—his work has appeared in *The Sleepers almanac* (twice) and *Overland*. In his spare six days he is a web developer and father.

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