

# City of Thieves



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID BENIOFF

David Benioff was born and raised in New York City. His family is Jewish and he is the youngest of three children. He attended The Collegiate School and Dartmouth College, graduating in 1992. He held several odd jobs after graduation including a club bouncer in San Francisco and a high school English teacher and wrestling coach in Brooklyn, NY. He attended grad school twice, first at Trinity College Dublin in 1995 for Irish literature and then at UC Irvine for a MFA in creative writing. He completed his first novel, *The 25th Hour*, as his thesis at Irvine. It was later made into a film directed by Spike Lee. In addition to *City of Thieves*, his second novel, Benioff has written several screenplays including *Troy* (2004), *The Kite Runner* (2007), and most notably *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009). While studying in Dublin, Benioff met D.B. Weiss, with whom he began adapting George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels for television in 2006. The adapted series *Game of Thrones* premiered on HBO in 2011 and has won numerous awards, including 38 Primetime Emmy awards and a Peabody Award. Benioff married actress Amanda Peet in 2006 and they have three children together. The family splits time between homes in Manhattan and Beverly Hills.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Joseph Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union in 1922. Following the death of Vladimir Lenin in 1924, Stalin began consolidating power, expanding the functions of his role, and eliminating all opposition. In 1928, he launched the first of many "five-year plans" meant to industrialize and transform Soviet society from an agrarian one to an industrial one. Meanwhile, the Soviet government censored everything from news to art. Lev's father was likely arrested during the Great Purge, a campaign of political repression from 1936-1938 in which the NKVD – the Soviet secret police – arrested political figures, members of the Red Army, and a number of artists and writers. World War II began in September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland. The Soviet Union had previously signed a non-aggression pact with Germany that also divided Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union. In June of 1941, however, Hitler broke the pact and invaded the Soviet Union, advancing within 20 miles of Moscow and severing the last road to Leningrad and beginning a siege of the city in September. The siege lasted nearly three years, until January 1944, and remains one of the longest and most brutal sieges in modern history.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a contemporary World War II novel intended for young adults, *City of Thieves* shares similarities with novels such as [All the Light We Cannot See](#) (2014) by Anthony Doerr and [The Book Thief](#) (2007) by Markus Zusak. The novel also makes explicit references to several Russian writers and poets. Lev compares elements of *The Courtyard Hound* to the novel *Oblomov* (1859) by Ivan Goncharov, and the poet Osip Mandelstam is mentioned as a friend and peer of Lev's father. Mandelstam's 1933 satirical poem "Stalin Epigram," which led to his arrest, is quoted in the novel. The events of the siege of Leningrad were documented extensively through diaries and journals written by residents of the city. One of the most poignant is that of Tanya Savicheva, who died at age 14 in 1944. Her six-page diary lists only the dates and times of various family members' deaths, and is currently displayed at the Museum of Leningrad History in St. Petersburg.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *City of Thieves*
- **When Written:** mid-2000s
- **Where Written:** New York, California
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Coming of Age/Bildungsroman; Historical Fiction; Black Comedy
- **Setting:** Leningrad (modern-day St. Petersburg) Russia and surrounding areas, January 1942; Sarasota, FL, mid-2000s
- **Climax:** When Lev wins the chess match against Abendroth and kills him
- **Antagonist:** Nazis, specifically Abendroth; cold and hunger
- **Point of View:** Primarily third person, though David and Lev occasionally address the reader in second person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Inspiration for Other Media.** Bruce Straley, director of the post-apocalyptic video game *The Last of Us*, credits *City of Thieves* as a source of major artistic inspiration for the award-winning game.

**Cannibalism in Piter.** Rates of cannibalism were likely much lower during the siege than one would expect given the circumstances. NKVD records list only around 2000 people arrested for cannibalism, mostly during the first winter of the siege.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins with David as the narrator. He is an American who describes himself as growing up knowing that his grandfather killed two Germans in a knife fight before he was 18, even though he was never actually told the story. As a child David lived two blocks away from his grandparents, who owned an insurance company. In the late 1990s, an insurance conglomerate offered to purchase the company, and David's grandmother asked them to double their offer. Eventually the conglomerate agreed and David's grandparents retired to Florida. David lives in Los Angeles writing screenplays, but when he was asked to write an autobiographical essay, he decided he wanted to write instead about Leningrad, where his grandfather grew up. He flies to Florida to speak with his grandfather, and for a week David records his grandfather's stories.

The narrator changes to Lev (David's grandfather) and it's New Year's Eve in 1942 in Leningrad, Russia during World War II. Everyone's been hungry since the German siege of the city began in September, although many, including Lev's mother and sister Taisya, have evacuated. Lev, at 17, is a firefighter for the city, and sits on the roof of his apartment building with his friends Vera, Grisha, and Oleg. Vera spots a German soldier falling from the sky in a parachute and the four run down into the street to investigate. When the German lands in the street, Lev takes the man's knife while Grisha opens the man's hip flask and passes it around, toasting the cold that killed this soldier. Suddenly they hear a car coming and run, because what they're doing is illegal. As they race back to the apartment building, Vera falls. Lev goes back to help her and boosts her over the gate, but the Russian soldiers out on patrol grab Lev before he can climb over himself. The soldiers take him to the Crosses, the prison in Leningrad.

After hours in his pitch dark prison cell, Lev has come to the grim conclusion that he'll never be a great Russian, since he feels half-broken after just his short time in prison. He hears guards coming, the cell door opens, and a young soldier is ushered into the cell. When they are alone, the young man introduces himself as Kolya. Kolya was accused of desertion, but tells Lev that in fact he was defending his thesis on **Ushakovo's The Courtyard Hound**, a book and author that Lev has never heard of.

The next morning, Lev and Kolya are taken to a mansion where the NKVD – the Russian secret police – are stationed. There, Colonel Grechko tasks them with finding a dozen eggs to make a cake for the Colonel's daughter's wedding the following Friday. He confiscates Lev and Kolya's ration cards and sends them off with a letter saying they shouldn't be stopped or harassed.

Lev and Kolya decide that the Haymarket, which is entirely

black market, is the place to start. As they walk there, Kolya teases Lev about being a virgin and begins to explain his theory of "calculated neglect" to him, which he learned from *The Courtyard Hound*. They don't find eggs in the Haymarket, but a very large man approaches them and says that he has eggs at his apartment. The giant leads them to an apartment building and refuses to bring the eggs down to the street. Kolya cheerfully agrees to do business in the giant's apartment even after the man admits to being a murderer, but when Lev and Kolya enter the giant's apartment, they discover that the giant and the giant's wife are cannibals. Lev and Kolya manage to escape unscathed.

Kolya and Lev decide to stay at Lev's apartment that night, but when they turn onto the street, they find the apartment building has been reduced to a pile of rubble. Kolya then leads Lev to the apartment of a friend, Sonya, where she welcomes them warmly and introduces them to the doctors also staying with her. Lev sleeps that night in the living room and listens to Kolya and Sonya have sex in the next room, thinking that it's the loneliest sound in the world.

The following morning, Lev and Kolya decide to investigate a rumor they heard in the Haymarket that there's an old man keeping chickens on a roof. They get into the old man's building by offering to carry buckets of ice for two girls who live there. When Lev and Kolya get to the roof and find the coop, they open the door to discover that the old man has been dead for days, and the chickens are gone. His grandson, Vadim, is still guarding the absent chickens and is very weak. Vadim refuses Lev and Kolya's offers of help and finally offers them the last chicken he'd been keeping warm under his coat. They take the chicken back to Sonya's apartment and debate how long it'll take for her to lay a dozen eggs. During this time, Lev reveals that his father was Abraham Beniov, a famous poet who was arrested by the NKVD and never returned. Timofei, one of the doctors, returns to Sonya's apartment and incredulously explains to the others that the chicken is actually a rooster and will never lay eggs. So, that night, they cobble together a fabulous chicken soup.

Kolya wakes Lev the next morning and informs him they're going to walk to Mga, where there's a poultry collective that's surely being kept functional by the Germans. As they walk, Kolya shares more about *The Courtyard Hound* and they discuss Lev's father. They hear a howl and follow the sound, eventually coming across a clearing littered with dead dogs. One is still alive. Kolya slits the dog's throat and explains that the dogs were strapped to bombs and intended to blow up German tanks, but were shot by the Germans instead.

Lev and Kolya continue their march to Mga, although as night falls, Kolya admits they're going the wrong way. Lev notices a farmhouse with lit windows and decides that he's going to try to stay there for the night. He and Kolya creep up to the house and peer in a window. They see four teenage girls dancing

inside, and Kolya looks angry. Kolya knocks on the door and has a short standoff with one of the girls, and Lev finally realizes that the girls are being kept by the Germans as sex slaves. Lev and Kolya make peace with them, however, and the girls offer them food and share that the soldiers who visit them are Einsatzgruppen (Nazi death squads).

Kolya asks the girls why they don't walk away, and Lara tells them about Zoya, who was a young girl who was captured with this group of girls. She tried to run away one day and to punish her, Abendroth, the Einsatzgruppen officer in charge, made the others watch as he sawed Zoya's feet off. Lev and Kolya decide to try to kill the Nazis when they come later that night.

Lev is terrified, and Kolya offers him a pack of playing cards with naked women on them to distract from his fear. The Nazis arrive earlier than expected, but are ambushed by Russian partisan fighters outside. The partisans almost shoot Lev and Kolya as well, but finally agree not to. Lev, meanwhile, is surprised and intrigued to find that their best sniper, Vika, is female.

Korsakov, the partisans' leader, gives everyone an hour to warm up and then they all depart the farmhouse. The girls head south and Lev and Kolya follow the partisans to try to hunt Abendroth. As they walk, Kolya tells Lev more about *The Courtyard Hound* and Lev asks Kolya if he's writing it. Kolya doesn't deny this theory. They soon come across villages that the Einsatzgruppen are burning, and head for a nearby safe house to sleep. While everyone is sleeping, Kolya explains to Lev that he was actually accused of desertion because he spent New Year's Eve trying to find a woman in Leningrad to have sex with, but grossly miscalculated how much time he had to get back to his squad.

The next morning, the partisan on guard duty wakes everyone, yelling that the Germans are coming. They all try to run but it's too late. Korsakov is killed. Lev tries to hide. Vika, Kolya, and a partisan named Markov find him, but the Germans are still approaching. Vika decides they should try to infiltrate the group of prisoners who are with the Germans, and they successfully do so—but then one of the prisoners starts yelling that Markov is a partisan, and the Germans shoot Markov.

When the company reaches a schoolhouse, an Einsatz officer tests the prisoners' literacy. Lev, Kolya, and Vika all pretend to be illiterate. All the literate prisoners are shot and the rest are squeezed into a toolshed for the night. The following morning when the Nazis move the prisoners out of the shed, they discover that the prisoner who betrayed Markov had been murdered in the night. As they march that day, Kolya suggests that Vika certainly killed the man, and is likely NKVD. A convoy of German vehicles passes the prisoners but one of the artillery vehicles breaks down, and all the German soldiers take the excuse to stop and urinate. Vika points out Abendroth's car at the end of the convoy and Kolya, who speaks German, approaches a group of soldiers and begins to banter with them.

When he returns to Lev and Vika, he said that he bet their lives and a dozen eggs on Lev winning a **chess** match against Abendroth.

That night, Abendroth calls for Lev, Vika, and Kolya. He's a hulking man but very smart and sees through their ruse, stating that Lev is a Jew, Vika is female, and they're all certainly literate. He finally agrees to the match and adds a dozen eggs to the pot per Kolya's request. The three are searched but the young soldier who searches them misses their hidden knives.

Lev wins the chess game against Abendroth, and realizes it's going to be up to him to stab Abendroth. He makes his move and a fight ensues. He kills Abendroth and the soldier fighting Kolya, losing his left index finger in the process. Vika grabs the Germans' guns, Kolya grabs the box of eggs, and the three jump out the window and run for the woods. When Leningrad is in sight, Vika asks Lev for his full name so she can find him later, kisses him, and leaves to find another group of partisans.

When Lev and Kolya reach the defenses of Leningrad the next morning, the soldiers on duty shoot at them and hit Kolya in one of his buttocks. When the lieutenant realizes that Kolya and Lev are working for Colonel Grechko, he loads Kolya and Lev into a truck and heads quickly for the hospital, afraid of making a powerful enemy. Kolya is incensed at having been shot by his own people but tries to tell Lev that everything's going to be fine. As Kolya's lips turn blue, it becomes obvious that Kolya is going to die. He smiles at Lev and Lev wishes he could make a joke.

Lev delivers the eggs to Colonel Grechko later that morning and discovers that Grechko has already procured three dozen other eggs. Colonel Grechko grants Lev two ration cards and tells him he'll live a long life by keeping his mouth shut.

The German siege is lifted in January of 1944. In 1945, Lev is in his apartment reading when he hears a knock at the door. He answers it and Vika is standing in the hallway with her suitcase and a dozen eggs. Lev suggests they make an omelet, and Vika states that she doesn't cook.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Lev Beniov** – The protagonist of the novel; a 17-year-old Jewish boy who has grown up in Leningrad. He is the son of Mother and Abraham Beniov, a famous poet who was arrested by the Soviet government years earlier and never returned. His older sister is Taisya, and the narrator of the prologue, David, is his grandson. Lev is an excellent **chess** player but is also a weak, acne-ridden, fearful teenager who doesn't think that any women will find him attractive. Even so, he dreams of being a war hero. When he's arrested for looting he gets arrested by the Russian police and ends up meeting the more mature and confident Kolya. The two are then sent on an absurd journey to

find eggs for a Russian colonel's daughter's wedding cake. Throughout his journey Lev carries a stolen German knife, and makes the transition from boy to man when he uses it to stab Abendroth. But this transition to manhood is as much one of disillusionment as it is about gaining maturity. He has to confront his greatest fear, death, when Kolya is shot and dies, and finally learns that he isn't even the hero of his own absurd quest when he discovers that Colonel Grechko already had eggs. Despite his disillusionment at his dreams of being a hero, he does fall in love with Vika and the two marry sometime after the end of the novel. Lev becomes a man, in that he gains wisdom about the world and himself, but that wisdom also involves a loss of innocence.

**Kolya Vlasov** – An extremely handsome young soldier imprisoned after being accused of deserting his battalion after he snuck off in search of sex and failed to return before being noticed. He and Lev are sent by Colonel Grechko on an absurd journey to find eggs for Grechko's daughter's upcoming wedding. Kolya approaches the world and the war as though he's living in someone else's absurd story and is afraid of nothing but embarrassment. Throughout the novel he's in the process of writing his own novel, titled **The Courtyard Hound**, although he invents an author for it and discusses it as though it's already an acclaimed, published novel so that he doesn't have to admit he's writing it. Kolya adores women and sex and takes it upon himself to educate Lev on how to woo a woman. Kolya dies, shot accidentally by Russians, and never gets to truly grow up as Lev does.

**Vika** – A sniper working with Korsakov's partisans, Lev's love interest and David's grandmother during the prologue. Vika is described as predatory and athletic and is later revealed to be NKVD. She believes that killing Abendroth is of the utmost importance and is willing to sacrifice herself and others to complete this task.

**Abendroth** – A high-ranking Einsatzgruppen (death squad) officer in the Nazi army. He's a very large and strong man and keeps teenage Russian girls as sex slaves, and enjoys playing **chess**. When one of his captives, Zoya, tries to run away, he saws her feet off in front of the other girls as an example. He agrees to play chess against Lev and bets Vika's freedom and a dozen eggs if he loses. Lev both defeats Abendroth at chess and then stabs and kills him.

**Colonel Grechko** – Father to the colonel's daughter. An NKVD officer who Lev understands has been "disappeared" in the past by the same organization he now works for. When Lev and Kolya are brought to him, Grechko takes their ration cards and instructs them to bring him eggs to make a cake for his daughter's wedding before the end of the week. This ridiculous quest imperils Lev and Kolya's lives in food-starved Leningrad, and even after Lev succeeds in it he discovers that Grechko already had the means of finding eggs, hinting at the corruption inherent in the army that Lev originally hoped to serve in as a

hero.

**Zoya** – One of the girls kept as a sex slave for Nazi soldiers outside of Berezovka. Zoya was very young and scared of the Nazis, making her a favorite for their sexual abuse. After a week she attempted to run away, but Abendroth captured her and cut off her feet to make an example of her for Nina, Olesya, Galina, and Lara. She died hours later.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**David** – Lev and Vika's grandson and the author of the novel. He wants to write about his grandfather's experience during the Siege of Leningrad.

**Mother** – Lev's mother, mother as well to Taisya and previously married to Abraham Beniov. She fights with Lev when he wants to stay in Leningrad rather than evacuate, and regularly calls him "her idiot." She does eventually evacuate with Taisya, leaving Lev behind.

**Taisya** – Lev's kid sister, daughter to Mother and Father. She evacuates Leningrad with her mother at the beginning of the siege.

**Vera Osipovna** – One of Lev's friends and his original romantic interest in the Kirov apartment building. She's a talented cellist and favors Grisha. After they get caught looting, she leaves Lev behind to be arrested by Russian soldiers even though he saves her from the same fate.

**Oleg Antikolsky** – Twin to Grisha, one of Lev and Vera's friends in the Kirov apartment building.

**Grisha Antikolsky** – Twin to Oleg, one of Lev and Vera's friends in the Kirov apartment building. He is Vera's love interest.

**The Colonel's Daughter** – Daughter of Colonel Grechko. She is well-fed and about to be married.

**Sonya Ivanova** – A friend and early conquest of Kolya's. Lev imagines that she was very beautiful before the war, and she is extremely kind.

**Pavel** – One of the surgeons who stays with Sonya.

**Timofei** – One of the surgeons who sleeps on Sonya's floor.

**The Giant** – A towering man in Leningrad who tricks Kolya and Lev into thinking he can sell them eggs. They discover he's a cannibal butcher, intent on killing and eating them.

**The Giant's Wife** – Wife of the giant, a cannibal butcher.

**Vadim** – A young boy charged by his grandfather to keep chickens safe on top of a roof in Leningrad. When Kolya and Lev find Vadim, his grandfather is dead, only one chicken is left, and he's close to death due to the cold and starvation.

**Lara** – One of the girls kept as a sex slave for the Nazi soldiers.

**Galina** – A teenage girl kept as a sex slave for Nazi soldiers.

**Olesya** – A teenage girl kept as a sex slave for Nazi soldiers. She doesn't speak.



**Nina** – One of the teenage girls kept as sex slaves for Nazi soldiers.

**Korsakov** – The leader of the Russian partisans (Vika, Markov). He's shot by Nazis when they discover the partisans' safe house.

**Markov** – One of the partisans working with Korsakov and Vika. He's accused by a Russian prisoner of being a partisan and is shot by Nazis.

**Abraham Beniov (Lev's Father)** – Lev's father, wife of Mother and father to Taisya. He was a semi-famous Jewish poet who was "disappeared" by the NKVD after his book *Petir* was deemed offensive in 1937, four years before the German siege of Leningrad began.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### GROWING UP

*City of Thieves* follows the classic storyline of a coming of age novel, or bildungsroman. While many coming-of-age novels cover a longer time period as they portray the physical as well as psychological development of their protagonist, Lev's coming of age takes place over the course of one week and is primarily psychological.

The events of the novel transpire because Lev naïvely wanted to be a war hero, leading him to fight with his mother to stay in Leningrad rather than evacuate. However, Lev's great heroic dreams are quickly shattered, some even before the beginning of the novel, as he's faced with the simple difficulties of surviving the intense cold and hunger. Especially after Lev is arrested, he learns that he'll never be a "great Russian" in the way he once hoped. He finds the experience of being imprisoned too terrifying and comes to believe he's simply not cut out to do anything more than survive day-to-day challenges. Throughout the rest of the novel, Lev struggles to reconcile his desire to be a hyper-masculine hero with his existence as a fearful and weak-bodied teenager.

The reader is always kept very aware of Lev's youth through the contrast offered by Lev's narration of the story as an old man, commenting on his youthful self with an old man's wisdom and maturity. While the youth of both Lev and Kolya is played for humor at times, it also serves as a constant reminder of their naiveté and stupidity in a brutal adult world that allows for neither. Further, Kolya himself exists in a space of not quite adult but definitely not a boy. While Lev has the privilege of

growing up and coming of age, Kolya remains youthful forever in the stories and memories of Lev.

At the climax of the novel, Lev has to face all his fears in quick succession, and in doing so crosses the threshold from boy to man. Lev has to use his both his **chess** skills and meager physical fighting skills to kill the Nazi Abendroth, which fills him with thrilled pride after his success, especially as it seems to win the admiration of the girl sniper Vika. This glee, though, is soon shot down with Kolya's death. Lev is upfront about the fact that he fears nothing more than death, and facing the death of his best friend brings him back to earth after his earlier triumph and starts to build a sense of disillusionment with the war and his heroics. This disillusionment is confirmed when Lev delivers the eggs to Colonel Grechko, only to find that he's not even the hero of his own absurd journey, as Colonel Grechko had food airlifted into the city the night before. In response to Lev's astonishment, Grechko counsels Lev to not speak, saying that staying quiet is the secret to living a long life. In other words, Grechko makes Lev understand that the Russian army, too, is corrupt in its way even as it fights the Nazis, and that Lev's earlier dreams of heroism are impossible in such a world.

In a more overarching way, Lev's experiences that lead to his coming of age serve to support the idea that war *does* turn boys into men, but in doing so robs them of their innocence and idealistic dreams. Lev has to live his entire adult life with what he saw during the war, while Kolya pays the ultimate price for not having to grow up.



### LITERATURE AND STORYTELLING

From the opening framing device of the novel, in which David narrates how he came to interview Lev for the story that makes up most of the novel, storytelling, and by extension literature, are introduced as central ideas and concerns of the book. Storytelling is considered as it applies to local myth, family lore, and fairytales, while formal, published literature is explored in terms of power and censorship.

The novel begins with the fact that the author David's grandfather, Lev, is famous in the family for having killed two Nazis in a knife fight. The power of this knowledge as family lore leads into questions about truth, fiction, and the power of storytelling. When the elderly Lev grows tired of answering his grandson's clarifying questions about the siege, he instructs David to simply make things up. This allows the reader to wonder which elements of the story that follows are true or not, highlighting the strangeness of truth and the importance of fiction. These ideas work throughout the rest of the novel to heighten the absurdity and dreamlike quality of the events and the narration.

In a similar vein, viewing the world through a lens of fiction and

fairytale is one way that the teenage Lev attempts to make sense of the horrors taking place around him. As things that seemed once to be relegated to the world of fiction become reality, like cannibals and an absurd quest for impossible-to-find eggs, the narration shifts more and more to an engagement with events as though the characters are simply existing in a very strange story. Lev describes both himself and Kolya as living in this way. Kolya simply treats the war as though it's a ridiculous story from which he will certainly emerge triumphant. Lev, on the other hand, is fascinated by the absurdity of the situation, makes connections to fairytales, and hears events being narrated in his head. In this way, fiction becomes a vehicle through which the characters, in different ways, can both protect themselves and attempt to make sense of the events they experience.

Lev and Kolya are both shaped by the dangers and difficulties of writing, telling, and publishing stories. During this time in Russian history, intense censorship by the Soviet government of all sorts of art and information played a huge part in keeping the population under control and boosting Soviet citizens' morale for the war. Lev's family paid the price for writing material that didn't unwaveringly support the Soviet regime when his father, a semi-famous Jewish poet, was taken by the NKVD in 1937 and never returned. For Lev, this created a sense of danger around the written word, as he's witnessed firsthand the price of speaking one's mind. Kolya is also a writer, but he's afraid of embarrassment rather than persecution for his work. As such, he invents an author, **Ushakovo**, and discusses his novel *The Courtyard Hound* as though it's already a published work to avoid embarrassing himself. However, though Lev falls for Kolya's ploy, he's still quick to point out when elements or passages of *The Courtyard Hound* seem too similar to other famous works. Through Kolya's referencing of these other authors, the reader is reminded that Kolya is young and inexperienced and is in the process of not just writing his novel, but of writing the story of his life as well. In the end, this idea extends to all the characters. The narration that Lev hears in his head becomes actual narration in a published novel, and his and Kolya's story, no matter how fictionalized, is recorded, edited, and shared with the world.



### SEXUALITY, MASCULINITY, AND POWER

As a coming of age story, a good portion of Lev's development occurs as his naiveté about sex is challenged and he's confronted with the realities of what sex can be. Throughout the novel, sex and masculinity are developed as a way for male characters to obtain and exert power over others.

Sex is a major motivator for many of the characters, and the novel presents a broad range of desires and experiences. Lev is relegated to mere fantasizing about sex as a result of his youth, fear of women, and fear of sex itself. Kolya, on the other hand, is

impossibly charming and upfront about his need for regular sex, a need which landed him in jail, accused of desertion, when he snuck out in search of sex and didn't manage to get back before his absence was discovered. The difference in sexual experience between Lev and Kolya serve to further develop their difference in age and upbringing. While they're both fairly on par intellectually, their difference in sexual experience serves to illustrate just how much more grown-up Kolya is.

Sex is also depicted as a way for male characters to assert their power over others, both in subtle ways and in more overt displays of power and masculinity. While the reader is never given any indication that Kolya's sexual pursuits are non-consensual, the language he uses to describe his method of wooing women is rooted in ideas of power and manipulation. His concept of "calculated neglect" translates to a way for Kolya to manipulate women into going to bed with him, rather than acknowledge that consent and desire may have been mutual. Further, by referring to his former partners as "conquests," Kolya shifts the locus of control to himself exclusively, situating himself as overtly masculine and powerful to those around him, particularly Lev.

Abendroth makes this idea of sexual "conquest" more horrifyingly literal. He uses sexual domination of women as a way to demonstrate his rank and shows off his military victories by keeping beautiful teenage girls as sex slaves. The chilling account of what happened to Zoya, in which Abendroth mutilates and kills a young girl for trying to escape him, indicates that for Abendroth, the pleasure he experiences from sex stems from the control he has over the lives and bodies of his captives. The particulars of Zoya's torture indicate further that Abendroth also takes pleasure in performing this power for others. It wasn't enough for him to simply punish Zoya for running away; it was of the utmost importance that both his Nazi peers and the other girls witnessed and were complicit in Zoya's fate.

Lev's relationship to Vika then stands in contrast to all of the various forms of sex as a form of masculine domination. Vika is herself an accomplished warrior, the best sniper among her band of partisans, as well as an NKVD agent. Her attraction and connection to Lev comes about as Lev demonstrates his own intelligence and bravery in defeating Abendroth at **chess** and then killing him. Lev never "tricks" or "woos" Vika into loving him—she comes to love him on her own. And when she appears at his door at the end of the novel, after the siege has ended, it is of her own choice. Lev and Vika's relationship, then, is held forth as an example of what mutual love and sex can be – something both moral and fulfilling.



### SURVIVAL

The novel begins four months into the Siege of Leningrad, which lasted 900 days and spanned four brutal Russian winters during World War II. *City of*

*Thieves* portrays a brutal physical and emotional landscape in which extreme measures must be taken in order to survive the intense rationing, cold, and the violence of the war.

When the Germans began the siege in September 1941, Leningrad began rationing food immediately. As Lev notes, residents began to have to eat house pets, rats, and pigeons as the situation quickly became dire. As flour grew rare, bread was made from anything that could approximate flour and was often made from cottonseed, cellulose, and sawdust. By the winter of late 1941 and early 1942, when the novel begins, the death toll in the city was around 1,600 people per day, and it's estimated that Leningrad's residents were only consuming 10% of the calories needed to survive the cold, which was regularly as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Russian characters dance a very delicate dance with the cold dark winters. They remark many times that it's the winter that will defeat the Nazis, but given the situation, the difficulties that winter poses stand a good chance of killing the Russians themselves too. To this end, Benioff pays a great deal of attention to the physical items necessary for staying alive, namely **boots** and warm clothing. Boots are a chilling indicator of the fortunate and the unfortunate have-nots. Red Army soldiers as well as Nazis have state-issued boots to keep them warm in the snow, while others suffer in a variety of inadequate footwear or none at all. The boots also serve as a reminder of who didn't survive, as the living are quick to remove and steal boots from the dead, either for themselves or for resale on the black market. Lev also takes note of the blood on some of the boots for sale in the Haymarket, which further reinforces the fact that the individuals who are alive are at least in some way alive at the expense of the dead.

The novel also explores many different but intersecting definitions for survival, asking the reader to consider what is truly necessary to survive. Lev and the other residents of Leningrad need the true basics to survive: food, shelter, and something to burn to keep warm. But Lev and Kolya are shocked when they realize that Colonel Grechko's idea of basic necessities far exceed their own. Grechko places a great deal of importance on providing a "proper wedding" for his daughter as a way to remain human and Russian. As Lev and Kolya are roped into the quest for eggs, they're forced to comply with the questionable wisdom and morality of supplying luxury items in exchange for getting back their own ration cards, which are the only surefire way they have to obtain food. However, as they encounter cannibals and some of the shocking brutality of the war, they realize that staying alive can come at the expense of one's humanity. Put another way, the lengths a person needs to go to survive can result in that person losing what made them human in the first place.

To this end, everyone involved in the war must protect themselves mentally and emotionally in order to continue functioning after witnessing the violence, horror, and brutality

of the war and the siege. This fact primarily ties back to how the novel deals with storytelling as a method of self-preservation. By either choosing to believe a happier version of events, or refusing to engage with a story altogether, characters can preserve some sense of wellbeing in the face of intense violence and life's absurdity, and what it forces them to do and encounter in order to survive.



## RUSSIA AND WORLD WAR II

*City of Thieves* takes place during World War II, four months after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 that began the war on the Eastern

Front. Historical accounts state that Stalin ignored or brushed off intelligence from multiple sources that indicated the German forces were planning an attack on the Soviet Union. As a result, Soviet forces were woefully underprepared to defend against the German advances. By September, the Germans had successfully surrounded Leningrad, beginning the siege of the city, and were stationed about 30 kilometers outside Moscow, the Soviet Union's capital city. By the end of 1941, when the novel begins, Soviet military casualties totaled around 4.3 million. The brutal siege was lifted almost three years later, in January 1944. The Germans surrendered to the Allies (USA, Britain, and Soviet Union) in April of that year, the day after Hitler committed suicide.

The novel shows many faces of the war, ranging from Leningrad's citizens, Red Army soldiers, Soviet NKVD (secret police), to Nazis. Lev, an ordinary citizen, remains in the city rather than evacuate. He insists on staying less because of Russian pride, but more due to the pride he feels towards Piter (Leningrad) specifically as his hometown. This pride in the city is woven throughout the novel, as the conflict is spoken of more in terms of the Nazis versus Leningrad than in terms of the Nazis versus the Soviet Union as a whole.

Alongside the development of the different "types" of people in their different roles, Lev is confronted with the difficulty that arises when the conflict isn't simply a matter of good versus evil, or Russia versus Nazis. While Lev falls madly in love with Vika nearly immediately, he struggles with the fact that she's a member of the NKVD, which arrested his father years before and never returned him. Lev essentially has to grapple with the fact that while the NKVD is undeniably on the side of Russia and Leningrad, it is also responsible for destroying his family, making it difficult to consider them as entirely good or evil. Lev also recognizes this dissonance in Colonel Grechko, when he understands that he too was at one point taken by the NKVD, but was returned and now exists in a place of power, working for the same organization that once imprisoned him.

The situation in Leningrad is dire enough to turn citizens and neighbors against each other, alluding to the idea that even though the Nazis are the true "bad guys," there are also Russian people in Leningrad who very much want their fellow

countrymen dead. As Lev and Kolya encounter individuals like the cannibals and Vadim's grandfather, who died protecting chickens, Lev begins to understand that there perhaps isn't a side of true good, as even his fellow Russians are willing to kill him for little more than a ration card or a pair of **boots**, and his government is willing to send him into danger to try to find a dozen eggs to make a wedding cake. In this way, much of Lev's growing up stems from the realizations he makes about his own place within the conflict of World War II, and what he learns about good and evil as he's confronted with both existing on the same side of the conflict.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BOOTS

One of the best ways for anyone to survive the brutal winter in and around Leningrad during the siege is to be in possession of a pair of warm boots. The state of one's boots then becomes a way to identify the haves from the have-nots, and to make an educated guess as to who will live and who will die. Soldiers, both Nazis and Russian Red Army, are issued very warm and strong boots to withstand the hours they spend in the snow, while Lev notes that some of the Nazis' prisoners are barefoot, their boots stolen. If these prisoners can't survive the inevitable frostbite from walking barefoot in the snow, they'll certainly die of the cold and exposure. It becomes obvious then that boots aren't just about survival, they're also indicative of power. The Nazi soldiers had enough power to confiscate boots from their captives, while those still living in Leningrad have the power to steal boots from the dead. The blood on the boots for sale in the black-market Haymarket further serves as a chilling reminder of this power and of those who didn't make it.



### CHESS

As a child Lev was a brilliant chess player, but wasn't able to reach the "higher plane" that would've allowed him to continue to be brilliant as an adult. Since chess is a strategy game, it works throughout *City of Thieves* as a metaphor, as Lev and Kolya discuss their plans and strategies for staying alive as well as finding eggs. It also serves to differentiate between Lev, who is described as being small and weak, and other more conventionally masculine and strong characters like Kolya, the giant, or Abendroth. While Lev is certainly at a disadvantage for most of the novel because of his fear and slight build, it's his knowledge of chess that allows him to strategically position himself, Kolya, and Vika in a place to

both beat Abendroth at chess and kill him.



## THE COURTYARD HOUND, RADCHENKO, AND USHAKOVO

Throughout *City of Thieves*, Kolya is working on his novel, *The Courtyard Hound*, which follows the life of a man named Radchenko. Kolya invents the author Ushakovo so that he can discuss *The Courtyard Hound* without letting on that *he's* actually the one writing it. Kolya's creation of Ushakovo points to one of Kolya's most prominent character traits: he doesn't fear death, but rather fears being embarrassed most of all. Both Ushakovo and Radchenko are based on Kolya. Ushakovo represents the author that Kolya wants to be or be like, as Lev on several occasions draws similarities between Ushakovo and other admired Russian authors (particularly Goncharov and Gogol). The protagonist Radchenko is also a kind of idealized version of what Kolya hopes for himself—grand, wealthy, and loved by many women. Kolya states that he learned his concept of "calculated neglect" from Radchenko, making it reasonable to believe that a lifestyle like Radchenko's is the kind of romanticized and dramatized life that Kolya admires. In this way, Radchenko and *The Courtyard Hound* offer Kolya an avenue through which to escape the horrors of the war and imagine a very different life for himself.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *City of Thieves* published in 2009.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ But I wasn't leaving Piter. I was a man, I would defend my city, I would be a Nevsky for the twentieth century.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniiov (speaker), Mother

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 8

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev is explaining how he conceptualized the war and his role in it at the beginning of the siege. Specifically, he fought his mother for the first time and elected to stay in the city rather than evacuate with her and his sister. This phrase is indicative of Lev's youth and works to provide a starting point from which he can grow throughout the novel. Nevsky refers to Alexander Nevsky, a 13th-century Russian prince who rose to mythical status due to important military



victories, and who was later canonized as a saint in the Russian Orthodox Church. By idolizing Nevsky in this way, Lev illustrates the pull and tension he feels regarding his pride in being Russian. He very much wants to be a hero à la Nevsky, but he struggles with the knowledge that his country isn't always on the side of clear good after experiencing his father's arrest by the NKVD. In this sense, Lev's idealistic dreams here set him up to experience the disillusionment (with himself and his country) necessary to grow up and truly come of age.

☝ 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... 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.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Mother, Taisya

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 10



### Explanation and Analysis

Lev is describing for the reader how he lived during the siege after his mother and sister evacuated the city. Rather than lament their absence, Lev, at 17, finally gets the opportunity to live out his childhood fantasy of being a "resourceful orphan."

Lev will consistently hearken back to the fairytales of his youth as he encounters the absurdity and inhumanity of the war and the siege. These fairytales are the only way to effectively make sense of everything, as the absurdity of reality is too great at times for the characters to be able to handle the truth. By engaging with events in relation to stories, Lev asserts the importance of fiction both as a way to handle life and consider the text as a whole.

☝ ... 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 five thousand meters onto my street, and what seventeen-year-old Russian boy would not sneak outside to peek at a dead Fascist?

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev has just run back to help Vera escape a Russian Army patrol that found them looting a fallen German paratrooper. As Lev scales the gate to the Kirov, the army captures him, although Vera escapes.



This thought makes Lev's youth abundantly clear, especially since this is one of several phrases that obviously comes with the weight of adult Lev's wisdom. Lev characterizes himself as a normal 17-year-old boy whose world revolves around himself—he mentally implores the soldiers to look away from his blatant illegal activity, despite the fact that looting and being out past curfew are punishable by death. He also alludes to his youthful curiosity. It seems reasonable that Lev, while caught up very much in the Russian cause, has never seen a Nazi in the flesh, and would therefore be very interested to see if Russia's adversaries are all that different from himself.

Further, the style of narration here (where the thoughts seem to come from the adult Lev) reminds the reader that the story they're reading is one that was originally told to the "author" (David, Lev's grandson). Whether the framing device is true or not, the reader is at least asked to remember it as a reminder of the power of stories and literature.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ ... Contrary to popular belief, the experience of terror does not make you braver. Perhaps, though, it is easier to hide your fear when you're afraid all the time.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev is describing the experience of being in prison. Lev struggles throughout the novel with his fear, saying he's plagued by it constantly. In prison, however, he wonders essentially if being afraid all the time creates a different threshold for experiencing fear.

When Lev asserts that terror doesn't make people braver, he tackles one of the many tidbits of wisdom that people choose to believe to make life easier. By insisting that it's not true, that saying becomes little more than a happy story

that doesn't apply to real life. The reader is then asked to consider if it's better to go through one's life believing these small untruths, or tackle life knowing that sayings like that aren't necessarily descriptive of reality.

- ☞ So many great Russians endured long stretches in prison. That night I learned I would never be a great Russian.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

Despite being used to being alone and/or in the dark, Lev is struggling with the experience of spending a night in the Crosses prison. Throughout the first few chapters of the novel, it's made very clear that Lev wants to be a war hero. He wants to be an adult and essentially perform his idea of adulthood in such a way as to make himself into a hero and a "great Russian." However, while in prison Lev is confronted with the reality of the situation. He's a naturally fearful person and as he's faced with experiences that are scary, he begins to learn that his fear isn't going to diminish or disappear. This begins the process of disillusionment and coming of age for Lev, as part of his growing up is coming to terms with the fact that he will be an eternally fearful person.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

- ☞ She wants a real wedding, a proper wedding. This is good, life must continue, we're fighting barbarians but we must remain human, Russian. So we will have music, dancing... a cake.

**Related Characters:** Colonel Grechko (speaker), The Colonel's Daughter, Kolya Vlasov, Lev Beniov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

Colonel Grechko, Lev, and Kolya are standing on the edge of the river, watching the colonel's daughter skate. The colonel is explaining to Lev and Kolya what their mission is.



It's abundantly clear that Colonel Grechko and his daughter are faring much better than Lev and Kolya are during the


siege, and it's also apparent that the colonel has a very different idea of how life should be conducted in a time of war. While Lev and Kolya are concerned simply with eating enough to stay alive, Colonel Grechko places a great deal of importance on throwing a lavish (by wartime standards) party for his daughter. While having a wedding cake, or eggs for that matter, wouldn't seem like a big deal under most other circumstances, in light of the siege, expecting eggs and cake is simply absurd. This helps to illustrate the divide between haves and have-nots even in a supposedly egalitarian society like the USSR, as well as emphasizing the sense of absurdity and strangeness that is woven throughout the novel, which forces the characters to consider life as though it were a story and not actually real.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

- ☞ The secret to winning a woman is calculated neglect.

**Related Characters:** Kolya Vlasov (speaker), Lev Beniov

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 40

### Explanation and Analysis

Kolya is explaining his theory of calculated neglect to Lev as the beginning of Lev's education in women. Kolya asserts that he learned the theory from his favorite novel, *The Courtyard Hound*, but when it comes to light that Kolya is actually *writing* the novel, it is made clear that the idea of calculated neglect is largely Kolya's invention. Calculated neglect works as a way for Kolya to assert and demonstrate his dominance and power over women. It places the control in a sexual or romantic situation squarely on Kolya and denies his partners any control over what happens, but this importantly only seems to happen in the retelling of events—not really in the events themselves. The reader is never given any indication that Kolya's sexual pursuits aren't consensual, indicating that his partners at the time do have some power and control over what happens. However, by telling the stories as though Kolya had all the power, he retroactively robs his partners of their agency and asserts his own assertiveness and masculinity to his listeners.

- ☞ None of them got out. If you want to tell yourself something sweet to help you sleep, go ahead, but it's a lie.

**Related Characters:** Kolya Vlasov (speaker), Lev Beniov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis



Kolya and Lev are walking to the Haymarket and Kolya mentioned that he was near the zoo when it was bombed by the Nazis. Lev asks if it was true that animals escaped and ran through the streets, and Kolya answers that all of them died.

Lev will later describe how ignoring the fact that horrific things have happened is absolutely necessary for emotional survival during the war. Several times throughout the novel Kolya shares some of the awful things he's seen as a soldier. This helps to set him far above Lev in age and maturity, even though he's only three years older, making Lev seem extremely young and naive in comparison. However, the fact that Kolya is willing and able to discuss these things also alludes to the idea that he's potentially not telling himself "something sweet" to live with what he's seen, as Lev does. This works to turn Kolya into an honest and likeable character in spite of his swaggering nature.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ Everything about the war was ridiculous: The Germans' barbarity, the Party's propaganda, the crossfire of incendiary bullets that lit the nighttime sky. It all seemed to him like someone else's story, an amazingly detailed story that he had stumbled into and now could not escape.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 51

### Explanation and Analysis

Kolya is engaged in an argument with a man in the Haymarket selling wood alcohol, and Lev is describing to the reader how Kolya is dealing with the state of his world and life in light of the war. Rather than accept it as simple reality, Kolya moves through his life as a soldier as though he's part of a grander narrative, with an unwavering belief in his own eventual success and triumph. Lev will later describe this state of being as pure, as though Kolya has accepted his own heroic destiny.

Further, Lev's description of the war begins to hint at the

idea that war itself is absurd and ridiculous, and at times simply cannot be understood logically. As such, those affected by war must sometimes treat it as absurd and ridiculous and use fiction and stories, as Kolya is doing, in order to survive.

☝☝ I'm not bringing them out here. Everyone's starving and everyone's got a gun.

**Related Characters:** The Giant (speaker), Lev Beniov, Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 57

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev has asked the giant to bring the eggs out to the street, and this is how the giant replies. Essentially, this encompasses the desperation that Piter is experiencing during the siege. Lev states that ration cards are enough to get killed over, which the giant alludes to here—while the giant certainly has other motives for luring Lev and Kolya into his apartment, the sudden appearance of eggs on the street might be enough to start a riot or result in death, given how dire the situation is. Additionally, the reader soon sees the real truth of the giant's words once Lev and Kolya do enter his apartment. Everyone in Piter is starving, causing (for a few people) the practice of cannibalism in the first place, and while the giant isn't using guns specifically to kill his victims, the sentiment remains the same.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ You couldn't let too much truth seep into your conversation, you couldn't admit with your mouth what your eyes had seen. If you opened the door even a centimeter, you would smell the rot outside and hear the screams. You did not open the door. You kept your mind on the tasks of the day, the hunt for food and water and something to burn, and you saved the rest for the end of the war.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), The Giant's Wife, The Giant, Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev and Kolya are walking to the Kirov for the night after escaping the cannibals' apartment, and Lev is haunted by the thought of the human body parts he saw hanging there. This passage succinctly and poetically describes how mental and emotional preservation works in this time of war, danger, and intense suffering. People can't actually admit how awful life is or the terrible things they've seen because those awful experiences are everywhere and inescapable. Instead, it's easier to focus on what's necessary for physical survival and repress everything else.

Lev indicates at different points that he's been engaging in this repression as protection since his father was taken. This develops the idea that it can be used to deal with many different types of loss and trauma, not just what the war brings.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ Sonya was lovely and kind, but her pleasure was awful to listen to—I wanted to be the one who could transport a pretty girl away from the siege with my cock.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Sonya Ivanova, Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev and Kolya are staying the night at Sonya's apartment. Lev is sleeping in the sitting room with a number of doctors and nurses, while Kolya and Sonya sleep together and have sex in the bedroom.

While sex is often used by one character to assert dominance over another or others, having Lev himself discuss it in this way primarily serves to further develop his youth and inexperience. He wishes he were in a position to escape the siege (and help someone else escape) emotionally through sex, which he's characterizing as being something adult, or at the very least something that indicates he's well on his way to adulthood. The fact that he's not the one currently experiencing sex is thus a painful reminder of his youth and frustration.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Kolya stared into the distance, contemplating the lieutenant's words. He must have thought they were profound. To me they sounded manufactured, the kind of line my father always hated, fake dialogue invented by some Party-approved journalist for one of those "Heroes at the Front!" articles *Truth for Young Pioneers* always ran.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Abraham Beniov (Lev's Father), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 78

### Explanation and Analysis

Kolya has just finished telling Lev about something his former lieutenant told another soldier. While the sentiment of the lieutenant's words was admirable (he was trying to help the soldier feel better), Lev takes offense to the fact that the words sound very fake and manufactured. This provides some insight into Lev's father as well, and the influence that he continues to have on Lev's life even in his death. It's indicated that Abraham Beniov also found lines like the lieutenant's offensive and poorly written, which alludes to the possibility that even though he may not have been quite the dangerous man the NKVD thought he was, he was at the very least not fully supportive of the Soviet government (and, furthermore, was a poet who probably disliked such clichéd statements on purely aesthetic grounds as well). Lev has inherited this skepticism of the government and the words they publish, and he regards all published material with this skeptical eye.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ I was cursed with the pessimism of both the Russians and the Jews, two of the gloomiest tribes in the world. Still, if there wasn't greatness in me, maybe I had the talent to recognize it in others, even the most irritating of others.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

Kolya has informed Lev that they're going to walk 50 kilometers to Mga to find eggs, and Lev knows he's going to



follow Kolya because of Kolya's natural leadership tendencies despite the plan being optimistic at best. This develops both Lev and Kolya's characters. We see how Kolya is able to lead. He uses logic to hatch a plan that while far fetched and likely impossible, seems logical at the very least. Then, he's able to convince those around him to follow. Lev is beginning to recognize by this point that he's likely not going to be a hero alone like he dreamed of being. However, Lev is recognizing that Kolya's leadership abilities paired with his unwavering belief in his own future success are the marks of a potential hero. By following Kolya, Lev will potentially have the opportunity to share in the glory he hopes to find.

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev and Kolya are walking through the woods outside of Leningrad, having passed the last line of Russian forces. They're in German-controlled territory, and despite the fact that it feels safe at the moment, it will later become very dangerous. However, at this point Lev sees the seemingly empty forest as shelter from the death, hunger, and destruction running rampant in Leningrad. The guilt Lev feels stems from the loyalty he feels to his city of origin. Leningrad is his home and he originally wanted to stay and protect it, but has grown disillusioned with his visions of being a hero. Out in the woods he might not be a hero yet, but he's not at the mercy of the German bombers either.

☝ "Don't worry, my friend. I won't let you die."  
I was seventeen and stupid and I believed him.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov, Kolya Vlasov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 99

### Explanation and Analysis



Lev has insisted that he and Kolya sit before departing on their journey for Mga, which is an old folk tradition. When Lev opens his eyes and sees Kolya watching him, Kolya tells him this.

Whenever Lev and Kolya are engaged in conversations about their own potential deaths, it's possible for the reader to take those statements as prophecy and foreshadowing for the future. That is the case particularly with this statement, as the reader knows from the beginning of the novel that Lev lives to tell his tale, thanks to the framing story. This statement is also very referential of the frame story, as these words are evidently coming from a Lev with many more years of experience, and who can call his 17-year-old self stupid.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ It seemed wonderfully abstract to me, somebody else's war. Wherever they dropped their bombs, it wouldn't be on me.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker)


**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 113

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ And there was the excellent possibility of death. I never understood people who said their greatest fear was public speaking, or spiders, or any of the other minor terrors. How could you fear anything more than death?

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 136

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev and Kolya have made plans to attack the Nazis when they arrive at the farmhouse later that night, and Lev is understandably very afraid. Lev grapples throughout the novel with his fear, which he claims is something he experiences all the time and can easily recognize in others. His fear of death specifically alludes to the time and place in which he's existing. Lev is living through situations where death is highly likely at all times. Prior to the war the NKVD arrested his father (and likely killed him), and during the war everyone is at risk of dying from cold, hunger, or both, in addition to dying from the violence of the war itself. On a different scale, Lev's fear of death over everything else asks the reader to consider their own fears, and whether or not they agree with Lev's statement.

☝ This is all very strange, I thought. I am in the middle of a battle and I am aware of my own thoughts, I am worried about how stupid I look with a knife in my hand while everyone else came to fight with rifles and machine guns. I am aware that I am aware. Even now, with bullets buzzing through the air like angry hornets, I cannot escape the chatter of my brain.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 140

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev and Kolya unexpectedly find themselves in the middle of a Partisan attack on German soldiers at the farmhouse. Rather than try to avoid what's happening, Lev is experiencing this intense sense of turning inwards and picking apart how exactly he's experiencing his fear—which is, in its way, another kind of detachment. This points back to the novel's engagement with literature, as the way that Lev describes his thoughts is as though he's writing it. In this way, the reader is reminded of the framing story and that we're essentially hearing the story from Lev as an adult.

Further, Lev's youth is made very apparent, as he's the only man without a gun. This sets him apart from the others and is in some ways humorous, but in others a simple reminder that Lev is in the process of growing up.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ Kolya considered himself a bit of a bohemian, a free thinker, but in his own way he was as much a true believer as any Young Pioneer. The worst part about it was that I didn't think he was wrong.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 161

### Explanation and Analysis



Lev and Kolya are preparing to follow the partisans, and Kolya has declared that while he and Lev are still looking for eggs, they're also going to kill Einsatz because it's the right thing to do. Lev is experiencing discomfort as he grapples with the intersections of being Russian (and therefore anti-Nazi), being wary of the NKVD and the Soviet government in general after his father's arrest, but also seeing that in this situation, the side of Russia is the side of good triumphing over evil, despite the evil it might partake in itself.


This emotional struggle that Lev undertakes is one of the ways he grows and comes of age. He moves from a childish understanding of the world in black and white to a more mature and adult view that not everything is entirely good

or evil.

☝☝ Kolya seemed fearless, but everyone has fear in them somewhere; fear is part of our inheritance... Cannibals and Nazis didn't make Kolya nervous, but the threat of embarrassment did—the possibility that a stranger might laugh at the lines he'd written.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev has just realized that Kolya is actually the author of *The Courtyard Hound*, and is piecing together the reason why Kolya invented the author Ushakovo. Throughout the novel, Kolya is portrayed as relatively fearless. He remained in the apartment to fight the cannibals, and he shows no hesitation in times when Lev is completely terrified. Kolya's fearlessness comes from a confidence in his own physicality and charm, but that confidence doesn't necessarily protect him from embarrassment in creative matters.

Realizing that what Kolya fears most of all is embarrassment adds a layer of irony and sadness to his death in particular. Kolya remarks that it didn't happen the way he'd picture it. The particulars of his death (shot in the buttock by his own Russian army) are embarrassing for someone who had already taken on Nazis, cannibals, and all manner of other threats successfully.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ At a distance it seemed beautiful, and I thought it was strange that powerful violence is often so pleasing to the eye, like tracer bullets at night.

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Korsakov, Vika, Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 170

### Explanation and Analysis



Lev, Kolya, and the partisans are passing a village that has


been torched by the Nazis. With this observation, Lev is engaging with the violence as though it's very abstract. While this style of engagement doesn't only happen at this point—Lev does this throughout the novel—it serves to demonstrate how otherworldly such extreme and brutal violence can seem, and how individuals have to deal with what they've seen. Lev is able to keep going because he focuses on the very strange beauty of the siege and the war, rather than the very ugly result of the violence itself. Further, the strangeness of the beauty also works to dehumanize the Nazis as the ones who are creating this vision of beautiful violence.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ "We're pawns and he's a rook, that's what you're saying."  
 "We're less than pawns. Pawns have value."  
 "If we can take a rook, we have value, too."

**Related Characters:** Vika, Kolya Vlasov (speaker), Abendroth, Lev Beniov

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 211

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev, Kolya, and Vika are posing as prisoners of German soldiers and are discussing the best plan for how to kill Abendroth. Chess is used throughout the novel both literally and as a metaphor to explore the strategy and decision-making that Lev, Kolya, and Vika must engage with in order to successfully stay alive and accomplish their other goals. Lev was a childhood chess prodigy, and engaging with chess in this way allows him to triumph and be successful using something other than brute masculine strength, as the other male characters do, and which Lev lacks. Chess essentially provides a stage on which Lev can shine naturally, giving him an opportunity to participate in a way that works for him.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ "I have never been much of a patriot. My father would not have allowed such a thing while he lived, and his death insured that his wish was carried out. Piter commanded far more affection and loyalty from me than the nation as a whole. But that night, running across the unplowed fields of winter wheat, with the Fascist invaders behind us and the dark Russian woods before us, I felt a surge of pure love for my country."

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Abraham Beniov (Lev's Father), Abendroth, Vika, Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 233

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev, Kolya, and Vika are running towards the woods after killing Abendroth. Killing Abendroth was the catalyst for several changes in Lev. First, while he was still very afraid at the time, he conquered his fear and accomplished what he set out to do. This allowed him to become a man for all intents and purposes, as much of Lev's development over the course of the novel is psychological, and killing Abendroth represents the culmination of this development. Finally, as Lev states here, killing Abendroth allowed him to experience love for his country like he had not previously been able to. Lev's relationship to the Soviet Union was made complicated after his father's arrest, as Lev sees the government and the country as responsible for taking his father unjustly, but this experience with the Nazis allows Lev to at least momentarily move past his qualms and consider Russia as a whole, and see it as his true and beloved homeland—a place of beautiful fields and dark woods that hide him from wicked foreign invaders. Lev essentially gets to become the great Russian hero he dreamed of being.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☞ "Kolya had no faith in the divine or the afterlife; he didn't think he was going to a better place, or any place at all. No angels waited to collect him. He smiled because he knew how terrified I was of dying. This is what I believe. He knew I was terrified and he wanted to make it a little easier for me."

**Related Characters:** Lev Beniov (speaker), Kolya Vlasov

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 251



### Explanation and Analysis

Kolya is in the backseat of a Red Army car after being shot in the buttock by a Red Army soldier, and it's becoming apparent that he's going to die. Lev is extremely upfront throughout the novel that while he dreams of being a hero, he's hobbled by fear and specifically by his fear of death and dying. By the end of the novel when Kolya dies, Kolya has been made very aware of this fear in Lev. Their friendship and affection for each other has grown significantly over the course of their journey, and managing Lev's fear is Kolya's last act of caring for Lev. Kolya promised to keep Lev alive, and he did, but as he now faces his own death, Kolya also performs this last act of protection for Lev.

### Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ "Those words you want to say right now? Don't say them." He smiled and cuffed my cheek with something close to real affection. "And that, my friend, is the secret to living a long life."

**Related Characters:** Colonel Grechko (speaker), Kolya Vlasov, Lev Beniov

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 254

### Explanation and Analysis

Lev has just delivered the dozen eggs to Colonel Grechko and found out that the colonel already has three dozen eggs. Lev is realizing with intense clarity that his and Kolya's journey was an absurd wild goose chase. While it seemed to mean something once, and seemed very important at the start, in the end Lev and Kolya went through everything they did, and Kolya died, for little more than a pat on the back. This turn of events cements Lev's coming of age as it's what truly illustrates to him that he's not going to be a hero—he's denied even the small victory of being the one who made a wedding cake possible. Essentially, it cements Lev's disillusionment with the adult world and the war, making it very clear that it is all truly absurd and tragic.

Additionally, we can tell from the prologue that Lev took Colonel Grechko's advice to heart, as David notes that his grandfather doesn't like to speak much around anyone other than Vika. This, compared with how Kolya conducted himself, allows us to take Grechko's words as foreshadowing, as the colonel predicted Kolya's death and Lev evidently lived a very long, prosperous, and silent life.





## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

David, the narrator of the prologue, tells the reader that his grandfather (Lev) killed two Germans in a knife fight before he was 18, and that this knowledge is just something he knows, not anything he'd ever been told. He describes his grandfather as a small, quiet, smiling man. David grew up two blocks from his grandparents. They owned an insurance company. His grandmother sold on the phone while his grandfather did paperwork. In the late nineties, a large insurance conglomerate offered to purchase David's grandparents' company. David's grandmother asked the company to double their fair offer, and they eventually agreed. David's grandparents moved to Florida, where his grandfather spends his time playing **chess** on the computer and his grandmother teaches Russian Literature at the local community college. They're not worried about crime and believe that nothing can kill them.

David tells the reader he lives in Los Angeles and writes screenplays about mutant superheroes. Two years ago he was asked to write an autobiographical essay, which he attempted to do, but then decided he'd rather write about Leningrad.

David traveled to Florida where his grandfather and grandmother picked him up at the airport. His grandfather made dinner (his grandmother is famous for her refusal to cook). Sitting outside after dinner, David asks to talk about the war. His grandmother brushes him off, but David's grandfather agrees to talk about Leningrad. For the next week he fills numerous minicassettes with recollections of the war, despite hating to speak much in front of anyone other than his wife. At the end, David tries to ask clarifying questions, but his grandfather eventually instructs David to just make it up, since he's a writer.

*The prologue about David operates as a frame story for the novel. This frame story ensures that, from the very beginning, the reader knows that Lev is alive and well and retired in Florida. Further, by capturing Lev in late adulthood and presenting him as quite normal, Benioff makes the story about Lev's experiences during World War II seem even more wild, absurd, and fantastical—while also emphasizing that such crazy, shocking things can happen to normal people, thus making the craziness feel real. Chess is mentioned early on as something that David's grandfather enjoys and participates in, and it soon becomes a symbol to watch out for.*



*David's work is creating truly fantastical stories about superheroes. That he doesn't want to write about himself but does want to write about Leningrad suggests that he is looking to write about a different sort of heroism – about real world heroism. And yet at the same time, his background as a writer of fantasies and difficulty writing autobiography suggests that the reader should question the relationship between fact and fiction in the novel.*



*It's stressed in the first chapter that David's grandfather (Lev) isn't particularly talkative around anyone other than his wife. This serves to make the reader interested in discovering how their relationship unfolded to begin with. When his grandfather instructs David to make it up, the reader is also essentially warned that the following story may or may not be entirely true, and is asked to question whether that matters or not. David's grandmother's refusal to cook also becomes an important plot point at the novel's end.*



## CHAPTER 1

The narrator changes from David to Lev, and it's New Year's Eve 1941 in Leningrad, Russia. Everyone is hungrier and colder than they ever thought they'd be. All surplus wood has been burned, all animals, from house pets to pigeons, have been eaten. Lev is skinny, with acne, dark hair, and a big nose, and his skinniness means he's better able to handle the deprivation. The Germans decided months ago that it would be impossible to rush Leningrad, so they settled for circling the city with the goal of starving and bombing the city to defeat.

On New Year's Eve, Lev sits on the roof of his apartment building, the Kirov, watching for German bombers. He's a firefighter, and since his mother and sister Taisya evacuated in September, he lives alone. Lev, at age 17, was insistent that Leningrad needed him to stay to defend it, which Mother declared idiotic. Lev doesn't really miss his mother or sister, as he loved stories of resourceful orphans as a child and believes wholeheartedly in defending Russia from the threat of Fascism. Lev guards the roofs with his friend Vera and the Antokolsky twins Grisha and Oleg. From the roof they can watch the strange beauty of the siege, including the fighting planes in the sky. They share ration bread and an onion, which is a feast.

Vera then spots a German man falling from the sky. He appears to be dead already, and Vera, Lev, and the twins wonder if the Germans are finally starting a massive drop of paratroopers. When it becomes obvious that the Nazi is heading towards their street, the four run down to the dark and empty street, six hours into curfew (meaning they aren't supposed to leave their building). They spot the paratrooper gliding down the street until his parachute deflates and he falls to the ground. Approaching the corpse, they begin to strip him of his belongings. Lev takes a knife from the corpse's ankle and straps it to his own, and Grisha opens the man's hip flask and begins passing it around the circle. Lev declares that the man froze to death, and Grisha raises a toast to the cold.

*The writing style here sets up from the very beginning how dire the situation is. There aren't any pets anymore in Leningrad, and any wood that isn't actively providing shelter is gone for fires. We also get a sense of how the Russians interpret the German intent. The Germans are set up as ruthless and cruel, willing to starve and bomb an entire city into defeat and/or oblivion.*



*As a teenager, Lev is getting to live out his childhood fantasy of being an orphan and simultaneously perform a very adult job as a firefighter. Logically, staying in the city was foolish given the danger, which underscores the extent of Lev's youth and youthful pride. That he sees himself as living like a plucky orphan from a storybook also indicates Lev's naïveté. By describing the siege as beautiful, Lev begins to introduce the motif of the strange and absurd beauty of the events happening around him, which consistently hold Lev's attention going forward, even amidst the horrors of war.*



*Winter in Leningrad often means that temperatures are around -40 degrees Fahrenheit. The intense cold is a threat to everyone, German and Russian alike, so while the twins, Lev, and Vera are toasting the cold, they're also reminded that they're not immune to the fate of this German pilot. The way they strip the Nazi of his belongings again indicates just how important material things are during this siege in the middle of winter. But at the same time their excitement suggests the way that Lev and his friends are like kids playing at being heroes.*



Lev, Vera, Oleg, and Grisha don't hear the car coming until it has already turned onto their street. Being out after curfew, abandoning a firefighting post, and looting are illegal and punishable by summary execution, so the four run back to the Kirov. As Lev begins to scale the courtyard gate, he looks back and sees that Vera has fallen. Lev goes back for her and boosts her over the gate, but the soldiers grasp Lev before he reaches the top of the gate. Vera doesn't look back as the soldiers remark that Lev looks like a good one for the "colonel," and shove Lev and the German corpse into the backseat.

*The Russian authorities in the city set a curfew for reasons of defense against the Germans. Lev and his friends' "adventure" here puts them in danger from the Russian police – from their own side, which is the first sign that the story will not simply be one of plain good (the Russians) against evil (the Germans). Note that it's Lev's heroics here that get him captured and that lead to his involvement in later events. This begins to develop Lev as a loyal and caring character to his friends. Lev was terrified, but was able to ignore his fear in order to save his friend. Vera, however, doesn't look back. This creates a great deal of resentment in Lev's feelings for her, which he will return to again and again throughout the novel, and also establishes loyalty as a kind of baseline for real friendships (or even capacity for friendship).*



## CHAPTER 2

Lev shares that if you grew up in Piter (the nickname for Leningrad), you grew up fearing the Crosses prison. The guards shove Lev into an empty cell in that prison, which seems a blessing until the darkness and silence become nearly too much to bear. Lev remarks that he'll never be a great Russian, because many great Russians endure time in prison, and Lev's own short time in prison half broke him.

*Lev is an extremely fearful individual, a fact about himself that he will grapple with often going forward. He very much wants to be "a great Russian" – a hero of Russia such as in books or history – but feels as though he can't do so until he conquers his fear. Notice too that the fear of the Crosses is a fear born in childhood, and is still scary to him as an almost adult teenager. The name "Piter" comes from "Petrograd," the city's name before it was changed to "Leningrad" after the Russian Revolution.*



Finally Lev hears footsteps and a key in the cell door, and by lamplight two guards shove a young soldier into the cell. Before the light disappears, Lev sees that the soldier is tall, blond, and blue-eyed. After a minute, the newcomer asks Lev if he's a Jew. When Lev retaliates, the newcomer says he doesn't have a problem with Jews and offers Lev a piece of sausage, introducing himself as Kolya. They share why they've been imprisoned, and Kolya says that he was accused of desertion but was actually defending his thesis, which was an interpretation of **The Courtyard Hound** by Ushakovo. Lev doesn't recognize the author, offending Kolya. Lev hears scratching, which Kolya says is him writing notes on *The Courtyard Hound* in his journal.

*Lev's first experience with Kolya sets Kolya up as a foil for Lev. While Lev is young, scrawny, and afraid, Kolya is older, handsome, brash, and decidedly not afraid of prison. Lev's suspicious nature and his pessimism will be played off of Kolya's optimism for humor throughout the novel. Note too how Lev thinks about being Jewish, as it will influence how he tackles obstacles and challenges going forward. He's evidently not a practicing Jew if he's eating pork, but he's very aware of his place in the world as a culturally and ethnically Jewish individual.*



Lev wonders if he and Kolya will be shot in the morning, and Kolya replies that they're not being kept just to be shot. He then shares that he hasn't had a shit in eight days and wonders how long one can go between bowel movements. Kolya makes one final remark that the Crosses is likely a very safe place, settles onto a mattress, and falls asleep. Lev tells the reader that he's envious of sleepers like that, as he's an insomniac, and he spends the entire night awake.

*Kolya is always open to seeing the best of a situation. It's humorous, but also likely very true that the fortified prison is one of the safest possible places in the city in case of bombs. His logic also adds another layer of humor to the situation. Kolya retains this sense of logic (that presumably allows him to sleep), while Lev struggles with his spinning thoughts.*



## CHAPTER 3

After dawn, two guards rouse Lev and Kolya, laughing at Kolya's jokes. The guards lead Lev and Kolya outside to a waiting car, where Kolya cracks another joke. The guards laugh, while the driver of the car threatens to break Kolya's arm. After a standoff, the driver backs down, Lev scurries into the car, and they depart the Crosses. They head onto Kamenny Island and Kolya shares facts about the family who used to live in the mansion there.

The soldiers stop at the old family's mansion and lead Lev and Kolya inside, where they see dozens of NKVD (Soviet secret police) officers hurrying about their business. Lev shares with the reader that the NKVD arrested 15 men from the Kirov throughout his childhood. Some were returned, broken, and others, like Lev's father, were not returned at all.

Lev and Kolya are pushed into a sunroom where a man sits at a desk on the phone, doodling X's. The man looks like an ex-boxer. As he hangs up the phone, he instructs guards to remove "the looter and the deserter's" cuffs, to which Kolya replies that he's not a deserter. The man—the colonel—approaches, not allowing Kolya to explain, and laughs when Lev apologizes for looting. He asks Lev if he stole anything else but food. Lev unstraps his knife and the colonel tells Lev how to appropriately use it before giving it back.

Returning to the window, the colonel confirms that Lev's father was the poet. He commands an aide to bring Lev and Kolya breakfast, and then calls the two to step outside. An obviously well fed girl is skating on the river, and the colonel says that this is his daughter, and she's getting married next Friday.

*Kolya begins to demonstrate his charm and ability to figure out how to play to an opponent's emotional and mental strengths or weaknesses. This trait will come in handy throughout the novel, but it also can be humorous and nerve wracking, as Lev is never sure if it's going to work.*



*Lev's father is still a mystery at this point, but Benioff is leaving clues for the reader to begin to piece together what happened to him. Russia at this time has relatively recently become Communist and is ruled by Stalin, a brutal dictator. Lev's father and these other men were arrested during the "Great Purge" before the war—a method for Stalin and his government to assert and maintain their political control. Lev, then, is loyal to Leningrad and Russia, but his feelings about the Soviet Union and its NKVD secret police are, at best, complicated.*



*Kolya's inability to keep quiet when he probably should will be a blessing and a curse going forward. These scenes also continue to show how young Lev is as he tries to apologize for committing such a crime, but the colonel is seemingly charmed by Lev's honesty. The colonel's easy manner and choice to give the knife back to Lev is mysterious at first, as Lev and Kolya were presumably brought here to be punished, but this hints at the adventure to come.*



*Again Benioff creates mystery and intrigue by offering up these tidbits of information about Lev's father without answering any real questions. The colonel's daughter being well fed indicates that some people in Leningrad aren't suffering like others are. While Lev is loyal to Russia, there is a hint of Soviet corruption here, and how being willing to go along with the government can provide perks and comfort.*





Lev realizes that the colonel's teeth are false, and suddenly knows that the colonel had been tortured, just like his father had. Lev's father was Jewish, mildly famous, and named his book *Piter*, a name banned by the Soviets, who had renamed the city Leningrad (although Piter is still the nickname locals use for the city). Lev's father was taken in 1937 and never seen again.

*Finally the reader is given some concrete facts about Lev's father and some further information about the extent of censorship in the Soviet Union. Notice too that despite Lev's youth, he's aware of the absurdity inherent in the colonel working for the same organization that tortured him. This realization further captures the way that the Soviet government finds ways to make people complicit in its goals – to not just torture or punish, but also offer comfort and power in exchange for joining them. As stated previously, “Piter” comes from “Petrograd,” the city's name before the Revolution.*



The colonel continues, saying that his daughter wants a real wedding, which means they need a cake. They have all the ingredients except eggs, and he needs a pair of thieves to find these elusive eggs. Kolya is offended by being called a thief, but the colonel shuts him down. Turning back to the mansion, the colonel takes Lev and Kolya's ration cards and instructs them to return with eggs by sunrise Thursday. Kolya again shows an attitude, to which the colonel responds that Kolya won't live long, but that he likes him. The colonel writes a curfew waiver and hands it to Kolya, along with four 100-ruble notes. Kolya and Lev eat their breakfast and the colonel sends them on their way.

*Colonel Grechko has a very different idea of what survival means. He places a great deal of importance on creating this show and event to demonstrate that the Nazis can't beat the Russians down or really starve out Leningrad successfully, though one might argue that he has simply found a way to justify seeking his own pleasure. Kolya's attitude again indicates that he's incapable of staying silent when he probably should, and the colonel's response shows both Kolya's charm and the colonel's more worldly knowledge of how things work. Meanwhile, though, the colonel is putting on his own kind of performance, showing off his power by sending Lev and Kolya on a quest for eggs in a besieged city that has none.*



## CHAPTER 4

As Lev and Kolya walk back across the bridge from Kamenny Island, Kolya insists that the colonel's daughter smiled at him, and questions who Lev's father is. Lev refuses to engage and calls Kolya a deserter. After some verbal sparring, the two continue walking. Kolya suggests trying to escape, but Lev insists they must find the eggs. Kolya says the Haymarket is their best chance, since it's primarily black market, and Lev concedes.

*Kolya's belief that women are inherently attracted to him guides how he interacts with the opposite sex, and his friendly confidence is itself a kind of guarantor of his success. Lev, on the other hand, is envious and doubtful of this quality in Kolya and doesn't believe himself particularly worthy of admiration or attraction. This shows both Lev and Kolya's youth manifesting in different ways.*



Lev thinks about the colonel's daughter skating naked, and Kolya seems aware of Lev's thoughts and teases him, saying "the secret to winning a woman is calculated neglect," which he says is a line from **The Courtyard Hound**. Kolya begins to describe the protagonist of the novel, Radchenko, and Lev says he sounds exactly like Oblomov (the protagonist from Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov*), which irritates Kolya.

*While Lev doesn't necessarily conduct himself as a romantic "catch" like Kolya does, he's not exempt from sexual fantasies either. Kolya's concept of calculated neglect provides a framework for interacting with women that involves manipulating them, which gives Kolya a great deal of power.*



After a moment of silence, Kolya says that he was stationed at the fortress when the zoo was bombed. When Lev replies that he heard there were animals running around the city, Kolya says it's a nice story but they all died, including Betty the elephant, who took hours to pass away.

The Haymarket is six kilometers away, and Lev describes the city as they walk through it. Nevsky Prospekt is a ghost street now, but was once the heart of the city and a fine spot to watch pretty girls. Kolya cuts into Lev's thoughts, asking if he's a virgin. Lev asks Kolya why he cares, and Kolya replies that if they were friends, he could teach Lev things about girls, literature, and **chess**. They discuss betting on a game of chess, and Kolya suggests a bet of Lev's German knife against some pictures of French girls.

Lev says he wasn't worried about losing the knife to Kolya because he already knew everyone in Piter who could beat him at **chess**. Lev was a young chess talent, but discovered as a teenager that he would never be truly great, and while quitting the club disappointed Lev's father, Lev enjoyed chess much more after he quit.

Kolya points to a restaurant where he once took a girl, and begins to explain his theory of calculated neglect to Lev. He asks Lev if there's a girl he likes, and Lev suggests Vera. When Lev can't remember the color of Vera's eyes, though, Kolya insists Lev doesn't really like her, and Lev is happy to follow instructions and forget Vera. Lev suggests the colonel's daughter, but it's decided that she's not for either of them.

Lev and Kolya walk past young boys whitewashing over street signs and building numbers. Kolya accuses them of vandalizing the city, and is shocked by one boy's impertinence. As Kolya begins to argue with the boy, Lev interrupts that the boys are acting on orders, and if Fritz (a nickname for German soldiers) gets inside the city, they'll be lost without street signs. Kolya leaves the boy alone and declares the strategy "damn clever."

*The zoo animals escaping is a nice story, but Kolya insists that it's entirely untrue. The zoo story, then, stands as one of many tales that people tell themselves to try to shield themselves from the horrors of the war and the siege.*



*When it comes to sexual thoughts, Kolya appears to be a bit of a mind reader. This exchange does establish that Lev is a virgin, however, which sets up his maturation as something that will include sexual growth as well. Kolya asserts himself as a great teacher, and we see how highly Kolya thinks of himself.*



*Lev's chess prowess is established here, and that skill will prove critical later in the novel. Lev's calmness in the face of Kolya's chess challenge also suggests Lev's potential for growth, as well as indicating that Kolya's self-confidence can lead him to make mistakes.*



*While it was previously established that Lev is a virgin, in this exchange the novel establishes that his crush on Vera is a childish thing easily left behind, and foreshadows that he's likely to meet a woman he truly likes. And according to Kolya, his true interest in this woman will be obvious when he takes note of her eye color. Finally, though, their agreement that neither of them has a chance with the colonel's daughter further marks how within the Soviet Union there are still class divisions that can't be breached.*



*Amid the very normal idea of coming of age sexually, Lev and Kolya are confronted with the war. The war adds a sense of horror and absurdity to the lives it affects and colors the typical and mundane events of everyday existence. Lev's recognition of the strategy also shows the value of his quick mind, while Kolya's openness to Lev's intelligence both shows their growing friendship and that Kolya's self-confident bluster isn't all there is to him.*



## CHAPTER 5

Lev describes the Haymarket as the poor man's Nevsky Prospekt before the war. Though the shops on the Prospekt closed when the siege began, the Haymarket continued to thrive. Lev and Kolya walk through, taking in the stalls full of **boots**, pistols, grenades, and jars of dirt that came from under a bombed food warehouse, supposedly full of melted sugar.

Kolya stops at the stall of an old man selling what he claims is vodka, but what Kolya insists is wood alcohol. Lev tries to steer Kolya away but Kolya ignores him, telling the man the dangers of wood alcohol. The man insists the alcohol is safe after being poured through seven layers of linen, and Kolya strikes a bet with the man if the man agrees to drink some of the alcohol. Kolya offers his handkerchief and the man pours the liquid through and takes a sip. Kolya downs the rest of the glass and pretends to be in the throes of death, and then makes a show of discovering that Lev has no money to pay the man.

The man and Kolya face off, and Lev shares with the reader that danger made Kolya calm. He says for Kolya, the war seemed like someone else's ridiculous story that he'd become trapped in and couldn't escape.

The man growls at Kolya and Lev to move on. Lev and Kolya continue through the market, asking for eggs. An old woman selling patties of meat says there are none in Piter, and other people share theories and rumors, the most promising of which is of a man keeping chickens in a rooftop coop. It seems an absurd story, but the boy telling it insists it's true and tells Kolya how to get there. Kolya shares that it's been nine days since his last shit, and continues to banter with the boy, but Lev moves on, wanting to go home and sleep.

Lev hears a voice asking him if he's looking for eggs, and turns to see a huge bearded giant. Lev runs back to get Kolya, who hands Lev a bar of "library candy" he bought from the boy. They reach the giant and the giant tells them to follow him to his apartment, saying that he keeps everything inside for safekeeping. The man doesn't believe Kolya when he says they're on an actual mission for eggs. Meanwhile, Lev notices a dead woman in the canal, and watches her hair blow across her face.

*The boots here are taken from the dead, alluding to the idea that those who are still alive are alive thanks to the ultimate sacrifices made by the dead. The desperation created by the siege is also hammered home by the detail that people are selling, and presumably buying, jars of dirt and sugar as food.*



*Wood alcohol (methanol) is extremely poisonous and is almost certainly still unsafe even after being poured through cloth. Remember, though, that many of the products used to make other alcohols (grains or potatoes) aren't available due to the siege, and the presence of dangerous wood alcohol for sale in the market further works to create the sense of deep desperation for basic supplies or pleasures. Kolya, meanwhile, continues to show off his bravado and savvy.*



*Kolya conceptualizes himself as the hero of this story, although he's trapped in it, and this idea that he'll eventually triumph influences his actions throughout.*



*The slightly gruesome look of the meat here foreshadows what Lev and Kolya will encounter shortly. Consider here the purpose of these siege stories. True or not, they provide a sense of hope that there's food somewhere, and presumably, not all of the stories are untrue – the colonel and his daughter are proof that some people in the city are eating.*



*The library candy is made from boiled down book bindings, the glue from which contains animal products and therefore some protein and calories. Again that people are eating such things emphasizes the despair of the siege and how ridiculous it is that the boys are on a mission to try to find eggs. The giant's disbelief that they are actually looking for eggs furthers that sense. The dead woman is another indicator of the horror of the siege. There's nobody to bury her or care about her loss.*



Lev, Kolya, and the giant approach a five-story brick building. The giant unlocks the door and beckons Lev and Kolya inside. Lev asks the giant to bring the eggs down, saying he doesn't do business in strangers' apartments. The giant refuses, and says he doesn't do business in the street. Kolya asks the giant to name his price. Lev laughs when the giant says 1000 rubles, and the giant, already angry, looks even angrier when Kolya makes a joke about the futility of haggling with his "little Jewish friend."

The giant says that "everyone's starving and everyone's got a gun," which Kolya teases him about. The giant gestures to the canal and says there's a man out there who died because his skull was smashed with a brick. Kolya, cheerful, steps into the apartment building and Lev, terrified, follows, thinking that their small amount of money and ration cards, which the giant doesn't know they don't have, are enough to get killed over.

The giant leads Lev and Kolya up the stairs, and Lev quietly puts his knife in his pocket. The giant raps on the door of a fourth floor apartment, saying he has customers. A woman in a bloody butcher's apron looks perplexed as Kolya asks how they keep the eggs from freezing, and the giant ushers them in. A sheet hanging in the room billows as the door closes, exposing slabs of meat hanging from hooks. Lev realizes the meat is human, and, screaming, he pulls the knife out and slashes at the giant. Kolya punches the giant's wife, knocking her to the ground, and tells Lev to run.

Lev runs to the landing on the floor below and listens to the fight taking place upstairs. He tries to talk himself into going back upstairs to help Kolya, but is too afraid. Suddenly, Kolya shoots out of the apartment and yells again for Lev to run. The two run out of the building and down the street for blocks until they spot an army car. They jump in front of the car and inform the soldiers that there are cannibals, but the soldiers won't take Kolya seriously until he offers them the letter from Colonel Grechko. Finally they ask Kolya and Lev to lead them back to the building, but the giant and his wife have already fled. The officer says they'll put their names on the list, and the soldiers look away from the hanging meat.

*Not being a practicing Jew doesn't protect Lev from anti-Semitism – it's a burden he has to bear no matter what he actually believes. Lev has a bad feeling already about the giant, and the discovery that Lev is Jewish has potentially made the situation even more dangerous. That Kolya is still cracking jokes and seems unaware of the danger seems on the one hand naïve, but on the other also suggests that Kolya himself isn't anti-Semitic. He seems to see anti-Semitism as being a ridiculous joke.*



*Again, the residents of Leningrad are desperate and hungry enough that ration cards (cards granted by the government for people to be able to receive food) are more than enough to kill someone over, and the giant here essentially admits to having murdered someone. Kolya remains cheerful and joking in light of the situation, which further attests to his bravery while also supporting the idea that he's engaging with the war as though it's a story.*



*The revelation that the giant and his wife are cannibals calls the unsavory-looking meat in the Haymarket into question. Was it, too, human? It seems possible given the scarcity of other options. Once again Kolya shows his bravery. Note the contrast between Kolya's actions here and those of Lev's "friend" Vera's at the beginning of the novel. Kolya doesn't abandon Lev; he puts himself in danger and tells Lev to run. Kolya's actions reveal him to be a true friend to Lev.*



*Lev's fear keeps him from doing what he feels he needs to do (help Kolya). This will be a challenge for Lev throughout the rest of the novel as he grapples with his fear on one side and his loyalty and sense of what's right on the other. While Colonel Grechko was obviously an important person in the NKVD, we see here just how important he is for his letter to be able to command the attention of a group of soldiers. The soldiers' disgust at the hanging "meat" strongly emphasizes the despair of the siege. These soldiers, being soldiers, have seen death. But even they are horrified by the things that the besieged people of Leningrad have been pushed to do.*





## CHAPTER 6

Lev and Kolya, having decided to spend the night in Lev's apartment at the Kirov, talk freely and easily about Kolya's excellent punch at the giant's wife. Lev shares that, during the war, you couldn't allow too much truth or thought into your conversations as a method of self-preservation. Despite that, though, Lev can't get the image of a child's ribcage in the cannibals' apartment out of his head, and he can barely nibble on the "library candy."

Lev apologizes for not going back to save Kolya, which Kolya laughs at, admitting that he was the "country fool" who insisted on going up to the giant's apartment. Lev feels better and compliments Kolya again on his punch, saying that the woman won't be eating children anymore. Kolya smiles for a moment, but Lev remarks to the reader that they're living in a city with the witch Baba Yaga snatching children.

Sirens begin and Kolya announces that Fritz (the German army) is coming. He and Lev walk faster and listen to the shells from German bombers landing near the Kirov Works, where tanks and heavy artillery are built. Suddenly Kolya stops, and he and Lev hear someone playing the piano in an apartment building. They stand and listen, and Lev shares that while music was important in his family, he'd never heard that music before and hasn't heard it since.

When they resume their march, Kolya and Lev begin arguing over the evacuation of famous people from the city. Lev insists that it'd be bad for morale if famous people died, but Kolya believes that the outrage that would certainly come after a famous individual's heroic war death would be a positive, adding that he doesn't like hypocrites.

*Lev succinctly describes how storytelling becomes a method of preservation when faced with the horrors of the war. But even that sort of self-protection is barely enough to protect oneself from the trauma of the siege, as Lev's inability to escape the image of the butchered bodies shows.*



*Lev's comment about the witch Baba Yaga – a witch from Russian folklore – provides an extremely concrete example of the idea that while stories can be used to protect oneself from the horrors of reality, the fairy tales that the people of Leningrad grew up with are also being made gruesomely real by the siege in a way not previously thought possible. On one hand, this dynamic implies just how insane the situation of the siege is. On the other hand, though, it underlines the inherent truths hidden within such fairy tales: that humanity, when pressed to extremes, can actually commit the sorts of gruesome crimes that are usually safely contained within such tales. Even the most fantastical of stories can speak a kind of truth.*



*The term "Fritz" is used by the Russians to refer to the German army. It is a kind of ethnic insult, and in using it the Russians find a way to voice their defiance of the Germans even as they are besieged by them. Hearing the piano provides a brief reprieve from the horrors of the war, but it also signals all that was lost to Lev because of the rise of the Soviet and Nazi regimes.*



*Even as the novel will turn increasingly toward Kolya and Lev's interactions with the German invaders, it never loses sight of the unfairness and hypocrisy on the Russian side of the war. Lev's sense of the correctness of protecting famous people hints at his remaining idealism, as he believes that there is a kind of Russian pride that must be kept up to boost the morale of the people. Kolya's charge that such actions are hypocritical, with the implication that the common people are fighting a war for the elite without the elite ever having to suffer, seems more realistic, though. Meanwhile, it's worth noting the irony of this conversation, as Lev and Kolya are being forced by the powerful on a ridiculous quest.*



Lev and Kolya turn onto Lev's street and suddenly Lev comes face to face with a pile of rubble where the Kirov is supposed to be. Lev thinks of the life he had at the Kirov and all the people who made it what it was. He wades into the debris and begins digging, but Kolya grabs him and says that there's another place they can stay. Lev insists people might still be alive in the rubble, but finally follows Kolya away, feeling no real misery, but thinking that there's no one left in the city that knows his full name.

*With the fall of the Kirov, Lev becomes truly alone – his former friends are probably dead –except for Kolya. This sets them up to become close friends, as Lev has been forced to turn away from his past. Notice too how Lev describes his mental state. He detaches from any real emotion regarding what's happened, something characters will continue to do throughout the novel.*



## CHAPTER 7

Kolya's friend, a young woman who must have been beautiful before the war, welcomes Kolya and Lev into the house. Kolya introduces her as Sonya Ivanova, and one of his early "conquests." Sonya makes a joke of this, and Kolya explains further that he wooed her with stories of master painters' perversions, and Sonya jokes again that the conquest was short lived. Lev isn't used to hearing women talk about sex, and thinks briefly of Grisha and Vera before remembering that they're now both dead in the rubble of the Kirov.

*Notice the power dynamic between Kolya and Sonya. Despite Sonya's insistence that their intimacy was short-lived and consensual, Kolya continually refers to her as a conquest and attributes that conquest to his own skill at wooing her into bed with him. By discussing what happened with Sonya as little more than a challenge he overcame, Kolya robs her of her agency and establishes his own power, even if he does so with a certain level of charm.*



Sonya assures Lev that none of them are as bohemian as they think they are. Kolya says that Lev is from the Kirov, and Sonya offers her condolences, hugs Lev, and offers her apartment as a place to sleep whenever he needs it. She leads them into the sitting room where a group of six people, looking displeased, sit around the stove. Kolya makes friends by passing around his library candy, and Sonya's friends share that they're surgeons and nurses. They ask Lev if he was inside the Kirov when the bomb hit. Lev shakes his head and Timofei, one of the surgeons, says he heard that some people got out.

*The displeased expressions of the other residents of the apartment indicate what a burden taking in more people would be, as it means more mouths to feed and less food to go around. Savvy Kolya recognizes this, and smoothes things over by sharing his library candy. It's not possible to tell yet at this point if Timofei's statement that people escaped the bombed Kirov is a fantasy story or truth, but at this point it's allowing Lev to continue forward with life.*



Lev feels better hearing the rumor of survivors, and accepts a cup of tea from Sonya. The discussion turns to the war, and one man, Pavel, insists that the Germans will soon take Moscow. As bickering ensues, Kolya asserts that the Germans won't take Moscow because they're currently being pushed slowly back, and the Germans simply don't know how to retreat.

*Kolya does ultimately end up being correct, as the German army never did take Moscow. However, the reader has the privilege of knowing this while the characters are still two years away from relief. So Kolya's confidence is itself a kind of story to keep people from giving in to despair.*



Lev notes that after Kolya's speech, the dynamic in the room has shifted to spotlight Kolya and Sonya, and he says that the foreplay had already begun. Lev tells the reader that he wishes a girl would stare at him like Sonya is staring at Kolya, but insists that he's not the type to inspire lust. The worst, he says, is his nose, the nose of an "anti-Semitic caricature," and while he's proud to be Jewish, he didn't want to look Jewish. Kolya again brings up that he hasn't had a shit in nine days.

*Lev characterizes sex as a performance here, an idea that will come up throughout the novel. Here Kolya's show of confidence wins over Sonya. Lev, in contrast, continues to insist to himself and the reader that he's unable to achieve a romantic relationship because of his looks and his youth, and he insinuates that he'd rather look like Kolya than himself.*



That night, Lev sleeps in the sitting room, sharing blankets with the surgeons and nurses, while Kolya and Sonya disappear into the bedroom. Lev is put off by the sound of Sonya's pleasure, and wishes he could make a woman forget the horrors of the siege with sex. He can hear Kolya talking to Sonya and wonders what you're supposed to say to a girl during sex. Lev states that listening to other people make love is the loneliest sound in the world.

*Here, the language makes clear that Lev, even at 17, characterizes sex as a very adult activity, and sees himself as not-adult because of his virginity. Meanwhile, despite Kolya's language of conquest, the sex with Sonya appears very much consensual. On one hand, one can take from this that the language Kolya uses is just for show. On the other, one could argue that the show is the point, and it is the "show" that makes Sonya want to sleep with him.*



## CHAPTER 8

The following morning, Lev and Kolya are standing outside a building near the Narva Gate, where the boy in the Haymarket said they'd find the man with the chickens. The door to the building is locked, and Kolya asks Lev why he's grumpy. Lev tries to deny his mood but is undeniably grumpy, and answers yes when Kolya asks if he's thinking about the Kirov, even though he wasn't. Kolya then launches into a story about a lieutenant who'd come across a young soldier crying over a letter saying his family had been killed by the Germans. The lieutenant took the letter, put it in the soldier's coat pocket, and told him to cry now, but not again until Hitler is dead. Kolya contemplates the lieutenant's words, and Lev thinks that they sound like they were manufactured by a Soviet party-approved journalist.

*The reader is aware that Lev is jealous of Kolya's activities with Sonya last night, but Kolya hasn't quite made that leap yet, which creates a sense of tension and dramatic irony for the reader. Lev, further, is embarrassed about his jealousy and so lies to try to hide it. Also, consider how Lev responds to Kolya's story about the lieutenant. Remember that the Soviet Union is censoring all sorts of media in order to boost morale during the war and portray Communism in a positive light more generally, but notice that Lev – whose own father was disappeared by the Soviet state – isn't buying that. Again, the novel makes sure that Lev's complicated feelings about Russia remain in view.*



Lev asks if the soldier stopped crying. Kolya says that wasn't the point. The point is that the Nazis want the Russians dead and crying won't help. He shares that the lieutenant died stepping on a land mine days later, and Lev thinks that despite the clichéd phrasing, the lieutenant was just trying to help the soldier.

*When the lieutenant is humanized, though, Lev's thinking changes and he isn't bothered so much by what he's seeing as purely propaganda. Lev's feelings about the Soviet state are, at best, conflicted, but his feelings about the Russian people seem to be positive.*



Kolya tries to engage Lev in conversation, but Lev remains grumpy, telling Kolya to "go fuck a pig." Kolya is thrilled to discover that Lev is jealous, and Lev sits down on the steps. He asks Kolya what he was saying to Sonya the night before, and Kolya acts confused and suggests "the usual stuff." Kolya smiles and sits down next to Lev, insisting that Lev wants to know what to say when he finally has sex, which is a good thing. He tells Lev that women are offering something precious with sex, and begins a discussion of the qualities that make a nightmare lover.

*Kolya is using his sexual experience here as a way to underhandedly exert a degree of power over Lev. Lev is at the mercy of Kolya's "teaching" since he doesn't have his own experiences to draw from. Again, this building up of Lev's lack of experience creates the expectation for the reader that Lev is going to at some point get to experience sex during the novel.*



Before Kolya can move on to what makes a dream lover, he and Lev see two teenage girls coming towards the building towing buckets of ice. Kolya offers to carry the buckets, and when the girls question his motive, Kolya tells the truth. One girl tells him the old man will shoot him, but they allow Lev and Kolya to carry the buckets up the stairs. Kolya keeps up a conversation with the girls and treats them like absolutely delightful young ladies, while Lev finds them boring and spiritless. Lev is envious of Kolya's way with women, even ones like these that he doesn't like.

Lev thinks he likes Sonya, and thinks that the thought of her is keeping him from dwelling on the thought of the Kirov's dead residents. Lev finds, though, that he can hardly concentrate on the people in the Kirov, who already seem unreal. Lev thinks that he learned to protect himself after his father was taken.

As Kolya says goodbye to the girls, they offer to give them some soup when they come back down. Kolya and Lev head for the roof and are shocked to see an actual chicken coop. Kolya knocks on the door and when he gets no answer, toes the door open. He and Lev peek inside and see empty nesting boxes, a dead old man with an antique shotgun, and a boy wearing a woman's fur coat.

Kolya asks the boy if he needs water, but Lev sees that the boy is very weak. Kolya suggests they bring the old man to the street, but the boy replies, with great effort, that the old man doesn't want to leave the birds. Kolya tries to reason with the boy, saying that all the chickens are gone. Lev thinks the boy won't make it to tomorrow, noting soft down growing on the boy's cheeks and neck, and the boy continues to talk about the necessity of guarding the chickens.

As Kolya tries to convince the boy to leave the coop, Lev notices that there's something moving under the boy's coat. Kolya offers the boy money for the chicken and puts his money, a piece of sausage, and library candy in the boy's lap, and tells him that he and Lev will take him downstairs to the girls. The boy refuses, but then finally unbuttons his coat and offers the thin, bedraggled chicken to Kolya, saying he's tired of the birds and instructing Kolya to keep it warm. Kolya makes one final attempt to get the boy downstairs, and the boy tells Kolya and Lev to go away. As they head for the door, Lev asks the boy his name (Vadim) and thanks him for the chicken.

*Regardless of how Kolya describes himself and his sexual pursuits, he's undeniably charming and is willing to use his charm to get what he wants from these girls. However, the girls can confirm that the man guarding chickens on the roof is actually there with chickens, making the characters (and the reader) question what other siege myths might be true.*



*Lev has learned to disengage from the people around him and not get too attached after experiencing the loss of his father. Notice how the dead are turning into stories in Lev's mind as a protective measure against emotion.*



*The siege has left no one untouched, even those who were fortunate in September. Even though these individuals had the chickens, which were supposed to provide eggs and then soup to their keepers, the boy and the old man are still dead or close to death.*



*It's obvious the boy is going to die – in part from his seeming delusion that the chickens are still alive and need to be protected. Notice the language Kolya uses to talk to the boy, calling him "soldier." Kolya meets the boy on his level, treating him like an adult while at the same time actually treating him as the child he really is. Underneath Kolya's bravado is a way with people and a degree of true kindness.*



*Kolya's attempt to get Vadim out of the coop and into the care of the girls again indicates that for all Kolya's posturing and swagger, he really is a caring person. When Vadim gives Kolya the chicken, the boy surrenders to his own death. It's indicated that he's not going to live even though Kolya leaves him with food and money, making Kolya's gift of food a symbolic gesture and nothing more. And yet, in a besieged city where people are buying jars of dirt for food, that is a pretty profound symbolic gesture. Kolya is willing to sacrifice his own comfort in exchange for the comfort of a dying boy.*



## CHAPTER 9

Back at Sonya's apartment, she, Lev, and Kolya sit around the stove drinking tea. The chicken sits in a nesting box made from an old cookie tin, ignoring the ground millet in front of her. Lev wonders if the chicken needs to have sex before she can lay eggs, but Sonya doesn't think so, saying that her uncle manages a poultry collective in Mga. Lev thinks of how he used to make fun of country folk before the siege, but thinks they must be laughing at the city dwellers now.

Lev laments that the chicken won't lay 12 eggs by Thursday, let alone live until then. Kolya replies that she's a tough Leningrad chicken, and mentions that the Germans thought they'd celebrate Christmas in the Astoria. The narrator then explains to the reader that the Nazis had printed invitations to a victory party Hitler had intended to throw at the Astoria Hotel in Leningrad after conquering the city. Several of the invitations had been found by Red Army soldiers and had been reprinted in the newspapers as well as copied and put up around the city. Lev remarks that the "Politburo hacks" couldn't have come up with better anti-Nazi propaganda.

Lev and Sonya decide that the chicken probably needs water, but nobody moves. They're hungry and tired. After a while they again remark that the chicken certainly needs water, but it's not until an hour later that Sonya finally gets up, lights the lamps, turns on the radio, and offers the chicken water. The chicken only glares at Sonya, who commences darning socks.

Out of nowhere, Kolya says that he hates Natasha Rostov, a character from *War and Peace*. Lev, half asleep, thinks that he can't help but liking someone who despises a fictional character so passionately.

On the radio, the playwright Gerasimov is speaking, wishing death on "panic mongers" and "rumor spreaders," and saying that Death is afraid of Leningrad. When Lev snorts at the passionate speech, Kolya asks if Lev doesn't like Gerasimov, saying that he's at least staying in Piter. Sonya agrees with Lev, and calls Gerasimov a salesman for the Party.

*The fact that Lev, Kolya, and Sonya are city dwellers through and through is obvious here in their reaction to the chicken (and it will become more obvious soon). Lev's thought about the "laughing" country folk will come to seem darkly ironic as Lev and Kolya later venture out into the countryside themselves and see what it's like under German control.*



*Kolya will comment later that the Nazis are doing a terrible job of trying to turn the Russians in favor of the German cause, and this is one example of the poor planning in that regard on the Nazis' part. The Soviet Union had a strong handle on propaganda that was intense and effective in spite of their staggering casualty rate, although again notice the unflattering language Lev uses to discuss those coming up with the propaganda.*



*The characters' extreme tiredness again speaks to the brutal conditions of the siege. The chicken seems to feel the same way that the human characters do, although it shouldn't be overlooked that the chicken has some food in front of it, while none of the humans do.*



*Lev is beginning to feel affection for Kolya. The friendship between the two is starting to look real.*



*Lev, despite being Russian and wanting to be a Russian hero, has a very developed "me versus them" mentality when it comes to the people involved in the Russian government, certainly born from the trauma of losing his father to the NKVD.*





Angrily, Lev says that Gerasimov is worse than a Party salesman, saying that the man claims to be a writer but hates them in actuality. He continues, saying that Gerasimov simply reads to see if writers wrote something dangerous or insulting and then denounces them, and then unnamed committees decide that the writer in question must be a threat to the Party. Lev suddenly stops talking, thinking that he has revealed too much. Sonya looks worried for Lev but Kolya looks impressed, and states that Lev's father was Abraham Beniov. Lev doesn't deny this, and Kolya says that he doesn't understand why Lev would want to hide that, since Abraham Beniov was a "real poet," and tells Lev to be proud of him. Lev snaps at Kolya, saying that he doesn't talk about his father with strangers.

Sonya, confused, says she isn't familiar with Lev's father and asks who he was. Kolya says that he was a great poet, and Lev corrects Kolya, saying his father always claimed to be "fair to middling." Kolya mentions one of Abraham Beniov's poems, which Lev says is the one included in anthologies. Sonya asks if Lev's father was "removed," and Lev nods.

The surgeon Timofei enters the apartment and joins Lev, Sonya, and Kolya at the stove. When he notices the chicken, Timofei pulls onions out of his pocket and says they'll have soup that night, but Kolya insists that the chicken is needed for eggs. Timofei looks confused and, as the argument continues, becomes irritated at Kolya and Lev's insistence that the chicken will lay eggs. Finally Timofei laughs and says that the chicken is a rooster and certainly won't lay eggs.

## CHAPTER 10

The soup they make tastes like dinners that hadn't been possible since before the siege began. Sonya had obtained a potato and traded some broth for vodka, and by midnight Sonya, Lev, Kolya, and Timofei are drunk and full. While Sonya and Kolya are occupied in the bedroom, Lev and Timofei play **chess**. It's obvious that Lev is very good, but when he remarks that he used to be better, Timofei teases him about his age and asks if he's shaving yet. Sonya gasps and laughs in the other room, and Lev pictures her naked body. Timofei says that if he had chicken soup every night he'd never need a woman again, and he promptly falls asleep.

Before dawn, Kolya wakes Lev and hands him a cup of tea. Timofei is still out cold, snoring. Kolya studies the **chessboard** and frowns, remarking that Lev is very good. Lev asks if he still wants to bet on the pictures of French girls, and Kolya replies that he should just give the pictures to Lev.

*Lev has essentially described what likely happened to his father after the publication of his book, and indicates that it was probably Gerasimov who is responsible for his father's arrest. Kolya's recognition of Lev's father's name indicates that his father really was a famous, or at least good and moderately well-known poet. The exchange about Lev's father again brings up the contrast between a kind of romanticism and realism. Now, though, it is Kolya who is being romantic, as he focuses on the excitement of having a famous poet for a father, but Lev is focused on the reality of his lost father, and so such romanticism merely makes him angry.*



*Here, it's indicated that being "removed" by the NKVD is something widespread and terrifying for everyone. However, notice that Abraham Beniov's poems still exist, which alludes to the power of literature as something that continues after a writer's death.*



*Lev, Sonya, and Kolya's lack of knowledge about chickens is played for humor here, but on a more serious note, the chicken means that they'll all be able to survive another day. The revelation about the chicken's sex also certainly knocks Kolya down a peg, humanizing him and indicating that he can make mistakes like everyone else.*



*Benioff is continuing to set up chess as an important thing for Lev and something that he's very good at. We're also reminded of Lev's youth again when Timofei asks if he's shaving yet. Even though Lev says he is, it's evidently not particularly obvious. Timofei also begins to get at the question of what is most important for survival. Here we're presented with yet another view to compare with Colonel Grechko's and Lev's.*



*Kolya seems to be willing to accept that Lev might be better at something than he is. By suggesting just giving the pictures to Lev, he effectively concedes defeat in their chess match, even though they haven't yet played.*



Kolya tells Lev to get his **boots** on, because they're going to Mga. There's enough authority in Kolya's voice that Lev has his boots laced even before he thinks to question the plan, but he realizes the absurdity of walking 50 kilometers to a town behind German lines for eggs. Kolya explains that the Germans are certainly keeping the poultry collective going, and explains that Mga will be easy to find since it's on the Moscow rail line.

Lev feels like he hates Kolya, who he thinks probably still stinks of sex, and who is currently adjusting his hat to a jaunty, heroic angle in the mirror. Kolya says that every peasant selling potatoes in the Haymarket brought them in from outside the city, and he asks Lev if he has a better idea. Lev doesn't, Kolya smiles, and the two discuss the fact that the whole thing is a very stupid joke.

Kolya says they have to leave now if they want to make it with daylight left, and Lev thinks that sleeping makes more sense than heading to Mga, but he knows he'll follow. Lev mentally considers that Kolya's confidence is pure to the point that it's the mark of a man accepting his destiny rather than just arrogance. Lev thinks that he himself was cursed with the pessimism of the Jews and the Russians, which he says are two of the gloomiest tribes, but thinks that maybe he has the talent to recognize the greatness in others even if he doesn't have greatness himself.

Lev follows Kolya to the front door, but before they leave, Lev insists they sit, since they're going on a journey, and Lev likes the traditions. Someone is hammering outside and Lev pictures a coffin maker. Lev looks at Kolya, who tells him that he won't let Lev die. Lev says that at the time he was 17 and stupid, and believed Kolya.

## CHAPTER 11

Kolya walks on a rail of the train tracks like it's a balance beam, and Lev trudges along behind. They pass a crew of women working to turn a post office into a defensive position, and Kolya indicates that one of the women has a great body, explaining to Lev that she has a dancer's posture. When Lev seems unconvinced, Kolya says that some night he'll take Lev backstage at the Mariinsky Theater and take advantage of his reputation—he mentions having slept with Galina Ulanova, a famous ballerina. Lev doesn't believe it, and Kolya decides he's being cruel and they should change the subject.

*Kolya is evidently a natural leader, even for something as obviously crazy as walking 50 kilometers (about 31 miles) through enemy territory and brutal cold. This plan also introduces a sense of danger, as Lev and Kolya will be going behind German lines, putting their lives even more at risk for this absurd task.*



*Lev is still jealous that Kolya is having sex and he isn't. By acknowledging the absurdity of the situation and the task itself, Lev and Kolya again engage with it as though it's a story, as in many ways it's almost too fantastical to be real.*



*As the novel progresses, Lev begins to consider a little more the state of being both Russian and Jewish. He attributes his fear and pessimism to being a part of both of these groups. However, despite his own pessimism and his annoyance at Kolya, it's implied that Lev is possibly in the company of a "great Russian" (Kolya, or perhaps others), and that maybe that's as close to greatness as Lev himself will ever get.*



*Lev, despite leaning on the luck that the traditions will hopefully bring, still sees death as the most likely outcome of their journey. However, we know from the framing story that Kolya is correct in this moment, so despite Lev's so-called stupidity for believing Kolya, he wasn't wrong to do so.*



*Again, Kolya is bragging about his sexual endeavors in order to create a sense of dominance and increased masculinity in comparison to Lev, and this works despite the fact that Lev doesn't entirely believe Kolya. We also see how Kolya consistently views women in terms of their sexuality and physicality, which is a way for him to emphasize his own power and agency.*



Kolya adopts his joke-telling accent and begins to tell a joke about three boys trying to steal chickens from a farmer. Lev refuses to play along, and Kolya asks if Lev is in love with Sonya, and Lev, annoyed, tells Kolya to finish his joke. Kolya reminds Lev about calculated neglect and finishes his joke. Lev doesn't laugh, and Kolya says that other people think it's funny.

Kolya asks if Lev knows why the town is called Mga. Lev suggests it's someone's initials, and Kolya says her name is Maria Gregorevna Apraksin, and one of the characters in **The Courtyard Hound** is based on her. Kolya explains her role in the story, and Lev asks what else Ushakovo wrote. Kolya says that he only wrote *The Courtyard Hound*, which was a failure according to critics. After the failure of that novel, Ushakovo began writing another one, but was growing more religious and, after becoming convinced that fiction is Satan's work, tossed his manuscript in the fire. Lev points out that that's what happened to Gogol, and Kolya insists that the particulars are very different.

Lev and Kolya see a group of dead bodies lying facedown in the snow, their **boots** and clothes stripped away, and their suitcases open next to them and emptied. Someone had also hacked off their buttocks. Lev says he didn't want to know how they'd died, but knows that they'd been dead a long time. Kolya tells no more jokes that morning.

Around noon, Lev and Kolya reach the edge of Leningrad's defenses. A sergeant approaches them and asks for their papers. Kolya hands the letter from the colonel to the sergeant and tries to make conversation, but the sergeant wants to know why Kolya isn't with his regiment. As the sergeant reads the letter, Kolya begins to sing, and the sergeant looks at him with respect and hands back the letter.

The sergeant apologizes for stopping Kolya and Lev, and says that he knows all about their mission organizing the partisans (guerrilla resistance fighters battling Germany behind enemy lines). Lev shares with the reader that the letter only says they're not to be detained, but that the newspapers are full of stories about organized partisans being trained by NKVD. Kolya matches the sergeant's tone, and the two discuss cutting off the German supply lines. The sergeant offers Lev and Kolya bread as they tell him they need to reach Mga before nightfall.

*When it comes to jokes, Lev can deny Kolya some of his attempts at power simply by refusing to engage or laugh at the jokes. Kolya, however, is undeterred, and brings the conversation back to his own superiority with the mention again of calculated neglect.*



*Whatever Kolya says, what Kolya describes Ushakovo doing is exactly what happened to the famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. This indicates that Kolya likely finds Gogol's story dramatic and enticing, and probably idolizes Gogol and the other writers whose work he's borrowing ideas from. This helps create a sense of the Russian literary canon that Kolya is presumably trying to join by writing *The Courtyard Hound* (which is later revealed to be his creation).*



*This passage mirrors the dead body that Lev saw in the canal when he and Kolya were walking to the giant's apartment. These passages serve to highlight the horrors of the siege and make very clear that death is everywhere—and the living can only survive by taking from the dead. The hacked-apart bodies may also be another gruesome intimation of cannibalism.*



*We're again reminded of the power that Colonel Grechko has over what seems like everyone in the Red Army. Kolya is reminded once more that he was accused of desertion, which continues to build a sense of curiosity in the reader as to why Kolya wasn't with his regiment.*



*The papers are evidently trying to tell stories to rally support and create a sense that they're doing something to fight the German army. Notice how the lieutenant jumps to this conclusion without asking any questions—this propaganda has obviously penetrated the army itself and can even provide them with a sense of hope and purpose.*



## CHAPTER 12

Kolya and Lev march through the woods outside of Leningrad. It's German-controlled territory, but there's no sign of the war at all. Lev finds himself happy, and thinks that Piter is a graveyard now. Kolya seems to feel the same way.

Kolya sees a scrap of paper and picks it up. It looks like a bank note, but it's obviously counterfeit. Kolya explains that the Germans drop counterfeit notes because it lowers the value of real money. Kolya flips the note over and reads the text on the other side, which is written by someone who obviously doesn't speak Russian. It guarantees safe return to "a free Russian" after the war. Kolya, smiling, says that the Russians invented propaganda and the Germans are just irritating the people they want to convert. He spears the note to a tree and lights it on fire, and he and Lev continue their march.

After an hour, Kolya asks Lev if Jews believe in the afterlife. Lev explains that it depends on the Jew; his father was an atheist and his mother's not actually Jewish. Kolya says he thinks he has "Gypsy" blood, which Lev declares entirely untrue. Kolya returns to the subject of the afterlife and says that the New Testament is very clear. Lev says that the underworld is called Sheol, and mentions one of his father's poems called "The Bars of Sheol."

Lev thinks that it seems odd to speak about his father, and that the words seem unsafe, even though he's in the middle of nowhere, but feels like he's happy to talk about his father and his work. Kolya asks what happens in Sheol, and Lev says that everyone goes there, good or bad, and it's dark and cold.

Kolya says that last week he saw a soldier who had lost his eyelids to frostbite, as well as his fingers, toes, and some of his nose. He says he saw the man sleeping with no way to shut his eyes. Kolya says that he'd rather be blind.

Both Lev and Kolya hear a howl. Kolya begins to follow the sound, and Lev follows Kolya through the snow. Lev spots tank tread marks that he knows aren't Russian as they reach the edge of a clearing, and gray and brown heaps are scattered across the snow. Lev thinks they're coats, but realizes they're dead dogs. Hearing another howl, Lev and Kolya spot a sheepdog dragging itself across the field by its front legs.

*Once they're outside of Leningrad, Lev and Kolya don't encounter any signs of the war, and it seems strange to consider that the land is controlled by Germans.*



*Kolya is trying to insert logic into the war by analyzing the Germans' poor strategy. He alludes to the power of Soviet propaganda, which we've seen evidence of throughout the text. The egregious misspellings and poor grammar on the counterfeit note are played for humor, although the undertones and implications of it are also very sinister.*



*Lev is finally accepting Kolya's curiosity as just a part of him rather than viewing it as offensive. While Lev is finally discussing his father, we don't actually get any clear indication of what Lev himself believes. Still, we've seen how even being culturally Jewish has caused problems for both him and his father.*



*Notice how Lev's description of Sheol (the afterlife described in the Old Testament) mirrors the Russian winter that he and Kolya are currently enduring. This alludes to the idea that war, and the winter accompanying it, is hell on earth.*



*The reader is reminded again of how horrific the war and the cold are. Kolya has seen horrendous things and believes at this point that he'll have to live with what he's seen forever.*



*The horrors of the war continue and evidently aren't unique to the humans involved. While it's obvious that something terrible has taken place in the clearing, the cruelty is magnified when they notice that one dog is still alive and certainly suffering.*



Kolya instructs Lev to follow him to the still-living dog, telling him to not get too close to any of the dead dogs. As they approach the sheepdog, Lev sees boxes strapped to the dogs' backs. Kolya explains that the boxes are mines, and says that the dogs are trained to find food under tanks, starved, and then turned loose on German tanks. The Germans, however, clearly knew all about this plan, as the dogs have all been shot and there's no evidence that anything in the clearing has exploded.

*While the Russian plan was good (if inhumane and cruel) in theory, in practice, it was all for naught. This points to the idea that during wartime, some things that people must do to survive or win really work to rob them of some of their humanity.*



Kolya asks Lev for his knife and approaches the sheepdog, who has finally given up on reaching the woods. Kolya kneels besides the dog, tells the dog he's a good boy, and slits the dog's throat. After a minute of silence, Kolya cleans the blade on the snow and says that they need to walk fast to make up for the lost time.

*Kolya is once again shown to be kind, offering the dog release from its suffering. However, he and Lev have to move on quickly, both physically and emotionally, and detach from what they've seen.*



## CHAPTER 13

The detour to the clearing ruined any chances Lev and Kolya had for making it to Mga by nightfall, and they walk fast to try to beat the cold. As the sun begins to set, Lev sees four German airplanes racing towards Leningrad, and he thinks they look harmless. The war seems abstract outside of Leningrad, and Lev feels guilty and selfish for feeling safe outside the city.

*Consider the fact that while Lev is indeed safe from the bombers targeting Leningrad, the woods outside of Leningrad are controlled by Germans, meaning that the woods aren't really safe either. However, the cold at this point is more pressing than the threat of Germans.*



Lev and Kolya are walking past Berezovka, a name Lev is familiar with because it was the location of one of the clashes between the Nazis and the Red Army. Lev tells the reader how the newspapers must be read in order to glean the hidden truth. If the newspapers say that the Red Army "withdrew to reserve strength," that means they lost the battle, while if they "gladly sacrificed themselves," it had been a massacre. Berezovka had been a massacre. The village itself has been torched.

*Despite the censorship, those who know how to read the newspapers between the lines can still learn some truth about how the war is progressing. Notice that Lev doesn't say how victories are handled in the papers, which makes the reader question if there have even been any victories to speak of.*



As they walk around the edge of the village, Kolya says the Germans are fools, since the best fighters in history gave their enemies a way out. He continues, saying that with the Germans, you die whether or not you fight or surrender. Lev thinks that this assessment, while true, misses the fact that the Germans don't care about embracing the "inferior races." Lev says to the reader that the Russian people are a "mongrel" people shaped by years of invasion and lost battles and haven't adapted to brute reality, unlike the Germans, who simply believe they're playing a role in human evolution. Lev responds to Kolya, though, by mentioning that the French got a way out, which Kolya ridicules.

*Kolya is again trying to look at the war logically, and Lev finally explains to the reader how silly that attempt truly is, since the German goal isn't logical. Consider how Lev himself—with his low self esteem and cautious, undecided nature—fits into his assessment of the Russian people as a "mongrel people" who are who they are because of many years of conquest.*





Lev changes the subject to the disappearing light, and Kolya says they can build a dugout. Lev thinks he can't keep up much longer, and can't feel his fingertips even in his thick wool mittens. He asks Kolya if they have a shovel, and Kolya replies that they have hands and a knife. Lev, unimpressed, says they need to get inside, brushing off Kolya's attempt to jokingly draft him into the army and sleep outside.

Suddenly Kolya puts his hand on Lev's chest and gestures to a Russian soldier standing with his back to them, 100 meters away. They creep closer, and at 50 meters, Kolya shouts at the soldier to not shoot. The soldier doesn't turn, and Kolya and Lev walk closer. The soldier is standing far too still, knee deep in the snow. As Lev and Kolya approach, they realize the soldier has been dead for days. A wood sign with the German phrase "Workers of all lands unite!" hangs around his neck. Lev removes it and Kolya tries the man's gun, which doesn't work, but Kolya finds a pouch of bullets under the coat. Lev and Kolya try to pull the man out of the snow, but he's frozen to the ground, and they soon move on.

East of Berezovka, Lev and Kolya spot a farmhouse with lit windows and smoke coming out of the chimney. They bicker about the merits of approaching the farmhouse. Kolya says it's a bad idea, and Lev counters that it's better than freezing. Kolya finally admits that they're not going to make it to Mga, because he realized hours ago that they're not going the right way. After more arguing, Lev starts walking to the farmhouse alone, his legs beginning to give out.

Kolya catches up to Lev and says they don't have to be stupid about it. He leads Lev behind the house, next to a huge stack of firewood. Kolya peers into the window and they hear American music playing inside. Lev asks who's in the house, but Kolya is silent, and Lev thinks that it must be something entirely unexpected. He joins Kolya at the window. Inside are four teenage girls in nightshirts, dancing to the music. Lev expects Kolya to be happy at what they've stumbled upon, but he looks grim and angry. He leads Lev around to the front of the house.

*Kolya's optimism is hilariously misguided, and Lev's pessimism wins. It's becoming very clear that Lev and Kolya have a great deal of respect for the Russian winter and understand that it can kill them as easily as the Germans can.*



*This sad scene functions in multiple ways, as we see the barbarity and cruelty of the Nazis (hanging this ironic sign with a Soviet slogan on the man's dead body) as well as the cruelty and danger of the winter. We also see how the dead are used to sustain the living, as Kolya will likely be able to use the bullets he found on the soldier. Also note that just because the soldier is Russian doesn't mean he's friendly, and Lev and Kolya must be very careful in their approach before they realize the soldier is dead.*



*The reader is left to wonder if Kolya had another plan in mind when he reveals that he and Lev aren't going to make it to Mga. The house here, while a refuge from the cold, represents a great deal of danger. Whether there are Germans inside or not, whoever's inside is alive because the Germans want them to be alive.*



*The firewood is an indicator of the immense privilege of whoever's inside the house. Kolya understands immediately what's going on, while it will take Lev a few minutes to catch up and realize that the girls are being kept as sex slaves. Notice too that Kolya is angry at women being treated this way, providing clearer evidence that his perception of sex, while often manipulative and arrogant, never approaches the inhumanity of a situation like this. He often describes women as "conquests," but clearly still sees them as human beings with dignity and value.*



Kolya knocks on the door and one of the girls appears in the window. She tells Kolya he shouldn't be here, and Kolya instructs her to open the door, holding his pistol so she can see. After conferring with the other girls, the girl lets Lev and Kolya inside and into the great room. The youngest girl looks ready to cry as Kolya asks when "they" are coming. When the girls attempt to sidestep the question, Kolya chambers a bullet dramatically, and one of the girls says "they" come around midnight. Kolya asks if the Germans come and have the girls take care of them after shelling Piter.

Lev says that in some ways, he's very stupid, even though he feels he's more intelligent than average. He tells the reader about how smart his father was as well, and says that his father would've known what was happening in the farmhouse immediately, but Lev is takes a long time to realize why the girls are here and who's feeding them.

A blond girl looks angry, and asks Kolya where the Red Army has been and why they didn't protect her family when the Germans shot them and burned the town. She continues, saying that if she were a general, all her soldiers would've died before they let a single Nazi into Russia, and Kolya puts his pistol away and says he's glad she's not the general.

## CHAPTER 14

Lev and Kolya soon make peace with the girls. The girls haven't spoken to anyone but Germans in months, and they have no radio. They pepper Lev and Kolya with questions about if certain landmarks in Leningrad still stand. Lev and Kolya don't ask much about the girls, since the story is obvious: when Germans invade, men are slaughtered, women are sent to work as slaves, others flee, and the prettiest girls are kept for the Nazis' pleasure.

The girls give Lev and Kolya tea, bread, and baked potatoes with butter. Kolya asks if the soldiers ever bring eggs, and Galina says they did once. One girl, Lara, explains that the officers are in a house near the lake, and Kolya again asks about eggs. The girls laugh at what seems a joke.

Lara asks if Lev and Kolya are organizing partisans, and Kolya offers a swaggering non-answer that doesn't impress the girls. Kolya suggests to Lev that the house on the lake might be a good target to pick off Wehrmacht officers, but Nina, another girl, says the officers aren't Wehrmacht, they're Einsatzgruppen.

*Despite the fact that Lev and Kolya certainly don't want to do the girls any harm, the girls are extremely aware that helping the boys puts their wellbeing and their very lives in danger. They are allowed to survive at this point to keep the German soldiers who visit them happy, and their tenuous existence is dependent on being able to continue to do that.*



*We're again reminded of Lev's youth, which is probably partially to blame for his late understanding of the situation. Notice that Lev thinks of his father in times like this and compares himself to his father, indicating that his father is still an important influence in Lev's life and strongly affects his sense of self.*



*Despite the fact that these girls are well fed and warm, they're not exempt from the horrors of the war, even aside from the sexual abuse they're no doubt experiencing. They've seen their families murdered and their homes burnt, and feel rightfully angry at the Red Army.*



*In Lev's description, the war doesn't just encompass killing and starvation; it at times necessitates psychological gymnastics like the girls must be experiencing as they grapple with their fates.*



*We're reminded that the hunt for eggs seems like a hilarious joke, and forced to remember that while it is absurd in every way, it's still a life-or-death matter for Lev and Kolya.*



*Despite the fact that the girls haven't been a part of Russian society for months, they're still aware that the NKVD are supposedly organizing partisans. This again alludes to how pervasive the newspapers' stories are.*



Lev explains to the reader that Russians had gotten a crash course in German since the invasion, and at first Einsatzgruppen didn't sound as sinister as some of the other German words. However, the Einsatzgruppen are Nazi death squads, made up of handpicked killers from other branches of the military. They follow behind combat divisions and hunt Communists, intellectuals, Jews, and other targets.

Nina explains that the Einsatzgruppen don't generally bother with bombing cities, but the soldiers who visit them make bets on who can hit different buildings in Leningrad for fun. Lev thinks of the Kirov again and wonders if Vera, Oleg, and Grisha are dead because an officer gave the wrong coordinates and hit the Kirov instead of the Winter Palace.

Kolya asks how many officers come. Olesya, a girl who doesn't speak, takes plates out of the room, and Nina finally answers that it's usually between two and four, and that they drive, and nearly always come at night. Kolya asks why the girls don't walk away, citing the fact that he and Lev left Piter at dawn and made it to the farmhouse. Nina, offended, asks if he thinks the Germans are stupid and would just let them walk away. Lara says to tell them about Zoya. Galina, another girl, leaves the room.

Lara says that the Germans loved Zoya, and that six men came for Zoya for every one that came for her (Lara). Zoya was only 14, had seen the Germans murder her parents, and was very afraid. She was brought to the house at the end of November with the rest of them, but panicked. Lara says that every night after the soldiers left, Zoya would cry for hours, and there was nothing they could do to help her. After a week, the other girls started to ignore her, and Zoya suddenly stopped crying. She was silent for three days, and the next day, the other girls didn't even notice that Zoya had left.

When the officers came that night calling for Zoya, they didn't believe Lara or Nina when they said that they didn't know where she was. The officers went out looking for her. Lara says that Abendroth, the man who gives orders, led the hunt. He always got Zoya first when he came, and then would drink plum schnapps and sometimes plays **chess** with Lara. Nina says that Abendroth is the worst of them.

*The Einsatzgruppen are essentially some of the most sinister and feared members of the German army, as they do the more personal "cleanup" work after combat divisions have taken over an area. The fact that the girls are being kept by the Einsatzgruppen makes the house even more dangerous for Lev and Kolya.*



*Bombing the city is sport for the Einsatzgruppen. Considering the bombing that Leningrad is experiencing in terms of a game serves to further dehumanize the Nazis while simultaneously allowing the Nazis to distance themselves from the tragedy.*



*The Nazis are obviously keeping the girls here through psychological means, as the door to the farmhouse was unlocked. While Kolya seems to think he's being entirely logical, Galina's reaction to the mention of Zoya indicates that there's definitely more to the situation than what Kolya and Lev realize. This creates a sense of foreboding for the reader as the tale begins.*



*The reader is asked to think back to Lev's statement that one must engage with the war by essentially either not thinking about it at all, or treating it as a story. In her fear and in light of the trauma, Zoya was likely unable to do that and unable to mentally escape. The other girls ostracized her because they recognized that disengaging from what was happening to them would be the only way to get through it.*



*This is the first the reader hears of Abendroth, who becomes the primary antagonist of the story. Even before Zoya's story is fully told, it's clear that he is both powerful and evil. Benioff also mentions that Abendroth plays chess, which is something that will be important later.*



After a few hours the Nazis returned with Zoya, who was dirty, bruised, and naked. Zoya had taken Lara's coat and boots, and Abendroth told Lara to get the saw. Nina begins crying as Lara continues the story. The officers held Zoya down. Abendroth made Lara give him the saw and then made her, Nina, Galina, and Olesya stay in the room and watch as he sawed Zoya's feet off, one at a time, while Zoya screamed. When he was done, Abendroth stood, bowed, and said that this is what happens to girls who walk away. The girls tried to wrap Zoya's legs, but there was too much blood.

*While it appears as though there was never a question of Abendroth's authority, notice that here he makes a show of performing his power for the Nazis as well as the other girls. He leaves no room to question his power, as he's even able to make Lara complicit in what he did to Zoya. In a more overarching way, Abendroth's actions demonstrate the utter cruelty and depravity of which humanity is capable.*



After a few minutes of silence, Kolya confirms with the girls that the German soldiers come at midnight. Lev thinks he won't be able to sleep after hearing about Zoya. Kolya tells Lara and Nina that tomorrow they need to head for the city, and the farmhouse won't be safe for them after tonight.

*Everyone is visibly shaken after hearing about Zoya. Kolya's conception of himself as a hero shows here, as he makes it clear that he's going to attempt to kill Abendroth and (hopefully) rescue the girls and avenge Zoya.*



## CHAPTER 15

Lara leads Lev and Kolya to a bedroom in the back of the house. She and Kolya come up with a code to signal to Kolya how many Germans come that night. After she leaves, Kolya disassembles his pistol, inspects it, and puts it back together. Lev asks if he's ever shot anybody, to which Kolya replies that he doesn't know if he has, explaining further that he's shot his rifle but doesn't know if he's hit anyone, but he'll know when he shoots Abendroth.

*Again, we see how detached many soldiers must be, as Kolya describes not knowing if he's truly killed anyone. However, hearing about Zoya apparently galvanized Kolya's belief in the war effort, Russian superiority, and possibility of really fighting for a good cause.*



Lev suggests they leave, and says he can't stop thinking about Zoya. Kolya instructs him to think of her when he stabs Abendroth, but Lev says he doesn't think he can do it. Kolya asks what the record is for the longest time between bowel movements, deciding it's been 11 days now. Lev says that they should take the girls and head back to the city, but Kolya says that he and Lev are like two of Piter's bricks, in that you can't burn or starve a brick. After a minute Lev asks Kolya where he heard that, to which Kolya says it was his lieutenant, and he asks Lev if he's not inspired.

*Remember that Lev is a very fearful person at his core, and being confronted with true and dangerous evil in the form of Abendroth is understandably very frightening. Kolya's repetition of his lieutenant's words brings to mind the idea of Party-approved propaganda or manufactured phrases, as it seems very contrived and doesn't impress Lev. Yet clearly many people derive courage or a sense of meaning from such clichés.*



Kolya says to forget about the bricks and again brings up his supposed "Gypsy" blood, saying he can read the future and that he and Lev are going to kill some Nazis and find eggs. Kolya continues, saying that he'll make the colonel invite them to his daughter's wedding, and says he's truly in love with her and if they married, she'd have to do nothing but skate naked on the Neva.

*Kolya is trying to lift Lev's spirits and take his mind off of the horror of what's happening around them. This is another way that they're engaging with the war like it's unreal or a story, by using things like thinking about the colonel's daughter skating naked to escape into their own heads for a moment.*



Lev forgets his fear for a moment, but it soon comes back to him stronger than ever. He tells the reader he fears shame, Kolya dying, and pain like Zoya suffered, but mostly death. He continues that he never understood when people were scared of spiders or public speaking more than death.

*While Lev is scared of many things, he's scared most of losing his own life. Consider that we know that Lev lives after the conclusion of his story, so the reader is aware that Lev will avoid his greatest fear during the war.*



Kolya leans down from the top bunk at Lev, looking concerned, and Lev muses that Kolya is the only one who knows he's still alive and afraid. Kolya drops a deck of cards into Lev's lap and says they'll cheer him up. Lev looks through the deck, which is the deck of sexy French women Kolya had offered to play for in a game of **chess**. Kolya says that after tonight he and Lev are going to be heroes for the girls in the house, and asks Lev which one he wants. Lev suggests Galina. After a moment, Kolya makes Lev promise to talk to Galina after tonight.

*At this point, Lev and Kolya have become best friends by necessity—they're all the other has by now. Kolya is doing his best to comfort Lev, but he's also continuing to assert his dominance and masculinity by reminding Lev that he's less experienced sexually than Kolya is.*



Lev asks about how talking to Galina fits in with calculated neglect, and Kolya explains the difference between ignoring a woman and enticing her with mystery.

*Remember that the girls didn't seem particularly impressed by Lev or Kolya (and it's obviously understandable that they wouldn't be looking for romance, considering their traumatic situation), so this makes it seem like Kolya is simply trying to comfort Lev.*



Lev and Kolya's conversation is interrupted by two clangs of a spoon against a pot as the Nazis begin to arrive, earlier than expected. Four more clangs on the pot signal six total, and they hear car doors slamming shut. Kolya says that they'll let the Nazis come in and have a few drinks. Lev agrees, terrified, and wonders if the girls will help them.

*Finally Lev is going to come face to face with possible death, his greatest fear. Kolya, however, remains calm and logical, and wants to use the Nazis expectations against them. Once again he acts like he thinks a hero in a story should act, which seems to give him real-life courage.*



Kolya and Lev are startled by unexpected rifle shots and the sound of panicked German shouting. Kolya runs to the great room where the girls are lying on the floor, protecting their faces from shattering glass. They continue to hear bullets hit the house as Kolya asks Lara who's shooting at the Nazis. She doesn't know, and Kolya begins to creep towards the front door with his pistol. Lev follows with his knife, thinking about how strange the situation is and the absurdity of wondering how stupid he looks with his knife when everyone else has a gun.

*In his fear, Lev mentally disengages from the situation and can only concentrate on thinking about how he looks and how absurd and silly the situation really is. While Lev certainly has a point (a knife wouldn't do much good against opponents with guns), this moment creates a tone of fantasy and reminds the reader that the situation is truly absurd (and possibly not even real at all).*





As Kolya is about to open the door, Lev notes that it's quiet outside. Kolya opens the door a tiny bit and they see Einsatzkommandos facedown in the snow. A bullet flies between Kolya and Lev's heads, sending them backwards. Kolya yells through the window that he's Russian, to which a voice responds that anyone with a few years of Russian could say that. Kolya, laughing, yells a complicated and overly sexual phrase out the window, which is met by silence.

The voice outside asks what weapons Lev and Kolya have and instructs them to step outside. Nina, who crept into the hallway during the exchange, asks if the Nazis are dead. She looks worried when Lev says all six are dead, but tells Kolya that whoever is out there won't trust him. Lara yells through the window to please not shoot Lev and Kolya. Kolya steps outside and Lev thinks about recounting this adventure to Vera and Grisha—but then he remembers that they're dead.

As Lev steps outside, he thinks about how heroes and fast sleepers can switch off their thoughts, but cowards and insomniacs must deal with incessant brain babble. Kolya doesn't seem to be thinking at all. A voice from behind a hay bale instructs Kolya to shoot each of the Germans in the head to prove he's a Russian. Kolya agrees and moves through the snow, shooting the soldiers one by one. When he's done, a dozen men appear out of their hiding places. Most look like farmers, and some have Red Army **boots** while other walk in felt shoes. The leader's name is Korsakov, and he approaches Lev and Kolya while the others search the Germans.

Korsakov asks why Lev and Kolya are here, and Lara explains that they were going to kill the Germans. Korsakov tells Lara she can stop being a whore and to go inside and put clothes on. Kolya tells Korsakov he's being unkind, but Korsakov brushes him off and asks Kolya if he's a deserter. Kolya explains that their papers from Colonel Grechko are in the house. Lev notices that one of the men next to Korsakov is actually a woman.

Korsakov tells Lev to not look shocked, as the woman, Vika, is their best shot. Kolya begins a conversation with Vika about female snipers and Vika's German rifle. After a minute, Vika declares that Korsakov and Kolya are falling in love with each other, and heads for the farmhouse. Lev wonders what she looks like under all her clothes, and Kolya says that Lev has a crush. Korsakov laughs and wishes Lev luck, telling him to remember that Vika can shoot out his eyes from half a kilometer away.

*As Lev and Kolya begin to make more contact with Germans, the concept of language will become very important. Kolya demonstrates here the simple fact that one of the best ways to demonstrate mastery of a language is by being able to appropriately use slang words. However, it's still a very tense moment, and nobody knows yet who exactly is outside.*



*Again, Lev is engaging with his adventure as though it's a story, and thus essentially disengaging from it. However, this instance of doing so is unsuccessful in really protecting Lev at all, as he's reminded of the Kirov's dead residents and experiences the hurt and pain from remembering that trauma all over again.*



*Lev's mind remains fully occupied with the process of considering his own mind, that of Kolya, and the narrative in which they've found themselves. Lev and Kolya, as well as the reader, are likely realizing that they've finally stumbled upon the fabled Russian partisans that Lev and Kolya are supposedly organizing. Notice the explicit mention of the partisans' different footwear. This indicates the vast differences between various partisans, who are not an official unit like the army.*



*Korsakov is using his power as a man and a potentially dangerous one to bully Lara. This underscores the fact that no matter which men arrive at the farmhouse, Lara and the other girls are at their mercy, and truly are not able to make their own decisions. Their wellbeing depends on the whims of their male visitors.*



*Despite the fact that Vika is fighting with the partisans and appears powerful, at this early point she's not exactly allowed agency and an opinion—just a degree of respect and even fear from others. Lev's crush on her is validated by the men around them but not necessarily reciprocated by Vika herself, indicating that the power here to initiate doesn't necessarily include her; she is just considered a monolithic (if fearsome) figure.*



## CHAPTER 16

Korsakov gives his men an hour to warm up in the farmhouse. Vika lounges on a sofa, looking at one of the taxidermy animals on the wall, and Lev sits across the room, pretending not to watch her. He enjoys a graphic daydream of having sex with her, and wonders about this departure from the usually chaste fantasies he used to have of Vera. Lev tells the reader that his fantasies usually end before sex, because he's afraid of sex and doesn't understand how it works, and never had anyone to ask.

Nina, Galina, Lara, and Olesya are serving the partisans. One of them pulls Galina into his lap and harasses her about her Nazi "boyfriend." Vika tells the man to leave Galina alone, and Lev wishes he'd said that first to impress Vika. After a halfhearted jab at Vika, the partisan pushes Galina away.

Lev approaches Vika and sits down next to her on the couch. He asks her if her father was a hunter and taught her to shoot. Vika answers no, and mostly ignores Lev. He tries to desperately continue the conversation and asks her about her German gun. He finally offers her his German knife, but his explanation of getting it from an already-dead German is unimpressive. Vika offers Lev her own knife, which is slender but very sharp. She explains that this style of knife is given to Finnish boys when they come of age, but she bought hers.

Still trying to keep conversation going, Lev compliments Vika on her sniping of the Einsatzkommandos outside. Vika says the men outside aren't Einsatzkommandos, and interrogates Lev on why he's at the farmhouse, asking if one of the girls there is his girlfriend. Lev, trying to be mysterious, keeps his orders secret. Vika shares that she's looking for Einsatz, particularly Abendroth, and Lev shares that Lara said that Abendroth is in a house by the lake. Vika goes to Lara and presumably asks for confirmation.

Korsakov and Kolya enter the great room, friends now. Kolya sits down next to Lev and says that they're moving out, despite the fact that they haven't slept since Sonya's apartment last night. Across the room, Vika speaks quietly to Korsakov as the rest of the partisans get ready. When Lev suggests they steal the German car and drive the girls back to Piter, Kolya laughs and says they're going with the partisans to the house on the lake.

*Lev's fear once again dictates how he conducts his life, but we see that he's beginning to mature and overtake his fears. Additionally, the reader is asked to compare Lev's fantasies and use them to mark his growth. We also see another way that not having a father has affected Lev, as he hasn't had anyone in his life to ask about sex since it became relevant to him (presumably his mother wasn't available or willing).*



*The reader is once again reminded that the girls are at the mercy of whoever has the power to keep them alive. For them the enemy is all powerful men, not just Nazis or Russians.*



*Vika is beginning to assert her power over Lev. Regardless of how the other men treat her, Vika provides clues that she's in charge of her own life—buying a knife instead of receiving it as a rite of passage shifts the control of deciding when one has reached adulthood to the person in question, rather than his or her (often patriarchal) community. Lev is also growing, as he's facing his fear of women by talking to Vika.*



*Lev is trying to remember what Kolya's been telling him about the difference between calculated neglect and mystery, although it doesn't appear to be working. It's also indicated that Abendroth is a more powerful and important figure than was previously let on, if the partisans are actively looking for him. We're also reminded that Lev is very inexperienced, as he didn't recognize that the dead Germans aren't Einsatz.*



*Kolya is capable of charming almost everyone he meets, as evidenced by his ability to charm even a man who an hour ago wanted to kill him. We see that Vika is possibly very powerful within this group of partisans, given her conversation with Korsakov, and Lev once again proves his youth and inexperience with his suggestion.*



## CHAPTER 17

On Korsakov's orders, Lev, Kolya and the partisans walk single file in the snow, nine paces between each person. Lev, fighting extreme exhaustion, falls in and out of consciousness. He considers that the situation must not be real, and thinks that they're mice in the snow, looking for a sorcerer, hunted by giant black cats. Lev trips but doesn't lose his footing.

Lev explains to the reader that Lara, Nina, Galina, and Olesya left the farmhouse when the partisans did. Since Abendroth had taken their coats and boots after Zoya ran, the girls had to layer sweaters and leggings. Kolya and Lev kissed their cheeks at the doorway and the girls, rather than heading to Leningrad, headed south, in high spirits despite the poor odds.

Lev realizes he's been falling asleep when Kolya suddenly appears beside him. Kolya says he'll walk with Lev to keep him awake, saying he won't take orders from Korsakov. He turns the conversation to Vika, explaining to Lev that redheads (Vika has red hair) are "demons" in bed and hate men, thanks to the fact that they're descended from Vikings who raped Russians.

Lev confirms that they're marching to the house on the lake to steal eggs from the Einsatzgruppe, but Kolya amends that to add that they're going to kill the Einsatz because they need to be killed. Lev doesn't reply, and thinks that Kolya is very much a true believer in the Russian cause, but isn't wrong about the Einsatzgruppe. Lev thinks that he just doesn't want to destroy the Einsatz himself, and considers that while the story of his quest would've seemed a great adventure a week ago, he now wishes he'd evacuated with his mother and sister (Taisya).

Kolya brings up a scene from **The Courtyard Hound**, making the joke again that Lev hasn't read it, which Lev finds comforting. Kolya recites a passage and Lev compliments it, asking if Kolya has the entire book memorized. Lev then asks what Kolya writes in his journal, and shares a theory that Kolya is in fact writing *The Courtyard Hound*. Kolya demurs, but it becomes clear that Lev is correct, and Kolya cites Lev's father as inspiration. Lev asks why Kolya didn't tell the truth at first, and Kolya replies that he thought they were both going to die in the Crosses so it didn't matter what he said.

*This is an extreme example of how the characters engage with fiction in order to maintain a degree of sanity. Lev is grappling with the thought that this is all ridiculous and a wild goose chase of sorts, which in a way his journey really is.*



*The fate of the girls is left mostly to the reader's imagination, but it's treated as likely that they won't make it to wherever they're heading. However, their story ends on a more optimistic note, now that they've at least achieved some degree of freedom.*



*Kolya is certainly testing the boundaries of the friendship he's struck with Korsakov, but we also see how his friendship with Lev has grown and developed. He again reminds Lev and the reader of his sexual experience and the history of conquest that shaped the Russian people.*



*Here, Lev continues to grapple with his thoughts on the relative good or evil of the Soviet regime. It's undeniable that the Germans, and the Einsatz in particular, are awful and need to be stopped as Kolya suggests. However, Lev is still having trouble associating himself with the side that should represent good when it's also the side that robbed him of his father.*



*This is a defining moment for Lev and Kolya's friendship, as it's the first time that Kolya becomes truly vulnerable in front of Lev. Kolya experiences fear, just like everyone else, but similar to how Lev fears his own death most of all, Kolya fears being embarrassed or mocked. We again see the power that Lev's father has even in death. In a way, he's now mentoring Kolya as well as Lev through his work, which continues after his death. It's also noteworthy to learn that Kolya really did think he would die in the Crosses, despite his rather nonchalant attitude (in Lev's perception) at the time.*



Lev asks what Kolya was doing that night if he wasn't defending his thesis on **The Courtyard Hound**, but Kolya only says that it's complicated. Vika asks them if Lev and Kolya are going to have sex in the bushes, and calls them out for not walking in line appropriately. Kolya outs Lev as a Jew, and Vika calls Lev the first dumb Jew she's met, shoving them back to their places in line.

*Kolya still isn't ready to be completely vulnerable in front of Lev, leaving some degree of mystery despite this new closeness. The reader is reminded once again that Lev isn't able to escape the fact that he's Jewish simply by not practicing the religion. This is also the second time that Vika makes a joke about her male comrades being homosexual—it seems that she must act especially aggressive and hyper-masculine in order to assert herself as a figure worthy of respect in the male-dominated world of warfare.*



Lev thinks about the revelation that Kolya is writing **The Courtyard Hound**, and finds he's not angry. He thinks that Kolya fears embarrassment most of all. Lev tells the reader that his father had many writer friends who gathered at his house to debate and share their work. Lev describes how the drunk poets would sometimes stand and recite a poem as he watched from the hallway, eight years old. Usually the response was modest approval, and occasionally the poet received a "Bravo!", but more commonly they had to deal with silent disdain. The poet would stay long enough to not seem a coward and then leave, the remaining poets joking about the horrific poem. Lev thinks that Kolya protected himself by inventing the author Ushakovo, allowing him to test his work without fear of that silent disdain.

*Lev has been around creative individuals his entire life thanks to his father, so he has an understanding already of how they function in the world with regards to their creative work. He describes the creative group his father was part of as relatively cutthroat and not necessarily a safe space for budding writers. It's implied that that this kind of a world and reaction is likely what Kolya would have experienced had he been upfront about writing The Courtyard Hound—or at least what he fears would happen. Keep in mind how Lev notes that the poets drank; this will be important later.*



Lev feels more awake after his conversation with Kolya. He wonders how the light of the stars works compared to flashlights, and why the sky isn't bright all the time. Lev finally runs into Kolya's back. Vika is on top of a boulder and calls down that the Nazis are burning villages. Lev explains that the Germans promised to kill 30 Russians for every German soldier killed, and were following through with that. Korsakov mutters that they're no longer heading for the house on the lake, since they've already found the Einsatz, out hunting for the partisans.

*While Lev isn't experiencing quite the delusional fantasy that he was earlier, his scientific musings border on hallucination, alluding again to how tired he is and how he must experience some things from a certain distance to remain present and sane. We also see more the great violence of the war as the Nazis burn entire villages.*



## CHAPTER 18

Dawn draws closer, and Lev, Kolya, and the partisans head for a safe house near the lake. As they walk they pass another burning village, and Lev wonders how the intense violence can look so beautiful. They hear machine guns firing and keep walking.

*The sound of the machine guns is supposed to indicate that the Nazis are massacring the villagers. This ties back to the extreme and senseless violence of the war, but also how beauty can be found in even the most brutal conditions.*



When they reach the safe house, one of the partisans starts a fire and they all crowd around it. Lev again fantasizes about Vika and wonders if he's the only one who is attracted to her. When the fire is warm enough, Lev lies down and falls asleep nearly immediately, but is soon woken by Kolya asking if Lev is mad at him, and apologizing for lying to Lev. Lev asks Kolya to let him sleep.

Kolya asks Lev if he wants to know the truth about why Kolya left his battalion. Lev says Kolya can tell him tomorrow, but Kolya shares anyway. He says that he hadn't been with a girl in four months, and after a week without sex he can't concentrate. There was a party planned for New Year's Eve and he figured it'd be easy to sneak out and see one of his female friends in Piter. When he arrived at her apartment, he was told that she'd been dead for a month. When he tried the apartment of another woman her husband answered, and he ended up across town to see a "professional." The woman allowed Kolya to pay with bread.

By the time Kolya had finished, he'd missed his ride back to the battalion by hours, but figured getting back wouldn't be difficult. An NKVD patrol stopped him, though, and they weren't impressed by Kolya's lack of papers and attempt to appeal to their humanity, so they took him to the Crosses. Lev asks how the first girl died, and Kolya suggests starvation.

Lev and Kolya are silent for a moment and Lev asks Kolya why it's dark at night. Kolya replies that it's an excellent question and then falls fast asleep. Lev falls asleep an hour later.

## CHAPTER 19

Before noon, the partisan standing guard wakes the group and says that the Nazis are coming. Lev, Kolya, and the partisans run from the cabin as they hear German voices shouting. Lev thinks that he's becoming an animal driven by fear, the warm snow sucking at his boots.

*For once in his life, Lev falls asleep quickly but is thwarted by Kolya. This reversal (as well as Kolya's newfound vulnerability) is somewhat humorous, and provides some lightness to a very serious and potentially deadly part of Lev and Kolya's journey.*



*Finally Kolya opens up to Lev fully about his life and desires. While Kolya's story is a somewhat humorous and desperate tale of desire, sex, and relationships, and the reader is fully expected to find it funny, parts of it remain deeply sad, particularly the discovery that the woman he was going to see first had died. Notice that Kolya doesn't spend any time sharing how he felt or feels about her death. He's thus humanized further when the reader realizes his youthful selfishness and narrow-mindedness.*



*Lev picks up on Kolya's omission of information about the first woman who died. Kolya's tone could indicate that he maybe doesn't care that much about her, but it could also reference back to the necessity of disengaging from the horrors of life to survive.*



*The end to the conversation provides the reader with another lighter note, when Kolya answers and immediately falls so deeply asleep, leaving Lev awake once more.*



*This entire scene is a very lucid experience for Lev as he struggles with the very real possibility that he could die at any minute.*





Lev says that when he was nine, Communists from France visited Piter, and the streets were spruced up for them. Lev had been watching with Oleg and Grisha as workmen poured fresh tar onto the street outside the Kirov. Silently, the three took off their shoes and ran across the street, leaving footprints in the soft tar. It took Lev's mother an hour to scrub the tar off his feet, but his father smiled at the trails of footprints in the road from the window. Lev says that running through melting snow and wet tar are entirely different, but somehow the memories exist together.

As Lev runs, he sees a partisan shot down. He thinks that right now, had a German caught him and asked his name, he wouldn't be able to answer. Korsakov turns to shoot at the Germans and is shot in the jaw. Lev keeps running down into a gully and turns to follow the stream. When he has to stop he hides behind a tree and peers up the hill, where three people are jogging towards him. They turn out to be Kolya, Vika, and a partisan called Markov. Lev is paralyzed by fear and can't call or wave to them, but Vika notices Lev and they run towards him.

Kolya tries to pull Lev up to keep going, but Germans are already coming over the hilltop. With the Germans is a large group of prisoners, some without coats or hats. Markov wants to shoot at these soldiers, who are just infantry, but Vika counsels that Abendroth travels with this company and must be close. Lev thinks of Zoya as Vika suggests they mix in with the prisoners, saying that the prisoners have already been searched for weapons so their pistols will make it through. She hides her rifle and instructs Markov to do the same. Kolya seems pleased with the idea. Markov is decidedly not excited about it.

Markov finally agrees, hides his rifle, and pulls a grenade out of a pouch. They wait until the prisoners have started passing their tree and Markov throws the grenade over the group, where it explodes, attracting attention to the far side of the group. In the confusion, Markov, Vika, Lev, and Kolya walk out and join the prisoners, who seem unsurprised and defeated.

All the prisoners are male. Two are Red Army and walk only in socks, their **boots** likely confiscated by the Germans. The Germans seem relatively calm about the explosion, and Kolya translates that they think it was a land mine. The Germans signal to continue, but then one of the prisoners shouts, pointing to Markov, saying that Markov is a partisan. A German translator steps in, but the prisoner continues to berate Markov. Markov pulls a pistol on the prisoner, but the Germans are faster and shoot him first.

*The reader is asked to consider the sometimes nonsensical nature of memory, and how humans naturally look for patterns and relationships between memories and experiences. The reader also gets a glimpse into what Lev's life was like before his father was taken, and what kind of a person Abraham Beniov really was. He seems to be easily charmed by childish actions like this, encouraging consideration of what he might think of Lev and Kolya's absurd journey in the present.*



*The run continues to unfold in a very lucid way in Lev's mind. He experiences these scattered thoughts and witnesses people dying around him. It's gruesome and terrifying, but it's important to note that Lev does turn out to be physically able to outrun the Germans for a little while at least.*



*Vika is logical in a similar way that Kolya is, which makes it understandable that Kolya is entirely willing to go along with her plan. We see also how dedicated she is to finding and killing Abendroth. She's willing to risk her life and the life of her current companions in order to find Abendroth, and is willing to give up her rifle as well. She is clearly much more experienced, capable, and focused than either Lev or Kolya.*



*The reader is asked to consider how beaten down and detached from reality these prisoners must be in order to simply accept new prisoners joining their ranks out of the trees as a normal occurrence.*



*We learn here that Kolya speaks German, which gives our protagonists an advantage now that they're prisoners of Germans. The reader is certainly asked to wonder what the prisoner who accuses Markov possibly has to gain from outing him, as there's plenty of evidence to support that this man won't be rewarded for doing so.*



The company resumes its march with six Russian prisoners walking in front, serving as minesweepers. Nobody walks next to the man who accused Markov. Lev, Kolya, and Vika walk together, talking quietly. Kolya glares at the prisoner and discusses killing him, but Vika declares that he doesn't matter. Kolya affectionately says that Lev plays great **chess**, and the three argue about their relative importance to each other. Kolya ends by declaring he's especially important since he's writing a great novel.

*The man who accused Markov is now a marked man and seen as a traitor, and it's unclear what will happen to him now that he doesn't have the group support of his fellow prisoners. It becomes apparent here how much importance Kolya places on writing and authors, as his declaration that he's more important because of his writing places him above other soldiers or prisoners.*



The procession slows as one of the Russian prisoners without **boots** gives up on walking. He raises a hand in a mock Nazi salute, and Lev looks away.

*Even though this man dies at the hands of Nazis, he still finds agency and defiance by deciding on the time of his death.*



## CHAPTER 20

An hour before sunset, the company reaches a schoolhouse built during the second Five-Year Plan. The Wehrmacht are using it as a command center, and many of the Germans head inside. The remaining soldiers still on duty prod the prisoners along the side of the schoolhouse into lines, where an Einsatzkommando is sitting in a folding chair.

*The Five-Year Plans were designed to transition the Soviet Union from an agrarian society to an industrial one. The Einsatzkommando in his folding chair has a degree of absurdity to it, as it's a normal, banal image of a very evil and dangerous man.*



The Einsatzkommando addresses the prisoners, telling them to not be afraid, and that they're on the same side. Soldiers hand out newspapers to the prisoners, as the commander says that victory for Germany is also victory for the Russians. He explains that every prisoner will read a paragraph aloud, and those who are literate will be taken to Vyborg to work as translators, while those who can't read will be working in steel mills in Estonia.

*The Einsatzkommando's promise of where prisoners will be taken should raise some eyebrows, as it's become extremely clear throughout the novel that the Nazis aren't interested in actually embracing any of the people they conquer.*



Many prisoners take the test very seriously. The Nazis joke with the Russians, some of whom make up articles. The literate prisoners try to read impressively, and Kolya rolls his eyes and suggests reciting 60 stanzas of a famous poem. Vika grabs Lev's arm and tells him he doesn't read. The Germans test the man on Kolya's other side, and Lev tries to get Kolya's attention, shaking his head at him. Lev hopes Kolya understands.

*Kolya once again demonstrates his inability to remain silent when he should and doesn't appear to take the test seriously, which creates a sense of danger and suspense for the reader. This is heightened when Lev doesn't get to tell Kolya explicitly that he should pretend he doesn't read. Also Vika once again shows herself to be much more experienced and savvy than the other two.*



Kolya and the Nazi banter for a moment, and then Kolya laughs and tells the Nazi he can't even fake reading. He insists on staying to see if his friends can do better. The Nazi, moving on to Lev, says that he looks Jewish. Kolya tells the Nazi that they tease Lev about it all the time, but they know his family and he's not Jewish. Lev purposefully fails the reading test, and then it's Vika's turn. She doesn't even try, and the three join the group of illiterate prisoners. The prisoner who betrayed Markov is standing outside the circle.

*It seems as though Kolya is able to get a degree of special treatment from his captors thanks to how charming he is, as he's allowed to stay and watch Lev and Vika perform the test. His charm likely saves Lev in this instance, and Vika's decision to not even try to read likely saves her from being outed as female. We again see that Markov's betrayer is still being ostracized from the group.*



Lev asks Vika if the commander leading the test was Abendroth, and Vika answers that Abendroth is a rank above the man who was testing them. The soldiers form the literate prisoners into lines and instruct them to march, and the prisoners seem proud as they move in front of the wall of the schoolhouse, not understanding their fate. The Nazis then fire at the literate prisoners, killing all of them.

*In this brutal scene, the Nazis prove once again that they're not to be trusted. This also calls into question what will become of the illiterate prisoners. The hunt for Abendroth continues, but it's indicated that he's nearby and their meeting will come soon.*



## CHAPTER 21

All 35 of the illiterate prisoners are squeezed into a toolshed with the door nailed shut. Lev is in a corner between Kolya and Vika, and the prisoners discuss escaping.

*The discussion of escape is tragically futile, considering their currently hopeless situation.*



Kolya whispers to Vika and asks why they didn't shoot the Einsatzkommando who tested them, and Vika admits to being afraid. She tells Lev that anyone the Nazis hate is a friend of hers, and she and Kolya discuss their student lives before the war. Vika says she's from Archangel and was studying astronomy, and Kolya says that since she's from the north she's truly descended from Vikings. He then falls promptly asleep.

*Kolya teasingly brings the conversation back to sex in a very underhanded way. Vika is beginning to open up to Lev, indicating that maybe she does like Lev on some level, and potentially for more reasons than just the fact that the Nazis will kill him the moment they realize he's Jewish.*



Lev tries to distract himself from his hunger and thinks about **chess** and then Vika, who smells like a wet dog. Lev thinks that his mother never tolerated dirtiness, but he finds himself not offended by Vika's smell; rather he thinks he wants to lick her clean. He tries to make conversation with Vika and wonders if he's a very boring person.

*Lev's attraction to Vika is forcing him to turn his attention inward and consider himself and what he believes, which is a key element of growing up. The reader is reminded again of the symbol of chess as an important part of Lev's life.*



Lev asks Vika his earlier question of why the sky isn't bright at night, and she answers that the universe is expanding. Lev asks for more clarification, but Vika says it's complicated, and instructs Lev to open his mouth. Piece by piece she feeds him a slice of real rye bread. Lev then formally introduces himself and Kolya, and asks how Vika became a sniper. She says that she just started shooting people. Lev abandons the conversation to sleep. When Lev wakes later in the night, he finds that Vika has fallen asleep on his shoulder, and he stays very still, trying not to disturb her.

*Lev is trying to sound smart to impress Vika, and is again shot down by her bluntness and knowledge. Her bluntness is played for humor here, although shooting people usually isn't a laughing matter. We also witness Lev's first experience of intimacy. It's not sex by any means, but it's the first time he's this close to a person he's attracted to in a vulnerable position, and he takes great care to not disturb her, making it a very intimate experience for him.*



## CHAPTER 22

Vika, Kolya, Lev, and the other prisoners are awakened in the morning as the Germans pry the nails from the door. They shout at the prisoners to move, but as the line begins to file out, someone in the shed cries out. Kolya and Lev are curious but Vika seems uninterested. Lev and Kolya sidle to the other side of the shed and see Markov's accuser dead on the floor, his throat slashed. The prisoners begin to take the dead man's gloves and **boots**. Kolya grabs the man's hat.

A soldier enters the shed, irritated, and mutters something to himself. Kolya answers in German. Outside, Kolya tells Lev that he told the German that the peasants hate Jews more than the Germans do. Lev questions the wisdom of letting the Germans know that Kolya speaks German. Kolya agrees it's dangerous, but says the Germans will stop speaking as though they can't be understood.

The soldiers line up the prisoners and offer them dry biscuits, and then the prisoners and the company begin to march south on the road. As they pass a sign for Mga, Lev and Kolya realize it's Wednesday and that they're supposed to be back in Piter with eggs tomorrow. Kolya realizes he hasn't had a bowel movement in 13 days now, and wonders how that's even possible. One of the prisoners tells Kolya to boil buckthorn.

Kolya tells a joke that Lev deems old and not funny. Lev asks if Kolya thinks Vika killed the prisoner in the shed. Kolya believes she certainly did. He says she's a talented killer, is likely lying about her past, and is actually NKVD. Lev expresses disbelief, but Kolya points out that the partisans wouldn't just trust a girl who showed up out of nowhere.

Kolya wonders out loud if Vika has breasts, annoying Lev. Kolya apologizes for offending Lev and asks if he really likes Vika. Kolya wonders out loud how Lev should impress Vika, since a demonstration of strength and toughness probably won't work.

As Kolya ponders Lev's assets that might impress Vika, the prisoners are waved off the road to let a German convoy pass. Lev counts 40 flatbed trucks, followed by armored cars, mortars, and light trucks carrying troopers. One of the artillery pieces in the front of the line slips a tread, and while some soldiers hurry to fix it, the others jump out of the stopped vehicles to urinate along the side of the road.

*Once the man is dead, he becomes purely a commodity, as the other prisoners take his belongings. This reminds the reader of how desperate the situation is, as the man's boots have the potential to save another prisoner from death. Vika's disinterest is suspicious, and suggests that she may have killed the man.*



*The Nazis now understand that one of their prisoners surely has a weapon of some sort, which undermines their power to a degree. Kolya sacrifices the protection of anonymity by letting his captors know he speaks their language, which also attracts attention to him.*



*In a recurring comic motif, Kolya is still keeping track of his nonexistent bowel movements. This entire passage is humorous, as Lev and Kolya finally figure out where Mga is, and are also reminded of the original absurdity of their quest.*



*Despite the seeming hopelessness of their situation, Kolya retains his sense of humor and his love of logic. While he's probably right, Lev will now be forced to reconcile his negative feelings about the NKVD with his attraction to Vika.*



*Lev is becoming somewhat protective of Vika, and resents Kolya's tendency to assess women's bodies. However, Kolya quickly attempts to spin this around and seem helpful.*



*Watching the convoy pass, it becomes apparent that such a display of military strength means the war is still far from over. It's also suggested that Lev and Kolya cannot be successful based on strength alone.*



Vika, having silently crept up behind Lev and Kolya, makes a jab about Lev and Kolya being attracted to each other, and points to a car at the end of the convoy. She says that it's Abendroth's, and decides she'll take a shot at it when the convoy starts moving again. Lev points out that they and all the prisoners will die whether Vika hits Abendroth or not, and Vika declares that the prisoners are worth sacrificing to take down Abendroth. Kolya confirms that she's suggesting that they are **chess** pawns and Abendroth is a rook. Kolya suddenly smiles, and tells Vika and Lev to wait.

Despite Vika's protests, Kolya approaches the nearest group of soldiers and begins speaking to them in German, and within a minute the Germans are sharing their cigarettes with him. Vika remarks that Kolya has charm, and that Kolya and Lev are a strange couple. Lev denies that he and Kolya are a couple, and Vika calls Lev "Lyova" and says she knows he likes girls. Lev thinks that his father called him Lyova, and it seems strange but natural coming from Vika. Vika asks Lev if Kolya made him angry when he teased Lev about wanting to see Vika naked, but Lev finds that he cannot answer appropriately or handle the highs and lows of the last few days, and also can't figure out if Vika is flirting with him or not.

Vika asks Lev about his father, and asks if Lev wants to be a poet. Meanwhile Kolya appears to be delivering a very grand lecture, pointing at Lev. The soldiers look doubtful, but one runs back to the end of the convoy. Kolya cracks a final joke and returns to Lev and Vika, sharing that he told the soldiers he had a wager for Abendroth that 15-year-old Lev could beat Abendroth at **chess** without a queen. When Lev protests that he's 17, Kolya declares that 15 is more of an insult. Vika angrily asks if Kolya is joking, and lists all the reasons such a plan would make Abendroth suspicious—but Kolya says that'll make him agree to it.

Kolya explains that if Lev loses the **chess** game, Abendroth can shoot them all, and if Lev wins, Abendroth sets them free. When Vika says he'll never actually set them free, Kolya insists that they'll at least have a good shot at him, inside and in semi-private. Just then the mechanic fixing the busted track finishes, and the infantrymen load back into the trucks. The trooper who ran to the back of the convoy jogs back and yells "tonight" to Kolya. Lev asks what else Kolya asked for, and Kolya replies that he asked for a dozen eggs.

*The use of chess as a metaphor to discuss the characters' place in the conflict then shifts to chess itself being used as a tangible plot device. Finally, Lev, Kolya, and Vika have encountered Abendroth. This slow build to actually meeting him creates a great deal of tension and suspense, as we assume that a climactic conflict is approaching.*



*Kolya's charm is apparent, as he's even able to talk his enemies and captors into sharing a cigarette. Vika's use of "Lyova" begins to create a link in Lev's mind between Vika and his father, and family in general. Lev is trying to truly engage with Vika in the moment, but his exhaustion keeps him from truly being able to communicate. Vika also finally appears truly interested in Lev, whether Lev can tell or not.*



*Kolya is banking on Abendroth's pride, curiosity, and the guaranteed suspicion that such a request will raise. Here, Lev's youth is considered a positive, and the fact that he can essentially "pass" for 15 works to heighten the hurt pride that Abendroth will experience should he lose.*



*Following Kolya's plan, our protagonists won't have to necessarily sacrifice all of the prisoners in order to get a shot at Abendroth. Kolya is certainly playing on the absurdity of them being out looking for eggs. Nobody thus far has believed him, and it makes an intriguing story, both for the reader and for the characters he and Lev encounter.*





## CHAPTER 23

The Germans lock their prisoners in a sheep barn for the night and while the others sleep, Lev, Kolya, and Vika sit up and discuss their plans for if Abendroth sends for them. Vika insists that they'll be searched for weapons. She removes her knife and digs a hole in the ground. She puts her pistol in the hole and insists on burying Kolya's too. When she's finished, she straps her knife to her bare chest using her belt. Vika takes Lev's hand, places it against her chest, and asks if he feels anything. He nervously shakes his head no.

Lev asks what should happen with his own knife. Vika unstraps it from Lev's ankle, tells Kolya he can't have it because he looks like a soldier and will be searched carefully, and finally hides it in Lev's boot, making sure he can walk normally. Vika touches the spot below Lev's ear and draws her finger across his throat, telling him that if he cuts that open, it can't be closed.

Several hours later, two soldiers escort Lev, Kolya, and Vika to the Party building the Nazis are using. Abendroth sits at an end of a long table, drinking clear alcohol, with a traveling **chessboard** already arranged. He's not the professorial type that Lev expected. Rather, he's a very large and strong-looking man. Lev realizes that Abendroth is a little drunk, sharing with the reader that he learned to recognize the different faces of drunkenness at a young age since all his father's literary friends were big drinkers.

Abendroth, in perfect Russian, tells Lev, Vika, and Kolya that he's drinking plum schnapps, and asks who speaks German. Kolya answers, offering that his grandmother was from Vienna. Abendroth asks how Kolya learned that he plays **chess**, and Kolya mentions the soldier he spoke to earlier in the day, saying he was especially friendly. Abendroth snorts with amusement and disgust, and asks about Kolya's "Jewish friend." Kolya replies that Lev had the nose and no money.

Abendroth addresses his soldiers in German and asks Kolya to translate what he said for Lev and Vika: Abendroth knows a Jew when he sees one. Abendroth adds that he can also spot a girl, and asks Vika to remove her hat. She pauses but then complies. Abendroth turns back to Kolya and asks how it is that he can speak German but not read, and then asks Lev how he can play **chess** but also be illiterate. He doesn't give Lev or Kolya time to answer before declaring that all three of them are certainly literate, smart since they passed the Nazis' tests, and wanted Abendroth to notice them, knowing full well he won't set them free even if they win the chess match. Abendroth asks Kolya to explain the eggs, and Kolya says he hasn't had one since August.

*Vika is beginning to show that she's apparently interested in Lev romantically. This is again a very intimate experience for Lev, and everyone (including the reader) is asked to consider Lev's youth in comparison to Vika's confidence and knowledge of how the night will progress.*



*Again, Vika touching Lev's throat in this way is a very intimate and action, but it's also tense as Lev is forced to remember that he's going to have to confront his fears of death and potentially follow Vika's advice.*



*Lev's upbringing didn't necessarily entail a focus on physical strength, but he is now finding his chess- and literary-focused childhood lessons coming in handy. His knowledge of how alcohol affects people differently allows him to see Abendroth as a man like any other, even if a powerful one.*



*Thus far, Kolya has been able to turn attention away from Lev's Jewish features, and it appears that he expects the same to happen here. There's the implication that the soldier Kolya spoke to will suffer for his friendliness towards his prisoners, indicating further that the Nazis are unforgiving when one doesn't follow protocol.*



*Abendroth is evidently an intellectual match for Kolya, but we see that Kolya's earlier suspicions were correct. The situation begins to seem more dangerous when Abendroth indicates he knows that Lev is Jewish and Vika is female. We've already been given ample evidence of how the Nazis treat their captive female prisoners, and any Jewish individuals are in even more danger. The eggs remain an absurd and humorous story that Kolya can use to draw in his audience.*



Abendroth considers the situation and asks if Lev, Kolya, and Vika have information to trade, but Kolya says he simply saw an opportunity. Abendroth savors his last glass of schnapps and instructs the soldiers to search Lev, Kolya, and Vika. The man who searches them is only a year or two older than Lev, and he searches Lev and Kolya carelessly. When he moves to Vika, another soldier teases the boy, who is unnerved by Vika's stare and doesn't search her thoroughly. When he's finished, Abendroth says he can't release Kolya or Lev, but can let "the girl" go home.

Lev asks for Abendroth's word that he'll let Vika go, and Abendroth agrees, after wondering if Vika likes "the Jew." He then invites Lev, Kolya, and Vika to sit, but Kolya insists on the eggs. Abendroth's patience is wearing thin, and he tells Kolya that he has the power to kill Kolya and rape Vika later. Kolya, rather than staying silent, agrees that Abendroth can do all these things, but insists that Lev will play terrible **chess** if Kolya's dead, and asks for eggs one more time. Abendroth mutters a command to the boy soldier and motions for the three to sit.

Abendroth pulls out a coin to toss and begin the **chess** game with Lev, telling him he can keep his queen. The opening moves are classic and no indicator of skill. Lev addresses the reader, saying that he can still write out every move of this game with Abendroth. As the game continues, Abendroth remarks that he hasn't had a good game in a long time, and tells Lev that he'll keep him around to play chess with. The young soldier returns with a box of eggs.

Two soldiers now stand behind Kolya and Vika, and Abendroth and Lev begin exchanging pieces. Abendroth remarks that Jews make great violinists and **chess** players. Lev ignores him and keeps playing, but soon realizes that his plan with Kolya and Vika, while not spelled out initially, is obvious, and it will be up to Lev to slit Abendroth's throat. He thinks of Abendroth's strength and feels that he can't possibly murder him, but continues playing.

After another sequence of moves, Abendroth has unknowingly committed a fatal error. Lev looks at Vika, proud of his victory, but Vika is reaching for her knife and Kolya is ready to push himself up and tackle the soldiers. Lev pretends to scratch his calf as Abendroth studies the **chessboard**, finally realizing his defeat. Abendroth smiles and declares it beautiful.

*Lev recognizes himself in the young Nazi who searches him—he's youthful and uncomfortable around women. This works to humanize the boy somewhat, yet his youth and inexperience also play into Lev and Kolya's favor, probably saving their lives because he cannot find their hidden knives.*



*Abendroth agrees to Kolya's demands because he sees that he's able to exert his power in a place he believes to be safe. Abendroth certainly doesn't think that his power will be in danger, even if he loses, and the eggs are an absurd request but inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. He also reminds Vika of her tenuous state as a woman, as she's especially prone to sexual violence.*



*As Lev and Abendroth play, Abendroth is humanized to a degree. Drinking has apparently been his only distraction from the war (aside from the girls in the farmhouse) and he desires intellectual stimulation like anyone else.*



*Abendroth mentioning Jews at all reminds Lev that Abendroth is truly a vile person, their shared love of chess aside. As Lev realizes that he's going to have to kill Abendroth, he retreats into what he knows he's good at and concentrates on playing.*



*Abendroth's intellectual defeat from chess signals the greater defeat that's coming for him. Lev is still unsure of the situation he's gotten himself into, but is going to have to accept it momentarily, as his willingness to participate will mean triumph or defeat.*



Abendroth then realizes what Lev is trying to do and tackles him to the floor. Abendroth reaches for his pistol but becomes distracted as Kolya and Vika attack the two soldiers. Lev reaches for Abendroth's gun just as Abendroth pulls the trigger, managing to push it enough that Abendroth doesn't hit Vika or Kolya. Abendroth punches Lev in the face and Lev sits up and stabs Abendroth in the chest. Abendroth falls and doesn't try to go after Lev.

*Fortunately for our protagonists, they are able to take Abendroth completely by surprise, and when he's a little too drunk to function at full mental capacity. Further, we see that Lev is able to accept what he needs to do, and, faced with pressure, follow through with it.*



Kolya struggles with one of the troopers, and Lev runs to help and stabs his knife into the man's back. Vika finally pulls Lev off the dead man and asks for his hand. He realizes he's missing half of a finger on his left hand. Vika wraps his finger with a strip of wool from one of the German's pants.

*The adrenaline continues, allowing Lev to save Kolya as well as himself. It's intense enough that Lev doesn't even realize he's lost his finger. Vika shows her care for Lev by wrapping his finger.*



Kolya grabs the guns from the dead soldiers, as well as the crate of eggs. He opens a window and he, Lev, and Vika jump out into the snow and run from the Party building. When they reach the edge of town they head for the woods. Lev thinks that he's never been much of a patriot, thanks to his father, but that night he felt a surge of love for Russia.

*Finally, Lev has become a man (according to his approximation of what "manhood" means) and done something heroic, and he associates this growth with being Russian and part of something larger than himself. As this climactic scene ends, we see that the legend of Lev (as David's grandfather) killing two Nazis in a knife fight was, it seems, actually true.*



## CHAPTER 24

After an hour nobody has given chase to Vika, Kolya, and Lev, and Lev's finger is throbbing. Lev thinks that now he's a killer, and his knife is an actual weapon. He tells the reader that the images of Abendroth and the dying boy soldier have stayed with him, but he felt nothing but exhilaration at what he'd done. It had been less about avenging Zoya or killing a prominent Nazi, but more about keeping himself, Kolya, and Vika alive. When they stop so that Vika can check Lev's finger, she whispers "thank you" in his ear.

*Vika allows Lev to bask in his triumph and feel entirely responsible for their victory. We see too how Lev's emotional relationships with his friends are what allowed him to do what he did, rather than the idea of national duty or patriotism. However, this is also the adult Lev discussing the images that have stayed with him, as he is haunted by what he did in some way.*



As they walk, Lev tells Vika why he and Kolya are actually outside Piter. Soon after, Lev asks Vika if she's NKVD. She doesn't explicitly answer, but asks if it bothers him. Lev says it does, because the NKVD took his father, and Vika says that they also took her father, who was NKVD as well.

*Vika muddies the waters even further for Lev. Vika here is surprisingly similar to Colonel Grechko in her relationship to the NKVD, and Lev is going to have to come to grips with this if he wants to continue down this path with Vika.*



When Lev, Kolya, and Vika reach the top of a long hill, Vika points at a beam of light in the distance and says it's Piter. She says she's heading to connect with another band of partisans. Kolya tells Vika to not get killed, and he offers his hand, telling her he hopes they'll meet again in Berlin. Vika then turns to Lev and touches his cheek. Lev thinks that he'll never see her again, and Vika asks for his last name. She tells him that with his full name she can track him down, and then she kisses him on the lips. As Vika walks away, Kolya puts his arm around Lev and tells him they have a wedding to attend.

*Kolya finally decides to keep his mouth shut and skip teasing Lev about Vika, which is a very big thing of Kolya to do given what we know of his character. He kindly allows Lev to keep this fairly chaste intimate moment and not ruin it. The reader is asked to take Vika at her word, especially given her clear skill and confidence. The boys now finally have their eggs, and so seem ready to return victorious to Leningrad and the colonel's daughter's wedding.*



## CHAPTER 25

Lev is again exhausted and his finger is extremely painful. Kolya appears to be treating their walk like a leisurely stroll. He finally asks Lev if he's ever told him the story of where the name **The Courtyard Hound** comes from. He explains that the hero, Radchenko, lives in an old multi-family building, and one night an old dog walks into the courtyard and makes it his home. Radchenko sees the dog the next morning and throws it some sausage. Radchenko hasn't left his apartment in five years, but each day he tosses the dog some food when the church bells ring.

*Kolya's engagement with the march as though it's a stroll for pleasure ties back again to the way he views the war as a fantastic and detailed story in which he's trapped. Finally, the reader and Lev find out what The Courtyard Hound is about. In the final chapters of the novel, Kolya increasingly opens himself up for the potential criticism that he spent so long trying to avoid.*



One morning, **Radchenko** wakes to the church bells, but sees that the hound is dead in the courtyard. Radchenko realizes that nobody will bury the dog because it technically didn't belong to anyone. Radchenko then leaves his apartment for the first time in seven years to bury the dog. Lev asks questions about where the dog will be buried and points out that Radchenko needs a shovel, and Kolya is annoyed. Kolya asks if Lev understands why *The Courtyard Hound* is such a great title, saying that all the women Radchenko sees aren't able to get him to go outside, but a dog can do what the women can't.

*Lev gives Kolya exactly what he was trying to avoid—criticism, and an apparent lack of understanding of the sweeping, dramatic, and romantic story arc that Kolya has dreamed up. We also get a final glimpse of how Kolya personally views women. While they factor into the story of The Courtyard Hound in a sexual capacity, they're not allowed the power that the hound itself is.*



Kolya suddenly stops, eyes wide, and says that his long-awaited bowel movement is finally coming. He runs behind a tree and Lev waits, swaying and trying to not sleep. When Kolya returns, he tries to pull Lev to go look, but Lev refuses. They struggle for a moment and Kolya falls, and Lev yells that he doesn't want to look at Kolya's shit, he just wants to know if the eggs are broken. Kolya inspects the eggs, which are unbroken.

*Finally, the absurd and humorous motifs of Kolya's bowel movements and the eggs converge and are pitted against each other. The moment is made tense as Lev and Kolya are reminded that as absurd as the eggs are, they're their ticket to survival, given that they're the only way to reclaim their ration cards.*



Lev and Kolya continue their march. Kolya declares that the colonel will invite them to his daughter's wedding, while Lev wonders where he's going to sleep now that the Kirov is gone. Kolya insists that Lev will stay with Sonya. Their conversation meanders from the **chess** match to the four girls in the farmhouse, and finally as they reach Piter's defenses, Kolya says he wants a piece of wedding cake.

*Lev and Kolya pit depressed pessimism against grandiose optimism as they discuss their journey and where they'll go from here. In this moment, Lev and Kolya are portrayed as hopeful (if morose, in the case of Lev) young men, with an entire future ahead of them.*



Kolya and Lev then hear a gunshot. They leap to the ground and Kolya yells that they're Russian. The soldiers instruct Lev and Kolya to stand and walk towards them. When Kolya tries to stand, he stumbles, and he and Lev notice a bullet hole in the seat of his pants. At the officer's instruction, Kolya throws his rifle away and yells that he can't walk because he's been shot. Lev helps Kolya kneel as Kolya laments having to explain his fate to his battalion, and the soldiers yell that they'll come out to Lev and Kolya.

Lev asks what he should do, and Kolya says to apply pressure, taking off his hat and pressing it to the wound. Kolya takes the box of eggs from under his sweater and hands it to Lev. An armored car rolls towards them and a sergeant and a lieutenant get out, insisting they did the right thing since Kolya had a German gun. Lev addresses the lieutenant and asks if they can help Kolya now and ask questions later, and the lieutenant threatens to kill him. Kolya offers the letter from Colonel Grechko to the officers, and they stiffen when they see the name. As Kolya prepares to yell at the lieutenant, he finally seems to understand that not speaking is best.

Kolya assures Lev that it's not that much blood, and the driver and another soldier carry Kolya to the car and arrange him in the backseat. Lev sits with him, applying pressure to the bullet hole. Kolya jokes that he'd rather Vika were touching him like that, but when Lev asks, he admits that the wound hurts. The lieutenant ignores Kolya's sarcastic barbs and tells them that they're taking him to the hospital at the Works. Kolya asks them to take Lev to the colonel after.

The driver tells Lev that it's 8-10 minutes to the hospital. Lev and Kolya discuss how much blood a man can lose, and Kolya instructs Lev to dance with the colonel's daughter. The car is held up several times and Kolya is growing weaker by the minute, his lips blue. Lev asks for water and tries to offer some to Kolya. Kolya asks Lev if he likes the title for **The Courtyard Hound**, and they agree it's his best option.

Kolya smiles at Lev, and they both know that Kolya is going to die. Lev narrates that Kolya's smile was a gift to try to make Lev's fear of death a little easier to bear. Kolya muses that he was shot in the ass by his own people. Lev wants to make a joke but can't come up with anything. Kolya says that this isn't how he pictured it.

*Kolya believed himself unshakable, and as such is only willing to see the sense of humor and irony in being shot in the buttock by his own army. Notice that he focuses on having to explain what happened to him—it hasn't occurred to him yet that he might not survive this and be able to tell the tale at all.*



*Kolya has survived the entire novel in spite of not staying silent, even when it might have served him better to not always speak his mind. This moment of choosing silence indicates Kolya's own coming of age. While Kolya has been portrayed as very adult throughout, he's experienced growth and development, although it's becoming apparent that this is the end of his journey. Lev too is exhibiting signs of adulthood by taking on the officers and demanding help.*



*Both Lev and Kolya are attempting to tell stories that take away and distract from the terrible reality of the situation. The power of Colonel Grechko is apparent once again, and it's portrayed as the reason that Kolya is receiving what little help he is. Kolya hasn't given up yet, though; he remains focused on the task of the eggs.*



*Lev and Kolya continue to tell stories that distract Kolya from his pain and impending death. Kolya imparts his one final lesson regarding women to Lev when he insists Lev dance with the colonel's daughter. It's a symbolic statement, as both know that they're not actually going to be invited to the wedding. Kolya also finally receives some affirmation regarding The Courtyard Hound, the book so close to his heart.*



*Lev has to face another important scene of coming of age a mere 12 hours after killing Abendroth. This time, he's forced to face the death of a loved one right in front of his eyes. Kolya's final words allude to how he conceptualizes himself as a hero, not someone who gets shot by his own people.*





## CHAPTER 26

At Colonel Grechko's mansion, a sergeant leads Lev through the house until they find Grechko in the wine cellar. The bottles are gone, but young soldiers are opening crates and compiling a list of the contents-- caviar, garlic, salted herring, white sugar. Lev watches in disbelief. Grechko turns and notices Lev, asking where "the deserter" is. Seeing Lev's face, Grechko replies that it's too bad. Lev hands the colonel the eggs, who hands them to another soldier, saying "another dozen eggs." Lev asks if they already have eggs, and the soldier replies that they now have four dozen.

Grechko says that they can now make fish pies, and instructs the soldier to give Lev two Grade One ration cards, each of which entitle Lev to an officer's rations. Lev looks around the cellar and thinks that Kolya would know all about the wine that was once there. Lev turns back to the colonel, who instructs Lev to not say what he wants to say right now, tapping Lev on the cheek and telling him that staying quiet is the secret to living a long life.

*Lev's world has already been turned upside down. He's killed a man, lost his best friend, and now he's denied the privilege of even being the hero of his own absurd story. The eggs become one of four dozen, making it very clear to Lev that his and Kolya's journey was truly a wild goose chase. As he's confronted with the abundance of foodstuffs before him, Lev is also forced to accept his position and that no matter what, he's still going to be hungry while the colonel feasts.*



*Going back to the frame story, the reader is reminded that as an adult, Lev doesn't like to speak much in the presence of anyone other than his wife. He seemingly took Colonel Grechko's advice to heart. This also further separates Lev from Kolya, who was always so verbose but ultimately didn't survive.*



## CHAPTER 27

The narrative then jumps ahead to January 27, 1944, the day the siege ends. Lev is on the rooftop of Sonya's building with her and some of her friends. He'd been in the army a year, working for the Red Star offices as a reporter. Lev states that his father would've hated it.

That night, Lev kisses Sonya on the mouth. Lev knows that they both are thinking of Kolya, and Lev believes that Kolya probably would've been delighted that Lev was kissing somebody. Lev and Sonya never kiss each other again.

Lev tells the reader that a few days after he'd returned to Piter with the eggs, he learned that the Kirov didn't collapse immediately, giving the residents hours to evacuate the building. Vera earned a seat in the city's orchestra and kept it for thirty years, while Oleg and Grisha fought in the army and made it all the way to Berlin. Though Lev ran into all of them eventually, there wasn't much to say.

By the summer of 1945, Lev is living with two other journalists near the Moscow station. Evacuees had returned to the city, but the city is less crowded than it once was and people say the river still tastes like corpses.

*The ghost of Lev's father still haunts him, though Lev has given in to becoming what he once referred to as manufactured and fake. He's evidently disillusioned, but accepting that this is how he must live.*



*It's possible that this is Lev's first kiss since Vika kissed him in the woods, but the tie to Kolya via Sonya makes it bittersweet rather than sexual or particularly pleasurable.*



*Lev's lack of relationship with his former best friends indicates just how much everyone grew up during the war. While Lev once lusted after Vera, the horrors they saw and the self-protection measures they all had to take drove a wedge between them, like the wedge between childhood and adulthood.*



*Despite the fact that the war ended (and the Nazis lost), Leningrad is still haunted by the war and the siege, even though it's now turned into a story and history.*



One night in August, Lev is home alone reading a story by Jack London. He finishes and starts again, not looking up when he hears a knock at the door. He explains that a boy who lives on the floor likes to run up and down the hallway knocking on doors, and anyone Lev knew would've let themselves in since the lock is broken. After three knocks, Lev gets up to scold the boy.

Standing in the hallway is Vika, with her suitcase and a cardboard carton. She smiles at Lev and tells him he's still too skinny, and Lev replies that Vika has hair, and immediately feels stupid. Vika says she brought Lev a gift, and opens the carton to reveal a dozen eggs. Lev suggests they make an omelet. Vika picks up her suitcase and tells Lev that he needs to know that she doesn't cook.

*Lev remains fascinated with literature and storytelling even after the absurd story in which he found himself during the war. It remains a way to escape reality, even when reality isn't as bad as it once was.*



*Vika keeps her promise to find Lev, and we're reminded that while Lev has grown up and come of age, Vika is still intimidating and Lev is still inexperienced. The comment that Vika doesn't cook makes it abundantly clear that Lev and Vika do eventually marry and even have children—remember David's aside that his grandmother is famous for not cooking. Meanwhile, Vika's gift of eggs both sets up the reveal about not cooking, connects this moment to Lev's quest for eggs that caused him to end up meeting Vika, and also subtly hints at the promise of the future: this moment is a kind of "egg" from which everything after "hatches," including David the narrator.*





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