

## You're in the Army Now

There is nothing like Russian winter. Poets throughout the ages have used all kinds of long, elaborate words to describe it. Me? I'd just describe it as terribly cold. I shifted on my feet, seeing my breath clouding in front of my face. The air was so freezing that I felt like I could almost drink it. Apart from a rare birdcall and the sighing of the bone-chilling wind, the forest was completely silent. The blanket of crisp, white snow contrasted starkly with the black branches of the trees. After a few days out in the middle of nowhere, I was very tired of the cold and the snow and the eerie silence. One of my men, Boris, walked up behind me scowling, as usual.

- Still nothing? – I asked automatically.
- No, comrade lieutenant. And I really want a decent meal sometime soon. It's been two days since we ran out of food.

My name is Yevgeny Ivanovich Malashenko. I was seventeen when Nazi Germany attacked Russia in June of 1941, and I'd just finished school. My dream was to become a pilot, so right after school I applied to train in the air force. But I had two weaknesses I couldn't conceal or pass the strict tests with: I was partially color-blind and my hearing was worse in one ear. I wasn't allowed to become a pilot, so I joined the infantry. After a few months of rigorous training, I took part in the fighting near Moscow in December of 1941 as a lieutenant. I served in military reconnaissance: my main task was to go behind enemy lines leading a group of soldiers, take some prisoners to bring back, and extract important information from them about enemy forces and their plans. Did I ever wish that I had become a pilot? It was a hypothetical question, so I'd never really bothered answering it. This was my job, and I was good at it. I was now

eighteen, and leading another mission with a group of five men under my command. The assignment we had been given was to capture an officer who could provide us with some valuable information or documents. So far, we'd been sitting in an ambush behind enemy lines for days, but we'd had no luck. I rolled my eyes at Boris, pulling my coat up closer around my neck.

- Personally, I'd just prefer a good night's sleep in a real bed.

It was true. While we were lying in wait, we lived literally in the middle of the forest. We spread out branches on the ground at night, so we wouldn't freeze to death, covering ourselves up with more branches if it snowed. Before falling asleep, we'd drink a glass of spirit with an alcohol concentration twice as strong as that of vodka. It kept you warm long enough to fall asleep, and you'd wake up after about half an hour because your side would be frozen. Another glass. Turn over. Repeat after your other side froze solid. I grimaced inwardly, deciding that I was definitely ready for a civilized bed anytime. The other Spartan element of our life was that we couldn't afford to light a fire, because it would give our position away. I leaned down, scooping up a handful of snow, and put it in my mouth, which is what we did to get water. My jaws ached from the cold and I clenched my teeth, waiting for the snow to melt as my cheeks went numb. Boris was frowning again, and I wondered for a second if some of my men resented the fact that I was younger and in charge. I shrugged. I didn't think my age mattered, as long as what I did worked. I was told that I definitely did not look like a battle-tested army guy. I was tall and slightly gangly, with dark hair and large ears. As they say, appearances can be deceptive. Ivan, another one of my men, appeared from the trees, beating his hands in stiff mittens together

in a futile attempt to stay warm. He was younger than me, only seventeen, and the bitter, frosty weather had turned his nose red. I raised an eyebrow.

- Who's watching the path?
- Misha, Viktor, and Zhenia. We've seen a horse cart on the trail. There's only one man in it. We think it could have food supplies.

I looked at Boris.

- Well, we can't just eat snow for the rest of the mission, can we? Let's capture the cart.

\*\*\*

Just our luck. I cringed, feeling the salty, fishy caviar on my tongue, knowing that I would be very thirsty later on and would have to thaw lots of snow to drink. Why would the only food a sled was transporting be a big pot of black caviar, something considered a delicacy? Who knows? My men and I certainly did not. I forced myself to swallow, recoiling at the briny taste, which seemed especially disgusting considering we were starving and had nothing else to eat. You were supposed to eat caviar with bread, anyway! It barely lessened our hunger, and the combination of the sickening aftertaste and the icy temperatures did not improve our moods. I sat back, closing my eyes, and braced myself against the biting wind that would come with nightfall. I didn't know, then, that after four days of snow and caviar eating in freezing temperatures we would catch an officer and go back home. I didn't know that the war would last for a few more years, and that I would be wounded twice. I didn't know that I would lead many other missions, including attacks on the rear of an enemy army, with over a hundred men under my command. I didn't know that I would go up the ranks, and end the war as a major. I didn't know that I would

get married and have two sons, and that one of my granddaughters would go to an all-girls school in New York City. But I did know that I would never, *ever* be able to eat or smell black caviar again.