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Opening extract from

City of Fate

Written by

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Dedication

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YURI

It was 23 August 1942, about four o'clock on a typical Sunday afternoon. Yuri Bogdanov was swimming in the River Volga with his friends Grigori and Anatoly. There were plenty of people around the water's edge, kissing couples and noisy families – everyone relishing their freedom from lessons and chores.

The boys were celebrating. It was Yuri's fourteenth birthday and, after their swim, they were going back to his house, where his mother had baked a cake in his honour. For now, Yuri was in no rush to leave the river, preferring to spin out the feeling of excitement, of expectation for as long as he could.

Underwater, he practised his gliding, focused and determined. This was where he was faster than anyone else. His left leg had never been straight, nor had it ever been quite as long as his right one, so he limped when he walked. No doubt the other two were calling him to grab someone's legs

as he swam past. One, two, three, four; he held his breath for twenty-five seconds before jutting his face out for a gulp of air, glancing at his friends splashing one another. Leaving them to it, he drew back beneath the water and started counting all over again. It was a green jungle down there, almost like a secret garden with knots of bushes, barely two inches high, and waving weeds. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted tiny flashes of silver fish that nibbled here and there before fleeing from his shadow.

On reaching twenty-six seconds, he nosed up once more for air, and that was when he heard the thunder; or at least that's what he thought it was. He gazed at the cloudless sky, puzzled. Then he had another idea. *Bees*, he thought, *and a heavy swarm from the sound of it. But where?* He was approximately ten feet from the bank and all about him was wide open space. Bees don't like water, so that didn't make sense. How much time did he spend at this debate before noticing the heads of the picnickers and sunbathers snapping upwards? Water plunged in and out of his ears, and his teeth chattered in the blazing sunlight.

'Planes!' somebody shouted.

Yes, Yuri thought, *that's exactly what it sounds like*; *an awful lot of planes*.

Then, there was a second of silence, or maybe two – allowing the nearest loud speaker to be heard calmly repeating the general alert: ATTENTION CITIZENS, AIR-RAID

WARNING – a bitter pause when everyone understood. It was followed by the sound of Stalingrad's anti-aircraft guns rallying to her defence. Boom! Boom!

An old woman stood up and quickly crossed herself; just as she finished there was an almighty crash somewhere in the city. That's how her prayer was answered, and again and again and again.

★ ★ ★

Following months of half-hearted expectation, the Germans had finally arrived. In minutes, thousands of bombs pelted down from the Luftwaffe killer planes. Fire and smoke exploded into being in such volume that the most powerful light of all, God's own sun, was blocked out. Day became night, while throughout the city huge clouds of dirt poured down a heavy rain of bricks and roof tiles that had previously been the guts of pristine buildings such as the Prizyv Cinema, universities, hospitals and the train station.

Almost accidentally, Yuri caught sight of Grigori who screamed at him, wild-eyed, 'Get out of the water!'

Confused by his friend's expression, Yuri made no reply. *Who was this boy?* Grigori's normally relaxed features were scrunched up in terror. Not surprisingly, Yuri had never seen him like that before. After all, terror is not a common

expression for a freckly-faced, plump thirteen-year-old. This was Yuri's first thought. He waited, stunned a little, as the air shook around him, and then his next thought came and it propelled him towards the bank as fast as he could swim: *Mama …*

★ ★ ★

For the next two weeks Yuri lived in the coal cellar, at the end of his garden, with his mother and baby sister Anna. Every morning, before sunrise, his job was to climb out and scout around the smashed houses for food and water. But then Anna got sick. Mrs Bogdanov said that the noise of the bombs had made her too frightened to eat. The child cried all the time during the attacks, and when each one was over, she would tremble for hours in the fleeting silence.

The roar of the planes and the fierce, deafening booms, as all over the city bombs fell, were like nothing anyone could ever imagine. In between the explosions there was plenty of noise. For one thing, fire has a sound; it cackles and splutters as it consumes all around it. Then there were the howls and wails of animals that were wounded, lost or just very afraid. No one could have got used to that, not to mention the fear that at any moment something could fall on their cellar, blowing them all into tiny little fragments.

Yuri's entire body ached with the strain; his withered leg

itched with fright, while his heart could hardly bear the terror in his mother's face.

One time he found himself wishing it would happen; he really did. The three of them were so scared and the bombing so brutal and constant; he couldn't help it. He suddenly prayed for them to die together, not to feel a thing but just be gone in a puff of smoke. It was the only way he felt the noise would ever stop.

But, then, after fourteen long days, the bombing came to an end. As soon as it did, the Germans swarmed around with their loudspeakers, calling for any civilians to come out from wherever they were hiding.

Yuri saw no reason for any of them to move. *Who would bother to look in a coal cellar?* He told his mother as much, 'We're safe here; they'll never find us.'

She said nothing to this. But the following day, when they heard the Germans again, she explained that she had to go, for Anna's sake, 'Or she'll starve to death otherwise. You understand me, Yuri, don't you?'

Yuri wasn't sure that he did and proved it by asking, 'Are we leaving now?'

Mrs Bogdanov licked the palm of her hand to flatten down a few stray wispy hairs on Anna's head. On her face was a look her son had never seen before. 'No, Yuri. I need you to stay free. Someone needs to be here when Papa returns, and then you can tell him where Anna and I have gone.'

It was confusing. She had never trusted him enough to leave him alone before. But he agreed with her, someone had to be here for his father. Nevertheless, he still heard himself say, 'But maybe I should come with you and help take care of Anna?'

His mother had tears in her eyes, he was sure of it, though she did her best to hide them from him. 'I can't be here to mind Papa when he gets back. It has to be you.'

He vaguely suspected that something else was going on, and may have discovered it, had he really and truly wanted to know what it was. She removed Anna's outdoor things and gently wiped her with a grubby towel. The rusty tap in the garden had stopped working days ago. As she rubbed Anna's arms, legs and face, taking the time to clean in between every single finger and toe, she hummed a lullaby that she used to sing to Yuri.

'There, sweetheart, we're almost ready to go now.'

She never looked at her son once, the whole time, leaving him to sit there feeling utterly miserable, wishing that the world would stop turning and that she and Anna didn't have to go anywhere.

'Hold the baby, Yuri, while I run the cloth over myself. I can't go out looking like this, all covered in coal dust.'

For once Anna was quiet. She had cried and screamed so much over the last couple of weeks. 'She's tired?' he offered.

'No. She's just too weak to do anything. Poor baby needs to eat.' His mother's cheerful tone clashed with what she was saying. Anna was far too light in his arms.

He pressed ahead with another question, while she dodged his pleading looks, 'And Papa is going to come back?'

'Of course!'

He had no reason to doubt her. The loudspeaker sounded again, calling for all Stalingrad citizens to gather in the centre immediately, bringing no more than one bag each.

His mother's tone was brisk. 'Right, I just want to make sure I have everything. Can you put her clothes back on her? Her hat and coat are beside your foot and use my scarf to wrap her up tight.'

Before the bombing, Yuri had had little to do with the baby. In fact, it would be true to say that he had taken little interest in his sister. For years it had just been his mother and himself. His real father died when he was a baby and his mother used to wonder why Yuri never asked about him. However, Yuri was perfectly happy having his mother all to himself. Then his world was upturned when his mother fell in love, married his stepfather and had a baby, all in the space of one year. It was a lot for any boy to put up with. Perhaps he might even have grudgingly admitted to experiencing jealousy as he watched his mother coo over the precious new born, having no way of knowing whether she had cooed over him in the same way.

But war changes everything, doesn't it? It knocks ordinary living on its head and challenges a person to understand what is really important. Accordingly, both he and his mother had taken turns to do their best to look after Anna, cradling her for hours as she bawled in terror.

Spreading her coat on the ground, Yuri gently laid his sister on top of it. She sighed a little, fretting that he was leaving her alone. After all she had been through she could no longer settle by herself, needing to be in their arms.

'It's okay, Anna. I'm still here. I'm just putting on your coat. See? Hold my hand, and this is one sleeve.'

She didn't squirm at all, making it an easier job than he expected. Taking her other hand, he fed it through the second sleeve of her now grimy coat. She never took her eyes off him once, the complete opposite of his mother who was far too busy peering into the old carpet bag.

'Now, I'm going to fasten your buttons. There's one, there's two and there's three. Look, all done now!'

He sat her up, leaning her back against his knees as he gradually fitted her cap over her head. She couldn't sit up by herself yet so he had to use his elbows to keep her from sliding over, while he did his best to force the hat down without hurting her.

'Don't forget her shoes and stockings.'

Mrs Bogdanov's voice was hoarse, as if she had a sore throat. Anna's feet felt cold as he folded on her socks, one

by one, before slipping on the tiny slippers knitted by their mother.

Anna turned her head upwards to make sure he was still there and then pointed to her feet, making the smallest sound, 'Ooh?'

'What? Yes, they're your feet, your stockings and your shoes.'

She rubbed her nose grumpily and looked at her mother who was putting on her own coat. Yuri picked her up and, maybe for the first time, kissed her cheek.

Reaching for his nose, she tried to stick her finger into it.

'Anna!' he giggled, 'Stop, that's dirty!'

Then, as if exhausted from getting dressed, she snuggled up against her brother and pressed the right side of her face flat against his shoulder. Her breath on his neck felt wonderful, and it was with great reluctance that he released her to his mother who suddenly seemed impatient to leave.

'Come here, baby.' Anna assumed the same position against her mother's shoulder.

'Okay, Yuri. Stay here until it's completely quiet outside. Do your best to keep clean, look after your clothes. It could be a while before you get new ones.' She was talking very quickly.

Hoisting the strap of the bag onto her other shoulder, his mother turned to leave, taking a few steps forward before Yuri thought to ask, 'But, where are you going?'

Anna's eyes were now closed. He didn't know what he envied more, his sister's spot at their mother's shoulder, or his mother's firm clasp of the sleeping baby.

His mother looked surprised by his question and, for a couple of seconds, he thought she wasn't going to answer it, but then she shrugged and said, 'I don't know, Yuri, wherever they take us, I suppose.'