

## CHAPTER 20

### Summary

Along the way to find Sohrab, Farid points out empty villages where he had once known people. He said most of them were either dead or in refugee camps in Pakistan. He notes that the dead ones are sometimes luckier. Farid warns him that Kabul is very different from what Amir remembers, but the sight of his old city is a still a shock to Amir. Everywhere he looks are rubble, beggars, and orphaned children. There are no trees, because people cut them down for firewood and there is no smell of lamb kabobs in the streets, because only the Taliban gets meat. At that moment, a red truck filled with the "Beard Patrol" idles by and Amir can't help staring at them. But Farid angrily warns him that he must never stare, because they are always looking for someone to provoke them so they can kill and break their boredom.

An old beggar chimes in with the same advice and so Amir asks him if he knows where the orphanage can be found in Karteh-Seh. The old beggar is able to give them directions and then asks Amir if it's the first time he has seen a Talib. He remarks in the same way Rahim had about how everyone was so hopeful for peace when they arrived. In the course of the conversation, Amir discovers that the man had been a professor at the same university where Amir's mother taught and that he knew Amir's mother. He remembers her saying how happy she was and that they only let you be that happy when they are preparing to take something from you. Amir is thirsty for information about his mother, but the old man can remember no more. However, it occurs to Amir that he has learned more about his mother from this old beggar than he ever learned from Baba.

When they find the orphanage, the director is reluctant to let them in, saying he doesn't recognize the boy in the picture. It is only when Amir gives the man many pieces of information about Sohrab, especially that he handles a slingshot well, that the man finally lets them in.

The director, Zaman, tells Amir that most of the children are not really orphans. They have been brought there, because their mothers can't feed them and their fathers are dead. The Taliban refuses to allow women to work so they cannot support their children alone. Then he tells Amir that he may be too late to help Sohrab.

He takes them to his office where he can be assured of more privacy and asks Amir how badly he wants to find his nephew. Amir says he will not leave Afghanistan without finding Sohrab. So Zaman explains that Sohrab had been taken by a Taliban official who comes once every month or two, usually for a little girl, but sometimes a little boy to use them for his sexual pleasures. He brings a great deal of cash, which helps the orphanage stay afloat. Farid becomes incensed that Zaman is selling children and nearly kills the man until Amir screams that the orphans are watching. Zaman finally reveals that the Taliban official had taken Sohrab a month ago and he admits that he gives up any child when asked, because he knows the Talib will take ten of them, if he refuses, and kill him in the bargain. This way he keeps some of them alive. He also explains that some of the children come back, but not all. He advises Amir and Farid that they can find the Taliban official at Ghazi Stadium the next day and that they will recognize him by his sunglasses.

### Notes

This chapter is a revealing exposé of the real Afghanistan that Amir sees when he returns: orphaned children roam the streets and are used by the Taliban for their sick pleasures; and the double standard they have created for women - not allowing them to work and killing their husbands - means that many children beg on their own, go to one of the rare orphanages, or die in the streets. The world is turned upside down in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Unfortunately, Amir must go into this dragon's lair to save Sohrab.