

*Nadia and  
the Night Witches  
of World War II*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this book is a work of historical fiction, the Night Witches were very real. Following the German invasion of Russia in the summer of 1941, the Soviet government authorized the formation of three squadrons of female pilots. One of those, the 588th Night Bomber Squadron, became known as the “Night Witches.” Equipped with obsolete, open-cockpit biplanes built in the 1920s, these women flew some of the most daring combat missions of World War II. During the last half-century of Cold War, their story, for the most part, remained untold outside of the Soviet Union.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE NIGHT WITCH

For the first time in almost two years, Nadia Tarachinko smiled. It was not a happy smile but rather a smile borne by thoughts of death. It spread unexpectedly across her small, round face the moment her little plane cleared the treetops and began its climb into the gray morning sky. There would be no more tears, she told herself; now there would be only revenge. She was just seventeen. She had graduated from flight school the day before, and for whatever short time was to be left of her life, she would kill Germans.

She flew west, toward the front. The five-cylinder radial engine settled down to a steady pop-pop-pop as she eased back on the throttle and found her best cruising speed. Wind whistled through the open cockpit and sang in the wires that supported the wings. The air forces of other nations had already placed open-cockpit biplanes like the Po-2 in museums, but the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics believed differently. “Simple and dependable,” an instructor had told her snidely on the first day of flight training. “The Po-2 is so simple that even little peasant girls like you can be taught to fly it.”

The Po-2 was also cheap: cheap to build, cheap to repair. And with women to fly them, the young men could be saved to fly the more important missions of this Great Patriotic War.

None of that mattered to Nadia. Two years earlier she had wished only for a rifle and bullets to kill Germans. An airplane was

something that had been beyond her wildest imaginings. The freshly-painted red stars on the plane's body and tail glistened in the few rays of sun that managed to cut through the dark clouds. She climbed higher, and at 1,000 meters she reached the clouds and hugged their bottoms. The Po-2 was an ancient trainer to which bomb racks and a release wire had been added. It was slow and unarmed, except for a single machine gun mounted to be fired from the rear cockpit. Nadia would be an easy kill for any German fighter.

On the ground below, tanks and trucks of the People's Army were moving. Long columns of them jammed every road she crossed. There was cavalry, too, and heavy guns dragged along by teams of tired horses. All were headed west. At flight school, rumors had circulated that the Germans were massing near the city of Kurst. Soon there would be a great battle there, perhaps even larger than the one at Stalingrad. Nadia hoped the rumors were true and that she would be a part of it.

From the Po-2's altitude, the tanks and trucks looked like ugly little toys painted reddish-brown—almost the same color as the clouds of dust that stained the brilliant green forests and golden fields of wheat that passed below. The fields were scarred with shell craters and tank tracks, but Nadia could tell that at least some of the crop had survived and would soon be ready for harvest.

Nadia knew about wheat—and about vegetables and cattle, too. Once, those things had been her life. She had been born on one of the collective farms built during Stalin's first Five-Year Plan. She fondly remembered the sun on the wheat fields, the smell of fresh-plowed earth, the crisp taste of an apple in summer. That part of

her life might be gone forever, but she kept the memories dear; she believed they made her stronger.

Her plane flew into the bottom of a cloud. As the cool gray mist surrounded her, old memories sneaked in from the fringes of her mind.



The calf was born in the evening, but its mother had died, so Nadia stayed in the barn all night nursing it with a bottle while artillery fire rumbled in the distance like the rolling thunder of a summer storm. Through cracks in the barn wall, she watched as flashes of red-orange lit up the western sky. “We have to leave soon, little one,” she whispered to the calf, “and you have to be strong enough to walk.” She tried once more to make the calf stand. It staggered for a moment on spindly legs but then fell back onto the hay.

Nadia’s mother appeared at the barn door. “Leave the calf and come on,” she told Nadia. “It’s time to go.”

“If I have to, I’ll carry her,” Nadia replied.

An objection formed on her mother’s lips but went unsaid. “Very well, but hurry.”

Nadia gathered the calf in her arms and started toward the door, but a new rumbling was rising in the distance. The ground seemed to vibrate beneath her feet.

Suddenly from outside her mother screamed, “Nadia! Tanks!” They were her last words. Nadia ran for the door with the calf

clutched against her chest. Then the world turned red, and the barn collapsed around her.

For a while there seemed to be only spinning darkness, but when the light returned, it came with a ringing in her ears that blocked out all other sound. Nadia lay where the barn had been. The calf had died in her arms. There were three jagged holes in its side, and its blood was spattered across her dress. In dying, it had saved her life. She gently pushed it away and stood up.

In the distance, the main house burned fiercely. Lumbering across the fields were huge gray-green tanks—German tanks. Her mother lay face-down in the barnyard mud.

“Mamma, get up!” Nadia cried, but there was no sign of life from her mother’s body. Through tears, Nadia saw her father and one of her brothers running toward her. “Hurry!” she screamed. “Hurry!”

Then the firing started. Bullets kicked up freshly plowed earth all around them. Her father fell first. “Run, Nadia! Run for the forest!” her brother shouted, and then he, too, fell.

All around her was death. The tanks were smashing down the farm buildings. Soldiers in dark uniforms followed them, shooting anything that moved. One of them pointed at her and yelled something she couldn’t understand. Two others turned and started toward her. Nadia ran.

Gunfire rattled behind her, and bullets zipped in the air, but somehow she reached the forest and crashed her way through the tangle of low-hanging limbs. Pine boughs cut her face and ripped at her clothing, but she kept running and running and running until her legs failed her and she fell.

All day she ran or walked or stumbled on. When darkness came, she huddled against the roots of a fallen tree and cried as quietly as she could. The moon rose after midnight, and she started off again, moving silently through the forest with no real idea of where she was going.

*I'll find the partisans and fight with them*, she reasoned. That was the plan, after all. The political kommissar had told them so. If they were attacked and cut off behind the enemy lines, they were to form themselves into small groups and fight the Germans wherever they could. Surely those groups were already forming; she had only to find them. But where?

Nadia never found the partisans. Just after dawn, two German soldiers caught her as she tried to cross a road through the forest. They were around her before she even realized they were near or saw the car they had parked on the road. One of them fired his rifle into the dirt inches in front of her and ordered her to halt. They laughed as they pushed her toward the car. When one of them tried to kiss her, she spit in his face.

The soldier's cheeks flushed red. He raised his fist, and Nadia cringed, but the blow never fell. A popping noise filled the air—an engine. It seemed to be coming from above the trees, but it sounded more like a farm tractor than an airplane.

*"Luftwaffe?"* suggested one of the soldiers as he let go of Nadia to cock his rifle.

*"Nein, ich denke nicht,"* the other replied.

The plane came in so low that it appeared to rise up from the trees. It dipped down until it was flying only inches above the road. The

other soldier released Nadia and raised his rifle. His first shot rang loud and sharp in Nadia's ear. *My chance!* she realized, and with all the strength she could muster, she pushed the nearest soldier and ran. She leaped into the ditch beside the road, and for a split second she saw the plane as it roared past. Painted below the cockpit was a black witch riding a broomstick and carrying a bomb. As Nadia watched, the pilot dropped something small and black. It bounced once on the road and hit the car with a dull metallic thud. The plane pulled up a second before the explosion.

The blast knocked Nadia backward into the mud and water at the bottom of the ditch. For a moment she lay there, trying to decide what to do. She could see flames rising from where she knew the car had been. And the soldiers? They were probably either dead or looking for her.

Carefully, she climbed to the top of the ditch and peered out. The car was blazing, and two crumpled bodies lay nearby. *Rifles*, she thought. *The soldiers have rifles and bullets and maybe food.* Could she take them? Could she face those dead bodies, perhaps even touch them if she had to? Yes, she decided, she would take what she needed. Then she would find the partisans, and she would kill more Germans. She rose unsteadily from the ditch and ran toward the burning car.

Again came the popping engine noise. Was the plane coming back? She looked up, and suddenly there it was, dipping over the trees and bouncing as it landed on the road. Nadia stood watching as it taxied toward her in a cloud of dust. The pilot seemed to be waving to her, trying to tell her something. Nadia approached cautiously.

“Move! Move! Get into the rear seat, you stupid little peasant!” The pilot’s face was all but hidden beneath her flying helmet and goggles, but it was a woman’s voice that yelled at her.

Nadia climbed awkwardly onto the lower wing, lost her footing, and fell.

“Hurry up!” the pilot shouted. “You think I want to fight the whole German army sitting here on the ground?”

“I’m hurrying as fast as I can!” Nadia defended as she looked down into the tiny rear cockpit. The seat there was already occupied. Blood was everywhere, and two sightless eyes stared up at the morning sky. “There’s a dead woman in here!” Nadia cried.

“Excellent! You can see!” the pilot shouted back. “Sit in her lap. Believe me, she won’t care. And put on her headphones—now!”

The engine roared, and the plane turned on the road while Nadia struggled to wedge herself into the corpse’s lap. With uncertain fingers, she removed the headphones from the dead woman’s neck. They were covered with blood, and they felt sticky as Nadia pressed them against her head.

“Be careful you don’t touch the controls back there,” the pilot’s voice crackled in the headphones. “And pick up that microphone. I want you to tell me what’s behind us.”

Nadia found the microphone at the end of a long cable and picked it up. “Hello?” she said nervously.

“Shut up and watch the sky. There are at least two Messerschmitts looking for me.”

“Yes.... Yes, comrade.”

The plane's tail rose almost at once as they sped down the road. In front of them, the forest stood like a prison wall. The plane bounced once and then was airborne. "Come on," the pilot pleaded as the propeller tore leaves from the top branches of a tree. "Climb, climb, you little sewing machine!"

A few meters above the trees, they leveled off and stayed low. "You see anything back there?" the pilot asked.

Nadia craned her neck, searching the sky all around her. "No, nothing."

"Good."

For a moment Nadia sat in the dead woman's lap, holding the microphone with shaking hands. Finally she asked, "Who-who are you?"

The pilot laughed a harsh, unpleasant laugh and answered, "I'm Lilly. I'm a Night Witch."