

ZAHHAK

By Vladimir Medvedev

Excerpts translated from the Russian by Lisa Hayden

Excerpt 1: Andrei

I'm leaning on a shovel and prying at the ground...

Holy crap! It's a skull.

Human.

I crouch and take a closer look. I've never seen dead people. This isn't a dead person, though. It's bone. A pumpkin with crooked teeth and holes for eyes... Sympathy came over me in a big way anyhow. "Yes," I'm thinking, "somebody got solidly screwed. Killed, head cut off, and buried in the yard..."

I hear:

"What're you sitting there for?"

I look up. There's plastic Nike flip-flops at the edge of the pit. Bare toes sticking out of them. Striped pajama pants over those. A round gut further up. And at the very top is the rich landowner's fat, wide face in the morning sky. Khakberdyev, the owner. He's totally the killer. It's his yard.

I hate these jerks. He doesn't own me, I'm just working my butt off for him. Building a house. And he's staring at me like I'm his property.

"Why aren't you working?"

"I found a skull." I'm snapping at him. "What have you got here, a cemetery?"

He's gaping, like he's sizing me up. And he explains, oh-so importantly:

"You know what they say: there's two hundred eyes buried under every horse's hoof print."

Damn, he's a wise man, too! And everybody in Tajikistan knows that saying. So many generations came before us that, like, no matter where you dig, there's a hundred people lying everywhere. Found himself an alibi!

And he asks again, kind of like he's threatening:

"You got that?" And he points a finger: "That... bring it here."

I can't stand when people make orders. I'm not a little doggie that's going to jump out of the pit with a bone in his teeth. I stood and hurled the skull with a basketball throw. He received my pass surprisingly accurately. His dark eye just shot me a glance:

"Go on and work... Dig."

He turned as he was walking away:

"Work well. You're Murodov's son, aren't you? See that you dig the land well. Or you'll disgrace your father."

And he cleared out, those Nikes slapping.

I watch closely as he's parading across his estate, holding the skull at his hip like it's a ball. "Oh, you *basmach*," I'm thinking. "The hell with it!" I spit, crawl out of the pit, and take off for the far end of the yard where Ravil and Karl are knocking together molds for the foundation.

I'm walking and messing around, sticking my gut out and slapping my sneakers like the owner with his flip-flops. I walk up and shout to the guys:

“Hey, why you working so slow? You hammer bad, I cut off head for you.”

Ravil drives a nail into a board, raises his red-haired head, and asks:

“What was it you fired at him?”

“Your predecessor's head, from the foreman who built the old house.”

Basically, I tell them about the skull. Karl wonders:

“What's it like? With flesh, with hair?”

“Smooth.”

Karl's a pro on any topic:

“It's been lying in the ground about twenty years. No less.”

Ravil gets right into things:

“Maybe even a thousand.”

“Maybe that long. The ground's dry.”

Ravil winks at me:

“Don't want to make it a million? Andryukha, you dug up the first person. You found the grave of Saint Grandfather Adam.”

Karl taps his finger at his temple:

“You think if Vatan's the gateway city around here that means the gates opened up into heaven?”

Ravil clicks his tongue:

“Hey, my brother, looks like the lights are on but nobody's home. You've got no idea where you live. We had everything. Heavenly garden. Alexander the Great. There was comrade

Saidakram Mirzorezoev from the Soviet of Ministers, too. You're living at the crossroads of the world."

That's about our piddly Vatan? I wouldn't call it the region's gateway city. Not even as a joke. I'd get out, go to any old place. It's just there's nowhere to head. There's no money to make a break for Russia. They're playing war for the second year in Tajikistan. And there's just peddlers and bandits all around.

"Listen," I ask Ravil, "what do you think, why'd he make off with the skull?"

"Who?"

"That, well... the *basmach*... Khakberdyev."

"How should I know? Maybe he'll bury it. The locals love burying stuff, Allah forgives their sins for it."

"No, there's something else going on here. I swear he wants to hide the evidence far, far away. He's a bandit."

"Come on, he's just a peddler."

"If you ask me, all peddler are bandits."

Ravil smirks:

"Enough philosophizing, Andryukha. Get to work, look for the rest of the bones."

"Enough ordering around," I snap.

Well, damn, he's my big boss, too!

I'm digging and thinking maybe the skull really is ancient but that guy, the *basmach*, he's a thug no matter what. What's the foul grin for? "Don't disgrace your father." What's that about? My father was planning to say something, too. Yesterday. I'm walking down International Street and he's coming in the opposite direction. In a white shirt and ironed black pants, like always.

Smooth-shaven. Shoes shining, like he just came out of the operating room. And right away he says:

“Andrei, son, you need to quit that job.”

“But why? It’s a good job. In the fresh air. Physical activity. And they pay money.”

“It’s an embarrassment. They’ll start saying the doctor’s not taking care of his children at all. That’s not good. In my position...” So that’s how it is, is it? I couldn’t take it:

“It’s my personal matter who I work for. And you... it’s not us you’re... you only think about your own position!”

I’d never talked back to him before. It’s just—I hadn’t expected it myself—that the hurt came out in the open. He doesn’t pay any attention to how I try to reach him. It’s like I don’t exist. Sometimes he’ll toss out a couple words in passing like a bone and call it good. I used to even cry at night about that. Now when something concerns him, though, he’s quick to say, “Andryusha, son...”

Yes, I know, I know it was unfair to lash out at him. There was no reason. After all, he’s thinking about us and taking care of us. Of me and Zarinka and our mother, too. When all this playing war got started a year ago, we wouldn’t have survived without him. Of course they weren’t shooting and weren’t killing in our settlement, but there wasn’t squat to eat. They’d stopped paying my mother’s salary at the library. It was easier for the locals: everybody had a kitchen garden and kin in some village. And what about us? We would have kicked off from hunger but my father supported us. It was later that Ravil took me into the brigade...

I thought my father’d be mad. But he said:

“Andrei, this is a tough time. Don’t forget there’s a war going on. You have to be very careful. There’s still a lot you don’t understand. Do you know what kind of people you’re working for? They’d be glad for any pretext as long as they can do me a great deal of harm.”

“They didn’t even ask my name...”

But my father wasn’t listening.

“There’s no time to explain now. In the evening...” And he cleared out.

That’s what’s called a “father-and-son talk.” I waited up late and felt even more hurt. This time’s turning out just like always. My mom was mad, too, and kept asking:

“And so he told you he’s coming?”

She’d baked up some little hand pies, with potato. She’s convinced he loves them. But I know he can’t stand potato. My mother wrapped the dish in a clean towel so the pies would stay hot. But they cooled anyway...

I’m digging and wondering: what had my father planned to tell me? I can bet it’s about the peddler. There’s a reason he asked, “You know who you’re working for?” Then I dug up the skull today. It’s one thing after another. Like a detective story, damn! If my father doesn’t come home again tonight, then I’ll go ask him what he had in mind. Although he doesn’t like unannounced visits... I remembered that and the hurt caught me again.

I hear somebody beeping like a madman outside the fence. And shouting, too:

“Andrei! Hey, Andrei!”

I crawl up out of the pit and go over to the fence. Who could that be, anyway? A white van, an ambulance. There’s a skinny devil, mustache and dark skin, at the wheel: Ali, the hospital driver. He and I are like old cronies. He’s shouting out the driver’s window:

“Andrei, get in fast. Let’s go!”

It's always like he's rushing to a fire. It's the same thing the whole way: "fast, fast," "let's go fast." Hostility's getting to me. My father didn't find time for me yesterday but today he even sent a car for me. Abandon what you're doing, son... and go to him. Fast, fast!

"Did ice start burning in your ass or what?" I ask Ali.

"Stop shooting your mouth off, bro," Ali shouts at me. "There's no time!"

Hell of a way to move in on somebody.

"So you, Einstein, is there at least space left?" I say.

Humor's always a problem for Ali, constantly. He doesn't get it.

"Hey, get in, I'm telling you!"

"And then what? You going to lecture me about time?"

"They killed your father."

I didn't understand at first. He said it again:

"Your father! They killed him!"

I understood but didn't believe it, and then when I believed it, time disappeared. And space probably did, too. As I was riding, there was a dull shroud hanging outside the windshield and things were dissolving in it: solid clay fences on the settlement's outskirts and tall poplars along the road and empty cotton fields stretching to the distant mountains. It was like I'd gone deaf and mute. Ali's voice carried to me from somewhere else, from a different dimension: the chief doctor had ordered... to go there... pick up the body... made a detour... to get you...

We stopped at the edge of some kind of salt marsh. A bunch of people. A car next to them, a black Volga. I jumped out of the van. People turned around to look and made way. My father was lying on his back. Burdocks were stuck to clothes smeared with mud, like he'd been dragged along the ground. There was a bruise across half his face.

It was like I'd gone blind. I didn't see the close hills and distant mountains. Didn't see people standing around. Saw only the deep mark across his neck. The thin line cutting through swollen flesh. It was like I'd gone deaf. I didn't hear the wind rustling. Didn't hear people around me whispering. A little later I gathered what they were saying nearby, but it seemed like it was behind some kind of wall:

“Well, then, the body should be taken away.”

I didn't even grasp that at first. A feeling of something horribly irreversible came over me. It was like I was being torn to pieces. And somebody's calling. To me. By name. I look around. The district public prosecutor. I try to understand what he's saying.

“So much sorrow, Andrei... I sympathize with you very much. Be strong...”

He nods to Ali.

“Go ahead, load.”

Ali swung open the van's back doors, dragged out a folding canvas stretcher, and laid it alongside my father. I came to my senses:

“And the investigation?!”

“It's a difficult case,” says the prosecutor. “No witnesses. A very difficult case. But we'll figure it out. We'll definitely conduct an investigation.”

He's lying! There won't be any investigation. It's written in big letters on that snouty face of his.

I started yelling:

“Why did they trample the footprints?! Even a dog wouldn't find them.”

“Andrei,” the prosecutor softly said, “a dog's not necessary in situations like this.”

It was like a damper covered his eyes. As the Tajiks say, he'd stretched a donkey's hide over his face. I looked around. The investigator—everybody in the settlement knows him—was not among the people standing there.

“Where's the investigator?! Where's the photographer?”

“Andrei,” said the prosecutor, “don't teach me how to do my work.”

“Why aren't you opening an investigation?”

“We'll definitely open one. We'll conduct an inquiry, clear things up... Definitely, certainly.”

“You won't clear anything up! You... you're letting it all ride.”

“Andrei, I'm forgiving you. You said unkind words but I understand what you're feeling. This is awful for me, too. Your father was my friend. A very good friend...”

I was furious and lost my head, though, and wasn't weighing what I said very well.

“You don't want to conduct an inquiry, right? Am I supposed to investigate this myself or something?”

The prosecutor interrupted me in Russian:

“You're a smart guy, don't do something stupid. You yourself know this is a dangerous time. There's no need to say things like that. You'll regret it...”

“You threatening me?”

“Who are you that I'd threaten you?!”

The prosecutor was steaming mad and there was shit coming out of him anyway:

“You're teaching me how to conduct an inquiry? First learn how to speak with your elders! What do you know, anyway? If your gut were ripped open, nobody'd even find the letter

“alef” in there... You’re like your father! He at least treated patients and that’s why they tolerated him. But why should they tolerate you?”

Now I blew up completely:

“They tolerated my father!? If he hadn’t treated you, you would have all kicked it! From gluttony! I’ll find out myself who killed him! If I don’t get results here, I’ll go to Dushanbe. Let them send out a brigade. And I’ll smash up your snake pit. I’ll find out who...”

He rolled his eyes and looked at me like he’d devour me but he restrained himself.

Turned away. Without looking at anyone, he commanded:

“Take him away.”

Nobody even stirred.

I was shaking but didn’t want anyone unfamiliar to touch my father. I bent and pushed my hands under my father’s shoulders. I looked at Ali... He wavered then came over and grudgingly took the feet. We lifted the body. It was very heavy and sagged a little below the belt.

“Safarov, help out,” the prosecutor ordered.

His driver came over, grabbed at the belt of my father’s pants, and pulled. We lifted the body a little higher. My father’s head slumped back. We hauled the body to the stretcher. I tried to lower him so his head wouldn’t hit the canvas. Together, Ali and I took the stretcher by the handles, carried it to the ambulance, and pushed it into the van. I sat alongside the stretcher. The ambulance set off. I held on to my father so he wouldn’t be jolted on the potholes. Only then did I notice the scratches and bruises on my father’s dark, strong hands. He’d been restrained. He was strong. One person couldn’t handle him. There were several of them. I chased off those scary pictures. I couldn’t stand them. I stifled them but they flared up again and again.

Excerpt 2: Zarina

No, she didn't love Papa! And for some reason she's not especially nice to us, either. I unintentionally overheard her talking with Uncle Jorub in the evening.

I didn't feel like seeing people. Even Mama or Andrei. So I climbed up on the flat clay roof of our wing of the house, lay on my back, and started looking at the sky. There's never such a black, deep sky and so many stars in Vatan. The roof was very cold. In the mountains, even during the afternoon, in the sun it's like a bathhouse, but in the shade it's like a refrigerator. "There's one roof, two weathers. There's cold on that side of the roof and scorching heat on the other." That's what Aunt Dilbar said. It's a local saying.

I was freezing to death but that was even better: I was trying to imagine I'd died. What is it to be a dead person? I'd started thinking about Papa. He's lying there now, too, looking up with eyes that don't see, but there's no starry sky over him: there's a solid black layer of earth. The earth is probably the sky for dead people.

I heard rustling hay and footsteps down below, on the ground. Somebody was apparently tossing food to the sheep in their enclosure. I heard Auntie Bakhshanda say:

"Jorub, why did you bring these people to us?"

Uncle Jorub sighed:

"They're family to us. People were planning to kill them in the city. Who else but us will protect the children of the deceased Umar?"

And she says:

"Eh, elder brother... Maybe you took a fancy to that *jalap* of his?"

She called Mama a prostitute! I wanted to jump off the roof and yell, “Don’t you dare say that about my mother!” But I had enough brains to hold myself back. I thought, Well, now Uncle Jorub will let her have it. And then I start hearing him mumble:

“You shouldn’t talk that way. Vera’s a good woman. You don’t have any reason to feud with her now that my brother’s life has ended...”

And she says:

“The children! The children are the reason. My children and her children will have to share bread there’s already not enough of. That *jalap* will eat my bread.”

“Not to worry,” Uncle Jorub started muttering. “They’ll start working. You know yourself: a lot of people means a lot of workers.”

And she says:

“Workers? Those Russians from the city don’t know how to do anything.” She went silent then said, “Are you thinking of leaving them to live with us?”

“Where will they go? Figure that out yourself, sister-in-law—there’s a war. They wouldn’t even make it ten kilometers down the road. They’d be stopped, robbed, and killed... It’s scary to even talk about what would happen. Let them live with us until the world calms down. And then, as God wishes.”

She went silent then harshly said:

“The upper field. It needs to be cleared and plowed up. There’s more eaters so there needs to be more land. There was enough before—the deceased sent money. But now they don’t pay you anything at the state-owned farm. The deceased departed and we need to find where we can get bread. I’ve thought a long time about this but there weren’t enough hands. Let them work. But you, my brother, you tell her yourself. I don’t wish to speak with her.”

Uncle Jorub says:

“Eh, sister-in-law, this work isn’t for a woman and teenagers. It’s for strong men.”

“There isn’t one man in this house,” and Bakhshanda cut him off. Then I heard light, decisive footsteps. She was gone.

And if she’d blurted out anything like that to my father? He’d’ve put her in her place for sure. No, there’s a good reason Uncle Jorub has such a stupid, funny name. It just means “twig broom” in Tajik. Apparently a few of my grandfather’s babies died in a row so they gave my little new-born uncle that name to trick the illness. They call the baby a twig broom, meaning he’s not a child, just a little bundle of branches, a little sweeper. Illness doesn’t cling to twig brooms. Mean sisters-in-law cling to them: they sweep however they want with them.

Excerpt 3: Oleg

This afternoon I ran into Zukhursho in the hallway: I was seeing this former district committee trainer in all his kingly glory for the first time. He had changed out of the civilian suit he’d been wearing in Kurgan-Tiube and into a camouflage military robe of a fantastical silver-and-black material. Later he dressed up in gold brocade and came to resemble a third-rate pop singer, something that ruined his style very much in my view. He looked positively stunning that morning, though.

I said:

“They’ve housed me in the same room as your people. I’m a journalist. I need the opportunity to focus and work. Well, you understand yourself... Notes, drafts, and all the rest... Might it be possible to be somewhere on my own?”

He looked at me as if he were The Lord God and a sinner was complaining to him that the heat's not working well in Hell. He granted my request, though:

“Get all your junk.”

I took my rucksack and the case with the cameras. Zukhursho flung open a nearby door.

“Go ahead in.”

I entered what I initially thought was an absolutely empty room. Four bare walls. An unpainted floor. There was only a long—about three meters—section of spotted fire hose by the far wall.

Zukhursho was standing in the doorway, observing.

“You like the room?”

I've been afraid of snakes since I was a child. My friends used to catch grass snakes in the summer and carry them around under their shirts. One fine day I finally gathered up my resolve and picked up a snake in my hand. I wince to this day from the recollection of how that loathsome, rough, and cold creature squirmed in my palm...

Zukhursho caught my fear—he has zoological intuition. Never before have I seen such overt pleasure as what flashed in his eyes.

“You afraid?”

I shrugged my shoulders and muttered something indefinite. Zukhursho walked up to the boa constrictor, lifted it, and placed it on his shoulders. The snake curved like the spout of a devilish teapot.

“Take a picture.”

“It won't come out. It's too dark.”

Zukhursho strode to the door. I recoiled reflexively, distancing myself from the boa.

“Take your camera,” said Zukhursho. He left the room.

The yard was awash in sunlight. Zukhursho stood in the middle and struck a grand pose. The spectacle turned out not to be funny at all. I expected that with a boa constrictor on his neck he’d begin to resemble a circus performer or beach photographer carrying a python around on himself... But no, Zukhursho looked ghastly. The boa constrictor’s coloring blended with the camouflage pattern and it seemed as if the snake was growing out of the former regional committee member’s shoulders.

I took several shots. The apes were gawking in the distance. Gafur turned away and the dim-witted Zanbur approached.

“Zukhursho, I have a favor to ask. Can I take a photo, too... With that snake...”

He would have had the same success if he had asked to try on the king’s crown. Zukhursho considered the request so ridiculous that he didn’t even rage. Later he carried the boa constrictor around on his person in all circumstances he rated as particularly ceremonial.

How perversely the former regional committee member’s imagination works, though. It isn’t difficult to grasp why he endeavors to play the role of the ancient king: an inclination for grand, heroic figures basically typifies the Tajik character. And where else can those be derived if not Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*! It’s something else that’s surprising: the prototype Zukhursho found for himself in that great poem. He chose to impersonate Zahhak instead of a noble and wise sovereign, of whom there are plenty to spare in *Shahnameh*.

Zahhak is an unjust tyrant and oppressor. A son who killed his father and unlawfully took possession of his throne and kingdom. A transgressor of interdictions from whose shoulders there grew two huge snakes to whom he fed human brains.

The boa constrictor that Zukhursho carries around on his person essentially fulfills the role of one of those vipers. Of course he would need to have two for a full resemblance to Zakhak...

There's no denying that the figure of Zakhak boggles the mind. I remember how at one time in my youthful years I had a little book with pictures that retold *Shanameh* for children and the artist depicted Zakhak. I now realize the drawing was fairly clumsy but the fiendish king with the gigantic snakes looked dreadfully terrifying. That's most likely exactly what Zukhursho wants, too: not simply to drive fear into people but to arouse in them an inordinate, mystical horror, as well. A curious case for a psychoanalyst. I'm not Sigmund Freud but here's what I think: beyond everything else, the thing is that the self-invented Zukhursho lacks confidence in his own charisma. In any case, his choice is strange. Zakhak suffers defeat twice in the poem: a rebellious mob led by the blacksmith Kova overthrows him and prince Faridun kills him as a result. It would have been worth being a bit more careful in seeking out a model for himself...

It's striking how precise and—most important—contemporary a figure Ferdowsi found. Ferdowsi's ruler is in symbiosis with reptiles and, accordingly, nourishes himself with the brains of his subjects. An ingenious metaphor expressing the very essence of power. Violence is accomplished first over the minds of those under his control and only second over their bodies...

Excerpt 4: Davron

I cannot, in fact, return to Kurgan-Tiube: I'd promised Sangak that I'll stay in the mountains until he himself summons me back. There's no reason for Zukhur to know that but I'll give him some kind of explanation tonight. A practical one. I've had enough of him. Rambo was the last straw. People like Zukhur need to be taught a lesson. I'll pound his face until it bleeds,

but I'll do it in private, in a secluded spot: it can't be done with people around. That's the kind of order I'm going to institute: you try pulling a fast one during the day and there'll be a lesson at night.

He's attempting to maneuver: "Davron, I was joking."

"I'm not joking."

Zukhur strokes the snake. Reflects. And backs up:

"You know how much I respect you. Let things be as you say. You're a military man, a commander..." He smiles in flattery:

"We can't feud. We need to find consensus. I'm prepared to shoot him myself, to do something nice for you..."

If it's consensus, then it's consensus. Until the evening.

"Fine," I say, "peace and friendship. But assign the shooting to Gurg."

He's on a short fuse again. Zukhur takes any verb in the imperative voice as a command. He doesn't tolerate orders. That's an insult for such an important personage.

"Don't teach me what to do! I said I'll do it, I'll do it."

The stubborn jackass, he's ruining my whole scenario! Not only does Rambo need to be liquidated, but Gurg has to be roped into the shooting. But you can't explain that to Zukhur. It has to be like with a child...

"What's the point in you getting your hands dirty?"

"I'll. Shoot. Him. My. Self."

There's a dreamy expression on his face. He's found a new toy. A new way to get kicks from power. He's yearning for blood. Dragon King, my ass... I ask:

"Have you ever killed a person? It's not as simple as you think."

He's insulted:

"You don't know me yet..."

He refused to budge. Now he's nursing his hurt and he'll try to win back what he lost. I couldn't care less. If worst comes to worst, Zukhur's suitable as an executioner, too. I check my watch. Seventeen hundred hours. Time to start.

The local population had lined up on the opposite edge of the small square. Along the drop-off to the river. Men in front. Women bunched in back. To the left is a stone block about three meters high. There's a small flock of young women on the block.

My eyes unwittingly find that same one among them. Zarina. The girl was firmly stuck in my brain. Ever since that moment three days ago, March 24, on the road by the turn to Talkhak when I saw one of the mujahideen, Khuchak, forcefully pulling some girl with light hair into an ambulance. It was like a grenade detonated in my skull. That was Nadya! My first thought: "She's back." But the dead don't return. Nadya died nine years, seven months ago. The safety valves in my brain started blowing out one after another. The damper regulator had failed, something was tilting dangerously and ready to topple all to hell in a few millimeters, and then I'll collapse like a total nutcase... The learned skill saved me. I halted the process, checked myself, tapped myself, and locked myself down. I had to figure out what was happening. I calmly ordered Alik, "Brake." I walked over. Fact: this wasn't Nadya. It was a young woman insanely resembling her. Like a reflection in a mirror. Adjusted so the glass has slightly different twists. This one has a different facial expression. Her eyes look at things differently. From a distance, though, you couldn't tell her from Nadya... Problem: how to deal with Rambo and Khuchak? They'd both violated my order not to harass the locals. I was itching to liquidate them on the spot. I held back. It was too dangerous. Practically speaking, the bastards would be

sentenced for violating discipline, not for infringing on that particular, specific young woman who's a copy of Nadya. My personal motives, however, kicked in so it was impossible to guess in advance how The System would react and what consequences would threaten the young woman. I was afraid to take the risk. I gave the whole trio—the third was a local guy—a final warning. I'd violated my own principle of punishing instantaneously but couldn't do it differently. Rambo got brazen as a result and went for a second violation. He'll get the full punishment this time.

I order myself not to look at Zarina but my eyes keep coming back to her.

“You like the girl?”

It's Zukhur. He has a sly look: he's saying he nabbed me.

I say:

“What, you're imagining babes everywhere?”

“You can't fool me. You set your eye on that one, the blonde one.”

“And that's what I'm saying: everybody talks about something, for you it's babes.”

He's majestically stroking the snake:

“You don't know me yet. I see everything. That young woman, on the rock...”

“So, there's a young woman standing there... What of it?”

“I want to give her to you as a gift. Do something nice for you.”

“Zukhur, calm down. The female contingent doesn't interest me.”

“Ehh, just take a look at her, she's... A daisy.”

“I'll make do without flowers.”

He sighs affectedly:

“Too bad. Refusing a gift...”