

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena Study Guide

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena by Anthony Marra

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Plot Summary

The story opens with a man named Akhmed who watches helplessly while his friend and neighbor, Dokka, is arrested and hauled away in the middle of the night. Akhmed sees that Dokka's daughter, Havaa, is not taken and as soon as the military truck leave, Akhmed goes looking for Havaa in the nearby woods. He finds her and takes her home. The next day, Akhmed heads for the nearby city where he has heard of a woman doctor who runs a hospital. He hopes this woman will take care of Havaa.

Sonja is the only doctor remaining at Hospital No. 6. She has one nurse and a security guard to help her, and she has no interest in helping Havaa. She agrees that Havaa can remain at the hospital on the condition that Akhmed works at the hospital. He's a doctor but graduated at the bottom of his class and they both see his shortcomings very quickly. Akhmed agrees, but knows he has to be very careful about going to the hospital each day.

At home, Akhmed cares for his bed-ridden wife and tries to hide his activities from a neighbor, Ramzan, who works as an informant for the military. Ramzan is an informant only because he was tortured and castrated. He hates his role but feels powerless to change it. His father, Khassan, is ashamed and feels he should kill his son, but can't bring himself to do so. Khassan never speaks to Ramzan except when his son is heavily drugged and won't remember their conversations. He does help Akhmed hide his daily trip to the hospital for the short time that commute continues.

Ramzan is the reason for Dokka's arrest and the reason the military is looking for Havaa. Ramzan is told that a gun that had once been in his possession was used to kill a military officer. Ramzan tells his handler that the gun had last been in Dokka's possession and tells them how to find Dokka and Havaa. Though Havaa is just a child, it's clear that she'll be punished for her role in the officer's death.

Dokka had possession of the gun for awhile but had given it away. Dokka's entire world is caring for Havaa but he has a huge handicap. He is Ramzan when Ramzan is arrested for the second time, and their captors cut off all of Dokka's fingers. Dokka's house is known as a haven for refugees traveling toward the camps. When a young woman named Natasha arrives at his home one day, Dokka immediately recognizes her as the midwife who delivered Havaa at Hospital No. 6. Dokka urges Natasha to remain with him rather than traveling alone, but Natasha insists that she's going on toward the refugee camps in the hope of eventually making her way to London. Dokka gives Natasha the gun, saying he can't fire it and doesn't want Havaa to have that responsibility.

Natasha continues her journey but is stopped at a military check point. It becomes clear that an officer is going to rape her. Natasha was held captive years earlier and decides she won't be a helpless victim yet again. She kills the officer but his soldiers kill her moments later.



Natasha's older sister is Sonja and Sonja realizes that Natasha has a connection to Havaa when she finds a nutcracker among Havaa's possessions. Sonja had given the nutcracker to Natasha who had given it to Havaa. Sonja accepts full responsibility for Havaa from that moment and helps her grow into a successful, well-educated young woman. Havaa lives to be more than 100 years old and eventually dies at Hospital No. 6, the same hospital where she was born.



Chapter 1

Summary

The first section is titled “The First and Second Days.” Chapter 1 opens the day after Federal soldiers burned down the home of Havaa and her father, Dokka. Havaa is 8 years old and she is at the home of her neighbor and friend, Akhmed. Akhmed and Havaa stand outside and look at the burned rubble. Akhmed recalls helping build an addition onto the house for Havaa's room and Dokka's promise to help Akhmed build on if he ever had a child of his own. Akhmed also remembers the events of the previous evening. Four soldiers had emerged from a truck and forced their way into the house. They emerged a short time later with Dokka, bound and gagged. Akhmed heard the soldiers ask about “the girl” but they didn't find Havaa. Akhmed waited, hidden inside his own home, until the soldiers left, before going into the woods where Havaa was hiding. He kept Havaa at his own home for the rest of the night.

Back in the present, Akhmed tries to imagine why the Feds would arrest Dokka and why they would be looking for Havaa. Havaa breaks into this thoughts, saying her father probably isn't coming back. Akhmed says it's safer if they assume he isn't ever going to return.

Havaa has a blue suitcase with everything she has left. She'd kept it packed on her father's orders and it was the only thing she had time to grab the previous evening when the soldiers arrived and her father ordered her to hide in the woods.

Akhmed and Havaa walk through Eldar, the village where they live, and on toward the town of Volchansk. They see a dead wolf, killed by a landmine, and Akhmed assures Havaa that the wolf died because it wasn't careful. Havaa says they will be more careful and they continue their journey.

Meanwhile, a young doctor named Sophia Andreyevna Rabina is asleep at Hospital No. 6 where she is the only doctor remaining. She is known as Sonja. The hospital's only nurse is an old woman named Deshi. Deshi wakes Sonja, saying there's a man who wants to talk to her. The man is Akhmed. He greets Sonja by her full name, which is something few people know. He says Havaa needs a place to stay and pleads with Sonja to take care of her. Akhmed questions Sonja about the hospital and she confirms she is the only doctor. He is a licensed doctor and offers to work for her until a home is found for Havaa. She says it's not likely they can find a home and he promises to work for as long as it takes. He points out that the Feds are looking for Havaa. Sonja questions Akhmed about his medical knowledge and realizes he knows very little. He claims to have graduated in the top of his class but was actually at the bottom, barely earning his degree. She says they need someone to help with laundry and other chores, and agrees Havaa can stay as long as Akhmed works at the hospital.



Sonja spends all her time at the hospital though she has an apartment in the city. She takes Havaa to the room where they will sleep then turns her attention to Akhmed. She shows him around the hospital and he notices there is a lack of furniture. She says everything of use has been moved to the rooms where they handle trauma patients and births. She opens a door on the fourth floor and shows Akhmed that the entire side of the building is missing. Just inside that door, the floor falls away and she says Deshi's sister was killed in the blast.

She introduces Akhmed to Deshi. With his first comment, Deshi says Akhmed is trying to seduce her. Akhmed is 39 years old and says Deshi is "old enough to be my mother." Deshi then says Akhmed is insulting her. Akhmed is clearly unnerved and Sonja lets it go on for a few minutes before stepping in.

Analysis

There is little explanation about the relationship between Akhmed and Dokka in this first chapter but the details will be revealed over coming chapters. Their relationship is part of one of the book's most important themes. The two men, along with a man named Ramzan who also lives in the village, grow up together and are good friends until circumstances push them apart. This relationship is important in the first chapter as Akhmed watches Dokka's arrest. Akhmed does nothing to try to intervene and it seems that this is merely an accepted part of life in this area at this time. The civil unrest is rampant and arrests like this are common. As Dokka is being hauled away, Akhmed is relieved that he is safe.

Akhmed takes a tremendous risk in helping Havaa after her father's arrest. Akhmed could be arrested just for allowing Havaa to spend the night in his house. He is uneasy and tries to hide his participation, but that's partly because he wants to keep Havaa safe. Over the coming days, he'll travel to the hospital daily and he tries to keep his destination secret because he knows that there is an informant in the village.

Sonja is keeping the hospital open by herself. This work is one of the themes of the story and indicates her level of commitment to providing at least a basic level of medical care for the people of the area. She is literally driving herself into the ground and is staying awake so much that she has hallucinations.

Sonja quickly realizes that Akhmed doesn't know much about medicine but she accepts his help because she's desperate. She imagines that she will have him washing sheets, making beds, and doing other menial tasks, but he does step in at times of crisis to help provide medical care.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Havaa's reaction to Dokka's arrest and what does this indicate about the situation in this time and place?



Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe Sonja is keeping the hospital open?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sonja accept Akhmed as a member of the hospital staff?

Vocabulary

writhing, arabesques, consoling, divot, prostrated, ablutions, robust, immense, viable, compensated, provisionally



Chapters 2-4

Summary

Chapter 2 reverts back to 1996. Sonja recalls leaving her home in London. She broke up with Brendan, her Scottish fiance, resigned from her hospital residency, and made the trip home with a single Samsonite suitcase, a gift from Brendan. The situation was serious and she was frightened as her bus crossed military checkpoints. She knocked on her apartment door, hoping her sister, Natasha, would answer, but found it empty. The next day, she encountered a neighbor named Laina who warned Sonja that it wasn't safe to come into the hall when she heard people. Laina didn't know where Natasha had gone.

Sonja was hired at Hospital No. 6 and they didn't even ask for a resume. There was little in the way of management structure and she became chief surgeon in two months. She soon had more trauma experience than most of her medical school professors and her only interaction was with patients and other hospital staff members. One evening, Natasha returned.

Chapter 3 returns to 2004. Akhmed is happy as he leaves the hospital that first day. He thinks Sonja is domineering and that Deshi is a lunatic, but Akhmed is pleased that Havaa is safe and he is using his medical training.

Akhmed becomes very cautious as he nears his village. Ramzan is an informant for the Feds, and Akhmed knows that he will tell them if he learns where Havaa is hiding. Akhmed makes it safely home and his wife, Ula, asks where he's been. Akhmed says he was helping Dokka shear the sheep and Ula accepts this unlikely information as fact. Ula is bedridden and seldom coherent. Akhmed is repelled by her illness but bound by her helplessness. He makes rice for Ula and thinks back over his day. He knows Sonja is not impressed by his abilities and wishes he'd had the forethought to tell her about his ability to communicate and help people on an emotional level.

Back at the hospital, Sonja makes room for Havaa in the room she calls her own. It's in the abandoned gerontology ward. Sonja is upset to find that Havaa has stapled latex gloves all over her clothes and now claims to be a sea anemone. Citing the waste of medical supplies, Sonja urges Havaa to change her clothes. Sonja asks about the blue suitcase and Havaa says she has clothes and souvenirs inside. The souvenirs are from people who stayed at her home in Eldar.

Sonja and Havaa talk as they get ready for bed and Sonja gets some small insight into Havaa's life, though mostly through hints. Havaa falls asleep quickly and Sonja wrestles with thoughts and emotions. She is grateful that Akhmed is going to help. She thinks about Natasha's second disappearance and that her sister didn't even leave a note.



In Chapter 4, Akhmed heads back to the hospital. He sees Khassan and tries to avoid him, but the snow makes it easy for Khassan to track Akhmed. Khassan is old and Akhmed recalls being amazed by Khassan's stories of a "16-year odyssey" that included travels through several war zones.

Khassan says he's sorry about Dokka. Akhmed asks if Khassan can get information from Ramzan but doesn't know what information he'd want. Khassan says he hasn't spoken to his son for almost two years. Khassan says no one in the village will talk to him because of Ramzan and asks why Akhmed still talks to him. Akhmed knows that Khassan is a decent person caught up in a situation he can't control. Akhmed says he'll be gone for the day and asks Khassan to walk around on both sides of the road to disguise Akhmed's footprints in the snow.

A one-armed security guard stops Akhmed at the door of the hospital, making him remove all the glass shards from his shoes before entering. Akhmed has convinced himself he's playing an important role at the hospital and is upset at the guard's attitude. He snidely asks if the guard is paid half rate because of his missing arm. The guard makes a comment indicating he knows that Akhmed failed Sonja's brief medical interview the previous day.

Inside the hospital, Havaa rushes to Akhmed, obviously having worried that he wouldn't return. Havaa is at a loss for how to fit in to this new environment. Akhmed says the guard wants to learn to juggle but is embarrassed to ask. He says Havaa should offer to teach him and warns that she'll have to be persistent to get through to the guard.

That afternoon, Sonja works in surgery while Akhmed folds sheets. Dokka thinks back to the beginning of Ula's illness. He had been embarrassed to take her to the hospital, believing he should have been able to diagnose and treat his own wife. He tried forcing her to get out of bed but had realized he'd never try that again. That morning, he left Ula food and water at the bedside and knows that Havaa's future is more important than Ula's.

Sonja announces that they'll go to the city of Grozny the following day to pick up supplies. They are still talking when they hear the blast of a landmine. Soon, victims arrive and Sonja talks Akhmed through the process as she forces him to help amputate what's left of a man's leg. Akhmed argues that he isn't qualified to perform the surgery but Sonja points out that there might be multiple victims, meaning he'd have to be ready and able to help.

Analysis

It's important for the reader to understand about Akhmed's life prior to the day of Dokka's arrest to fully understand his happiness as he leaves the hospital for the first time. He is a native of the small village of Eldar. He is the only person in that village's history to be accepted into medical school and the entire village celebrated his achievement. It seemed as if everyone had gained something but it wasn't even



because they wanted him to become a doctor and return to the village. Their happiness seemed to be wrapped up in the idea that Akhmed would have the education and opportunity to leave the village and to make something better of his life. However, Akhmed was a failure in medical school. He didn't really have the scientific abilities his teachers expected and he hated medical school. He skipped an entire session of lectures to attend art classes and he almost flunked out of medical school entirely. Ironically, he felt a sense of failure because he knew he let the people of Eldar down. Akhmed's lack of medical understanding is an important aspect of the story and drives several scenes of the book.

Akhmed is not a good doctor but he is a kind, thoughtful person. He cites a case of a man in the village who had a medical problem but was too embarrassed to tell Akhmed about it, though he needed Akhmed's help. Akhmed gives the man a questionnaire and the man checks his specific problem, allowing Akhmed to treat the man without embarrassing him. This is an important part of Akhmed's character and it's vastly different from Sonja. Sonja has been forced to become harsh and fast with her medical treatment. She can't take time to soothe an injured patient because there are always more patients and too much demand on her emotions. She thinks she should force Akhmed to become more like her but Akhmed thinks Sonja should realize his approach is also important.

When Akhmed meets up with Khassan on the morning Akhmed is headed to the hospital for his second day, they talk about a couple of things that are important to the book. One of them is Khassan's interaction with his son, Ramzan. Khassan says he hasn't spoken to Ramzan in "one year, eleven months and three days, since he began informing." This indicates that the amount of time is very important to Khassan. He knows exactly how many days have passed. He is ashamed of Ramzan's actions and later asks Akhmed if he should kill Ramzan. This aspect of the story will be discussed in greater depth later.

Another important aspect of the conversation between Akhmed and Khassan is seen when Akhmed asks about Khassan's book. Khassan has written a book about the history of their country. The book is thousands of pages and various pieces of it have been rewritten and submitted for publication at various times. The book is never published though one short section of it is published as "Origins of Chechen Civilization: Prehistory to the Fall of the Mongol Empire." That book will tie Natasha to Khassan.

When Akhmed has to perform his first amputation, he's horrified by the situation and by his role in it. He tries to argue with Sonja but she says she might have multiple victims with the next landmine and that he might be left on his own to perform an amputation. Akhmed knows he would have dropped out of medical school if he had foreseen this moment. He completes the task with Sonja's instructions, and notices a specific pain in his hand from using the saw. He then notices that Sonja has callouses in that spot, obviously from the massive number of amputations she's performed.



Discussion Question 1

What do you know about Ramzan and Khassan at this point? Why does Khassan know the exact number of days since he's spoken to Ramzan?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Akhmed's medical abilities and his reaction to his first amputation.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Akhmed's character. Why does he tell Havaa that she should help the security guard learn to juggle?

Vocabulary

reiterate, insubstantial, unfathomably, haughty, indeterminate, reverberated, emulsion, scrutinized, corporeal, supplication



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5 opens in 2004 with Khassan Geshilov. He has been working on a massive manuscript, the history of Chechnya, for years. The manuscript has 3,302 pages and Khassan has submitted it multiple times for publication. The first chapter is published as “Origins of Chechen Civilization: Prehistory to the Fall of the Mongol Empire” with plans to publish more of the book later. None of the rest of the manuscript is ever printed.

Khassan's relationship with his son, Ramzan, has never been good. As a child, Ramzan is not curious and Khassan largely ignores him. Khassan has not conversed with Ramzan since the day Ramzan and Dokka returned from being arrested. Khassan knows that the list of people Ramzan has turned in is written in an old algebra book. Khassan sometimes talks to Ramzan when he knows Ramzan is too drugged to remember. On this day, he pleads with Ramzan to forget about Havaa and Akhmed. He also thinks about killing Ramzan, as he often does.

Ramzan gets food and supplies as payment for being an informant. Khassan belligerently gives most of the food to a group of stray dogs. Ramzan tries locking up the food, leaving out just enough for Khassan for one day at a time, but Khassan feeds that to the dogs as well. When he loses a great deal of weight, Ramzan gives up.

Khassan thinks about Akhmed's day and realizes Akhmed's wife, Ula, will be alone. He goes to the house and uses the spare key Akhmed gave him years earlier. Ula is obviously confused about his identity and he says he's lonely. He tells her about his love affair with Akhmed's mother, when they were both very young. He feels relieved after his confession and realizes that the manuscript has weighed him down. He decides to write something shorter and more important, such as his memories of Dokka to be shared with Havaa.

In Chapter 6, Havaa is struggling to fit in at the hospital. She worries that Akhmed won't return and hates that he's left her again. She follows Akhmed's advice and approaches the guard, asking if he'd like to learn to juggle. The guard says he must have died and gone to hell. They continue to banter for awhile but Havaa says the guard seems grumpy and might need another nap.

Havaa has been watching Sonja and now wonders if she might do something with her life. Her father was an arborist. She talks briefly with Deshi who encourages her to find something to do. Later, Havaa talks to Sonja. Havaa asks the military is “going to take me too?” She feels the need to put the possibility into words in order to address it. Sonja encourages her to get ready for bed without answering.



Analysis

Chapter 5 is devoted to Khassan and there is a great deal of information here about his character. He was once in love with Akhmed's mother though they both married someone else. He moved his parents bones from their burial place back to their home village in a suitcase. He is also a kind man though he has failed miserably as a parent. He remembers Ramzan's constant interruptions while Khassan is trying to write. Ramzan always asks if he can do something and Khassan sees this as a fault, believing that Ramzan should be curious about the world around him. He wishes Ramzan would sometimes ask "how" or "why," and largely ignores Ramzan because he doesn't ask the right questions. It seems possible that their lives might have been much different if Khassan had taken the time to pique Ramzan's curiosity instead of ignoring him.

Khassan writes a massive manuscript and he wants to get it published. He begins literally before the history of his country and it's only that chapter that gets published. Khassan writes the entire manuscript in long hand and faces a number of challenges in his quest for publication. He rewrites multiple times to meet the requirements of various publishers but then deals always fall through before the publication date. With the current political situation, Khassan will never be able to get the manuscript published. The government controls what's published which means Khassan won't be able to publish anything that puts the government in an unfavorable light. The political climate changes so drastically from one day to the next that it's literally impossible for Khassan to revise quickly enough.

It seems strange that Khassan spends the day with Ula. Ula has been bed-ridden for years and she often lives outside reality. This seems to be why Khassan spends time talking to her. He believes that she'll forget everything he says to her, meaning he has someone to talk to but his secrets will still be safe. Ula later believes that Khassan is Akhmed's father and she tells Akhmed about his visits. That prompts Akhmed to believe that she's taken a dramatic turn for the worse.

Havaa's observations of Sonja are important because this is the first time Havaa really believes she has a chance at a better future. She will actually go on to earn a doctorate degree and to live a long life, and Sonja is the main reason she accomplishes that. Havaa's life and her future are one of the main themes of the book.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Khassan spends time talking with Ula while Akhmed is away?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Khassan's manuscript and the reasons it's never published. Define the word "propaganda" and discuss how it applies to this situation.



Discussion Question 3

Why is Havaa interested in Sonja's career?

Vocabulary

monumentally, autonomous, delirious, morass, appeasement, expurgate, depredations, insinuation, stipulation, tedium, progeny, paradigm



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7 reverts back in time to 1996. Natasha slept for days after her return. Sonja tried to get her to talk about her time in Italy but Natasha refused. She had needle marks from prolonged heroin use. Sonja tried to find a psychiatrist who might help Natasha but discovered there wasn't a single one left in the city. Natasha would remain home for seven years and three weeks before disappearing again.

During this time, Sonja struggled to have enough supplies to run the hospital. She saved the life of a man named Alu. Alu's brother was rich and provided supplies and mental health books at Sonja's request. He said morphine was prohibitively expensive but provides heroin as a pain killer. One day, Sonja was walking in the bazaar when she saw a huge ice machine that came from a hotel. She later asked Alu's brother for the machine and he got it as well.

Meanwhile, Sonja and Natasha lived in the same apartment but remained at odds. Sonja hated that they were not close but they each seemed unable to bridge the gap. One evening, Sonja arrived home and heard Natasha talking with Laina, their neighbor. Natasha revealed a few details about her time in captivity and Sonja left because she was "afraid" of what she might overhear.

Chapter 8 returns to 2004. Akhmed's hands shake for hours after the amputation. He sees Sonja as a hard woman, capable of cutting off a man's leg without a second thought. He believes this means she would throw Havaa out, regardless of the danger.

Akhmed encounters Khassan on his way home that evening. Khassan is burning his manuscript. Akhmed says the manuscript is Khassan's life's work but Khassan says he has discovered he would rather be forgotten than to be remembered.

When Akhmed reaches home, he discovers Ramzan is waiting for him. They talk with Ramzan hinting that he wants to know the identity of the person who is helping hide Havaa. Akhmed is too tired to be very discreet but doesn't admit to anything and says he can't imagine why the soldiers would want a little girl. Ramzan says there are no limits, meaning anyone can be sought by the government. Ramzan asks where Akhmed has been all day but Akhmed refuses to say. Ramzan reminds Akhmed that he has a sick wife but Akhmed refuses to give any information.

Akhmed goes inside and Ula says she visited with Akhmed's father that day. She says they talked about Akhmed's mother and she reveals a detail about his mother that she couldn't have known. Akhmed takes it as a sign that her days are numbered.

In Chapter 9, Khassan writes about Dokka. This manuscript is intended for Havaa. He writes that Dokka had planned to teach Havaa to write, but couldn't decide whether she should learn Cyrillic in case the Russians took over their country or Latin in case the



rebels won. He finally decided on Arabic. Khassan says his favorite memory is of Dokka peeling a plum while seated with Havaa, both of them by the chess set.

Analysis

Alu's brother is an interesting character though he really doesn't play a huge role in the story. Sonja treats Alu and this connects her to Alu's brother. Alu's brother says he has several other brothers, and that Alu is the least favorite of them. But, because Sonja saves Alu's life, his brother is willing to do a favor for Sonja. She asks for medical supplies. Alu's brother then says Sonja can have another favor and she asks why she's getting two. He tells her a story of his childhood. He had a pet turtle and forgot to feed it before leaving for several days. He says Alu is not very smart but it somehow occurred to him that he should feed his brother's pet turtle. Alu's brother says that, because of that action by his brother, he's giving Sonja another favor. The man is very wealthy through his black market connections but apparently not very intelligent.

There are several references to American culture throughout the book and some of these are somewhat humorous. One of these references is seen when Sonja is dealing with Alu's brother. She requests several books on mental health. Alu's brother says he has a relative in America who is ordering them from Amazon. Sonja asks him to explain "Amazon" and Alu's brother says he doesn't know what it is, but that this relative can produce items "from ether" through Amazon. He then laments that Amazon, whatever that is, is going to put him out of business.

The fact that Akhmed is an incapable doctor is reiterated throughout the book. Sonja literally holds his hands and forces him to begin the process of sawing through the bone on his first amputation. Akhmed knows that she did it because she wanted to force him to face the fact that he would rather let the man die than to perform the amputation. This lack of ability is seen throughout the story and is a driving force for several of the scenes in the book.

When Akhmed and Khassan meet in the woods as Khassan is burning his manuscript, Khassan says he wants to disappear. This has several possible meanings. Ramzan informs on people and they disappear when they are arrested. Most are never seen again. It might be that Khassan is simply tired of being the father of the town's informant, and that he's so upset by the situation that he wishes he could be arrested and killed like so many others. Khassan mentions that pride is a sin and he may be referring to the pride of having such an impressive manuscript. He's old and probably doesn't have a lot longer to live, which may mean he is looking toward his final judgment in death. As it turns out, Akhmed helps him disappear, though not in either of these ways. Akhmed will later provide Khassan with two letters instructing that he should have safe passage through rebel territory, enabling him to pack up and leave the village. Khassan will take advantage of those letters and will leave.



The chess set is not described in great detail yet but it will later be explained that Dokka loves chess and is very good at it. Havaa loves the days when Dokka and his friends gather to play.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Khassan burns his manuscript and begins writing another of his memories of Dokka?

Discussion Question 2

Compare Akhmed and Sonja.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Sonja leaves without listening to more of Natasha's conversation with their neighbor?

Vocabulary

repatriated, decadence, clairvoyance, prurient, manipulation, reductive



Chapters 10-11

Summary

The section titled “The Third Day” begins with Chapter 10. This chapter ranges from 2000 to 2003. Dokka began opening his house to refugees fleeing the country and word quickly spread that his house served as a hostel. He gave food and a place to sleep to anyone but asked that they paid if they were able. Dokka took things of real value as payment and gave the trinkets to Havaa, which she kept as souvenirs.

On alternating Sunday afternoons, Akhmed and Ramzan arrived at Dokka's for a game of chess. Havaa felt more like a younger sister of the three men than a daughter and young child. Dokka was an excellent chess player. Akhmed and Ramzan played as a team and consulted each other about upcoming moves. Dokka read while they figured out their moves. Havaa watched.

Akhmed hated being a doctor but continued to do his duty when he could. One day, rebels arrived in the village and there were some in need of medical attention. One of them was a commander who had stitches in his chest. Akhmed was amazed to discover the neat stitches were dental floss and the commander described Sonja's skill. Later, Ramzan and Dokka talked to the commander who put them in touch with a man looking for someone to transport guns.

A few days later, Havaa and her parents hid as fighting took place in the village. When the fighting was over, several were dead or seriously wounded. Akhmed was horrified at the need for medical attention and wished he could transport them to the hospital, but knew it was not possible. One of the wounded was a 13-year-old boy named Akim. Akhmed's fingers were too large to repair an artery in Akim's leg. He recruited Havaa to help and she reluctantly did as instructed. Akim died a few hours later but Akhmed said she gave him a few vital hours to come to peace with his impending death. Havaa didn't know how he could have come to peace with anything because he was crying in pain.

After the crisis was over, Akim drew the faces of all 41 of those who died or were arrested. He placed the boards all over the village but put Akim's in a wooded area where Havaa would find it.

After that, Ramzan and Dokka left in Ramzan's red pickup one day each month and returned a week later. Dokka's wife, Esiila, wasn't happy about the arrangement and predicted a bad end, but Dokka persisted. While Dokka was gone on what would be his final trip, Ula became ill. Akhmed tried everything to help her and finally spent several nights at Havaa's house, thinking it would force Ula to get out of bed and take care of herself. She didn't and the situation at Havaa's house was somewhat uncomfortable after one particular night together though Havaa didn't really know why. Havaa and her mother stopped speaking over the situation even though Havaa couldn't “name” what happened.



Dokka didn't return on the normal day and eight more days passed before he arrived with Ramzan. Dokka's fingers had been cut off and Akhmed rushed over with his doctor's bag as soon as Dokka was out of the truck. There wasn't enough skin for Akhmed to close the stumps of Dokka's fingers, so he had to cauterize them.

One day, Dokka took Havaa to Ramzan's house. Dokka said he wanted a gun and that he wanted Ramzan to teach Havaa how to shoot. He said he wanted to protect his family but couldn't even pull a trigger himself.

Chapter 11 returns to 2004. Sonja and Akhmed are traveling to Grozny. They talk kindly to each other at first but then Akhmed says that Sonja should be nicer to people. Sonja says Akhmed is a poor doctor, which gives her the right to be harsh with him. He counters that he has a level of decency that she doesn't have, which gives him the right to question her. The argument continues and Akhmed says he's sorry that Sonja has "something broken" inside her. Sonja says she has amputated "1,643 legs." She says Akhmed has amputated 3, and that he doesn't have the ability or the right to diagnose her. When she looks directly at him, Akhmed can see that her pupils are dilated. He stops trying to reason with her.

They go through military checkpoints and finally reach Grozny. They see children who are living in the ruins, selling metal, wire, and bricks to the Russians. They arrive at the warehouse where Sonja is supposed to pick up her supplies. There are well-armed men around the area and Alu's brother. One of the guards aims a gun at Akhmed and Sonja says he has lied to her. She wants to know if Akhmed is an informant. She says no one knows her full name and that he used it when he arrived at the hospital. Akhmed tells about seeing the rebel with the dental floss stitches and later meeting a refugee at Dokka's house. Sonja asks if the woman's name was Natasha.

Analysis

It seems likely that Esiila and Akhmed had at least a brief affair while Dokka was away with Ramzan and Akhmed was trying to force Ula into getting out of bed. The perspective at this point is focused on Havaa and the details are not revealed, but she sensed that something changed between Akhmed and Esiila. Ula's illness is never detailed but it seems she might be suffering from some sort of dementia brought on by the fighting in the village.

Sonja and Akhmed seem almost happy on their way to Grozny. Akhmed asks if Sonja worries about landmines and she says there is a steel plate under the driver's seat, prompting Akhmed to ask if it extends to the passenger's seat. They also talk about the pros of specific radio stations though there are no stable transmissions. Sonja prefers one spot on the dial, saying it sounds exactly like static is supposed to sound.

Akhmed is proud that he has retained some "common decency" in the face of the situation. He believes that Sonja should try to stop being so harsh with everyone and try to exhibit a level of compassion. Akhmed may not be realistic on this point. Sonja has



single-handedly held the hospital together for a long time and she has really pushed herself farther than what most people could endure. Akhmed hasn't really had the same level of loss, even though he's dealt with the loss of friends and Ula's failing health.

When Sonja asks Akhmed why he lied, he immediately believes she's talking about his claim that he was in the top ten percent of his class at medical school. He confesses that he was in the bottom four percent which confuses Sonja for a moment. She then presses him, asking how he knew her full name when he first arrived at the hospital. Alu's brother speaks up, saying Sonja won't even tell him that information. Sonja believes this indicates that Akhmed is a spy of some sort. When Akhmed reveals how he really knew about Sonja, she asks for the identity of the woman Akhmed had met at Dokka's house. The chapter ends on that note, a literary device to keep the reader guessing about what's to come. It will later be revealed that the woman was Natasha.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Akim and why is he important to Havaa?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Akhmed is realistic when he says Sonja should try to be nicer to people?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sonja question Akhmed at gunpoint. Are her fears founded?

Vocabulary

hostel, gratuities, exploited, reiterating, calamity, nihilists, reminisced, tomes



Chapters 12-14

Summary

Chapter 12 reverts to 1994. Natasha was four years younger than Sonja. She was prettier and everyone loved her. Sonja was studious but Natasha was obviously going to become a very beautiful woman. It was said that everyone seemed to be waiting for Natasha to grow up, unsure what to do with her until that happened. Natasha recognizes Sonja's intellect but also recognizes that Sonja is socially inept.

When Natasha was a young adult, she moved in with a boyfriend and had an interesting job where she became well-versed on pipelines and oil. Their mother died of cancer. Natasha lost her government job and her boyfriend, then Sonja announced she was going to London to finish her medical training. Natasha was afraid for Sonja to leave. Sonja later worked as a smuggler for the black market and wound up with many beautiful clothes as a perk of her work. She was in Grozny when the Russians attacked. Natasha returned to her parents' now-vacant apartment and lived a lonely and bare existence.

One day, Natasha read a small book called "Origins of Chechen Civilization: Prehistory to the Fall of the Mongol Empire" written by Khassan Geshilov. She and Sonja talked by phone and Sonja told the details of her life, including her boyfriend. As Natasha's life became more difficult, they found less to talk about. Natasha didn't want to hear about Sonja's wonderful life. Natasha began leaving the phone off the hook to avoid Sonja's calls. She thumbed through one of Sonja's medical books and found that the definition of life is "a constellation of vital phenomena – organization, irritability, movement, growth, reproduction, adaptation." She followed news when she could get it and knew that the situation in her country was going to get worse. Shortly after she put the phone back on the hook, it rang, and Sonja said she'd been calling for weeks.

Chapter 13 is set in 2004. Back in the warehouse, Akhmed says he doesn't know what the woman's name was. He says he met hundreds of refugees and stopped asking their names. Alu's brother says he doesn't believe Akhmed is an informant. After they leave, Akhmed asks about Alu's brother. Sonja has learned the man's name is Ruslan, but she always refers to him as Alu's brother.

Before they leave the city, Sonja stops at an old shopping center where there's a phone bank set up. She telephones Brendan but he isn't in. She doesn't really have a message for him, but wants him to know she's still alive.

Chapter 14 is set in 1995. Brendan and Sonja met and fell in love while Natasha was sleeping in the park because it was safer than being in a building. She struggled to survive. She encountered a man named Sulim who was "in business with both Feds and rebels," and who even sometimes worked with Alu's brother. Natasha begged Sulim to help her get out of the country. He had called on her once for help and she denied



him, but he still agreed to help her. Sulim told her there were things she could do to earn her way, including prostitution. Natasha knew that she would eventually be forced into prostitution for the Russian soldiers, and decided that being paid as a prostitute in London was the better of her options.

She boarded a vehicle with several other women. They were taken to Serbia.

Analysis

The relationship between Sonja and Natasha is explored briefly in Chapter 12. They grow up together but weren't very close, partly because of their age difference but mostly because they liked and wanted different things from life. Natasha recognized Sonja's superior intellect and admired her for it, but she hated it when Sonja left the country to study at London. While they were apart, they talked regularly on the phone and they seemed to become closer during this time. Then their relationship became strained because of Natasha's situation. She lived in a constant state of hunger. She had no electricity and few comforts. For awhile, she slept in the park because there was a danger that apartment buildings might be bombed. It's during this time that Natasha no longer wanted to hear details about Sonja's life, such as an outing where she ate scones. And Natasha realized that Sonja didn't want to hear about Natasha's hardships because then Sonja would feel guilty about her own life, including the simple pleasures such as eating scones. It may be that the guilt was the reason Sonja returned after Natasha's disappearance.

Natasha's life was difficult during the war and she knew that she'd probably going to end up dead or tortured. She was very pretty, which was a negative as lonely soldiers fight in the city. At one point, she wished she was ugly, thinking that would save her from at least some of the horrors that likely awaited her.

Natasha's relationship with Sulim is described in an earlier chapter. They were romantically involved for a time but broke up when it became clear that Natasha was nothing more to Sulim than a mistress. At one point, he came to her for help but, afraid, she and turned him away. This may be the reason she wound up in such a serious situation after he "helped" her escape the city. She asked him to help her get to London, believing she'd be safe there, and he agreed. He didn't follow through, however, and instead sent her to Serbia, which it is later revealed that she became a prostitute there. She was tortured and barely escaped with her life.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Sonja and Natasha during their early years. Does it seem typical of sisters?



Discussion Question 2

How does the relationship between Natasha and Sonja change over the course of their lives, especially while Sonja is in London? Why does it change?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Sonja calls Brendan just to let him know she's alive?

Vocabulary

reciprocated, echelons, obsequious magnanimity, roiling, florid, stalwart, matriculated, dispensations



Chapters 15-17

Summary

Chapter 15 is set in 2004. Akhmed and Sonja are continuing their journey to the hospital. Sonja apologizes for interrogating Akhmed at gunpoint. He understands. He talks to her honestly about his jealousy of Dokka. He says Ramzan didn't really need Dokka's help running guns, but believes Ramzan took Dokka so that Akkmed was excluded from that part of their lives.

In Chapter 16, set in 1996, Natasha stayed at her apartment in the weeks after her return. Sonja was living there as well and tried to “diagnose” her sister. She suggested Natasha had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Natasha shrugged off Sonja's attempts to help, saying only that she endured the time in captivity and that Sonja didn't have the right to tell her what to do now. Sonja countered, saying she had given up her life in London to return to Natasha, and that meant Natasha owed her respect. Natasha said Sonja made a mistake by returning, just as Natasha made a mistake by trying to leave.

Sonja gave Natasha a Buckingham Palace Nutcracker. She then asked Natasha to join her at the hospital the following day and Natasha reluctantly agreed. Sonja showed Natasha around the hospital, ending at the maternity ward. A new mother drew Natasha out, getting her to hold the newborn baby. Natasha was moved by the experience.

Deshi was a nurse at the hospital along with her twin sister, Maali. Maali was younger by 18 minutes and Natasha became close to Maali, more so than Deshi. Natasha began going to the hospital everyday and was soon working a lot in maternity. One day, Natasha drew a mural on the boards covering a particular window. Deshi and Maali criticized it, saying it wasn't accurate. Under their guidance, Natasha redrew it with their help.

One day, Sonja was tied up helping trauma victims when a woman arrived in labor. Natasha delivered the baby and learned that her name was to be Havaa. There were two men with Esiila when she delivered, though that wasn't the custom. One of them was Dokka and the other was Khassan. Natasha recognized his name and said she'd read his book.

Chapter 17 is set in 2003 and 2004. Esiila wore baggy clothes that kept her next pregnancy secret. Havaa knew where Akim's portrait was and went there often. She found a scarecrow body and connected it to the portrait. Esiila had complications with her labor and died at a checkpoint on the way to the hospital. In the present, Havaa doesn't feel guilt for her mother's death but does for her father's.



Analysis

In Chapter 15, Akhmed describes being jealous of Dokka. He says he wanted Dokka's opportunities, his family, and his life. This seems odd because Akhmed had the opportunity to attend medical school, meaning he could have been an important person if he had applied himself. It seems that Akhmed is jealous that Dokka has a wife who continues to function as a wife and that Dokka has a child. Akhmed lacks those things. It's left to the reader to decide what this says about Akhmed's character.

The connection between Natasha and Havaa is first seen in this section. Natasha was alone in the maternity ward when Havaa was born. The birth scene is described and Natasha had a few anxious moments, worrying if Havaa would be alright, but then she breathed normally and it was clear that she was healthy.

Khassan's presence in the delivery room when Havaa was born is never explained. This seems another example of how close the families were before Ramzan became an informant. It could have been that Khassan was the only one in the village with a truck, but it seems likely that he would have waited outside the room, if that had been the case.

When Sonja returned home from London, she gave Natasha a nutcracker crafted to look like the guards at Buckingham Palace. Sonja didn't buy the nutcracker as a gift for Natasha and gave it to her only as an afterthought. It must have been important to Sonja for her to bring it back from London. She talked about visiting Buckingham Palace and that the guards were perfectly still, regardless of the antics of the tourists. It could be that the nutcracker reminded her of that happier time of her life. The nutcracker's true importance is revealed later. Dokka asked refugees who stay at his house to give something as payment and Natasha gave Havaa the nutcracker. It's such a specific item that Sonja would realize that Havaa had spent some time with Natasha, and that may be at least part of the reason she took responsibility for Havaa for the rest of her life.

Esiila tried to keep her second pregnancy hidden by wearing baggy clothes. It may be that Akhmed was the father, but that possibility is never explored. Havaa tried to talk to her mother as they are putting her in the truck for the trip to the hospital, but she wasn't allowed. She always looks back at those moments with regret, knowing they were her final chance to say good-bye. This is yet another example of loss, a theme seen repeatedly throughout the book.

There's an important distinction in Havaa's mind between the loss of her mother and the loss of her father. She doesn't feel any responsibility for her mother's death, therefore doesn't feel any guilt. However, she has learned to shoot and believes she should have tried to save her father's life. She didn't argue when he told her to run but she now feels that she should have. The author includes another tease at the end of this chapter, saying that the gun isn't in the drawer where it had been kept, and that it hadn't been there for some time. It's later revealed that Dokka gave the gun to Natasha, and that will become an important aspect of the story.



Discussion Question 1

How does Havaa's mother die and how does she feel about the deaths of her parents?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Havaa's birth. Why do you think Khassan and Dokka remain in the delivery room in direct conflict to the customs of this time and place?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the nutcracker?

Vocabulary

permutations, petulant, opined, supine, convoluted, burrowed, recipient, essential



Chapters 18-21

Summary

Chapter 18 is set in 2003 and 2004. Ramzan struggled to survive in the year prior to Dokka's arrest. He always managed to get insulin for his father. He eventually made contact with a sheik who hired Ramzan to carry supplies. He sometimes had to carry supplies on foot and he took Dokka with him, but never Akhmed. One day, he and Dokka encountered an unexpected checkpoint. There were guns in the truck and they were arrested.

They were taken to the Landfill. It had literally been a landfill but two huge pits, Pit A and Pit B, were used for housing prisoners. Dokka and Ramzan were held separately. When Ramzan was called out of the pit, he tried to give information to avoid torture, but was tortured anyway. When the torture finally stopped, he became an informant and was released. He asked for Dokka. Ramzan had some money and paid for Dokka's release. He didn't have the full amount, so Dokka was returned with all his fingers missing.

The scene reverts to just prior to Dokka's disappearance. A military commander said a specific pistol was used to kill a military officer and that the pistol had once been in Ramzan's possession. Ramzan says he'd given the gun to Dokka and revealed that he had taught Havaa to shoot the gun because of Dokka's missing fingers. Ramzan then went to visit Dokka. He admitted to himself that he was saying good-bye, though he didn't say that to Dokka.

Chapter 19 is set in 2004. Akhmed and Sonja arrive at the hospital. Akhmed and Mohmad, the one-armed guard, argue. The guard asks if he can shoot Akhmed but Sonja says she needs him because he has two arms to help unload the supplies. Later, Sonja and Akhmed talk about their lives. Sonja says Natasha "was" complex, indicating she doesn't have any hope that Natasha will return. She asks Akhmed if he would love Havaa as much if he had children of his own. He says he isn't sure but he knows she's a part of his family now.

They see the mural Natasha drew and Akhmed tells about the 41 portraits he drew in his village. Sonja asks Akhmed to draw the woman who told him Sonja's full name. Akhmed can't really remember her and Sonja has to provide details to get the portrait correct.

Chapter 20 reverts to 1995 and 1996. Natasha was sold to a brothel and drugged on heroin. She was under the control of a pimp named Sergey. All the women are called Natasha, even when that's not their names.

In Chapter 21, set in 2004, Khassan hopes to encounter Akhmed the following morning. He finds Akhmed's footprints. Khassan and his dogs walk all over them, disguising the trail. He then goes to visit Ula and washes her hair. He describes Mizra's arranged



marriage and their affair that ended when she became pregnant. Khassan talks about his relationship with Akhmed, as a sort of an uncle. He compares that to his relationship with Ramzan and says he was better to Akhmed than to his other son.

Back at home, Khassan speaks to Ramzan, condemning him for the people he's had arrested. Ramzan is happy to hear his father talk to him, even in condemnation. Khassan is soon on the defensive. He then says he's sorry that Ramzan will never have the opportunity to become a husband and father. Khassan says he is 79 and that his life is worth less than the lives of Dokka or Havaa. Ramzan says he's turned in his friends and neighbors because Khassan is his only family, and that's important. Ramzan says he's always known Khassan wants Akhmed to be his true son. Khassan says Ramzan will turn someone in, then be forced to turn in more names. Khassan then leaves the house.

Analysis

Ramzan seems to be a traitor and the reader may find it impossible to like him. However, it's important to realize that Ramzan is a victim of the war, just as many of the other characters are also victims. Ramzan was arrested prior to his capture in 2003 when he was with Dokka. In that first arrest, he was brutally tortured and castrated. Despite this, he continued to refuse to become an informant. His refusal was the only reason he was allowed to live. The soldiers torturing him were amazed that he didn't promise them anything they asked. The soldiers got others to watch, and they were also amazed. In the end, Ramzan was returned to his home and allowed to live. With the memory of that torture, it's easier to understand why Ramzan was not able to go through it a second time. He tried to turn himself in as an informant before the torture even began, but the soldiers still tortured him before they allowed him to give in.

Ramzan and Khassan have become strangers who don't speak to each other, which is tearing both of them apart. Ramzan is desperate for his father's forgiveness, especially since he has almost no friends by this point. Few people will talk to him for fear that he will pass on some piece of information that will get them killed. Ramzan does continue to talk to Dokka, but that may be because Ramzan feels remorse for Dokka's arrest and the loss of his fingers. Ramzan cuts firewood for Dokka and may very well take care of other tasks for him.

With this information, it seems strange that Ramzan would turn Dokka in for having had possession of the gun. However, Khassan likes Dokka and Akhmed. This plays a big role in Ramzan's decision to tell the military officer that Dokka had been the last to have possession of the gun.

It seems odd that the gun is so easily traced. The military officer has the serial number but there are lots of guns in this time and place and it doesn't really seem reasonable that Ramzan would have kept a record of the guns. It's not until much later that the details of the gun and how it was used are revealed.



Ramzan could have given the military false information about the ownership of the gun and the military would apparently believe whatever information he gives. He notes that this is the first time he's been truthful when giving information, meaning he has sent innocent people to their deaths over the two years that he has been working for the military.

It's clear by this point that no one knows that Ramzan has been castrated other than Akhmed, who helped ensure the wound healed, and Khassan. This is an important aspect of Ramzan's character. People of the village wonder why he has never taken a wife and started a family of his own. They also wonder why he still lives with his father rather than being out on his own. Ramzan hates the gossip, which includes the idea that he might not be interested in women. This might explain, at least to a degree, why Ramzan has invited Dokka to participate in his smuggling runs instead of Akhmed. Akhmed knows this detail about Ramzan, meaning their relationship is now different.

Sonja asks Akhmed to draw the woman who told him Sonja's full name. He agrees but it's obvious from the beginning that he can't really remember the woman's features. It is Natasha, but neither of them are really certain of that. As Akhmed draws, Sonja helps him get the portrait correct. She "gently corrects" him when he draws features that aren't right and she reassures herself that she's helping him remember, but she's actually just directing him. Sonja needs to know what happened to Natasha and she will grasp onto anything that gives her hope of the truth. Later, she starts to show the portrait to Havaa, hoping that Havaa can identify Natasha. Sonja admits to herself that there's a part of her that just doesn't want to know. This is all part of the many losses experienced by the characters, which is a theme seen in the story.

There's an interesting statement in Chapter 20 when all the women were called Natasha. This was simply a common name for women of this ethnicity and indicates that they were all considered to be expendable and interchangeable.

Khassan's decision to speak to Ramzan is significant. Khassan hasn't spoken to Ramzan in almost two years. He only does so now in an attempt to appeal to Ramzan's sense of honor, asking him not to turn in Akhmed or Havaa. Ramzan responds that he is doing it to protect Khassan, which is only partly true. Their lives are luxurious compared to most and Ramzan is able to get the insulin that keeps Khassan alive only because he is working as an informant. Ramzan is also afraid for himself.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ramzan become an informant?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Ramzan and Khassan.



Discussion Question 3

Why might Ramzan feel guilty about Dokka's fingers?

Vocabulary

infidel, metastasized, crucible, ancillary, viscosity, spatial, pristine, basked, concavity, remonstrations, totalitarianism



Chapters 22-23

Summary

Chapter 22 is set in 2004. Khassan catches up with Akhmed and says he tried to convince Ramzan to forget about Havaa. Akhmed knows that speaking to Ramzan at all is an important step for Khassan, and he's moved by the gesture. Akhmed knows this means that he'll be arrested because he won't tell Ramzan Havaa's location. He also knows that means there won't be any connection between the village and Havaa, which will make her safer. Khassan says he's considered killing Ramzan and asks Akhmed if he should. Akhmed promises to think about it and to tell Khassan his answer later.

Khassan gives Akhmed an envelope. He says there is a letter inside that contains information about Dokka. He believes Havaa might want to know these details about her father someday.

At home, Ula talks about another visit from Akhmed's father. Akhmed takes this to mean that she is still deteriorating. He has a needle and a vial of heroin he took from the hospital, and he places it in a cigar box under the bed.

At the hospital, Sonja allows Havaa to ask questions. Havaa asks who Sonja bribed to gain entrance into medical school and Sonja says she simply studied hard and got in on her own. Sonja tells Havaa that her life will be different as an adult and that she can become anything she wants.

Havaa then allows Sonja to ask some questions. Sonja asks if she remembers a girl named Natasha. Havaa says she remembers lots of girls named Natasha. Sonja goes to retrieve the portrait drawn by Akhmed but Havaa is asleep before she returns.

Chapter 23 is set in 2001. Natasha recalled the day at the hospital when the security guard rushed through the hospital shouting that the rebels had arrived. This was prior to the one-armed security guard and the guard never returned to his position at the hospital. The rebels came in, demanding medical help. The commander insisted that all his men be treated ahead of him. Sonja amputated the arm of one of the men and that man would become the security guard for the coming years.

By the time Sonja treated the officer, she was out of some of her supplies, including thread for stitching. He had a huge gash on his chest and she wound up sewing it closed with dental floss. The rebels stayed only long enough to regroup. Everyone prepared to move on but they were leaving behind the amputee. The commander told him that he was relieved of duty and pointed out that the hospital was in need of a new security guard.

Six days later, the Federal army arrived. They knew the rebels hid out in the hospital for a time and the Feds bombs one side of the hospital, prompting the collapse of a section. Maali was in that section at the time of the blast. Natasha rushed to get a syringe of



heroin but Maali died before Natasha could finish the injection. Natasha injected the remainder of the drug between her own toes.

Analysis

When Khassan intercepts Akhmed going home in Chapter 22, he reveals that he has tried to convince Ramzan not to tell the military of Akhmed's role in Havaa's disappearance. This is important on several levels. Akhmed doesn't know that Khassan is really his biological father. He just knows that Khassan has always been there for his family, even to the point of purchasing the burial shroud for Akhmed's mother. Another important aspect is that Akhmed now knows that he will be arrested, and that it's only a matter of time. Finally, there's the question that Khassan poses, asking Akhmed if he should kill Ramzan to stop him from informing. By not killing Akhmed, Khassan is essentially allowing the murder of his other son, though no one knows of the biological connection.

Natasha and Maali became close during their time at the hospital. Maali was Deshi's twin sister but was younger by just a few minutes. The relationship between Maali and Deshi was somewhat strained because Maali always felt like the younger sister who was trying to catch up with Deshi. Natasha felt the same and this created a connection between Natasha and Maali that might not otherwise exist. Natasha was never as close to Deshi.

Maali was not a major character but she was somewhat humorous and interesting. Her response to everything was to suggest amputation, and this provided a release from the stress that keeps everyone constantly on edge. At one point, there was even a lengthy discussion about amputation that went so far as to consider amputating someone's head.

The people of this time and place accept violence and destruction as a fact of life. Sonja talks about the bombing of the hospital. She says it wasn't an act of war, but was retribution because some of the rebels had sought medical help there. She doesn't seem particularly angry about it at all. This is one of the many effects of war, a theme seen throughout the story.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the new information about the relationship between Akhmed and Khassan.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Khassan consider killing Ramzan? Do you think he should?



Discussion Question 3

Describe Maali, Deshi, and Natasha, and their relationships with each other.

Vocabulary

arbitrarily, monochromatic, insufferable, sequestered, exasperated, vociferously



Chapters 24-26

Summary

The final section is titled “The Fourth and Fifth Days.” Chapter 24 is set in 2004. Akhmed forgets to pick up the letter for Havaa. Havaa is elated when he arrives at the hospital. They don't talk about the fact that he might be arrested at any point, just as Dokka was, but they both know it's true.

Akhmed gives Sonja a book titled “Hadji Murad.” They talked about the book in the past and Sonja immediately flips to the back page. She says she never reads a book unless she knows it has an ending she'll like. She says the character of this book gets decapitated at the end, so she won't read it.

Akhmed, Havaa, and Deshi go to the weekly “aid distribution” so Sonja is at the hospital alone when a man arrives with a “tailpipe lodged in his chest.” Sonja can't do anything for him but talks to him, asking if he can see his sister wherever he is now. Akhmed finds her talking to the corpse and insists she rest. She says she can't but he gives her a medical dictionary, saying that will put her right to sleep. Sonja is surprised to find the definition of life circled in red. She leaves the room but passes out.

When she wakes, she goes downstairs and has a cigarette. Akhmed joins her a short time later and tells her she looks better after her rest. They banter a bit and that turns into flirting. After a short while, Sonja says she's going to the fourth floor, and says that Akhmed should wait a half hour before joining her there. He does and they have sex. They are both amazed that they can be silly with each other because that takes a level of trust they don't usually experience. As he is leaving that night, Sonja says goodnight, and points out that Akhmed has an “ugly nose.”

Ramzan is waiting when he gets home. Akhmed again refuses to say anything though Ramzan hints that Akhmed and his wife could be in danger. Ramzan says Akhmed doesn't owe Dokka this level of loyalty. Akhmed knows he will die before he tells anyone where Havaa is, but he worries that he won't be able to stand up to torture without talking.

Ramzan says Akhmed is one of only two people who really knows what happened to Ramzan during his first arrest. He says he has been a joke to the people of this village who gossiped about him because he never married. He points out that these were the very people he sacrificed so much to save, and that they didn't appreciate it. He begs Akhmed to say he understands. Akhmed pushes him. Standing there, Akhmed understands Khassan's inability to actually kill Ramzan. Akhmed now knows the situation is not nearly as simple as he'd first imagined.

That evening, Akhmed carefully washes Ula and is very tender with her. He then waits until he hears the trucks arrive before giving her a fatal dose of morphine. He has found



the letter to Havaa and he hides it in the only place he can think of – under Ula's body. He also places an envelope there with the letter “K” and Khassan's address. He prays for Havaa as he's being arrested but as the soldiers begin beating him, he prays for himself.

Chapter 25 is set in 2003. Natasha had feigned illness that morning so that she wouldn't have to go to the hospital with Sonja. She had been using morphine for months by that point. When she shot up one night, she promised she'd leave the next day, and she did. She considered leaving Sonja a note but couldn't imagine anything she could say.

She stopped at Dokka's house in Eldar and he immediately recognized her as the woman who delivered Havaa. He welcomed her and pleaded with her to stay rather than face the dangers of traveling. She did stay awhile. She and Havaa got to know each other. When Natasha insisted it was time for her to leave, Dokka gave her the Makarov pistol. He said it was impossible for him to put Havaa in the position of trying to defend them and pointed out that he couldn't pull the trigger. Natasha reluctantly accepted the pistol.

Natasha managed to avoid most of the soldiers but reached a front-line check and was forced to stop. One of the officers took her into a wooded area, saying she needed to sign some paper. No one expected her to have a gun so she still had it as she went into the woods. When the officer instructed her to undress, Natasha made a decision. She shot and killed the officer and other soldiers quickly rushed to the sound. They shot and killed Natasha in retaliation.

In Chapter 26, Akhmed doesn't arrive at the hospital the morning after his arrest. Sonja knows his address and finally decides to go to his house. She finds signs of a struggle at his home and Ula's body. Sonja works for hours to clean up the house, putting the books back on the shelves and clearing away the glass. She then dresses Ula and discovers the envelopes.

She opens the larger envelop and finds the letter from Khassan to Havaa. She automatically flips to the final page and reads Khassan's account of Havaa's birth. He describes the mural on the hospital wall, saying Havaa was “born within the memory of a kinder past.” He remembers that the nurse present at the delivery was named Natasha and that she helped Havaa take her first breath. He says both her parents held her during her first moments of life, and that her father was the first to say that they were naming the baby Havaa. Khassan then writes that Dokka held Havaa on the morning of her birth and that he held onto her as he was arrested.

After she finishes, Sonja realizes that her sister delivered Havaa and she feels a drive to keep Havaa safe, at least partly because of Natasha's role in Havaa's birth. She goes to the address on the smaller envelop and asks for “K.” He asks about Ula and Sonja says she's dead. Khassan accepts the envelop and Sonja leaves without waiting to find out what's inside.



Analysis

Havaa rushes to Akhmed as soon as he arrives at the hospital each morning. She is thrilled to see that he's returned and knows that he might not come back at any time. This is an example of the situation of the time and place. Havaa has grown up with this instability and doesn't really see it as unusual.

At one point, Akhmed is talking to Khassan about Ramzan. Akhmed says he won't tell Ramzan where Havaa is hiding. Khassan says Ramzan would rather not know. He explains that Ramzan would rather tell the Feds that Akhmed can give them the information so that the Feds can force Akhmed to tell. That way, Ramzan can tell himself that he hasn't directly caused Havaa's death. This is undoubtedly a way Ramzan is able to deal with his guilt but it's a lie designed to deceive himself.

Sonja knows that she has never marked in the dictionary but she recognizes the red ink as being the same kind of pen she kept on her nightstand. She seems to understand that Natasha must have circled the definition but she doesn't voice that thought. This is an important revelation because it gives Sonja a brief piece of insight into Natasha, but it's also important because it's the definition of life while Sonja is surrounded by death.

Natasha's death is finally revealed and the reader discovers that her death was a direct cause for Dokka's arrest. Dokka gave Natasha his pistol because he wanted to help her be safe. While she died at the hands of the soldiers, she was at least able to protect herself from being raped. The new commander tracked the pistol back to Ramzan who gave it to Dokka, and that's why Dokka was arrested. This full circle of events is finally explained and the casual reader may miss some of the connections.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Akhmed and Sonja connect sexually?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sonja learn that Natasha delivered Havaa and how does this change her attitude about Havaa?

Discussion Question 3

What is Natasha's fate and how is it connected to the arrest of Dokka and then Akhmed?

Vocabulary

aspersions, subterfuge, orthodoxy, incipient, tethered, malaise, regression, immutable, penultimate, circumnavigation, corroborating, refutation, appeasement, profligate



Chapters 27-29

Summary

In Chapter 27, Akhmed is at home when the Federal soldiers arrive. Khassan watches from his home, unable to stop what's happening but hating himself for allowing it. He feels a lack of pride and honor, knowing that Akhmed is on his way to die. He takes a knife and plans to kill Ramzan.

He sits beside Ramzan, who is in a deep, drugged sleep. Khassan talks about a man who had felt honor-bound to kill his son. The village shunned the man until he killed his son but then welcomed him back into their society. The man, however, couldn't live with the horror of what he'd done. Khassan knows that Ramzan will sleep most of the day and decides to put off the murder for awhile longer.

He hears a knock and finds Sonja at the door. They talk for only a moment, then Khassan takes the envelop and Sonja leaves. Inside, Khassan finds two letters instructing that the bearer should have safe passage. One is from a Federal commander and the other is from a rebel commander, meaning Khassan should be safe in almost any situation. There's also a small scrap of paper with Akhmed's handwriting and the single word - "mercy."

He goes to see Ula one last time then returns home where he packs a few essentials and gets into Ramzan's truck. Khassan doesn't know that he's already suffering from dementia that will erase his memories in a few years. Ramzan will remain in the village for three years before moving to a lonely hamlet where he'll live out his life, 57 more years.

Chapter 28 is set in 2004. Sonja remembers Natasha asking once if she would go back to London, if that option were open. Sonja says she has tried to figure out the "map" of her life that brought her to this point, but that it's all hypothetical. When she gets back to the hospital, she finds they don't have a single patient. She and Deshi briefly discuss closing it down but know it's not really an option. With nothing pressing at the hospital, Sonja finds Havaa. She asks if Havaa's suitcase is still packed. They take it and leave the hospital.

They arrive at the apartment Sonja shared with Natasha. Havaa is pleased to have a room of her own. Sonja says Havaa can live there, if she wants. Havaa agrees. She sets out the souvenirs that she collected from the people who stayed at her house. One of them is a Buckingham Guard nutcracker. Sonja questions her but Havaa says she can't remember the woman's name because there were so many refugees. She says the nutcracker's name is Alu and that "he's an idiot." Sonja questions Havaa but she simply doesn't know where the woman was going and can't give Sonja any of the details she requests, other than to say she was traveling alone.



Years will pass. One day a porter on a train will mistake Sonja for Havaa's mother and Sonja won't even think that she should correct him. Havaa will go on to college and her dissertation will be well received. She'll acknowledge the roles of Natasha, Sonja, Dokka, and Akhmed in her life. She will meet a man and marry. She will live to be 103 and will die in Hospital No. 6, in the room that Sonja had used as a bedroom. They would never know what happened to Natasha.

In Chapter 29, the men in Pit B at the Landfill are hopeless and helpless. No one wants to know the names of the other men but one man has no fingers. When a new man arrives, he helps tend medical needs as best he can. These two men find each other and embrace, crying out repeatedly that “she's safe.”

Analysis

Sonja has several letters guaranteeing her safe passage in various places. She keeps them in the glove box of her truck. Akhmed takes two of them and these are the letters he gives to Khassan, knowing that Khassan can use them to get away from Eldar and from Ramzan.

The word “mercy” indicates that Akhmed is recommending that Khassan have mercy on Ramzan. It's interesting that Akhmed is so gracious when he knows that he's going to be arrested and will die because of Ramzan. It's left to the reader to decide why Akhmed tells Khassan to be merciful to Ramzan. It seems likely that Akhmed is at peace with his life and his situation, and that he is satisfied with the fact that he played a role in saving Havaa.

There are indications that Havaa and Sonja live happy lives, though it can be argued that there isn't a “happily ever after” considering the horrific events they've endured. Sonja remains at the hospital after the country begins rebuilding and is accepted as an important member of the medical team. Havaa is well-educated, married, and successful in her own right.

The nutcracker is not a unique piece. Having the nutcracker might indicate to Sonja that Havaa has seen Natasha but it's also possible that the nutcracker didn't come from Natasha. The fact that Havaa says the nutcracker is named Alu makes it certain that she got the nutcracker from Natasha. Natasha would have known about Alu from Sonja and that he was considered “an idiot.”

The fact that the author includes information about the futures of some of the characters provides a higher level of hope than would otherwise exist. It seems necessary to avoid having a story that is merely one of hopelessness and uncertainty.

Discussion Question 1

What does the word “mercy” mean on the paper from Akhmed, and why do you believe he wrote it?



Discussion Question 2

Why do Dokka and Akhmed embrace and seem happy when they are reunited in Pit B at the Landfill?

Discussion Question 3

How do you believe the events of 2004 impact the rest of Havaa's life? How might her life have been different if these events hadn't occurred?

Vocabulary

splayed, contortion, grandiose, collusion, articulated, benefactor, premonition, epitaph, emaciated, reticence



Characters

Akhmed

Akhmed is a man who lives in the small village of Eldar. He is friends with Dokka and he takes Havaa to safety after Dokka's arrest though it means putting himself in danger. The next morning, he decides to take her to the hospital where he hopes Sonja will take care of her. He is a kind man and believes that being decent to others is more important than anything else. This belief is tested as he briefly becomes a member of Sonja's staff.

He is a doctor but his first love is art. When he left his village for medical school, everyone was proud of his achievement. When he snuck out of class to attend art classes, he felt that he had let down everyone in his village. Despite this feeling of responsibility, his love of art continued to be an important part of his life. When 41 people went missing from their small village one night, Akhmed drew their portraits and put them around the town to make sure no one forgot them. He knows that he is a terrible doctor but holds to the idea that his desire to care for people makes up for his lack of skill.

Akhmed is married but his wife becomes bed-ridden, leaving him to take care of all their combined needs. He does so until the night of his arrest. He knows he will be taken and that his wife, Ula, will not survive alone. With that in mind, Akhmed kills her with an overdose of heroin.

Akhmed's sole purpose after Dokka's arrest is to save Havaa. He makes the trip to Volchansk each day until his arrest in order to make sure that Havaa is safe. When he is arrested, his only real concern is whether he can withstand the torture without revealing anything about Havaa.

Sophia Andreyevna Rabina

Better known as Sonja, she is the only doctor and surgeon available in Volchansk. She is Natasha's sister though the two girls are very different. Sonja spent most of her early years studying while Natasha enjoyed dressing up and being social. Sonja studied hard and ended up in medical school without having to bribe anyone to get there. She then earned a place in London, taking her away from her war-torn home.

Sonja was living a good life in London while Natasha remained at home. The war made conditions horrible for Natasha and Sonja gave up her life in London to return to Volchansk. Her sole reason for returning was to help Natasha. When Natasha returned from her time as a captive, Sonja wanted to help her recover. Sonja was frustrated that she couldn't fix Natasha's problems. Sonja was hurt when Natasha left on her own, especially considering that she didn't even leave a note. Sonja spends the rest of her



life not knowing how Natasha died or that she loved Sonja for giving up her life in London.

Sonja is critical and analytical. She is the only doctor at Hospital No. 6 for a long time and she has to become something of a machine when it comes to treating patients. She has no time to get to know any of her patients and she doesn't care about them on an emotional level. This is her way of protecting herself from total burnout while she tries to keep the hospital functioning.

Natasha

Natasha is Sonja's younger sister. She was very beautiful and was envious of Sonja. When Natasha was young, it was evident that she would go on to grow into a beautiful woman and it seemed that everyone was waiting for that but that there really wasn't anything for Natasha to do other than wait. This seemed to hurt her a great deal because she wasn't prepared for the terrible situation she lived in as an adult. She was captured and forced to become a prostitute, living with horrible cruelty.

She was grateful that Sonja gave up her cushy life in London and knew that Sonja did it only because they are sisters, but she was never able to tell her so. She eventually began work at the hospital Sonja ran and delivered many babies, including Havaa. She was never able to fully kick the heroin habit and she decided to leave the apartment she shares with Sonja mainly out of remorse. She was shot and killed after killing a military officer who intended to rape her.

Havaa

Havaa is the daughter of Dokka and she grows up in the small village of Eldar. She is an intelligent little girl and is wise beyond her years, mainly because of the harsh conditions in which she lives. She has seen a lot of death and knows that nothing in life is guaranteed or even truly safe. She hides, as Dokka instructs, while he is being arrested and goes with Akhmed willingly, though she questions everything. She also questions Sonja endlessly and it's Sonja's encouragement that makes Havaa realize she can become a professional rather than a wife and mother.

Havaa grows up to earn her doctorate degree and lives to more than 100 years of age.

Ramzan Geshilov

Ramzan is the son of Khassan and he lives in the village, Eldar. He had a normal childhood for the area and time, and he had friends among the villagers, including Dokka and Akhmed. When Ramzan was arrested the first time, he withstood an incredible level of torture while continuing to resist the attempts to make him into an informant. Even when he was castrated, he continued to resist. When Ramzan was



captured for the second time, he capitulated as quickly as his captors would let him. His only act of defiance was to beg for Dokka's release.

As an informant, Ramzan is granted necessities that others are denied, including food, medicine, and electricity. He never feels good about his role and often tries to drown his guilt in drugs. He hates that people in the village know that he's an informant. He also hates that people speculate about the reason he never marries. He manages to keep the level of torture a secret and one of his greatest fears is that his castration might become public knowledge.

Khassan Geshilov

Khassan is Ramzan's father. He lives in the village, Eldar. He is a scholar and a writer, and wrote a huge manuscript about the history of his country. One small section of the book was published but the changing political and social situations meant the rest of his book never went to press.

His greatest regret in life is that he wasn't a good father to Ramzan. He hates that his son is an informant and stops talking to Ramzan as a means of punishing them both. He believes the honorable thing would be to kill Ramzan but can never bring himself to do it. He accepts the insulin Ramzan gets for him but feeds the majority of the food to the dogs that have been abandoned in the village.

Khassan is Akhmed's biological father though that fact is never openly revealed to Akhmed or to the community.

Deshi

Deshi was a nurse at Hospital No. 6 long before Sonja's arrival. She is waspish and opinionated, but is also highly capable and dedicated. She often reminds Sonja that she retired from nursing years earlier as a threat but they both seem to know she will never follow through. She is the older of twins and her sister, Maali, worked at the hospital until her death.

Maali

Maali was a nurse at Hospital No. 6 until she died in a retaliatory attack on the hospital. She was Deshi's twin sister, younger by only a few minutes, but had always felt that she was behind. She wondered what her life might have been if she'd been born first, and seemed to believe that it would have made a difference. Maali and Natasha connected, probably at least partly because of their roles as younger sisters of outspoken, successful women.



As a nurse, Maali was constantly recommending amputation, even when it was not necessary, which became something of a joke at the hospital. It seemed likely that this was Maali's way of coping with the constant death that surrounded her.

Dokka

Dokka is Havaa's father. He is friends with Ramzan and they were together when Ramzan was captured with a truck load of weapons. Dokka was released when Ramzan was released, but his captors cut off all his fingers before allowing him to leave. Dokka was well-educated and devoted to Havaa. He answered her questions and encouraged her to think past the typical boundaries of girls of this time and place. When he is arrested and facing certain death, his only fear is that Havaa might not be safe. When Akhmed is also arrested, Dokka's main question is whether "she" is safe. Learning that she is, Dokka is at peace with his own fate.

Alu's Brother

Alu was treated at the hospital, and Alu's brother was grateful to Sonja for that. Alu's brother runs a black market business and is wealthy and relatively safe in an area where no one is really safe. He offered to do something for Sonja as a means of showing his gratitude and she asked him for medical supplies. He got them illegally and also managed to get a huge ice machine for the hospital. When Sonja wonders if Akhmed is an informant, Alu's brother helps threaten Akhmed in an effort to find the truth.

Alu's brother is somewhat dismissive of Alu, saying Alu is his least favorite brother. He describes a time when he forgot to feed his pet turtle and Alu thought to feed the turtle. He says that's the only reason he likes Alu enough to do any favors for Sonja.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Blue Suitcase

This is the small suitcase that Havaa has packed as her “just-in-case bag.” She grabs it the night Dokka is arrested. The suitcase and its contents are all Havaa has left after the Feds burn down her house.

Havaa's Souvenirs

These are things Havaa carries in her blue suitcase. They are items given to her by the various people who have stayed at her home on their way out of the country. The nutcracker Sonja gave to Natasha is among these souvenirs.

The Markarov Pistol

This is a gun that Dokka owned but gave to Natasha. She used it to kill a military officer who was obviously about to rape her. The gun was then traced back to the village, Eldar, and to Ramzan, who said it had been in Dokka's possession. This is the reason Dokka is arrested and the reason the Feds are searching for Havaa.

Dokka's Fingers

Dokka's fingers were cut off after he and Ramzan were arrested and held at the Landfill. The fingers represent loss because Dokka's family was changed after this. At one point, Dokka had Havaa learn to shoot a gun because he wanted to find some way to protect his family in the volatile situation, and he can't pull a trigger without his fingers.

The 41 Villagers

These are 41 people who were killed or arrested in a single night from Akhmed's village. He painted the portraits of each on a piece of board and put them throughout the village as sort of a memorial to them.

Origins of Chechen Civilization: Prehistory to the Fall of the Mongol Empire

This is a small book written by Khassan Geshilov but it is part of a huge manuscript. The entire book is thousands of pages but there are a million problems with it, including that the political situation changes so quickly that he can't keep up with it. He eventually



burns the manuscript, deciding that he would prefer to die as an unknown than to be remembered.

Chess

This is a game played by Akhmed, Ramzan, and Dokka a couple of times each month at Dokka's home. Havaa sees the game as being an important piece of a civilized life. Her father says hands are an important part of playing chess, which makes Havaa even more upset that her father loses his fingers.

The Ice Machine

This is a huge contraption that Alu's brother bought for the hospital at Sonja's request. It had reportedly been used for some famous people through the years, including the singing group, the Bee Gees. The machine is a symbol for what's missing in the lives of the people living during this time. Sonja relishes the fact that the hospital has ice and clean water available.

Ethnic Russians

This group controlled the majority of the power when Natasha and Sonja were children. They, as members of this class, were set apart to some degree. The Russians of this era in this region were important people but their hold was tenuous. By the time Natasha was working the black market, the situation had changed dramatically. At one point, Natasha's friend said that their fellow Russians were "dropping bombs on us."

The Mural at the Hospital

The hospital had been damaged by the time Natasha began working there, and some of the windows were covered with wood. One day, Natasha began drawing a scene on one of the windows. Deshi and Maali were critical of it, forcing Natasha to redraw it so that it was a reasonable rendition of what was actually outside that window before the war. That mural prompted Akhmed to draw the portraits of the 41 villagers who are taken one night.



Settings

Volchansk

This is the city where the hospital is located. It's several miles from the village where Akhmed lives and there is a great deal of rubble as a result of years of war and unrest. When Sonja looks out over the city from an upper floor of the hospital, she can see the ruins of buildings but can still identify many by what's left and others from memory. She notes a huge office building, a place of worship, a school, a library, a jail, and a store.

Hospital No. 6

This is the hospital where Sonja works and lives. It's apparently the only functioning hospital left in the city of Volchansk. It was once staffed by 500 people but Sonja, Deshi, and a guard are the only staff members left by the time Akhmed arrives with Havaa. There is an incredible mural drawn by Natasha on the wood covering a window in what was once the maternity ward. On one floor, a bomb blew away a part of the building. Sonja shows Akhmed this by opening a door that literally leads to open air. A person who takes a single step through that door would fall several stories.

Pit A and Pit B

These are a huge holes in the ground in an area known as the Landfill where prisoners are held. Ramzan is held while Dokka is held in Pit A. The prisoners sometimes carve their names into the walls of the pit. A man who teaches the Qu'ran has the men push mud into the name as a manner of burial once that person has been taken away. No one who is questioned ever returns to the pit. When Ramzan is taken from the pit, he's tortured and turns into an informer for his captors. This is also where Dokka and Akhmed reunite after their arrests.

Eldar

Eldar is the name of the village where Akhmed and Dokka live out their lives. Eldar is a small town with no real amenities for the people who live there. Khassan's house is one of the few in the village with electricity and that's only because Ramzan is an informant. There are just a few houses and several of those have been destroyed even before Dokka's arrest. An important aspect of the village is that there are 41 portraits posted around the town. They were drawn by Akhmed in honor of the 41 people who were taken one night. Natasha notices the portraits when she arrives in Eldar in 2003.



Grozny

Grozny is a larger city where Sonja goes to get medical supplies from the black market. Grozny is under military rule just as the other parts of the country are at the time of this story. There is a huge warehouse in this town where Sonja picks up her supplies. Akhmed has never been to Grozny before his trip there with Sonja and he imagines that it's a more attractive destination than it really is.



Themes and Motifs

Saving Havaa's Life

The entire book is devoted to the people who work to save Havaa's life. Havaa is the daughter of Dokka. Khassan rushed Dokka and his wife to the hospital for Havaa's birth and Khassan talked about the delivery. Though dictators of the day prohibited men from being present for the birth, both Dokka and Khassan remained for Havaa's birth. Khassan wrote about those moments after Havaa's birth, including how tenderly her parents held her.

Natasha served as midwife for Havaa's birth. Havaa was one of dozens of babies she delivered, but Dokka never forgot Natasha's role. When Natasha showed up at Dokka's house as a refugee, he immediately recognized her and welcomed her. When Natasha insisted that she was leaving, Dokka gave her a gun for protection. She asked why he was giving her the gun and Dokka said he wants to take care of the person who took care of Havaa in her first moments of life.

When Dokka is arrested, his only concern is that Havaa gets out of the house to hide before the soldiers enter. Shortly after he leaves, Akhmed rushes to find Havaa. He takes her inside his own home though the soldiers would arrest him for hiding Havaa. Akhmed then takes Havaa to the hospital where he hopes that Sonja will take care of her. Akhmed makes the long walk to the hospital each day to work in return for Havaa's care. When Akhmed is arrested, he encounters Dokka. The other prisoners note that the two men seem to know each other and that their only conversation is that "she is safe," indicating Havaa. Both go to their deaths willingly because they know they have done all they can to protect Havaa.

After Akhmed is arrested, Sonja takes full responsibility for Havaa. She raises her to adulthood and plays the role of mother. When Havaa writes her dissertation, she credits the roles of those who took care of her, including, Dokka, Akhmed, Sonja, and Natasha, indicating that she is fully aware of the sacrifices those people made for her.

The Relationship between Akhmed, Dokka, and Ramzan

Akhmed, Ramzan, and Dokka were friends when they were young and this lasted until the war and adult cares tore them apart. The dynamics between these three men drive some of the action, including the deaths of Dokka and Akhmed. The relationship between Dokka and Akhmed became strained when they are adults because Akhmed slept with Dokka's wife while Dokka was away. Dokka knew, but he apparently never confronted Akhmed about the situation. When Dokka lost his fingers, he often had to depend on Akhmed for help and this bothered him.



Ramzan was arrested and held as a prisoner early in the conflict. He stubbornly refused to become an informant though he was beaten and cruelly tortured. His captors were amazed at his resistance, and that's probably the only reason he was released. He even continued to refuse when his captors castrated him. This wound is horrific and he was dumped in his home village, bleeding and in danger of dying. His father took him to Akhmed, the only doctor in the area, and Akhmed tended the wound. This means that Akhmed is the only person, other than Ramzan's father, who knows that he has been castrated. It strains their adult relationship because Ramzan is ashamed of his situation.

Dokka and Ramzan are also close friends into adulthood. Ramzan began running guns and he often took Dokka along, leaving Akhmed behind. This gave Akhmed the opportunity to sleep with Dokka's wife. This was the reason Dokka was with Ramzan when he was captured and held at the Landfill. When Ramzan was tortured for a second time, he quickly tried to become an informant but he was tortured for a long time before his captors allowed him to capitulate. When Ramzan was released, he begged for Akhmed's release as well. He had some money but not enough to meet his captors' demands, which was why Dokka was released only after they cut off all his fingers. This led to Dokka's dependence on Akhmed.

The final point of this theme is seen as Ramzan turns in Dokka and then Akhmed, leading to their arrest and their deaths.

Hope for a Better Life

Akhmed grew up in Eldar, the same village he ultimately dies in. He was the first student of his group to accept some scientific ideas, and this set him apart from his classmates. Though most of the young people of the village grew old and remained there all their lives, Akhmed managed to gain entry into medical school. His success was celebrated by the entire village. However, Akhmed soon realized that he would prefer to become an artist and he sometimes skipped entire lectures to attend art classes. The important aspect of this is that Akhmed felt a sense of responsibility toward the people of his village because he represented the hope each of them has for a better future.

Sonja and Natasha are another example of this theme. Sonja had the intellectual ability and applied herself rigorously in order to become a doctor. She actually left the country and lived in London for awhile. When she became worried about Natasha, Sonja returned to her home, despite the war conditions that exist at that time. Natasha lived through a horrific ordeal but eventually became a productive member of the hospital team. She held to the hope that she would be able to go to London and live the wonderful life Sonja had described. That was the reason Natasha left her home for a second time, this time voluntarily. She was one of thousands who left their homes in the hope that their lives would be better in the refugee camps.

This theme is seen again when Havaa watches Sonja. Until meeting Sonja, Havaa had seen women only hold traditional roles of wives and mothers. She is amazed that Sonja



has accomplished so much and she asks if it's possible to reach some of those goals herself. Sonja assures Havaa that she can become anything she wants to be if she just applies herself toward those goals. Havaa's goals become a combination of Sonja's and Dokka's, and both are mentioned in her dissertation.

Maintaining the Hospital

Before the war, Hospital No. 6 was run by some 500 employees who keep the hospital operational. There were some problems even then, but the hospital seemed to meet at least the basic medical needs of the people of the city. Once the war truly began, most of the hospital staff members left. Some left on their own but some were killed or arrested. The hospital is eventually operating with a skeleton crew of two people and they are meeting only some of the basic medical needs with very rudimentary equipment and supplies. Sonja is the only doctor in residence and she is the only reason the hospital remains operational at all.

Sonja might have given up on the hospital if not for the help of a pair of nurses who remained on staff. Deshi and Maali are sisters and they worked together until Maali's was killed during an attack on the hospital. Deshi remains, even though she periodically reminds Sonja that she retired years earlier. For a long time, Sonja and Deshi keep the hospital going. When they hear land mines going off, they know to prepare for an influx of patients. Some days they handle only a few routine medical cases but the majority of the time, both are overworked. One day, Sonja notes that there isn't anyone in the hospital and they briefly discuss closing the hospital, but neither is serious.

Sonja goes to great lengths to keep the hospital open. The rich brother of a former patient offered to get anything she wants. She knew that she could ask for a plane ticket out of the country and she briefly considered that, but she put the hospital first. She asked for medical supplies and the man provided it. Sonja has to travel through dangerous circumstances each month to collect the supplies and she always faces the temptation to give up and leave, but she continues to keep the hospital operational.

As the story comes to a close, the reader learns that Sonja will remain on staff after the war and will become a well-respected physician among the fully-staffed hospital.

The Effects of the War

The story is set in a war-torn country where there is a high level of unrest and violence. People are taken in the middle of the night with little or no cause. Dokka, for example, was arrested because Ramzan says he was the previous owner of a pistol that was used to shoot a military officer. Akhmed was arrested because he helped hide Havaa after her father's arrest.

There is little medical care available and this can apparently be attributed to the war. Sonja and Deshi know that they'll soon be busy whenever they hear the blast of a mine detonating. There are so few options for medical care that the victims are always

brought to Hospital No. 6 where Sonja is the only doctor available. Sonja is a skilled doctor but she is limited by the lack of supplies, another effect of the war.

Ramzan's actions are reprehensible but can be traced directly back to the war. He was tortured brutally during his first arrest which made him ready to do whatever it took to escape that a second time. He tried to give information even before they began their torture, and he willingly became an informant because he was so afraid. This changed the lives of many people, including Havaa, Dokka, and Akhmed. Ramzan's father is also a casualty of this situation. He is ostracized because Ramzan is an informant and he stops talking to Ramzan, though the silence obviously hurts them both. Akhmed even considers killing Ramzan as a means of putting a stop to his informing.

Styles

Point of View

The story is written in third person from an omniscient perspective. However, each chapter is limited in perspective to the characters that appear in that chapter, meaning the reader knows only what those characters know at that time. For example, Sonja appears in several of the chapters throughout the book and she is driven by her desire to know what happened to her sister, Natasha. The reader sees some of Natasha's early actions but doesn't see her inner thoughts until late in the book when a chapter is presented from her perspective. It's only then that the reader learns that she died even before Akhmed took Havaa to Sonja. The reader also learns at that point that Natasha was connected to Dokka's arrest and is, therefore, the reason Havaa is an orphan who winds up in Sonja's care. However, Sonja never learns all the details of Natasha's final days or that she's dead.

The omniscient perspective means the reader knows the inner thoughts of the various characters. An important example of this is seen in Khassan and Ramzan. Ramzan is an informant and causes the arrests of several of his neighbors and friends. It seems a cowardly thing to do and the reader probably doesn't like Ramzan from the early pages of the book. It's only later, when the reader sees Ramzan's inner thoughts, that he becomes a more sympathetic character. Ramzan was brutally tortured the first time he was arrested, and that makes it easier to understand that he did whatever it takes to get away from his captors after his second arrest.

The perspective is appropriate to the story. There is no way for the perspective to be more limited without leaving the reader in the dark about specific events and characters. For example, Sonja never learns the fate of her sister. If the perspective was written from Sonja's point of view, the reader would also never know what happens to Natasha.

Language and Meaning

The overall tone of the story is one of fear and despair though there is an undercurrent of hope. Many of the main characters are focused on keeping Havaa alive. She is the only child seen among the main characters and they all hope that she will have a better future. Havaa herself changes her outlook to a more hopeful future after seeing that Sonja is an educated and successful woman.

There are brief sketches of some of the characters' futures and many of these also provide an element of hope. Most notably are Havaa and Sonja. Havaa grows into an adult, finishes her doctorate degree, and lives to be more than a hundred years old. Sonja also lives a long life and is recognized as an important part of the medical staff even after the hospital is again fully operational. Mohmad, the guard at the hospital, remains at work for many years to come. It's noted that he doesn't get a single



paycheck until after the country and economy are restored. When he gets a check as back pay, he doesn't cash it but continues to work.

There are also some elements of humor. Maali is constantly suggesting that each patient should have something amputated. Her insistence that amputation is the cure for everything is funny and provides some much-needed relief in an otherwise horrific situation. Deshi is old by the time Akhmed meets her and she is always worried that every man she meets is trying to seduce her in some way. She fusses at him for every comment, turning his words so that it sounds as if he actually is being rude. Their banter is humorous and Sonja laughs at them. There is also a couple of conversations between Sonja and Akhmed about the leaders of the United States. Akhmed confuses Ronald Reagan with Ronald McDonald. Later, he asks her who Ronald McDonald really is and Sonja explains that he's a clown who sells hamburgers. Akhmed says he would never eat a hamburger cooked by a clown.

The story is written in modern English though the characters didn't speak that as their primary language. This is obviously meant to bring the story to English-speaking readers. There are some words, phrases, and ideas that readers may find strange or unfamiliar. Most unfamiliar words are explained within the context of the story. Some ideas, such as the fact that Akhmed leaves his bed-ridden wife alone for hours at a time, seem impossible to fathom considering modern American medical practices. However, the reader has to remember the setting and situation.

Structure

The story is divided into three sections. They are titled "The First and Second Days," "The Third Day," and "The Fourth and Fifth Days." Each section is divided into chapters that are titled by number only. Chapters 1-9 are included in the first section. Chapters 10-23 are in the second section and the final section includes Chapters 24-29. The chapters vary greatly in length and in content.

There are five main days in the story. On the first day, Akhmed watches while Dokka is arrested and he then takes Havaa into his own home. On the second day, Akhmed takes Havaa to the hospital and begs Sonja to take care of her. On the third day, Akhmed and Sonja travel to Grozny where Sonja has help questioning Akhmed's true motives. She is trying to make certain he isn't a spy and she leaves convinced that he isn't. On the fourth day, Akhmed returns to the hospital for his final day. He kills his wife with an overdose of heroin that night just before he's arrested. On the fifth day, Akhmed doesn't arrive at the hospital and Sonja makes the decision to move on with her life, including the acceptance that she's responsible for Havaa.

The story is not presented in chronological order though the five main days of the story provide a basis for the other events. The majority of the book actually occurs before the five main days, which are set in 2004. For example, the first chapter of the final section is Chapter 24. It's set in 2004 with Sonja and Akhmed headed for Gozney to get supplies. Chapter 25 is set in 2003 and describes Natasha's brief stay with Dokka and



her death. There are also brief looks at the future, such as the information that Havaa goes on to earn a doctorate degree and to live a long life. The time setting for the chapters is indicated at the top of each chapter where there's a timeline with the year of this setting highlighted.

There are many run-on sentences that ramble to the point that some readers won't be able to follow the meaning. One of these occurs in the first chapter of Day 3 and it consists of more than 500 words. These may be a problem for some readers who may not be able to fully follow the meaning through the rambles.



Quotes

When the soldiers grabbed Dokka by the shoulders and belt, tumbling him into the back of the truck and slamming his door, the relief falling over Akhmed was quickly peeled back by self-loathing, because he was alive, safe in his living room, while in the truck across the street, not twenty meters away, Dokka was a dead man.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 8)

Importance: Akhmed is watching as Dokka is arrested. He is describing survivor's guilt. Dokka is arrested and never returns.

He was an incompetent doctor but a decent man, he believed, compensating for his professional limitations with his empathy for the patient, his understanding of pain.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: This is referring to Dokka and this is a core piece of information about his character. He knows that he isn't a good doctor but he truly believes that his kind heart and good intentions make up for at least some of this.

For a quarter century his book hadn't been published because it was too accurate. Not it wouldn't be published because it wasn't, and couldn't be, accurate enough.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 15)

Importance: This is referring to Khassan's massive manuscript and is an indication of how the political climate controls all aspects of life in this time and place. He can't satisfy the publishers because of the governmental control of all aspects of life.

He had left her, just like her father had, and her mother, and she bandaged that wound with all the stubborn sullenness she could muster, so it would be hidden, well insulated, and so no one could see how in just three hours she had learned to miss him with the same incredible longing she reserved for her parents.

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 20)

Importance: This is referring to Havaa after Akhmed leaves her at the hospital. She is worried that he won't return but she's also torn, trying to prepare herself for the time when he won't come back to her and to insulate herself from caring too much when that happens.

As the saw teeth caught on bone, she had performed a second surgery, one less bloody but no less brutal, excising from his heart the impulse to run, to cower, to let the man bleed to death rather than face the horror of saving him.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is referring to Akhmed after he has amputated his first leg. He is not a competent doctor and he hates having to perform the harsh medical treatments. He



would prefer to deal with patients on a less invasive level but realizes that he has been changed because of Sonja's insistence that he perform the amputation.

I've amputated one thousand six hundred and forty-three legs. You've done three, and you think you have the right to diagnose me?

-- Sonja (Chapter 12 paragraph 47)

Importance: Sonja is talking to Akhmed after he says that something inside her is broken. Akhmed is trying to make Sonja realize that she can choose to react differently to the world, with more kindness toward the people she encounters. All Sonja can see is that she has performed these hundreds of amputations and that she's surrounded by death. She is also dismissive of Akhmed's professional abilities, meaning she doesn't seem to really respect him as a person. This changes later in the story.

The winter Brendan and Sonja fell in love, all of Volchansk became homeless; even those like Natasha, whose homes hadn't been hit, found the cold easier to sleep through than the fear of falling rubble.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is meant to show the vast differences between the lives of the sisters. Sonja is living in London, is in love and happy. Natasha is sleeping outside for fear her apartment will be bombed.

I was happy there. But I came back for you and that entitles me to your respect.

-- Sonja (Chapter 6 paragraph 17)

Importance: Sonja is talking to Natasha. She's angry at Natasha but she's also trying to break through to reach Natasha who has fallen into a deep depression.

She smiled at these two buffoons – the one-armed guard threatened to kick Akhmed's ass with his two working legs – and they had to be buffoons, because every hospital employee with a kopek of common sense had left.

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 1)

Importance: This is an example of one of the lighter moments of the story. Akhmed and Mohmad are arguing and there is good-natured teasing about Mohmad's missing arm and Akhmed's lack of medical knowledge. The two act like good friends though they've just met and are united only by their loyalty to Sonja.

It could be the sleeping pills you take to fall asleep among ghosts. It could be Alman, or Musa, or Omar, or Aslan, or Apti, or Mansur, or Aslan the Hirsute, or Ruslan, or Ami, or Amir Number Two, or Isa, of Khalid, or even Dokka. Probably Dokka.

-- Khassan (Chapter 21 paragraph 26)

Importance: Khassan is talking to Ramzan for the first time in months and he begins by saying any of these could be the reason Ramzan is having digestive issues. The people he lists here are the people who have been arrested on Ramzan's say-so.



Then, halfway through the book, at the bottom of the 1,322nd page, circled in red ink:
Life: a constellation of vital phenomena, organization, irritability, movement, grown, reproduction, adaptation.

-- Narrator (Chapter 24 paragraph 29)

Importance: Sonja has just come across the mark made by Natasha. It's not clear whether she fully realizes that Natasha circled the words, which would make it a connection to Natasha. It also could be simply that Sonja suddenly accepts that she is still alive and that she has more to live for than just waiting for Natasha to return.

She would die at the age of one hundred and three, in the geriatrics ward of Hospital No. 6, in a room that had been the director's office, then Sonja's bedroom, and finally a regular hospital room, a room Havaa would remember as many thousands of refugees remembered her own childhood bedroom, as room that had been there when it was needed.

-- Narrator (Chapter 28 paragraph 98)

Importance: This is an indication that Havaa lives a long and happy life and that she remembers being taken in at the hospital when she had no where else to go. There's a reference here to the many refugees who spent a night or two in Havaa's childhood bedroom and appreciated that safety just as Havaa appreciated the room at the hospital. This is also a sign that the sacrifices made so that Havaa could survive were not in vain.