

City of Thieves

David Benioff

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DAVID
BENIOFF

*City of
Thieves*



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and if the City falls but a single man escapes
he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
he will be the City

Zbigniew Herbert

At last Schenk thought he understood and began laughing
louder. Then suddenly he asked in a serious tone, 'Do you
think that the Russians are homosexuals?'

'You'll find out at the end of the war,' I replied.

Curzio Malaparte

My grandfather, the knife fighter, killed two Germans before he was eighteen. I don't remember anyone telling me – it was something I always seemed to know, the way I knew the Yankees wore pinstripes for home games and gray for the road. But I wasn't born with the knowledge. Who told me? Not my father, who never shared secrets, or my mother, who shied away from mentioning the unpleasant, all things bloody, cancerous, or deformed. Not my grandmother, who knew every folktale from the old country – most of them gruesome; children devoured by wolves and beheaded by witches – but never spoke about the war in my hearing. And certainly not my grandfather himself, the smiling watchman of my earliest memories, the quiet, black-eyed,

slender man who held my hand as we crossed the avenues, who sat on a park bench reading his Russian newspaper while I chased pigeons and harassed sugar ants with broken twigs.

I grew up two blocks from my grandparents and saw them nearly every day. They had their own small insurance company, working out of their railroad apartment in Bay Ridge, catering primarily to other Russian immigrants. My grandmother was always on the phone, selling. No one could resist her. She charmed them or she frightened them, and either way, they bought. My grandfather manned the desk, doing all the paperwork. When I was small, I would sit on his lap, staring at the stump of his left index finger, rounded and smooth, the top two knuckles so cleanly severed it seemed he'd been born without them. If it was summer and the Yankees were playing, a radio (after his seventieth birthday, a color television my dad bought him) broadcast the game. He never lost his accent, he never voted in an election or listened to American music, but he became a devout Yankees fan.

In the late nineties, an insurance conglomerate made an offer for my grandparents' company. It was, according to everyone, a fair offer, so my grandmother asked them to double it. There must have been a good deal of haggling, but I could have told the conglomerate that haggling with my grandmother was a waste of time. In the end they gave her

what she wanted and my grandparents, following tradition, sold their apartment and moved to Florida.

They bought a small house on the Gulf Coast, a flat-roofed masterpiece built in 1949 by an architect who would have become famous if he hadn't drowned the same year. Stark and majestic in steel and poured concrete, sitting on a solitary bluff overlooking the Gulf, it is not the house you'd imagine for a retired couple, but they didn't move south to wither in the sun and die. Most days my grandfather sits at his computer, playing chess online with old friends. My grandmother, bored by inactivity within weeks of the move, created a job for herself at a commuter college in Sarasota, teaching Russian literature to tanned students who seem (based on my one classroom visit) constantly alarmed by her profanity, her heavy sarcasm, and her word-perfect memory of Pushkin's verse.

Every night my grandparents eat dinner on the deck of their house, looking out over the dark waters toward Mexico. They sleep with the windows open, the moths battering their wings against the mesh screens. Unlike the other retirees I've met in Florida, they're not worried about crime. The front door is usually unlocked and there is no alarm system. They don't wear their seat belts in the car; they don't wear suntan lotion in the sun. They have decided nothing can kill them but God himself, and they don't even believe in him.

I live in Los Angeles and write screenplays about mutant superheroes. Two years ago I was asked to write an auto-

biographical essay for a screenwriting magazine, and midway through I realized I had led an intensely dull life. Not that I'm complaining. Even if the summary of my existence makes boring reading – school, college, odd jobs, graduate school, odd jobs, more graduate school, mutant superheroes – I've had a good time existing. But as I struggled through the essay I decided I didn't want to write about my life, not even for five hundred words. I wanted to write about Leningrad.

My grandparents picked me up at the Sarasota airport; I stooped to kiss them and they smiled up at me, always slightly bemused in the presence of their giant American grandson (at six foot two I'm a giant next to them). On the way home we bought pompano at the local fish market; my grandfather grilled it adding nothing but butter, salt, and fresh lemon. Like every dish he made, it seemed incredibly easy to do, took him ten minutes, and tasted better than anything I'd eaten that year in LA. My grandmother doesn't cook; she is famous in our family for her refusal to prepare anything more complicated than a bowl of cereal.

After dinner my grandmother lit a cigarette and my grandfather poured three glasses of homemade blackcurrant vodka. We listened to a choir of cicadas and crickets, stared out at the black Gulf, and slapped away the occasional mosquito.

'I brought a tape recorder with me. I thought maybe we could talk about the war.'

I thought I caught my grandmother rolling her eyes as she flicked her ash onto the grass.

‘What?’

‘You’re forty years old. Now you want to know?’

‘I’m thirty-four.’ I looked at my grandfather and he smiled at me. ‘What’s the matter? You guys were Nazis? You’re hiding your Nazi past?’

‘No,’ he said, still smiling. ‘We weren’t Nazis.’

‘You thought I was forty years old?’

‘Thirty-four, forty—’ She made her *pshh* sound, always accompanied by a dismissive wave of the hand, slapping away the stupidity. ‘Who cares? Get married. Find a wife.’

‘You sound like every other grandmother in Florida.’

‘Ha,’ she said, a little wounded.

‘I want to know what it was like. What’s so horrible about that?’

She nodded at my grandfather while pointing the burning tip of her cigarette at me.

‘He wants to know what it was like.’

‘Darling,’ said my grandfather. Just that, nothing else, but my grandmother nodded and stubbed out her cigarette on the glass-top table.

‘You’re right,’ she told me. ‘You want to write about the war, you should.’

She stood, kissed me on the top of my head, kissed my grandfather on the lips, and carried the dishes inside the

house. For a few minutes we sat there quietly, listening to the waves breaking. He poured us fresh vodkas, happy to see I'd finished mine.

'You have a girlfriend?'

'Uh-huh.'

'The actress?'

'Yeah.'

'I like her.'

'I know you do.'

'She could be Russian,' he said. 'She has the eyes . . . If you want to talk about Leningrad, we talk about Leningrad.'

'I don't want to talk. I want you to talk.'

'So, OK, I'll talk. Tomorrow?'

He kept his word. For the next week we sat together every day on the concrete deck and I recorded his stories. A few hours in the morning, breaking for lunch, then again in the afternoon – my grandfather, a man who hated to speak more than two consecutive sentences in mixed company (meaning in the company of anyone other than his wife), filled minicassette after minicassette with his words. Too many words for one book – truth might be stranger than fiction, but it needs a better editor. For the first time in my life I heard my grandfather curse and speak openly about sex. He talked about his childhood, about the war, about coming to America. But mostly he talked about one week in 1942, the first week of the year, the

week he met my grandmother, made his best friend, and killed two Germans.

When he was finished telling his stories, I questioned him about various details – names, locations, weather conditions on certain days. He tolerated this for a while, but eventually he leaned forward and pressed the Stop button on the tape recorder.

‘It was a long time ago,’ he said. ‘I don’t remember what I was wearing. I don’t remember if the sun came out.’

‘I just want to make sure I get everything right.’

‘You won’t.’

‘This is your story. I don’t want to fuck with it.’

‘David—’

‘A couple of things still don’t make sense to me—’

‘David,’ he said. ‘You’re a writer. Make it up.’

ONE

You have never been so hungry; you have never been so cold. When we slept, if we slept, we dreamed of the feasts we had carelessly eaten seven months earlier – all that buttered bread, the potato dumplings, the sausages – eaten with disregard, swallowing without tasting, leaving great crumbs on our plates, scraps of fat. In June of 1941, before the Germans came, we thought we were poor. But June seemed like paradise by winter.

At night the wind blew so loud and long it startled you when it stopped; the shutter hinges of the burned-out café on the corner would quit creaking for a few ominous seconds, as if a predator neared and the smaller animals hushed in terror. The shutters themselves had been torn

down for firewood in November. There was no more scrap wood in Leningrad. Every wood sign, the slats of the park benches, the floorboards of shattered buildings – all gone and burning in someone’s stove. The pigeons were missing, too, caught and stewed in melted ice from the Neva. No one minded slaughtering pigeons. It was the dogs and cats that caused trouble. You would hear a rumor in October that someone had roasted the family mutt and split it four ways for supper; we’d laugh and shake our heads, not believing it, and also wondering if dog tasted good with enough salt – there was still plenty of salt, even when everything else ran out we had salt. By January the rumors had become plain fact. No one but the best connected could still feed a pet, so the pets fed us.

There were two theories on the fat versus the thin. Some said those who were fat before the war stood a better chance of survival: a week without food would not transform a plump man into a skeleton. Others said skinny people were more accustomed to eating little and could better handle the shock of starvation. I stood in the latter camp, purely out of self-interest. I was a runt from birth. Big nosed, black haired, skin scribbled with acne – let’s admit I was no girl’s idea of a catch. But war made me more attractive. Others dwindled as the ration cards were cut and cut again, halving those who looked like circus strongmen before the invasion. I had no muscle to lose. Like the shrews that kept scavenging

while the dinosaurs toppled around them, I was built for deprivation.

On New Year's Eve I sat on the rooftop of the Kirov, the apartment building where I'd lived since I was five (though it had no name until '34, when Kirov was shot and half the city was named after him), watching the fat gray anti-aircraft blimps swarm under the clouds, waiting for the bombers. That time of year the sun lingers in the sky for only six hours, scurrying from horizon to horizon as if spooked. Every night four of us would sit on the roof for a three-hour shift, armed with sand pails, iron tongs, and shovels, bundled in all the shirts and sweaters and coats we could find, watching the skies. We were the firefighters. The Germans had decided rushing the city would be too costly, so instead they encircled us, intending to starve us out, bomb us out, burn us out.

Before the war began eleven hundred people lived in the Kirov. By New Year's Eve the number was closer to four hundred. Most of the small children were evacuated before the Germans closed the circle in September. My mother and little sister, Taisya, went to Vyazma to stay with my uncle. The night before they left I fought with my mother, the only fight we'd ever had – or, more precisely, the only time I ever fought back. She wanted me to go with them, of course, far away from the invaders, deep into the heart of the country where the bombers couldn't find us. But I wasn't leaving

Piter. I was a man, I would defend my city, I would be a Nevsky for the twentieth century. Perhaps I wasn't quite this ridiculous. I had a real argument: if every able-bodied soul fled, Leningrad would fall to the Fascists. And without Leningrad, without the City of Workers building tanks and rifles for the Red Army, what chance did Russia have?

My mother thought this was a stupid argument. I was barely seventeen. I didn't weld armor at the Works and I couldn't enlist in the army for close to a year. The defense of Leningrad had nothing to do with me; I was just another mouth to feed. I ignored these insults.

'I'm a firefighter,' I told her, because it was true, the city council had ordered the creation of ten thousand firefighting units, and I was the proud commander of the Kirov Fifth-Floor Brigade.

My mother wasn't forty years old, but her hair was already gray. She sat across from me at the kitchen table, holding one of my hands in both of hers. She was a very small woman, barely five feet tall, and I had been afraid of her from birth.

'You are an idiot,' she told me. Maybe this sounds insulting, but my mother always called me 'her idiot' and by that point I thought of it as an affectionate nickname. 'The city was here before you. It will be here after you. Taisya and I need you.'

She was right. A better son would have gone with her, a better brother. Taisya adored me, jumped on me when I

came home from school, read me the silly little poems she wrote as homework to honor martyrs of the revolution, drew caricatures of my big-nosed profile in her notebook. Generally, I wanted to strangle her. I had no desire to tramp across the country with my mother and kid sister. I was seventeen, flooded with a belief in my own heroic destiny. Molotov's declaration during his radio address on the first day of the war (OUR CAUSE IS JUST! THE ENEMY WILL BE BEATEN! WE SHALL TRIUMPH!) had been printed on thousands of posters and pasted on the city's walls. I believed in the cause; I would not flee the enemy; I would not miss out on the triumph.

Mother and Taisya left the next morning. They rode a bus part of the way, flagged down army trucks for rides, and walked endless miles on country roads in their split-soled boots. It took them three weeks to get there, but they made it, safe at last. She sent me a letter describing her journey, the terror and fatigue. Maybe she wanted me to feel guilty for abandoning them, and I did, but I also knew it was better with them gone. The great fight was coming and they did not belong on the front. On the seventh of October the Germans took Vyazma and her letters stopped coming.

I'd like to say I missed them when they were gone, and some nights I was lonely, and always I missed my mother's cooking, but I had fantasized about being on my own since I was little. My favorite folktales featured resourceful orphans

who make their way through the dark forest, surviving all perils with clever problem solving, outwitting their enemies, finding their fortune in the midst of their wanderings. I wouldn't say I was happy – we were all too hungry to be happy – but I believed that here at last was the Meaning. If Leningrad fell, Russia would fall; if Russia fell, Fascism would conquer the world. All of us believed this. I still believe it.

So I was too young for the army but old enough to dig antitank ditches by day and guard the roofs by night. Manning my crew were my friends from the fifth floor – Vera Osipovna, a talented cellist, and the redheaded Antokolsky twins, whose only known talent was an ability to fart in harmony. In the early days of the war we had smoked cigarettes on the roof, posing as soldiers, brave and strong and square-chinned, scanning the skies for the enemy. By the end of December there were no cigarettes in Leningrad, at least none made with tobacco. A few desperate souls crushed fallen leaves, rolled them in paper, and called them Autumn Lights, claiming the right leaves provided a decent smoke, but in the Kirov, far from the nearest standing tree, this was never an option. We spent our spare minutes hunting rats, who must have thought the disappearance of the city's cats was the answer to all their ancient prayers, until they realized there was nothing left to eat in the garbage.

After months of bombing raids we could identify the various German planes by the pitch of their engines. That night it was the Junkers 88s, as it had been for weeks, replacing the Heinkels and Dorniers that our fighters had gotten good at gunning down. As wretched as our city had become in daylight, after dark there was a strange beauty in the siege. From the roof of the Kirov, if the moon was out, we could see all of Leningrad: the needlepoint of the Admiralty tower (splashed with gray paint to obscure it from the bombers); the Peter and Paul Fortress (spires draped with camouflage netting); the domes of Saint Isaac's and the Church on Spilled Blood. We could see the crews manning the antiaircraft guns on the rooftops of neighboring buildings. The Baltic Fleet had dropped anchor on the Neva; they floated there, giant gray sentries, firing their big guns at the Nazi artillery emplacements.

Most beautiful were the dogfights. The Ju88s and the Sukhois circled above the city, invisible from below unless they were caught in the eyes of the powerful searchlights. The Sukhois had large red stars painted on the undersides of their wings so our antiaircraft crews wouldn't shoot them down. Every few nights we'd see a battle spotlit as if for the stage, the heavier, slower German bombers banking hard to let their gunners get a bead on the darting Russian fighters. When a Junkers went down, the plane's burning carcass falling like an angel cast from heaven, a great shout of

defiance rose up from rooftops all across the city, all the gunners and firefighters shaking their fists to salute the victorious pilot.

We had a little radio on the roof with us. On New Year's Eve we listened to the Spassky chimes in Moscow playing the *'Internationale.'* Vera had found half an onion somewhere; she cut it into four pieces on a plate smeared with sunflower oil. When the onion was gone, we mopped up the remaining oil with our ration bread. Ration bread did not taste like bread. It did not taste like food. After the Germans bombed the Badayev grain warehouses, the city bakeries got creative. Everything that could be added to the recipe without poisoning people was added to the recipe. The entire city was starving, no one had enough to eat, and still, everyone cursed the bread, the sawdust flavor, how hard it got in the cold. People broke their teeth trying to chew it. Even today, even when I've forgotten the faces of people I loved, I can still remember the taste of that bread.

Half an onion and a 125-gram loaf of bread split four ways – this was a decent meal. We lay on our backs, wrapped in blankets, watching the air-raid blimps on their long tethers drifting in the wind, listening to the radio's metronome. When there was no music to play or news to report, the radio station transmitted the sound of a metronome, that endless tick-tick-tick letting us know the city was still unconquered, the Fascists still outside the gate. The broad-

cast metronome was Piter's beating heart and the Germans never stilled it.

It was Vera who spotted the man falling from the sky. She shouted and pointed and we all stood to get a better look. One of the searchlights shone on a parachutist descending toward the city, his silk canopy a white tulip bulb above him.

'A Fritz,' said Oleg Antokolsky, and he was right; we could see the gray Luftwaffe uniform. Where had he come from? None of us had heard the sounds of aerial combat or the report of an AA gun. We hadn't heard a bomber passing overhead for close to an hour.

'Maybe it's started,' said Vera. For weeks we'd been hearing rumors that the Germans were preparing a massive paratrooper drop, a final raid to pluck the miserable thorn of Leningrad from their advancing army's backside. At any minute we expected to look up and see thousands of Nazis drifting toward the city, a snowstorm of white parachutes blotting out the sky, but dozens of searchlights slashed through the darkness and found no more enemies. There was only this one, and judging from the limpness of the body suspended from the parachute harness, he was already dead.

We watched him drift down, frozen in the searchlight, low enough that we could see that one of his black boots was missing.

'He's coming our way,' I said. The wind blew him toward Voinova Street. The twins looked at each other.

‘Luger,’ said Oleg.

‘Luftwaffe don’t carry Lugers,’ said Grisha. He was five minutes older and the authority on Nazi weaponry. ‘Walther PPK.’

Vera smiled at me. ‘German chocolate.’

We ran for the stairway door, abandoning our firefighting tools, racing down the dark stairwell. We were fools, of course. A slip on one of those concrete steps, with no fat or muscle to cushion the fall, meant a broken bone, and a broken bone meant death. But none of us cared. We were very young and a dead German was falling onto Voinova Street carrying gifts from *das Vaterland*.

We sprinted through the courtyard and climbed over the locked gate. All the streetlamps were dark. The entire city was dark – partly to make the job tougher for the bombers and partly because most of the electricity was diverted to the munitions factories – but the moon was bright enough to see by. Voinova was wide open and deserted, six hours into curfew. No cars in sight. Only the military and government had access to gasoline, and all the civilian autos had been requisitioned during the first months of the war. Strips of paper crossed the shop windows, which the radio told us made them more resistant to shattering. Maybe this was true, though I had walked by many storefronts in Leningrad where nothing remained in the window frame but a dangling strip of paper.

Out on the street we looked into the sky but could not find our man.

‘Where’d he go?’

‘You think he landed on a roof?’

The searchlights were tracking the sky, but they were all mounted on top of tall buildings and none of them had an angle to shine down Voinova Street. Vera tugged on the collar of my greatcoat, a vast old navy coat inherited from my father and still too big for me, but warmer than anything else I owned.

I turned and saw him gliding down the street, our German, his single black boot skidding over the frozen pavement, the great canopy of his white parachute still swollen in the wind, blowing him toward the gates of the Kirov, his chin slumped against his chest, his dark hair flecked with crystals of ice, his face bloodless in the moonlight. We stood very still and watched him sail closer. We had seen things that winter no eyes should ever see, we thought we were beyond surprise, but we were wrong, and if the German had drawn his Walther and begun shooting, none of us would have been able to get our feet moving in time. But the dead man stayed dead and at last the wind gave out, the parachute deflated, and he slumped to the pavement, dragged another few meters facedown in final humiliation.

We gathered around the pilot. He was a tall man, well built, and if we had seen him walking around Piter in street

clothes, we would have known him at once for an infiltrator – he had the body of a man who ate meat every day.

Grisha knelt and unholstered the German's sidearm. 'Walther PPK. Told you.'

We rolled the German onto his back. His pale face was scuffed, the skin scraped on the asphalt, the abrasions as colorless as the intact skin. The dead don't bruise. I couldn't tell if he had died frightened or defiant or peaceful. There was no trace of life or personality in his face – he looked like a corpse who had been born a corpse.

Oleg stripped off the black leather gloves while Vera went for the scarf and goggles. I found a sheath strapped to the pilot's ankle and pulled out a beautifully weighted knife with a silver finger guard and a fifteen-centimeter single-edge blade etched with words I could not read in the moonlight. I resheathed the blade and strapped it to my own ankle, feeling for the first time in months that my warrior destiny was at last coming true.

Oleg found the dead man's wallet and grinned as he counted out the deutsche marks. Vera pocketed a chronometer, twice as big as a wristwatch, that the German had worn around the sleeve of his flight jacket. Grisha found a pair of folded binoculars in a leather case, two extra magazines for the Walther, and a slim hip flask. He unscrewed the cap, sniffed, and passed me the flask.

'Cognac?'

I took a sip and nodded. 'Cognac.'

'When did you ever taste cognac?' asked Vera.

'I've had it before.'

'When?'

'Let me see,' said Oleg, and the bottle went around the circle, the four of us squatting on our haunches around the fallen pilot, sipping the liquor that might have been cognac or brandy or Armagnac. None of us knew the difference. Whatever it was, the stuff was warmth in the belly.

Vera stared at the German's face. Her expression held no pity, no fear, only curiosity and contempt – the invader had come to drop his bombs on our city and instead had dropped himself. We hadn't shot him down, but we felt triumphant anyway. No one else in the Kirov had come across an enemy's corpse. We would be the talk of the apartment bloc in the morning.

'How do you think he died?' she asked. No bullet wounds blemished the body, no singed hair or leather, no sign of any violence at all. His skin was far too white for the living, but nothing had pierced it.

'He froze to death,' I told them. I said it with authority because I knew it was true and I had no way to prove it. The pilot had bailed out thousands of feet above nighttime Leningrad. The air at ground level was too cold for the clothes he was wearing – up in the clouds, outside of his warm cockpit, he never had a chance.

Grisha raised the flask in salute. 'Here's to the cold.'

The flask began to circle again. It never got to me. We should have heard the car's engine from two blocks away, the city after curfew was quiet as the moon, but we were busy drinking our German liquor, making our toasts. Only when the GAZ turned onto Voinova Street, heavy tires rattling on the asphalt, headlights stabbing toward us, did we realize the danger. The punishment for violating curfew without a permit was summary execution. The punishment for abandoning a firefighting detail was summary execution. The punishment for looting was summary execution. The courts no longer operated; the police officers were on the front lines, the prisons half full and dwindling fast. Who had food for an enemy of the state? If you broke the law and you were caught, you were dead. There wasn't time for any legal niceties.

So we ran. We knew the Kirov better than anyone. Once we got inside the courtyard gates and into the chilled darkness of the sprawling building, no one could find us if they had three months to search. We could hear the soldiers shouting at us to stop, but that didn't matter; voices didn't frighten us, only bullets made a difference and no one had pulled a trigger yet. Grisha made it to the gate first – he was the closest thing to an athlete among us – he leaped onto the iron bars and hoisted himself upward. Oleg was right behind him and I was behind Oleg. Our bodies were weak,

muscles shrunken from lack of protein, but fear helped us scale the gate as quickly as we ever had.

Near the top of the gate I looked back and saw that Vera had slipped on a patch of ice. She stared up at me, her eyes round and fearful, on her hands and knees as the GAZ braked beside the body of the German pilot and four soldiers stepped out. They were twenty feet away, their rifles in their hands, but I still had time to pull myself over the gate and disappear into the Kirov.

I wish I could tell you that the thought of deserting Vera never entered my mind, that my friend was in danger and I went to her rescue without hesitation. Truly, though, at that moment I hated her. I hated her for being clumsy at the worst possible time, for staring up at me with her panicked brown eyes, electing me to be her savior even though Grisha was the only one she had ever kissed. I knew that I could not live with the memory of those eyes pleading for me, and she knew it, too, and I hated her even as I jumped down from the gate, lifted her to her feet, and hauled her to the iron bars. I was weak, but Vera couldn't have weighed forty kilos. I boosted her onto the gate as the soldiers shouted and their boot heels slapped on the pavement and the bolts of their rifles snapped into place.

Vera went over the top and I scrambled up behind her, ignoring the soldiers. If I stopped, they would gather around me, tell me I was an enemy of the state, force me to kneel,

and shoot me in the back of the head. I was an easy target now, but maybe they were drunk, maybe they were city boys like me who had never fired a shot before in their lives; maybe they would miss on purpose because they knew I was a patriot and a defender of the city and I had snuck out of the Kirov only because a German had fallen twenty thousand feet onto my street, and what seventeen-year-old Russian boy would not sneak outside to peek at a dead Fascist?

My chin was level with the top of the gate when I felt the gloved hands wrap around my ankles. Strong hands, the hands of army men who ate two meals every day. I saw Vera run inside the Kirov, never looking back. I tried to cling to the iron bars, but the soldiers dragged me down, tossed me to the sidewalk, and stood above me, the muzzles of their Tokarevs jabbing at my cheeks. None of the soldiers looked older than nineteen and none seemed reluctant to splatter the street with my brains.

‘Looks ready to shit himself, this one.’

‘You having a party here, son? Found yourself some schnapps?’

‘He’s a good one for the colonel. He can ride with the Fritz.’

Two of them bent down, grabbed me under the armpits, yanked me to my feet, guided me to the still-idling GAZ, and shoved me into the backseat. The other two soldiers lifted the German by his hands and boots and swung him into the car beside me.

‘Keep him warm,’ one of them said, and they all laughed as if it were the funniest joke ever told. They squeezed into the car and slammed the doors.

I decided I was still alive because they wanted to execute me in public, as a warning to other looters. A few minutes before, I had felt far more powerful than the dead pilot. Now, as we sped down the dark street, swerving to avoid bomb craters and sprays of rubble, he seemed to be smirking at me, his white lips a scar splitting his frozen face. We were going the same way.