

Sanctum (Guards of the Shadowlands) Study Guide

Sanctum (Guards of the Shadowlands) by Sarah Fine

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Plot Summary

Sanctum is the first book in author Sarah Fine's Guards of the Shadowlands series. The novel follows 17-year-old Lela Santos, who loses her closest friend to suicide. Lela follows her friend into the afterlife where she makes a desperate attempt to save her friend's soul.

The novel opens with Lela Santos arriving for her first day at Warwick High School. After being bounced from one foster home to the next all her life, she spent several months in a juvenile detention center after nearly killing the foster father who raped her repeatedly. She meets Nadia Vetter, a privileged but troubled girl who uses painkillers to mask her depression, and the two form a close but unlikely friendship. A year later, Lela's life has turned around with the help of both Nadia and her new foster mother, Diane, but she is crushed when Nadia, unable to deal with her depression any longer, overdoses on pills and dies. Lela, who has been plagued with disturbing nightmares since her own suicide attempt a few years earlier, begins having dreams about Nadia in a dark, dangerous city that is reserved for those who take their own lives. When she accidentally falls off a cliff and dies, Lela forgoes the peaceful Countryside and goes into the dark city to save her friend.

In the city, Lela meets Malachi, a handsome young man who is head of the guards and responsible for finding and eliminating the evil Mazikin, who steal the souls of city residents. After first mistrusting him, Lela finds herself falling for Malachi, who turns out to have a dark history of his own, having committed suicide while a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. Malachi has been in the city for about seventy years, but is nearing the time he can appeal to the judge and be released to the Countryside. As he falls for Lela, Malachi agrees to help her find Nadia and they are joined by Ana, another of the guards.

During their search, Lela must learn whom she can and cannot trust. She must face her worst demons by successfully navigating the city's Dark Tower that is constructed of the deepest fears of the residents. When they finally find and rescue Nadia, Lela is disappointed to find that her friend is more depressed than ever and learns that she is not capable of saving her. When they finally find themselves before the judge, Malachi and Lela both try to sacrifice themselves so the other can leave the city, but in the end both are sentenced to remain as guards but on a dangerous mission outside the city. The book ends with Lela back in Rhode Island, where many of the Mazikin have come. She is assigned to lead a special unit to find and destroy the Mazikin. She is surprised to learn that one of her assistants is Malachi, who will masquerade as a high school student as they start their new mission.



Prologue - Chapter 5

Summary

Sanctum is the first book in a series called Guards of the Shadowlands by author Sarah Fine. Troubled teen Lela Santos survived her own suicide attempt two years ago, but it left her with visions of a frightening place that beckons her forward in her dreams. When her best friend, Nadia Vetter, succeeds in taking her own life, Lela follows the demons into a special part of hell in the hope of saving her friend, even if it means sacrificing herself.

In the Prologue, the narrator is having a cigarette midway through her first day at Warwick High School in Rhode Island. The other kids have stared at her because of her cheap clothes and the fact that she was brought to school by her new foster mother and her probation officer. She sees a well-dressed girl trying to buy drugs from a guy in dirty jeans and intervenes when he wants sex in exchange for drugs. After the dealer leaves, the girl introduces herself as Nadia Vetter and the narrator says her name is Lela Santos, and also reveals that she served time in a juvenile facility for beating up her former foster father, Rick Jenson. Nadia offers to walk Lela to her next class, and Lela tells the reader that she would later choose to go to hell for her new friend.

Chapter 1 takes place one year later and finds Lela exercising in her bedroom when her foster mother, Diane, comes in. Over the past few months, Lela has pulled up her grades. At Nadia's urging, she has applied to a college; but, she has not gotten a response yet. She goes to Nadia's house, where she learns that Nadia has been accepted at the University of Rhode Island and they make plans to room together, assuming Lela gets in. Lela falls asleep and wakes to find Nadia in the bathroom taking prescription painkillers even though she has promised to stop. When she says sometimes she wants to sleep and never wake up, Lela tells her that she tried to commit suicide two years ago and that there is no happy place to escape to. She privately reflects on trying to hang herself; but, she was saved by Rick, her cruel stepfather who sexually abused her. Before being revived, she experienced the terrible Suicide Gates that lead to a dark city with monsters beckoning her forward. She still has nightmares about it. At Lela's urging, Nadia flushes the rest of her pills down the toilet. Lela asks her to talk with her if she ever feels like this again.

In Chapter 2, Lela reflects that Nadia seemed better in the following weeks, but was often too busy to spend time together. Returning from school, Lela finds Diane excitedly waving her acceptance package from the university, including a scholarship, and she hurries to Nadia's house to share the good news. However, she finds that Nadia has gotten high again and shows little response to Lela's excitement and Lela leaves, reflecting that her worst fear has come true – the person she considered her best friend has turned her back on her. The next day, she learns that Nadia's mother found her on the bathroom floor, dead, with an empty pill bottle in her hand.



Chapter 3 finds Lela getting a tattoo of Nadia's face on her forearm. Diane is worried about her and is concerned that she is having nightmares again, but Lela thinks that what she is experiencing – seeing Nadia in the dark city – feels too real to be dreams. Lela looks at photos she had taken of Nadia and realizes that when no one was looking, her beautiful smile had become a haunted look, so she burns the photos on Diane's back yard grill.

In Chapter 4, Lela is in the dark place with Nadia; in fact, she feels that she IS Nadia as she watches a horrifying scene. A terrified Nadia hides behind a Dumpster as a guard who is dressed differently than the others slays several people who attack him even though their weapons would seem to overpower him. When he sees Nadia, rather than killing her, he tells her to find shelter because the Mazikin are recruiting tonight. Lela wakes to find herself still in the back yard with Diane trying to get her out of what seems to be a trance. Lela reassures her that she is OK, then goes to bed and tries but is unable to summon further dreams or contact with Nadia.

In Chapter 5, Lela is unable to connect with Nadia, so she slips out of the house and drives to the Cliff Walk, a place on the Rhode Island coast that Nadia loved. There she has another vision of Nadia wandering toward an apartment in the dark city with pills in her hand, oblivious to everything except her need to escape from her pain. As Nadia stumbles into a vacant apartment, Lela finds herself back on the cliff and a gust of wind blows her off the edge. When she becomes aware again, she realizes she is dead but she is in a beautiful place called the Countryside. Everyone is happy and peaceful there, but Lela realizes she must go to the city to find Nadia and save her since she had not been able to save her in life. She steps through a veil of darkness and goes to the Suicide Gates, where she steals a knife from an unsuspecting guard, goes through the gates and settles in to watch.

Analysis

Sanctum's Prologue draws the reader in by introducing main character Lela, and a tough teen with a troubled past, as evidenced by references to a parole officer and a stint in a juvenile facility for beating up her foster father. It also sets up a contrast between Lela and the beautiful, popular Nadia, although it is clear that Nadia has her own demons when Lela sees her attempting to buy drugs. As the book's narrator, Lela foreshadows the primary plot by revealing that she would choose to go to hell for Nadia.

Chapter 1 contains a considerable amount of foreshadowing. Nadia's abuse of prescription medications will soon lead to her death. Lela's comment that there is no safe place to which one can escape through suicide, along with her description of her nightmares about the Suicide Gates, appears to be simply a dream but in fact it describes the city in which both girls will soon find themselves. This chapter also establishes Lela's current life, which is full of hope and promise in direct contrast to her history of rape and her immediate future in the dark city.



This section is important in terms of Lela's reaction to Nadia's drugged state and her subsequent death. In later chapters, it will be determined that Lela feels enormous guilt about her last interaction with Nadia, selfishly wanting her friend to rejoice with her, which also causes her to ignore clear signs that Nadia is in desperate need of help, leading to further guilt. The theme of abandonment also surfaces here. Lela has been abandoned by her mother, a series of foster parents and now she fears she will be abandoned by Nadia as well, exacerbating her trust issues. Her feelings of guilt drive her need to rescue Nadia when she discovers that she is in the dark city of Lela's nightmares.

In this section we also meet the character who will become known as Malachi. Initially he seems cruel and vicious, but his true nature and his mission will be revealed later in the novel.

Other pieces of this section that will be important later include the tattoo of Nadia's face, Lela's fall from the cliff, and the descriptions of the city and its occupants as Lela sees it through Nadia's eyes and eventually her own.

Discussion Question 1

What can you surmise about Lela's early life from these initial chapters? How do you think these experiences have shaped her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does her university acceptance mean so much to Lela? What do these feelings say about the future she had initially envisioned for herself? Why is it so important that Nadia be excited for her and why is she so disappointed when her news gets little reaction?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Nadia and Lela. Include discussion of their physical appearances, their backgrounds, their personalities, their current lives and their approach to life as you understand it at this point.

Vocabulary

pivot, entendre, probation, preppy, involuntary, anorexic, croon, indentation, stereotype, shabby, consult, mute, flinch, instinctive, recoil, overrated, cautious, lurch, jeer, disoriented, raspy, delinquent, elaborate, splay, indulgent, intimidating, menace, saturate, deftly, infinite, ratchet, crane (verb), wield, adversary, remnant, comatose, fester, oblivious, reedy, unfurl, trudge



Chapters 6 - 9

Summary

In Chapter 6, Lela notices how different this city is from others she has lived in or visited. It is dark. There is no transportation; and, the only sound is that of people muttering to themselves and the clang of the gate opening to welcome new suicides. She finds a food store where she learns that the food is free; but, it is old and inedible. She shows the tattoo of Nadia to many people but no one knows where she is. An old man grabs her wrist and says, "You're perfect." Then, she is captured by a guard who thinks she is a Mazikin. She manages to stab his leg with the knife she stole, but then she is knocked unconscious.

Chapter 7 opens with Lela awakening in a dank cell. A couple of guards see that she is awake, and she hears them saying that Malachi has been summoned. Amid, the guard she stabbed earlier, arrives and attacks her violently, refusing to listen when she says her name is Lela, not Mazikin. After a struggle, he pins her with her face and body crushed into the wall and she has flashbacks of her foster father raping her. Suddenly someone breaks down the door and pulls him off her. She hears loud voices arguing but cannot understand what they are saying because she is dying again.

Chapter 8 finds Lela waking up to find herself lying on a cot, naked except for the sheet wrapped around her, and her injuries have healed. In the cell with her is the guard she saw kill several people when she first arrived in the city, and he introduces himself as Malachi. He gives her clothing and questions her about why she is there, saying she appears to have been trained to infiltrate the city. He sees her tattoo and eventually she confesses that she is there to find Nadia, but he says that is impossible because the city is so large, filled with those who have committed suicide. She tells him about arriving at the gates during her own suicide attempt and he is shocked to learn that she has continued to experience the city in her dreams when she was alive. Malachi says he will take her before the Judge, who will return her to the Countryside, but she wants to stay until she finds Nadia. After a failed attempt to seduce him and get his key, Malachi says she will stay in the holding cell overnight and go before the Judge in the morning.

In Chapter 9, Lela is pacing her cell when she hears a voice calling to her. Looking through a hole into the next cell, she finds Sil, who says he is Mazikin, which apparently is a resistance movement. He insists that Malachi and the other guards are bad and convinces Lela that they can escape together. She agrees, but after she frees Sil from his muzzle and binding mittens and he picks the cell lock, he beheads the guard who is in charge and takes his keys. Just as Lela is realizing she made a mistake by helping him, they see Malachi down the hall but he is unable to help her because Sil says he will kill her if Malachi tries. Sil uses the stolen keys to open the door to an alley and the chapter ends with him forcing Lela to go with him.



Analysis

The chapters in this section find Lela dealing with confusion as she tries to navigate her new reality. The city is dark and confusing, and she begins to get the first glimmers of what the afterlife is like for those who choose suicide, although the implications will not become completely clear until later in the novel.

Little is clear at this point and it is difficult for Lela to make good decisions. As a result of her history of rape, abuse and abandonment, she values control more than anything else. This is why she avoids the drugs and alcohol that many in her situation turn to for comfort, and it is why she has difficulty understanding Nadia's penchant for numbing herself. Both Nadia and Lela have been troubled teenagers who fear being abandoned (although Nadia's issues will not become completely clear until later in the book) but they have responded in very different ways. While Nadia has become weak and dependent on prescription painkillers, Lela has become strong, defiant and suspicious. Her suspicious nature and her strong need for control come into play as she meets characters such as Malachi and Sil because she is unsure of who to trust. This causes her to ignore warning signs she gets from Sil because she sees in him her opportunity to escape, thus putting herself into an even more dangerous situation. This is the first of a number of misjudgments she will make in future chapters.

Although Lela is seriously damaged by the treatment she received from her stepfather, she finds herself intrigued by Malachi. Her humorous attempt to flirt with him to steal a key foreshadows their close relationship that will evolve as the book continues.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the city as you know it so far. What elements are similar to real cities on Earth? What makes it different? Include a discussion of the architecture, the inhabitants, the services, and the overall atmosphere.

Discussion Question 2

How does Lela feel about Malachi at this point? Have her feelings about him shifted since she first saw him in the street with Nadia? What is his reaction to her?

Discussion Question 3

When Lela meets Sil, she knows only a little about the Mazikin, but after she helps him escape, she knows immediately that she has made a mistake. What bits of information and warning signs does she ignore when she lets Sil convince her to escape with him?



Vocabulary

aggressive, embed, reverberate, trudge, serrated, traipse, sadistic, oblivious, deploy, unintelligible, monolingual, encounter, coherent, contemplate, hoist, skitter, exalt, bulbous, estimation, inevitable, vengeance, futile, ferocity, defiance, operative, consort, instinctively, scoff, duress, tangible, insurmountable, excruciating, infiltrate, demented, hover, dismissive, harbor (verb), seething, verdict, assess, glint, scrutiny, manipulative, interpret, foray, unfettered, ludicrous



Chapters 10 - 13

Summary

In Chapter 10, Sil drags Lela for some distance, intending for her to join his family. When they arrive at his destination, several other Mazikin emerge – an old woman named Doris, a young girl named Lacey, a huge Samoan named Chimola and a creepy, lecherous man named Juri, who recognizes Lena. He has haunted her in her dreams about the city and now tells her that she will be his. Suddenly a dark-skinned teenager appears, apparently in a daze like most people here. When the Mazikin approach her, she pulls out a blade and begins skillfully fighting them off. Malachi appears, and a battle ensues with Malachi eventually being bitten by one of the Mazikin, whose saliva is poisonous. Lela learns that the girl's name is Ana and she is a colleague of Malachi's. Lela's leg has also been cut, but they start running toward the Guard Station, where Malachi says Raphael can heal both of them. When he collapses, she helps him into a vacant apartment and after a tender moment between them, he gives her directions to the Guard Station.

Chapter 11 finds Lela arriving at the Guard Station to find Raphael but has trouble convincing the other guards that she is telling the truth about Malachi's situation. Raphael appears and recognizes Lela from healing her earlier injuries, and since he can tell she is not Mazikin, he goes with her to the apartment where she left Malachi, who is unconscious. As Raphael works on him, he tells her that Malachi is controversial among the other guards. He is their captain, but unlike them, he is human, as is Ana, and he is both merciless and principled. Raphael does all he can for Malachi and also heals Lela before saying he has to leave to tend to other patients. Lela is tempted to leave, but feels she cannot because Malachi risked his life for her, so she stays and bathes his unconscious body, feeling very attracted to him. She also sees a tattoo on his arm – a five-digit number with a small triangle beneath it – and it reminds her of those given to Jews imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps.

In Chapter 12, Malachi awakens and is weak but improving. He can tell that Lela wants to leave but asks her first to explain why she wants to help Nadia when she chose to take her own life. Lela tells him about what their friendship meant to her. She also feels guilty because while Nadia saved her in a sense, she failed to do the same for Nadia. Lela is extremely attracted to Malachi, causing her to be torn about leaving. As she is about to go, he offers to help her find Nadia, but only if she will follow his instructions in order to keep them out of danger. She

hesitates but agrees to try.

In Chapter 13, Lena and Malachi walk back to the Guard Station. On the way, they see a man carrying a large amount of cocaine and Malachi explains that here, people can have whatever they want, but they cannot get out until they let that go and go after what they need rather than what they want, causing Lena to remember seeing Nadia with her



bottle of pills. She asks why he does not just let himself die so he can get out, but he says if you die before you are ready, you have to start over. They arrive at the station, where the guards are cold to Lena but accept her because she is with Malachi. From Lena's description of the dream in which she saw Malachi through Nadia's eyes, they determine that Nadia is in the Harag section of the city, where the Mazikin are setting up a new nest. Because she went into an apartment, Nadia will be safe unless she goes back outside because no one can follow someone inside. Malachi summons Ana, who seems suspicious of Lena but agrees to get her some clothes and help train her before the three of them leave for Harag.

Analysis

Much of this section is devoted to explanations that help the reader understand why the city exists and how things work there. The reason that food, drugs and other items are plentiful and free is that people who are suicidal seek them in great quantities without realizing that they cannot fill the void they feel or stop their pain. The premise behind the book is that suicide is not an answer and in this fictional tale, it simply results in landing the victim in a situation that is even worse and more difficult to escape than problems on earth. Further explanations will come at a later point; but, the essence of Malachi's explanation in Chapter 13 is that severe depression and substance dependence is cyclical until the sufferer learns to focus on what is needed rather than what is simply desired, thus explaining why residents of the city who die again, whether by suicide or other means, are simply returned to the Suicide Gates and forced to begin again until they figure it out.

Other new characters are introduced in this section, including Raphael, who appears to have supernatural healing powers that are not yet explained. Ana is a female counterpart for Malachi – strong, smart and dedicated to the mission of eliminating the Mazikin and the threat they represent by stealing the souls of the city's already troubled residents. Juri, the lecherous Mazikin who is attracted to Lela, represents the foster father who threatened and raped her, as he is the creature who has appeared in her dreams, beckoning her to come through the gates just as Rick

was the reason for her suicide attempt.

The character of Malachi is further explored in these chapters. The tattoo on his arm provides clues about his history and his offer to help Lela find Nadia speaks to both his growing feelings for her and his desire to save souls.

Lela's feelings toward Malachi grow in this section as she finds herself being physically attracted to a man for the first time. Thus far in her life, her sexual experiences have consisted only of horrible rapes, so her attraction to him confuses her, particularly because it also represents a threat to the control she values so much.



Discussion Question 1

After Malachi's health improves, Lela has an opportunity to leave and continue her search for Nadia. Discuss the various, confused feelings that cause her to hesitate about going.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss what you know about the residents of the city at this point. How do they behave? What do they seem to want and how do they satisfy those desires? What does the author say must happen before they can leave the city permanently?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lela's attraction to Malachi disturb her so much? Why does she fear him even as she feels drawn to him?

Vocabulary

cascade, croon, burrow (verb), lope, obscene, nimble, riveted, transform, maniacal, retort, mesmerized, ruthless, omnipresent, maneuver, saturate, therapeutic, wistful, epidemic, speculatively, unison, controversial, recommence, cadence, detached, physique, erupt, ferocity, solitary, rash, constrict, whimsical, decipher, quadrant, render, emanate



Chapters 14 - 17

Summary

In Chapter 14, Ana takes Lela to her room, which is welcoming and decorated with colorful paintings. As they talk, Lena learns several new pieces of information. She is not hungry because she is in the wrong place, so the food here is not right for her but if she does not leave in a few weeks, she likely will starve. Malachi is losing his appetite for the food and water here, which means he is almost ready to leave. A man named Takeshi trained both Malachi and Ana, but they do not seem to want to talk about what happened to him. Later, Ana and Malachi give Lena a rigorous training session on various weapons, then after Ana leaves Malachi says it is time for her to learn hand-to-hand combat.

Chapter 15 opens with Malachi training Lena in various forms of hand-to-hand combat. Everything is going well until he attacks her from behind, reminding her of how Rick used to rape her, and she panics and blacks out. Malachi is kind and understanding, but he balks when she asks him to teach her to respond to a rear attack because he does not want her to see the face of the person who hurt her when she looks at him. She is insistent and after some careful practice she learns to escape and hurt her attacker. Afterward he takes her to the top of the guard tower where they look down on the city and the edge of the Countryside. Malachi explains that buildings grow bigger because if someone wants a house, it grows; everything in the city is fed by the wanting of its inhabitants. Lena learns that he has been here about seventy years and that as she suspected when she saw his tattoo, he killed himself to escape from a Nazi concentration camp. She can tell he is longing to escape, so she puts her arms around him and they embrace.

Chapter 16 finds Ana and Lela preparing to leave for Harag. Ana says that some members of the Mazikin have become very strong and they love pretty, strong people like Lela. If they had kept her, they would have summoned a Mazikin spirit to possess her. When they kill the Mazikin, Ana and Malachi think the spirit goes back to its homeland and the human soul is released, but the Mazikin body can come back and possess someone else. The Mazikin want to increase their numbers, escape the city and spread chaos, and the guards' job is to keep that from happening and protect the residents of the city until they are ready to leave. She also says that as the guards' leader, Malachi should have taken the long view but he refused to do anything that might bring harm to Lela. They talk about Lela's nightmares and Ana says that the Mazikin can see ghosts like Lela but others cannot. Malachi arrives and they go to see Michael, the weapons maker, to pick up a set of armor for Lela and some new weapons.

In Chapter 17, Malachi, Lela and Ana begin walking toward Harag. Eventually they reach the downtown section of the city, where those who have no desire to see beyond what they want reside, and as Nadia sees them hoarding their possessions, she wonders what Nadia thought would fill her empty space. Soon they reach the dark tower



at the center of the city. It has grown out of people's fears and is a vortex for feelings and memories. Malachi says that to go around would take two extra days. So, even though going through it is very hard for humans, Lela forges ahead.

Analysis

Lena's relationship with Malachi deepens in this section as she learns more about him, including the fact that as she suspected, he was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and has spent many decades in the city already. This speaks to the fact that it has been difficult for him to do what is necessary to earn release, but also hints at other reasons to be revealed later. Malachi learns more about Lena as well, confirming the fact that her foster father raped her and getting a deeper understanding of the emotional scars those experiences left on her. However, her growing trust in him is evident from the fact that despite her extreme fear and panic, she asks him to train her in responding to an attack from the rear, not only increasing her chances of survival in battling the Mazikin but also pushing forward in her own personal healing.

Takeshi is introduced in this section. Although the character died prior to the beginning of this story, his role in the lives of Ana and Malachi will become important at a later point, and this is foreshadowed by Ana's reluctance to talk about him even though he clearly has been a significant figure in both her life and Malachi's.

Ana's explanation about the role of food and water also foreshadows events to come. Lena has puzzled over her lack of hunger and thirst, which has been a blessing since the food is so unappetizing, but it is yet another sign that she does not belong in this place. The destructiveness of placing want over need also comes back around as Malachi explains why the city's buildings continue to grow. On the surface, the city operates in ways that would seem to be paradise to inhabitants whose wants and self-absorption have brought them to suicide because here they can have anything they desire and in any quantities. However, the fact is that nothing can satisfy them – no amount of food or drugs, no large or elaborate home, nothing – until they come to terms with what they really need and focus on that rather than their more base desires.

The scene in which Lela, Ana, and Malachi go to Michael for weapons provides some humor for the novel, as Michael is a comical character and Lela relaxes as she enjoys bantering, harmlessly flirting and playing word games with him.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Lela asking Malachi to train her in responding to an attack from the rear? What does this step mean for Lela personally and for her relationship with Malachi?



Discussion Question 2

What does the author seem to be saying about possessions? Why do some residents of the city hoard their possessions? What does this say about their potential for being released and sent to the Countryside?

Discussion Question 3

How has Lela's relationship with Ana evolved? How does it compare with her relationship with Nadia?

Vocabulary

impersonal, oasis, arsenal, intricate, brandish, chaotic, deft, calculating, skepticism, meticulous, wince, coax, purposeful, cavernous, must (verb), subdued, eloquent, inopportune, neutralize, beckon, momentum, relent, exploit, evade, compensate, angular, exercise, acceleration, contemplate, ornate, deflect, projectile, dereliction, pivot, vortex, circumvent



Chapters 18 - 22

Summary

In Chapter 18, Lela enters the tower and immediately is submerged in her memories of Rick, who seems to be present with her. Eventually, she realizes that the floor of the tower consists of people who have given up and allowed themselves to be consumed by their bad memories, but she hears Malachi's voice urging her forward and in time she finds the door and gets out. Malachi is waiting for her and says he gets through faster now because he has done it many times. Ana runs through, but then she needs time to clear her head. When she returns, they resume their journey.

In Chapter 19, Lela, Malachi and Ana arrive in Harag and go to an apartment Malachi keeps there. After Malachi goes out to look around, Ana tells Lela her story. She grew up in El Salvador and got friendly with men from the People's Revolutionary Army who set up a base near her home, giving them food without her mother's knowledge. Eventually the death squads came and killed her mother, and Ana felt so guilty that she hung herself. When she arrived in the city, Takeshi helped her and they fell in love, but as he became ready to leave, he hid the fact that he had stopped eating and drinking because he wanted to stay with Ana. When he became very weak, the Mazikins captured him. Since then, both Ana and Malachi have decided it is too dangerous to care for people because they will either die or be taken away. Lela denies that she is in love with Malachi, but Ana warns her not to confuse what she wants with what she needs.

In Chapter 20, Lela and Malachi sit on the sofa and talk while Ana is out on patrol, and she tells him her story. Her mother was mentally ill and she does not know who her father is, so she bounced around foster homes most of her life, eventually ending up with Rick and Debbie. On the night she tried to commit suicide, after he revived her and started to rape her again, she snapped and beat him up. However, she refused to take a medical exam or tell anyone what he had been doing, so she was sent to a juvenile detention center for nearly a year. Malachi says that when he goes through the tower, he usually hears his brother's voice urging him on, but this time he heard Lela, and she feels so content in his arms that she thinks this might be what she needs.

In Chapter 21, Lela muses about her feeling toward Malachi and thinks she might be falling in love with him but is afraid such feelings might get in the way of her mission to save Nadia. Malachi returns from patrol and they go to the roof for further training and flirting. Afterward he tells her about his past, growing up in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia with his Jewish father, Gypsy mother and one brother until the Nazis gradually took over. Lela reveals that she knows he is eating and drinking less so is probably getting ready to leave, and he reminds her that she, too, needs to leave soon or she will starve. The chapter ends with Lela picturing Malachi, Nadia and herself in the Countryside together.



In Chapter 22, Lela is becoming discouraged after a long day of looking for Nadia. They are standing outside an apartment building when a man commits suicide by jumping from the roof, causing Lela to faint because she remembers falling off the cliff and dying. Back at the apartment, she overhears Ana arguing with Malachi, saying he is ignoring his mission by helping Lela and becoming so attached to her, but he refuses to listen. Ana storms out and Lela and Malachi talk, with him telling her that since Mazikin cannot survive the dark tower, for years the guards captured them and put them there but when he took charge he forbade it because trapping the Mazikin forever might also trap the human soul, damning them to suffer for eternity. Ana returns and says she found the Mazikin nest and saw Nadia entering the building after having been recruited. They discuss options but in the end, Lela insists on dressing in civilian clothes and letting the Mazikin recruit her, enabling her to enter the building and get Nadia. Malachi says it is too dangerous but when she refuses to reconsider, he says he cannot be part of it and leaves.

Analysis

Chapter 18 is an important one because of the large amount of symbolism it contains. Of all the places in the city, the dark tower is the most frightening because it contains everything the city's residents fear most. The fact that it is the largest structure by far is significant because it houses the most important, most overwhelming issues that have brought the suicide victims to this place. As they go through the tower, different people see different things, depending on their particular experiences and circumstances. In Lela's case, of course, she is immediately thrust back to her life with Rick and it feels as though she is actually back in her old bedroom as he threatens her and begins to molest her. She is nearly consumed by the memories and is tempted to simply give up and give in, as that seems to be a more attractive alternative, but her inner strength – the strength that gave her the ability to attack Rick, survive the juvenile facility, get into college and survive life in the dark city – enables her to pull through, with the help of Malachi's voice urging her on. At the time, she assumes that Malachi is physically nearby and talking to her, but later it is revealed that, like the horrific memories and personal demons, each person's experience is unique and Malachi also heard Lela encouraging him to get through to the exit door.

The discussion between Ana and Lela in Chapter 18 is also significant, particularly Ana's warning not to confuse wants with needs, as it will resurface in a personal way for Lela as the novel nears its end. The relationship between Ana and Takeshi also mirrors that of Lela and Malachi in many ways, and the fact that Takeshi wanted to forego his opportunity to leave the city because of his love for Ana foreshadows a similar event between Lela and Malachi.

In this section, the reader also learns the personal story of Ana and Malachi along with additional details about Lela's history. These are important passages in getting to know the characters and their motivations better, but they also point out the fact that everyone in the city has taken different routes to arrive at the same place and must find his or her own way out. As more about them is revealed, it becomes clear that Malachi, as an



older soul, is a more complex character than Lela at this point in her life. She sees things in black and white – she can and must save her friend, you are either good or you are bad, having control is all-important – while he sees more shades of gray. Killing is not an easy thing for Malachi to do, although he does it well, but he knows that the outcome of a Mazikin death is still uncertain. No one knows exactly what happens next, so he has outlawed the practice of trapping Mazikin in the tower out of fear that their human souls might also be trapped and damned. Lela's inability to consider all sides of an issue, her tendency to jump to conclusions and her need for control continue to bring about problems throughout the novel.

Other significant parts of this section include Lela's daydream about going to the Countryside with Malachi and Nadia, which foreshadows a similar yet very different outcome.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the argument between Ana and Malachi in Chapter 22. Do you think one is right and the other wrong? What is convincing about each argument? Which side do you agree with and why?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism and significance of the tower. Why is everyone's experience different as they go through it? What determines who survives and who does not?

Discussion Question 3

In these chapters, all three main characters reveal more about their personal histories. What is similar and different about the stories of Ana, Malachi and Lela? How do their individual histories shape their personalities now?

Vocabulary

falter, brace (verb), suppress, saturated, retch, undulate, traction, flail, deliberate, entombed, sustenance, trek, warily, bland, methodical, evict, crest, manageable, rifle (verb)



Chapters 23 - 28

Summary

In Chapter 23, Ana explains to Lela why Malachi is so upset. When Takeshi failed to return from a patrol, they searched for him, but when they found him he bore the unmistakable scent of Mazikin so Malachi was forced to cut his friend and mentor's throat to free his human soul. Now he is afraid the same thing will happen with Lela if she lets herself be captured by the Mazikin. Lela finds Malachi on the roof and tried to embrace him but he begs her not to, saying that if she touches him, he will be unable to let her go. Eventually he relents and they share their first kiss before Ana arrives to say that Sil has arrived at the nest so they must leave immediately.

In Chapter 24, Lela quickly gets captured and taken into the Mazikin nest, where she sees Nadia among a group of new recruits. Sil recognizes Lela and does not believe her story that Malachi died from his bite wound, and Lela becomes even more concerned when he says that they are close to getting out. Sil walks among the male recruits and chooses one, then the Mazikin tie him to a table and conduct a procedure in which he becomes possessed by Juri, the cruel Mazikin killed earlier by Malachi. After the possession is complete, the new Juri looks at Lela and says, "Mine."

Chapter 25 finds Lela looking frantically around for potential weapons but finding little. Juri, Sil, and the other Mazikin drag her to the table. Before they can tie her down, Malachi and Ana set off an explosion that damages the building and diverts attention. Lela manages to reach Nadia and convince her to go outside but Juri pulls Lela back before she can leave with her. The other recruits pay no attention as he tries to rape her, but Lela, having flashbacks to Rick, beats him unconscious with a rock until Malachi arrives and they escape from the building. Nadia is safe outside but Ibram has arrived and is battling with Ana, then a large group of Mazikin ambushes the group and as Malachi fights them off, Ana is captured. Malachi kills all except Ibram and is battling him while Lela runs to Ana, whose wounds clearly are fatal. As Malachi kills Ibram, Ana asks Lela to tell Malachi she loved him like a brother and makes Lela promise to be sure he gets out of the city, then she dies.

In Chapter 26, Lela is concerned because Nadia is still completely passive, seeming to care about nothing. Lela feeds her, bathes her, and puts her to bed. Then, Malachi arrives, having killed all the Mazikin except Sil, who appears to have escaped. He does not know where Ana is, but says that if she comes back through the Suicide Gates, the guards will retrieve her, but she will not be the same. Lela apologizes for everything she blames herself for, including Ana's death, but Malachi is not angry but rather loving toward her. She confirms that Juri tried to rape her and Malachi ensures her that if he had succeeded, it would not change the way he feels about her. When he sees the extent of her injuries, he insists that they leave immediately to get her to Raphael, but when Lela insists that both she and Nadia need to rest, he agrees to wait two hours, then he leaves, saying he needs to kill something.



In Chapter 27, Malachi, Lela, and Nadia walk toward the Guard Station, but Nadia is almost catatonic and has to be led by Lela. Malachi is furious that Lela hid the extent of her injuries from him, now putting her life in danger. They approach the tower, but Lela insists that they take the much longer route to avoid it because she knows Nadia would not survive the experience. Lela's condition worsens and, eventually, she becomes delirious and Malachi must carry her.

In Chapter 28, Lela gradually regains consciousness after being near death for twelve days. She and Malachi have a tearful reunion, and she learns that he has been looking after Nadia and thinks she is a little better. When Malachi is informed about a possible breach at one of the city's walls, he prepares to investigate and Lela goes to see Nadia, where she finds Amid guarding her room to prevent her from escaping. Thinking there is no need, she sends him away and visits with Nadia, who seems like her old self again. As they are talking, Lela gets very weak from her still-unhealed injuries and Nadia goes to summon Raphael. After she leaves the room, Lela reads a note Nadia had been writing. It says she has always been just an empty shell and needs to end things, and Lela realizes that she fell for Nadia's act. Malachi has not yet left for his mission, so he says he will find Nadia as Raphael helps Lela fall asleep.

Analysis

More of Malachi's story is revealed when Ana explains how Takeshi died, revealing that he is haunted and tormented not only by events from his life on earth, but also by things that have happened since he has been in the city. He finds it hard to accept Lela's plan to allow herself to be recruited by the Mazikin because there is a good chance they will possess her before she can succeed in freeing Nadia from their nest, and if that happened he would have no choice but to cut the throat of the woman he has fallen in love with.

The complexity of Malachi's character also comes into play in Chapter 23's rooftop scene. Lela, with her more simplistic, younger view on life, is thinking of her own need to be comforted and her desire to comfort Malachi, while his older soul realizes that his pain will be much deeper if he gets closer to her and then is forced to either watch her be killed by the Mazikin or even kill her himself. This is one of many examples of behavior that Lela comes to regret as she realizes that many of her actions have been committed out of her own needs rather than someone else's, a situation that will come into major play in the book's final chapters.

Lela's naivete surfaces again when she meets Sil at the nest. He fooled her once before into helping him escape from the Guard Station and now she is unable to conceal her relationship with Malachi, revealing that her story that he is dead is, in fact, not true and leading Malachi and Ana to walk into a trap. Still, Lela is able to use both her wits and her strength to buy time for Malachi and Ana to create a diversion and get Nadia out of the building and to safety.



Much of this section is taken up with the battle at the Mazikin nest that results in Ana's death. Ana's dying words, asking Lela to be certain Malachi gets out of the city no matter what it takes, foreshadow the book's ultimate conclusion, including the choice Lela makes and its result. The scene in which Juri tries to rape Lela mirrors the actual rapes she suffered at the hands of Rick, but this time, as was the case in her last encounter with her foster father, she is able and willing to defend herself as violently as necessary. She reveals the same street smarts and toughness that prompted her to defend Nadia from the drug dealer on the day they met for the first time, but she now possesses a greater understanding of herself and what she is capable of.

However, despite the evolution she has experienced in many respects, Lela still fails to understand the nature of Nadia's illness and the extent of her desperation to end her suffering. Both girls attempted suicide, but under very different circumstances. Lela's failed attempt came primarily because she wanted to escape from a specific situation – the sexual abuse she was suffering at the hands of her foster father. When the situation resolved itself, she no longer wanted to end her life and she gained strength from both her own actions in beating up Rick and from the better life she built with the help of Diane and Nadia. On the other hand, Nadia's life appeared to be perfect on the outside. She was beautiful, popular, smart, and privileged, but her need for perfection and her deep-seated feeling that she was a fraud led to a deep depression that she did not allow anyone to see. For that reason, she is not even close to being ready to leave the city and although she is able to fool Nadia, who sees things in black and white, she cannot fool Malachi. Lela's need for control and her inability to see past the surface comes back to haunt her again when she allows Nadia to escape from the guard house despite the precautions Malachi has taken.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Malachi so upset when Lela tries to embrace him on the roof before they go to the Mazikini nest? What is the basis for his attitude?

Discussion Question 2

How is Nadia able to fool Lela into letting her escape from the guard house? How does this situation mirror the behavior of both girls before Nadia took her life back on Earth? Why does Lela fail to see the truth and what enables Malachi to understand the situation better?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lela despise Juri more than the other Mazikin? What enables her to fight back when he attacks her?



Vocabulary

systematically, insignia, lash (verb), surveillance, solace, meticulous, embed, audible, casement, inquisitive, feisty, speculatively, unwavering, agitated, swarthy, accelerate, impassive, guttural, predicament, unison, coalesce, contort, tepid, compliant, catatonic, feeble, tainted



Chapters 29 - 32

Summary

In Chapter 29, Lela awakens to find Malachi sleeping beside her cot and she notices how hollow his cheeks are becoming, making her realize he is ready to get out. When he wakes, he tells her that he caught Nadia just as she was about to jump off a building. He says she was getting better and had more energy, which sometimes causes depressed people to do stupid things. Lela wants to take her before the judge immediately, certain that she will be given mercy because of all she has been through, but Malachi explains that mercy is not a right that can be earned, but rather a gift from one person to another. He tells her about his past. His father died on the train to Auschwitz and his mother was taken away upon arrival. His brother Heshel was optimistic that they would work and survive until they could get out. But, after he was shot and killed, Malachi lost hope and killed himself by walking into an electric fence. Upon arriving in the city, he became homicidal rather than suicidal and when he stormed the Sanctum, the judge sentenced him, like Ana and Takeshi, to lead the guards because they were strong enough to fight their way into the judge's chambers and stupid enough to think they would be given a free pass. He says he thinks he is ready to go before the judge again and asks Lela to come with him to the Countryside. She does not give him an answer but knows she cannot fail Nadia a second time so she must stay. Planning to sacrifice herself, she asks Malachi to spend the night with her to make one last memory together.

Chapter 30 opens after Malachi has left to attend to some business. Lela is on her way to see Nadia when she hears an argument between Malachi and Raphael. Malachi says he needs time to take care of Nadia, who clearly is not ready to leave but Lela cannot stay any longer because she is weakening. Raphael argues with him but Malachi is determined and Lela is shocked that she has misjudged him so badly because he apparently plans to kill Nadia. She goes to Nadia's room and convinces the guard to leave, then she puts on armor under her clothes and takes Nadia to the Sanctum. On the way, they run into Clarence, one of the few surviving Mazikin from their earlier battle at the nest, who says that Sil and the others have already gotten out. Lela, who plans to offer herself as a guard in exchange for Nadia's release, kills Clarence with no remorse. When they arrive at the Sanctum, Raphael is waiting for them and says that they should hurry because Malachi is on his way. As they talk, Raphael's appearance transforms and Lela wonders if he is really the archangel. Just before he shoves Lela and Nadia into the judge's chambers, he reveals that Malachi did not intend to kill Nadia, but rather sacrifice himself for her, but Raphael says he was meant for something else.

In Chapter 31, Lela and Nadia go before the judge, who appears in the form of Diane, Lela's foster mother. Lela asks for Nadia's release; but, the judge tells her that she was wrong to think she could fix Nadia. Lela realizes he is telling the truth. At the judge's urging, she asks Nadia why she took her life. Nadia replies that everything about her life was fake and she knew if everyone, including Lela, discovered that, they would walk



away from her. Lela realizes that she did love the real Nadia but never told her that. So, she shows her the tattoo and tells Nadia how much she had done for her and meant to her. Just as the judge accepts Lela's offer to stay so Nadia can be released, Malachi bursts in and offers himself instead. He says that he loves Lela and would do anything for her, but the judge leaves the decision up to Lela, who remembers promising Ana that she would ensure that Malachi got out, insists that she will stay. The judge accepts her offer and says she will be leading a new field unit. Mazikin have escaped and are tearing the boundaries between life and death. The judge assures Lela that she will not face anything she cannot handle and that she will not be alone, then everything flashes and disappears.

In the book's final chapter, Lela awakens with the sun in her face. She is back in Rhode Island, lying on the trail from which she had fallen and Raphael is beside her, looking like an ordinary person. She learns that Sil and the other Mazikin are in the area and her mission is to find and eliminate them while continuing high school and her regular life with Diane. However, Lela is devastated to learn that Malachi was not released into the countryside. The judge punished him for his breach of her chambers by stripping him of his rank and sent him on a new, dangerous assignment. Raphael sends Lela home, saying he will contact her when necessary. At home in her bed, she dreams of Nadia and sees her in the Countryside, where someone is holding her hand. She knows she is loved, and she is at peace, not wanting anything more than what she has, and Lela says a silent "thank you." Arriving at school, she is standing by the fence when Malachi arrives. He is masquerading as a foreign exchange student and has been assigned to the unit Lela will command. The book ends with her ordering him to kiss her.

Analysis

The book's final chapters bring a number of the book's major themes full circle, including abandonment, friendship, trust and guilt. Lela once again misinterprets a situation and acts on misinformation rather than trusting Malachi or giving him an opportunity to explain the conversation with Raphael that she overhears. Lela clearly has grown in her ability to trust others, as is evidenced when she makes love with Malachi despite the sexual abuse she has endured in the past. Her entire background – being shuttled from one foster home to another and feeling abandoned by various foster parents – makes it difficult for her to place her trust in anyone, but trusting a man with her body is particularly and understandably difficult. However, despite this progress, she is unwilling to give Malachi the opportunity to explain his conversation and assumes the worst.

Lela's insistence on not abandoning Nadia again, as she feels she did in life, causes her to act rashly, but in the end she finally realizes that she has been wrong all along to believe that she had the power to change things for Nadia either in life or here in the afterlife. While she finally realizes that one person is not and cannot be responsible for the another person's happiness and well-being, she is able to give Nadia the one gift she needs in order to move forward in the afterlife – the knowledge that someone saw



her and loved her the way she was, without expecting her to be perfect. Presumably it is this knowledge that enables her to be released to the Countryside and find peace, and it also enables Lela to say goodbye to her friend and move forward herself.

The author also brings in the theme of sacrificing oneself for a loved one. Lela is willing to sacrifice herself for both Nadia and Malachi while Malachi insists on sacrificing his own future for Lela. In the end it is Lela who must make the final choice and she does the only thing she can do, given the promise she made to Ana before her death.

The book's final chapter wraps up this story while paving the way for the author's sequel.

Discussion Question 1

How do you interpret Malachi's speech to Lela about the nature of mercy? How does this concept tie into the rest of the book's themes?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the judge appear in the form of Diane? How is her interaction with Lela similar to the real Diane's behavior and demeanor? How is it different?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways has Lela grown and matured during the course of the novel? In what ways does she demonstrate that she still has a need to grow further?

Vocabulary

suffused, indestructible, naive, dire, vulnerable, equivalent, labyrinth, compliant, dilapidated, stance, oblige, scuttle, expedite, intricate, reverberate, predatory, unfurl, carnivorous, revelation, arrogant, render, precipice, somber, axis, figment, amiable



Characters

Lela Santos

The book's main character is Lela Santos, a teenage girl living in Rhode Island. Abandoned by her mentally ill mother at age four, Lela has bounced around foster homes all her life. Her worst experience was at the hands of a foster father named Rick, who raped her routinely. After one attack, Lela tried to hang herself, but when Rick revived her and attempted to brutalize her again, she fought back and beat him badly, resulting in a year in a juvenile detention center. Now her life has turned around with the help of her kind, loving foster mother Diane and her best friend Nadia Vetter. Still, Lela retains her street smarts and the fears leftover from Rick's abuse, and she is haunted by vivid dreams of a frightening part of hell reserved for those who commit suicide.

Lela is slow to trust. However, once she cares about someone she is fiercely loyal, as she proves when she gives up her own future to save Nadia. She also gradually learns to open herself to love when she falls for Malachi, a handsome guard who helps protect the dark city. Before the book ends, she learns that she cannot save everyone, but her strength and courage are needed to eliminate a mutant race that threatens the world.

Nadia Vetter

Nadia Vetter is a beautiful, popular student at Warwick High School in Rhode Island, but behind her glowing smile is a deeply troubled soul. She leads a privileged life, but her mother is more concerned with her own boyfriend than her daughter. Nadia begins taking pain killers and drinking to keep her pain at bay. Eventually, she is no longer able to face her life and she commits suicide, landing in the dark part of hell reserved for those who take their own lives. Even when her best friend Lela risks her own afterlife to save her, Nadia has trouble seeing her own self worth.

Malachi

Malachi is the captain of the guards in the dark city. He was sent there after committing suicide to escape from a Nazi concentration camp. What appears initially to be cruel savagery is actually a strong commitment to ridding the city of the evil Mazikin and freeing the human souls they have inhabited. After seventy years in the city, Malachi has progressed enough that he qualifies to leave and go to the Countryside, but he offers to give up that future to save Lela after he falls in love with her.

Diane

Diane is Lela's current foster mother. She is kind and loving with a strong commitment to help Lela outgrow her troubled past and find a positive future.



Tegan

Tegan is a vapid, self-absorbed high school student who is a friend of Nadia.

Raphael

Raphael lives in the dark city and is a healer with supernatural powers.

Sil and Ibram

Sil and Ibram are the leaders of the evil Mazikin creatures.

Ana

Ana, a fierce Latina, is Malachi's second-in-command as one of the guards of the dark city.

Takeshi

Takeshi is dead when the novel takes place, but is a character who is referred to often. He was one of the lead guards in the dark city and Ana's lover.

Michael

Michael is the weapon maker for the guards.

Guards

Several guards appear as minor characters, including Bilal, Amid, Hani, and Lufti.

Mazikin

Less important members of the Mazikin who appear in the novel include Juri, Doris, Lacey, Chimola, and Clarence.



Symbols and Symbolism

Suicide Gates

The Suicide Gates are the gates to the city in hell reserved for people who kill themselves. Everyone who commits suicide must enter through these gates, which symbolize the entrance to the dark place where they wander aimlessly fulfilling their wants rather than their needs.

Dark Tower

The Dark Tower is located in the middle of the city's downtown area. When residents go through it, they are faced with their worst fears and the most horrible experiences of their lives, and many do not survive. The tower represents all the fears and bad experiences one must go through in order to overcome depression and suicidal tendencies.

Armor

The guards in the city wear custom armor molded from leather. This provides protection from physical harm, but also symbolizes the invisible armor many have built up to keep people from getting close to them.

Lela's Tattoo

After Nadia's death, Lela gets a tattoo of her face on her forearm. It is designed from a photo in which Nadia was looking sad and distant -- a rarity because she tried to cover up her pain and Lela did not fully comprehend its depth until after her death. The tattoo symbolizes both Nadia's hidden despair and Lela's commitment to save her from the city.

Malachi's Tattoo

The numbers tattooed on Malachi's arm symbolize his life in the Nazi concentration camp and the experiences that led to his suicide.

Scimitar

A scimitar is a type of sword primarily used by the Mazikin to kill guards and others.



Television

Televisions in the city are connected to the wall with an umbilical cord. The programs they show are determined by who is watching. They symbolize one facet of the self-absorption displayed by the city's residents.

Drugs, Alcohol and Food

Drugs, alcohol and food are free and plentiful in the city. They represent the things the residents used in life and continue to use now to mask their pain and unhappiness. Just as in life, they are not satisfying and do not fill the void in someone's soul.

Countryside

The Countryside is the beautiful, peaceful place many think of as heaven. It represents the peaceful afterlife residents of the city can achieve once they have faced their demons and met the requirements to leave.

Dark City

The Dark City is the area of hell reserved for people who commit suicide. It symbolizes the tortured existence these people had in life and the fact that taking one's life is not an escape. It is simply a ticket to an equally hellacious existence.



Settings

Warwick, Rhode Island

The book opens and closes in Warwick, a mid-sized city on the coast of Rhode Island. Warwick is now the home of the lead character, Lela Santos, who has also lived in other parts of Rhode Island. Specific locations in which scenes take place are Warwick High School, the modest home in which Lela lives with Diane, the upscale home in which Lela's friend Nadia lives, and Cliff Walk, a rocky path on a cliff overlooking Narragansett Bay.

The Shadowlands/The Dark City

Called the Shadowlands, the Dark City and simply the City, this is the area of hell reserved for people who commit suicide. A dark, dreary and frightening place, the city includes apartment buildings that enlarge as residents want places to live, food that is plentiful and free but unappetizing, and unlimited supplies of drugs, alcohol and anything else that residents focus their attention on. At the city's center is a dark tower containing one's worst memories and fears. People who commit suicide can only be released from the city when a judge determines that they have become ready by focusing on the right things, including what they need rather than what they want.

The Countryside

The Countryside is a beautiful, peaceful part of the afterlife equivalent to heaven. It is sunny and bright, filled with grassy meadows, flowers, and beautiful coastlines. It is in sight of the dark city, but no one here sees it because they are happy and at peace.



Themes and Motifs

Abandonment

One of the overarching themes of *Sanctum* is abandonment and guilt. The lead character, Lela Santos, has essentially been abandoned her entire life, first by her mother and then by a long series of foster parents. In some cases, the parents had no choice in the matter – some moved out of state, for example – but the effect on a young person was the same and Lela reacted as one might expect – by shutting down her emotions and refusing to let anyone get close to her. This changes dramatically when she meets Nadia and finds a real friend in her, causing her entire life to turn around and bring things like the prospect of college that Lela never dreamed could be part of her future. Nadia, too, has been abandoned in a sense because while her mother is still in her life and her home, she is distracted by her social life and apparent substance abuse so Nadia is left to her own devices, leading her mother to ignore her worsening depression and drug use. After Nadia's death, Lela experiences extreme guilt because she feels that she, too, abandoned her friend both by failing to understand her fragile mental health and physically by leaving her alone after Nadia failed to share her joy at receiving her college admission letter. Her guilt causes Lela to follow Nadia into the afterlife, determined not to abandon her friend again under any circumstances.

Responsibility

The author weaves the theme of responsibility throughout *Sanctum*, primarily through Lela's relationship with Nadia. In many respects, Lela feels responsible for Nadia's death because she failed to see how desperately depressed and unhappy her friend was. Making matters worse, she leaves Nadia's house in a bout of anger rather than reaching out to help her, so she takes it a step further by taking responsibility for saving Nadia from the city and getting her to the Countryside. It is not until she appears before the judge as the book concludes that she realizes that no one can assume responsibility for another person's happiness. It is also her sense of responsibility that prompts Lela to sacrifice herself for Malachi, as she promised Ana that she would make sure he got out of the city regardless of what it took.

Love and Trust

Love and trust are connected themes that are woven throughout the novel. Lela has spent a lifetime learning to mistrust others and to avoid getting close to anyone. This attitude is understandable given her background as a foster child and particularly in light of the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of Rick. It takes a great deal for her to let anyone see beyond the tough shell she has constructed around herself but she softens when she connects with Nadia and with Diane and she finally allows herself to love and be loved. However, she has a more difficult time learning to trust Malachi,



partly because of her previous experience with sexual abuse and partly because it is so hard to learn what is real in the city. For example, she initially misjudges Sil and helps him escape from the Guard Station but she believes that Malachi is on the side of evil after seeing him brutally murder several Mazikin. Eventually she learns to love and trust him, and she uses her feelings for him to help her overcome the demons that continue to haunt her. Primary examples include asking him to train her to overcome her fear of being approached from behind and even seeking out a sexual relationship with him despite the horrible rapes she has experienced in the past.

Guilt

Guilt is another theme found in the story. After Nadia's death, Lela experiences extreme guilt because she feels that she, too, abandoned her friend both by failing to understand her fragile mental health and physically by leaving her alone after Nadia failed to share her joy at receiving her college admission letter. Her guilt causes Lela to follow Nadia into the afterlife, determined not to abandon her friend again under any circumstances.

Styles

Point of View

Sanctum is told from the point of view of a first-person narrator. Having the main character, Lela Santos, tell her own story is an effective technique for a book of this nature because the plot is greatly enhanced as the reader learns more in-depth information about Lela's history. Learning from her own perspective about her rape by a foster father provides greater understanding about her reluctance to enter a relationship with Malachi and her need to be in control at all times. Learning her feelings about being bounced around from one foster home to another and her gradual acceptance of Nadia's friendship enables the reader to understand why saving her friend from the city is so important to her. Having the book's most emotional and powerful moments, such as the experience of going through the tower, told through Lela's own eyes rather than those of a third-person narrator make the character come alive and help the reader relate to the character and experience these things vicariously through her.

Language and Meaning

Sanctum is written in modern American English for a young adult audience and contains an appropriate number of words to challenge young readers. The language is informal and moves the plot along at a steady pace. The plot is somewhat complex with many twists and turns, but concepts and events that are confusing at first are explained in fairly short order.

The book contains a good balance of exposition and dialogue. Lela tends to speak like a typical American teenager although the author does not include a great deal of slang or expressions that tend to change with time, ensuring that the book's appeal will last. Malachi, although he appears to be a young man, is actually more than 80 years old and he is Slavic, so his speech is a bit more formal and clipped, reflecting both his nationality and the time in which he lived on Earth.

The plot is straightforward, but it contains a few flashbacks when Lela recalls the abuse she suffered from her foster father, Rick. This is an effective way of bringing her pain into the present time as she seems to be reliving those experiences in reality rather than in memories.

Structure

Sanctum is divided into thirty-two chapters of varying length. The chapters are numbered but untitled. The book also contains a Prologue that takes place one year before the remainder of the plot and introduces Lela and Nadia, setting up the circumstances of their meeting and the basis for their friendship.



Quotes

By my second day at Warwick High School, if you'd told me I would choose to go to hell for its queen bee, I might have believed you.

-- Lela (Prologue paragraph Page xv, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This sets up the book's premise and establishes the fact that the friendship between Lela and Nadia will deepen significantly.

When she'd given me that camera for my seventeenth birthday, it was like she'd given me permission to capture it all, like she was saying our friendship was real.

-- Lela (chapter 1 paragraph Page 8, Paragraph 3)

Importance: This foreshadows Lela's later discovery of the haunted look on Nadia's face in some of the photos she took, as well as the subject for the tattoo she gets.

In my head, the world was caving in. This was the thing I'd feared ever since I'd let myself get close to her -- that like everyone else, she would turn her back on me. I felt like such an idiot having all these dreams of being away at college with my best friend. I had started to trust it. And I should have known better. No one could possibly feel that way about me.

-- Lela (chapter 2 paragraph Page 21, Paragraph 3)

Importance: This passage establishes Lela's continuing self-doubt despite the good things that have happened to her, as well as foreshadowing the comments Nadia makes to her at the book's conclusion about how much she admired Lela.

What if I could find her? What if I could get her out? What if I could bring her into the sunlight? What if I could do in death what I hadn't done in life? What if I could save her?

-- Lela (chapter 5 paragraph Page 48, Paragraph 5)

Importance: This sets up Lela's belief that she is responsible in part for Nadia's death and now for saving her.

He chuckled dryly. 'We're all dead. But we breathe. We bleed, too. The body you have here can be hurt just like the one you had before. It can be killed as well. And you never know where you'll end up if that happens.

-- Malachi (chapter 8 paragraph Page 75, Paragraph 8)

Importance: This passage explains some important facts about the city and its inhabitants that will be important throughout the book.

It had been a while since I'd felt so out of control and off balance with another person. I liked being in control. It was why I hated pills. And alcohol. And most grown-ups. Staying one step ahead was the only way to keep myself from getting hurt again.

-- Lela (chapter 9 paragraph Page 94, Paragraph 1)



Importance: This passage explains a great deal about Lela's personality and her reaction to everything that has happened in her past. It also sets up a number of mistakes she makes throughout the book when she is too quick to judge a person or situation in her need to control a situation.

He is the most merciless of them all but also the most principled. He has changed some policies for dealing with Mazikin in recent years, and the other Guards do not like it. He comes from a different place than they do, and his future is different from theirs.

-- Raphael (chapter 11 paragraph Page 136, Paragraph 1)

Importance: This explains some things about Malachi's personality and sets up events to come.

Something in the way he had looked at me made me think he wanted me to tough him, though. That didn't make what I was doing right, but this was my chance, as shameful as it was. I wanted to know what it felt like when it was my choice. When I was in control.

-- Lela (chapter 11 paragraph Page 142, Paragraph 4)

Importance: This represents a big step for Lela as she feels attracted to a man for the first time and realizes that she can touch someone without getting hurt.

I turned to go, completely torn. Nadia was my reason for being here. The only reason. And yet I also wanted to stay. Not in that hellish city, and not to go to the Sanctum, whatever it held for me. I wanted to stay with Malachi.

-- Lela (chapter 12 paragraph Page 149, Paragraph 4)

Importance: This confirms Lela's growing feelings for Malachi and her attachment to him.

People can have whatever they want here. As much food. As much pornography." He nodded toward the building the young man had just disappeared into. "As many drugs. As many apartments. Whatever they want, whatever they imagine. None of it will help, though. You can't get out until you let all that go. Until you go in search of what you need rather than what you want.

-- Malachi (chapter 13 paragraph Page 152, Paragraph 7)

Importance: This passage explains how things work in the city along with the premise that those who commit suicide are self-absorbed people who cannot get enough of whatever it is that they crave.

When you don't have a future, you act different. You don't plan. You don't try. You just . . . exist. She wouldn't let me do that. She pushed me. Harassed me. Nagged me. It was damn annoying sometimes, but she wouldn't let me slack off. We had fun, too. She took me places I'd never been before. We laughed a lot. I'd never done that with anyone. Life seemed worth living, and a future seemed worth having if it could include



stuff like that.

-- Lela (chapter 16 paragraph Page 204, Paragraph 6)

Importance: This passage establishes how Lela felt about Nadia and the ways in which the friendship changed her life, explaining why she is so committed to saving her friend.

I know what you saw. Some cannot bear to re-experience the worst parts of their lives. They lie down and give up.

-- Malachi (chapter 18 paragraph Page 232, Page 2)

Importance: This is another example of the author's commentary on suicide and the importance of facing the bad things in one's life head-on.

I have no doubt he appeared back at the Suicide Gates. Suicide is never the escape it seems.

-- Malachi (chapter 22 paragraph Page 278, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This confirms again the book's premise that suicide is not the solution to problems.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing him closer. Oh God, it was so out of control, but in this really sweet, beautiful way. I never thought I'd be allowed to have that feeling. I thought it had been completely beaten out of me, but here it was, untouchable and clean.

-- Lela (chapter 23 paragraph Page 296, Paragraph 5)

Importance: This clearly explains how Rick's sexual abuse has affected Lela, causing her to believe she was worthless and unclean, and how Malachi is helping her heal.

Dear Lela, Thank you for trying so hard to save me. You are a true friend. You always were, even when I didn't really deserve it. You made the last year of my life worth sticking around for. But in the end, it was too painful to stay. I was just a fake, and everybody would have figured it out sooner or later. Including you. There was nothing inside me, just a pretty, empty shell. I've always been empty, and I couldn't stand it anymore. Now I'm here, but it's no better. I need it to end. If you're reading this, I'm gone. Please don't come after me.

-- Nadia (chapter 28 paragraph Page 360, Paragraph 2)

Importance: This note explains how Nadia feels about herself and finally makes Lela realize that her friend is not healed and might never be healed.

You were the one who made the decision -- the visions didn't do that for you. You could have chosen to stay safe in your bed. You knew how bad this place was, but you came anyway. You could have chosen the Countryside. But you didn't. What brought you here was your belief that you could fix Nadia, that you were the magic pill she needed to take.

-- Judge (chapter 31 paragraph Page 394, Paragraph 7)



Importance: This statement from the judge finally brings clarity to Lela about why she has done the things she has done.

Someone was sitting next to her. She didn't turn enough for me to see who it was, but the person was holding her hand. She was happy. She was loved, and she knew it. She didn't want to be different than she was. She didn't want anything more than what she had.

-- Lela (chapter 32 paragraph Page 412, Paragraph 1)

Importance: This ensures Lela that Nadia has found peace in the only way possible -- by accepting herself and what she has and believing that she has worth.