

When Eagles Collide with Airplanes

Chapter Seven from *The Road Home*

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One day the air strikes were so intense that the orderlies couldn't bring the wounded into the hospital. The doctors used the break in their routine to rest in the waiting room and drink tea. Suddenly the door was thrown open to reveal a boy, about thirteen years old. He carried a crippled girl in his arms, wrapped in a thin but colorful plaid cloth. Golden curls streamed out from beneath her hat and covered the boy's shoulders. He held the girl's hand against his waist, measuring her pulse.

The head doctor Ansar skillfully extracted the girl's hand from the boy's grip. When the doctor pulled off the plaid, Seda saw that the girl's leg had been torn off and that she was unconscious.

"When will she wake up?" the boy asked.

"Don't worry. Everything will be okay. It's good that she lost consciousness. That means she doesn't feel the pain," Ansar said, measuring the girl's pulse. "For now you can rest in the room next door."

Seda escorted the boy to the waiting room, poured him some tea and pointed to the candy on the table and gestured for him to eat them. The boy stared at the table, not seeing anything. He drank the tea greedily and wrapped his hands around the cup, as though trying to warm his fingers against the tepid glass.

The boy sat silently. Seda didn't want to bother him with questions. Everyone who arrived here had the same story. She only wanted to know how he managed to get here in the midst of such intense bombing.

“What's going on in your village?” she asked.

“They're dropping bombs,” the boy said laconically, alternating each word with deep breaths.

He stood up, impatient to know what was happening with his sister.

Seda gently put her hand on his shoulder. “Drink your tea. I'll find out for you.”

The girl was lying on a cot, her head wrapped in a sheet.

Seda opened the door to the corridor. Ansar was standing outside on a patch of ice in his hospital overcoat. When the door opened, he turned around. A cigarette dangled from his trembling hands and he could barely keep it from falling. I did everything I could, his face seemed to say.

Whenever anyone died, particularly a child, Ansar walked out of the hospital and into the cold air to chain smoke as many cigarettes as he could find. His mind was divided between two questions: first, did he do everything he could to save his patient and second, why did they have to die, all of them good and innocent people?

Seda returned to the waiting room. Her face must have told that she had seen death, because as soon as the boy saw him, he jumped up from his seat and headed for the door.

She looked for words that could comfort him, but couldn't find them. While she mumbled, the boy tore the edge of the flaxen tablecloth into pieces.

How young you are! Too young to endure all this, Seda thought to herself. She wanted to wrap her arms around him, to embrace him until it hurt, to take away the pain and replace it with her love. She felt like her own mother, looking at her child.

‘Don’t let yourself suffer. It must have been fated,’ Seda began, but the words sounded hollow and offensive even to her ears.

The boy turned his back to her, so that Seda wouldn’t see the tears forming on the edge of his eyes. He thought he was already a man, and didn’t want to appear weak in front of a woman.

‘Why didn’t they kill me also?’ he finally said.

Ansar entered the room. The boy turned around and said, ‘If I had got here earlier, would she have survived?’

‘No. She died in her sleep from internal hemorrhaging.’ Ansar laid his hands on the boy’s shoulders. ‘You need to be brave. It’s dangerous for you to go anywhere right now. We’ll bury her here. When they stop bombing, we’ll bury her according to our traditions.’

‘No.’ The boy stepped away from Ansar. ‘I won’t let her suffer any more. I’ll bury her today.’

Ignoring Ansar’s attempt to dissuade him, the boy lifted his sister gently from the table, thank Ansar and Seda for their help, and left with her in his arms. He carried her as though she were still sleeping and he was afraid of waking her up.

The next day Islam (for that was his name) returned to the hospital. He asked if they needed help. For a few days, he assisted the medical staff. He carried in water, cut wood, tended to the wounded. At night, washing the sheets, Seda conversed with Islam. She soon realized that this was a boy advanced way beyond his years.

Islam, it turned out, lived in the city. His father had died during the first months of war. After that, his mother took their children back to the village. She then went to Grozny alone to find her husband’s body, but never returned. Islam was the only member of his family still alive.

More than once, Seda watched him silently crying behind the hospital gates, unaware anyone saw him.

Once he told Seda that he wanted to return to Grozny. Probably, he decided to find his parents' bodies and bury them next to his sister, she thought to herself. She didn't try to talk him out of it, though she knew how dangerous the trip would be. Secretly, she was happy to have found a traveling companion.

On the eve of his departure, Seda visited all the patients and wordlessly begged their forgiveness for her decision to abandon them. Suspecting that she might be seeing them for the last time, she made an effort to remember every face.

“God willing, the war will end, and I'll see them again alive and well. We'll always remember January 1995.”

This is what she told herself, and she made an effort to believe it.

She passed a boy whose hands had been torn off by a toy booby-trapped with a mine. Such were the presents Russian planes dropped on Chechnya. His mother looked everywhere for her son. She didn't find her son, but died instead. Her six children waited in the village for her to return. Their husband had moved to Moscow long ago. He had become rich and made a home for himself there. Mostly likely, according to his wife, he had fallen in love with another woman.

Seda wished them all well and walked towards the exit quietly, taking her bag with her, which was nearly empty by now. She had handed out its contents as gifts to the wounded. She left without turning back.

Ansar walked with her to the hospital gates. She was so ashamed of herself for leaving the hospital that needed her that she couldn't look him in the face. Ansar thanked her for all she had done. Seda couldn't restrain the tears that flowed down her cheeks.

“If only I knew what happened to my family, God knows I would stay here.”

Ansar asked her to send a message to him that she was safe once she arrived in the city. Then he hugged her goodbye and walked away without looking back. Seda took one last look at the hospital and its surroundings before stepping forward.

Islam waited for Seda behind the hospital gates. He was carrying a duffle bag and a machine gun.

“What’s that for?” Seda asked, pointed at the gun.

“To protect you,” Islam said.

Seda wondered to herself: Was he planning to fight? One more crazy, lost soul. That’s just what we need.

She didn’t say anything to him. Along the way, instead of speaking, she prepared a speech, selecting her words carefully, developing arguments, anything to convince him not to fight. She would say to him everything she had been unable to say to Selim, her childhood sweetheart who had left her alone in Moscow to fight in Grozny.

A driver passed by and stopped to pick them up. He was returning to the city, he said, to collect his belongings. The closer they got to Grozny, the louder became the sounds of bombing and gunfire. The driver began to get nervous. His car started screeching as though afraid of the bombs. The driver saw this as a bad sign. Or maybe he was looking for an excuse not to go any further.

“Do want you want,” he said. “I’m not going any further, and I don’t advise you to either. I can see it now. A shell will hit me, I’ll become a cripple, and what use will I be to anyone then? If I die, or if I’m crippled, money won’t help me. Let’s turn back.”

Seda wasn't prepared for this turn in events. The fear which she had kept hidden from herself came back to life. Islam got out of the car, closed the door, and looked at Seda questioningly. She followed after him.

"You'll find another driver. However, I don't advise you —" the driver mumbled, clearly uncomfortable at the thought of leaving them alone on the road.

Seda only wanted one thing: for him to drive away as soon as possible and take his gloomy prophecies with him. Finally, he left Seda alone with Islam. As she watched him march ahead of her, never for a second doubting himself or his purpose, Seda became brave again.

He has nothing to lose, she thought to herself. Hence his courage. Plus, he's young.

In the depths of her heart, she rejoiced that she at last had the chance to speak to Islam privately. She had to take advantage of this opportunity before another car passed them by.

Islam walked quickly. Seda followed, her eyes alert for cars.

They stopped walking when a herd of tanks approached them from the distance, big fat bison in search of prey. Islam pulled Seda behind a tree, and they watched the tanks pass by together, on their way to Grozny.

"We're better off waiting in the forest," he said. "They'll kill us if they see us here. They can run over you, just like you're asphalt."

Seda followed him into the forest.

"They're on their way to Grozny, those scum. No problem. Our fighters will crush them like matchboxes," Islam growled through his teeth.

"And you want to help kill us all," Seda said.

"What do you think I should do? They've left us with no choice."

She repeated his words to herself. They've left us with no choice. So he already thinks he's one of them.

“What good will you be to them? If you destroy one column, Russia will just send another. Russia has more than enough soldiers and weapons. Your fighters will be destroyed before Russia will.”

“You can’t imagine the resources we have!”

“Oh yes I can. That’s why this war has dragged on so long, killing the best of us. And you help them do that. Even on the Russian side, many who die were deceived by their government or drafted against their will. Or forced, just like you. They didn’t have a choice either. You want to take revenge for your family? Go ahead and have your revenge. You’re only going to die. What good will that do anyone?”

“What do you think I should do?” Islam asked.

“Go to school, raise a family and have many, many children. Simple arithmetic tells you: with every life you create, you’re giving life to many others in the future.”

“My children will be born into the same world as me. I don’t want them to fight for their lives. I don’t want them to suffer like we have.”

“If you don’t want them to suffer, you have to raise them to hate war. Just imagine what would happen if everyone who wanted to end this war decided that they didn’t want to have children? Why should only barbarians have kids? Who would they be to make the world a good place? Our children should be smarter than us. They shouldn’t be so easily infatuated with every romantic sloganeer proclaiming ‘Freedom at any price!’ And whatever happened to our President, Jokar Dudayev? He sent his son abroad to study and left you to fight his war, to win his freedom. Only an educated man can be free. Even Epicurus two thousand years ago knew that. Listen to me, Islam, Chechens are still educating themselves. We’re naive and believe anything. We overreact to the slightest provocation. We’re headstrong and reckless. We still need to grow up.”

Seda stopped. She had delivered the speech she had been preparing all day, on the road and in the car, stringing words together, hoping to save a life. They sat silently. The tanks were gone. One bird was brave enough to whistle at another, but other than that, the silence was complete.

“Why are we always punished?” Islam finally asked. “What did we do to make this happen?”

Seda sighed and said, “I don’t know. I suppose there’s something inside us that we don’t even understand ourselves. Have you studied the inquisition yet? Do you remember the kinds of people they punished? The smartest ones, the independent thinkers, those who wouldn’t give in. The intellectuals, the so-called witches and sorcerers, all the outcasts. Powerful people are attracted to those who stand apart. They notice them and get scared that they might take their place. So they sacrifice them. People who don’t give in are hated by their rulers. After the inquisition, Spain lost its most talented, brave, and educated people. That’s exactly what’s happening with us. That’s what they want to do to us. And we’re helping Russia annihilate the Chechen people. Including you, Islam.”

“Why didn’t the people rise up and defend the victims during the Inquisition?”

“The people? To the contrary, the people blamed them for everything. Bad government, warfare, and the death everywhere began to hurt the economy and people started getting poorer. If the soil wasn’t good or the weather was bad, people died of starvation. The authorities wanted to distract the people. They didn’t want them to realize the real source of their poverty. They needed a scapegoat. When the harvest was bad, they found witches. When cows didn’t give milk, they found heretics. When locusts destroyed the crops, they punished the freethinkers. The same thing’s happening now. Poverty everywhere, unemployment, a low quality of life. Russia suffers, and people get angry. The rulers of this country search for a scapegoat. It’s easy to blame the

Chechens. We've been blamed for centuries, and now again we're witches burned at the stake. When there's a terrorist act, it always carries a 'Chechen trace'. When there's an economic slump, the Chechen mafia's to blame."

They sat down on one of the many tree stumps in the forest. Seda remembered how before the war the trees had not yet been killed, and the forest was a dense thicket where you could hide and dream. After the army blew up the gas filtration center, people had to cut wood to keep from freezing. Of course, she thought, cutting the wood destroys the ecological system for the future, but what else are people supposed to do?

"Look what they've done to our land, to our forests," Islam said. Grandpa used to say that in the mountains people spoke so quietly that they could hear the rivers flow. They were afraid of causing avalanches if they made too much noise. Now they bomb our mountains without any shame."

He stopped talking and closed his eyes, as though dreaming of something far away, long ago. Seda imagined to herself that she had won him over to her side. She pictured him throwing his gun away. As she was rejoicing in this image, Islam rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and carefully arranged his gun by his side. The hum of tanks picked up again with renewed force.

It sounds like they're headed for Kursk, rather than little Grozny, Seda thought.

In the depths of the forest, they heard the wail of a wolf. The wail echoed fearfully and sounded like hunger.

"A predator," Seda said.

"Those wolves can't be any worse than the two-legged wolves attacking us," said Islam. "At least they don't kill their own. Grandma used to tell me a story about something that happened when we were deported to Kazakhstan. A boy got lost in the woods and he was raised by wolves. When he grew up, hunters captured him, put him in a cage. His mother wolf followed

the trail of scent he left behind and used her teeth to break in two the bars that were holding her human son captive. And you call wolves predators.”

After Islam finished his story, Seda grabbed the gun from him and threw it far away, where it lay buried under the snow.

“You need to learn. With that thing gone, you’ll gain more than it ever could have given you, and you’ll serve your country better. We’ve already proven that we’re one of the bravest people in the world. That’s written into history. It’s time for us to think about other things. We need to develop our minds. Napoleon said: ‘two things rule the world – the sword and the intellect – but the intellect is stronger.’ In the past hundred years, we’ve lived through more tragedies than most people have in their entire existence. We have a lot to teach the world because we’ve experienced so much suffering. If only we could turn our suffering into wisdom. Only when we do that will we deserve to be called a civilization. It doesn’t take much intelligence simply to kill and die. We’re destined to be destroyed from time to time as long as there are so few of us. The bigger we are, and not just in numbers, but in mind too, the harder it will be for Russia to rule us. When we grow bigger, and not simply physically bigger, but when we become bigger in the intellectual sphere, then and only then will we have control over our territory.”

Islam was still too absorbed in thought to move. Slowly, he stood up, walked over to the pile of snow concealing his gun, picked it up and said, as though delivering an order:

“Let’s go.”

Seda obeyed.

This time, there were more cars on the road, but none of them could fit the two hitchhikers inside. The drivers didn’t even glance back as they passed Seda and Islam.

At last, a green *Zhiguli* screeched to a halt in front of them. A woman with a child in her lap sat next to the driver. There were several children in the back seat. Seda hesitated before getting in.

“Don’t worry,” the driver said. “Nothing’s wrong with a crowd.” Then he turned to Islam and, pointing at the gun, said: “We have no room for that kind of toy here, my friend.”

Islam stepped back, uncertain. It went against his grain to violate Chechen tradition by disobeying his elders. He looked at Seda sideways and threw the gun back into the snow.

Seda and Islam settled into the back seat, and the children nestled on their laps.

The driver, named Salavdi, made jokes along the way. He was in a good mood. Salavdi lived in Moscow. When the war began, he returned home for his family. First, he looked for them in the city, but all he found was the remains of his home. He returned to the village where he was born in the hopes that his wife had gone there with their children after their house had been destroyed. Someone said they were in a mountain village. They weren’t there either. He searched for them among the hundreds of thousands of refugees who had found a home among the mountaineers. After he told his story, Salavdi turned to his fellow travelers as if to ask them where they were from, and how they had turned up on the road to Grozny.

Seda said that she was searching for her family.

“And you, little *dzhigit*, what do you plan to do in Grozny?”

Seda answered for him. “He agreed to escort me into the city.”

“How did your parents allow you to get this far?” Salavdi asked.

Islam silently lowered his head. Seda answered for him again, and said that he was an orphan. After that, the driver didn’t joke anymore and concentrated on the road ahead of him.

Every few miles, they reached a checkpoint built of bricks, next to which stood Russian soldiers. The soldiers checked their documents, searched their belongings, and even dug inside

the children's bags. At one of the checkpoints, Salavdi was detained for longer than normal. One of the soldiers said something to him, and they all broke into laughter. Salavdi went pale and turned to the side, as though awaiting help from the soldiers' ridicule. He unfastened the top button on his jacket and loosened his scarf. Beads of sweat poured down his face. The bursting veins on his neck revealed the effort he was making to restrain himself from fighting back. But his lips stayed pursed. The soldiers continued laughing and pointing at him, as though they wanted to see him take revenge.

'Look at him sweating!'" one of them said, poking his head inside the car.

The soldier's pockmarked face made him look more like a criminal than a soldier. He reached out to Salavdi and poked his legs with the tip of his gun. The other soldiers laughed.

Salavdi's eyes filled with blood. He whispered something through his clenched teeth, which made the soldiers stop laughing. The pockmarked soldier hit him again with the tip of his gun. Salavdi stayed upright, crunched his fist into a ball, and hit him back. The pockmarked soldier fell backwards into the snow.

Salavdi's wife rushed to her husband's side. Seda grabbed Islam's hands and clenched them tight to keep him from fighting. As Salavdi's wife ran in front of them, a stream of bullets shot through the air, aiming for Salavdi's heart. Another soldier pumped a stream of bullets into his shoulder. His arm fell off as his bulky figure crashed to the ground, staining the snow red.

The air carried the piercing sound of a woman's scream. The children inside the car wailed. Islam tightened his fists and howled like a wounded animal. A young conscript ran away from the car and heaved vomit onto the pavement. Seda sat paralyzed, and tried to fasten Islam to her body. She forgot where she was until she felt Islam struggle against her, trying to pry her arms off his body. She tightened her grip, refusing to let go.

Islam screamed at her: "Let me go!"

‘No!’ she screamed back. ‘Don’t you dare give them another reason to rejoice!’

Another soldier approached the car, turned to Islam, and began to tease him. He pressed his face against the car window. His deformed and flattened features opened onto a few isolated, rotten yellow teeth. Small drops of spittle covered the glass.

‘Aren’t you going to take revenge for papa, little boy?’ the soldier said. ‘Hey, baby wolf, why doesn’t the cub protect his daddy?’

Seda felt Islam’s body grow tense. One more second and he would have broken free from her grip. She pressed his hands hard enough to stop the flow of blood and whispered in his ear: ‘I beg you, don’t react! That’s just what they want. Don’t give them that satisfaction.’

Meanwhile, Salavdi’s wife keened over her husband’s body. She bent down and raised her hand towards the sky. Her children, alternating between screams and silence, prayed aloud that the soldiers wouldn’t take them away.

Seda was left with only one question: why did God create humans and set them above the animals only to show at the end of the twentieth century that men are worse than beasts?

Fighters and guns were everywhere on the streets of Grozny. The Russian journalist Bunich would later write about what he saw: ‘In half a year, the Russian army endured a few embarrassing setbacks and unfortunate deaths, and responded by attacking the republic with all the rage and weaponry it had been gathering for decades.’

Though they had complete control over the air, superior weapons, and hundreds of thousands more fighters, the Russian army was unable to destroy the ‘illegal formations’ of Chechen rebels. Instead of destroying the opposition, they launched air strikes and set the city on fire, mercilessly exterminating civilians. In doing so, the Russian side lost many of their own.

The siege of Grozny dragged on for four months. One night, drunk at a New Year's Eve party in Mozdok, General Grachev told Soskovets and Egorov that the army must win back Grozny by his birthday. On Grachev's birthday, the army was either surrounded, killed, or taken captive. Russian corpses were piled high on the streets, gnawed through by dogs. The meat grinders never ran dry as new body parts were shoved inside them.

The artillery and air force destroyed apartments and houses without thinking twice about those living inside, many of whom were elderly Russians living out their retirement in Grozny. They carpet bombed the city, and that was just the beginning. Everything forbidden by international conventions, every variety of cluster bomb, was exploded on Chechen soil, as though the Russian army was preparing for the end of the world.

In spite of their strength, the army didn't advance and couldn't take the city. When there was no more conscript blood left to be shed, the elite troops were brought in: the navy, the North, Baltic and Pacific Oceans fleets, and the most esteemed section of the air force, still named in honor of Beria's predecessor as head of the NKVD, Felix Dzerzhinsky. Sailors, not afraid of the television cameras, screamed hysterically that if they were ever to escape from this hell they would never serve in the military again. One pilot named Morev went insane when he saw eight of his comrades destroyed within five minutes.

Crouched in darkness, the city looked like a hairy beast. After every explosion and tremor, her features became unrecognizable. Life only took place now in basements, many of which had been pieced together at the last minute from leftover scrap metal and burnt wood. Rarely did people emerge into the light of day, and if they did, it was only to gather water and food and race back underground. Water could be obtained from melted snow, but food was harder to come by. People did what they could. Seda saw one girl chasing chickens in a bombed out henhouse.

In one of the bomb shelters, a Russian plane brought in a shipment of food. Chechen women had pooled together their resources and come up with a million roubles to rent the plane and use it to bring in a load of food from Dagestan.

One gray-haired old man in a threadbare jacket and cloth shoes knocked on the window of the shelter and began distributing the packages of food.

Who's this Santa Claus? Seda asked herself. When she saw his face, she recognized the face of Salambek Khadziev, a representative of the Russian puppet government.

To think that I thought he left his cozy job in Moscow and came to Chechnya just to advance his career! Seda thought to herself. In war, sometimes the good people are aligned with the evil, and the evil people aligned with the good.

The biggest beneficiaries of the war were the dogs and the vultures. They had more food during those months than they'd had all their lives. Most of the corpses were young soldiers. Seda felt for them a pity she imagined their superiors who had sent them to defend their country had never felt. What was a thousand dead soldiers to vast, proud Russia. They had millions of bodies with which to feed the war machine.

Looking at the bodies, Seda recalled the song which Petya used to sing with the Chechen fighters:

My tank burns.
I burn inside.
A Chechen jumps
under my tank.
He knows why he dies.
Fire consumes him.
His mother cries.
Russian shells
rape his country.
Why do I burn in a foreign land?
Behind my back,
my friends and my enemies
eat us alive.

Stray dogs sniffed the dead bodies with the nonchalance of gourmands. They waited impatiently for night to come so they could feast on their treasures. One dog, however, could not wait until nightfall. Yellow as the pus on a festering wound, he approached a corpse with the legs and arms torn off and licked the skin on his chest as the blood as flowed out. Then it opened its mouth to take a big bite of flesh, beginning with the stomach.

Islam picked up a stick and chased the dog away.

Seda remember how the Russian Minister of Defense told the country that their soldiers died with smiles on their faces. No matter how many bodies Seda saw, she couldn't find any dead soldier with a smile on his face.

Of one soldier, lying dead on the train tracks, Seda said: "It looks to me like he's crying. "Maybe he's still alive and needs help."

"Stay here," Islam said. "I'll go find out."

He walked over to the train tracks and inspected the body.

"Nothing can help him anymore," Islam said when he came back. "The tears are real. Probably he was crying when he died. The tears froze on his face. Then they melted and now they're flowing down his face."

Seda wanted to say to him, Look, Islam, now you see what happens to boys when they go to fight a war. They're victims just like us. Why kill them?

But she knew that words were superfluous. Islam was absorbed in his own thoughts, probably not that different from her own. She limited herself to hoping silently that her lectures to him on the way to Grozny, illustrated now by so many examples, would have an impact not just on his thinking but his actions, and that he would decide not to fight.

"Where's your home?" Islam asked. "I'll take you there."

Instead of answering, Seda thought to herself, We'll go home together. My parents will be delighted to adopt Islam. He'll become part of our family. When the war ends, they'll give him a good education, and we'll find him a wife.

Seda became so enmeshed in fantasy that she forgot that they were standing in the line of fire. A sudden fusillade reminded her. Nearby, a group of *boyeviks* were shooting at the Russians, and the Russians answered back by launching Grad missiles in their direction.

War offers thousands of opportunities to die, but people only survive through accident and luck. It doesn't even help to be careful. People's instinct for self-preservation is so strong that they continue to be cautious, even when it doesn't make a difference.

Seda and Islam ran along the concrete wall, hoping that it would somehow protect them from the shrapnel and bullets flying everywhere. All along the way, Islam covered Seda with his body, not protecting himself. A piece of shrapnel with sharp edges ripped into his hands and tore through his jacket. Islam didn't make any sound, only clenched his teeth and covered his wound to staunch the flow of blood. Seda tore her headscarf into pieces, and tied one piece like a tourniquet around his wrist to slow the bleeding. She used the rest of the fabric to fasten the tourniquet to his arm.

"We need to get you to the hospital before the wound gets infected and gangrene starts."

Islam didn't object. Seda of course wanted to find her family, but it was more important now to find a doctor for Islam.

The crossfire increased with every moment of hesitation. Once again, they turned out to be in the center of a street battle. A girl dressed in army camouflage with a hospital jacket on top loaded wounded bodies on her back. Seda ran after her and dragged Islam behind, who protested loudly: "I'm not going anywhere because of this little scrape."

"People lose their arms over scrapes like that," Seda said. "I've seen it happen before."

They found a makeshift hospital set up in the center of the city. All the beds and every inch on the floor was occupied. The basement was also being used as an infirmary. For those patients who had found a space on the floor, the doctors operated on them there, bending on their knees to keep their balance. When the doctors ran out, the nurses operated on the patients who couldn't wait any longer. The patients who were still able to walk were also put to work transporting corpses and making space for the next body. Others were busy in the backyard, digging graves for those who couldn't be saved.

Seda remembered learning in school that crematoriums were first used during World War I, when there wasn't any room left to store the casualties of war, so they burned the corpses and buried the ashes. They did the same thing during World War II, only the Nazis incinerated those who otherwise could have survived. Indeed, crematoriums were an efficient way of getting rid of all the unwanted "unnecessary" people on the earth. Those who used them must have taken pride in their effectiveness and ingenuity.

Islam set to work helping the nurses. Seda asked one of them, a blond aged twenty-five, to look at his wound. Ignoring his protests, Zulya (so the nurse was called) cleansed his wound and gave Seda a fresh bandage. Seda unrolled the sterilized cloth and tied it tight around his arm. She used her scarf to keep the bandage in place.

As Seda watched the nurses, many of whom had not slept or eaten for days, rush back and forth through the hospital, she felt something less than admiration for them. For a while, she couldn't articulate the exact nature of her feeling, but she soon realized what it was. She was ashamed. Ashamed to watch them save lives while she sat idle, breathing in the oxygen for which thousands of people on the street of Grozny were dying.

During a short break, Zulya knelt down next to Seda, closed her eyes, leaned against the wall, and heaved deeply. Seda decided to strike up a conversation. Zulya told her that when the

war began she quit her job as a nurse and planned to move back to her hometown, Vedenov, but the heavy crossfire kept her from leaving the city, and she had been working in the hospital ever since. Her parents searched for her to take her back home to them in Vedenov, but every time she left home and returned to Grozny to work in the hospital.

The second nurse was named Toita Kutukhanova. Toita had been at work in a hospital when the first bomb struck Grozny, and she hadn't abandoned her post for one day since.

"Without this war, us girls wouldn't have guessed what we were capable of. When peace arrives, our lives will go back to normal. No one will remember how we carried the wounded on our backs, how we consoled children who had just lost a leg or arm, how we didn't sleep or eat, how we risked our lives." Toita spoke as though she feared the end of the war, for then she would not know what to do with herself.

For the last five minutes of the break, the girls rested, their bodies leaning against each other, to keep from falling. Seda tried to sleep, but she couldn't. She kept seeing Salavdi's body, convulsing before it fell onto the pavement. She kept hearing the shrill echo of his wives' screams. To stop these visions of death, Seda opened her eyes. She saw water dripping from the ceiling. The drops fell with such regularity and force, that she felt like a sink, as though the water was dripping into her brain, flooding her consciousness. She remembered the favored form of torture in medieval China was to wrap a tube around the head of the prisoner, and squeeze it tighter until sweat dripped from the victim's face. Usually, the prisoners would go insane before they were set free.

Later on during that endless night, Seda was jolted from her dreams by the sound of something scraping across the floor. She listened more closely, and heard the rapid, nervous movements of a mouse.

Anything but that! Seda thought. Her head spun as she felt something soft lick her toes. Unable to restrain herself, she screamed loud enough to wake the entire hospital.

“What’s wrong?” The nurses asked in distress.

“I felt a mouse on my leg,” Seda whispered, ashamed already at waking up the hospital because of a rodent. The nurses ran through the corridors, calming down patients and soothing them back to sleep. Some men in a corner, irritated by her frivolousness, mumbled to themselves: “Look who’s come to stay with us, the Queen of Spain!”

“That woman’s scream nearly gave me a heart attack,” an angry elderly woman said.

As soon as she finished speaking, a powerful explosion ripped through the building. The wall next to the door collapsed into rubble. A young man with his head wrapped in bandages barely managed to escape the avalanche of bricks which buried his bed as soon as he jumped away.

The nurses rushed into the tent adjoining the hospital, where children from Vedenó were sleeping as the town itself underwent heavy bombardment in the effort to restore constitutional order. The nurses managed to extract four children alive from the rubble. Seven of them could not be found, or rather could not be found whole, as there were plenty of body parts – hands, arms, legs, and heads thrown on the floor, cut by shards from the broken windows, their bloody traces rubbed against the wall – to go around.

Of the children they managed to save only two of them – a brother and a sister – were severely wounded. The boy looked about four years old, the girl was younger, perhaps three.

“Aunties, I’m fine,” the boy said calmly. “Please take care of my sister.” His voice faded with every word he uttered, until he was completely silent. Toita grabbed the boy’s wrist and measured his pulse. She couldn’t feel any beat, and pressed harder. The nurses watched her beat his wrist with her fist.

‘I can’t take this any more!’ she screamed as his twisted arm hung limp in the air.

Zulya walked over to her and placed her hands firmly on her shoulders. “Get a hold of yourself, Toita. You can’t break his arm. He’s dead. Let go of him. You know how much they need us here. We can’t let ourselves go crazy.”

The walls trembled again, as though from the aftershocks of an earthquake. The shrieks of children’s cries mixed with the rumble of crashed missiles. The children, afraid of more explosions if they remained inside, asked to go outside.

When it was quiet at last, the nurses busied themselves with new wounds, shots of anesthetics, and setting casts. A sulphurous film, which they had been used to seeing after a slew of bombs, hung in the air. It brought tears to the eyes, and everyone in the hospital closed their eyes from the sting. Seda began sifting through arms and legs for Islam. She called out his name.

‘I’m here,’ he whispered behind her back. “Are you okay?”

“And you?” Seda asked instead of answering.

With his working hand, Islam helped pull people out from beneath the rubble. His wounded hand flapped at his side. Seda yelled at him to be careful.

It was impossible to look directly at the suffering patients, especially the elderly, mostly Russian residents of Grozny.

From time to time the nurses complained, ‘How many times we asked for buses to evacuate the elderly from the city. They always said: ‘the army never hurts the Russians.’ Just look how they didn’t hurt them!’

Hardest of all to look at were the young men. They refused to accept anesthetics and asked that they be saved instead for the children. They endured their private hells silently; according to Chechen tradition, men were not supposed to cry in the presence of women.

When all the medicine ran out, the nurses sat on the floor and waited, not knowing what to do next.

“Have they really started bombing hospitals now?” Seda asked.

‘That’s nothing,’ Toita said. “You should have been here for New Year’s Eve. They put on quite a party for us!”

When the bombing stopped, the nurses blew out the candles, and the hospital was once again wrapped in the darkness of dreams.

Everyone fell asleep except from Seda. She wanted to gulp down fresh air and feel light illuminate her skin. All she could see in the basement were hospital jackets and bandages. In the intensity of the darkness, she relived that horrible day just passed, so many dead, the screaming that would never end. She saw the eyes of Salavdi’s children staring at her, only they were wider, fluorescent as the eyes of cat. Then they became fists hammering Salavdi’s dead body.

Tomorrow will be a difficult day, Seda thought to herself. We will have to count the bodies and dig graves. Islam won’t leave as long as he’s needed here. We might be stuck here for a long time. But it’s only a half-hour walk from here to my home.

She sighed. Who knows when all this will end? Who will return their lost youth to these girls who risk their lives every minute? Seda thought of her mother. She wanted to hold her tight, to tell her everything that she had endured in the last few weeks.

As soon as the sun rises, I’m leaving, Seda thought, even if Islam won’t come with me. For these girls, it’s their job to stay here. They’re nurses, sworn to Hippocratic Oath. The only oath I’m tied to is the one I made to myself: to see my parents again. Maybe they’re also wounded, and have no one to help them. I’d be better off helping them.

She tried to quell her conscience, which whispered that it was her duty to stay behind and help in the hospital. The minutes passed but the night grew longer, as though time was weighed down by lead.

Finally, sunlight penetrated the dead night. The sun always returns, Seda thought, bringing life back to the city. We need to build Grozny again. If not Islam, then who? Whose children will live here if not his?

Seda thought she had hit upon an argument to clinch her debate with Islam. I need to tell him! she thought. He'll never dream of using a gun again.

She looked for Islam to share with him her revelation, but couldn't find him anywhere. Thinking he had volunteered to dig graves, she went to garden, but didn't find him there. Her good mood began to go sour. Her head spun from the sleepless night, and hunger. Her legs barely held her. Could he really have gone to fight without saying goodbye?

She left the hospital and began to search for him in the city. The old library, where her sister used to work, the school where she met Selim, the movie theatres where she fell in love – everything seemed so foreign, now that it was bombed to ruins. The only points of orientation were the checkpoints made of poured concrete with bags of sand stacked high.

Her legs guided her to the same checkpoint where Salavdi had been killed the day before. It was guarded already by other soldiers. The only face she recognized was that of the young soldier who vomited when he saw blood flow over his feet. When he saw Seda, he straightened his posture and tightened his grip on his gun.

Seda could see from the soldier's expressions that something bad had happened. She surveyed the goods they had looted from local residents: rugs and linen stuffed on the dirty cement. Any then she saw a body covered in camouflage. The legs poked out. Seda recognized the shoelaces on the tattered sneakers. It was Islam.

Her first reaction was to scream. She pressed her hands to her lips. Then she flew at the soldiers. They hit her and told her to go away. She wouldn't be pushed off, and beat their backs with her fists. Suddenly she was strong. The harder she hit, the more they ignored her, until one soldier walked up to her and kicked her with the back of his boot. Seda lay on top of Islam's body and whispered into his ear, "You should thank God he killed your mother so she wouldn't live to see what happened to her son!"

The young soldier walked near Seda, trying to keep her from harm without openly siding against his fellow soldiers.

"You're wasting your time attacking them. They didn't do it. The ones who killed him left early this morning. This boy, your brother, arrived early in the morning. He threw a grenade at one of them. Remember the one who said 'little wolf cub, why doesn't he take revenge for his daddy?' That was the one he aimed at. They killed your brother for that."

"Why give the bitch these details?" one of the *kontraktniks* yelled at him.

Islam, she said to him silently, with you your entire family has died. You died before falling in love, without touching the hand of your first child. All you knew was death. But you took revenge for those you lost.

It was a shock to Seda to see how wrong she had been. She couldn't find a single innocent victim of this war. People either threw themselves at death or rushed to commit another murder. And there was no way to hold them back.

Victory goes to those who thought up this system to subdue and tame those who never give in. They know they can't break us. This isn't the first time they're tried, and it won't be the last. That's why they try so hard to destroy anyone who has an independent spirit. But they can't destroy us all. They can kill the best of us, but more of us are born every day.

She wandered the streets, trying not to cry. Nothing she told herself about Chechnya's future could bring Islam back to life. She didn't know what to do with his body. I can't leave him for the dogs to consume. She remembered how Islam carried his sister outside during an air strike to bury her.

Seda was once again alone and helpless. "Mama," she whispered, "I'm wandering through these ruins and I don't know what to do with myself anymore. I want to go home!"

Why do people die? Seda asked herself. For the first time that day, she hit upon a clear answer to a difficult question: so someone's foreign bank account can be rounded up to the next zero! She laughed until it hurt, then sat down and stared at the sky.