

DL JUNG



RAVEN'S SHADOW

BOOK II OF AELITA'S WAR

Chapter 1: The Fallen

Astrakhan, February 28, 1943

An instant from now, the Bf 109 would be the perfect distance from the red dot. Aelita Makarova—Aelya—stared past the aiming reticule, knowing exactly how long she would have to wait. She couldn't say how many fractions of a second that might be. She just knew.

Her body instinctively counted the number of adrenalin-fuelled heartbeats before she should fire. One heartbeat. Two heartbeats. She pressed the triggers.

The enemy fighter didn't even twitch as she laced it with three thousand grams of armour-piercing bullets and high-explosive shells. It hovered, almost unmoving.

"Stop admiring your shot," Lara shouted in her ear. "Check your six o'clock!"

Aelya snapped a glance over her right shoulder. Brightly coloured posters exhorting defence of the motherland, chipped and worn logs visible between them. The inside of a bunker. Where did the cockpit go? We must be reviewing gun camera footage, her brain decided.

Her attention flicked forward once more. She was in the cockpit. The German plane was still there. It looked so real, suspended in the air. It still hadn't moved, even as its propeller spun at full speed.

That's impossible, she thought, glancing at the control column between her legs. By instinct, she pulled hard and pressed the rudder to break off her attack.

"What are you doing?" Lara asked. "You need to press home the attack, make sure he's dead."

That's not right, Aelya thought. Lara always preached against staying in a straight path for too long and presenting a juicy target to the enemy. She wasn't like the aces in the regiment. Lara was safe and sensible, and everyone called her Auntie for the way she looked after her charges, especially the other women pilots who'd come to Stalingrad with her. As squadron commander, she'd been a pillar of strength for Aelya, reassuring her even in the worst of times.

The cockpit faded. Blackness surrounded Aelya.

“Look where safe and sensible got me,” said Lara, appearing next to her.

Aelya stared. Like everyone else, Lara had been ground down by Stalingrad. Beneath Lara’s stringy, sweat-matted hair, Aelya thought she could see down to her skull. That was how everyone looked after that cataclysmic battle. But not everyone made it through.

“You’re dead,” Aelya said, finally accepting that she was dreaming.

“I’m *missing*,” replied Lara. That was a major distinction. Missing meant a potential prisoner of war. A potential prisoner meant a potential traitor. True Soviets didn’t allow themselves to be captured. Aelya remembered: she’d been forced to denounce her former squadron commander, blaming Lara when the regiment had shot down other Soviet planes by mistake.

She searched Lara’s face for the recrimination she thought was sure to be there.

“Would you have done it?” Aelya asked. “Would you have let them destroy my reputation if I had gone missing?” She hadn’t done it lightly. Because Lara had gone missing, her family were refused any benefits and couldn’t even cling to the tenuous belief that she had died a hero.

Lara’s eyes were soft and filled with pity. “It’s your dream. You tell me.”

Aelya felt jolted awake. Her gaze darted around, searching for orientation. She was in a corrugated metal maintenance shed. Icy wind whistled through gaps in the walls. Her crew chief, Zina Borodina, hovered over her as she sat on hard-packed dirt, leaning against a wall.

Zina gently patted her quaking arms. “It was just a nightmare.”

Aelya wiped sweat from her brow, her pulse racing. It had been nearly a month since their regiment pulled out of the line at Stalingrad, to the shores of the Caspian Sea near Astrakhan. The Soviet counterattack, which had destroyed an entire German army in Stalin’s city, churned farther and farther to the west. What Aelya wouldn’t give to be back in the fighting. Resting and refitting at a rear area base, pilots like Aelya no longer had to suppress the jitters that came from flying combat missions, so it should have been easier to sleep. But without the vodka rations that came with combat, Aelya was fighting against nightmares as well.

“I’m sorry to startle you,” said Zina, “but there’s a problem.”

Aelya felt backfooted by her friend's words. "I've got nothing else to do, and you were the one who suggested I could nap here."

"Not that," Zina responded. "Remember you told me to watch out for the twins doing anything stupid?"

Aelya rolled her eyes. Sisters Olga and Yulia had also come from the women's regiment. All three were stuck here in administrative limbo, waiting for word on their appeal against being transferred out of the regiment, clinging by their fingernails to their status as frontline fighter pilots. The last thing any of them needed was to entangle themselves in a prank feud with the other regiment sharing this reserve air base.

Zina continued, "Yeah, I think they're doing something stupid."

Aelya was about to ask more but held off. Instead, she said, "I meant for you to go tell someone."

"Who? All the senior officers are away on conference. Legend?" she said, referring to the regiment's adjutant. "Or would you prefer Baby?" She smirked as she named Aelya's squadron commander, the remaining senior officer on base. "Do you really think either of those men should handle this?"

Zina was right. This was something that should be dealt with by the twins' comrades. But even if Roza, Honeybee, and Stone were around, could they really sort it? Roza was too self-absorbed. Honeybee would try to exploit the situation. And Stone would only escalate matters.

"All right," Aelya said. "What's going on?"

Chapter 2: For the Motherland

Moscow

Jutting defiantly toward the sky, the upended tail of the Junkers bomber seemed to deny its crashed state.

“I feel like I’m copying over someone’s shoulder in a school exam,” Lieutenant Mark Akhmatov, better known as Stitches, whispered through the side of his mouth.

His fellow pilot, Roza Kulik, stifled a giggle. “Call it extra credit, then,” she said.

The two of them shivered on a patch of snow in Izmailovsky Park, posing in front of the wrecked Junkers Ju 88, feeling on display themselves. The twin-engine bomber was cracked in half, looking as if it had crashed cleanly in the middle of the park.

Stitches was right in a way—it was cheating. Through their photographs, *Red Army Soldier* magazine would give them credit for someone else’s work. The bomber had been shot down the previous year and collected in the park with so many other war trophies. A triumph frozen in time, transported hundreds of kilometres from where it had fallen.

If only I could be shooting at the real thing, Roza thought. She flexed her fingers, grasping on to an imaginary control column. Her body tingled as she remembered the sensation of fighter combat. It was not a joyous or happy business, yet Roza could only describe the feeling as ecstasy, more intense than anything else she had ever experienced. The feeling passed, as the reality of Colonel Dmitriev’s propaganda show set in.

“This is hardly the only untruth we’ll be a part of,” Roza said quietly.

Dmitriev smiled at them, as if he’d heard. Their former regimental commissar was a newly minted colonel, and now a liaison with the Air Force for SovInformBuro. He ensured that the Air Force steadily supplied of all the State’s propaganda needs, which included arranging this photo shoot. Untruths are his daily currency, Roza thought.

Behind a tripod, the magazine’s photographer, a small, bespectacled man with a thinning brown comb-over, signalled for Roza to remove her *pilotka* cap. She did so reluctantly, exposing the unbleached roots that had been carefully hidden underneath. Stitches was about to do the same with

his peaked officer's cap, but the photographer shook his head. He leaned forward to look through his viewfinder, then screwed up his face in disappointment. He stepped around the tripod and reached for Roza's hair. She recoiled reflexively, but held back a retort as Dmitriev glared at her and gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

"Let your hair down," the photographer said. "Try to make yourself more feminine."

"How about me?" asked Stitches. "Should I look more feminine as well?"

"Look heroic, smartass. Hands on hips. Like in a TASS poster."

The photographer returned to his spot to snap pictures. As soon as Roza untied her bun, the wind whipped her hair in her face. Whatever he was expecting, Roza wasn't going to give it. She stood, arms crossed, her smile lopsided with a glimpse of gritted teeth.

"This is not working," the photographer said with a frown. "Let's try this with just the lieutenant."

Stitches chuckled at Roza, then shrugged.

Dmitriev pulled her roughly out of frame. "Show a little gratitude, Kulik."

"For what?" Roza said. "Getting a ride in the Li-2?" The flight back to Moscow had been much better than the alternative: scrambling between three or four trains loaded with a mix of wounded soldiers, refugees, supplies, horse feed, and who knew what else. But she wasn't about to admit that.

"At least you could have touched up your hair."

"When have I had time?" She'd managed only token efforts to appease her vanity, the situation made worse because she couldn't access the beauty supplies Honeybee usually provided. "I've had to give talks at factories, meet with random officials from departments I've never heard of, and constantly rehearse my story of a blissful Soviet home life for press consumption. I had an easier time looking good at Stalingrad."

"Go see my secretary at the SovInformBuro office this afternoon."

"So you're not hustling me back to the Air Force barracks?"

Dmitriev didn't say anything, but a sly smile crept across his face as the photographer signalled that they could chat while he checked his equipment.

Stitches exhaled loudly, blowing out icy vapour, and exaggerated a slouching posture as he stamped his feet.

Roza sidled over to him. “At least you get to fly when this is over. All I get is more handshaking, smiling, and waving.”

“I’d gladly trade. This is the first time they’ve let me out of the school at Lyubertsy.” For the past two weeks, Stitches and his wingman had been sent to the higher air combat school outside of the city.

“I miss flying so much,” she said. “What do they have you doing at aces’ school?”

“Oh, it’s all terribly dull. We spent last week putting the new Klimov engines through their paces. They’re nothing special. They top out at just over twelve hundred horsepower,” he said with a wink.

“If that’s what it takes for you to finally catch up with me . . .”

“Very funny.”

“I’ll take that as an insult,” she said with a smirk.

They turned face to face and laughed. That almost psychic connection they’d forged through combat in the same squadron had kept them alive. Bantering with him now after weeks of dreary propaganda work was like stepping into sunshine from out of a cave.

“I miss this,” Stitches said. He cleared his throat. “Being with the regiment, I mean. Don’t start thinking you’re anything special.”

“Of course not. That’s why I wasn’t invited to Lyubertsy.”

She pouted and his eyebrows furrowed as if he was trying to figure out how serious she was about being disappointed. She wasn’t sure herself.

“You should be there with us,” he said. “You’re twice the pilot some of my classmates are. Anyway, the school’s really not anything special. It’s mostly learning to work better with my wingman. The best part is that I’m close by and can see you.”

Roza’s chest tightened. Stitches’s comment reawakened something in her. On the battlefield, his flippant flirtatiousness had just been a form of tension relief, part of their camaraderie. But now, without the threat of enemy fire, it held the promise of something more.

She’d known of this promise ever since she’d heard Stitches would be at this event. It had kept her spirits up through the cold morning. She was pleased to be pursued, as she had been in high school. She remembered Daniil . . . and Pavel. That one hadn’t ended well; she pushed the morbid

thought away. This was a game she hadn't played for a while, and she liked it.

"I guess you must be so good that you don't need to show up for classes," she said, her voice dripping with jovial sarcasm. "Win a gold star and now it's gone to your head."

Stitches didn't take the bait. "I'm only here because Dmitriev wanted to use me. Seriously, you should drop this. Come join us at Lyubertsy."

Roza looked away. "You know that's not possible." Photos and meet-and-greets were what the higher-ups wanted her doing, not learning advanced tactics. But Stitches saw her as more than propaganda fodder. She felt guilty for wanting to toy with his emotions a moment ago.

After inserting a new roll of film into his camera, the photographer barked at Roza to try another series of poses, this time against a backdrop of evergreens. His mood soured rapidly as she failed to give him some combination of determined warrior, glamorous femme fatale and maternal caregiver. Exasperated, he complained to Dmitriev. The colonel placated him with promises of better opportunities once Roza cleaned herself up.

"Right, I think we're done here," Dmitriev declared, then waved at Stitches. "You can return to Lyubertsy. I'm really happy with how you balance each other in this composition, but you won't be needed for the rest of the day. Kulik, it's on to our next appointment."

"Everything for the motherland," she said flatly.

Stitches stood in place for a moment; then, as if remembering something, asked, "I'll have another free day on Sunday. Will you join me for lunch?"

Her lips twisted as she considered this. She really did want to see him. "Propaganda's tough work. And I have no idea what Dmitriev has got planned, though I suppose it will be around Moscow. Maybe I can get away. I don't know." She was so used to keeping a part of herself inaccessible. It was comforting, even, and she didn't want to let go of the game.

"I know you'll find a way," he said, as if completely seeing through her reticence. "How about the Rublev? It's off Teatral'ny Proyezd."

"Fancy," she said, smiling ever so slightly. "I suppose it might be our last chance to see each other."

"You mean until we're back at the front."

Roza tilted an eyebrow. "Always the optimist."

“Come on. This is *you* we’re talking about. Orders or no, I’m sure you’ll find a way back to the regiment.”

The supreme confidence he showed in her made her shudder with unfamiliar excitement. It reminded her of getting at the controls of the Yak fighter for the first time.

“How about eleven o’clock?” she said.

“That would be perfect,” he said before kissing her hand in a showy flourish that made her roll her eyes.

Stitches waved as he backed away.

“And Stitches . . .”

“Yes?”

“It’s really good to see you. Another comrade from the regiment, I mean.”

He winked.

Dmitriev tugged her arm. “Right, Comrade. We’re going to be late if we don’t hurry. There’s still a chance to redeem yourself.” He hustled Roza out of the park, and they crunched across the snow-encrusted footpath. On the street, his chauffeur had the door open to his car, provided by SovInformBuro.

Roza plopped down in the rear seat next to Dmitriev. “They want some doll they can dress up and pose. It’s not my fault I couldn’t be that for them.”

Dmitriev wrinkled his nose. “You and your womanly moods. While you were with the regiment, you couldn’t wait to get your dress and makeup on. What’s wrong?”

Sensing an opening, she smiled slyly. “Well, that’s just the thing. I’m not *with* the regiment.”

“Ah yes, about that . . .” Dmitriev shifted in his seat to face her. “You’re not an ordinary pilot anymore. Going to the front line . . . well, is that really the best use of your time?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re more than a fighter pilot now. You’re a symbol. You need to be seen, so the people can see just what our fighting forces are made of. You can tell the workers how they’re helping in the war effort. Little boys and especially girls can look at you and think, one day, even I can make a difference. But you’re not helping by moping around.”

“If I could see some end point and know I’ll be back in action, then I promise, I’ll be everything you need me to be. But I just . . .” She shook with frustration. “I can’t be here too long. I need to be back in action.”

He placed his hands on her upper arms. It was neither warm nor threatening. “That’s just not possible.”

“But you promised you’d help me get back to the front line.”

“That was before I moved to SovInformBuro. I’m not risking my prize.”

“You won’t have a prize, then. I won’t do it.”

“You’re not that valuable, you know. In fact, I’m giving you a great opportunity. Don’t squander it.” He hefted a leather briefcase from the floor of the car, making a show of rifling through some papers without looking at her, as if he had more important business to tend to. “Face it, your fighting days are over.”

Chapter 3: Poison

As the ball peen hammer struck a piece of scrap metal, Aelya flinched, feeling the impact in her heart. The metal-on-metal clang reverberated around the cold concrete interior of the former workers' canteen. It was too similar to the sharp crack of a bullet striking an engine block and reminded her of metal tearing into flesh. Too much time away from combat gave her mind the opening to dwell on these things that gnawed at her.

Ulanova put down the hammer. The short Asian technician was seated at a desk at the front of the room. She called out, "I hereby declare the Workers' Committee of the 497th Fighter—"

A staff officer seated next to her elbowed her.

Ulanova scowled, but nodded, declaring, "That should be written into the record as the 74th Guards Fighter Aviation Regiment."

The name change not only acknowledged the regiment's honour and elite status, but also meant higher pay for its personnel.

"I now declare us in session." Ulanova hammered on the metal once more. "Guards Senior Sergeant Duya Ulanova, armourer, presiding. We are convening to review disciplinary action against Guards Sergeant Yulia Yunevich, Guards Senior Sergeant Olga Yunevich, and Guards Senior Sergeant Aelita Makarova."

Low afternoon sunlight streamed through drafty windows, throwing the dozen or so technicians, pilots, and staff officers comprising the workers' committee into silhouette. They formed a semicircle around Aelya and the twin pilots, Yulia and Olga, as they sat on a bench behind a canteen table, their backs against the wall. Yulia stretched out her long legs, her foot tapping furiously against the table leg, the vibrations causing several models of the latest German warplanes to skip along the table's surface.

Once used to feed the facility's workers, this damp and musty hall southwest of Astrakhan now served as a makeshift classroom. While its proximity to rail lines and long grassy stretches of countryside made this former fish processing plant workable as a reserve air base, little else about it made sense to Aelya. Beyond the unsuitability of many of its buildings, the odour of rotting fish permeated everything. Technicians had been

scouring the compound to find the source of the stench for weeks, to no avail.

Baby, Aelya's squadron commander, stood to address Ulanova. "Before we begin, Comrade Chairwoman, I'd like to once more raise my objection." Nicknamed for his chubby build, he was a perfectly adequate fighter pilot, but Aelya had never warmed to him as a commander. He was fickle and frequently condescending to subordinates, while bowing with slimy obsequiousness to higher-ups. With Red and the other senior officers away at a conference, Baby was nominally in charge.

"I think you would all agree that our comrade commander," Baby continued, "wouldn't want military command to be undercut by this workers' committee, no matter how well meaning."

The regiment's political officer, Captain Kisel, raised his hand. "Strict military control made sense in those dangerous times before Stalingrad," the sandy-haired, round-faced captain said in a soft tone. "But now it would be good to remember that such egalitarian assemblies are what make us Soviet. And in my judgment, it would be better for discipline, which is within my purview. I've also spoken to my counterpart in our sister regiment, and he has agreed."

The political control of the regiment had changed, as it had for all the armed forces. No longer were commissars, like Dmitriev, of equal rank and authority to military commanders. The new political officers, called *zampolits*, were fighting men and women who looked to the education and morale of their comrades in arms.

Ulanova responded, "The committee recognizes and accepts Captain Kisel's explanation, and we will proceed with the hearing."

"Excellent." Kisel winked at the accused pilots as if to say, "I'm one of you, too." The fact that he flew fighters with them, instead of sitting in an office conniving ways to award himself medals, had endeared him to the troops already. The *zampolit* even went by the nickname Cricket. How he'd earned that, Aelya had no idea.

Ulanova motioned to begin and read the charges. Aelya and the twins were accused of trying to poison the pilots of the 466th Fighter Regiment, who were also based at the former fish plant.

Olga stood. "Poison? It was just going to give them diarrhea for a bit."

Cricket let out a sharp laugh but Ulanova shot him a glare. Olga sat down.

It grated on Aelya to be included in these charges. She was getting it from both sides. The twins blamed her for their getting caught, but she had prevented things from escalating out of hand. Aelya knew they had been planning revenge against the 466th for a previous prank. With the women pilots appealing their transfer back to the women's regiment in Air Defence, priority for training activities was given to the men. That meant a lot of free time to get into trouble.

After waking her, Zina had told Aelya that Dr. Krupenya discovered certain medications missing, presumed stolen. Putting two and two together, Aelya raced to catch up to Olga and Yulia as they were about to lace the 466th's soup with a drug meant to purge the digestive system. Unfortunately, while they argued, the bottle dropped and shattered, catching the attention of an officer from the 466th.

"Do the accused have anything to say?" asked Ulanova.

Beforehand, Aelya and the other two agreed on a united front, and that Aelya would speak for them.

"We admit that we've done wrong. But we did so to defend the honour of the regiment. A couple of days earlier, while Olga and Yulia were in the bathhouse, some members of the 466th stole their clothes and threw them into a pond. They were forced to parade naked in the snow across the whole compound to get to shelter."

Most grating of all had been the fact that the men of their own regiment, their supposed brothers in arms, were more amused than angry and had done nothing to help. Even now, Yulia turned bright red as a few of the men quietly tittered. Olga looked plaintively at the women of the committee. Perhaps gender solidarity would help them, but Aelya didn't want to resort to appealing to that. Weren't they all supposed to be equals?

Zina, sitting as one of the committee, raised her hand. "Is it true you tried to stop the others from taking such rash action?" As crew chief, she always made sure Aelya's fighter was in top shape, and even now she was trying to protect her.

Aelya wavered. Agreeing to face the charges together with the twins had been easy at the time. They were all part of Sparrow Squadron, three of the six surviving women who had flown down to fight at Stalingrad last

autumn. They needed to support each other. But now, with the immediate threat of punishment looming, Aelya worried about being removed from frontline duty permanently.

That was why she'd been so keen to keep the sisters out of trouble. With the other women pilots—Roza, Honeybee, and Stone—all away, it rested with the three of them to cling to the beachhead they had made for women to fight in a frontline fighter regiment. Every day, she'd been hoping the appeals of their regiment's commander, Red, might reverse the Air Force's decision, or that they might simply get lost in the VVS's bureaucracy. Her uncertainty had lingered, twisting in the pit of her stomach for the past month.

There was also the threat to her new Communist Party membership. Whereas Olga and Yulia were still only candidates, Aelya had been welcomed because they'd confirmed she had killed a German. That counted more than knowledge of and dedication to Communist thought. Although membership no longer held any allure for her, Aelya wasn't blind to the privilege and protection it provided, however minimal.

She composed herself, tamping down any temptations to cut the twins loose. She remembered what Roza had shared with her during the worst days at Stalingrad: all they had to keep them going was each other.

"I was aware of the plans and take full responsibility for my complicity in our actions, which again, I stress were for the highest of intentions, to defend the honour of the regiment."

With no other questions, Ulanova excused the three accused pilots. They filed into a corridor outside, observed by a guard, while the committee deliberated.

Olga huffed and paced. "I can't believe we have to sit through this humiliation, on top of everything else."

"It's better than going through military discipline," said Aelya. "I think we have a chance."

"If we weren't women, they would have just laughed everything off. Sometimes I think we'd be better off in Air Defence, back with a women's regiment."

"There shouldn't be women's or men's regiments. We've fought for the right to be here. But sometimes, as my mother says, we have to bear a greater burden, if only to prove how much better we are."

Olga shot her a nasty look, then whispered to her sister, who so far had just stared at the wall. Then they were called back in.

They stood to attention as Ulanova announced the committee's decision. "Because the accused acknowledged their responsibility and caused no actual harm, the committee has decided that their Party membership and candidacies should not be affected, nor their status as active duty personnel of the VVS. Cricket, er, our comrade *zampolit*, has suggested absolution through good works, and we agree. The accused will perform five days of hard labour."

Aelya sighed, breathing freely for the first time since the hearing began. They were still part of the regiment, for now. Olga patted her on the back. Zina was the first to come over and embrace them.

As they filed out, Baby put his arms around Aelya's and Olga's shoulders. "See, I told you it would just be a matter of boys being boys. Or in this case, girls being girls." He slapped Olga on the butt and practically skipped out of the room.

Chapter 4: Family Photo

The thought of seeing Stitches in a few days gave Roza some hope to cling to as the car weaved through a city turned over to war. The streets were inundated with military vehicles. At the direction of Red Army traffic wardens, mostly women, the black Packard turned awkwardly around X-shaped steel tank traps. Waves of ghostly human beings streamed along the snowy footpaths, their grey faces masks of grim determination. Even after the victory at Stalingrad, Moscow was girding for German attack. Signs indicating bomb shelters and enforcing nightly blackouts showed how near the danger still lay.

It was not the city Roza had expected to return to; there was little sense of home here, the place where she'd grown up. She had been more welcome in the Air Force barracks at Monino, where she'd billeted east of the city. With a lack of accommodations for women, they'd made her sleep in a coatroom, but at least she still felt connected to the Air Force and her comrades at the front.

"Don't be so glum." Dmitriev nudged her shoulder. "I've arranged a little surprise, just for you."

Dmitriev's strained levity made her nervous. There was no surprise he could offer that she was interested in.

The car halted before the entrance to the recently opened ZiS metro station, named for the nearby massive automobile factory now churning out all sorts of war material. After they exited the car, Dmitriev guided her past crowds filing down the stairs. Roughly shoving a woman aside to speak with a ticket collector, he flashed a letter, and a guard was summoned to escort them farther into the depths of the station. Queuing commuters who wore the ubiquitous mask of defiance against the invaders turned nasty glares on Roza. In response, she puffed out her chest, displaying more fully the Order of the Red Banner. She had earned this privilege.

The large pink marble-clad concourse of the station was cluttered with supplies for use in air raids. Folded metal cots, blankets, and large canisters of water had been piled up between the pillars, narrowing the already congested hall. War-themed mosaics adorned the walls. Dmitriev greeted a cluster of officials emerging from a side door.

Roza gasped to see who was with them, alarm flooding her mind. No, not her.

“Ah, my little surprise,” Dmitriev trumpeted.

The plump middle-aged woman with fading blonde hair smiled at Roza. She held her arms out, though she maintained a haughty demeanour. Roza only just managed to force a smile.

“I arranged for your mother to be relieved from her shift,” continued Dmitriev. “Thank you for obliging, Yelena Borisovna. And Kulik, your things are being transported to her apartment. You’re going home.”

Roza’s heart skipped a beat and her body twisted into knots as she struggled to show the happy face Dmitriev wanted.

“Hello,” Roza said. “Mother.” She’d almost messed up and called her Aunt Yelena. She exchanged a quick double kiss with her, wary of Dmitriev scrutinizing their relationship. All this time away from Moscow had dulled the constant fear of her true parentage being discovered. Of some careless slip letting the world know that she was really the daughter of an “enemy of the people.”

Dmitriev crossed his arms, frowning. A bright flash startled Roza and she reflexively tensed and scanned her surroundings for threats. It was only a photographer accompanying the officials.

“It’s not like this is for *Pravda*. It’s for *The Woman Worker*,” Dmitriev said. “They want images of a strong family.”

The reporter accompanying the photographer clasped her hands in contemplation. She had a narrow face and pointed nose, and when she tilted her head Roza thought of a mouse sniffing at cheese.

She moved Roza and Yelena around like store mannequins. “You should be embracing each other. Both arms,” she barked. “No, not that way. Over here. Let’s try this instead.”

Roza felt the cold coming from her aunt with each change of position, and the feeling was mutual. After the series of poses, the reporter’s lips curled.

Roza noticed Dmitriev’s eye twitching in exasperation. She kept a straight face but laughed inside. If she couldn’t get what she wanted, then he couldn’t either.

Dmitriev cleared his throat. “I’ve seen this before. Sometimes the reunion of families under wartime conditions can be difficult. Kulik,

perhaps you should spend a night at home with your mother first. Warm up to each other.”

The reporter nodded. “I can work with that. We just need to show the transformation after you get home.”

Dmitriev waved the magazine crew away, put his hands on his hips, and approached Roza and Yelena. “We’ll do a much better job tomorrow, won’t we?”

“The struggle continues, Comrade Colonel,” Roza quipped.



Dmitriev sent them with his driver to Yelena’s apartment, which was nearby. He admonished Roza to get a makeover from his secretary later. After arriving at a four-storey housing block, the driver dumped Roza’s suitcase on the sidewalk and left the two women without a word. They trudged up the stairs in silence. Roza lagged behind the other woman, carrying her suitcase, dragging out her steps.

It had been a year and a half since she’d had to show daughterly affection toward the woman. She was out of practice and not in the mood to try harder. When the State had turned against Roza’s father, Roza, her little brother, and her mother were left friendless and homeless in Moscow. Yelena was only too eager to remind everyone she wasn’t a blood relation; Roza’s mother was the sister of Yelena’s husband. Only later, when it proved useful, did Yelena take Roza and her brother in, pretending to be their mother.

On reaching the top landing, her steps still echoing in the drafty stairwell, Roza felt a wave of trepidation wash over her. “Does Zhora know I’m here?”

Yelena shrugged, then moved to open her front door. Roza’s heart pounded at the thought of seeing her little brother, but as the door swung wide the other woman spat, “He likes to stay overnight at the ZiS plant.”

Roza relaxed involuntarily, forced to admit to herself that she was relieved. “The ZiS plant?”

“The boy’s thrown himself into the war effort.”

In the foyer, Roza’s eyes darted around the familiar layout of the apartment, roomy by Moscow standards. “I’m sure you appreciate the extra

money but he should be in school.”

“Not so loud,” Yelena snapped. From the kitchen and dining area that opened out from the foyer, Roza noticed an older couple in dusty, dark clothes watching her curiously. “The schools shut down when the Fascists were on the doorstep, so he found work at the factory. He wouldn’t go back when they reopened. Maybe you should have done the same, but instead you pranced off on your adventure with the aeroclub.”

She spoke as if Roza’s evacuation from Moscow had been a picnic, as if all her experiences at Stalingrad counted for nothing. Perhaps Yelena hadn’t bothered keeping up, hadn’t read any of Roza’s letters, which she was supposed to have relayed to Zhora, but it was doubtful she’d passed them on.

Without acknowledging the couple, Yelena motioned toward a long bench beside the stove. “You can sleep there.”

Roza put down her suitcase and glanced at the door to the old room she’d shared with her little brother.

Yelena leaned in close. “If you want to, you can ask to sleep on the floor in the Mandelbaums’ room. Just keep an eye on your things.” She gave a knowing glance that dripped with disdain, which Roza did her best not to acknowledge. “Lord knows they’ve taken up all the available space in here,” she said a little louder.

Roza smiled weakly at the Mandelbaums. Though they weren’t much older than Yelena, their skin was splotchy and withered. Even before she’d left Moscow, refugees had been trickling in to the apartment block, to be placed in the few homes that had extra space. She’d envisioned that the apartment would be the same, though with Yelena’s husband in the army and Zhora at the factory, it had become a prime candidate for shared housing.

She tried to suppress her surprise at the newcomers. “Where are you from?”

After a long pause, the man replied, “Vitebsk.” With the name Mandelbaum, they were lucky to be alive. The town was in Nazi territory, and stories had trickled out of a terrible massacre of its Jewish population.

“Settle yourself in,” said Yelena. “What’s another body in here? Fine thanks for my husband putting his life on the line.”

“Uncle Kolya delivers military mail,” Roza snapped. “Anyway, if this is too cozy for you, why not move to Vitebsk? I’m sure the Mandelbaums will trade you their home. The Nazis have lots of space in their lands.”

Yelena put a hand on her heart, playing up being offended.

Roza picked up her suitcase. “Well, you needn’t worry about one more body. I’m going to stay with my mother.”