

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION TOPICS

CHAPTER 21 – CHAPTER 30

1.

Agent Kovak and Azar both seem to represent unyielding patriarchal leaders marching toward an inevitable war. Phantom Heights, in contrast, is primarily under a matriarchal leadership with strong women taking responsibility for the community's survival. We see women assuming various leadership roles—Madison is a ghost hunter leading the raid team on the front lines; Dr. Crawford is responsible for the health of the survivors and provides medical treatment for the injured; Holly, although the current situation in Phantom Heights has caused her to lose much of the power she previously wielded, used to be a lawmaker and politician responsible for setting policies and maintaining order and safety. All three have or had very different, very important roles, and at no point is the competency of these women ever challenged. Even though Emerton is the Chief of Police, he has stepped back and allowed Madison, who is more qualified, to lead the raiders. Mayor Correll also yields to Madison's expertise when it comes to ghost matters.

How does this setup—a society led by women trying to survive on the battlefield of two aggressive and uncompromising male powerhouses—correlate to current gender roles in our world? How plausible do you think it is that the female leaders of Phantom Heights dominate their positions without having their authority challenged by the men they lead? Is that something you think our society could ever achieve?

2.

The Alpha ghosts make the desperate decision to kidnap someone in an effort to save their lab-brothers. In most cases, kidnapping would be considered an unforgivable act, and we would be inclined to view the kidnapers as "bad guys." But knowing what led up to the act and being inside Cato's head for so much of the story, do you consider them to be villains? Anti-heroes, perhaps? Do you agree with their reckless decision, or was there another solution they could have taken? How does the POV shifting between Cato, Vivian, and Madison affect your experience during the kidnapping?

3.

How would you have handled the hostage situation Madison is now facing? Would you choose to nurse the twins back to health, or turn them over to the Agents? Is Madison in the right state of mind to continue leading Phantom Heights? Did Holly have a right to question her authority and accuse her of breaking the cardinal rule of never allowing a ghost to come inside the Dome?

4.

Holly's true nature starts to manifest as she demands that Finn and Reese should be turned over to the AGC, regardless of what that decision would mean for Vivian. Holly seems to be more concerned with keeping her dark secret than she is for Vivian's life. Holly's paranoia and/or guilt has resulted in an obsession with the twins.

What type of character do you see Holly emerging as? Do you think her narration is trustworthy? How does her past job as a politician contribute to her behavior? Do you believe she's capable of warmth and compassion, or is she always scheming?

5.

Doc inventories past injuries on the twins, including scars, long-term starvation, evidence of regular beatings, and brain surgery. How do Madison and Holly handle this information? Do you think their opinions of the twins have changed? In what ways does Doc's examination challenge the Agents' previous testimony?

6.

In Chapter 26, Jay breaks down at the prospect of his "family" falling apart. He says, "This family can't break. I can't let it." This triggers an unusually hostile response from RC, who snaps back at Jay: "Sometimes I get real sick of you saying the word *family* like it's the holiest word in the world. You wanna know something? Families aren't perfect, and they *do* fall apart, whether you like it or not." He even snaps at Kit when she begs them to stop fighting and says that brothers shouldn't fight. "And how would you know that, Kit?" RC retorts.

Why do you think "family" seems to be such a touchy subject between Jay and RC? Was Ash right when she claimed that RC didn't mean it and had lashed out because he was scared, hurt, and sick, or was RC truly venting about something? Why do you think Jay seems to have such a desperation to keep his mismatched family together?

7.

Madison holds A1 while he's sleeping, and the ghost hunter reminisces that this isn't the first time she's held a sick child. As she notices how innocent and humanlike he appears in slumber, she wonders if a *kálos* can be raised as a human, or would the lust for violence persist despite the upbringing? Essentially, she's pondering the nature vs. nurture debate. What are your thoughts in response to her question? Do you think the twins are likely to become dangerous when they grow up, even though their powers are passive? Do you think the Agents' conditioning will be permanent?

8.

Wes is afraid of the twins, or rather, what they represent: “They were living proof the Agents were committing unspeakable atrocities against kálos at the AGC . . . Humans criticized the violence spreading from the Rip, but who was really the villain? Was it the kálos causing destruction and kidnapping humans for the slave trade, or was it the Agents imprisoning kálos, breeding them like animals, and torturing them for the sake of building a weapon to destroy them all?”

How would you answer Wes’s question? Who is the worse villain in the scenario? Which side, if either, do you feel has more justification to go to war? Assuming that a battle between the Realms will inevitably erupt, which antagonist do you feel more inclined to root for? Are you more drawn to the humans because that’s technically “our side”?

9.

Once again, we see the power of names at play. In Chapter 30, Cato recollects: “Jay once told me, ‘They’ll try to unname you and make you believe you are A7, not Cato. Don’t let *Them*. You have to remember who you are.’ I hated my lab name. I was not A7-5292, no matter how hard *He* tried to reprogram me to believe I was.” Telling Vivian that his name was A7 was a truly horrible moment for him, and he was stunned when she replied that A7 was a terrible name and dubbed him *Seph* instead. Cato realized, “Vivian named me. She looked at me, and she determined I was more than just a numbered lab rat. I was a *person* worthy of a name.”

What is the significance of Vivian, who is not only a human, but also the daughter of a ghost hunter, rejecting the idea of referring to someone by a number and choosing to bestow a name on a stranger she believed was otherwise nameless? What does this simple action tell you about Vivian’s stance on ghost rights? Do you think other humans in Phantom Heights share Vivian’s position?

10.

Doc seems to view all life as sacred. She doesn’t care that Finn and Reese are kálos; she’s determined to save them no matter what. Madison and Holly, however, both struggle when dealing with the twins. Madison hates them for being the cause of Vivian’s kidnapping, and Holly is afraid that they’ll reveal her secret. Both women have dedicated their lives to fighting kálos in different ways, and yet, they’re both also mothers. When A1 falls asleep in Madison’s arms, she can’t help but remember holding her own kids when they were sick. And Holly, despite her best efforts to focus on the twins’ glowing eyes and remind herself that they’ll likely grow up to be dangerous enemies, still struggles to see past their youth. When Wes calls her bluff and says she doesn’t have the courage to pull the trigger, she says, “Courage? Is that what it takes to shoot a kid?” and he answers, “Whatever it is, you don’t have it, do you?”

Do you think motherhood has softened these tough leaders to the point of weakness? Or do their internal struggles make them more human, more relatable? Are these conflicts something you think a male character in their place would be likely to experience?