

PROLOGUE

I am not a traitor.

I have been asked to defend myself to this tribunal, and I am going to do so plainly. I will speak of things that are now forbidden, for which I ask your pardon. Nothing I say will go beyond these walls.

I am Anastasia Viktorovna Nabokova. Anastasia is the name of a saint, Anastasia the Healer. Anastasia was also an empress, the first wife of Czar Ivan the Terrible. And it is the name of the youngest of the four murdered daughters of Nicholas II, the Russian empire's last Romanov czar. I don't think our glorious leader Stalin would approve of the name Anastasia. It is a holy name and a royal name, and we are no longer supposed to worship the saints and the czars and the Romanovs. Those are relics of Imperial Russia, and they died when the Soviet Union was born.

But Anastasia means resurrection – rebirth. I think it is a good name for a girl who is fighting to save her nation from an invading army.

That is what I am doing.

I am not holy, nor am I royal, and everyone calls me Nastia because it is shorter. But I am still proud of my name. Nastia is not the name of a traitor.

It is true I landed my plane behind enemy lines. I am a pilot in the Soviet Air Force, and I landed my Soviet Yak-1 fighter aircraft in territory held by the German fascists. I risked them taking my plane and learning specialist secrets of our country's top aircraft engineers. I also risked being taken prisoner myself and being tortured for information about our air force.

In any case, I accept that I took this risk and that perhaps I did not act with full responsibility.

Stalin's Order Number 227 of July 1942 forbids us to retreat. If we do, or if we allow ourselves to be taken prisoner by the enemy, we are considered guilty of treason and will be shot. The order tells us: *Not one step back!* We shout this to each other for encouragement. And we whisper it to ourselves

between combat missions – in the brief hours when we are able to rest. *Not one step back!*

But any act of cowardice might be a step back. Any mistake could get you shot.

It is true that I am not the same person I was before the war. But I am not a coward, I am not a traitor, and I did not run away.

Let me tell you how I became a pilot and why I landed my plane behind enemy lines – and what I did afterwards.

And then you can judge for yourself.