

## CHAPTER 1: A DAY OFF

*Smolensk, June 22, 1941*

Ceding control was the hardest part for Aelya. “Yuri Antonovich!” she shouted over the wind. Formally addressing Yura always kept him on his toes. “Take over!” “Yes, Comrade Instructor.”

In the front seat of the biplane, Yura glanced furiously between the instruments and the ground, searching for the next waypoint. Aelya wished she could remove her goggles and helmet, let the wind flow through her hair, and allow the engine to calm her with its hypnotic juddering. But she hated taking her hands off the stick. It felt unnatural to her as a pilot.

Her mother would say that just being a pilot was supposed to feel unnatural. “Man was not meant to fly,” the true red Socialist always said. “When you ascend in an airplane, you’re proclaiming your triumph over nature.”

Her father, when his wife was out of earshot, would counter, “When you’re in the air, nothing feels more right. How can that be unnatural?”

Focus, Aelya thought. Let Yura learn the nuances for himself and observe. For Aelya, traversing the air came as easily as gliding through water did for an Olympic swimmer. It took hours and hours of practice for a complex machine to become an extension of oneself. She kept her patience, resisting the urge to correct her student.

The plane crossed the last of the waypoints, a marker flag in the vast open field behind Aviation Plant No. 35. Now for final approach. Time to take up the slack. If Yura made any mistakes trying to land, he could damage state property. That would be on her, a blemish against her

future Communist Party membership. She was already under enough scrutiny as the aeroclub's youngest instructor.

"Turn now. You're late!" she shouted.

The plane jerked violently as he overcorrected on the rudder. Aelya lined it up properly with her controls in the back seat. Now the descent.

"Flare up! Flare up!" He always nosed up late when touching down. The wheels hit the ground hard. The aeroclub had the privilege of using the paved runway at the plant's test facilities, so the plane remained level.

As the propeller made its last few revolutions, a technician met the slowing plane on the tarmac. They climbed out of the aircraft, Aelya declining Yura's hand despite her small frame. The technician guided the plane toward a hangar while they approached the aerodrome office to go through post-flight forms. Inside the low clapboard building, they removed their helmets and jackets in the stifling early-summer heat.

"I think you need more rudder pressure on takeoff," she said, looking at his neck. There was a gap of smooth, pale skin showing between his blue worker's jacket and white woollen scarf. She thought of another criticism and braced herself to look him in the eye, but his gaze fell somewhere over her shoulder. She turned and caught a glimpse of golden-blond hair.

"Dear Spacegirl, you're not giving poor Yura a hard time, are you?" Vasya beamed. Though the nickname was meant to be derisive, Aelya had embraced it ages ago. Being named after a fictional Queen of Mars, she had to. Her elder sister only dredged up "Spacegirl" to belittle her in front of boys.

Vasya fidgeted with the strap of her fashionable red leather handbag and drew near to kiss Yura on both cheeks, her vibrant locks flicking from side to side. Aelya ran her fingers through her own matted hair. Why did she have to sweat so much in her flying helmet?

"Dear Vasya, were you waiting here for me?" asked Yura with a lopsided smile that other girls apparently found endearing.

"Oh Yura, I thought you were so wonderful. Surely Spacegirl will let you fly on your own soon?"

Yura turned the smile on Aelya. "What do you think, Aelya, er, Comrade Aelita Petrovna?"

"Yuri Antonovich, you might need some more time yet." Aelya badly wanted to wipe his smile away. He was still too sloppy to solo. To let him do so would reflect badly on her teaching. But she just

couldn't say it. She shoved the clipboard into Yura's chest. "Please complete these forms and I'll see you outside. I have to get changed. My sister and I have to be somewhere."

Yura frowned as Aelya hustled toward the ready room, dragging Vasya away from her shameless flirtation. She would have preferred keeping on her flying uniform to changing into a summer dress, but it made her father happy. Back outside, she completed the sign-offs with Yura, then said goodbye as quickly as she could and walked out of the aerodrome toward Frunze Street.

Vasya rushed to catch up. "That was very rude, Spacegirl."

"I thought I was being as polite as I could."

"Well, I didn't have a chance to say a proper goodbye," Vasya complained.

"Why don't you stay and talk some more? I don't need you to escort me to the tram."

"It's better this way. I can't seem too eager. Anyway, we're late enough for the picnic as it is." She turned to blow kisses at Yura as he crossed the street toward the workers' dormitories.

Aelya spotted a tram coming down the rails and started running.

"Wait, it hurts to run in these heels," said Vasya.

"You're the one worried about being late."

As they reached the stop just in time, Vasya caught her breath. "I just don't want to waste Mama and Papa's Sunday off. It's bad enough you had to use up the morning in your greasy contraption."

"Then you should be at Lopatinsky Garden already. No need to haul yourself up here to get me. Oh, I forgot—you're such a flying enthusiast." Aelya flicked her eyes back up the street toward Yura. Vasya burst out laughing.

They boarded and the tram squealed, pulling away from the stop, passing the massive cinder block edifice of the aviation plant where their parents worked. Two men offered their seats, doffing their hats toward Vasya.

"That greasy contraption," Aelya said, "lets us see the world from up high. Just think. A few decades ago, no one had ever done that. It's surely worth a smudge or two. I should take you in the trainer next time." She envisaged doing a roll and a couple of loops to make her sister sick, then terrifying her with a stall turn. She smiled.

"I wouldn't be caught dead in an airplane," Vasya said.

"But what if Yura wants to take you flying? He's going to be an Air Force pilot, after all."

“Oh come on, Aelitchka. Flirting with Yura’s just a bit of a lark. I have university to think about.”

Yura seemed to really be in love with Vasya. It was a bit cruel to lead him on, even if he was a blockhead. But Vasya would aim higher. Sometimes she thought Vasya had only joined the Komsomol to meet boys with good Party prospects.

Aelya sighed.

“Don’t give me that,” Vasya said. “You’ll understand when you’re old enough.”

“I am—” The rattling tram wheels drowned her out as they crossed the Dnieper River bridge into Smolensk’s old town. Some men at the front of the train chatted, sounding agitated.

Aelya looked out the window. Despite the Assumption Cathedral’s czarist decadence, she admired the way its golden-capped towers reached up to the heavens. Its magnificence could only be fully appreciated from the air. Perhaps the builders had thought of that, intending only God to have the best view.

At the first stop across the bridge, the men at the front rushed off. There was a commotion on the street as the tram continued rolling alongside the river. More people than usual were lining up at the shops.

“Oh no,” Aelya said. “Do you have the *pirozьhki*?”

“Did you think they’d fit into my handbag? I thought you were bringing them.”

The tram lurched to a halt to make way for a cluster of people heedlessly crossing the street as the driver cursed at them.

“It would have been just as easy for you to carry them as for me,” Aelya muttered. “Except I had to fly an airplane. Molotov University will be humbled by your genius.”

“Oh, don’t get in huff. You could have stashed them in your ready room.” Vasya strained to look past the passengers on the other side. “Let’s get off at the next stop and head back across to the bazaar.”

Aelya gathered her bearings. Two couples taking Sunday strolls alongside the river had stopped to talk. It didn’t seem to be a happy conversation. Through the opposite window, she saw a group gathered around a radio set up in the doorway of an apartment block.

Vasya said, “Since it was supposed to be your job, we’re getting the apple *pirozьhki*.”

“Ugh. Come on. Half apricot.”

They got up and pushed their way toward the doors. Out on the street, more people were gathering in crowds. Other passengers craned their necks to see what was going on.

The tram came to the next stop. A man rushed up the vehicle's front stairs. He shouted two words that jolted everyone to attention.

“It’s war!”

## CHAPTER 2: THE CALL-UP

The locomotive blew its whistle. Vasya tilted her large summer hat as she hugged Yura. Aelya looked away. On the open platform, she shielded her eyes from the sun and scanned the mass of faces and the waving hands of those leaning out the windows of the carriages. She recognized a few people from the aeroclub and waved, but they were too preoccupied with their loved ones.

“Stay safe, please,” Vasya told Yura.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I had the best teacher.”

Aelya’s cheeks reddened and she cast her eyes downward. This was her last chance to say something. With his father already called up and his mother on factory shift, Yura had only her and Vasya to see him off.

“There’s still so much for you to learn.” What a terrible goodbye.

He smiled. “You sound like you want to go instead of me.”

She grimaced. She was the better pilot. With the aeroclub shut down, he’d be flying and she’d be grounded. It wasn’t fair.

“Maybe I should join up,” she said, affecting a pout.

“A girl? In the Air Force?” Yura laughed.

“Marina Raskova teaches at the Air Force Academy.”

“You’re no Raskova. Or was that you who flew non-stop across Siberia? Was that last week?”

Actually, Raskova had crash-landed short of her goal, but Aelya would never disparage the great Raskova, even to put Yura in his place.

“Stop making this about you, Spacegirl,” snapped Vasya. She was one to talk.

“I’m not. It’s just . . . why couldn’t they wait to call you up?” Aelya said.

Yura shrugged. “If they had, the war might be over by the time I joined.”

“I’ll wait for you,” said Vasya.

Aelya flashed her an angry look at her obviously empty promise.

“It might be a while.” Yura smiled. “We’ll probably be stuck for months teaching Communism to the Germans when we get to Berlin.”

Vasya leaned in for a kiss. Yura seemed surprised for a moment, then reciprocated. Aelya didn’t like standing there, watching it. If anything, Yura’s attention should have been focused on her. Stupid Yura. Now that he was in the Air Force, suddenly he thought he was better than she was. The most important things he would be doing from now on were all based on the lessons she had taught him.

Catcalls from the train broke up the embrace. The carriages began to roll. Yura frantically picked up his bags and hauled himself on board. As he waved from the door, the train slowly pulling away, a compulsion struck Aelya and she ran alongside.

“Watch the nose, then the gauges,” she shouted. “And pay attention to the checklists!”

What else, what else? Yura just nodded and waved. Seconds later, he had moved too far away to hear anything she might have to say.



At the last step, the bag of onions nearly fell out of Vasya’s hands. Aelya scooped it up smoothly and took the handles from her sister.

“You really should find something new to wear,” Vasya said. “That thing stinks.”

Aelya looked down at her dark blue tunic and skirt. “I only have the two Komsomol outfits.”

“You know what I mean.”

No, Aelya didn’t know what she meant. The problem was that Vasya had no healthy sense of shame. After seeing Yura off, they had spent the whole day with the rest of the youth leaguers accosting shoppers at the bazaar to donate goods for soldiers’ care packages. Vasya ignored their area organizer Fedor’s instructions and continued to wear a summer dress—a brilliant red number, more ostentatious than the white one she’d worn on Sunday, when the war had started. The dress that billowed in the wind as she’d kissed Yura. Why did the image of those two keep playing in Aelya’s mind?

They trudged down the corridor of their dormitory. Their mother’s voice barked through paper-thin walls, and they caught her in

midsentence. “With that leg of yours? All a Nazi has to do is step to one side. Worse than useless is what it is!”

They strained to hear more as they neared their door, but their father, as always, kept his voice low.

Mama picked up her harangue once more, loud and clear as they stood by the door. “You’ll do the most good here, at the plant. This is where you’re needed.”

Aelya leaned against the door. Her sister took the bag of onions from her and plopped them noisily on the floor. She then made a show of fumbling with the doorknob before opening it.

Mama stood at the kitchen counter facing them, her hands clasped in front of her. “About time.”

Vasya kissed Papa, seated at their little round dining table, then took the onions over to Mama. Aelya sat opposite her father.

He looked from daughter to daughter, his lips trembling slightly. “My two princesses, back from their quest.”

Mama said, “Aelitchka, dear, get some water from the washroom.”

A door swung open and Babushka emerged from the bedroom she shared with her daughter and son-in-law. “I’ll get it.”

Aelya’s grandmother knew to make herself scarce when Mama was on the warpath. It always surprised Aelya. From what her mother said, Babushka had been quite combative in her youth. She grabbed a bucket from the floor and headed out into the hall, escaping the tension.

“Why is there no mince?” Mama said, rifling through the bag.

“Meat? Are you joking?” said Vasya. “There’s a run on everything at the bazaar. People are stockpiling.”

“Watch your tone, Vasilisochka. You didn’t think about simply substituting in mushrooms? I thought not. Too distracted by boys, weren’t you?” Mama turned her gaze to Aelya. “Of course you weren’t distracted, were you, Aelitchka? So what’s your excuse?”

Aelya swallowed. She was never quite sure when Mama expected an answer. What could she say? She had no clue what ingredients went into *golubtsi*. That was Vasya’s department.

Mama groaned and threw up her hands. “Just when there’s a war on and everyone needs to pitch in, this is the help I get.” Papa looked about to say something when Vasya flashed him a warning look. Mama continued, “You’d think, considering I have to plan a conversion of our whole factory line, that I might have a little help at home and not have everyone running off, thinking only of themselves.”

“You’re not alone in this,” said Papa. “I’m not leaving.”

Leave? What was he talking about? He was pushing forty, with a bad leg from an industrial accident. He thought he was going to join up?

A clatter at the window drew everyone's attention. Vasya stuck her head out.

"Roman!" she cried. "What are you doing here?"

Beside Vasya, Aelya squeezed through the narrow window. Three storeys below, their schoolmate Roman was leaning his bicycle against a lamppost.

"I just wanted to check you were home first," he shouted up, then bounded into the entrance.

Aelya and Vasya stepped into the hallway just as Babushka returned with a bucketful of water. Footfalls echoed from the stairwell at the end of the corridor. Roman emerged at the landing, out of breath. Like Aelya, he was sixteen, but the way his pale, skinny legs stuck out of his Komsomol shorts, he looked even younger.

"Big news," he said. "We're being called to duty. Building defences outside the city. Fedor says to pack overnight bags and extra uniforms. We're meeting down by the train station tonight."

He handed over a sheet with details to Vasya and Aelya, who looked at each other.

"What's this about defences? You digging trenches?" Papa called from inside.

"Why don't you come in, Roman?" said Aelya. "We're getting dinner ready."

She regretted the invitation immediately. Roman came from a family of leatherworkers, crammed into a low-rise with a dozen other families in the Iamskaya district. While he'd appreciate the luxury of a modern apartment with private bedrooms, what would Mama say to having an extra mouth to feed?

"Can't stay," the boy said. "I've got to finish my rounds." He nodded, then disappeared down the stairwell as quickly as he came.

Inside, Papa was standing next to Mama now, with Babushka seated, drinking something clear that was probably not water.

"Why are we digging trenches?" asked Mama. "We're hundreds and hundreds of kilometres from the border."

Vasya looked over the information on the sheet. "It doesn't say how long this will be for. There'd better be some way of washing our uniforms while we're there."

Mama dropped into a chair and slammed her palms on the table. “Why are they doing this to me? I’m going to lodge a protest with the workers’ committee. They can’t take you away like that, putting you in harm’s way.”

A protest built up within Aelya, but it caught in her throat. Mama was just blustering anyway. She would never publicly go against the Party. But Aelya didn’t like her saying it. So what if Aelya wanted to dig trenches? It was better than sitting around not being able to fly.

“The enemy’s still far away. It’s just a precaution,” Papa said, stroking his wife’s arm. “It’s a tactic. Trade space for time, then hit the enemy when they’re overstretched, as we did Napoleon.”

Babushka snorted. “Didn’t Napoleon burn Smolensk?”

## CHAPTER 3: ESSENTIAL TO THE WAR EFFORT

A *makbra* pointing a rifle was not to be disobeyed. Aelya and the other Komsomol members dutifully disembarked from their convoy of trucks. The Red Army soldier climbed onto the back and closed the tailgate, leaving himself plenty of room to stretch out his legs. Another *makbra* commandeered the driver's seat from Andrei, Roman's oversized puppy of a friend.

"You're just taking these empty?" Fedor complained to the driver.

Aelya couldn't muster any concern. One overcrowded, mud-caked village was the same as the next in the constant refrain of retreating to the next defensive line, just barely staying ahead of refugees and fleeing soldiers.

The driver shrugged. "My orders were to bring empty trucks to Mozhaisk, and that's just what I'm doing."

In the back, the soldier was standing now, warily brandishing his rifle and cursing at a swarm of refugees clawing to get on board.

"We're headed to Mozhaisk too," Fedor said. "Why don't you take us most of the way and drop us off just before you get there?"

A nasty squelch sounded as an old man tried to scramble aboard and got a rifle butt to the head for his trouble.

"If I take you," the driver said, "I'd have to let everyone on. Then we'd never get anywhere."

Empty or full, there was little chance of anyone getting anywhere. The line of vehicles had been swallowed up by the mass of people and animals bumping slowly into each other in this village, caked with so much dust and grime it was hard to tell one from the other. Just two months ago, this might have been a quaint farming settlement built around the intersection of two dirt roads. Now it was an artery for the

defensive line in front of Moscow and clogged with twenty times its former population.

The truck's horn honked. But with no space for the other vehicles, horse wagons, soldiers, and overladen refugees to move out of the way, what was the point of honking? The driver put the truck into gear, honked once more, then lurched forward. Amazingly, the mass of creatures in front of it managed to scramble out of the way, but a horse wagon was overturned and two cars had their rear ends crumpled as the line of trucks forced its way through.

"So that's how you do it," said Andrei.



Fedor spent the rest of the day and half the night desperately negotiating with refugees and soldiers for alternate transport before making the inevitable decision to move out on foot the next morning.

Aelya had thought she'd be gone for a week. Near the forests west of Smolensk, her Komsomol group had made an outing of digging trenches and building defensive emplacements. The jovial atmosphere of a summer field trip continued even as the Germans crept closer and closer. Crept was the wrong word; the Germans *raced*. The news announcements Fedor received kept trumpeting heroic stands made by the Red Army. But anyone who'd taken a geography class noticed those stands moving eastward rapidly. By the time the air raids began, the unthinkable was reality: Smolensk was to be evacuated.

Not everyone had gone east, however—only workers and families essential to the war effort. Of course, Aviation Plant No. 35 was near the top of the list. The Komsomol group disintegrated, thinking only of themselves. Half of them scabbled through their belongings, scooping up their bags, while others stepped aside, watching numbly. Roman and Andrei didn't even bother looking at the list of factories, knowing their families weren't important enough to evacuate. Fedor had no chance either and ruefully remarked, "No need for bakers in this war."

Anguish had clutched Aelya's chest while she watched Roman and Andrei struggle to collect the camping gear of departing Komsomol members, even as Vasya bullied her way into finding space for two on an evacuation truck. There weren't enough spaces on the trucks for everyone. Over Vasya's recriminations, Aelya let a fourteen-year-old

boy take her place. She would take the next convoy out—only there would be no other evacuation convoy, as Fedor told her after the truck had departed. When new trucks did arrive, they took the Komsomol members to the next line of defence east of Smolensk. In the two months since, Aelya's world had shrunk to one dirty patch of land after another.

Now dirt flew up with each step, crusting her fingernails and invading her nostrils. The ball of Aelya's foot chafed against the hole wearing in the sole of her right boot, socks long ago replaced by footwraps. A sore spot on her thigh flared every time she pulled up the ill-fitting trousers Roman had given her. Her Komsomol skirts had long ago shredded into rags used for wiping off mud.

The journey was hard, made worse by the congestion on the road to Mozhaisk, but at least it saved them from hearing Fedor's regular updates. The point of his litany of Nazi atrocities eluded Aelya. She was already torn up with worry over friends and family; she didn't need the horror stories. Her reserve of outrage was exhausted, and now she simply felt numb. For those who'd suffered loss, hearing Fedor's news picked away at their emotional sores.

She felt sorry for Fedor. Too young to be called up, he'd been burdened with responsibility for the youths in the group. Tall with cropped blond hair framing a square-jawed face that managed to be both boyish and rugged, he looked just like the young men in the posters TASS churned out extolling the virtues of the ideal Soviet worker. She suspected he'd been elected acting area organizer based on his looks.

Her pace slipped and she fell closer and closer to the back of their column. Roman and Andrei straggled behind, whispering conspiratorially. They were probably planning when to make a break and run away to the front. Roman had been obsessed with this since encountering a ragged group of retreating soldiers on the road outside the last village. They looked as though they'd been put through a wheat thresher. Not a single one had a clean spot anywhere on his body. Almost all of them wore bandages or splints. Bright red scabs and scars interrupted any exposed skin on these soldiers.

Roman had buzzed around them, peppering them with questions about the front. They weren't infantry, though. They were support troops—cooks, supply clerks, and mail carriers who'd been shattered by German bombers. One of them caught on to Roman's intentions. A bandage over his forehead covered only half the wound on the side of

his head. What was left of his ear was lost amid a raw, lumpy mass that looked ready to bleed at any moment. Beneath the dirt on his face, his cheeks were smooth. He was barely older than Aelya was. This *frontovik* promised Roman a tip on how to join the front in exchange for the half-full packet of cigarettes Roman secreted in his boot. The advice was simply to head west and wander around, and eventually some frontline unit would pick him up and “volunteer” him for service. Roman was upset at spending all those cigarettes for such simple advice, but he’d been talking about going ever since.

Could she manage running away to the front? Not that she had an appetite for picking up a rifle. But pitching in for the Komsomol’s war effort had lost its lustre after the third set of trenches. They were the future of the Socialist state, so surely they were destined for something more. But to disobey the Komsomol committee?

She noticed Roman and Andrei stop talking as she fell in step next to them. She said, “I know you’re up to something. What is it?”

Roman looked around nervously. “Why, so you can tell your boyfriend?”

“What? Fedor’s not—never mind that. You’re planning to run away, aren’t you?”

Roman shushed her so loudly, he drew a few glances. He dropped into a whisper. “Fine, that’s what we’re doing. And now that you know, you’re part of this. You have to help us.”

“No, I don’t.” She sighed. “Look, I understand what you must be thinking.”

“How can you? You’re a girl. No one expects you to fight.”

“You’re sixteen. No one expects you to either.”

A distant rumbling caused the line of travellers to stop. Panic rose in their voices as they searched the skies in vain for the German bombers the deep sound signified. They were up there somewhere, hidden away by the streamer-like stratus and puffy cumulus clouds scattered across the blue.

Aelya heard Fedor’s voice in her head: a story from the day before about a woman pushing her baby daughter in a pram and being strafed by a Fascist fighter looking for sport. The effect of a 20 mm cannon shell on a baby’s body . . .

They cautiously took shelter in the long grasses next to the road, crouching down.

“Look!” A girl pointed behind Aelya, above a line of tall pines.

They saw them before they heard their high-pitched whines. A line of nine or ten Soviet I-16 fighters streaked over the horizon. Even from this distance, Aelya could recognize their distinct, snub-nosed shape. Pilots called the plane the Ishak because its clumsiness reminded them of a donkey, but in the hands of experts it was a nimble machine.

Aelya had always wanted to try her hand at an Ishak. It was said that if you could fly one, you could fly anything. She envied those pilots, the wind whipping their scarves like banners, the summer sun beaming down on them in their open cockpits. Aelya found herself joining in as the Komsomol members waved, even if the pilots couldn't possibly see them.

"Go get 'em, boys!" shouted Andrei, red-faced. He was twice the size of Roman, and when he patted the smaller boy on the back it almost knocked him over. Andrei had already lost a grandmother to bombing and his grandfather passed away from grief soon after. He made a point of loudly exhorting to battle any troops he encountered.

Aelya spotted the danger a second before anyone else on the ground did, and certainly before the Soviet pilots did. Little black dots, fly specks against the glare of the sun. They appeared quickly and transformed into sleek, angular silhouettes as they dived at the Ishaks from a high angle. There were four of them—Messerschmitt Bf-109s, probably. Another second later, one, two, three, then four of the Ishaks dropped out of formation, trailing smoke and airplane parts as the German fighters hit them.

The remaining Ishaks broke up their line, scattering in every direction like pigeons fluttering away when a dog barked at them in the park. Two of them flew flat out in the general direction of the Komsomol members. No, Aelya thought. You're a plane. Use the vertical space. The Messer pilot on their tail knew this. He arced smoothly into a climb until he was above the Ishaks and behind them. He must have been spotted by his prey, who banked hard to the left. The Messer streaked down at the trailing Ishak. It was close enough now that Aelya could make out the black cross on the Messer's grey fuselage and the swastika on its tail.

Cannon and machine-gun fire popped quietly in the distance, reminding Aelya of oil sizzling in a pan. The trailing Ishak broke apart, its pieces falling from the sky. One of them might have been a pilot, but no parachute opened. Someone gasped and another screamed. In the time between firing his cannon and the scream, the German pilot did something amazing. It looked as though he'd overtake the lead

plane and fall within its gunsights, but the Messer pulled up from its dive, snaking and rolling upward until it crested an imaginary hill, slowing its momentum by just the right amount so that it finished its roll with its nose pointed just ahead of its target. Tracer rounds, mixed in with regular ammunition, burned bluish-white, streaking from its wings. The Ishak flew into the stream of shells and bullets and exploded.

Everyone on the ground fell silent as the Messers climbed back into the clouds. Aelya had no idea what happened to the remaining Soviet planes, but none could be seen. Fedor began hustling everyone back into the tall grass, in case the Messers lingered to strafe careless gawkers on the ground. Big Andrei supported himself on Roman, shaking his head. One girl was sobbing. A queasiness gripped Aelya. It had been disheartening to see the Air Force beaten so easily, and horrifying to witness the doom of those brave pilots. But her horror mixed with guilt, for she knew she had seen, in the enemy pilot's actions, something beautiful.

## CHAPTER 4: THE LAST DITCH

Rain pelted the tent, droplets seeping along every seam and through every gap. The moisture spread from the ground, soaking in and turning the dirt beneath their sleeping rolls into a spongy brown carpet. In this weather, there was no use digging. The group was given a break to read their mail. Given their constant movement and the fractious state of the postal service, letters arrived in clumps, the delivery today the first since Vyazma, two retreats ago.

A heavy envelope awaited Aelya. A hardbound grey book with a familiar illustration of the red planet Mars on its cover fell out. A note written by her mother was tucked inside, simply saying, “For you.” Nothing else was needed.

She clutched the novel close to her for a while. Her mother had read *Aelita* to her when she was child, only in her telling, Aelita was not just a Queen of Mars but also a fearless explorer, like the heroes she’d just heard brought to life. One day, she was destined to reach the stars. As time went on, Mama’s drive manifested itself in pressing Aelya for academic achievements, and in working long hours herself researching new technologies at the aircraft plant. Aelya would fly to the stars in a craft her mother helped build. or that was what Aelya assumed; Mama had never found the time to articulate this. She would have welcomed a scolding from Mama right about now, just to hear her voice.

The envelope also contained a long letter. She recognized the flowery writing. The missive from Vasya was a change from the terse note she’d received weeks ago, written by her mother. It had simply told Aelya that everyone came out of the journey to Kuybyshev fine and they hoped she would stay safe.

Now Vasya’s pen gave life to a long elaboration on everything they were up to. The whole community around the aviation plant was banding together to build anew in the Central Asian city, known in

ancient times as Samara. But Kuybyshev was far from being romantic or exotic; Vasya described vast open spaces that were rapidly being transformed into industrial complexes. Everyone was expected to pitch in, even her. There were terrible shortages of everything, as the front was given priority for supplies. As she read that part, Aelya could almost see the pout on Vasya's face. Mama and Papa were holding up fine, waiting for the day Aelya would come back to them. But they were all happy to do their part for the war effort, Vasya took pains to note.

*I know you're only digging ditches, she read on the letter's last page, but I hope you nonetheless stay safe.*

Aelya almost laughed at that.

*I can barely bring myself to write this, but you should know we've started to have our fair share of sorrows. Do you remember Lyuba, who lived downstairs? Her husband has been killed. And Yuri Antonovich Khmelnikov's dead too. His mother told us. She passed on this letter he wrote to you. I've put it in with the envelope. I couldn't bear to open it.*

*With love, Papa, Mama, Vasya, and Babushka*

Sitting on her bedroll, Aelya felt profoundly queasy. She stood and a little letter fell from within the envelope. Her hand paused above it. What kind of hurt would the words bring? Poor Yura. She never liked him that much. In truth, his overconfident demeanour and passive bemusement with Vasya's needling of her were infuriating. But they were part of her life, things she thought would still be around when the war was over. Now they had been taken away. That life was never coming back.

She tried to remember Yura's face. Tried to picture the way he ate sandwiches during a break at the aeroclub. What was his favourite movie? She had to try to remember these things, or else he would be gone forever, too. Although her heart pounded against her rib cage, she forced her shaking hand to retrieve the letter.

*Aelya, forgive my familiarity, but I'm over the moon. I've made it. I'm now on active duty! I can't say much, but it looks like I'll be a flying messenger—using the same old crop-dusters you taught me to fly. I thought I'd get a chance with something newer, but I guess we all have to work our way up.*

*I wish I could be out there hurting the fascists, but I'm happy to be contributing in my own way. For that, I am eternally grateful to you. I would never have had this chance without you guiding me. I'll make you proud of me.*

*Take care,  
Yura*

*P.S. I still remember: checklist, checklist, checklist!*



Aelya slogged her way through the mud to find Fedor in the mess tent conferring with the cooks. They were learning to be creative with what few ingredients were still getting through in the dwindling supply deliveries.

She caught his attention. “Some rain cloaks have arrived at the main depot, Comrade Organizer. Do I have your permission to grab them before some other group snatches them up?”

“Good thinking, Aelya.”

“I’ll take Roman and Andrei,” she said, cutting him off before he could suggest anyone else. “They’re a little down. No one’s writing them letters. They could do with something to distract them.”

She’d been too eager with the suggestion, she realized, because he didn’t respond right away and his eyes narrowed at her. “How did you hear about the rain gear?”

“Oh, Vera told me.” She’d had to think quickly. Vera had been sent off to pick up paperwork from the regional committee and wouldn’t be back for a while.

“I just saw Vera before she left and she didn’t say anything about it.”

Stupid, Aelya thought, trying to keep her face straight. Don’t say anything yet—think of something.

“Listen,” Fedor said, looking serious. “Don’t let those two boys rope you into some crazy scheme.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.” He’d mistaken her guilty hesitation for uncertainty. That made her indignant. “If they are up to something, I wouldn’t be getting roped into it.” This was her idea, stupid as it was.

“I know they’ve been planning to run away to the front for a while, ever since we arrived here. You’re not going with them, are you?” He laughed. “What will you do there? Pretend to be a boy? Hide in the trenches with the *makebras*? You’d just be a distraction. I’d give you three months before you get pregnant.”

“What about the women driving trucks? The medics? The partisans fighting behind enemy lines? Are they distractions?” she said, seething. She might be implicating herself, but he’d sniffed out her intentions already. “You of all people should know the vital contribution men and women both make to our society. Isn’t that what we’re fighting for, comrade?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t really mean all I said. I’m just trying to point out how crazy you’re being. I’ve seen this sort of thing already. Organizer Struganskaya just had three boys returned to her group. Lucky it was regular infantry that caught them, not the NKVD blue caps, or they might have been shot as deserters.”

“How can it be deserting if they’re heading to the front?”

“The Germans are moving so fast, every direction is the front. To the blue caps, every direction is also a retreat.”

This punctured all the stiff-backed official bluster of his daily talks. Was he hearing the same rumours, or was his pessimism coming from some more official channels?

“Is it that bad?” she asked.

“Who knows?” He leaned over a mess table and ran a hand through his grimy hair. His face was lined with an extra decade’s worth of worries. “Did you think there’d be more than this? I mean, when you gave up your spot on the truck back in Smolensk, is this what you’d thought you’d be doing?”

“I’m not sure I thought anything. I just... I needed to do something.”

“You didn’t hope this might be more of an adventure than digging trenches, retreating, then digging some more?” She didn’t answer because whatever she might say would sound stupid. So he answered for himself. “That’s how I feel. I should know better. My brother Sergei doesn’t have much good to say about the army. He’s stuck somewhere out east, watching the Japanese. It’s sort of the same thing, but without the retreating. I’m still jealous of him. I feel embarrassed having to wait until next year to put on the Red Army uniform.”

The idea of the war lasting another year was appalling but looked increasingly like the most optimistic outcome.

“Somehow this all feels lesser,” Fedor continued. “I know what we’re doing is important, but I guess I always wanted to be personally tested. I’m not getting that here. I want to know if I’d be like my father, during the Civil War. Do you feel like you’re destined for something greater?”

“Not really.” Of course she did. “But I think I know what you mean. It doesn’t really feel like I’m contributing. I mean, the State has given me skills. I can do more than just dig trenches.”

Fedor grew animated. “That’s right. You were a flight instructor before the war, weren’t you?”

She nodded.

“If you’re going to desert us, you might as well make the most of it.”

She immediately wanted to deny deserting. Or not use that word anyway. But she flashed Fedor a quizzical look. What was that last part?

“You could teach flying. A lot of aeroclubs reopened after evacuation. We need more pilots than you could possibly imagine.”

Would they really allow her to do it? Maybe she could make it back to Kuybyshev. She’d be back with her family, but it wouldn’t be like it was before. She’d be an important contributor to the war effort. How much more valuable would training a new Air Force pilot be compared to all the digging she could do in a year? She felt a pang in her gut. She’d need to do a better job than she’d done with Yura. But they’d rushed him into battle. She owed it to the next man to be more thorough, to give him everything he needed to survive before the Air Force took him. If she could do that much, it would go some small way toward making up for her guilt—she hoped.

“You’d just let me leave?”

“The evacuation order still stands, so I could get the committee to approve it. You don’t even need to get to Kuybyshev. We’re close to Moscow now. There are tons of aeroclubs here. Maybe you can sign on with one?”

Elation took hold at the thought of leaving this muck behind, but she hesitated. “What about Roman and Andrei?”

“I’ll keep them out of trouble. Don’t feel like you’re abandoning them. You’re doing them a favour. I don’t think they can pull off anything without you to help them. Now they won’t get themselves killed trying something stupid.”

She looked at this young boy, so condescending to her comrades. Who was he to say she was doing them a favour? It still felt as if she

was letting Roman and Andrei down. That was hardly the way to embark on her destined course. But she also thought about watching the Messerschmitt as it gracefully manoeuvred, destroying two fighters in mere seconds. That was the way their own pilots needed to fly. And she would teach them.