

Classics of Kazakh Literature

Mukhtar
AUEZOV



BEAUTY IN MOURNING

and other stories

FROM THE "WE ARE KAZAKHS
SERIES OF PUBLICATIONS BY
THE KAZAKH PEN CLUB



MUKHTAR AUEZOV

Beauty in Mourning and other stories

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Mukhtar Auezov.

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MUKHTAR AUEZOV

Beauty in Mourning and other stories

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

In translating these works I have intentionally left Kazakh words in the text. An *aul* is more than a village and the names of unique beverages, dishes, clothing, dwelling, social ranks and so on, give flavour to the setting. I have therefore inserted a glossary of italicised terms at the end of the book for ease of reference.

I would like to express my gratitude to Simon Hollingsworth for his excellent editing, my father, Peter Geoghegan for his meticulous and painstaking proofreading and Rose France, Svetlana Palmer and Bagila Bukharbayeva for their invaluable assistance 'at the death'.

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S.G.

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FOREWORD

**to the first edition of the Russian translation of Mukhtar
Auezov's story *Turbulent Times***

An old man is riding along the road, travelling towards him in the opposite direction — an unknown young man he has never seen before. The old man peers into the youth's face, and still not quite believing his eyes, but already half-recognising the strikingly familiar features, suddenly says to him in a trembling voice:

“Where are you from my son, thou art like the eye of a distantly recalled stallion?”

Then all at once, everything falls into place. He recalls himself as a young man, and a long lost friend whose son looks so like his father, and that road, that thunder of hooves, and the whistle of the wind in the horse's mane, and those voices and those faces...

Today, when I re-read the story *Turbulent Times*, I feel like making exactly the same exclamation, for though I may not be old enough to be a father figure, I am at least old enough to be an older brother to the young Mukhtar Auezov who wrote this story at the end of the 1920s.

A rare and unusual feeling. This story is being presented to the Russian-speaking public for the first time, forty-five years after it was written and many years after the death of its author.

It's one thing when a work is presented for judgement before its readers during the life of a writer, but quite another when he is not with us anymore. And what's more, this is an early piece, almost one of his very first. And although you understand

that no one becomes a literary great immediately, the risk the publishers are taking here is a big one: because Auezov's name in the minds of the majority of the reading public is up there with the classics of world literature and in particular, his greatest work, the immortal epic *Abai*.

However, I hope that having read *Turbulent Times* admirers of Auezov's work will be grateful to this journal's editors for publishing it¹. After all, every great river is fed by its tributaries. And Auezov was a remarkable writer long before *Abai* was published. *Turbulent Times* is testament to the fact that Auezov had already mastered the form and genre of the wide-sweeping epic tale long before *Abai*. In this sense, *Turbulent Times* is one the first strong-flowing tributaries, which later gave rise to the high water mark of Auezov's epic masterpiece.

Nevertheless, every work of literature should be able to stand up on its own merits. This bitter tale, written by the young Auezov all those years ago, is a vivid example of the revolutionary development of a great writing talent. It is precisely to this, the revolutionary nature of the story's content, that I would like to draw the reader's attention. Rarely have I encountered in Eastern and Central Asian literature works of such artistic force and conviction as those created by the young Auezov, or such an expression of hatred for the tsarist system and its apparatus of violence. A work where the inhumanity and cynicism of tsarist colonial policy is so passionately unmasked, where, against the backdrop of such a large sweep of characters, the nature of the nomadic peoples' rejection of the tsarist administrative system that is so alien to them is so definitively revealed, where with such pain and compassion the tragedy is told of ordinary people who dared, to their own misfortune, to rise up in rebellion and so cruelly paid for it with their own blood and exile from their native lands.

¹ The story was first published in Russian in the journal *Novy Mir* 1972, No. 6.

While reading Auezov's story, I recalled the stories recounted by eyewitnesses...

When the entire people fled through the snows and passes, escaping from the punitive expeditions, the mothers protected their babies before all else. When they came within range of the machine-gun fire, the mothers fell, covering their babies with their bodies.

Those same babies that survived are well over fifty years old today. Many of them bear names from those turbulent times — Tenti (wanderer), Kachkyn (fugitive), Urkyuk (insurgent)...

Whenever the nomads had to leave their ancestral lands, driven by innumerable wars, they would lose their flocks and belongings but save their children, seeing in them the continuation of the family line and the hope for the future.

And back then, in that bloody year of 1916 described by Auezov, the same old question was once again posed to the ancient tribes of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz: whether to be or not to be, whether to live in the land of their birth or the land of strangers?

There can be no comparison made between the extent and nature of the disasters faced by people in the past and our current existence today. But what was definitely better about the past was its spontaneous popular impulse to stand up to colonial tsarist oppression. A time when the people stood tall when they were convinced of the rightness of their cause, sensing they could throw off their shackles and challenge violence, and in so doing reveal the immense resourcefulness of the human spirit, that is so worthy of our admiration. And so, together with Auezov, we can honour and mourn the events that took place in 1916.

In my opinion, Mukhtar Auezov's primary achievement in this story was to depict the crystallisation and ripening of a spontaneous popular movement, driven by an eternal sense of

the age-old struggle for justice, freedom and human dignity. The young Auezov did this on a large artistic and historical scale, and from some of the most advanced points of view of his time in terms of the notions of revolution and class struggle.

That is why this sad, tragic story, recounting the unequal struggle of a foredoomed people, evokes a sense of pride in as well as compassion for them.

No, this explosion of popular anger against autocracy did not take place in vain, just as innumerable insurrections, uprisings, and mutinies throughout history were not in vain, for though throttled and suppressed, they have left an indelible mark on the memories of countless subsequent generations as a symbol of the tragic beauty, sacrifice and fearlessness carried out in the name of freedom. All this becomes a social and historical lesson for human society.

Many different thoughts and reflections are evoked in the reader by Auezov's story. But there is even more that could be said about the peculiar artistic features of this work that has been written with rapture for and a deep knowledge of the life lived at that time. It is difficult, for example, not to mention the rich impasto brushstrokes worthy of Rabelais, employed by Auezov in his description of nature, everyday life, the fair in Karkara and the people that inhabited it... And it's absolutely impossible not to mention the damning contempt with which he describes the Kazakh *tolmach* interpreters serving the police superintendent *Old Grey Mane* and other imperial officials at the fair, as well as the *bai* landowners — the base mean betrayers of their own people.

These people who have severed themselves from their native people and are tolerated with a barely feigned disgust by the *Grey Manes* of the world and are truly worthy of the epithet that Dante applied to them six centuries ago:

*And they were accepted neither in heaven,
Nor in sulphurous hell,
Seeing no honour for themselves in such as these...*

Yes, it's both sad and joyful to renew one's acquaintance with an unknown work of a favourite writer and deeply respected master. It is joyful because this meeting is an unexpected surprise for the reader that fate has seen fit after so many years to present us with another early work by a truly great writer, and it is sad because the author is no longer with us.

And therefore, in introducing this short foreword to Mukhtar Auezov's *Turbulent Times* by Mukhtar Auezov, I am filled with mixed and complex feelings. I feel as if I am leading a great, riderless horse along a large road. I have tightened the reins, raised the stirrups to the saddle bow and made them fast so that they will not get in his way, and then I say to the horse:

"Greetings and fare thee well, thou art like the eye of a fondly remembered stallion! Fly! Let the truth always remain true!"

And following him with my gaze and watching as he recedes into the distance, I think: a good man, upon seeing you gallop past without a rider, will wish you luck. But he who takes it into his head to seize you by the bridle, coveting your rich harness and trappings, will never deserve anyone's gratitude ever...

This foreword is an abridged version. (The full text was published in the Novy Mir journal, 1972, No. 6)

AN ORPHAN'S LOT

The high road stretches past Mount Arkalyk. The steppe road there is bleak and bare and Arkalyk catches the eye from afar, instilling hope in the hearts of the weary caravan traders. The narrow ridge of the mountain escorts the road for about 10 miles. But those seeking shelter here, do so in vain. Lonely and isolated, Arkalyk provides no respite from the penetrating winds from either the north or the south. In winter, enveloped by snow drifts, the mountain is round like an egg. Blizzards constantly rage here and *dzhut* or famine — the great white threat to all livestock and the great black misfortune for their human owners have been known to stalk in this place.

The *auls* near Arkalyk have been settled by a poor and hungry people, constantly lamenting their lot to God. They have stayed here because this is where their ancestors have always settled and because there is nowhere else to go. The land below the mountain provides some consolation, it is fertile and when ploughed and sowed, people have food to eat. Travellers on the high road find refuge and a place to stay the night with these people during the prolonged and fatal blizzards of the steppe.

The only crossing at Arkalyk is the Kushikpai Pass. Kushikpai is the local people's legendary ancestor and forebear.

According to legend, he was a great hero — a *batyr*. Not far from the road you can clearly see a low and ancient burial mound piled up out of unhewn stone. This is the grave of Kushikpai. And whoever passes this place soon learns about this extraordinary man and the remarkable life he led.

The memory of Kushikpai is jealously preserved by the elders in their hunger, infirmity and ill health. It is a living chronicle of the steppe.

They try not to embellish Kushikpai's great-heartedness with their words; they merely keep watch over it to ensure that his great heart remains beating. However, great storytellers have done the embellishing for them... So if the host's sheep have been safely driven home for the night from the deserted windswept steppe and you can unbend your work-weary back next to the hearth, if you meet your host's approval and have not caused him upset or disadvantage by taking his feed for your horses and oxen, and if there is tea to be had in the house, and, God be praised, the smell of meat is coming from the pot, then sit down, good man, and listen to your host's tale!

The guest, more often than not, frozen and exhausted by the road, is half asleep but listening nonetheless. Listening with his ear and his heart.

Kushikpai died young, a mere twenty-one years old. From his earliest youth, he was a consummate master of the *soil* cudgel and the *shokpar* club, he dreamed of becoming a leader of warriors, of leading fighting men on military raids. He was resourceful, guileful, tireless, incredibly strong and peerless in battle and skirmish. He feared neither man, beast nor werewolf, neither blizzard at night nor evil omen. That's why he was a great hero.

Newly arrived from the south, smallpox caught hold of Kushikpai and knocked him to the ground, as no strong man had ever been able. Day and night he lay on his bed and

raved. An old rival of his from the Uak clan learned of this and said to himself: "My time has come!" He trotted up to Kushikpai's *aul* and, mocking the prostrate man, stole his beloved horse Kyzyl-Best, in broad daylight from right outside the sick man's yurt.

When this sad news came to Kushikpai's ears, ignoring his pain, the great hero rose to his feet, threw his *chekmen* tunic over his naked body and his *khalat* of camel's wool and set off in pursuit. With lance at the ready, frightful and terrible, he rode into the offender's camp who was boasting of the famous steed he had stolen and the brazen impunity of his deed. Fine fellows they were! Well, they knew of the righteous wrath of Kushikpai, his readiness to fight to the death with the thief and the whole band of his kinsmen and servants, and they quailed at the sight. The elders intervened and persuaded Kushikpai not to shed the blood of his own clan. They returned his horse and, so that the blood insult would be forgotten, they brought him a rich robe and accompanied him out of the village with the highest honour.

Kushikpai rode back via Arkalyk. In sight of the pass, the smallpox had the final word: in a burning fever, it toppled the hero unconscious from his saddle. His *chekmen* was soaked through with pus from his festering sores, rubbed raw by his journey. Yet Kushikpai still laid his head in the direction of the Kaaba — in accordance with Muslim custom, pressed himself close to his native land and bid farewell to his life. And there he breathed his last.

But the earth has never forgotten how he embraced her; that's why the steppe near Arkalyk is so severe, that's why it freezes over and refuses to feed the animals in winter and why she chases people away with her stinging winds and blinding blizzards. She cannot forgive or forget that he died so young, that he died in anger and that he died without having sated his audacious soul.

Such are the stories told by the folk of the high road next to Arkalyk, wretchedly poor yet proud to be the descendants of a true folk hero. Hard is the burden of their lives, which are yet illuminated by Kushikpai's glorious one, how he lived, how he died, how he flew over the steppe on his steed, spotted and pockmarked like the great snow leopard.

January was coming to an end. The frosty day was lazily fading away. The sky was clear. The leaden clouds melted into the sunset like the rough iron bars in a blacksmith's forge. The sun, a monstrous and bloody eye, glared through them bereft of eyelashes and with a huge cataract at its centre. A little higher up, small clouds, lit crimson from below, hung like billows of smoke. The sky above them turned a paler and paler green. The waning moon, forlorn and inverted, peeped out from the periphery. She seemed frightened as if looking out from behind a pair of muslin curtains.

There had been no wind all day but at Kushikpai pass it funnelled and whirled. Fresh snow flurried in disorderly red and lilac, sickle-shaped circles. The shadows lay like swollen tendons, crawling over the snowdrifts, sucking the crimson out of them.

A two-horse sleigh team ran along the road to Arkalyk at a brisk trot. On the light, yellow sled rode two impeccably dressed men.

You could immediately tell that one of them was a man of standing. Over his warm clothing, he wore a grey *chekmen* tunic with a rather fine, black velvet collar and on his head he sported a brand new fox fur *malakhai* hat. He was shod in exquisite heeled boots; over the top of these a pair of felt stockings was folded, also trimmed with velvet. He was about thirty. Stocky, round-faced and snub-nosed, his sleek beard stuck out like a wedge. His swollen, prickly little eyes were set at a slightly oblique angle and his eyebrows in a permanent

frown — betraying his lordly contempt and a certain concealed cruelty. From his loose and voluptuous lips, it was easy to guess that he was a womaniser.

This was *Mirza Akhan*, the *volostnoy* or head of the local *volost* administrative region. He was returning from town having completed his affairs there. These consisted of bringing the *volost's* taxes into the treasury.

With the *volostnoy* rode Kaltai, his favourite servant and constant henchman. The *Mirza* was very strict with him, but Kaltai was as faithful as a dog and as quick witted as a court jester. He was light fingered, of course, but sharp, resourceful and especially useful when it came to adventures of the nocturnal variety. The *Mirza* had become accustomed to him coming up with unexpected yet pleasant little services.

Mirza Akhan hadn't uttered a word all day and one might have been forgiven for thinking that, as the head of the region, he was concerned and burdened with the fate of the people for whom he was responsible. But Kaltai knew full well in which regions his master's thoughts were wandering and what those thoughts were. "He's been thinking about how he's going to get his way with some woman or other all day. God help me if I disturb him when he's like this. He'd soon warm his whip on my back and throw me out of the sleigh for good measure."

By the evening, at Arkalyk, *Mirza Akhan* began to feel the frost in the wind, perked up and started to stir. Kaltai flicked the horses with the reins, saying,

"Kushikpai's pockmarks must be playing him up if he's blowing up such a storm..."

Akhan sneered silently and sarcastically, like a fox. The joke hadn't hit the mark!

On a sloping hill in the distance, two graves could be made out, and the travellers, raising their hands, hurriedly mumbled a prayer.

The graves were fresh; the light earth around them hadn't yet darkened and was pockmarked with patches of snow. The wind was blowing from Arkalyk with a malicious whistle as if the mountain was enraged at the sight that confronted it. All it would need was a single night perhaps and the wind would conceal these small sandy hillocks under a white shroud — leaving no trace whatsoever of the final memorial to the people buried beneath them.

Half a mile later, a lonely little winter hut came into view. It seemed abandoned, uninhabited, sunk into the ground and stuck in the snow — not altogether unlike the graves they had just passed. The roof was dilapidated, the corners had collapsed and snow had filled in the resulting gaps. Only a narrow path trodden down next to the black walls of the hut betrayed the fact that anyone lived in it at all...

Kaltai gave a mysterious little grunt and sent the sled in the direction of the hut.

Close up it looked even worse. A hole gaped over the cattle yard and, above it, the snow swirled like a column of smoke. Behind a broken-down fence, a skinny, year-old calf and a lamb stood dejectedly next to a greasy stook of hay, their backs matted with great blotches of snow. It was enough to make you tremble to imagine what misfortune must have befallen this house!

Jumping off the sled and shaking the snow from his tunic, Akhan hissed through his clenched teeth:

"Where on earth do you think you've brought me? There's probably not even anywhere to sit, let alone lie down here... Surely you could have found somewhere a bit better than this?"

Unhitching the horses, Kaltai replied with a knowing grin:

"Just wait and see... where you get to lie..."

Mirza Akhan proudly drew himself up as far as his scanty height and flattened nose would allow him. Kaltai ceremoniously

took him by the arm. Crouching low, they stepped in under the leaky roof of the yard, groping around in the dark for the swollen, frost-covered door and stumbled head first into the house.

The house had two rooms. In the front one a small window, the size of a palm, flickered faintly and a few embers glowed in a simple hearth that had been constructed out of bricks. But evidently, there was no one living here. The room served as a mud room and pantry. The clay daubed walls were dirty and hadn't been whitewashed for a long time, the beams overhead were sooted black and the hoar frost crept down from the corners in silver whorls. Huddled close together, near the hearth, stamped a newborn lamb on a leash and a sorry looking heifer with a felt blanket on its bony back.

The back room looked as if it might be a bit more welcoming. The large stove immediately caught the eye, although it too was somewhat unprepossessing, polished black with soot and with a dented and cracked hearth plate. On one side of the stove rose a wooden bed; the paint on it had begun to peel but the old threadbare blankets and the shabby pillows had been so carefully arranged that it made your heart melt. Next to the wall opposite the door, on a low base, stood two chests covered with thick grey felt cloth. And that was the sum of their worldly possessions.

The glass in the window, which was crisscrossed with cracks and glued over with strips of paper, literally appeared to be breathing. With each gust of wind, the glass exhaled small streams of hot air. And it was dark; a weak light emanated from the dying embers in the stove.

Who could possibly be living in this dark, pitiful house? Three women... They sat by the stove, cowering and startled like small birds. The first was a decrepit old woman of about eighty, the second one was about forty and the third a young

girl of thirteen. A grandmother, her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter.

The elderly woman was infirm and gaunt, her entire face was extraordinarily masculine. It had a very unfeminine cast with a high forehead and large nose. Colourless eyes looked out tiredly from under a remarkable pair of silver-grey eyebrows. In the deep wrinkles of her hanging cheeks were traces not only of grief and a lifetime of torment and affliction but also the timeless, indomitable tenacity of the poor that is capable of shifting mountains of work and bearing burdens beyond the strength of any hero.

The daughter-in-law's face, on the contrary, was frightened and apprehensive. Her bright black eyes were strangely immobile and focused on a single point like a madman's, instilling a certain involuntary aversion in the onlooker's mind. But she was not mad, she was blind.

In contrast, the youngest, Gaziza, was slender and delicate, with a round, slightly freckled face that was so sweet and fresh that it was difficult to tear your eyes away from her. She was as nimble, fast and graceful as a mountain kid. And the peculiarly unchildlike sadness in her timid, downturned eyes made her especially enchanting. They contained not so much a sadness as a beseeching entreaty that was as naive and touching as the pitifully poor bed that had been so carefully arranged by her hands.

These three weak and defenceless women shared a common misfortune — they were abandoned and bereaved. The storm had swept over their heads, leaving the house with the fresh graves on the sandy hill where Gaziza's father and brother were buried. They had been carried away by typhus. In vain, the grandmother had called upon the spirits of the ancestors and they had failed to save the home's breadwinners. After the burial, "a speck had become lodged" in the mother's eyes and her tears had extinguished the light in them.

“Dear God,” the old woman had beseeched without a hint of anger but with a vehement faith, “what have we done to deserve this?”

They had been destitute enough before, lonely and unheeded on the boundless steppe. But Kushikpai himself had known solitude in his time... And in the evening, the women would huddle like small birds next to the tepid stove and reminisced and wept over the good life they had enjoyed when the family had still numbered five...

But now, like a bolt from the blue, guests had appeared in their home, rich, smooth-skinned and in fox fur hats — real *bai*, real men of rank and importance.

Gaziza’s mother quietly tugged at her elbow, asking who these people were. The young girl whispered in reply:

“I don’t know... Strangers...”

Having brushed the snow from their robes, the guests made their way to the commanding heights of the chests and the place of honour. Akhan read the surah prayer from the Koran. Then the guests greeted their hosts. As befitted decorum, the most high-ranking guest addressed the most senior member of the household:

“God willing! May you be granted abundance and full stomachs...” Thus hinting that it wouldn’t be a bad thing for the *dastarkhan* or table cloth to be spread.

The women were struck dumb at the sight of such rare guests, but, pulling themselves together, they even perked up a little. They lit the paraffin lamp, with a chimney that was as cracked and patched as their window. Gaziza deftly and dexterously made tea. And in an instant, everything that the hosts had to offer — a small lump of butter and a few small dark flatbreads, was laid before the honoured guests on their most precious and valuable cloth.

The old woman, as befitted the *aqsaqal* or head of the family, led them in leisurely conversation.

Akhan listened to her, regularly pursing his plump lips and nodding at random, while secretly and intently following Gaziza with his bloated, puffy eyes.

Kaltai amiably recounted the latest village and town news to the old woman, and she, too, pursed her lips and nodded.

But after the tea had been served, it was the old woman who spoke more and the guests fell silent. Seeing that God himself had brought the all-powerful regional *volostnoy* to her house, she spoke skilfully and boldly in a way that not every man might have with such an important personage.

There was an anger, a tenderness, a sorrow, a delight, a pain and hope in the old woman's sonorous and tremulous voice that was quite untypical of her years. She lamented her fate but recounted it as if she were singing the most ancient of legends. And the expression on her face changed as swiftly and imperceptibly as the mossy face of the cliffs on a windy day under the flying shadows of the passing clouds.

"You are a good man," she said, "You can see and understand our predicament for yourself. I am on the verge of death; I have neither the strength to live nor the strength to die. The only strength I have left in me resides here in my tongue. My daughter-in-law has been struck blind and now needs a sighted person to guide her through this life. It is my granddaughter who feeds us and it is she who has been left to carry out all the work. She has taken the men's responsibility onto her shoulders. But her shoulders are still those of a child. You are a good man; you see and understand all this!

"So why am I telling you all this? So that your heart may always beat fondly in your breast whenever you pass by and recall that your charity did not fail you when you saw our plight. And that, unlike others, you did not say to yourself: 'Who are these people to me? They are not my kin or from my village!' And so that, at the sight of you, the shameless

might feel ashamed... and no longer pour scorn and disgrace on our common people the Uak... and the memory of Kushikpai...

"For you are a good man, you know how people are today! Dull and small-minded souls. Like a gaggle of women... When their bluff is called. When they are called to heel like dogs. Who do they try to please? Why, he who they fear most. Any upstart who shows up in our house thinks he can put on arrogant airs and look down his nose at us. And absolutely everyone is striving and conniving to sneak something away with them like a band of thieves. The soil is still fresh on the graves of my son and his son and our relatives are already plotting how to split up my son's property and send each of us to a strangers' home. It's clear we can't last out for long. Women can't survive on their own. That is what these scheming foxes really covet. They can't wait to tear apart the living.

"Just take my brother in law Smagul. My son shared everything with him, counted him as our closest relation. Brushed over his bad points, praised his good, raised his standing with the good folk of these parts. All the while he just looked up at my son, his tail wagging, waiting for the next handout. But as soon as my son died, Smagul went and took our last barren ewe from our very own yard. He slit its throat because you must have meat at a funeral, but also so that he wouldn't have to offer any of his own... My daughter-in-law sent word to him via a messenger with tearful and bitter reproaches. And what was his reply? He said that she would be better off not building herself up as the mistress of the house and to stop snivelling about her husband. That was his answer! Like the louse that creeps onto the horse's hoof and crawls all the way up to its head.

"If my son were alive... They would never have dared. The hearth was always burning in his home, and our poor and humble pot was always bubbling over with joy. He was a good-

natured man with a clear conscience! May the earth be as soft as a feather mattress for you, my son... It was because of these scoundrels, who are not worth a nail of his finger, that he died, poor soul. You are a good man, listen to my story.

“My brother-in-law has a son by the name of Dyusen, but he more generally goes by his nickname: ‘Chatterbox’. His only passion in life is to gossip like an old woman.

“He’s never uttered a good word or done a good deed in his life. What’s more, he’s the biggest miser the world has ever seen. He’d rather hang himself than invite a guest to his table. When there’s a guest in the house, it’s like a day of mourning for Chatterbox. His wife would be driven to an early grave if the day ever arrived, God forbid, that she would actually have to put some meat on the table. He whines to you, complaining that she will only ruin it anyway. Listening to him, you just want to get away as quickly as possible, praying that the miserliness that afflicts him will never come to plague you...

“Once, in the late autumn, some ill wind or other drove a horse thief to Chatterbox’s gates, a member of the Tobykta clan from Shubaradyra. This time Chatterbox exceeded himself. Barring the man’s way at his threshold, he sent him back out into the stormy night. ‘We’ve nothing to feed you and there’s nowhere for you to stay!’ Everyone knows what those Tobykta are like; they think they’re God’s chosen people and they barely consider us Uaks to be human at all. There was no way that a Tobykta was going to put up with such an insult. He came back and raided Chatterbox’s yard that very same night, stealing half a dozen fat sheep and two draft horses.

“Well, do you think their rightful owner set off in hot pursuit? Not a bit of it. He was too afraid that he’d end up losing the horse he was sitting on. The next day he trotted in to see my son with an obsequious bow. ‘The Tobykta know you,’ he said, ‘You’re the only one they respect, they listen to

you when you speak. Are you going to let them get away with this robbery?’

“Of course, my son gave him an earful. ‘I don’t remember you doing a single thing to please God. In your own home and to your own wife you may be a hero. But you begrudged this man a small slice of meat... a man who should be more important to you than the local *volostnoy*...’” Mirza Akhan gave a small, cold laugh at this. “‘As you have sown, so you have reaped. You squabble with each passer-by, showing neither strength nor sense. Is this how you think you’ll rise in people’s estimation? You live in the shadow of the Arkalyk, where Kushikpai roamed! And you ask this of me? You bring disgrace upon a man by asking him to do that which he cannot do!’ That’s how he upbraided him.

“Dyusen the Chatterbox hung his head. ‘I have no-one to ask except you,’ he said.

“So my son girded himself and set off to do what was right. Nigh on twenty days, my son camped out on the doorstep of the Tobyktas’ elders. The thief was from a proud and rich village. Their elders decided that Dyusen should arrange a match between his ten-year-old daughter and one of their sons. My son gave his consent, vouched for Chatterbox and returned with all his stolen animals. Now, Chatterbox is tied by marriage to the thief; now they are blood relatives. But while sorting out this trouble my son fell ill on the way home. As soon as he returned he took to his bed. And our breadwinner never got up again. He left us, never to return and took his youngest son and our last hope with him. And how did they thank him? They slaughtered our last barren ewe and ordered us not to lament for my son. But that wasn’t the end of it...

“The day before his death, my son took a pencil and a piece of paper and, looking God in the eye, wrote who he had debts with and who was beholden to him. He could read and

write like a mullah since childhood. His hands were never idle. He could help a smith fashion iron, a merchant strike a deal and, if need be, set bones and heal the sick. I spent half of his property on the burial and paying off the debts so that they wouldn't lie heavy on his soul. I paid everything back down to the last copper. But who would have thought it? It turned out my son had a debt that he hadn't written down on his piece of paper... And what a debt it was! Just imagine, about three head of cattle. Having to give away your last possessions and being scattered over the face of the earth amounts to the same thing. A knife in the back. And this unrecorded creditor is giving us no way out; he can't wait to take the skin off our backs. So who is this person you might ask? He's a rich man. Snub-nosed Marden of the Tobykta clan."

Akhan, who himself was monstrously pug-nosed, screwed up his face and snarled quietly. Kaltai almost spluttered. But the old woman thought the *volostnoy's* angry expression was directed at the Tobykta man.

"I'm not trying to backtrack on anything. If my son made him a promise, then I believe my son. Only this man could have given us a chance to get our bearings and recall the debts that were owed to my son. We were only too willing... And maybe we'd have persuaded him if it hadn't been for Dyusen the Chatterbox. We didn't even have time to sneeze before he had arranged everything for us.

"That miser Dyusen realised that Marden would insist on having his debt returned. Dyusen, worried that Marden might suddenly have a change of heart, feel sorry for us orphans and ask for the debt to be paid by our closest, more wealthy relations. There was no way he was going to be able to wriggle out of it! And it would be his stomach that would end up suffering... So, what do you think Chatterbox came up with? Your honour, it's so frightful that my tongue cleaves to the

roof of my mouth. You see, they've turned everything to their own advantage. Nothing gives a cat more amusement than to toy with the mouse. Do you know what they want? They want me to end up weeping for the fate of my Gaziza, the apple of my eye, for the rest of my days. This year Marden's wife died and the old pug nose became a widower. Gaziza would make a wonderful wife for any man! She doesn't have a single fault. Look how beautiful she is! You are a good man, you understand such things..."

Akhan and Kaltai glanced at each other significantly. They rested on their elbows, occasionally clearing their throats, both of them wearing concerned and upset expressions on their faces. Akhan had let his fat, oily lips go slack out of sheer indolence.

"Well, I lost my temper. I cursed and gave the evil scoundrels the tongue lashing they deserved. My heart went numb, I don't know how it didn't burst. We wept, grieved and prayed to God Almighty... What was there left for us to do? Well, the third day has already passed and I'm told that old Pug nose still hasn't left. He is staying with his dear and esteemed matchmakers. And now Chatterbox's wife has the nerve to act as his procuress, molesting our poor young girl. What won't the despicable women stoop to! 'You are heartless,' she said to Gaziza. 'You have no pity for your poor, blind mother. How are you going to manage the farm without a man? If you had a husband, he would support you and your mother and grandmother. If you marry this rich man, you can forget your hunger and misery'. That's the sort of cunning vixen she is. With these sort of tricks, she's prepared to send Gaziza tied and bound on the back of this old widow's horse.

"Give away my own child to some pug-nosed old man! Into a different clan... Dear sir, you should know that we are direct descendants of the oldest family in our aul. Our house is the oldest and most venerated in the whole village. It's possible

that the blood of Kushikpai himself flowed in the veins of my son and his son in turn. And believe me, for this is what my son once said himself: 'Kushikpai will one day rise again from the grave, riddled as he is with smallpox...'" The old woman paused for the first time, her face resolute and proud. "But this means nothing to these degenerates! They have no respect for the spirit of my dead son and no fear of his wrath and revenge. It's their design not only to do nothing to help us but also to profit from our misfortune. The insatiable gluttons. They think that by doing this they'll be rid of Gaziza and, by hook or by crook, take possession of our cattle and home. They think that we'll hand it to them on a plate ourselves. They will happily send us to an early grave...

"There's truth in the saying that the scoundrel covets that which belongs to his nearest and dearest. For now, this Chatterbox is mild and harmless and his wife is acting like an angel with Gaziza. And Gaziza weeps and weeps and even listens to their scheming... She is too young to fully understand human guile. Dear God! It's high time for me to die. But I can't. I haven't earned the right to my final rest. I haven't drained my bitter cup. I am obliged to live... Please forgive an old woman, good man, if my words appear foolish..."

And with that, the matriarch of the house ended her bitter and miserable tale. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. But there were no tears left to wipe away. They had all been shed long ago.

Behind her, her daughter-in-law wept uncontrollably, listening to everything and it was as if her dreadful, unhinged eyes were seeking out the guests.

Akhan, grimacing, and fidgeting, as if his back was itching, muttered a few words. But he was no great lover of or expert at finding the right word; he felt it was awkward, uncomfortable and even somehow unseemly to let one pass his lips. The old

woman didn't catch what he was saying to her but understood that the fine gentleman was irritated, resentful and anxious. She hoped she hadn't tired him.

The *volostnoy* had listened to her, however, without interrupting or hurrying her. And he had been watching Gaziza with great attention and apparently some sympathy. He wasn't in any hurry. He had heard enough petitions and complaints throughout the region in his time; he was no stranger to these situations. Which was why he was in no rush to make any promises or raise any hopes. It was a blessing that he had been so respectful and heard her out so patiently.

The old woman was satisfied...

When she thought about the future she could see no chink in the storm clouds. Her back had been bent by the years and a habitual resignation to her fate. Her heart had grown cold from a constant unspoken sense of foreboding. But her carriage and appearance bore an overall stamp of calm restraint, without a shadow of timidity or panic. Powerless yet indefatigable, she was beautiful, like an old, draught horse that is so sturdy and strong that death itself shies away from it.

The delicious, fragrant meat that Gaziza cooked was served on the only dish left in the house. She had used their last piece of meat as her grandmother had ordered. The guests ate with relish, and the grandmother was happy to watch how they ate, secretly swallowing her saliva, wiping her mouth with the wrinkled and insubstantial palm of her frail hand.

But the sweet, wise grandmother failed to see what Gaziza saw. She did not sense what the young girl sensed, and neither, for obvious reasons, did her blind mother. Several times the mother had called Gaziza to her, grabbed her hand and held it without saying a word, quietly trembling. Had the guests really been listening? Oh, it didn't seem likely... How could they understand what Smagul had done to them and what Dyusen was planning to do?

The more senior of the two guests had been devouring Gaziza with his impudent, greedy eyes, but made sure that the old woman didn't notice him doing so. And all the time it seemed to Gaziza that he wanted to tell her something with these eyes, something secret and unpleasant, and having seen and understood this she felt ashamed and unwholesome. The lower ranking guest seemed to be slyly gesturing to her with his eyes and eyebrows: "Have you seen whose attention you've caught!" And he looked anxious and fidgeted, whenever she turned away and lowered her eyes.

Confused and frightened, the young girl made a bow and went into the other room where she stood in the dark and shivered.

The guests had finished off their meat, wiped their lips and made approving grunts, showing that they had eaten their fill. They began to prepare to sleep for the night. Gaziza laid out the bedding. The guests went out into the yard.

The old woman anxiously and respectfully following them with her eyes, said to her granddaughter:

"Darling... Their horses will need straw, take the lamp and show them where they can help themselves."

The young girl was afraid to leave the house, remaining silent and pretending that she hadn't heard. "It's not difficult to find hay in the yard..." But the old woman repeated her order:

"Out you go, out you go, quickly! Otherwise, they'll think you're being impolite. Don't be so lazy, show them some respect."

Gaziza went up to her mother, she felt her hand, held it for a second and then let her go. The young girl took the lamp and went out.

Meanwhile, Akhan and Kaltai had been whispering in the yard, loitering next to their horses.

"The little wench doesn't have a clue... Shall I flush her out for you... I'm only here to please, master..."

“Well, she is a top class piece...”

Seeing Gaziza with the lamp, they fell silent and went their separate ways. Gaziza showed Kaltai to the hay barn.

The entrance to the barn was like a low burrow. Only by bending down under the low ceiling on the crushed straw could a person fit in. With a bow, Gaziza showed Kaltai where the straw was and lifted her lamp up so that he'd be able to see better.

Grinning and winking, Kaltai thrust his hands on his hips. Then he leant towards the young girl's ear and in a nasal voice said to her, “The thing is my beauty, it's not so much straw that we're after but something quite different. Our fine stallion is after a totally different sort of oats.”

Gaziza jumped away from him, nearly dropping the lamp in the process. She was frightened and secretly slightly flattered. No adult had ever spoken to her so ingratiatingly before. But then she guessed that this gentleman's slave was just making fun of her and screamed:

“Do you think I don't understand? All your little schemes... Get out of here! We won't allow anyone to make fun of us...” She put the lamp down on the ground, powdered with snow, and ran for the house.

“Hey, stop and listen to what I have to say...” Kaltai foolishly mumbled in her wake in a loud whisper. But she didn't turn back.

However, next to the door of the house, she ran into Akhan.

He began to paw the young girl and, effortlessly grabbing her by the hands, led her to the burrow leading to the hay barn. She had barely been able to open her mouth before it was stopped up by his greasy and voracious lips.

Kaltai quickly bent down and blew the lamp out. The small red flame flickered and went out. Pressing the lamp to his chest, Kaltai furtively, as if he were doing a little jig, set off on tiptoe in the direction of the horses.

In the total darkness, he could make out the girl's muffled cries and weeping. And stifled a snigger with the back of his hand. Then he walked out of the yard and through the gates to keep himself warm.

Darkness enveloped the world. The wind howled. The stinging snow lashed the land like long whips. The frozen earth cracked with a muffled sound. Down the unseen slopes of the Arkalyk, there rolled a stony rumble or perhaps a bestial roar that instilled terror.

Kaltai started back through the gates.

Here he found Akhan. He was flushed, his robe open and he was breathing heavily and complacently. They stood side by side for a minute and then went into the house without saying a word. Akhan went to sleep before everyone else, laying himself on the mattress next to the stove.

Gaziza didn't recall how long she had been lying numb on the barn floor, her senses completely clouded.

It was the cold that brought her round. It sent a shiver right through her. But for a long time, she wasn't able to come to her senses and register what had happened to her. Instinctively she tried to cover herself with handfuls of straw. Then it came rushing back to her... And her throat was choked by an inarticulate keening. She wasn't even able to pinch herself. A dull pain and a vile feeling of disgust fettered her to the floor. She didn't have the strength to get up and she didn't have the will to rush to her mother and grandmother; her tears poured down her face. How could she show herself to them? To her grandmother... her mother... to these people? They would cut her off and curse the day she'd been born! They would remind of her recently deceased father... She was no longer the Gaziza she had been, no longer their ray of sunshine, no longer their sweet daughter and no longer their last and only consolation.

Suddenly, a thought entered her head: perhaps her grandmother would come out to look for her. "Oh God help me!" With a prolonged moan, she picked herself up and in an instant froze in fear that she might have been heard. She crawled out of her hay loft ambush and staggered, teeth chattering, out into the yard. The wind hit her in the back, prodding and spurring her out into the stormy steppe. They wouldn't find her here. They wouldn't see her here.

"Go, go," the wind howled in her ears. "They'll never catch you. Leave, young, proud daughter of a scrupulous father, great-granddaughter of the reckless Kushikpai. Take leave of your woes, misfortune and poverty, abandon the disgrace, the torment and the shame, abandon this life full of deceit and deception. What is there left for you to dream of, what is there left to aspire to? You don't even know how to dream and aspire. You have only learned to weep in silence at the sheer cruelty of the offences you have suffered. And now you are not even permitted to do this. This is your lot. It weighs down on you, it leads you and it is marked on your brow. Be gone, stay no more."

The wind blew all the pain from Gaziza's body and all the fear from her soul. But the cold tripped up her feet, the snow blinded her eyes. Hearing something frightful and threatening roaring on Mount Arkalyk, unsure whether it was the storm or the spirit of Kushikpai, she could only think of getting to her father and brother's graves... To reach them, to fall and to embrace them. Thus, like her father, she would be beholden to no-one.

At that moment Akhan lay in his warm bed under a quilted blanket. However, he couldn't get to sleep. He felt uneasy about something.

That squeaky little miss should have come in from the hay loft a long time ago... suitably tidied up as was right and proper... But she hadn't come in.

The women were whispering in the corner, the old woman was getting ready to go out into the yard. Akhan stopped her and sent Kaltai instead. He returned with the lamp still alight and placed it on the shelf of the stove. The women rushed towards him. In bewilderment he asked them:

“Surely, she’s come back by now?”

The women became alarmed and agitated. Sensing that things had taken a turn for the worse, Kaltai set about explaining to the old woman his version of events:

“I took the hay from her and thought to myself: it’s time the horses were watered. I asked her where the well was. She went with me... As we left the yard, the blizzard was whistling, it was pitch black. She’s a tough one, your girl! She showed me the way right up to the well. I, of course, sent her back home as soon as I could. I thought the poor child would catch a chill and I didn’t want that on my conscience... Surely she can’t have got lost?”

The women wailed:

“Our ray of sunshine! Dear God, she’ll freeze to death! Oh God, what have you sent to try us with now?”

The old woman, her stick in hand, shuffled in the direction of the door, hurriedly buttoning her coat on the way. The daughter-in-law felt her way behind her.

Akhan poked his ruddy face out from under his blanket and shouted at Kaltai:

“You idiot! Numbskull! Light the lantern from the sled, run after her, call after her, look for her... Get on with it! You dolt...”

Outside the gates, three voices began to call after Gaziza. The women shouting with all their might. But how can you shout down a blizzard? They were assaulted by a whirlwind of snow that wouldn’t allow them to open either their eyes or mouths.

The old woman prayed:

“Oh spirits, do not abandon her, show her the way! I will bring you the head of our white and russet ram as a sacrifice!”

The blind woman also prayed, falling to her knees.

Kaltai led his horse out of the yard, jumped onto it and galloped out into the steppe, waving the lantern and crying out at the top of his voice. Horseman, horse and lantern immediately disappeared into the gloom of the blizzard. Immediately his voice was silenced.

The women remained, waiting, whimpering and wailing. It was a long time before Kaltai returned. He returned alone, the lantern extinguished. Kaltai's horse was wheezing and out of breath and so was Kaltai.

“I lost my way myself... I barely managed to find you... And would never have done so if you hadn't been shouting... There's no sign of her anywhere! The devil has taken her!”

The women waited for her until morning. Many times they went outside, called for her, wept and prayed to God. But God did not hear their prayers.

Gaziza was found a day and a half later. She had reached the newly dug graves and laid face down between them. Her clothing was torn as if she had been savaged by a stray dog. Her blood had clotted and darkened on her thighs in the frost. But her slightly freckled face was clear, with no trace of suffering on her mouth or brow. Her face was as innocent and pure as that of a sleeping child. She slept calmly and deeply, no longer dreaming of the life she had lived.

1921

BEAUTY IN MOURNING

Six years... Six years spent in mourning and sadness. Long, cold, dull, grey years. Each one like late autumn. Each one like a lifetime.

For six years Karagoz had been a prisoner in her widow's bower, living like a bird in a cage. Day followed day without warmth, without a smile. And it seemed that Karagoz had reconciled herself with her lot. She neither tired, nor yearned, nor dreamed of any other kind of life. Karagoz was surprised at and perhaps proud of her ability to bear a solitude that made her so different from other people. Her mourning had become a habit, a ritual for her. As the traveller becomes accustomed to the pitch dark of a rainy night, making his way like a blind man, but to all appearances able to see...

Today, as usual, she was silent and diffident. But around her, the *aul* was full of noisy revelry.

Karagoz's *aul* was on the move. In the early morning gloom, the yurts had already been disassembled, packed and loaded, the sun had barely begun to burn the top of the nearby hill and folk were already in the saddle, their entire belongings on wheels and their livestock ready for the off. They were moving

from their encampment where the wide open roads and spacious ravines rolled up to and touched the mountains to different, more enticing lands, where thick grass, shady trees, and cool lakes beckoned.

The chatty, colourful, dressy crowd huddled close to their carts, the women on the horses and their children with them. Out in front, the young men corralled a herd of horses some four or five hundred head strong, while the herdsmen drove their flocks. The horses and sheep resembled an ebullient, bubbling stream that has burst out of the gorge into the open, untouched meadows.

This joyful stream of life invaded the virgin silence... People were in holiday mood. Giggly young girls and mischievous young wives blocked the paths of the men and boys, meeting and accompanying them with volleys of caustic and salty jokes. But this, of course, was exactly what the menfolk were hoping for, which is why they drew up to the carts in the first place. The young men preened and pranced in their saddles like their mounts beneath them. Their stallions danced and whinnied and rushed towards the herd. The young men would let them gallop, and with a whoop and whistle flew towards the herd, driving it onwards. Hundreds of horses, their manes flowing in the wind, whirled away into the distance, shaking the ground with the thunderous clattering of their hooves.

The baggage train of a migrating *aul* is a cheerful and noisy place, quite capable of waking the ancient cliffs from their centuries of slumber. You look and you fancy that the moss covered crags have broken into a genial, petrified, wrinkled grin from their steep heights, sending greetings to their visitors and paying them honour... The high mountain pastures, which have been forlornly deserted for the whole year, open their arms in a wide embrace around the camp's baggage train like the branching tree tops to the migratory birds. Everything

around exhales an intoxicating joy, an exuberant strength like the atmosphere at a great feast.

And it's hard to stop yourself galloping and shouting and laughing with all your might. It's not just the young who are distracted and infected by the general excitement. There isn't a single person in the *aul*, who hasn't been touched by an unconscious vague dream of something extraordinary and previously inaccessible that is now within reach.

Bulat the herdsman had seen out half a century and his moustache was peppered with grey. But when the hubbub and girlish squeal of the baggage train passed by his flock, even he dashingly rode up to it on his roan mount and, without a hesitation, plunged into the crowd of horsewomen. He also joked with the women his age, teasing and winking at them and soliciting bawdy banter in the process. And when one rosy-cheeked, young girl unexpectedly flicked her whip at his roan mare, the years visibly dropped from his shoulders. He felt himself a young cavalier again, worthy of her attentions and drew himself up in a dignified manner, straightening his silver moustache.

Karagoz was riding in a sprung trap drawn by three horses. Drawing level with the herdsman she unexpectedly shouted to him:

"Hey, Bulat... there's still a bit of the devil in you yet! The embers from yesterday's fire still glow hot in you!"

The words were enigmatic, but their meaning was clear to Bulat. Aha, he thought to himself, even Karagoz has noticed me. And gallantly and respectfully he stood up in his stirrups.

"There's no great mystery, my dear! The young girls are like boiling water, and I am but the snow that melts in their presence. It is a force that runs through everyone's veins, and no-one can withstand it..."

Karagoz turned her head away. Only she alone, the owner of her own cattle and mistress of the *aul*, the first and most beautiful women in this mischievous and friendly crowd, was indifferent to everything. She was absorbed in her grief. She was trapped in her despair. And this had been going on for six long years...

She had been a little over twenty when she had put on her black widow's weeds and slammed the door to happiness behind her. Before then she had considered herself in the lap of good fortune. Before then she had been cheerful and merry. An abrupt and evil death had taken her husband away, and Karagoz had been broken like a reed. Among his peers, Karagoz saw no equal.

His name was Azimkhan and he was his family's only son. His kin lived in their own *auls* with their own cares and needs and with time they had become distant. The closest person to Azimkhan's heart was his father Usen and he had already passed seventy years of age. But despite being without brothers and alone from birth, Azimkhan had earned great fame throughout Irgailinsk Volost. Not every man born of such a small clan could have achieved so much respect and fame as Azimkhan.

For a long time, there had been strife between the Irgailintsy and the other clans of the Konyrtau Volost. Neither side letting the other live in peace. Day and night the plaintive, ancestral cry: "To the horses," could be heard, violent clashes occurred and each side persistently stole the other's cattle and horses.

Even before his marriage to Karagoz, Azimkhan was among the most pugnacious and daring of young men. Usually, he would lead the gilded youth of his and other families when they went to fight with their spears and clubs for the honour of the Irgailintsy. But often Azimkhan would make his way to the Konyrtaustsy on his own to pick quarrels with them.

Mischievous tongues repeatedly said that the Konyrtaustsy reserved a particular hatred for Usen's line and with good reason.

For every raid made by the Konyrtaustsy, the Irgailintsy would reply two or three fold; Usen's son was indefatigable on this account. And this feud was fuelled by the fact that there lived on this earth a girl called Karagoz, a girl of great beauty who had been betrothed since childhood to a Konyrtausts, the grandson of Sybanbay, the head of one of the richest families.

Azimkhan was not happy that Karagoz was to become the bride of a Konyrtausts... Karagoz was not happy either. She only had a place in her heart for one man and he was a reckless Irgailinets!

Karagoz's betrothed had been lame since childhood. Even his own family had little esteem or love for him.

Karagoz felt ashamed to be betrothed to such a pitiful and sickly man, a man who had been so ill-favoured by God. And although it was unthinkable to rebel against her parents' will, she did not hide her displeasure. What could be done? Her father had already accepted the dowry for her.

Karagoz's mother was related to Usen by blood and was naturally drawn to him. His *aul* was nearby and more to Karagoz's liking. She would often go there and stay for several days, both with her mother and on her own. Growing up in this *aul* was a boy, an only son; he had no brothers but he was such a fierce fighter that it was as if he had seven! This boy loved Karagoz more than his sisters.

However, his parents had also betrothed him to another at a young age, and when he grew to manhood they had married him to her. There's no escaping your own destiny but then two misfortunes befell Karagoz and Azimkhan in quick succession that were to change their fate forever. In a single year, Karagoz's father died and within a month Azimkhan had

buried his first wife. Karagoz had long made it known that she did not want to marry Sybanbai's grandson. But you can never trust the whims that might enter a young girl's head! And her parents had refused to listen to her pleas, brushing her aside, saying that when the time came all would be clear. However, with the death of her husband, the mother began to listen to her daughter more attentively.

And it was then that the good and courageous Azim came to their house. He had just come to visit... Or so everyone thought. And it's possible that that is what he had thought himself, seeing as he was bereaved and had only just become a widow. When he entered the yurt and saw Karagoz, she was not the girl that he had known before, but a woman of whom he had heard good report and his soul was filled with determination.

He remembered her as a child, as a young girl. But now before him stood a young woman — fully grown, slim, supple and strong. What wonderful hair she had! What enchanting eyes! And it had only been a year since their last meeting... Before him sat the bride of his dreams. Here she was, his destiny. Karagoz looked at him shyly, but her cheeks were flushed hot with blood. She could sense his agitation and rejoiced in it. Their joy was mutual!

Once Azimkhan had greeted the mother, he turned to the daughter with the customary words: "And you my dear, are you well?" Receiving a polite but short reply from Karagoz, it was as if a tacit acknowledgement had been exchanged between the two of them. They had no need of words to understand one other. They spoke with their hearts and their hearts were filled with hope.

Soon after this meeting, hard negotiations followed.

Karagoz's family had no objections to Azimkhan's suit.

They were benevolently inclined in his favour. Now widowed, the mother was keen to ally herself to Usen's clan. She was looking for protection, and there is no better protection than that provided through blood. Azimkhan received their secret consent. However, this was only half of the matter. In the path of the bride and bridegroom's happiness lay the treacherous and dangerous mountain crossing that was Sybanbai and the Konyrtaustsy. The bride belonged to another. She had been sold into a hostile family.

Sybanbai flew into a wild rage when he learned of old Usen and his son's plans. From the greatest to the least, the Konyrtaustsy were deeply wounded and insulted. It was clear that they weren't going to give up their bride without a fight.

Who knows how events might have turned out, and in all likelihood, they would have been for the worse if there hadn't been another unexpected death. Sybanbai's grandson, the sickly cripple, whose body had never held onto life very tenaciously, finally yielded up his spirit. The rest of Sybanbai's line, both sons and grandsons were either already wed or betrothed.

Nevertheless, the wilful and stubborn old man insisted that he would never renounce the betrothal.

"Let Karagoz wait for one of my younger grandsons to grow into manhood."

He wanted to keep her beauty for one of his grandsons. However, it now became easier to take dispute with him. The unwritten law of the steppe was on Usen's side.

Usen compensated Sybanbai for the bride price that had been paid and betrothed Karagoz to his only son. Within a year, Azimkhan had brought her to his *aul* with a rich dowry.

And for a while, it appeared that the Irgailintsy and Konyrtaustsy might have finally buried their differences. And indeed, the feud between them really did seem to simmer down. For two or three years they enjoyed good neighbourly

relations, although even during these happy times the two clans kept a jealous eye on each other, never forgetting their past enmity. In the tribal steppe, old enmities are strong.

Each time rumour reached Sybanbai's ears that Usen's fortune was on the rise, he did everything in his power to diminish his neighbour's prosperity. And in his turn, Usen was only too happy to trip Sybanbai up when the occasion arose. Their ancestral pride only hardened the obduracy of their hearts. By turns, one would prevail over the other and there was no way they could let things be. These men and their issue were not fated to share the great wide steppe with each other and bless it with peace.

Barymta raids for livestock, honour and revenge flared up again like the plague and wandered from camp to camp.

That ill-fated year, Usen's *aul* had just migrated to the River Kainda, their beloved ancestral lands, the very lands to where, six years later, Karagoz's camp was now migrating. The nights were uneasy. Usen's *aul* was expecting a revenge raid and for this reason had left their fastest stallions saddled at the tethering post. They slept lightly and fitfully. Soon the familiar cry was heard: "To the horses!" Azimkhan was the first to his feet and into the saddle.

It was a calm and moonlit night. Karagoz ran after her husband, grabbing his roan stallion by the reins. Never before had she felt so alarmed, never before had she felt so afraid.

"Please don't go..." She entreated. "Send others in your stead... Don't go today my sweet..."

But he would not listen to her. Her fear was repugnant to him and boded no good. An ill will coursed through his veins and summoned him on. In his haste and hot temper, he roughly pushed his wife aside.

With a roar like a small landslide, Aziinkhan and three other riders swept over the rocky hill and disappeared into the distance, leaving the din of the agitated *aul* in their wake.

When Azimkhan arrived at the scene of the raid, the herdsmen were frantically shouting, pointing to where the raiders were driving their herd. The herdsmen had given chase to the thieves but kept a respectful distance because their opponents were many. Or at least that was how it has seemed to them in the darkness of the night.

Azimkhan didn't wait to gather the herdsmen and calculate how many enemies stood before him. He sent his horse at an echoing gallop after the stolen herd like the roar of a mountain avalanche. Azimkhan quickly caught up with the marauders. Without looking to see if his fellow riders were behind him, he overtook the lot of them and with a whoop galloped around the herd in an attempt to turn and stop it in its tracks.

Proud and hot-blooded was Azimkhan. He knew neither fear nor danger and instilled much fear in others. However, he was neither exceptionally strong nor exceptionally nimble. He fought valiantly and aggressively, but being the master's son, he had neither the skill nor experience of the habitual raider. He lacked their composure.

He could inspire the most timid and lazy of men and thus frighten off the enemy. But this time the battle was fleeting.

Two strong fellows, experienced and skilled in raiding spotted the horseman in the moonlight. They weren't able to catch up with him. The roan horse that he sat on was mightily swift! But he had turned to face them himself, turning the herd in the process. And now they galloped to meet him...

"There he is... Let's go! Let's be having him... Take him down..."

Azimkhan clove between the two of them like an axe through a sap-filled tree and was literally jammed between them, all three spinning in one spot on their whinnying and barging horses. Azimkhan was the first into the attack, letting loose a short, glancing blow to the head of the huge man to his right.

The return blow was swift but Azimkhan dodged it, ducking close to his horse's mane. However, the old hand on his left, without taking proper aim landed his club right on Azimkhan's forehead with an indolent, almost clumsy, arcing stroke. The thud was dull and terrible.

The blow stopped horse and rider in their tracks.

Azimkhan never even felt how he fell and skidded onto the floor his legs giving way beneath him, his arms thrown out to his sides. His horse reached out to nuzzle his face but pulled away whinnying and dancing skittishly on its fine legs.

The man who dealt him the blow rode up and, leaning down out of his saddle, said to his companion:

"Dear me... He seems to have had a bad fall. Did you see how he fell? God, I hope he doesn't die... Do you think he might die?"

"You hit out without even knowing your own strength!" the other murmured.

Azimkhan lay dead, without even having had time to ask for his beloved's forgiveness. The club had split his skull in two. By the time his men rushed to his aid, he was no longer breathing.

Sat next to her yurt in the *aul*, Karagoz sensed his death. She screamed and wrung her hands. She fell to the ground, listening intently to it, staring into the dark night with demented eyes. And she heard from afar, from the meadows, where the fighting had suddenly died down, a new, strange sound she had not heard before. It was the long ululating cry of the herdsmen as they rode into the *aul*, their voices heavy with tears:

"Our flesh and blood! Our leader and mainstay!"

That night marked the beginning of Karagoz's six years of mourning.

The Irgailintsy were quick to repay the offenders in kind. In one fight one of their enemy's men was also killed, also

young, for only the young men went out on raids... And into the bargain, the Konyrtaustsy were forced to pay blood money for the murder, equivalent to the value of one hundred camels. A huge blood ransom! They put the fear of God up the Konyrtaustsy. They wanted to provide the young widow with some consolation. But there was no consoling Karagoz.

Neither her old father-in-law Usen nor her young son Mukash were able to distract her from her grief.

The clan looked to the two-year-old Mukash with great hope. "Better a live mouse than a dead lion," they said quoting the old proverb. They pondered how he would grow into a great warrior rider and how he would remember the blood of his father and return it with interest a hundred times over. Everyone prayed to God for Mukash, the last of his line, as if the Irgailintsy and Konyrtaustsy were destined to be at enmity for generations and centuries to come...

Seventy-year-old Usen tarried in the world until his son's memorial feast, which is celebrated forty days after the death, and then died himself, enfeebled by age, having exhausted his strength and done all that he could in life.

The responsibility for the men's share of the work now fell to Karagoz. It's no easy task for a woman to handle a large holding and all its animals. No easy task for a young widow to manage the family and clan affairs of her husband and father-in-law. Many were the suitors that circled around her on the hunt for her wealth and beauty! Some were obdurate and some affectionate. Some tried to win her over, while others tried to frighten her. She was more than a match for all of them. Unlike her mother, she sought neither protection nor support. And her herds and flocks were kept in good order.

At first, it was as if she had grown old overnight. A feeling of emptiness and hopelessness followed her like a shadow. She was alone, and her longing hopeless and insurmountable. In the

evenings, as dusk fell, at the time when lovers are reunited, and at dawn, when dreams are at their sweetest, Karagoz hid under her widow's weeds and let the tears pour down her face. She could not restrain herself and did not want to restrain herself. Her lamenting and keening could be heard throughout the *aul*, as melodious as a steppe folk tale. She called upon her husband and would address him for hours on end:

"My clear-sighted, winged falcon... my only consolation... as tall as the poplar by the stream ... as precious as gold... my strength and my shield, my wonder and my awe, my fortress and my freedom..."

And those who heard her remembered the words and the music of her keening in the same way one remembers a song. Bitter was the song, more bitter than wormwood, but it was repeated by all word for word. And soon, throughout Irgailinsk volost, everyone came to learn of Karagoz's mourning, how she refused to bid Azimkhan farewell, how her sighs burned each breath, how her tears scorched her face, how the light left her eyes and colour, her cheeks.

With time, people began to talk of the "woman in the widow's weeds" with the sort of respect and praise that is rarely afforded her sex:

"See how she cries for her beloved..."

The elders who had seen much in their time spoke of her, not as one speaks of the living, but in the same tone as one speaks of those who have passed into legend.

"Never was there a woman like Karagoz! Great and sacred is her mourning... Heavy its load, wise its example, it is pleasing to God."

This renown returned to Karagoz, like the echo that resounds from the mountain. It lifted her up and gave her mettle as the frost in winter hardens the impetuous water.

Spring after spring spilt forth over the mountain pastures like a sea of green. Each year the *aul* migrated in its pursuit of the spring, in pursuit of life. Each year Mukash grew bigger and stronger. But each year, Karagoz remained true to herself and her rare, uncommon glory. She lived as a widow, as was pleasing to God and the elders but she was tender to none, save her son. She withstood a thousand temptations and not once did she succumb. And thus she endured for six long years.

Little wonder, that Karagoz's words about the devil and the embers of yesterday's fire had seemed so curious to Bulat.

But yet she was still young. She was still alive. As beautiful as ever were her sad dark eyes, swarthy was the flush of her cheeks. Her tears had not extinguished her beauty. Her body was a milky white and her figure now fuller than in her youth. Good health, liveness and a tender strength emanated from its every pore. It flowed with hot blood that was passionate and would not be silenced.

Karagoz was a woman, she was a mother. She loved and was loved. She had experienced a happiness that not all mortals are destined to feel. And suddenly she had been cast into a dark cell with stout iron doors. Oh, if only the people who sang the praises of her mourning knew how much torment she carried in her breast.

If this torment was pleasing to God, then, in reality, it was a hellish one. In vain hope, Karagoz blew out the lamp and lay down in her lonely bed and recited her prayers. In vain hope did she pray that God might grant her the blessing of sleep. Sleep and peace were the lot of weaker mortals who were not the object of the elders' grandiose praise. Her destiny was to endure the dark nocturnal ravings of passion. Fiery serpents slithered through her veins; they slithered out across her breast and kissed her neck, they crushed her entire body with sweet

and oppressive spasms. And there was no respite from these serpents. From dusk till dawn she fought to break free of their embrace, catch her breath and regain her senses. Blind and deaf, in a tormented fatigue, she would light the lamp, call her old and trusted servant and bid her to beat her naked body, to pluck out this writhing serpentine fire from her breast. The servant, terrified that Karagoz had lost her wits, also prayed in fear. Karagoz writhed in front of her as if possessed by a fit and the servant could not help but think that it was her youth trying to tear itself free from her fetters of mourning, that life itself was fighting to seek its freedom.

It was time — Karagoz's character had changed. Her relations with others had become so unstable and irrational that she seemed afflicted. The slightest provocation and she would explode like gunpowder, she would bristle, grow angry and boil over with rage at the slightest trifle. At other times she would retreat into herself, like a mouse in its nest, and remain dejectedly silent for weeks, never lifting her eyes to meet anyone else's like a small child; she was a sorry sight. At times like these, even those she had offended thought she was being too hard on herself and marvelled at how severe she was on herself. But on other occasions, she astounded people with her almost masculine will power, business sense and an authority that was as hard as damascene steel.

By the seventh year of her widowhood, spring was more intolerable than ever for Karagoz.

The days were warm, festive, light and joyful, the nights were cold but clear, enticing and full of stars. The mountains, the meadows, the rivers had grown younger. Everything gleamed, everything was noisy. The clatter of the horses' hooves, the bleating of the sheep on the open expanses of the mountain meadow was like music that one has long yearned for. People were drunk with the joy of being alive barely below the clouds,

in the realm of eagles. Each man and woman had something secret or precious on their mind, maybe a secret, maybe a dream. Being a protector of sheep, Bulat the herdsman was accustomed to not sleeping at night and had no scruples about letting everyone know that the intoxication that coursed through his veins was unstoppable, a force that no-one could withstand... Karagoz had turned away when she heard this. But with that single, innocent phrase "my dear", with the herdsman's slightly gruff, hoarse voice, the fiery serpents had begun to writhe over her body again. Karagoz urged her three horse team onwards right up to the very banks of the River Kainda.

Here she got down from the cart, leaving the sleeping Mukash inside. She walked slowly along the bank, overgrown with young, white-trunked birch saplings and impenetrable bird cherry trees. The water gurgled sonorously and tenderly. The morning freshness fanned Karagoz's face and neck, but her breast was on fire. Her legs were weak, her knees trembled. She wanted to lie down, to press herself close to the earth, to embrace the birch trunks that reminded her of the silky skin of her own body.

On the field that she knew so well she noticed an old-fashioned, tarantass trap, its shafts pointing up into the sky. There was no sign of its owners or horses anywhere nearby. "They'll be our neighbours," she thought to herself apathetically. It was here by the Kainda that Karagoz had first learned of Azimkhan's death. But her thoughts were languid now even on this subject. The air felt as suffocatingly stuffy as a sultry midday. Her heart beat heavily and loudly.

The sound of youthful, trilling laughter reached her ears from a nearby opulent and shady grove. It was a girl's laughter... Followed closely by the cheerful, sonorous reply of her young sweetheart... Karagoz listened to them as if she were in a dream. She wanted to walk by but set off in the direction of their voices and the grove instead.

She stopped just outside. A nightingale whistled and trilled, clearing its throat. It chirruped and warbled abruptly like the lash of a small whip. How many times had Karagoz heard the song of the nightingales in this grove and passed it by! Now she stood, lifting her inflamed face, squinting her eyes, listening and drinking it in. The nightingale was singing a song that had never been heard before, and Karagoz understood it.

It was singing to the cliff that towered grey and threatening over the grove. The cliff was lonely, it was wounded to the depths of its heart, it longed and yearned. It had sent the nightingale to sing its song for Karagoz. So that she would know how its stony heart suffered. She had existed without consolation for seven years, but it had suffered for seven centuries. They suffered the same feeling, the same pain.

Then the nightingale sang Karagoz's response. She now sent this song as a reply to the cliff. The nightingale sang of her beauty, of her dark eyes that burned brighter than all other things and that it was not for nothing that Karagoz means "the dark-eyed one"... The nightingale sang of her soul, bereft of people, like a desert without a drop of moisture, without a blade of green.

Karagoz listened to the singing messenger and consciously asked him in her sweet torpor: "What are you driving at? Where are you leading me?"

Unnoticed she passed through the middle of the grove and shuddered when she saw through the thick foliage the broad back of the young man and the shoulders of the young girl locked in his arms. The young man was dressed in a white shirt and a black waistcoat, he had curly hair, which had been tousled by her hands. The girl was also smartly and neatly dressed. They were sat, embracing on the green bank, paddling their bare feet in the water. The Kainda answered them with

its quiet lapping. They did not see Karagoz; they were playing and laughing, repeatedly tumbling each other over in the grass. Without a care in the world.

Karagoz recognised the young, betrothed couple. They were from Ismagul's *aul*, a distant relative of Karagoz's. She knew them well. The young man was good looking, literate and learned. He was due to spend the whole of the summer with his betrothed on the highland pastures, and her parents had no qualms about allowing them a bit of freedom.

Seeing as they were bride and bridegroom to be, they were at liberty to decide for themselves, how suited they were to each other. But it was evident that they were good together, they would not part.

Karagoz watched them through the foliage, unable to tear herself away, although she should really have moved on without a glance back. Her head was spinning. The foliage eddied and swirled before her eyes. The fiery serpents coursed through her veins with unprecedented force and crawled out unseen over her breast, entwining themselves around her neck, arms, legs and body. A minute longer and they would have knocked her to the floor, crushing her in an agonising, irresistible convulsion. With the last drops of her strength, Karagoz overcame herself and headed back, trying not to make any noise on the way. Her face burned with shame and a fear of her own actions.

Karagoz's camp and baggage train slowly rolled up to the Kainda with a joyful hum, driving the horses and sheep in front of them.

They unloaded the yurts from the carts, quickly and efficiently setting them up. As usual, on these occasions, the fuss and bustle went on until late in the evening and only quietened down with the arrival of the moon. Everyone retired to their yurts exhausted. Sleep soon overtook all. Ever the vigilant shepherd, Bulat lay down under a bush not far from

his herd, covered himself with a sackcloth and dozed fitfully like a watchdog.

Karagoz couldn't sleep. She lay in her bed, a tangled, writhing mass of burning serpents. She was mulling over the exuberance and merriment of that day's journey to the Kainda. And it seemed to her now that all the men and young women who had been joking with each other were laughing at her and laughing at her alone because she was the black sheep in their midst.

For the first time in six years, Karagoz seemed to make out a young man in the darkness of her yurt, a beautifully proportioned young man in a white shirt, black waistcoat and curly, tousled hair. He had passed through the walls of her yurt and she felt his cool hands caressing her body, lightly fondling her neck, laughing and whispering in her ear. She wanted to embrace him and he had disappeared but she heard his whisper calling her. Karagoz cried out:

"Oh God, I can stand it no longer! Dear God, why am I like this?"

She jumped up and rushed out of her yurt, not knowing where she was going. The *aul* looked as if it had been freshly whitewashed and the silvery moon was silent and mute. There wasn't a soul about. The grass shone under Karagoz's bare feet, her thin shirt shone under the black tresses of her loose hair. Karagoz did not feel the chill of the night. Her whole body was on fire. Going up to the river, she entered into the water up to her knees and lay on her back on the sloping bank. Laid bare, her body was a blinding white and crawling with burning serpents.

A slightly gruff, hoarse voice spoke to her as if he was calling from the top of the high cliff:

"Karagoz, my dear... Is that you? What's the matter with you?"

She understood who was speaking to her and what he was talking about. She heard his deep voice and at that moment stretched her arms out towards him, not rising from the ground. As the grass crunched under his heavy masculine footsteps and he leant over her, she pulled him towards her with all her might; embracing him with her entire body, she began to kiss him.

The moonlit sky grew dim, the sparkle on the water and grass was extinguished and the distant white specks of the mountain tops melted and faded away. But the fiery serpents danced joyfully in Karagoz's veins. In the fog of her passion, she could only make out the silvery whiskers of his cheek and the wolfish whiteness of his teeth.

1925

SAVAGE GREY

The deep ravine near the Black Hill is uninhabited, but well known to the herdsmen of the *auls* that neighbour it. Misfortune stalks these parts.

The Black Hill is covered with low meadowsweet and caragana bushes that make it look a bit like a fur hat. When their buds begin to open, the tops of the caragana turn a tender, pale green. The ravine is completely overgrown with wild roses. Under this barbed and sumptuous carpet wolves dwell.

The chill May wind squalls down from the ravine, carrying the scent of young grass and wild onion far and wide. The bushes stir and rustle sadly and drily as if whispering secrets to each other.

In late spring a male wolf and his mate returned to their old den in the ravine. The old lairs had been eroded by the flood water running off the plain and were now easily big enough for a man to crawl into. The wolves dug out a new, narrower den and dark, narrow passageways that connected up with the old lairs.

Their paws soon packed down the freshly burrowed earth. The female did not even have time to shed her white flecked winter coat before the smoky-grey wolf cubs were born.

One morning the she-wolf was lying in the full blaze of the sun under the high wisps of the wild horse dock. It was hot and airless here and she was drowsy. She dozed, squinting her foggy eyes from time to time. Her flanks stood out in sharp relief, her teats engorged with milk. The skin on her back twitched nervously and her sore teats constantly caused her to wince.

A light rustle reached her from the bushes. She leapt up from the ground a whirling blur of white fur, snarling and growling, the cubs floundering at her feet.

The body of a small lamb landed in front of the she-wolf over the plaited wall of thorns and branches, followed by a large, heavy wolf, his tail tucked between his legs. Red foamy drool dripped from his snout and he sniffed his mate while she greedily licked his blood-smeared jowls.

The lamb was still alive. Wolf and she-wolf hurled themselves onto the animal and in less than a minute had torn it to small pieces. Their voracious, white-teethed jaws swallowed large chunks of the tender meat with ease. Their green eyes burned balefully.

Barely leaving a trace of the lamb they had consumed, the wolves sprawled out on the succulent, fragrant grass, stretching themselves out to their full length. Then, in turns, they began to regurgitate the meat they had just swallowed.

One after the other the cubs crawled towards the meat and, growling and squabbling, began to gobble it down. The two smallest ones were still blind. The she-wolf pulled them towards her, positioning them close to her teats.

The next day, when the sun was at its zenith, the she-wolf caught the unmistakable, heavy scent of horses. Quickly pushing the cubs into the den, she hid herself in the bushes.

Soon she heard human voices and the footfall of horses.

The men rode right up to the lair and jumped from their horses. Long shepherds' clubs were tapped rhythmically against the earth.

Standing in the briar of dog roses on the steep slope of the ravine, her tongue lolling from her bared teeth, she could see everything.

Throwing a strong leather lasso over the cubs' necks, the humans pulled them out of the den one after the other. Five of them were dispatched immediately. They broke the hind legs of the sixth one and threw him next to the decomposing skull of the dead lamb. The wolf cub would crawl around, whimpering, ensuring that the adult wolves would carry him off and not return to these parts for a long time. But the men took the runt of the litter away with them.

The clatter of horse's hooves receded away from the ravine. The seasoned, black-backed male and the white female approached the cub, snarling ferociously at it and then at each other. The she-wolf grabbed the cub and sloped off up the ravine. The male dashed after her with long, flying bounds.

The den was left abandoned.

In the *aul*, there lived a young boy called Kurmash. The blind wolf cub was placed into his care. The adults had said that because the cub had been blind when it had been found perhaps it would adapt to life in the *aul*.

There was no parting Kurmash from him; he made a new little bowl for him and a soft leather collar.

Two days later the cub opened its eyes but didn't dare stick its head out of the yurt. The terrifying sound and scent of dogs reached him from outside. At night, Kurmash would let the cub sleep with him under his blanket and because of this the boy now slept separately from his grandmother whom he loved more than any other person in the whole world. She was the only person who had not approved of his attachment

to the small, weak, smoky-grey, creature with its tiny, razor-sharp teeth.

“He hasn’t grown to full size yet, but when his fangs are fully grown, he’ll be pinning his ears back and snapping at us before he even gets on his own two feet,” the grandmother warned.

The boy had been furious with her.

By the middle of summer, the cub had grown bigger and stronger and was much like any of the other cubs in the *aul*. Despite being slightly shaggier, he might easily have passed for a small wolf-hound. But life in the *aul* offered him little freedom. Like Kurmash’s old grandmother, there was no way that the wise old sheepdogs were going to put up with a young wolf in their midst. Every time he summoned up the courage to show his face outside the yurt, he was greeted with snarling jaws and snapping teeth.

Kurmash would always come to his defence and the loyal old guard dogs would back off from the boy, offended and growling. But the yurt was too stuffy, boring and cramped for the young wolf. He yearned for the steppe, the tall and many-hued grasses, the unexplored expanses. One day, a fully grown, piebald male from the Big Yurt waylaid the wolf cub when the boy wasn’t at hand, he chased him out of the yurt, knocked him down and set about him with his heavy fangs. The other dogs joined in and with frenzied barking set about the wolf cub’s legs and flanks. Children and adults rushed to the melee and were barely able to beat them off. Ripped and torn, the wolf cub crawled back towards the yurt, and sitting with his back to it, bared his milk-white teeth in a silent snarl.

“Look how silent and proud he is!” The men said in surprise and admiration. “Any other cub would have pierced the air with its whimpering and yelping by now.”

But the women replied:

“The reason he’s so silent is that he’s a rotten little thief!”

And they were absolutely right. Even Kurmash was amazed and alarmed at the cub’s gluttony. The boy spoiled him, feeding him much more than the other dogs. The village dogs were lean, wiry and undemanding but the wolf cub’s hunger could never be satisfied.

His flanks and chest filled out and the ruff of his neck grew perceptibly thicker with each passing day. But he was constantly hungry and would nose around the yurt on the hunt for anything left unguarded.

He wouldn’t touch his food in the presence of people, turning away from anything offered him. But the moment that person turned his back, he would instantly wolf down everything that had been placed in front of him, looking mournfully at the empty bowl as if there had never been anything there. People could only look on in amazement as he greedily grabbed anything left within reach of his long fangs. He would grab his owner’s meat, and lap up the milk that had been set to curdle from the pot as if it had been placed there especially for him. He would even chew the freshly skinned hides that had been left hanging to dry from the frame of the yurt.

Often he was caught and punished mercilessly. He put up with the heavy blows from the rolling pin that left his head ringing, and the sharp, burning pain of the whistling lash. Nimble ducking the blows he would bare his bright white teeth in a silent snarl. Not once did he whimper or yelp, no matter how hard the beating.

Meanwhile, in the *aul*, rumours spread that he would slope out to the sheep pens at nights, unnoticed by the other dogs, sniffing the lamb’s flat tails and frightening the ewes. Others said they had seen him furtively running off into the steppe.

Kurmash would not listen to all this village gossip. But no matter how the boy tried to train him he couldn’t teach the wolf

the difference between the food he was given by his owners and the food he stole from other people.

Kurmash was the only person he would never threaten and the only person in whose presence he would deign to eat. When the boy offered him a piece of meat, the cub would never take it until it had been offered to him from his hand. And Kurmash never once raised the stick against him that he so regularly used to beat off the other village dogs. The boy loved the wolf cub, he delighted in his impenetrable, independent gaze, his ever darkening and menacing ruff and his stubborn strength that grew with each passing day.

And Kurmash called his beloved cub “Kokserek”, which means “Savage Grey”.

By the end of the summer, Savage Grey was already very unlike the other village dogs. As long-legged as a calf and broad-backed as a bull, he had outgrown the lot of them. Unlike the domesticated dogs, he never raised and wagged his tail, which made him seem even taller, and his neck and back were as tightly sprung as a drawn bow.

Now, he no longer ran away from the piebald male and the other dogs stopped picking on him. He would only have to turn his large stone-grey muzzle in their direction and bare his upper lip and they would disappear in all directions. The other dogs would stick to the safety of the pack when they saw him. Both he and they were always on their guard.

Nobody noticed that a fully grown wolf was on the loose in the *aul*. He no longer even played with Kurmash. He remembered the name he had been given well and answered obediently when Kurmash or his grandmother called him, but he ran to them unhurriedly, at a lazy lope, without wagging his tail.

He never touched the other dogs, never reacted to their barking and never bothered chasing them when they ran away.

More often than not, he would lie in the shade of the yurt, his ears straight, screwing up his baleful green eyes.

Kurmash was proud of this silent, green-eyed, wild beast and laughed merrily every time the neighbours' dogs took to their heels at the sight of him, whimpering with fear. However, truth be told, the boy was sometimes frightened of Savage Grey himself, although he would never have admitted as much, even to his dear old grandmother.

One evening the owner of the piebald dog boasted to Kurmash:

"Your limp tailed Savage Grey is no match for my piebald. He'd rip his head off, given half the chance! He'd have finished him off long ago if you hadn't chased him away."

Seemingly by accident, but really out of curiosity, he unleashed his dog on the wolf. Without hesitating, the big male gave a hot-tempered bark and hurled himself at the wolf, planting his fangs into his shoulder. He had been aiming for his neck but had missed. At the last second, the wolf ducked the full force of the attack and, recoiling quicker than the dog, lunged at him in silence, grabbing him by the neck, and in one bound knocked him to the ground. The huge dog was sent rolling down the hill like a helpless, fat ewe. The wolf had also missed his mark for, otherwise, he would have ripped the dog's throat out.

Kurmash scrambled up, calling off Savage Grey, while the dog's owner pulled the piebald out of harm's way.

Late in the evening, two wolves unexpectedly attacked a ewe that had been grazing not far from the *aul*.

The shepherd raised a desperate hue and cry. Youths and older men came galloping up from the *aul*. With a deafening howl, the *aul*'s entire pack of dogs came rushing to the rescue, Savage Grey along with them.

The wolves retreated back to the steppe. The pack chased after them but couldn't catch up.

Riders and dogs stopped at the nearby hills. In the distance along the high ridge of the Black Hill, two grey shadows loped barely seen in the dim, lustreless light.

"They're early this year," the herdsmen remarked.

Only Kurmash had noted how Savage Grey had silently continued to follow the wolves' tracks, his nose close to the ground.

The boy separated himself from the crowd and, unafraid, set off on foot in the dark in the direction of the Black Hill. For a long time he affectionately called out:

"Kokserek! Kok-se-rek..."

But Savage Grey paid no heed to his plaintive calls, only returning to the *aul* later that night. Stopping in sight of his yurt, he pawed at the dry, flattened earth with his iron claws, raising up large clouds of dust. He lifted his head to the heavens and inhaled the cold, autumnal air, greedily sniffing at the faint traces of scent coming in from the direction of the Black Hill.

Savage Grey was seen in the *aul* the next day but that night he disappeared off into the steppe again. He was gone for three days. He returned tired and savagely hungry but as sullen as ever and without his collar. When Kurmash called him to him, he approached, his body low to the ground and his head lowered menacingly. Overjoyed, the boy flung his arms around his short muscular neck. The wolf sprang back, his ears pinned back to his head, and even Kurmash's grandmother was too frightened to scold him, and set about getting his food ready.

Watching him eat was a frightful spectacle, and Kurmash recoiled away from him.

"Aha! He's showing his true colours now," Kurmash's father said. "His eyes are getting greener and greener; even during the day they're burning. Son, the time has come to get rid of him."

The boy shivered, fearing that this time the adults would not give way and slay his wolf.

But it was as if Savage Grey had understood exactly what they had been saying. As soon as their backs were turned, he disappeared. Nobody saw him leave the *aul*.

For many days afterwards Kurmash looked for him in the chee grass but all in vain. He used pleas and threats but they were both equally futile. The windy autumn passed and the severe winter covered the steppe with a white felt blanket. Savage Grey did not return.

Until late autumn, he lived off rabbits far from his native lands; he wasn't fussy about taking mice as well when the opportunity presented itself. The gophers were fat and he feasted on them along with the foxes. But with the snow came hunger, which drove him towards the human wintering grounds and their sheep pens.

Now he returned furtively like a complete stranger. His fur bristled whenever he saw humans.

Night after night he circled and looped around the snowy hills, leaving a fleeting trail of paw and claw prints. His breath billowed around his slightly wizened snout. He stopped on the leeward side of the hill, his nose filled with the dense, appetising smell of paddock and livestock and his ears, with the agitated barking of dogs. The wolf snapped his jaws ferociously. At this time of year, the dogs' alertness was as keen as his hunger.

At the hour when the snow was swirling at its worst, he tried to stalk up to the wintering grounds. But it was as if the sleepless dogs knew exactly where he was coming from. He was met by the whole pack with the piebald at its head.

The wind abated and the frost had set in. The wolf skittered about, sitting on his hind haunches. The hard crust on the surface of the snow was burning the pads of his paws, the black corners of his jowls were frozen and his stomach was knotted

with hunger. He ascended the hill at a slow trot. The snow sparkled under the powerful moonlight. Savage Grey tilted his head back to the heavens and, frozen by a fatigue that he had never experienced before, he let out a long, desolate howl.

Immediately, the *aul* boiled over with the hysterical barking of the dogs. But Savage Grey did not lower his head. Then, suddenly, from far away out on the Black Hill, an inarticulate, melancholy howl reached his ears. The wolf pulled himself erect, shivering. Something out there was echoing his call, beckoning to him. He listened keenly, sniffed with his nose and made straight for the sound.

At the approach to the ravine, he stopped, wary, wincing from the severe cold. A snow white she-wolf descended down from the Black Hill.

Savage Grey did not let her draw near. Every time she approached, he would bound away, baring his teeth and flattening his ears. But he was unable to leave her. And when she turned towards him, querulously whimpering, sniffing and nuzzling him with her warm nose, he didn't move from the spot. The female quietly moved away. He caught up with her and licked her jowls.

Shoulder to shoulder they set off up the ravine, flying through it, and they doubled back in the direction of the human settlement. For half an hour they tirelessly made an enormous semi-circle along the crest of the hills, their tracks side by side, the crust of the snow crunching resonantly beneath their paws. Then, as if in silent collusion, they headed downwards towards the *aul*.

The moon was on the wane. The night was coming to an end. Savage Grey and the white female were flying past the *aul* like a whirlwind just as they had through the ravine when they both saw a long haired dog dashing towards them in hot pursuit from a yellowish snow drift next to the sheep pens, leading the entire pack behind him. This, of course, was the piebald male.

The wolves barrelled away from the *aul* at full speed. The piebald kept up, frantically and doggedly baying in their wake. The pack began to thin out and recede behind him. Savage Grey moderated his pace, malevolently listening to his adversary's barking, the dog was fit to burst with rage and fury.

Close to the hollow, the pack came to a stop and the piebald halted as well, turning to run back to the pack. The she-wolf was the first to make a dash for him. In the open steppe, it's hard for a dog to outrun a wolf. But the piebald did not quail, even though he was isolated and on his own. He had been born and bred to fight wolves and, without hesitating, grappled with the she-wolf. A second later Savage Grey leapt at him, pinning him down under his weight. With a shrill growl, the she-wolf sank her teeth into his throat.

Soon all that was left of the huge piebald was his tail, his well-chewed head and the occasional clump of fur. Even the blood stained snow was devoured by the wolves.

Having eaten their fill, they set off for the Black Hill and, once in the ravine, sprawled out on the pure, fresh snow.

From that night, they were inseparable. And from that night, a grey menace began to stalk the whole district.

Ranging far and wide, the wolves seized sheep, cattle and horses; they felled camels and killed the best guard dogs, always sloping off with impunity.

Terrifying rumours spread from *aul* to *aul*.

"There's a whole pack of these grey devils, every single one of them like grey ghosts; they have no fear of people. Not the slightest fear of man at all! Their leader is seasoned and experienced, as tall as a calf and savage and frightful to behold... He doesn't run away, even when he is within a club's length of you! He's terrifying to approach. The pack attacks from one side and, while the herdsmen and dogs rush in that direction to chase them off, the leader has taken one of the sheep from the other..."

The wolves never stayed long in one place. One day they would be seen near the Black Hill, the next — ten, twenty, thirty miles further to the south or east. Little wonder they say that: “a wolf lives by its legs”.

The steppe in those parts was hilly, full of ravines and overgrown with shrubs and bushes. A pleasure to survey from the heights of the Black Hill, it is like a stormy sea, its hills rolling like huge waves, their crests spuming with lush vegetation. Places like these are a boon for the wolf and a headache for the shepherd. It is easy to approach the paddock and stalk the herd unseen, easy to waylay and isolate your victim. And difficult to track down the grey menace, impossible to foresee from where the silent, misty shadows will attack next. And even if tracked you'll never catch them in winter! When the drifts are deep, the wolf can escape on the freshly fallen snow. The crust can hold the wolf but not the horseman. The horse founders and, no longer able to gallop, can only plough laboriously through the snow.

They tried leaving poisoned meat at the deep ravine, where wolf lairs were known to exist, but soon regretted it. As if these grey ghosts would fall for poisoned bait! The foolish young village dogs ate the meat next to the ravine and died on the spot. The wolves didn't even touch the frozen dog carcasses.

The pickings were rich for the wolves that winter. Savage Grey grew bigger and bigger, putting on a hefty weight, but, as before, was never able to satisfy his terrifying hunger for flesh and blood.

It was only in spring that his hunger abated slightly, replaced by a new appetite that burned briefly through his veins.

The snow on the steppe darkened and cracked. Thawed patches began to appear on the hills, the ruddy, sticky earth finally laid bare. Savage Grey was overcome with a playfulness that he had never felt before. He would become distracted

on the run, gambolling and running around the white female like a young puppy. She would lie down for a rest while he skittered about her, raising whirlwinds of sparkling snow, foolishly leaping over her and bumping her with his chest, paws and snout. She would snarl at him angrily and he would grab her by the neck and, having held her like this for a moment, let her go. Sometimes he would hold her by the scruff of the neck for longer, not letting her break free. She would yelp and snap back ill-temperedly.

But with time she became friendlier, sniffing and nuzzling him more often.

North of the Black Hill, lay an extensive network of shallow salt lakes. Their banks were densely overgrown with chee grass and bull rushes. It was a wild, isolated place and little wonder that the thickets and underbrush were full of the constant chatter of nesting birds. It was to this place that the white female led Savage Grey once the banks of the lakes had riotously burst into leaf.

He was now hunting far from his native hunting grounds. But the female would not stray from her den, feeding on birds' eggs that she found in the reeds.

One day he brought her a broad sheep's tail, but she didn't meet him at the entrance of the lair as usual. He anxiously scratched the earth with his paws and she crawled out of the den exhausted, barely able to drag her legs behind her. A strong, strange scent emanated from the den. Savage Grey bristled menacingly, poked his snarling muzzle into the lair and pulled out a frail, unprepossessing wolf cub with his teeth.

The female, threw herself at him, snapping feebly but unable to intervene. Savage Grey smashed the small, blind cub against the ground until it was nothing but a formless, grey, lump and then threw it aside in disgust.

By the time he had turned towards the she-wolf, she had positioned herself between him and the den, and the other cubs had crawled up to her nuzzling at her teats.

Savage Grey gruffly groomed himself, lying to one side.

The female began to go out hunting with him, but was still heavy footed, and would sometimes unexpectedly run back to her litter. Often they would return to the den, hungry, not having caught anything and he would greedily eye up the cubs, but she would immediately snap at him, chasing him away from the den.

Early one April morning, when the cubs had already grown bigger, Savage Grey and the white female were racing along the lakes towards their den, she in front, preventing him from overtaking her, he, tucked in right behind her tail when suddenly they picked up the scent of people. Birds flew up from their nests in clouds, horses stamped their hooves, shepherd's clubs tapped the earth. The wolves hid in the reeds until all was quiet. But when they crawled into the den all they could find was one wolf cub, its hind legs broken.

For several days, the she-wolf relentlessly roamed around the *aul*, where the men had taken the other cubs. In vain, Savage Grey called her to him. She hadn't listened and now they had been spotted.

The ground had dried out and was now blooming. The horses had quickly built up their strength on the juicy, spring grass. On that warm, bright blue day, for the first time, the wolves heard huntsmen behind them in noisy pursuit. Three men on fresh and lively horses chased them out of the deep ravine next to the Black Hill.

Savage Grey flew like an arrow. Back in the ravine, the female lagged behind him. Her teats hadn't hardened yet and her running was still laboured. At first, Savage Grey stayed with her, running behind her, nipping her hind quarters, driving

her on. She snarled at him. He glanced back at the horsemen and silently and determinedly hurtled on ahead.

At the mouth of the ravine, he made a sharp turn and with nimble bounds, like a mountain goat, flew up the steep side of the ravine.

Savage Grey hid in the bushes, but the white female had carried on across open country, and with a whoop and high pitched yells the horsemen had galloped after her.

That night, sniffing cautiously, Savage Grey followed the scent of the chase. In a distant hollow on a patch of grass, damp with dew, he found a pool of dried blood. He sniffed and licked at it. This was where the white female had lain, and this was where her scent had gone cold.

Savage Grey sat down and remained sitting, motionless, straining his bulging chest, his brown neck hunched, until the moon came out. And when the moon rose, he let out a grim and desolate howl.

As if petrified to the spot, Savage Grey sat in the hollow until the following morning. Just before sunrise, he got up, yawning fitfully. Hunger had chilled his belly.

All summer he roved over the steppe, filling the flocks and *auls* with fear. The night time raids were ceaseless and the herdsmen cursed their lot. Over the whole summer, this single lone grey wolf roaming around the Black Hill and the salt lakes had succeeded in taking over fifty lambs and calves. His belly was a bottomless pit.

Twice they had been in hot pursuit on fresh horses and with a full pack of lively hunting dogs; both times he had escaped them. Despite his full stomach, he was light on his feet, a tireless marauder. The wolf didn't just run away from them, he flew away, much to the disgrace of the *aul's* finest young bloods.

During the day he hid and slept in the dark, dense cover of the rushes, in the muddy and extremely swampy lakes, but at

night nothing could stop him — neither the baying of the dogs nor the cries of the men and the fire and thunder of their rifles. In vain the herdsmen spent cartridge after cartridge, shooting at the grey shadow; in vain the shotgun pellets whistled over the flock. The wolf remained unharmed and would return almost as soon as the echo of the shot had subsided into the murk of the night.

That summer, Savage Grey put on fat. His thick, coarse fur stood up on him like the spines on a hedgehog, but his belly was still drawn and didn't give him a minute of peace.

He had fallen into the habit of going after the herds of horses. Having stalked up to a suckling foal, he would grab it by its short tail, holding it so that it couldn't move from the spot. With all its might the foal would try to break free; the wolf would then unexpectedly let it go, causing it to cartwheel to the ground. He would then hurl himself on his victim, his jaws closing tight around its throat.

Autumn flashed past, short, rainy and miserable, and again the snow-laden storms whirled and howled for days on end.

One freezing, moonlit night on the bare crest of a hill Savage Grey unexpectedly bumped into a large pack of wolves. Kicking up a whirlwind of stinging snow, the pack flew towards him, surrounding him. Savage Grey found himself nose to nose with their leader — a large and experienced male, his breath streaming from his snarling jaws.

But the pack immediately understood that it wasn't prey that they had stumbled upon but the lord and master of these local parts. Tucking his bushy tail between his legs and sitting down, Savage Grey fiercely snapped his iron fangs in reply. He was half the age of the leader of the pack, but just as tall and heavy. There wasn't a single member of the pack that had such enormous and sleek flanks.

It was the females who first approached and began to sniff Savage Grey. Warily, the younger wolves followed suit.

Only the alpha male refused to acknowledge him or allow him anywhere near him. The trespassing incomers sprawled out on the hardened snowdrift, gulping down frozen lumps of snow. Savage Grey did likewise and set off with the pack, shoulder to shoulder with the alpha male.

By the morning, a blizzard was brewing. Savage Grey led the pack to a herd of horses. They isolated a two-year-old mare, chasing her into a deep snow drift and Savage Grey knocked her over into the snow just as he had done with the piebald dog the year before. The wolves fell on the horse from all sides. Out of habit, Savage Grey began to feed on the shoulder but was knocked sideways by a snapping blow to his shoulder. Snarling next to him was the alpha male. Savage Grey had taken the leader's share of the kill.

However, this was no time for a fight — the steaming horse flesh was disappearing before their eyes. The young wolves were tearing strips from the body from the belly to the ears. Barging and growling the females were ripping the carcass apart. Savage Grey and the alpha male returned to the tight circle of wagging tails.

The two of them were left with the last remaining back haunch. At a respectful distance, with their heads on their paws, the rest of the pack watched them as they tore into the horse's flesh and crunched its bones. They both left off simultaneously, breathing heavily, glaring angrily askance at each other, smeared to the eyes in blood.

They lay apart in the centre of the pack. The females bustled around Savage Grey but he never took his green eyes off the old leader for a second.

For several more nights, the two of them led the pack together, neck and neck. If one strayed ahead the other would immediately sink his teeth into his rival's flank or hind quarters.

The next few nights were clear, still and hungry. An inarticulate rage seethed up in Savage Grey's gullet.

The wolves were making their way along a high bluff when a hare shot right out from under their feet. It darted and weaved right in front of the wolves' noses for a little under a mile before it was caught. Savage Grey and the old male simultaneously caught it, tearing it in half in the process. The pack was left a long way behind them.

Both greedily gulped down their prize and without a moment's further hesitation hurled themselves at each other. Clumps of snow and fur flew in a fan-shaped semi-circle. The resounding clash of teeth and jaws shattered the silence.

The two seasoned wolves lunged at each other, standing on their hind legs, grappling with their front, digging themselves deeper and deeper into the drift. They disengaged for a second. The big male growled and was in half a mind to let things be. But in that second's hesitation, Savage Grey managed to grab him just below the ear — a trick that wolfhounds instinctively learn. He buckled him over, pinning him down and instantaneously bit high into the male's powerful upper neck. Squeezing his fangs, like pincers, he snapped his adversary's neck.

The old leader lay on his side in the snow, snarling weakly. When the pack caught up with them, he was torn to pieces in an instant, nothing was left of him but his bones. A prone wolf is shown no mercy either by other packs or its own.

Day and night the local herdsmen found themselves in the saddle and there was nothing they could do to protect their herds. The lands around the Black Hill had never known so much fear and savagery. The wolves decimated the livestock before the very eyes of the shepherds.

From sun up till sun down, Savage Grey led his pack from one wintering ground to the next. The wolves quickly satisfied

their hunger and put on fat, but their leader would not let them rest long. He would bite and attack the females and they, in turn, would malevolently drive the younger wolves on. The pack left their resting place, thundering over the steppe like an avalanche.

There was even an occasion when the grey marauders attacked a human. A solitary traveller was riding in his sleigh along a well-beaten road. It was rare for wolves to have the nerve to approach such a road, especially if a person was travelling on it. But Savage Grey didn't hesitate for long; he pinned back his ears and set off in pursuit of the sleigh.

The horse raced on ahead. The pack soon caught up, turning it from the road into a deep snow drift. The sleigh was soon bogged down, and the wolves swarmed over the horse's back, which was up to its chest in the snow.

Terrified out of his wits, the traveller, tumbled off the sleigh and made a run for it through the deep snow. Savage Grey leapt over the sleigh and with short light bounds dashed off after the fleeing man. Two experienced females set off in pursuit of their leader.

Savage Grey made a wide circle and stood blocking the man's path as if playing with his victim and testing himself. The females stopped in anticipation behind their doomed, defenceless and hitherto inviolable, two-legged adversary. Would their grey captain attack? Would he knock the man from his sacred two-legged perch on to all fours?

It was other humans that saved him. From the nearby hill came the thunder of horses' hooves. Two horsemen came racing along the road into the hollow at a gallop, whistling and shouting.

Savage Grey wrinkled his upper lip and, glancing back set off along the virgin snow as fast as his legs could carry him. The pack left the butchered, mutilated horse and melted off into the dusky, low, snow flurries that whipped the steppe.

But this wasn't the only time Savage Grey attempted to take on a human being out in the open.

The second time took place in the middle of the day. A bitter frost fettered the steppe. A freezing haze shimmered and sparkled over the hoary light blue sky, and the crimson bloodshot eye of the sun stared balefully through it. The snow tinkled audibly.

The wolves, huddled together and literally steaming in the frost, had come right up to the *aul*. Suddenly a two-humped camel wandered out from the edge of the wintering grounds, heading straight towards the pack with its rolling gait. Sitting between its humps was a single person and that person's head was wrapped in a white scarf, and that could only mean one thing — a woman. Savage Grey pricked up his ears.

A camel is not a horse, and its rider couldn't be a shepherd or herdsman. The dogs were barking, but didn't show their faces beyond the *aul*. The pack froze, sensing easy prey. However, the camel lifted its thick-lipped head and began to run towards the pack at a steady, sprawling gallop. The wolves swept away, jostling against each other, and scattered away from it over the steppe.

A strange camel! Where was it running to? Why wasn't it afraid? And its rider was also strange, it didn't yell, didn't whistle, didn't wave its hands about.

The wolves ran without a backwards glance. Savage Grey ran with them. The camel stopped, snorting noisily. The burning January wind riffled the dirty brown hair on its flanks. The woman sitting between its humps didn't stir, only the scarf on her head ballooned out like a white orb.

The fur on Savage Grey's body stood up on end. He stood rooted to the spot, straining his finely tuned ears, sniffing.

There was nothing unusual... This two-legged human didn't frighten him, it was he who frightened humans. Hadn't he

grown up in one of their settlements? And here on the open steppe, no-one was more terrifying than him.

The pack dispersed, the wolves hovering at a distance in the hills in the glittering, freezing fog. Savage Grey stood his ground. And when the camel threw back its head and set off towards him, he unhurriedly retreated towards the hills, holding himself low, hugging the snow, his tail luring the rider further and further from the *aul* and closer and closer towards the pack.

When the camel stopped — the wolf would immediately do the same. When the camel broke into a trot, so did the wolf. The distance between them gradually shortened. Savage Grey patiently and coldly measuring it in his head.

Finally, the *aul* disappeared from sight behind a snowy incline, where the pack was waiting!

Savage Grey straightened his back and repeated the same manoeuvre he had used against the solitary traveller: with effortless bounds he made a large circle around the camel, cutting it off from the *aul*. The camel stamped on the spot, roaring hoarsely, and Savage Grey noted how its discomfort had emboldened the pack, which was now dashing down from the hill.

However, he did not notice the smooth, black thunder stick with its round unblinking eye that had appeared from somewhere between the camel's humps, glinting in the sun.

And then from out of the blue cloudless wintry sky a clap of thunder rolled out. Its rolling echo leaping from one hilltop to another. An invisible lead wasp sank its sting into the wolf's thigh, burning its way right through. For the first time in his life, Savage Grey did not remain silent. Yelping savagely, he bit his own thigh and somersaulted head over heels, something else that had never happened to him before.

Limping on three legs, Savage Grey madly tumbled away from the roaring camel. Before the hunter's frozen hands could reload the rifle, the wolf was already hidden in the hollow. A long thread of bright red drops stretched behind his three-pawed tracks.

Somehow Savage Grey had managed to reach the deep ravine next to the Big Hill, where he sprawled out on the snow. His wounded thigh burned like a scorching ember that has been spat out of the fire. He began to lick the wound on either side of his thigh where the bullet had entered and exited his body, all the while wincing and uneasily twitching his ears.

The pack had disappeared; there was no way that it would return to these parts now. It was just as well that the young wolves hadn't caught the scent of his blood or seen him lying helpless on the growing patch of red snow; they'd have had no qualms about getting themselves even!

He couldn't hear the sound of anyone in pursuit either. The strange camel hadn't followed his tracks, but Savage Grey was more worried about something else. Any moment now, he was expecting to hear the baying of dogs and the thunder of riders' hooves.

The humans seemed to be hesitating and, for some reason, they hadn't let the dogs loose. The dogs had stayed in the *aul* — sensing the approach of a lengthy ice storm.

The frost did not let up and the wind increased. The steppe began to moan. Huge snow flurries hung over the vast expanses of the steppe, stretching from the earth to the sky.

Savage Grey got up gingerly. Glancing all around, heeling to one side on three paws, the fourth hanging uselessly, he limped towards the sanctuary of the reed beds by the salt lakes.

Without taking a breath, the storm screamed over the steppe with the strength of a hundred voices for three days and three nights, and there was no telling day from night. For three days

and three nights, Savage Grey did not poke his head out of his snow-bound reed bed. He had burrowed into a snow drift and buried his head in his tail, but the blood in his veins did not freeze, it burned brightly warming him better than the hearth warms the yurt.

Savage Grey became weak and emaciated, but the torn, slanting wound on his leg, began to clot and draw shut.

By the fourth night, he emerged from under the snow and, limping heavily, set out into the steppe. Once on the move, his leg began to loosen up, the limp was less pronounced but the pain did not let up.

He hadn't eaten for a whole week. He searched for carrion but could find none. It was only at the end of the week that he got lucky: he stumbled upon a one-year-old foal and its mother that had been separated from the herd, he killed the foal, lying next to it he spent the whole night devouring it, without a moment's break. He regurgitated it and ate it up again repeatedly, tucking his frozen and numb paw under his gradually filling belly.

Another week passed. The wolf's thigh began to mend and became less painful. He began to run more freely and became more emboldened. He was drawn ever more often towards the Black Hill.

By evening, he had approached the *aul* in which he had grown up and stood at the crest of the hill, his fur erect from his ears to his tail. There was no sign of the camel in the *aul* and no sound of the dogs — they were out with the flocks and herds on the steppe. Savage Grey descended, roving through his old stamping grounds, setting his moist nose against the wind.

In the distance, he could make out the faint and sweet scent of sheep. Savage Grey bared his lip. On the horizon, in the hazy yellow light of the dawn loomed the figure of a horseman.

A small group of sheep were bunched at the horse's feet. The shepherd was driving them to the paddock.

The wolf rushed to cut them off, hiding behind the low contours and slopes in the land. He dashed out, as he always did, unexpectedly and at full pelt, but the shepherd spotted him immediately and cried out after him in a slight young boy's voice that was full of despair but also authority.

Savage Grey stopped short abruptly, sitting on his tail, ploughing up the snow with his front paws. On the horse sat a boy with a long shepherd's club that was evidently too big for him.

A boy! Savage Grey had no fear of them.

Snarling menacingly, Savage Grey swept to the side, to avoid the young shepherd and draw closer to the plaintively bleating and jostling ewes. The bleating scrum only served to excite the wolf all the more. Before him stood easy and rich prey, soft juicy bones, an abundance of gushing blood. But the boy spurred his horse and raising his heavy unwieldy club above his head galloped fearlessly right towards the wolf.

Savage Grey again involuntarily turned to the side, away from the tightly packed herd. The boy shouted after him unceasingly. And there was something in the boy's voice that somehow nagged and bothered the wolf. The wolf ran and the boy chased after him, not letting him near the sheep. Standing up in his stirrups, he shook his club, yelling at the top of his hoarse voice:

"Kok...serek! Kok...serek!"

The wolf snapped his jaws and increased his pace.

The boy was a skilful rider and desperately urged on his obedient steed, whipping it with his cudgel, but he could see that he was being left behind. Savage Grey pulled away, and the boy hurled his cudgel after him like a spear.

It hit the wolf's injured leg with its rounded end and skidded away, bouncing and ringing over the icy ground. Savage Grey grabbed it in his ferocious jaws and instantly snapped it in two. He then turned, pinning back his ears and, baring his teeth in a savage, wolfish grin, he silently hurled himself at the boy. He leapt at him with all his might, tearing his half-length sheep coat. His horse recoiled to one side with a frightened scream and the boy flew from his saddle, hitting the hard frozen ground, with his back of his head, his hat flying from his head and rolling down the slope.

The last thing the boy saw was the familiar sight of the wolf's ear that had been torn in a fight with the village dogs when he had still been living in the *aul*.

The boy was already dead when the wolf flew past him towards the sheep, ripping his cheek with his curved fang in the process.

That night they found the boy's body, took him back to his yurt and laid him next to the hearth.

His old grandmother sat at his feet.

"My sweet little foal," she kept repeating. "My sweet little foal!"

And her dry, weak-sighted eyes were unable to shed the tears that she wanted to weep.

It was then that Khasen, a hunter renowned throughout the region and his red and white borzoi, was sent for.

Khasen had famously bought his dog in exchange for a horse in Semipalatinsk. The dog had a small, white bald patch on his forehead with four equal-sized rays emanating from its centre, and for this reason, his owner had named him Akkaska, meaning White Star.

Great rumours were told of Akkaska; everybody had heard of him, and many believed he was descended from the hound

of Bogembai — the legendary folk hero whose praises are sung by the Kanzhygal people to this day.

Akkaska was pure-blooded, proud and hot-tempered. He would devour his food with a menacing growl. Wherever he stayed, Khasen would leave him on a chain; the only person Akkaska ever allowed near him was his owner. Lacking his pedigree, the village dogs avoided Akkaska, barking at him from a safe distance. Akkaska didn't even acknowledge their presence, yawning lazily; he would lie for hours, full length on his stomach, resting his long face on his long paws. He only came to life during the hunt; he could easily outrun any horse and his bark was resonating and terrifying. His eyes shone with a savage light, but not green like the wolf's; his had a reddish fire, like burning embers.

Khasen lived with the herders for several days, learning about Savage Grey's habits and asking many questions about him. The men spent the nights outside in makeshift shelters and passed whole evenings around the fire arguing about the solitary wolf that had killed Kurmash. But Khasen did not learn anything new or unexpected.

They said that the wolf was rabid and mad. They said that it wasn't a wolf at all but some kind of hyena. How else could you explain its voracious appetite? Khasen did not believe these fables for a second.

"It's a wolf," he said. "And a wolf can't live on hay alone!"

The herdsman bristled threateningly:

"Just you wait till we get our hands on him!"

Khasen chuckled:

"And what are you going to do with your bare hands? Rip the hide off his back?"

It was the bitter words of Kurmash's father that affected Khasen the most. Over his son's grave he told the hunter:

"You are experienced... brave and persistent... It's no easy matter taking on a demon. But if you don't bring me that wolf,

you are no kinsman of mine and no hunter; your reputation will be worthless and your dog doubly so. You will never be able to show your face here ever again.”

Khasen decided to get the herdsmen together to flush out the wolf — he couldn’t manage on his own. They didn’t need any persuading...

At sundown on the day before the hunt, Khasen gave his dog no meat. Instead, a bowl of gruel consisting of finely crumbled sheep’s cheese was placed in front of him. Akkaska gobbled it down swiftly, never taking his eyes from his master. The wise old dog knew that there would be a big, important and dangerous hunt the next day.

“Well, Akkaska,” Khasen said, scratching the dog behind his ear, “it’s either you or him, there’s no other way out of it. Little Kurmash will be right there behind us...”

Akkaska looked his master in the eye intently, impatiently wagging his red tail.

They headed out into the steppe, and Khasen let Akkaska off the leash, so he could stretch his legs and warm up. Akkaska bounded along the snow that shone light blue in the haze of the early morning.

Khasen split the hunting party into several groups, sending them in different directions, while he ascended with Akkaska to the stony summit of a solitary, exposed and wind blasted hill. The hunters gathered their dogs together and galloped their separate ways. Khasen placed a thick felt blanket between the sharp jagged rocks, sat Akkaska on it and lay down next to him on the snow, holding the dog by his leash.

Akkaska lay still, calm and at the ready, his ears twitching constantly like a weather vane. From every quarter the sound of shouting human voices and the frantic barking of the dogs reached them, muffled and distorted by the wind.

Suddenly, Akkaska raised himself on his front legs, unbidden, and cautiously looked in the direction of the silent hollow. He resembled a golden eagle surveying its prey from the heights of the escarpment. But for a long time, the hollow remained empty and bare and the cries of the people and the baying of the dogs seemed to recede. It was unlikely the wolf's pursuers had seen him, no doubt he had evaded their wide circle unseen like a grey ghost. Akkaska crouched in an unusual fashion, lowering his muzzle. Surely he hadn't been distracted by a hare? Borzois love to chase hares.

No. Akkaska had made no mistake. Silently and suddenly the wolf appeared in the very spot where they had been waiting for him, in the quiet, deserted, snowbound hollow. The sly old fox! The drifts here were uneven, unstable and untouched. There was no way that a horse could have followed him; it would have been up to its flanks in the snow in seconds.

The wolf ran at a quick trot, but unhurriedly and warily, and for a minute Khasen bit his lip doubtfully, looking askance at his dog. The wolf was in fine fettle and from a distance looked like someone had placed a wolf's head on the body of a yearling horse. The living image of a wolf demon.

The wolf was upwind and hadn't caught the scent of the hunter and his hound. Khasen didn't dare to hope that the beast would wander into the hairs of his sights, so he let his dog loose saying to him: "Go and get him!" and ran to get to his horse, tethered on the other side of the cliff.

Savage Grey sized up the size and strength of the red and white borzoi at first glance. There was no running away from him. The dog flew towards him down the hill with a reverberating and booming bark, it was lean and twice as big as the piebald had been. Behind it, between the rocks that resembled the humps of a camel, he spied the figure of a man with a smooth, shiny, black, thunder stick. It was a trap. He needed to get out of here, quick!

The dog and wolf collided on the snowy escarpment. With momentum on his side, the dog knocked the wolf over but rolled down the slope himself, unable to stay on his feet. Both leapt up, their jaws clashing and disengaged, breathing hoarsely, blood dripping from their mouths. They were an even match.

Several times Savage Grey leapt at the dog and on each occasion was met with a heavy, well directed, snap of the jaw. The wolf nevertheless managed to twist and dodge so that he was now standing higher up the slope from the dog and grabbed him just below the ear but, unlike the pack leader, Akkaska did not buckle; he shook his head wildly, tearing himself free, leaving a great clump of his red fur and skin in the wolf's teeth. Savage Grey understood that this was a battle that wasn't going to be over quickly. Meanwhile, a rider recklessly galloped down the hill, crying:

"Hold on, hold on boy! Hold on Akkaska!"

Savage Grey let out a short yelp and leapt straight at his opponent.

The clash of fangs was so great that, had it been dark, sparks would have flown. Hearing his master's voice, Akkaska threw caution to the wind and plunged his muzzle right into the wolf's mouth, grabbing his adversary's lower jaw in a deadly grip.

Now there was no separating them. The dog bit hard into the wolf's jaw, while the wolf bit down into the dog's head, neither could get the better of the other.

Khasen galloped up. His horse, stuttering beneath him, rose up on its hind legs. Khasen's hands also stuttered. He threw his rifle to one side, jumped from the saddle and, also throwing caution to the wind, hurled himself onto the wolf's stony-hard back with the entire weight of his body. Skilfully he slipped his broad-bladed knife under the wolf's shoulder blade.

Akkaska freed his lacerated muzzle from the wolf's convulsed, snarling maw, and retreated to one side. He stood his ground for a couple of seconds and then sank to the ground on his chest. On his side opposite him, Savage Grey lay dead.

The other hunters began to approach and one of them thrust his whip between the wolf's teeth, revealing its black and bloodied maw. Everyone was amazed at its size.

"A real demon!" said one, recoiling back.

"Kokserek!" said Khasen, gently inspecting Akkaska's wounds.

The wolf's body was brought into the *aul* and dropped next to Kurmash's yurt. Like Kurmash, his grandmother recognised Savage Grey from his torn ear.

"Kokserek!" she cried, wringing her hands. "May you be three times cursed... You ungrateful wretch! You blood sucking demon!"

And feebly she kicked the wolf's snarling maw.

1929

GUNSHOT AT THE PASS

1

The elder brother lifted his younger brother up in his arms as if he were a child, and said to his wife as she hurriedly remade the bed:

“He’s nothing but skin and bones, as dried out and light as a tumble weed... He was such a fine man, look what they’ve done to him!”

The bed consisted of three or four quilts laid out on the earthen floor under the grey clay wall of a winter hut. They gently rolled the sick, exhausted man onto his right side.

As they lifted him, he breathed heavily, barely able to stir his anaemic lips. His brother and sister-in-law leant close to his face, but had to guess at much of what he was saying:

“A starving horse is blown on the wind like a dandelion seed...” The elder brother said.

“A starving man is like a disembodied soul,” his wife added, sighing bitterly.

The elder brother was called Bakhtygul, the younger Tektygul, the woman — Khatsha.

Black moustached, wide-shouldered and barrel-chested Bakhtygul sat near his sick brother, his head hanging low. It

was only last autumn that Tektygul had still been amazing people with his herculean stature and strength. He was a head taller, thicker set and stronger than his elder brother. And now he was being destroyed by this evil illness. His strength had ebbed away like blood pouring from a deep, open wound.

Previously bare mountain rock would have seemed soft and luxurious for him; now even this feather bed was too hard. He had become cantankerous and demanding, constantly asking for his bedding to be changed; he had become as light as a child. But there had been a time when you couldn't have lifted him off the ground!

Bakhtygul recalled how he had had to carry his brother in his arms in his youth. He had been sixteen then, his brother — ten. Typhus had swept through the steppe like a wildfire, surrounding every *aul* in the district. Their parents had perished in a single day, their mother in the morning, their father by the evening. The brothers had fled their native village with no plan and little preparation, as their dying father had ordered them, and when the younger brother's legs could carry him no further, the elder carried him on his back to get as far away as possible. Back then, Bakhtygul had carried his brother away from death, from the fatal plague that was chasing them. But now there was nowhere to carry him away to...

A deep anguish was tormenting Tektygul, not the valiant yearning of youth, but the deep torment of regret.

"A felled tree bears no leaves," he kept repeating, looking up with his fading, foggy, frightened eyes, first at his brother, then at his sister-in-law. "It's all because of our accursed poverty, the fact that we have no family. It's not people that killed me brother, but poverty. How will you get by without me?"

A spasm contorted his grey lips as if some deep-seated secret was bursting forth from his soul.

"Oh, if only I could get myself even... Not for my death, but for the offence..." He whispered, sobbing violently and

helplessly. Then, turning his face to the wall, he coughed heavily like a decrepit old man.

This time Khatsha was unable to hold herself back and screamed through her tears:

“The scoundrels! I hope their arms and legs dry up! They worked and worked him... And in the end broke him completely... They could at least have given him a dead baby goat. Shown him a little bit of charity... Given a sick man something to eat...”

Bakhtygul was more sparing with his words.

“Charity?” He muttered with a gloomy sneer, the downward movement of his thick black moustaches making his expression even more severe.

Khatsha understood her husband. Their tormentors had neither pity nor nobility. It wasn’t just that they had failed to stretch out their hands to help, they hadn’t even so much as blinked! They knew full well that to feed their sick and feeble bondsman would be tantamount to admitting their guilt before him... And if Tektygul didn’t survive? They would have to answer in accordance with the ancient law of the steppe — they would have to pay for his murder. That’s what they were afraid of.

Bakhtygul didn’t recall a single day in his life when the rich had ever been fair, and a lifetime had already passed since his father and mother had passed away before his very eyes.

In that terrible year, it was not the typhus that caught up with the fugitive boys, but a terrible and unjust fate. After wandering far and wide, they found shelter with some distant kinsmen, uncles on their mother’s side, but they didn’t find happiness. The boys became bondsmen in the rich *aul* of the Kozybak people who roamed throughout Burgen Volost. The previous autumn had marked twenty years of honest and fair service to *Bai Salmen*, the youngest of the Kozybak chieftains, a tough and testy master.

Throughout his years of service, Bakhtygul had won great honour. He had become the finest stockman in the *aul* and was considered a great expert in horses, although he didn't profit from his hard work. It was his master Salmen who grew rich.

Bakhtygul had fed and tended to his master's many herds on the steppe and many hundreds of his horses, cattle and sheep had grown strong in his capable hands.

The younger brother, Tektygul had fared much worse at the hands of the master, being left to milk the mares. The years passed and with them his joyless youth, but nothing changed. During the day he milked the mares, and at night he kept watch over the flocks of sheep.

Bakhtygul was luckier — the *bai* at least allowed him to marry. The herdsman took Khatsha, the daughter of a shepherd from the neighbouring village, to be his wife, and she also began to serve *Bai* Salmen, waiting on his wife and mother. The marriage cost Bakhtygul practically everything that he had earned over ten years, although even this had been at the *bai*'s discretion. But Tektygul was nearly thirty years old and he was still unmarried.

The bondsmen brothers were renowned throughout the entire region for their strength and courage, and the *bai* had another very special use for them.

The Kozybak people were a rich people, and consequently a greedy, insatiable and power-hungry people. From time immemorial, the Kozybaki had been famous for *barymta*, the ancient steppe custom of rustling your neighbour's cattle whenever the occasion and justification presented itself. When it came to *barymta*, Bakhtygul and Tektygul were indispensable to their master.

They were given long, black clubs, the finest horses and sent on secret raids. The brothers would bow low to the *bai* and go wherever they were ordered.

Every now and then their master's elder brother, *Bai Sat* would get involved in internecine, factional squabbles in a bid to win the prized position of *volost* (the local head of the region) for himself. Sat would bring different parties in the region together, engender enmity between them and then help himself to the rich pickings in the ensuing mayhem. The young men's bones broke under the blows of the cudgels during the raids, *Bai Sat* would become *volostnoy* and *Bai Salmen's* herds and flocks would continue to grow ever larger.

The young bucks from the other clans were more than a little in awe of *Bakhtygul* and *Tektygul* and extremely envious of their strength and daring:

"They're more like cudgels than men..."

But at other times, they would sneer at them as well:

"They're more like slaves than servants... Brothers in slavery!"

A dashing renown that held little joy. A meagre glory that brought little substance. Not only strangers, but even the women and children in their own *aul* would say behind their backs:

"Our boys rode out on a raid, as ordained by custom... Our boys rode back with booty stolen in the night... We live at our *bai's* pleasure! We go where he sends us, his wish our command."

With each passing summer and winter, the *Kozybaki* grew fatter and more brazen. And not without reason when they had *Bakhtygul* and *Tektygul* in their service. Heavy were the brothers' cudgels, long their lassos and gentle their souls. Twenty years had flown by and they were still as submissive and pliable as ever.

Bai Salmen hadn't paid them a thing. The brothers and their master had never come to an agreement, as was usual in the steppe, regarding how much clothing and how much

livestock they would receive for their service... There was no place for such over-indulgence in Salmen's affairs! After all, is not the *bai* the father and benefactor of his slave? Were not the brothers kinsmen, albeit on their mother's side? You don't pay your family wages — you grant them gifts.

That was why at the age of thirty, Tektygul had nothing that he could claim as "his own". Bakhtygul and Khatsha owned a little bit more. A cramped old yurt, three to four horses, a dozen sheep — and that was it! This was all that these three strong and capable people had accumulated for their many years of diligence and effort, their crushing labour and desperate risk-taking.

But they would have been grateful for that if only their rich relations had been just, if only Salmen had had the slightest shred of humanity. One foul, wet, windy night the previous autumn, misfortune struck. That evening, when Bakhtygul drove in a small herd of horses, the sound of shouts, weeping and cursing hung over the village. *Bai* Salmen was spitting in his rage like a camel, lashing out with his whip at anyone in the *aul* who came within range. The hearth had gone out and Khatsha lay next to it in tears, talking about Tektygul as if he was dead.

"Where is he?"

"God knows..."

"Is he alive or dead?"

"God knows..."

He had been out on the steppe, of course. A whirlwind had scattered a flock of sheep, driving them far away from the *aul*. Tektygul had refused to go after them even when the *bai* had threatened him with his whip. For the first time in his life he had been unable to contain himself and told his master right to his eyes:

"Have you seen what a night it is... I have no clothes and no boots! Just this *chekmen* tunic and that has rotted through from the sweat of my back and is full of holes... Can you at least give me an old coat to protect me from the cold."

Salmen was dumbfounded at the unexpectedness of it all.

"The sheep will die... it's a big flock! And you want to strike bargains with me?"

"I'm just asking for a little kindness..."

"You dog! All you can think about is the skin on your back!"

"It's the only one I have..." Tektygul joked mirthlessly.

"Then I'll have three hides off your back."

And at a sign from the *bai* five of his finest young bucks sprang at Tektygul, knocking him to the ground, and the *bai* himself in a frenzy of rage began to stamp and kick him in the chest with his boots. They then drove him out into the steppe and Tektygul was forced to resign himself to his fate. In shame and a dull, torpid despair, he set out, saying:

"This sin will be on your head... On your head be it..."

The *bai* accompanied him out of the *aul* with the most violent and abusive language.

One glance at Tektygul was enough to give those who saw him the shivers. His *chekmen* had been completely torn by the *bai*'s hobnailed boots, and it hung in tatters like the hair of the camel when it is moulting. But everyone remained silent, while the *bai* screamed at him, driving him out with his whip...

Tektygul could have struck Salmen dead there and then with a single blow of his fist, but the thought didn't even enter the bondsman's head. Much later, on the threshold of death, he thought about this and regretted it often.

Bakhtygul ordered Khatsha to keep an eye on his herd of horses and galloped off into the steppe, calling after his brother. He rode around the neighbouring hills and ravines. He rounded

up the sheep but wasn't able to find Tektygul until dawn. When he found and lifted his younger brother onto his horse, protecting him from the wind and rain with his body, he was more dead than alive.

Khatsha was unable to manage the herd she had been left with and, like the sheep, the horses were swept far and wide by the storm. As soon as the brothers returned to the *aul* savage punishment was meted out to both of them by their master. When they beat the younger brother he was already senseless, raving in his fever, and the elder brother could do nothing to defend him. They beat them with whatever came to hand, without pity or mercy as if they were common horse thieves.

That night the brothers left Salmen's service. They fled the Kozybak's *aul*, taking with them their pitiful belongings to the neighbouring Chelkar region and took shelter in their father's dilapidated winter hut that they had abandoned twenty years previously.

But a lingering and invisible death joined them on their return, it was as if typhus had never left their parents' house and now it hovered over Tektygul's bed-head.

The young man lay down, never to rise again. All winter he was assailed with a wet, racking cough. Tektygul hawked up thick gobbets of blood, spitting out the life force within him bit by bloody bit.

He had never previously complained about his lot, but now he whined through his teeth, like a cuffed puppy. But not because he had seen no happiness in this life, and not because he had never had a wife but because he had failed to get even with the man who had done him so much wrong. Ever since his childhood, Tektygul had been a kindly soul, simple-hearted and obliging, but now it was as if an evil spirit had settled on his soul.

During the winter cattle slaughtering, Bakhtygul listened to Khatsha's advice and went to visit Salmen's brother Sat. He went with an open heart and hesitant complaint.

Sat patiently heard him out and answered him in a manner befitting his position as an adjudicating elder, a *bii* at the tribal court:

"So you say you are starving? It's good that you are being open with me. But when you served Salmen you weren't starving! You are dying, you say? It's good that you speak openly of this. But those who are murdered die immediately, and those who have only been given a thrashing live on! You also fell foul of a quick temper, but you are alive... Your brother is sick, you say? That is indeed the truth. But you know full well, the nature of this sickness! Who amongst us has not suffered at its hands? Who does not fear it? Salmen's mother and mine lived a prosperous life; she never wanted for anything but died of consumption. Who should be held to blame for this? Salmen? Or me? Or perhaps, your wife Khatsha, because it was she who served our departed mother? As God is my witness. You have forced me to say that which perhaps should not be said. But how did such a brazen idea even enter your head, who persuaded you that you can demand redress of a man for that which God has taken away?"

Without permitting Bakhtygul to say a single word in his defence, Sat dismissed him from his presence. And Bakhtygul departed, laughing bitterly in his heart at his own and Khatsha's naivety.

By early spring, Tektygul's hour had come. As the last of his strength ebbed out of him, so did his life. Imperceptibly, the dusky light in his eyes flickered and went out.

For many days Bakhtygul was inconsolable as he grieved for his brother. He mourned for forty days, and when forty days had passed he gathered his destitute kinsman together, the last

few remaining descendants of the line of Sara. Selling all that he possessed, he organised a fitting funeral feast for Tektygul — his only brother.

At the feast, they declared that the departed had been a lion. They talked of his sufferings. And also of the line of Sara's great loss. The clan had been left bereft of a great hero.

"And I have been left without hands or feet..." Bakhtygul thought to himself, hanging his head, his heart as empty and bare as his yurt.

2

In the autumn, Bakhtygul resolved to undertake a secret and dangerous mission. He chose a dark and rainy night. He tied a goat skin with a thick broth mixed with curdled milk to his saddle and set out for the mountains. Along with these supplies, he added his old travelling companion and guide — hunger.

As Bakhtygul rode he thought to himself:

"Autumn... Precious and long hoped for... The rain muffles the ear, obscures the eye and washes all tracks away... If things go well, by the morning I will have driven my prize away over three mountain passes! It will not be for nothing that I have followed these tracks and made this journey."

The mountains loomed large in the night sky. Bakhtygul could barely make out the path in the dark but could see the sheer-faced mountains and forested slopes clearly. A herdsman is as sharp-sighted as his dogs. But this was country that he had walked and ridden many a time, a country that he knew and loved.

In the daytime, the distant mountains looked like huge stone yurts erected by fearsome giants, desolate and inaccessible to mortal men. Close up at night, they took on a different, more

frightening life of their own. The dense, shaggy growth of firs on the steep slopes resembled the coat of an enormous, peacefully sleeping monster. The ravines were like its ears, sharp, pointed and alert, the cliff edges — its gaping mouth, exhaling cold and decay, and the outcrops of rock below stuck out like pointed fangs.

But these parts held no fear for Bakhtygul, the mountains were familiar to him; they greeted him with a peace and quiet that drew him on: *Keep going, hurry, we will shelter you.*

However, the path was still pretty treacherous, especially in the rainy autumnal night. Bakhtygul trusted his horse without hesitation. His dappled grey stallion was strong, seasoned and accustomed to negotiating steep slopes and sheer precipices; he was as tenacious and nimble as a mountain goat. In places, the path narrowed to a thread's width, with no room to put two hooves side by side, but like a tightrope walker the grey stallion made his way along it calmly, easily and smoothly, without squeezing his side against the bulging rock face to the right and without a single downward glance at the terrifying drop below to the left.

The grey stallion went calmly about his business! He could sense where his master was planning to go. And when Bakhtygul gave him a light squeeze with his legs in alarm or danger, the horse would toss its head and tug the reins in disagreement. He would sink his back softly under the saddle as if reassuring his rider: "Sit quietly while I carry you to your destination, and when we get there... Well, that's your business."

Bakhtygul rode and thought about himself, about his horse and about the people he was about to encounter:

"You're not likely to be very happy in this weather either. In the open, in the rain, we all roam the world like a dog without a home! But we'll see who is stronger and which of us will go home with their tail between their legs... It's all the same to me

whether you are Salmen's kinsmen or of other Kozybak stock! The entire Kozybak clan owes me an irredeemable debt."

The interminable darkness of the night passed and the short, overcast light of the day lengthened. From the late, lazy rise of the sun to early twilight, Bakhtygul would take cover and doze in the Sarymsakty pine forest, deeply fragrant and carpeted with garlic... The wood was dark and wild with a bitter-sweet smell, but it was hard to sleep there on an empty stomach. Like a hungry wolf, Bakhtygul's stomach would give him no peace. The soured milk in the goat skin was spent. As if that was food fit for a grown man? Milk satisfies the throat but not the stomach, and the weaker your thirst, the more hunger torments you.

Bakhtygul was barely able to wait until sundown. His doubts began to subside. He could hear the lone voice of his secret adviser, his inseparable friend.

"Salmen's people or any other member of their clan... even Sat himself... What will be, will be!

"The horses should now be in the highland pastures. It's still too early for them to be down in the lowland steppe. Under the heavens on the open meadows, we'll meet again this very night... God will see who is guilty and who is innocent..."

Nevertheless, in the depths of his heart, Bakhtygul hesitated. "Let Salmen be the first to justify himself!" he thought to himself, but in fact, it was actually he who wanted to justify his plan to himself before putting it into action.

"All I have at home is a handful of ground black millet..." He whispered into his horse's ear, "A measly handful for the whole family... It's for the children's sake that I'm here, they are innocent..."

By midnight, Bakhtygul's dappled grey stallion began to make better headway. The path had widened, soon they would be in the mountain pastures. Bakhtygul could sense the wide

open spaces ahead with his whole being. He cheered up, straightened his tired, chilled back. And he and his steed were filled with fresh strength and a welcome boldness.

Bakhtygul now resembled a large broad-chested eagle, readying to unfurl its wings. An eagle that has long been the master of these parts, the ruler of the mountain heights and their snow-topped summits. See how it spreads its wings, takes to the skies and soars over the rocky cliffs and bottomless gorges of the Alatau, keenly searching for its prey. It takes aim and with a piercing cry strikes suddenly and unexpectedly like an arrow, grasping and crushing with its iron talons.

Bakhtygul remembered the euphoric, intoxicating feeling that he used to feel in his youth during the night raids for the Kozybaki. Back then he felt himself to be just such a bird of prey. He would fly down, breaking heads left and right without a second thought, striking from the shoulder. Riding alongside him, his brother Tektygul, a youth with the disposition of a child and the strength of a folk hero.

Although that wasn't the whole picture by a long chalk. It would have been wrong to see them merely as muscle-bound simpletons, smashing their heads against their adversaries like rams! They were skilled at tracking, ambushing, outflanking, encircling, flying over hurdles at full gallop while still half asleep and slipping unseen under the nose of the most watchful adversary while wiping his nose for him on the way. They were nimble, cunning and keen-witted. Brute force on its own would have made the raids boring but when coupled with cunning and guile they became exhilarating. But the brothers were also dogged and indomitable. If they were unlucky and fortune didn't smile on them, they would never turn aside but fought hard and tirelessly, one of them against two or three opponents.

Now Bakhtygul needed his previous passion, his former ability to swoop down like an eagle and seize whatever he

wanted! But it was no longer there. Something had broken within him, ruptured in his heart.

However, there was no going back now. From still some distance, Bakhtygul had discerned with his keen herdsman's senses the invisible movement of a large herd of horses on the soft, wet grass. The horses were grazing beyond the rocky saddle of the pass and Bakhtygul could already hear them through the murmuring of the rain and the rustling of the wind.

If the watchmen were experienced, they would be circling not far from their herd in order to hear and cut off any intruders. Men like that would be hard to fool even on a dark night like this one. Bakhtygul shortened his reins, making sure that his dappled grey didn't hit his hoof on a stone and more importantly, after his long and lonely journey, that he didn't whinny on catching sight of the herd.

There was no slowing down. Night time adventures favour the speedy and decisive. Bakhtygul kept the stallion on a short rein, not letting him drop his head. He also drew himself up, ready for the unexpected at any moment. His small narrow eyes were wide and round like a bird of prey as if he could truly see in the dark.

The herd indolently rolled up the slope of the meadow towards Bakhtygul. It was still a good stone's throw away. Bakhtygul took cover under an isolated outcrop. Sniffing and snorting, the herd contentedly crunched the succulent grass. The playful, whinnying of the young colts carried on the air from far away. Occasionally the stallions would also make themselves heard — the attentive, cautious and bellicose lords of the herd. In an instant, Bakhtygul could distinctly make out the shimmering, tightly packed herd. Had he frightened them, surely it wasn't getting light already? No, it was still pitch dark. But it was a rich herd, incalculably rich.

Bakhtygul took off his fur hat and hung it from his saddle-bow. Biting his long moustache, he listened with all his might. There was nothing suspicious. The herdsmen weren't devilishly cunning but weren't such simpletons that they'd just gone to sleep. They could be neither seen nor heard. However, the fact that the horses were grazing so closely grouped together put him on his guard. This was no coincidence. Someone who knew what they were doing had rounded them up together and was leading them to new pastures on this pitch black night.

Suddenly, a thin stream of horses separated itself off from the condensed mass of the herd and began to flow towards the rock face under which Bakhtygul was hiding. He immediately and silently flattened himself on the back of his grey stallion, forcing him to lower his muzzle to the grass. The stream of horses splashed and sprawled in different directions and then flowed back together again. Aha! A stallion was leading its small family group away from the main herd. That meant that there couldn't be any herdsman near.

Bakhtygul gave the grey stallion a quick squeeze with his knees and, quietly as if he was grazing himself, sent the dappled grey in the direction of the small herd.

The family immediately pricked up their ears and began to move to one side, not allowing a strange solitary stallion to join them. The handsome, long-maned light bay stallion, around whom the herd huddled, threw back his head and let out a short, quiet cry as if asking: "And who are you?" He had, of course, noticed the man prostrate on the horse's back.

Bakhtygul's experienced hearing immediately differentiated this low pitched neighing, which contained a threat and a challenge. What if it were to attract the attention of a herdsman? But the grey stepped to one side in good time, and Bakhtygul pretended that he was dozing in the saddle. The stallion dropped its head.

The first horses in the small family herd were a bit on the small side, one and two-year-old youngsters. At night, until you draw right up close, you can't tell how well fed they are. Gradually, the grey stallion drew closer to the group and Bakhtygul breathed a sigh of relief, squinting at the horses greedily. That was the one he was looking for! She had separated herself of her own accord...

A large, stout mare — the finest in the small herd, and perhaps in the larger herd as a whole. Her flanks were sleek and round, her mane clipped, she looked good next to the stallion.

No longer hesitating, Bakhtygul took a horsehair lasso from his saddle. The wise, experienced old grey had made his way right into the midst of the family and stolen up to the shoulder of the mare, and Bakhtygul did not miss in the pitch darkness, with his first throw he had the lasso firmly and neatly around her neck. Bakhtygul could have lassoed a bird in mid-flight with the same throw.

The mare was headstrong; she hadn't felt the touch of bridle or tether for the whole of the summer. Frightened, capricious and shaken, she swept on ahead away from the small herd. But the grey stallion was ready for this — and not for the first time! Without waiting to be pulled, he followed straight after the fugitive female, not letting her rip the lasso from the hands of his master.

The frisky mare careered straight on at full speed causing the lasso to twang like the string of an instrument. Bakhtygul smoothly and circumspectly held on to her, not allowing her to lash out to one side and wrench the lasso free. He didn't have to control the old grey; a natural herdsman's horse, he moved where he was needed, helping his rider with his every movement. The mare kicked out, faltered in the gallop and, tiring, began to circle back towards the herd.

At that moment Bakhtygul let her feel the entire power of his herdsman's arms and lower back. He sank sharply back onto the saddle with his back grunting from the strain. The mare choked in the noose of the lasso and moderated her gallop. Then she stopped completely as if she had been fettered to the spot, her head drooping.

Cautiously closing in and shortening the lasso, Bakhtygul calmed the mare with a couple of quiet, tender and authoritative words, then drew up to her and quickly and deftly put a bridle on her. With a light glancing blow of his whip, he flicked her along her croup, wet with rain and sweat, and started to lead her behind him. The other horses in the herd looked around nervously, bunching together and jostling to get out of Bakhtygul's way. There was no way that the commotion was going to go unnoticed. And there right in front of him or, to be more precise, looming above him, the tall, thick-set figure of a man on a huge horse with the most enormous cudgel...

Was he seeing things? No... he was standing in the way, head on, without stirring like a silent idol. Was he waiting, trying to work out whether Bakhtygul was a friend or foe? With all the brains and sense of a sheep!

Bakhtygul dug his spurs hard into the grey stallion, sending him forward. The hulk silently stretched out his long arm and grabbed his horse under the bridle. He'd finally worked out what was going on! It wasn't looking good. With a shudder, Bakhtygul imagined how any moment now his opponent's horse hair lasso would draw tight over his shoulders... However, the hulking shadow did a strange thing. He held the grey stallion, lazily, languidly, almost unwillingly. He didn't lift his club. And silently as if waiting for something, snuffled deeply.

Bakhtygul stood up in his stirrups, looking at his adversary and let out an inadvertent laugh. His first impressions had been right. The man in front him really did have the brains of

a sheep. It was Kokai, famous for having the brute strength of a horse and the intelligence of a rabbit, a laughing stock throughout the entire region. There wasn't a person who hadn't bamboozled or played a joke on him in one way or another.

"I'll flatten you... You great scarecrow!" Bakhtygul said in a frightful whisper and lashing Kokai with his whip sent his hat flying from his flea brained head.

The blow wasn't heavy, more insulting than injurious, but Kokai fell from his saddle like a sack and hid behind the croup of his horse, snivelling even more loudly. He didn't even dare to shout and call out to his comrades. He knew that they would all just laugh at him and everything would end as it always had done with him. Better to remain silent, hiding in the darkness, praying to God that this unknown intruder would be on his way home as quickly as possible.

Bakhtygul tugged on his reins and galloped off towards the large gorge, overgrown with pine trees. He would be able to hide there; no one would find his tracks even in the day time...

But Kokai was one of Salmen's herdsman, a servant of Salmen himself!

That meant Bakhtygul had scored a direct hit, he had hit the greedy swine where it hurt him most. All the doubts he had had over the last two days evaporated.

The grey stallion tore along at full speed, quickly outflanking the herd. The mare obediently and willingly ran alongside, shoulder to shoulder.

The cold maw of the gorge opened out in front of them. But here they ran right up against another herdsman.

He was galloping on a good mount along the crest of a pass, intercepting Bakhtygul crying out in a ringing voice:

"Hey, who's out there? Who are you?!"

In an instant, Bakhtygul recognised him by his voice and confident manner. He wasn't a man who would be so easily

frightened, a match for the devil himself. At one time, Bakhtygul had held his very position under Salmen — the *bai* knew who to trust with responsibility.

Ducking close to the mane of the grey stallion, Bakhtygul silently loosed his club, while the herdsman raised his above his head riding towards him at full gallop, whooping at the top of his voice.

“Ai! Ai! This way lads! To me! Ai... Ai!” A rolling echo followed close on his heels.

And immediately from various sides the voices of the other herdsmen could be heard answering. Judging by the way that they had immediately taken up the alarm, none of them had been asleep and there were many of them. In the dark, they quickly and unerringly worked out which direction they needed to go without any confusion. Behind him, Bakhtygul could hear the thunderous clatter of their hot-tempered and reckless pursuit.

Their whistling and whooping rolled violently over the herd. With their foolish bawling and hallooing, the herdsmen had drawn down a veritable storm on their heads. In a single moment, the peaceful and obedient herd turned into a wild, rushing torrent.

Dozens of heads and manes swept upwards, waving their long tails, flying to the four winds. The horses bit out angrily, malevolently kicking out with their hind quarters and rising up onto their hind legs. The stallions rushed about, trying to lead their family groups in different directions. The disordered thunder of hooves drowned out the voices of the men.

The horses' backs circled and pranced, like the waves of a river approaching the rapids. Then they all flowed into a single whirlpool, a mass of hot-blooded and unseeing bodies. Then the whirlpool suddenly broke loose, turning into a terrible,

shattering wave, crushing and grinding everything in its path under a thousand hooves.

Not knowing their way in their panic and terror, as if fleeing a fire or flood, the herd galloped full pelt along the grass of the pastures. The horses threw themselves into a mad gallop, right next to each other, crushing and trampling the weak, one-year-olds and foals were fatally hurled off their feet like pebbles in an avalanche.

The interminable, deafening thunder rolled and hung over the meadows and the surrounding mountains, all the way from the gorge to the pass. It was a blessing that the great wave of horses hadn't crashed over the edge of a precipice.

One after the other the herdsmen stopped and turned back. They had changed their mind too late! Not one of them had seen who they were chasing. Any second and you could lose your way in the darkness.

They weren't immediately able to stop and calm the herd.

But finally it did calm down and the horses' heads once again lowered towards the grass. Only the whinnying of the mothers searching for their foals pierced the silence.

The herdsmen gathered together, squabbling loudly and reproaching each other:

"What on earth was that?"

"Who was the first to call the alarm?"

"Where did that accursed devil appear from!"

"Did anyone see him at first hand?"

Nobody had seen or knew anything for sure, but how could they not have called to each other at night? How can you see in the darkness if you don't call to one another..?

The squabbling hot heads finally looked around and discovered that their head herdsman Zhamantai was nowhere to be seen.

They returned to the gorge and separated, quietly calling out to each other and to Zhamantai.

He was found by the ever alert Kokai on the sharp stones of the rocky slope cliff encircling the meadow. Zhamantai was groaning weakly, there was a strong smell of blood, his club lay nearby and his horse was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey!” Kokai cried. “Look over here... Someone’s hit him right over the head... He’s bleeding!”

They picked Zhamantai up.

“He’s alive! He’s breathing... Who did this to you? Who?”

The head herdsman mumbled inaudibly, pointing towards the gorge.

It was next to these stones that he had encountered Bakhtygul. Zhamantai had been the first to strike, but in his haste the blow had been weak and inaccurate, striking his opponent over the shoulder with the light middle part of the club. Not so Bakhtygul’s retaliatory strike, which sent both rider and horse rolling down the escarpment...

Zhamantai hadn’t even had time to recognise his attacker. But judging how the thief had managed to make complete fools of so many watchmen on his own in the night, he clearly knew what he was doing and he was evidently an extremely old hand. As the saying goes: “Both wolf and steed are judged by their speed.”

Bakhtygul carried on down the gorge at an unhurried trot. At first, he listened out, then he began to relax, and the dappled grey no longer pricked up its ears. There was no pursuit. But just in case, Bakhtygul made a detour in the pine grove, making a number of tight loops like a fox. He went round in circles on the damp ground breaking his tracks by climbing out onto smooth rocks. Although it was unlikely that anyone would have been able to pick up his tracks in this constant downpour.

Bakhtygul departed, taking his trophy with him. Occasionally he would glance back at the mare, admiring her. She was very pleasing.

Patting her on the neck, he could feel a dense layer of fat under her short mane. And the flesh was yielding and elastic under his fingers. Good fortune at last! Bakhtygul hadn't been so pleased for a very long time.

"A beauty..." He said in an admiring sigh. "A good animal!" And in order not to tempt fate, he spat on his hands.

The rain continued to drizzle without ceasing. A damp mist bathed Bakhtygul's face. Smiling, he rang out his wet moustaches. Bakhtygul had no fear of losing his bearings. Despite the pitch black sky and mountains, and even if the grey stallion had had his muzzle wrapped in a shaggy sheepskin, Bakhtygul would have still known where the sky, mountains and road lay in this pitch darkness. Long before sunrise, he could tell from the fragrant aromas around him that he had entered the Sarymsakty pine forest. The road down from the mountains is always shorter than the one up it... And the grey stallion was a real worker, just like his master! But at the forest edge, the resinous odour made Bakhtygul wrinkle his nose and turn away. He swallowed the last remnants of the sour milk in the goat skin and dismounted his horse. Having taken off the saddle, he gave his faithful old horse a good rub down along his back, flanks and chest. The grey stallion needed to cool down and get dry. He must have been so hungry that his hunger was probably gnawing him from the inside out.

Bakhtygul sank into a reverie, sitting on his saddle under an old pine. A little later the dappled grey woke him, quietly tugging at his master's shoulder with his muzzle. And he was quite right; it was high time to leave. He still had a fair way to go before light and it's a sin to dawdle when you're leading good fortune by the reins.

Bakhtygul saddled up the grey stallion again, tightening the hind girth so that the saddle wouldn't slip onto the horse's shoulders — the rest of the journey was all going to be downhill.

Just before morning, the rain stopped and it became warmer. Bakhtygul was overwhelmed by sleep. He was dozing in the saddle, his moustaches resting on his chest.

He woke up with a start from his own snoring. In his fright, he gave his head a shake, looking around him wildly. He had been dreaming that he was being suffocated.

It was growing light. In order to avoid suspicious eyes, Bakhtygul took a longer, secret path, scrambling his way through the low undergrowth of young Siberian larch, clinging as tenaciously as a horse tick.

He carried on now during the day, driving himself and his horse without a break.

"It's time to get home, the children are waiting..." He muttered into the grey stallion's ear.

Bakhtygul's winter hut nestled like a lonely orphan in the deserted hollow. The dusty caravan paths never reached these parts, although you could have concealed a whole herd of horses in the gorge. It was here that Bakhtygul had been born and it was here that he had buried his mother and father. He was at home here.

On catching sight of his winter grounds he began to pick up speed, he hobbled the mare and unsteadily stepped towards his home, stretching his muscles and licking his parched lips.

There was less than a month before the snows would arrive, and the family was still living in a yurt matted with soot and full of holes, close to the fence of the paddock.

Bakhtygul gave a grunt and stroked his black moustache to hide his weary smile. He saw Khatsha. Burned black by the sun and barely covered by ripped old cast-offs, she was fussing next to the hearth making tea for the children. There were three children: the eldest, Seit was ten, the second Zhumabai was

five and two year old, dark skinned and highly active Batima was still on the breast. Two sons and a daughter... Bakhtygul and Khatsha's greatest riches.

Their father was greeted without noise and fuss but it was as if a light had entered the dark, sooty yurt. On seeing her husband, the tall and graceful Khatsha stopped in her tracks in joyful trepidation. But he just calmly approached the hearth, without saying a word, as befitted the dignity of the man of the house. Stepping over the firewood that had been dumped on the threshold, he stepped into the yurt and, grunting as he did so, sat in the master's place next to the wall opposite the door. This is the *Tor*, "the place of honour" in the yurt. After a hard journey, there is no sweeter place to be than under your own native roof.

However, Bakhtygul did not remain long standing there silently stroking his moustache. He could not hold himself back; he leant over the red embers of the hearth and sniffed.

"So how are things... Has the hearth been burning bright, can we expect anything to eat tonight? Do we not even have a mouthful of something to put in a man's stomach?"

Khatsha wanted to fling herself on him and nestle up to him in his wide strong arms. But she didn't dare. Respectfully and humbly she asked from the doorway:

"Was your journey a success?"

"Turn round and have a look..." He replied gruffly. "There's no time to lose!"

Everything that Khatsha had in the house was placed on the table. She didn't spare the oil kept in a dried, translucent sheep's stomach that she had been saving since spring. She got it out from the very bottom of the small chest for foodstuffs and handed it to her husband. She poured him hot tea. And from time to time, albeit for only a brief moment, she tried to brush his elbow or shoulder with her body in the process. He noisily

slurped the burning tea, but she felt a deep sinking feeling in her heart and he could see this.

Today was going to be a holiday for the whole family. The children's eyes shone and their joy burst forth from deep inside them. Zhumabai and Batima, roguishly laughing, quietly began to kick each other. Seit shooshed them strictly, but with a great grin on his face, stretching from ear to ear.

Everyone was smiling, and Bakhtygul's soul was singing for joy as well. For the first time in many days, it was as if a vice had been loosened that had been constricting his heart. But from his face, you would never have guessed his joy. He was a man who did not like to speak for the sake of speaking. He sat, drank his tea and stroked his moustache.

He drained three bowls in a row, wiped his moustache, got up and went out of the yurt. At the entrance, he casually muttered the words his wife had been waiting for with such trepidation:

"Fetch the sack and follow me."

She quickly put the yurt in order and gave strict orders to her elder son Seit:

"None of you are to leave the yurt. Keep an eye on the fire. If someone comes asking for me, say that I have gone to get some fuel and will be back soon."

Soon only the children were left in the yurt. Immediately, all hell broke loose. From behind the tattered felt walls, every emotion could be heard, from howling and crying to peals of ringing laughter. Zhumabai, an irrepressible bruiser, was picking on his sister and brother, grabbing the daintiest morsels of dried plum *irimishka* right out of their hands and stuffing them into his mouth.

Khatsha found her husband nearby, in a secluded spot at the bottom of a small dried out glacial lake. The lake bottom was rocky, its cracks and crevices densely packed with last

year's snow. The banks were as sheer as a picket fence and littered with sharp, pinkish-white, wind-eroded stones that were as sharp as a ram's horn and overgrown with long tussocks of grass that looked like goats' beards. It was an inconspicuous place, and the only way of getting here was at the risk of breaking your horse's legs and your own neck.

Bakhtygul was sat on his haunches next to the spread-eagled carcass of the mare. He had already started to flay it. It was dark and cold in this deep stony depression and there was a strong smell of raw meat. Hurriedly and skilfully Khatsha set about helping her husband.

She had quite a job on her hands once he'd spilled the horse's intestines out onto its hide. Sorting this out was traditionally a woman's job and Khatsha tried as best she could.

She quickly and easily started a fire on a flat stone. She had not forgotten how long it had been since her husband had eaten meat and buried the fatty, blue-lilac kidneys and two or three other lovingly selected titbits deep into the hot embers — as was fitting for him as the family's provider.

Bakhtygul glanced at the fire with a worried expression. As if the smoke might attract unwanted visitors... But even on this point, he remained silent. Hunger fogs the mind and cleaves the tongue to the roof of the mouth. "Dear God, protect this fire and feed us with this food!"

They worked tirelessly until evening. They butchered the carcass and safely concealed the hide and meat by placing stones over them. Separating and leaving for themselves only a week's supply of meat and offal. It was a modest supply, but for a poor field hand's family, it was a feast. By dusk, they had returned to the yurt.

Bakhtygul secretly chuckled to himself to see Khatsha fussing about the hearth. Having suspended a fire-blackened cauldron with water over the fire, she threw in a tender piece of

the mare's udders and heart and added a generous helping of the abundant fat from under the mane to the pot. At the same time, she fried pieces of liver on the embers and handed them out to the children.

The night was chill, but the yurt was warm and full of the comfort of the home. Seit dragged over the firewood so it would be near at hand for his mother. The boy was trying hard, but his eagerness did not fool Bakhtygul. He called his son over and he approached somewhat unwillingly and diffidently. As on previous occasions, a sadness suddenly seemed to loom over Seit. He was a strange boy, broody beyond his years, curious about things that were beyond his reason, inappropriately knowledgeable about things that should have been beyond his ken. When their family was in low spirits, an oppressive silence in the air and the adults had had a quarrel, for no rhyme or reason he would start jumping and dancing about like a kid goat. But when everyone was happy, he would go and stick his head between his knees and not raise his gaze from the ground for hours. When this sort of thing happened, there was no distracting or consoling him, even if you were to pour gold coins into his hands. He would look like a whipped or addle-brained puppy, despairing and vacant and would not even react to the calls of his mother and father as if he had been deprived of sight and hearing.

Even now the boy was brooding, heavy was his gaze, like that of an adult, his smooth boyish lips wore a pale, sad and guilty smile.

Bakhtygul sat him down next to him. Immediately, Zhumabai and Batima rushed to their father as well, like puppies to their mother's teats. Khatsha covered all four of them with a sheepskin — they were sitting at a bit of a distance from the fire.

The children quietened down. A sweet and blessed peace emanated from them. The pot was bubbling, there were good smells in the yurt, Khatsha was fussing and playfully chatting. Bakhtygul could hear her voice as if it were coming through a thickly quilted long coat. He didn't even notice how he had fallen asleep, while still sitting.

Khatsha filled the tight necked *kumgan* pitcher with warm water and called to her husband, offering to pour it over his hands. He prised his eyelids open with great effort. His eyes were opaque and in the light of the smoky flames appeared to be completely bloodshot. In his sleep, his back had gone cold and his legs had pins and needles. He stretched and shuddered groggily, sweeping away the children that had snuggled up to him.

"Oy, I'm dead on my feet..." He murmured cupping his hands together.

"In a minute, darling, in a minute..." Khatsha answered tenderly and lovingly.

Having taken the cauldron off the tripod, she took a wooden ladle to spoon out some meat onto the dish. And Bakhtygul straightened his back, taking a long narrow knife with a black handle from its sheath on his belt and tested the sharpness of the edge with the thumb of this left hand. It was an excellent knife, cutting the meat like butter. Bakhtygul washed the blade with boiling water from the kettle.

"Just a minute, just a minute..." Khatsha repeated, and at that very moment, the sound of the dogs' barking could be heard coming from outside.

The old bitch and her two puppies were barking amicably. From their barking Bakhtygul could tell that they had headed towards the paddock.

Khatsha also froze, ladle in her hand poised over the cauldron, with a frightened look at her husband.

The thunder of many hooves reverberated from under the ground and drowned out the barking of the dogs. Bakhtygul made out the familiar dull thud of the end of the long *soil* clubs bumping over the stones, the steppe people's tried and tested weapon of choice.

"Hide the meat... There's going to be trouble soon!" Bakhtygul commanded with a muffled cry.

In her alarm, Khatsha was as hapless as a piece of fluff in the wind, unable to find the lid to the cauldron. The thunder drew closer. Her husband looked at her angrily, and she completely lost her composure. Flailing the ladle around and coming out in a cold sweat, she began to whisper senselessly:

"Just a minute, just a minute..."

Bakhtygul cursed under his breath, and in her haste she picked a mat up from the floor and covered the cauldron with it, throwing the ladle into the bucket with the water and withdrawing her hand as if she'd burned herself. Steam streamed through the floor mat, but Khatsha didn't seem to notice. Her legs unable to hold her up, she sank down onto the bare floor where she was standing.

Without any greeting or invitation, a group of strangers had already entered the yurt and the expressions on their faces presaged no good. These were the Kozybakovtsy — well-built, experienced, thugs, a select band of violent men and nocturnal raiders. Their manner was insolent, their gaze contemptuous. One glance was sufficient to see that they did their talking with their fists and clubs and weren't expecting anyone to pay them back in kind.

Flicking the top of his boots with his whip, Salmen waddled in. His fat stomach and wide-rump protruding over his wide leather belt decorated with engraved silver adornments and medallions. Following up behind him were a number of other haughty, puffed up and well-fed characters. They stood massive and immobile opposite Bakhtygul.

The yurt quickly became cramped and, from behind, even more were crowding in to be close to the *bai*. The last to weasel his way through the crowd was a puny, red-bearded man with small prickly eyes. Without even glancing at Bakhtygul he sniffed the air loudly and, pretending to accidentally trip over, sprawled himself down next to the hearth, leaning against Khatsha, who was frightened out of her wits with fear. She moved away from him and he winked at her, brazenly sniggering. Court jesters and impudent bullies are quick to make themselves at home!

A brawny red-faced thug, with frightening, bulging eyes, flaring nostrils and crooked mouth, licked his shaven upper lip and without any ceremony shouted:

“Last night at the mountain pastures, you stole a pregnant female from our herd and broke our chief herdsman, Zhamantai’s head. No one else could have done it! Everyone, who knows anything about it will say that the whole affair has your name written all over it. What’s more a lone horseman with two grey horses was seen early this morning in the mountains. And someone else noticed smoke from a fire coming from somewhere close to your yurt this evening. In a word, let’s not beat around the bush. If a son who has been wronged by the father has the right to demand redress! Then all the more so do we have the right to demand it of you... Come on, give us an answer!”

Bakhtygul did not lose his nerve in front of this mob of brigands, although he knew in his heart that these were cruel and dull-witted people and that he could expect no quarter from them. Nevertheless, he stuck to his guns: “You have twisted falsehood into truth! Whatever I have done is no less than Salmen deserves!” And when the big thug did not reply, he turned and calmly asked the *bai*:

“It would seem that you want to turn me into a thief? When has Bakhtygul ever been a thief?”

Salmen swelled with anger and spat out between his teeth:

“Don’t go playing the innocent sparrow; you went on the raids with all the others!”

Not a single muscle twitched on Bakhtygul’s stony face.

“How can the sparrow possibly compare himself with the hawk? How could I possibly claim to be your equal when it comes to thievery, and how could you possibly compare your losses with those that you inflict on others?”

In an instant, Salmen had turned purple, almost choking with rage.

“You... You... snake!”

“Show your proof, first! Who has established my guilt! Where are your witnesses?”

“We’ll find them. Don’t worry on that account...”

“Well, where are they? Let them accuse me to my face.”

“You are lying!” The *bai* said to him. “You took my livestock and frightened the whole herd... A huge loss for a single night’s work. You, who I brought up with my own hands!”

“There is only one thing clear from our treatment at your hands. And that is that you think that you can treat us like your chattels or sheep. That is how you treat everybody! Tell me, what are your claims against me?”

“You’re the one who has wronged me and you have the nerve to reproach me?”

“So, you really believe that I have nothing to reproach you with!”

The *bai* stared obtusely at the former herdsman.

“What have I taken from you?”

“You’d be better off asking what you haven’t taken from me! You have plucked my soul from my breast. You destroyed the life of my only brother. Nearly beat him to death...”

“So that’s what this is about! I’ve become your blood debtor, have I?”

Bakhtygul crossed his arms over his chest.

"It is God himself who has prompted you to say these words... It is you who have said this is so!"

"Have you gone completely out of your mind?"

Bakhtygul bitterly shook his head.

"You didn't even grant a dying man the right to pass away in peace... You sent neither greetings nor the slightest charity! In the six months, it took for him to shrivel away, you didn't even send him a mangy sheep to console him before death."

The *bai* narrowed his puffy eyes and whistled through his teeth.

"So... This is where you're leading to... You want to tally everything up! Do I owe a lot? Maybe half of all my fortune rightly belongs to you... Eh...? Grab it, but don't blink! What else did you think you might take from us, the very skin from Salmen and the Kozybak people's backs?"

The laughter of the rented crowd of thugs was obsequious and threatening, but Bakhtygul refused to lower his gaze. He might have been alone, but he had the truth on his side.

"Tally up, you say? By all means. For twenty winters I had nothing but ice for a bed and snow for a blanket, for twenty summers I did not get to close my eyes for days on end. For twenty springs I was allowed no joy and for twenty autumns I did not complain once, as I pastured your herds without seeing the light of day! Tektygul suffered exactly the same hardship together with your shepherds. For twelve years after she became my wife, Khatsha served and consoled your mother. As your mother faded in her illness, so did the youth and beauty of my wife. And what did we get for all this? One right and one right alone. The right to starve slowly to death?"

"I see, I see now... You ragged and mangy slave!" Salmen screamed, foaming in his rage. "I can see right through you now. What nerve, what insolence! The dirty little thief has taken it into his head to sully my reputation! Well, you'll bite your tongue in my presence! Where is the mare?"

“You can ask for the mare via the courts.”

“Aaask..?! You half-wit, simpleton! Beggar trash... So that’s what you’re hoping will happen?”

“You have might on your side but I have the truth. Let the court judge us.”

“Wait a minute, what court! Found your tongue suddenly have you? You’ve decided to take on the Kozybaki, have you? It’s the court you want, is it? The truth you seek? Very... Good... Go to court, try to get justice, seeing how well your tongue wags. We’ll see there who gets judged by whom... But now, I am asking for the last time: Where is my mare? Well?” And turning puce, Salmen struck out with his whip.

Bakhtygul didn’t stir as if it hadn’t touched him. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see how the *bai*’s thugs had moved close, clubs at the ready, just waiting for the word.

With a sigh he replied:

“Your mare isn’t here and you’ll hear no mention of her either...”

“What have you done with her?”

“I’ve given her to a friend for safekeeping. He’s a true friend and won’t let anyone have it...”

“You’re lying, damn your eyes!”

“If I’m lying then why ask me in the first place?! You’ll get no answer from me. “

At that moment the red-bearded weasel who had been lying next to the hearth raised himself up onto his elbow and pronounced in a facetious, screeching falsetto:

“You may be the strong and silent type... But what are you trying to deny? Why steal other people’s horses for no reason..? Just for the fun of it?! May the earth swallow me up, but if my nose doesn’t deceive me, there’s something tasty cooking in this cauldron that our hostess can’t seem to take her eyes off. My nostrils are fairly itching. I can smell meat, and

I swear that it's the sweet smell of horse meat... Now, where could it have come from, do you think? Tell us your story, we're all listening."

Bakhtygul remained silent, Khatsha didn't raise her eyes from the ground and, with a bound and a flourish, the red beard pulled the floor mat off the cauldron...

"Looks like I was right! It might not be the right lid and I might not have opened it at the right time, but there's no mistaking the loot that's frying in this cauldron! Well, what are you waiting for, dear guests, they've prepared it especially in our honour. What are we waiting for? Wash your hands boys, and you, Khatsha, hand us the dish. Come on, get on with it!"

Salmen's gang began to talk among themselves, elbowing themselves as close as they could to the *bai*.

Khatsha, struck dumb by the bitter shame of it all, proffered the family's large dish.

Red Beard took the meat out and began to carve it himself. Salmen and a dozen of the fiercest thugs rolled up their sleeves and proceeded to grab the most tender, fatty and aromatic pieces.

Bakhtygul hadn't even invited them to help themselves as a joke. Their host stood to one side swallowing back his hunger. The guests densely and deliberately barricaded him from his own hearth with their backs and backsides.

Khatsha looked at the ground in hatred and loathsome abhorrence. She had seen more than her fair share of foul behaviour in her life, but this was a first!

Munching noisily, the guests stuffed their faces, and along with them their lord and *bai*. It was a miracle his belly didn't explode!

When the bottom of the dish could be seen, Salmen belched contentedly and nodding to Bakhtygul said:

"Now, you will show us your yard. We'll see what you've got hidden there. And may my family rot, if I leave you so much as mare's tail! You'll get nothing from me, you liar... I'll take everything without leaving a trace. So get to it, quickly!"

It was as if Bakhtygul's hunger pangs had tied his intestines into a tight knot.

"Go and look yourself if you want, if you can find anything," he muttered through his teeth, shaking with anger from the humiliation and in expectation of the worst that would be to come. "You're not going to frighten me with your bulging eyes and bullying tongue..."

Salmen lunged at him, slashing at Bakhtygul twice with his snake-like, yellow whip...

Bakhtygul didn't even raise his hands in defence. He looked at him without blinking, and tears formed on his swollen sleepless eyes. The *bai* let out a torrent of foul obscenities.

This was what Bakhtygul had feared more than anything else: that they would humiliate him in front of his wife and children...

Rubbing her hands, Khatsha piercingly cried:

"You will be cursed for this, Salmen, as God is my witness!"

Young Seit gave a short cry and screamed:

"Swine!" And threw himself at Salmen's chest.

The *bai* sent the small boy flying. And Bakhtygul, forgetting himself, grabbed the bully by the throat.

Bakhtygul was a frightful sight at that moment and stronger than five men. Salmen's men were not immediately able to tear him off their leader and he didn't immediately come to his senses. Still choking, and hoarse with rage Salmen screamed again:

"I'll have you in jail for this! You wretch... May I rot in the earth, but I'll see you in Siberia for this! Or better that I had never been born at all..."

But Bakhtygul was already deaf to his curses and threats. He was on the receiving end of a fatal beating. Fiery zigzags, circles and stars, flickered, weaved and exploded before his eyes. Then even they went out. And with a roaring in his ears, he felt himself flying down a narrow black well, smashing his head, back and stomach against the wall, but he still hadn't reached the bottom.

In an instant, consciousness returned with a piercing pain in his cheekbone as if a large needle had been crushed into his gum. And then darkness again, and he was falling, his chest finally hitting the bottom of the well that had the same shape and felt as hot as a scalding frying pan.

And that was the last thing Bakhtygul could recall.

4

It was not soon before he came to and, with difficulty, he managed to make Khatsha out through a bloodshot mist. In a single night, she had grown more pinched and frighteningly older. Her weeping had strangled her throat, which now made strange wheezing and bubbling sounds. Bakhtygul did not recognise his wife's voice.

A pale, dismal light poured into the yurt via a wide, jagged opening, where the door had been torn off. Light horse hair rain was pouring through it, forming a carpet of puddles on the threshold.

Bakhtygul groaned. It would have been better if he had never seen the light of day again, a light that illuminated so much misfortune.

The hearth had gone out and Bakhtygul was shaking from the cold under a heavy sheepskin. His whole body was in pain and his cheek bone felt as if it was crawling with ticks. Quietly moaning in sympathy, Khatsha was washing away the blood

that had dried on his face. It had lost its human features and was now a tuberosus, blue, purple and grey mess. His eyes had swollen to unfeasible proportions, his cheek was ripped and the blood that oozed from it had dried on the soft leather of the sheepskin, like shining black beads.

Groaning, Bakhtygul managed to turn his head with difficulty. He was looking for somebody.

They were no longer there... "They've all gone, curse them..." Khatsha muttered through her sobs.

"Seit..." Bakhtygul sighed.

"He's here, he's been so brave."

Having finished with the father, they had started on the son. Salmen himself had interrogated the boy as to where the meat was. They had even threatened to kill him but Seit had not said a word. The *bai* was livid with rage, and the young boy just laughed at him as if he were a simpleton.

Swallowing her tears, Khatsha recounted how the red-bearded thug had lit a torch and set off to prowl in ever bigger circles like a dog. He thus sniffed out the modest week's supply of meat that had been left to hang from a beam in the cattle yard and the larger store that lay under the stones in the secret hiding place. The herdsmen had identified the missing mare from the markings on the hide. Salmen ordered that it all be confiscated as well the grey stallion and a cow for good measure. The stallion for the losses caused to his herd of horses, the cow as just revenge for the offence caused and the meat because it had been stolen. After all, stolen goods should never be left in the possession of the thief.

Just before leaving, Red Beard and two more of the thugs went up to Bakhtygul with their torches. They sat down and had a good look and listen to him.

Salmen approached and the red-bearded thug said to him: "Don't worry, he's still breathing..."

"This slave is not destined to breathe his last in a yurt but in prison," Salmen replied. "My brother will become the local *volostnoy*... You will all be my witnesses... We will write a document and put a stamp on it... Then the little thief will be sent into exile in chains! You mark my words." And with that, they left.

Bakhtygul looked at his children. The poor innocent pups would once again be faced with starvation. To starve in much the same way as their old bitch's puppies would starve.

"Is there at least something left for the children?" Bakhtygul asked.

"Nothing... Not even a crumb, they cleaned the bottom of every pot and pan. You see, the monsters have even vandalised the yurt... They even smashed up the frame... The swine ordered them to do that! May his grave be washed away after an early death!"

Bakhtygul ground his teeth and again lapsed into oblivion. Until midday he raved loudly, questioning God and earthly justice, reproaching the former and castigating the latter.

"Ah! Eh! Now, tell me who stole what from whom?"

For several days, Bakhtygul lay flat on his back, racking his brains, trying to work out what to do.

He was alone and didn't have a hope in the world. How was he going to exact just revenge on the Kozybaki on his own? There was no way he would make it into their *aul*, and they weren't going to negotiate. They were not only avaricious and greedy but arrogant to boot. Others would be frightened into remaining silent. The real misfortune was that he had no one to turn to. His kinsmen? The entire impoverished Sara clan didn't number more than about two dozen households at the most. And these were scattered throughout the region; he couldn't have counted them on his fingers. Usually, they migrated with the richer clans, serving them and making ends meet in poverty

and affliction. Who were they going to give orders to? No one would listen to them. There wasn't a single one of them who owned even a fingernail of land!

But unlike his kinsmen, Bakhtygul was incapable of reconciling himself with his lot. Perhaps he was braver and more stubborn, which was why his lot was even worse and more difficult than theirs. His brother Tektygul had been as mild as a lamb and the wolves had obligingly torn him to pieces. But his young son, Seit had his father's headstrong soul and disposition. Just a little bit of good fortune and Bakhtygul could have become a man of standing, able to live according to his conscience and to feed his children so that they wouldn't have to go hungry. Thank God, he at least had a wise head on his shoulders and an eloquent tongue in his mouth. Bakhtygul would have been capable of many things... if it hadn't been for misfortune and injustice. And like an infectious, incurable disease, God had afflicted him with hunger, torment and humiliation.

But now things would go from bad to worse. From this day, he would be a constant speck in Salmen's eye. What he had done to him was nothing in comparison with what he was going to do in the future! The Kozybaki would try to outdo themselves. They had the authorities behind them: the *volostnoy* was one of theirs and the *bii* judges in the clan courts were their kinsmen. They were all one big family, each greasing the other's palm. And if they succeeded in proving that they had caught Bakhtygul with stolen goods, they would throw the book at him, blaming him for crimes that might or might not exist, but most importantly making him the scapegoat for all their dirty dealings. If one of Salmen's gang stole something the finger of blame would be immediately pointed at Bakhtygul. And then he would be confronted with the thing he feared most — the misfortune and disgrace of prison.

Bakhtygul feared prison more than anything else in the wide world.

Salmen knew how to terrify his adversaries. On more than one occasion Bakhtygul had faced death during the *barymta* raids for his former master, and never once had he so much as shivered. But now he was shaking as if he had been afflicted with a fever. Like all men of the open steppe, for him, the idea of prison was like a fetid, sepulchral womb. They wanted to bury him alive. Tektygul's lot was easy in comparison.

Salmen was not the sort to make threats lightly. He would ensure that an example would be made of his wretched slave so that no one else would dare stand up to him; he would be sure to send him to prison.

"What am I to do?" Bakhtygul asked himself and, in his anguish, he rolled in the mud shamelessly in front of his wife and children like a wounded, trapped wild animal.

Khatsha thought her husband was raving once again and prayed with all her soul:

"Dear God, please help him to endure... Oh God, don't let him die!"

There was one day when his spirits were at rock bottom. He called for Khatsha and began to say to her the sort of things that he would previously have never said:

"No, wife... might makes right... that's the way of the world, what can I do?"

That moment was the first time that she was genuinely fearful for him.

"Surely, there must be someone who can stand up for us?"

He did not reply, but fell into deep thought and evidently seemed to have come up with something! Khatsha did not immediately understand this. But he abruptly stopped moaning and raving and went silent, tracing his fingers over his scar-ravaged chest.

A week later and Bakhtygul was back on his feet, and once he was up, Khatsha could see that her faith in him had not been misplaced. Once again, he prepared for a long journey.

The Kozybak thieves had taken his trusty grey stallion, but Bakhtygul had another that was just as good, a high-spirited chestnut pacer stallion, that had been kept safe in a trusted friend's herd until a time when it would be needed.

The horse was highly desirable, slender and lean with a broad chest and fine legs. On the boundless steppe even the poorest homeless shepherd might own two or three horses, but not every *bai* owned a horse as fine as Bakhtygul's. One of the *volostnoy* regional leaders was said to have a genuine pacer stallion.

The time had come to saddle up the chestnut. Early in the morning Bakhtygul loaded his ancient flintlock rifle, rubbed oil into the cut on his cheekbone, stuck a gauze onto it and, nodding farewell to Seit, gave rein to his horse. The chestnut carried Bakhtygul high up into the mountains, to the wild inaccessible places above the tree line.

For a long time, horse and rider fought their way through the low larches and thorny dog roses and it was only by midday that he made his way out of the impenetrable forest thickets. Opening out before him and reaching right up to the sky was the ponderous, oxblood mass of the red cliffs.

They hang so low that they cause onlookers to duck their heads involuntarily. Just approaching them is awe-inspiring. It feels like a sin to violate their stately, centuries-old silence. Neither man nor his cattle have any place here. The Red Cliffs' only truly native inhabitants are the unfettered, wild beasts and it's rare for hunters to wander these parts. It's difficult to get here and even more difficult to get back out again.

Bakhtygul quietly rode up to these stone giants, dismounted noiselessly, tied his horse to a shady crevice, took off his fox

fur *malakhai* hat, stuffing it into his tunic, tightened his rifle strap and began to climb up the sheer slope. Blood began to ooze out from under the scar on his cheek from the strain, a salty stream built up and flowed into his mouth. Bakhtygul licked it dry.

He took a breath on the bare summit of the escarpment, rubbing his sides as a rider does to an exhausted horse.

Looming below him unseen was a vast grey stone crater and, beyond that, he knew there was a sheer drop descending in steps that was crisscrossed with threadlike paths disappearing into the rock face that the mountain goats loved to use.

Bakhtygul gazed keenly at the immobile ripples of the rock face. On this side of the crater, on the wild slope, nothing was to be seen. All was dead, nothing stirred, nothing breathed. A wall-eyed, silent desert. Many was the time Bakhtygul had roved and crawled through these parts, scratched and torn by its stony talons, glad to have returned unharmed and in one piece. But today he could not leave empty handed. Today it was his lot to test his doggedness to the full.

The sky was as grey and gloomy as the surrounding rocks, and Bakhtygul with his grey patched tunic, his grey bloodless face and lean bony body could have passed for a rock himself. Unslinging his flintlock, unnoticed and unheard he began to crawl along the crest of the crater like a lizard. "Oh, great mountains! Show some mercy to this poor wretch!"

The day was sinking towards sunset when Bakhtygul drew up to the slope on the other side of the crater where some goat tracks emerged.

Sometimes even the ill-starred are fortunate. Right beneath Bakhtygul on a long winding slope, as if floating on a transparent grey stony mist, stood three fabulous argali wild sheep — a shaggy huge horned male and his short-tailed, sharp-hoofed mate. They had only just stopped, turning their heads back

in the direction from which they had just run, wary, alert and ready to bound away and disappear at the first bat of an eye. There was a spring-like, winged energy wound tight in their shaggy bodies.

“Well, God willing...” Bakhtygul whispered soundlessly, slowly pulling out the barrel of the flintlock from under his chest and laying himself down flat.

He aimed at the male but was too hasty, his hands shook, the muzzle moved and the animal noticed it. An alert nature never looks back twice. Barely sensing that something was wrong, the ram sprang to one side and bounding in giant leaps, quickly and lightly dashed down the sheer face of the slope. The other goats caught up with him, jumping on ahead like fleas.

But immediately, Bakhtygul steadied his hands, placing the sheep directly in his sights. And when it leapt up onto a high rock, calling its offspring after it, a flame leapt out of the barrel followed by a sharp report. A pall of blue smoke slowly billowed out over the rocks and through it, Bakhtygul saw the goat somersault in mid-flight.

With no regard for himself, Bakhtygul tumbled down the slope, fearing that his prey might get up again and escape. The ram was lying on its side, writhing in agony. Bakhtygul grabbed his knife and slit the animal's throat. Bright crimson blood gushed out on to the grey stones. The ram made a final jerk and went limp. Wheezing loudly, Bakhtygul sank down next to it.

He then skinned his prey, throwing away its innards. He cut the carcass in half, tying the meat up in the animal's hide. Taking a roundabout route through the gorge, Bakhtygul led the chestnut to his prize and with great difficulty loaded and made it fast to his horse.

Resting in the saddle, he headed back into the overgrown scrub. But he didn't set a course for home...

By the evening Bakhtygul had descended into a shady valley protected from the wind. Settled here on the banks of the river was a large and wealthy village. This was Zharasbai's *aul*, the *volostnoy* for the neighbouring region of Chelkar.

Zharasbai was well-known beyond his own *volost* and not only for the honour of his rank. Throughout the region, there was no administrator, *Mirza* (prince), *Khodja* (teacher) or *Bai* who was more distinguished. He was held in high renown as a landowner, merchant and warrior. He had no peer in terms of wealth, honour and intelligence.

You could never tell what you were going to get from a man of this sort:

He could dole out goodness or black-heartedness, kindness or mistreatment in equal measure. In this regard, his generosity knew no bounds!

"I'll try my luck..." Bakhtygul thought as he approached the *aul*. "I'm sick and tired of living like a recluse..."

It was evident that Zharasbai was planning to spend the winter here next to the river. Many of the *aul*'s inhabitants had moved from their yurts to their clay-walled winter quarters, wary of the autumn frosts. In the evening dusk, everyone had come outside to enjoy the last of the light.

Next to the gates of the largest yard, Bakhtygul could make out a tall fat man in an ermine *treukh* three-flapped hat and a snow-white lambskin winter coat. His face was a livid red and shone with perspiration but had an importance and even a certain majesty about it. Zharasbai! He was no older than Bakhtygul but there was no way the bondsman would ever rise to be his equal... He was surrounded by an entire suite: two respected elders, his eldest son — a well-fed youth of about seventeen years of age and any number of hangers-on, scurrying like grey mice around a sack of flour.

Bakhtygul offered his greetings with all due respect. Casting a brief glance at the curled horns of the argali wild sheep, the *volostnoy* replied with a gracious nod of the head. Not a bad start.

Carrying a tight necked *kumgan* pitcher the *Bai's* eldest wife came out of the gates, an opulent woman with a fair and well-pampered face. The huge horns on the head of the fine goat covered with blood also caught her attention and she slowly circled Bakhtygul's horse admiringly pursing her lips. Other curious onlookers were drawn in behind her.

Bakhtygul gave her a polite bow.

"It would appear this trifle has taken your fancy? On my way to your *aul* this afternoon I figured that you probably haven't enjoyed game for a while... So I went up into the mountains and found this poor specimen... Take it, it's all yours if you have no objections..."

For a split second the *baibishye* gave a crafty incline of the head to her husband as if asking for his permission, fearing that he might refuse her. Bakhtygul laughed to himself, *He's not going to refuse her.*

"Take it... What else can you do..." Zharasbai ordered laconically, adding with a wink to those around him: "The animal is from our mountains after all, and if you hadn't offered it yourself, we would have had to take it off you anyway!"

Everyone laughed. Bakhtygul's heart became much easier. One of the elders impatiently waved his hand.

"Where are the young women? Let them take it..."

Bakhtygul guessed that this was Kairanbai, a tight-fisted and calculating old man: he had been Zharasbai's late father's dearest friend, now he was in charge of the *volostnoy's* livestock and was considered his right-hand man.

"You mustn't think, Kadisha," Kairanbai said quickly to the *bai's* wife, "that if a person has suffered dishonour and

abuse at the hands of the Kozybaki, then what he bears in his hands is also desecrated and defiled! Don't turn your nose up at his gift! This poor man would give his last horse if the person he was giving it to was to his liking. He is stubborn, it's true, but they say that the great heroes of old were also stubborn..."

Tattered and flattered, Bakhtygul bowed low towards the old man.

"Thank you, kind father. You have put my case better than I could myself. I have neither happiness nor fortune, despite being stubborn and dogged. This is why I have come to the *bai* to lay before him all that has befallen me... But in the presence of your wisdom, I remain silent. You see right through me. Let things be as you judge and see fit."

The *volostnoy*'s son called over two young men, who took the carcass from the horse and carried it into the yard, while the son and heir took the goat's great head and began playfully to butt the nearby women from behind with its huge horns.

Zharasbai condescendingly watched all this horseplay without deigning to say a word to Bakhtygul. Perhaps it wasn't his intention to demean him in this way, but on the other hand, it would not have been seemly for a *volostnoy* to welcome every stranger he met with wide open arms. Bakhtygul was not someone of great standing and the sheep wasn't exactly the most valuable present he'd ever been brought!

However, the second *aqsaqal* elder looked upon Bakhtygul with sympathy. This was Sarsen, one of the most important *bii* tribal court judges in the region. Zharasbai would support his decisions in the courts without exception, valuing his many years of experience, and most importantly his wide network of connections.

Sarsen was on an equal footing with the *volostnoy*.

"This man has been through much..." Sarsen pronounced, stroking his beard. "A good intention is half the battle and

I have noted there is much that is good in your intentions. And it's not the first time that a man such as you who has experienced every misfortune life can throw at them has had to run away from his native village. Is this the case with you?"

"It is indeed as you say, *aqsaqal*," Bakhtygul replied, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the *volostnoy*. "I have not taken the easy or small part... And I am prepared to repay your kindness with interest as long as strength remains in my body!"

The *volostnoy* grudgingly raised an eyebrow and finally turned to address Bakhtygul.

"From the heights of your horse, it would appear that you speak the truth. Let's hear what you have to say at my table. Come into my house, you dogged and obstinate man..."

Overjoyed, Bakhtygul followed the *bai*.

"Forgive me, my lord, I have barely come through your gates and have spoken too much already. For a long time, I have been wanting to unburden myself to somebody."

"Ah... Well done... Good man..." the hangers-on murmured in a friendly fashion, noting the *bai*'s disposition.

Following their host in strict order of seniority, they entered into the yard and then into his large and rich house.

In his whole life, Bakhtygul had rarely been in such a grand house, maybe just on one other occasion and even then he had been left at the threshold. A large paraffin lamp burned like the sun in the middle of a huge, clean, warm room. On the *Tor*, the *bai*'s unapproachable place of honour, lay a mountain of multi-coloured, quilted blankets. Leading to it from the door was a red carpet. On the right was a Russian bedstead of glittering nickel and above it on the wall was an even richer patterned carpet. Everything was as bright, sparkling and playful as a flowering spring meadow carpeted with dew.

To step into a house such as this after his dark and cold field hand's yurt, adorned with a few ragged felt blankets, was a rare honour for Bakhtygul, but to spend the night in a place of such unearthly delights seemed to be a happiness beyond his dreams. And when he was sat next to the other guests in front of the *bai*'s luxurious and plentiful table, it was as if he had forgotten his hunger, despite the protestations of his knotted stomach and salivating mouth. He ate modestly, and everyone could see how much it cost him to do so. Thank heavens, his host's wife was quick to notice and not slow to fill his plate. He thanked her with dignity and recounted his whole tale... The words poured out of him of their own accord hot and bitter.

Everybody listened willingly and with interest as if hearing some important bit of local news or an enchanting folk tale. When he pronounced the terrifying word "prison", the hostess let out a little scream and groaned in the way that women do, while the older men frowned and shook their heads; *Bii Sarsen* grabbed his beard in alarm. A steppe dweller may be capable of wishing death upon a fellow steppe dweller, but never prison... And Bakhtygul was moved to the depths of his heart that a *bai* family should show such compassion, such understanding and sense the injustice shown to him! He would never have dreamt that he would ever be received into such a house, given such food and granted such attention

"I am a naked, defenceless orphan, without family or clan..." Bakhtygul stated. "Like a young foal that has been separated from the herd. My only hope is to find the succour and protection that a large herd can provide. I would give everything and agree to anything for this!"

As the most cosseted members of the family, the *baibishye* and *Zhangazi*, the eldest son, did not wait for the elders to speak but immediately began to pour scorn on the *Kozybaki*. Neither woman nor boy could take their eyes off the famous

cattle raider Bakhtygul. It would be a great boon to have such a person as your friend and servant.

Bii Sarsen, pre-empting his host likewise said:

“Okay, we’ll see what skills lie in your hands and what courage in your heart. The time for weeping is over and the time to prove yourself in the service of our *volostnoy* has come. Make the most of your chance! He needs men like you who are experienced, canny and quick, men who fear neither God nor the devil... If you try hard and succeed, you will become your own master, a member of the family, a younger brother to him and an uncle to his son. So keep your head up and fear nothing! While you are under his protection there is no court nor authority that can touch you. The great White Tsar himself wouldn’t be able to take you dead or alive! And maybe not today, but tomorrow, God willing, you will settle your accounts with your enemies, remind them of the evil they have done and show them the strength of your arm.”

Bakhtygul listened and could barely believe his ears. How could they be so generous? And what were this respected judge and elder hinting at? “You will become a kinsman... If not today, then tomorrow...” Bakhtygul knew that the Kozybaki were ancient rivals of Zharasbai’s. They were like two banks of one river, two mountains in one district. Bakhtygul had come here for good reason. But surely the great Zharasbai would never deign to become the brother of a lowly and ill-starred fugitive. Bakhtygul never expected such a turn of events. Fate had offered more than he had hoped for.

He was a fugitive on the run from the horror of prison and was ready to become his saviour’s slave. But they had held their hands out to him, to prove that in the steppe honour and justice could exist even for the likes of him!

However, Zharasbai was in no hurry to say his piece. As was his wont, he had listened to everything without saying

a word himself. And there was no way of telling from his imperious and amused expression what he was thinking. It was good that he was still listening and hadn't interrupted him... It would be good if he was only doing this to test the poor wretch's ability to be patient. But perhaps he was hesitating? Perhaps he was listening and listening and would then turn his back on him. Drive him away instead of accepting him...

That evening, Bakhtygul was not fated to hear what the lord and master would say. Joking and laughing, the *volostnoy* eventually went to bed, having bid his guests and hangers-on goodnight, he gave Bakhtygul a curt nod just as he had when they first met. Everyone parted in good spirits: the lord and master was pleased, jovial and in a good mood.

From early morning, a steady flow of petitioners began to make their way to the *volostnoy*'s courtyard. There were many of them. Bakhtygul saddled up his chestnut and stood to one side, showing that he was ready to leave or stay as ordered. The *volostnoy* finally came out after his morning tea. "Give me at least a sign of hope..." Bakhtygul's gaze seemed to beseech. Zharasbai walked past him without even acknowledging him. But Bakhtygul patiently waited for him to deal with the other petitioners and once again tried to catch his eye.

"What do you want my good man?" The *volostnoy* asked, exhaling wearily.

Bakhtygul straightened his back and approached.

"I swear I will serve you to the grave! Send me wherever you like. Ask whatever you see fit. I will be like a younger brother to you, and an uncle to your son... Was it not the wise, grey-bearded Sarsen himself who said this only last night?"

"Enough has already been said on this subject," Zharasbai replied "And I will remember your oath. But we're going to have to wait a while until the rumours and fuss die down. It doesn't suit my purposes at the moment to get involved with

the Kozybaki over small trifles. The time will come when I will call upon you and you can rest assured that I will work you so hard that you won't have time to sleep! We shall see how well you keep your oath then... But don't shy away from us completely, be sure to visit often. My kinsmen have taken a liking to you; if you can help them with the estate, they will find plenty for you to do. Then I will set you up as is right and proper. So step to it."

Bakhtygul was so overjoyed that he couldn't find the right words of gratitude.

- "Dear... kind *volost*... You are more to me than my own father... I thought that you might turn your back on me... Forgive me for my bold words..." Then he tugged on the reins of chestnut racer and the horse immediately tossed its proud head. "Please allow me in return for your kindness and welcome to do one small thing in return. I would be most grateful if you would allow me the honour of offering this horse as a present to your son Zhangazi! Seeing as we are now no longer strangers, let him take my chestnut horse and have it for his own..."

The *volostnoy* remained silent, neither consenting nor objecting, but looked approvingly, and Bakhtygul rushed to tell the young Zhangazi the news. The horse was swift-footed, a rare beauty. Making it all the more of a pleasure to give him away as a gift.

The lord's son, much like his father, did not deign either to refuse or accept the offer, but it was evident that the young man was very pleased. What else could one expect; like all youngsters he was foolish, playful and of course a connoisseur of horses!

The lady of the house accompanied Bakhtygul to the road and made sure that he didn't leave empty handed, placing in his hands a number of homemade salamis, rich in fat and stuffed with garlic, as well as several large pieces of tasty colt

meat that she had picked out especially herself. Bakhtygul returned home feeling happy and greatly blessed.

A couple of days later, Zhangazi arrived at Bakhtygul's yurt, sat for a while, exchanged pleasantries, passed on his father's greetings and then, untying the chestnut in the yard, jumped into the saddle and galloped off back to his own *aul*. The pacer looked good under him, soaring like a falcon.

5

From that day, a strange and unusually easy life commenced for Bakhtygul.

For the first winter, the *volostnoy* kept Bakhtygul in the shadows, not allowing him to show his face at his administrative chambers. Naturally, Bakhtygul did not sit idly by, but he did not starve and was not demeaned. And little by little his previous unhappy fame began to diminish in people's memories.

At the large councils at which gathered the region's *Atkamineri* big wigs and landowning elite, Zharasbai would quietly praise his new servant, recounting his sufferings, misfortunes and fortitude. Sarsen and Kairanbai took up the theme, praising the *volostnoy* in unison for his charitable role in this enterprise. For transforming this *barymtach* night raider into an honest hard worker, filling his embittered heart with kindness and humility.

"Once on the right path... he'll become a good man..."

As fat as their herds, and as proud as their lineage, the *atkamineri* began to pay closer attention to the fugitive bondsman. Respectable people began to slap him on the shoulder and engage him in conversation. And those who had the wherewithal to understand understood that Zharasbai had special plans for this man.

But Bakhtygul hadn't won his new place by sitting idly by. The easy life had been anything but easy for him — the eagle loves to fly high, the stallion loves the chase. He tried to serve Zharasbai's *aul* with all his strength. Whatever he turned his hand to, he did so with enviable ease, although ostensibly he had never done anything except look after animals all his life. But these trifling jobs in the *aul* could hardly be described as real work. And it wasn't as if it was here that his strength was really needed. When a woman's would have more than sufficed.

From sun up to sun down, Bakhtygul would rush from one end of the *aul* to the other, tirelessly looking for things to do, mending this, cleaning that, carrying this and loading that, as if seeking the solace of fatigue. The keen-sighted Kairanbai, seeing his ability and determination to take on work, softened completely — a smile spreading across his face like mutton fat floating across the surface of the cauldron. It's always a sweet sight to watch someone else bending their backs and spilling their sweat for your benefit.

Tasks and chores were soon completed. He was a master at everything he turned his hand to. And nobody's fool to boot!

"There's no pulling the wool over his eyes..." Kairanbai told the *volostnoy*.

"It's truly only down to his lack of kin and fickle misfortune that he hasn't amassed a fortune. How else can you explain why poverty has dogged such a hard worker for so long?" Kairanbai would impress on the others.

Bakhtygul was capable of doing any job around the estate, from pasturing the horses or fattening the sheep, to the spring sowing or the autumn harvesting. Whether it was finding unspoilt pasturage, getting the hay in on time, taking precautions against ice storms and famine or baking the perfect white loaf for an appropriate occasion — Bakhtygul would take it on and do it quicker and better than any other herdsman, shepherd or baker.

He had started out as a servant, but soon became a helper and then an adviser, and not only in the *volostnoy's* house but

all his neighbours' as well. People weren't shy to go to him for advice on all manner of practical as well as family matters; he made peace, gave good counsel and instilled reason wherever he went despite his relative youth. And with time he earned the title "Bakhtygul the far-sighted" in the *aul*.

Gradually, the *volostnoy* drew him closer and closer to his administrative chambers. First one commission, then another... Once again, Bakhtygul found himself back in the saddle, however, this time not with the long shepherd's club, but with a dispatch rider's bag over his shoulder — a sign of authority and trust. He could now barely recognise himself.

Between jobs, he did not forget to look after his own interests. Travelling across the region with a bag full of important papers inscribed in ink and marked with official seals, he would often take a travelling companion with him, making a small profit by selling goods brought from other parts that people might want to buy, and there were many who awaited his return, interested to see what he would bring with him this time. In the spring, Bakhtygul ploughed a plot of land initially three times and then four times greater than he had previously and Zharasbai didn't say a word. Kairanbai allowed him to help himself to seeds.

As had been the case with Salmen, he was not paid a wage, but at least Zharasbai didn't beat him and left him to his own devices. Khatsha was able to set aside stores for the upcoming winter of meat and flour, oil and white salt, strong thread and sulphurous yellow matches exactly like the ones the *bai* himself had in his own home. She herself became an accepted member of the *volostnoy's aul*, serving his wife, and by the summer had even put on a little weight and fixed herself up with a few new clothes. The *baibishye's* cast-offs became her holiday clothes and she was able to re-sew her old clothes into new ones for the children so that they would no longer have to run around in torn rags half naked.

Once winter had set in, Zharasbai called Bakhtygul over to him and said:

“Do you want your son to be able to read? Bring the young lad along to lessons.”

It was a tremendous gesture of generosity.

In the *volostnoy's aul*, there lived a young Kazakh called Zhunus. He had graduated from Russian school and because of his ability to read he had been nicknamed “the mullah”. He was teaching two to three boys from the more prosperous families how to read; he was also teaching the *volostnoy's* son Zhangazi. It was with great reverence that Bakhtygul brought Seit to the mullah.

“You might end up studying in the local town, then you’ll really become someone in the world,” Bakhtygul told his son and these heartfelt words made a strong impression on Seit.

Seit spent the whole of the winter learning the Russian alphabet, unremittingly repeating it like a sorcerer’s spell that would eventually help him to make his way in the world. He liked learning and quickly overtook the lazy, spoiled and slightly obtuse richer boys.

With great affection, the mullah told Seit:

“When you grow up, you’ll become a mullah.”

And at nights Seit would often find it hard to get to sleep, dreaming of how one day he would grow up to become a mullah.

The crops that Bakhtygul had sown grew tall and unblemished. The bondsman’s soul at last found a degree of calm. By the summer he had definitively moved into Zharasbai’s *aul*, becoming a kinsman to him. He spent the hot summer season with his son in the pastures high up in the mountains, where he drank his fill of the rich, foamy, golden-coloured *kumiss*.

In the summer there was less to do around the estate and the *volostnoy* took Bakhtygul completely under his wing. Whole

days were taken up with the bewildering bustle of Zharasbai's wider political affairs.

Bakhtygul quickly grasped the finer points of his master's business: how to deport himself in accordance with his rank — amiably and politely in those villages that the *volostnoy* regarded with favour, and threateningly and aggressively in those places he did not. Sometimes the *volostnoy* even allowed him to speak at small *aul* meetings — for Bakhtygul was eloquent and spoke well. He was loyal and efficient until he sensed that something was awry. He noted that people now looked up to him as he had looked up to Salmen's right-hand men. And immediately a dark cloud passed over the soul of the unpaid bondsman's soul.

So far he had heard nothing from Salmen. Almost a year had flown by, but Zharasbai hadn't once brought up the whole affair with Salmen. Bakhtygul tried to second guess what was on the *volostnoy's* mind, and the more he thought about it the more his mood darkened. He was well aware of the dishonesty of the world and this silence was suspicious.

Elections were due in the autumn and, back at the beginning of the year in Chelkar, Burgen and other regions, there had ensued a hidden and complex struggle between the clan parties. With each passing month, they became more open and more acute.

"Don't expect any great kindness from this place..." Bakhtygul the Farsighted said to himself, but he couldn't for the life of him guess in what form his impending misfortune would hit him.

Passions flared up that were incomprehensible and unfathomable to normal mortals and had already spread beyond the borders of the smaller *volost* regions and seized nearly half of the larger *uyezd* administrative region. The strong, rich clans, the *bii* and the *atkamineri* of neighbouring *volosts* were

all settling old scores and fanning the flames of old unresolved disputes.

The weak sought protectors, the strong — allies. The closer the elections approached the clearer it became that there were two large inter-regional forces forming. One headed by the Chelkar *Volostnoy* Zharasbai and the other led by Sat the head of the Burgensk region and Salmen's brother, both had their share of secret and paid agents in the opponent's camp.

In his own *volost*, it appeared that Sat was in a stronger and more powerful position than Zharasbai in Chelkar. Sat was backed by the numerous, close-knit and conceited Kozybak clan. Whereas Zharasbai was supported by two or three clans, each rich and influential in their own right, but it's hard to find two clans on the steppe without some history and friction between them. Nevertheless, the guileful Zharasbai had many more contacts in the wider *uyezd* than the over-confident Sat, more than all the other *volostnoys* put together, and Zharasbai had a close rein on all of them.

The struggle blazed up like a steppe fire during a summer drought.

Insidious denunciations, with countless *biis* and *atkamineris'* signatures, stamps, seals and *tamga* clan symbols attached to them, flooded into the chancellery of the head of the *uyezd*, a Russian official in his uniform with its twinkling, shiny buttons.

Sat's *atkamineris* excelled themselves in their complaints against Zharasbai's high-handedness. Each complaint entailed an investigation and a possible ignominious and onerous fine. But each time, Zharasbai returned from the town in triumph completely exonerated. Things didn't go quite so well for Sat in town though. For slandering Zharasbai, he was sentenced to fifteen days in the region's prison. God alone knew how much time and money Zharasbai invested in this cunning web of intrigue, but it was worth it.

Everyone for miles around said:

“He came back smelling of roses without a stain on his reputation... But that other one, Sat, ended up right up to his neck in the manure... Fifteen days and nights in prison — oy, oy, oy!”

After this triumph, Zharasbai gained more supporters but more opponents also. Where there is fear, there is also envy.

They tirelessly visited the migrating *atkaminer*, in some places using flattery, in others threats. The summer turned out to be hot, sultry and there was no time that year to enjoy that season's *kumiss*. Elections, elections... Three years of power! That's what was at stake!

Zharasbai tirelessly sought out weak points in Sat's camp, gathering around himself the unhappy, the cheated, the wavering and the avaricious, generously rewarding them, handing out money, livestock and largesse left and right. He knew that Sat was doing exactly the same, and keenly kept an eye on his own followers, cajoling the suspect and paying them more than Sat had done. Power for three years! Everything had to be paid for with interest.

Time passed and it remained unclear in whose favour the balance of power was leaning. Sat had every confidence in his Kozybaki, and they grew bolder and bolder, poking fun at the endless costs and trouble they were causing Zharasbai.

“He might be an eagle when he's in town, but out in the steppe, he's nothing more than a sparrow. We'll take these uppity Chelkar folk down a peg or two...” When Bakhtygul heard these rumours, he sensed only too well the turn that events would eventually take.

And when Zharasbai's herd was being driven out onto the mountain pastures, in the hustle and bustle three pregnant mares and one fattened colt went missing. The herdsmen set out to look for them and came upon the thieves' tracks. A

trusted source from Burgen tipped them off that the horses had been taken by some of Salmen's men under Sat's orders. The pursuers arrived at Salmen's hot on the heels of the thieves. Zharasbai's men demanded that the horses be returned, but Salmen without the slightest twinge of conscience cursed at them obscenely and chased them out of his *aul* with a flea in their ear.

Zharasbai was unable to sleep that night; he was choking with rage. But at sunrise, without delay, he ordered Sarsen to draft a denunciation and to send the document to the town. Bakhtygul was expecting the *volostnoy* to send him as his courier, but Zharasbai sent someone else in his stead, leaving Bakhtygul to unsaddle his horse, hurt and bewildered. People had been gathering round the *bai*'s imposing eight-cabled yurt all morning and heated discussions could be heard issuing from it. The elders were arguing, quarrelling and hectoring each other.

It was only at midday, when the revered white bearded *aqsaqals* had gone their separate ways, seeking respite from the heat in the shade of their yurts and the refreshing coolness of their *kumiss*, that Zharasbai called Bakhtygul to his side.

Bakhtygul's heart was constricted with a terrible foreboding when he saw the *volostnoy*'s inflamed face, livid with red spots. To the right, stood Kokysh, a morose and dark-skinned man, the most stalwart of all Zharasbai's *bai* supporters.

Zharasbai bade Bakhtygul sit down, poured him some *kumiss* and, taking a sip from his delicate drinking bowl, began the conversation by remarking that with the grace of God Bakhtygul had enjoyed a successful year since his arrival, as everyone knew and could see. He noted that he had not burdened his servant with hard labour but favoured him with work worthy of a real man. At that moment, Bakhtygul sensed that this strangely peaceful and unusually easy period of his life was about to come to an end.

"These mangy jackals are not going to put their tails between their legs until we take a stick to them..." Zharasbai added.

Kokysh spat and struck the top of his boot in agreement, and Bakhtygul's hand involuntarily shook spilling his *kumiss* in the process.

He understood that the worst thing that could happen was about to happen — the oath he made a year ago was about to catch up with him.

"Are we going to sit here and meekly put up with their games," the *volostnoy* continued. "Are we going to sit here yawning, while they put a yoke on our backs and a lasso around the necks of our livestock? While they beat our people and steal our horses? Many of our people are venal enough as it is and this won't help matters... It's clear, Bakhtygul, that the hour of reckoning that we have both been anticipating has now arrived."

Bakhtygul remained silent.

"This very night, I want you to choose a dozen of our best riders and then may God be with you! You don't need to seek out Salmen or Sat's herds, it doesn't make any difference; you may raid any of the Kozybaki. Separate and drive away a small herd of their pregnant mares that are even finer and more handsome than the ones they took. You have a good eye... it's not the first time you've done it..."

Again Bakhtygul fell silent, leaving his drinking bowl full of *kumiss* untouched, rubbing the palm of his hand on his robe. He felt a lump in his throat preventing him speaking. "*The hour that we have both been waiting for has finally arrived...*" What was that meant to mean? For a long time Zharasbai had been holding Bakhtygul up as an example of a changed man to his *bai* and *atkaminari* acquaintances and they had extolled him for his virtue, while the other bondsmen had clapped Bakhtygul on the shoulder and said to him: "See

what you can do if you stick to the straight and narrow!" When had that been? Yesterday. And today it was "*God be with you*"...? What would people say? And what would he say to his son Seit?

Kokysh sat down on his haunches opposite Bakhtygul and, flexing his bull-like neck, burst into laughter.

"What's the matter with you? Has your courage left you now that you are living at the *bai's* expense? A real hero would happily rise from the grave to take on such a task!"

But Bakhtygul didn't smile, and lifting his *kumiss* to his lips Zharasbai said:

"Sat was the first to start this, as you and everyone else knows it. If he hadn't been the first to strike, we wouldn't be trading blows now. They have sullied their hands with thievery in the night, but we will hold our heads up high with a justified *barymta* honour raid! And as of today, whomever these rustlers go to, whether it's the governor or anyone else, everyone will be on our side — be they Kazakh or Russian... Do you understand?"

"No, *volostnoy*... I don't understand. I can't make head nor tail of it," Bakhtygul replied sullenly and sadly. "I only know one thing: autumn is at hand, and this autumn both thief and honour raider will be hanging between earth and heaven from the gallows... I have done my share of daring deeds, now I am sick of them. I beg you, don't make me do this!"

Irritated, Zharasbai interrupted him:

"Since when have you started looking over your shoulder at the gallows? Shame on you, Bakhtygul the Farsighted! Have you forgotten the debt you owe me? Can you not hear the voices of your ancestors crying out from beyond the grave? It was Sat who ruined your father, Salmen who killed your brother, and now I am giving you the power to take on Sat and Salmen. If you pass up on such a chance, you are nothing more

than a cowardly traitor, a helpless, brainless good-for-nothing. In vain did I feed and support you.”

“Master, you are telling me nothing that I don’t already know perfectly well myself.” Bakhtygul murmured dejectedly. “But what example will I be setting my son?”

Zharasbai sneered.

“You have an answer for everything! And before all the powers of heaven and earth. I tell you that it is I who feeds you and I who gives the orders. What I will, shall be my sin. Now go and put your trust in God...”

“Enough of this talking,” Kokysh added. “Now is not the time for doubt but action.”

Zharasbai heavily got up from his place. In his rush to get up before his superior, Bakhtygul slipped to his knees, stunned, confused and bewildered.

6

That very same day, ten men with Bakhtygul at their head selected ten of the finest, swift-footed and long-tailed stallions from Zharasbai, Sarsen and Kokysh’s herds. No secret was made of their gathering because they were heading out on a “justified” honour raid, and by the evening the entire *aul* from the greatest to the least had come out to see off their brave, avenging heroes.

They were dressed modestly in grey *chekmen* tunics, but it’s not clothing that adorns a man but his strength and a handsome horse. The finest young men from the village were gathered together. Their tunics drawn tight over their broad shoulders with fists that could crush a stone to powder, quick and agile on their feet like a swallow in flight. Exchanging mischievous and bawdy jokes, the *barymtach* raiders preened themselves and their horses in front of the whole village as if the whole affair

was a merry game for them. Their mounts were a feast for the eyes. Under their low, flat saddles, with their short tied-back tails, their stallions held up their lean heads proudly, their fine legs prancing skittishly. These were well-known horses, the victors of many a race. In the softening evening light, their fine, groomed, sleek coats shone like satin. They were incapable of staying in one place, spinning and turning under their riders; and the *aul* was filled with a light, staccato, resonant percussion like the resounding report of military drums.

Everyone was waiting for Bakhtygul. He came out of the Big Yurt, accompanied by the *volostnoy* and it was as if he had been transformed. He was also dressed simply and without ostentation, which met everyone's approval. But there was something new about his bearing and comportment that they hadn't seen before. His tunic was stretched over his left shoulder with his right sleeve tucked into his belt to allow his striking arm greater freedom of movement. Sticking out of the sash around his waist was a six-shooter revolver. Bakhtygul had no intention of firing it at anyone, but it was a clear sign to anyone who was in command, who would be the first to strike and the first to take on anyone who fancied themselves to be stronger.

Bakhtygul approached his comrades with a rolling, unhurried gait, and they were unable to take their eyes off their leader. Here was a man who wouldn't let you down. He was stronger and bigger than any of the others. The rounded muscles of his right arm from his fist to his shoulder rippled with a wiry, explosive strength.

And Bakhtygul's face had also seemed to change. His cunning, narrowed eyes sparkled with a rapacious, impatient passion. Only under his bristling moustaches there beamed a soft smile as if he were lost in a daydream.

“Well, my young falcons!” he shouted abruptly and authoritatively. “May God grant our journey good fortune!” And his voice rang out into the silence over the clattering of the hooves.

“May God grant us all good fortune!” His riding companions replied in unison.

“Good luck, good luck!” The well-wishers joined in.

On his way to his horse, which was tethered with the others, he was met by a young shepherd who presented him with a large, light chestnut stallion, its tail shortened and tied back as well. Lit up by the red rays of the sunset, the horse resembled the flame of a large bonfire. This was the *volostnoy*’s favourite; Zharasbai had been saving him for the *baigi* — the steppe horse races that cover many miles.

The shepherd was about to respectfully help the captain up into the saddle, but the latter tucking the reins into his belt, fairly flew into the saddle, barely touching the stirrups. The horse recoiled, staggering five paces or so to the side.

“Let’s go!” Bakhtygul commanded, spurring his horse on.

The other riders dashed after him in a tight bunch, arranging their cudgels and clubs as they did so. Several of them casually held their cudgels under their armpits as if they were setting off for a promenade rather than a fight.

The *aul*’s men, women and children straggled out behind them in a noisy, bustling crowd. Strength and courage, the finest of the male virtues, had set off out into the steppe! Once let loose — even the devil is crushed and trampled underfoot...

In the dusk, the light markings on the horses’ hindquarters flashed hazily, merging into a dark dot and melting into the distance, but for a long time after the resounding thunder of their wild gallop resonated in the air over the *aul*.

Thus the tit-for-tat raids started, dubbed by the cunning and the simple minded alike as “honour” *Barymta*. They

soothed the ancient pride of the rich and briefly slaked the poor's thirst for freedom. The latter receiving a cudgel blow over the head for their pains, while the former increased their herds at the expense of others. Each to their lot, as decreed by the unseen and almighty heavenly judge, the arbitrator above all arbitrators.

By sunrise, Bakhtygul and his young falcons had returned, driving a small herd of ten young fillies, led by an impressive, long-maned stallion. They had evaded the chase with surprising ease, although they had heard the crack of a rifle behind them. Then they hid themselves in the silent, uninhabited mountains that bordered three different *volosts*.

On the way they helped themselves to a year old lamb from an unknown village, leaving only the hysterical barking of the dogs in their wake. They fearlessly butchered the lamb on some stones and Bakhtygul ordered that the meat be cooked while he set off up the bare, rugged scree.

Up ahead loomed a jutting, brick-red escarpment that looked as if it had been soaked in blood. Beyond it protruded a coniferous forest, bristling like the mane of a wild boar. The powerful, dense firs smouldered black as if a fire had passed through recently and above them hung a shimmering, smoky-blue heat haze. Higher up, as if snatched by the sun from the embrace of the night, shone the round, snowy summit of the mountain like a lofty, inaccessible, impossibly high-ranking, white yurt. An eagle soared over the boundless sky; he looked to be the size of a small sparrow.

Bakhtygul looked to the heavens, at the blood-red escarpment, at the blackened forest, at the soaring eagle, the snow-white yurt, and his heart skipped a beat. He looked and thought to himself: "I have come round full circle and I am none the richer or wiser for it!"

Down below a thin spiral of smoke rose from the campfire, the smell of cooking meat drifted upwards, the young marauders chattered away excitedly among themselves like women, larking around like teenagers, the treacherous scree scrunching under their feet. Bakhtygul frowned, chewing on his bristly moustache.

The thrill of the night raid evaporated like an alcoholic haze. All that remained in his heart was the bitter aftertaste.

“It makes no odds!” Bakhtygul said to himself out loud.

It didn’t matter whether he was hailed as a hero or reviled as a thief. His fate remained in Zharasbai’s hands. The *bai* could punish or the *bai* could be merciful. At least he wasn’t like Salmen, thank God. “Zharasbai will not forget that I have served him faithfully and zealously. That is enough for me and my family,” Bakhtygul whispered to himself. “And that is how I will have to leave it...” And with that, he set off back down the scree towards the camp fire.

And that was how the *barymta* raids started. After that successful and fateful night, a struggle arose between the clans and clan parties, the likes of which had never been seen before. In the dark of the night and the light of the day, the steppe and the mountains were plagued with savage skirmishes and fights, the rabid, crazed cry of the pursuit, blood and clouds of dust rising up into the sultry sky. And under the cover of the noisy raids, as in former times, thievery began to spread on the sly throughout the *auls* and pastures. And very soon even the prophet himself couldn’t have judged what was *barymta* and what was thievery, what was daytime robbery and night time burglary.

It is rightly said that elections in the steppe are like a famine. You can never tell when famine will hit the steppe. But the elections happen every three years! But Zharasbai had evidently decided either to take the upper hand or beggar himself in the process.

As ever, there wasn't a day when his house wasn't the site of teeming meetings and boisterous counsel, and of course guests, guests and more guests... Countless animals went under the knife to feed them and just as many were lassoed as gifts. Not to mention the huge sums of money that were secretly passed under the table by the *volostnoy*. Within two months Zharasbai had spent a third of the entire fortune that he had had at his disposal in the spring. Now he gave Bakhtygul and his young bucks no rest in much the same way as Salmen had before him. Although he was at least cunning enough to tell them that they were being sent for honour and revenge rather than just to fill their master's coffers. Admittedly, he did speak eloquently and persuasively!

In addition, the sly old fox had hit the jackpot by finding a strong ally right under Sat's very nose. Zharasbai had unexpectedly become friendly with the Dosai *aul* in Burgen *Volost*, a rich and powerful clan, who were not on good terms with the insolent Kozybaki. And this entailed especially large expenses and costs.

The wisest elders, who have been tempered by steppe politics, say that: "Running water assuages the land; seething enmity is appeased by a maiden." Especially a beautiful maiden of marriageable age... The head of the Dosai clan had a young daughter by the name of Kalysh who was especially pleasing to the eye, and matchmakers were sent by Zharasbai to the Dosai.

Bakhtygul quickly twigged what the real issue was. Of course, Zharasbai had fallen for her maidenly beauty and wanted to bring a young woman back home to help his beloved first wife. But this wasn't the main thing. The real issue was that Zharasbai had personally hand-picked fifty camels and sent them to the young girl's father. It was an unheard of bride price, fit for the daughter of a khan. And prior to that, the parents had received numerous other preliminary gifts.

It is truly said that marriage is the strongest bond; it is sealed with livestock and has a tenacity that is stronger than a blood oath. That is why the *auls* of bride and bridegroom are entwined forever, like the intestines in the stomach. Sat was kicking himself — the Dosai's *aul* was a massive obstacle in his path, like the bristles of the saxaul tree that divides the desert: there's no going through it and there's no going around it.

Meanwhile, the steppe groaned like a woman violently abused. Here, there and everywhere, the innocent and the poor fell victim to hot blooded *barymta* marauders who were neither for Sat nor Zharasbai. Many were the tears shed and many the curse hurled in vain. "Famine is upon us!" the people wailed.

Zharasbai put things on an even wider footing. He would sell the stolen animals in his own and the neighbouring regions on the scale of a large merchant. Bakhtygul would bring them in and Kairanbai would take them to market... The former seized the animals, while the latter sold them for half their value without haggling, in order to get them off his hands as quickly as possible. And they still made a profit! The greedy and miserly Salmen would never have been able to do the same. Animals disappeared as if they had been swallowed up into a bottomless pit. One night they would be out in the fields and by morning they had disappeared, and all the while Zharasbai's fat purse never grew lean.

Bakhtygul resigned himself to all this. He was living in a delirious and bloody fog, like the dust storms of the steppe where day cannot be distinguished from night nor night from day. He had no idea what had happened to the animals that he had appropriated on his raids. And Zharasbai did his best to ensure that his captain remained at ease on this account. He gave Sarsen, Kairanbai and Kokysh strict orders:

"Only drive the animals to market while he is sleeping. If suddenly someone is going to have to answer for all this, it'll be

better for us if Bakhtygul the Farsighted doesn't know what's been sold and where, even if they have to torture him."

The elections finally got under way. Zharasbai was victorious and remained in charge of the Chelkar region. Sat's campaign failed and he wasn't elected. The Dosai didn't succeed in getting their man elected either, but the Kozybaki were nevertheless well beaten. Zharasbai had not spent his resources in vain. His turn would come to shear his share from the long haired golden fleece of the state, both in his own smaller *volost* region and the wider *uyezd*.

It was then that he called for Bakhtygul and, accepting his congratulations, graciously slapped him on the shoulder and sent him home.

"Go home and have a well-earned sleep. Spend some time with your wife and son. You have earned your liberty for the next three years until the next elections..."

Bakhtygul breathed a sigh of undisguised relief. He was keen to be out of his master's sight and his master was keen for Bakhtygul to be as far away as possible.

"Your will is my command, my most esteemed *volostnoy*," Bakhtygul replied politely.

"Well, we shall see... Off you go then..." the *bai* replied brusquely.

7

The blackest days of autumn approached. Bakhtygul moved back to his winter quarters, taking his son with him. He just put him on a horse and left. Bakhtygul was rarely seen at the *volostnoy's aul*. He would go to pay his master his due respects and, having spent a day or two in his company, he would head back home to the warmth of his family with a much lighter heart. These days he was more like a stranger in the

aul — avoiding his master's estate and chambers alike, taking no interest in either. He literally kept himself to himself, taking no part in other people's conversations and turning a deaf ear to rumour. And despite not knowing what was going on in the world, and in his case that meant the *volostnoy's* party, he remembered one important thing: he and his master shared a common enemy — the Kozybaki... He remembered this well and shut all other considerations out of his mind.

And when a messenger came flying in on a lathered horse, shouting from the saddle: "Zharasbai has summoned you!" Bakhtygul was not particularly worried and followed hot on his heels.

All the big wigs from the region had gathered in the *aul* and... certain other people from other parts. Leaving their horses to mingle and graze with those of their hosts, the visitors had seated themselves around their host — Zharasbai. At a little distance from the others, Bakhtygul noticed a number of people from the *aul* of the Oraz in the neighbouring Burgen region.

The Oraz clan were less powerful in Burgen than the Dosai, Zharasbai's new relatives by marriage, and much weaker than the Kozybaki. However, while these stronger clans had been vying with each other, the Oraz had succeeded in getting their man elected as *volostnoy*. And so it turned out that despite losing the elections, the new Burgen *volostnoy* had ended up being of use to Sat. The situation was clear for all to see: being from one of the weaker clans the *volostnoy* could not be completely independent and was now being kept in rein by the Kozybaki.

Seeing the Oraz, Bakhtygul immediately thought to himself: "I've clearly been called in to answer their complaints." And he wasn't mistaken in his calculations. At the height of the raids before the election, Bakhtygul's men had seized livestock from them, seeing as they were from Burgen... But Bakhtygul had

miscalculated on another very important count. Zharasbai now met him coldly. He accepted Bakhtygul's greeting unwillingly as if it was a great effort for him. And without expressing any of the niceties that are customary when exchanging greetings, he immediately laid into Bakhtygul with strict cuffing words as if he were talking to a complete stranger:

"Well, Bakhtygul... You lack moderation! You bit off a bit more than you had the right to. I trusted you and assured everyone else that you would keep your nose clean, but now you've dragged my name through the mud as well. After all I have done for you, a case has been brought against you. What have I done to deserve this punishment? Can you at least explain yourself..?"

Zharasbai had never spoken to Bakhtygul like this before. The *volostnoy* groaned and his face was inflamed with the righteous wrath of the unjustly wronged master. In order to cover his own back, the master was demanding that his servant sincerely admit his guilt. Bakhtygul listened, astonished at how he could be considered guilty in the eyes of his benefactor.

"What do I stand accused of, my lord? Why are you so quick to anger! Could your reproach not have been couched in softer terms? First, prove what crime I have committed and then, by all means, punish me without mercy. But it is an affront to have to listen to slander, invented by malicious tongues. You must investigate these accusations and find out if they are true..."

"There is nothing for me to find out! And I can see for myself that you are guilty... Who else but you could have done this? Is it or is it not true that you took one chestnut and one roan stallion as well as two pregnant mares from the Oraz's *aul* in Burgen *Volost*? You know as well as I do that you took them... And you must make amends for what you have done!" Zharasbai ordered menacingly.

Bakhtygul remained silent, taking stock of his master. It was quite possible that he had taken them... That was perfectly true... Bakhtygul had no plans to deny it and brazenly lie to everyone's face. But Zharasbai also had no reason to play the innocent like this. The Oraz's horses had been taken on his orders and there were many people here who were witness to the fact. But for some reason they were also silent, looking intently at Bakhtygul.

Surely, the *volostnoy* wouldn't withdraw his support and turn his back on his captain? That couldn't be possible!

He was just doing this to save face in front of the others and to throw sand in their eyes... Zharasbai evidently saw more clearly what needed to be done in this situation and now wasn't the time to contradict him and interfere in the game he was playing. His objectives were far-sighted and his calculations subtle.

"I have never shirked my responsibilities and will not do so now," said Bakhtygul the Farsighted. "Everything we have is yours, Master, our bodies and our very lives. How could I possibly stand against you? As you are my one and only judge, as God is yours! I took the horses. Do whatever you see fit to ensure that the Oraz are fully compensated for their losses. Beyond that, I have nothing more to say."

Immediately, the elders present stirred in approval, shifting in their places, nodding their heads and narrowing their eyes. The faithful servant's speech had been well received. Humility and power are good bedfellows.

Much muttering could be heard praising the *volostnoy's* perspicacity and justice. While others said of Bakhtygul:

"He might not have a fig to his name, but he is as bold as a khan. He would rather die than hide the truth."

Another said:

“Even if he were to kill a man, he would never conceal it from his master. So what if he took them, he has admitted as much...” And this was also indirect praise for the *volostnoy*.

At that moment, Bakhtygul was hopeful that his master would be content with the flattery.

There was just one thing that he couldn't understand. When he looked around him, he noticed that there were some people from the Dosai *aul* sitting right next to the plaintiffs from the Oraz clan. Bakhtygul could barely believe his eyes. How could this be possible? All summer the two clans had been feuding irreconcilably, and now all that enmity had flown to the heavens like fledgelings from their nest. Today, they were sitting close together, knee to knee and you would be forgiven for thinking that all was peace and light between them. Here they were sitting in judgement over their own man — Bakhtygul.

Despite Bakhtygul taking the blame squarely on his shoulders, Zharasbai's tone towards him did not waiver or soften and his face grew darker. This time Zharasbai raised his voice, berating him malevolently and at the end threatening him:

“From now on don't expect any more favours from me! I treated you kindly, made a place for you close to my heart, considered you one of my own — and why? Because of your honesty. If you so much as take a step off the straight and narrow, you will be nobody to me, a complete stranger. Next time be sure to think very carefully before taking your next step...”

“Well, that's laying it on a bit thick!” Bakhtygul thought to himself but remained silent even on this count.

Everyone else in the room had also gone quiet as if bewitched by the *volostnoy's* commanding voice with its indignant and noble tone and its reverberating bass. A beautiful voice, a truly divine gift that should really have been put at the service of truth and honour.

Pointing at the most senior member of the Oraz delegation, Zharasbai ordered:

“This man is the owner of the animals that you took. You shall take him to your home and with your own hand give him four healthy horses, of a quality no worse than those that you took. (“And where are the horses that were taken..?” Bakhtygul suddenly thought.) “And as payment for your crime, you shall give him another horse and a camel as compensation... That’s what would be the honourable and conscionable thing to do!”

Bakhtygul was about to open his mouth but was frozen to the spot, astonished. He felt as if someone had hit him on the back of the head with a cudgel. Everyone else remained silent as if they’d swallowed their tongues. A clear sign of their own amazement...

The master knows full well how many and what sort of animals Bakhtygul owns. He knows this full well and has ordered him to give away over half of them... And a camel as well into the bargain!

Of course, Zharasbai will reimburse Bakhtygul for his losses with interest later. How could he act otherwise? The boss is bound to call him in and console him — in front of his own people once these outsiders have gone. He’s bound to repay his faithful servant with a kind word and the animals he has lost so that he would suffer no loss to either his fortune or spirits, so that things are fair and honest.

And Bakhtygul thought to himself likewise, as he led the men from the Oraz clan out of the yurt along with Sarsen who had been sent to check that the master’s orders were carried out to the letter.

But a day passed and then a second and a third and the *volostnoy* still sent no word to Bakhtygul. Zharasbai was evidently too busy. He had so many important and pressing

matters to attend to. The *bai* had completely forgotten about Bakhtygul. He had ruined and mortally offended his loyal friend at the drop of a hat in order to please his own sworn enemies... he had trampled him underfoot... and not even deigned so much as to look at him as he did so! Why had he done this?

Bakhtygul was at a complete loss. Khatsha wandered everywhere with a darkened and tear-stained face. Seit looked at his father with an incomprehensible expression, which was sometimes thoughtful and sometimes indifferent. Occasionally, the boy even laughed quietly to himself at his own secret thoughts, and this both frightened and angered Bakhtygul.

Tortured by these riddles, Bakhtygul rushed to see his neighbours and friends in the neighbouring *auls*, to share his woes, to seek advice and to find his bearings and understand how he was going to live from here on in. But he was met with caution. His head began to spin from the various tales, rumours and fables that he heard; he would have been a grey-haired old man by the time he'd made sense of them. And once again, as when his brother Tektygul passed away, he felt completely abandoned, like a lost soul that has been left behind by the caravan, at the mercy of the desert, lost, with no hope and with nowhere to go. Once again his lack of kin stood in his way like a massive, insurmountable stone wall. The entire world and all the people living in it were on the other side of this wall, and he alone was separated from it, like a disembodied limb or a plucked hair.

The summer *barymta* raids had been the feast... Autumn now brought the inevitable hangover, not for the fat and wealthy of course but only for the thin and poor. As in his father and grandfather's times, white could be made to look like black and black — white, and when it came to this sort of wheeling and dealing, the rich lords of the steppe were the undisputed masters. The guilty swaggered around like grandees with their

round bellies, while the innocent were dragged through the mud by their ragged collars — a familiar theme, as old as history itself.

After the elections, in the smaller outlying regions, the thunder of the *barymta* raids soon dissipated into the mountain air. However, in the town and the administrative centre, it continued to echo long and loud. The high-ranking big wigs in the imperial administration and the long arm of the gendarmerie were put on their guard. Behind the thick walls of the chancelleries in the cities they saw the events of the summer in a very different light:

Organised raids had been on the increase between the different Kyrgyz clans (at that time the Russians didn't distinguish between the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz)... A belligerent element had been given free rein. And one could never be certain that this contagion might not spill over from the Kyrgyz districts and out against the settlements and outposts of the peaceful Russian Cossacks...

The rural officials and constables were reporting increasing insubordination! Cases of disrespect towards imperial officials and higher ranking officers were on the up and the servile denunciations of the local *volostnoys* against each other only poured oil onto the flames. These obsequious expressions of devoted support were dotted like an infectious rash with such inflammatory words as uprising, rabble-rousers, troublemakers and brigands. And to an imperial official's ears, the word "brigand" was tantamount to "insurgent".

Thus, one freezing autumn day, the entire region was shaken by a decree from the chief of police, demanding that all the *volostnoys* and all the *biis* from every *aul* report immediately to the city to be questioned and reprimanded.

Now the fat was in the fire! Everyone in the administration, from the highest "big wigs" to the lowliest clerks sat behind

their chancellery tables with their glass inkwells and marble paperweights proceeded to pour oil on the bonfire. In time-honoured fashion, they used threats and fear... They threatened to remove the elected *volostnoys* from their posts, and the heads of clans and parties with exile from their native lands. In all the commotion, they naturally succeeded in filling their bottomless pockets with bribes in the process. They issued decrees demanding that the landowning masters made sure that there was no trouble in their fiefdoms!

The shock had a most efficacious effect on the fat ruling classes. Like a good, strong *kumiss*, the intoxicating effect of the summer's excesses passed in an instant. And even their preponderance for intrigue, as infectious and incurable as the plague, began to subside.

The heads of the feuding parties travelled to the city to meet up in a noisy, almost festive gathering and the ostentatious demonstrations of friendly carousing commenced... They butchered specially selected horses, they read the Koran at the tops of their voices, raising their soft, white, pampered hands to the heavens, calling on God to put an end to the discord and grant them the accord and harmony that they had coveted for so long. Finally, they swore an oath over the sacrificial blood that had been spilt and in front of many witnesses that from this day forth they would put a stop to all sedition and brigandry forever, artfully pretending that they didn't know and suspect who was actually behind it all.

As an example to all the others, Zharasbai and Sat made a great show of reconciliation.

Their collusion was both friendly and easy. Experienced old liars and predators that they were, they understood each other perfectly without having to exchange a word, and noted in their minds, who they would be handing over in order to appease the police, although of course, they didn't mention a single name out loud.

From time immemorial, it had always been thus: you can never expect peace until you've paid your dues to the officials in the regional centre. But this time they were demanding a payoff in a very special currency: human scapegoats...

Zharasbai had his own man in the town — Topkaev the regional *tolmach* or court interpreter. Zharasbai and he were as thick as thieves. Topkaev had become a guardian angel to Zharasbai, or to be more precise a weather vane in the form of an angel who showed him which way the wind was blowing. He was also the sort of angel who was not averse to accepting earthly recompense both in cash and in kind. In his time, this inhabitant of the region's exalted corridors of power had helped Zharasbai organise Sat's short "break" in the local prison, by ensuring that the right documents and the right sums of money were pressed into the right hands.

After the elections, Topkaev invited Zharasbai to stay with him at his town apartment and gently warned him in person:

"The high-ups are very angry... A lot of people are making denunciations that you have a number of brigands under your wing and among them some very well-known horse thieves."

And Topkaev advised the *volostnoy* to hand over one or two of the most conspicuous ones. The most important thing was to pass sentence on them in his own tribal court and then bring them to town tied and bound under his own guard. So that the whole affair should be seen as a fitting showcase for everybody.

Naturally, Bakhtygul was blissfully unaware of this state of affairs.

The day for the meeting of the Chelkar Volost's tribal judges approached. They would be called together every three to four months when a sufficient number of disputes and cases had accumulated. Traditionally the *bii* would do the judging, and behind their backs, the *volostnoy* would say:

“It’s not me who’s made the decision or meted out the punishment but the oldest and wisest members of our community...”

However, at the next hearing the *bii* were not planning to deal with the usual cases involving debts and goods but intended to deal with a particularly important case, requiring special discernment and wisdom, and for this reason, this hearing was being anticipated with unprecedented interest. Everyone was keen to hasten proceedings. Another circumstance that Bakhtygul was blissfully unaware of.

Misfortunes cling to the unfortunate like a patch on a worn out *Chekmen* tunic. At the very time Bakhtygul was reeling from one neighbour to the other seeking advice, a number of Kozybak horses went missing. There was no sign of any thief or theft, but the Kozybaki nevertheless immediately accused Bakhtygul. After all, if there was no trace — it could only mean that it was him! It’s not for nothing that they say that the blind often see what the sighted can’t.

Two men arrived at Bakhtygul’s to look for the missing animals; they barged into his home and began to rummage through his stores much as they had done the previous year. Bakhtygul was initially taken aback: the impudent thugs were giving orders in a different *volost* as if they were in their own. They could only be Kozybaki. Even so, Bakhtygul tried to show them the door in a civil manner. But they wouldn’t go. They began to scream at him as if they owned the place:

“Do you want a repeat of what happened last year? Have you missed the crack of our whips?”

Bakhtygul had a rush of blood to the head. From the top of his bootstrap he grabbed his long, narrow, black handled knife.

“I’ll run you through first... you shameless dogs!”

The strangers didn’t turn out to be exceptionally brave. All foul mouths and puffed up chests, they took to their horses at

the first sight of the knife, cursing horribly at the tops of their voices as they fled. For a long time, they circled the hill above the winter hut in full view of Bakhtygul, baying and swearing at him in the most abominable manner. The jackals knew they were a safe distance from the lion.

That same day, Khatsha prepared some hot food and set off to Zharasbai's house with her tasty and estimable dish. But she was met by Kadisha, the lady of the house with a frown of her dyed black eyebrows and not even a glance at the offering of food. Khatsha politely greeted her aunt, but she just curled her lip and contemptuously snorted. Taking their mistress's lead the other young servants began to make fun of Khatsha, spitefully laughing at her every word and sneering at her to her face.

Khatsha waited for the right moment and in Zharasbai's presence said to her mistress:

"Seit has taken such a liking to his studies and the mullah. He won't give us any peace. Winter is almost upon us again, he keeps asking when we are going to send him back to study... I don't know what to say to him."

Neither the *volostnoy*, nor his wife, even turned their heads and not a single word passed their lips, as if Khatsha wasn't there at all. Upset and frightened, she returned back to her sorry winter hut.

After that, Bakhtygul also made a trip and likewise soon returned silent and sullen. The folk in Zharasbai's *aul* looked at him distrustfully and spoke with him unwillingly. Behind his back they wagged their fingers and malevolently hissed:

"Troublemaker..."

The recent captain and village favourite spent another ten days or so in isolation, shunned by everyone, staying at home, going nowhere and trying to guess what had happened and what was about to happen. He lived like a man under house arrest, and it was only by chance that he found out from

an unknown passer-by that the tribal court had already been convened for three days.

People were saying that they had never seen the judges so grim and foreboding. There would be a lot of trials and their judgement would be strict, merciless and without leniency. A blacklist had been drawn up of about twenty men who had been denounced as thieves and brigands. Nobody knew who was on the list, but it was clear that the poor unfortunates were going to get prison terms.

Khatsha found out from some unknown source that one of them was Zhadiger. When Bakhtygul heard the name, he shivered with a terror that he hadn't felt for a whole year. Zhadiger had been Bakhtygul's right-hand man throughout the summer when the raids had been at their height.

"The forces of darkness know who they have in their sights," Bakhtygul said to himself. "Soon my turn will come."

Over these days he didn't smile once, hardly slept or ate and didn't talk to anyone. Pushing his fur hat low over his brow, he lay without stirring on his tattered felt blanket as if bound to the spot, and it seemed to him as if the whole world had been turned upside down.

He just lay there waiting to be called.

Finally, the summons came. A rider arrived carrying a bag full of official dispatches and led Bakhtygul away with him.

In a tall, spotlessly clean and elegantly adorned eight room yurt, the bloated and privileged lounged and sprawled on soft down pillows and quilts. They had been feasting day and night and were gorged to a stupefied torpor. They ate, drank and passed sentence... Like rabid dogs in a village where the animals have been wiped out by pestilence and disease, their eyes were bloodshot, the hair on the nape of their necks standing on end and their tails drawn in between their legs: they had eaten their fill of carrion and were now ready to throw themselves at any passing human.

As if exhausted by a protracted illness, Bakhtygul was barely able to drag his feet. He stood at the door for a moment and then entered the yurt, quietly greeting those around him. There wasn't a single person who met him with a sympathetic glance, neither the severe elders nor even the gentle Sarsen. The *bii* turned their backs on him, as if wary of even noting his bows and greetings, while the various hangers-on and toadies stared at him like gawping fish, turning pale at the very thought that he dared bow to them at all. Neither was there a person who dared inquire of his affairs, health and family.

"Well, now you know exactly what to expect?" Bakhtygul said to himself with a thin sneer, and unexpectedly even to himself, breathed a long sigh of relief.

It was as if his head had suddenly been cleared and his soul filled with light. This whole business was predictable and steeped in precedent. The simple fact of the matter was that there was no justice in this world and never would be. As simple as that.

"I have done nothing wrong, I am guilty of nothing," Bakhtygul said to himself. "And if I am a thief, then you are all three times as bad, it is not for you to accuse or judge me. God will be my witness!"

While the *bii* started the proceedings, he rehearsed his arguments in his head, proving to himself the rectitude of his own actions.

The plaintiffs were, of course, the Kozybaki, and the *bii* listened to their elder with respectful attention. Then delicately clearing their throats, they knitted their brows and, scowling, turned as one man towards the accused.

Despite their posturing, he refused to hang his head. True to himself, he refused to bend. To the first, second and third judge he coolly replied:

"I have never concealed and will never conceal the fact that I have taken livestock from the Kozybaki."

"Why did you take them? For what reason?"

"For the simple reason that I was on your side, in your party!"

For a second the Chelkar judges hesitated. They sniffed briefly, glancing at each other in silence. But the short-statured, corpulent Kozybak judge with moustaches that stuck out straight like needles came to their rescue.

"Oh, that political party again... your poor unfortunate party!" He shrieked, laughing heartily. "Who hasn't claimed to be a servant of that poor unfortunate party? And now your party would appear to have turned its back on you like a stubborn donkey. What do you say to that?!"

The Chelkar judges perked up, sneering and licking their lips.

"It would interesting to learn what official scores you had to settle with Sat or the Oraz clan? Maybe you had a dispute with them at some clan meeting or other, perhaps you were acting on behalf of the Chelkar authorities, a titan avenging the wrongs done to his people? I seem to remember something, now, when was it..? Would you be so kind as to remind us?"

The *bii* burst into gales of laughter, leaning back and holding their stomachs.

"And on whose account, can you remind us, did you take the five horses from the Kozybaki? Please, be so kind as to remind us my good man... about the five horses!"

Bakhtygul looked around him in bitter bewilderment. What were they laughing about? Initially, he honestly tried to recall the five horses they were referring to, but then, looking at the laughing judges, he sneered himself. Everything was a source of amusement to the rich and always would be.

"It might have been five, it might have been twenty-five" Bakhtygul muttered quietly. "You know full well how many I took! Because I was acting on behalf of my *volost*, never

once thinking of myself. It was for all of you that I fought and suffered, it was for the sake of my master and his belly that I put my neck on the line..."

Startled, the *bii* immediately shouted down the accused, not letting him finish his sentence.

"You've got a nerve!"

"You... fought for us! The impudence! Who taught you to speak to your betters like that?"

"You fought for us? You stole from us more like! He's incapable of telling one from the other!"

He himself said that it might as well have been twenty-five ...

"I don't understand," Bakhtygul muttered through his teeth, mastering himself with all his might, "What do you, venerable people, want from me?"

"We are trying you for the crimes you've committed," the most senior judge replied, "And we forbid you to continue making such seditious speeches!" With that he gave a drawn out, self-important grunt and started stroking his grey beard, pleased with his turn of phrase. "Don't you dare go snivelling that you weren't of a high enough rank, that you were out of your depth, that it was all beyond your lowly slave's comprehension. God has appointed each to their own estate. It's not for you to question the affairs of your superiors; God will do that. Our *volost's* party has already cleared itself of these five horses a long time ago and any other claims that might be brought against it. I repeat, it has cleared itself completely! And having done so, for the sake of truth we are helping the Kozybak plaintiff receive justice. So answer for your guilt, now that you have been summoned to answer!"

"But what am I guilty of?" Bakhtygul asked in despair. "I didn't take these horses for myself; I didn't get rich as a result. I took them, against my own free will under orders. Perhaps

the true guilty parties are those who gave the orders? What do you say..?”

“Very interesting, and who could possibly have given you the order to steal other people’s property?” Enquired the Kozybak, his insolent eyes bulging in mock horror.

Bakhtygul lowered his head and hesitated. He felt utterly ashamed to be even looking and listening to these people, let alone answering their questions.

“Why are you silent? You slanderer...”

“It would have been better if they had spoken up themselves,” Bakhtygul murmured sadly. “It won’t take long to find them. You don’t have far to go... There they are sitting in the place of honour.” And with that, he pointed at Sarsen and Kokysh, who had only just entered the yurt with the most luxurious braided whip in his hand. “Although it is not fitting for my rank, I would nevertheless like to know how they cleared themselves with regards the five horses and everything else... and what God’s judgement would be in this case...”

The *bii* looked at each other with barely concealed fury. A snide and sneering whispering stirred among the hangers-on and toadies.

This starving, ragged bondsman was not only holding his own with the authorities but doing so with extraordinary bravery and frightening intelligence. So the slave wanted the truth! It wasn’t going to be so easy to get rid of this slave!

Sarsen remained silent, proudly pursing his lips. Kokysh, as dark and bulky as a buffalo, sneered grimly and played with his whip.

“Let me say this once, and once only,” he said, “The proceedings between political parties are one thing, horse rustling is quite another! We will answer for the former and you, my dear man, shall answer for the latter. And don’t you go confusing the two!

"And he has the nerve to say this..?" Bakhtygul thought to himself.

"Don't you go confusing the judges!" Kokysh continued, hurriedly pressing home his advantage. "If you give him the opportunity, he'll drag not only us but dozens more, even Zharasbai himself through the muck he has raked up. But this isn't what I have been sent here by the *volostnoy* to say. He has entrusted me to tell you the following: this case has nothing to do with the elections. The man you see before you is a thief! And he himself has admitted as much! You must judge this thief and punish him accordingly."

Bakhtygul let his heavy, work-worn hands fall helplessly by his sides.

"I... a thief? Is that what the master says?" He asked with the naivety of a child, without waiting for an answer.

Despite what was going on before his very eyes, in the depths of his heart, he nevertheless thought that his master might put in a word at the very last minute to rescue him from his misfortune. "*I can vouch for this unfortunate man!*" That was all that the *volostnoy* would have needed to say. That was all it would have cost him. Nothing more than a few words. Bakhtygul would never have forgotten such a kindness, even if the judges had unjustly pronounced him guilty. Bakhtygul would have happily taken these words to the grave with him. "*I vouch for this unfortunate man...*"

Bakhtygul involuntarily touched the scar on his cheek with his coarse fingers. The jagged scar that protruded like a cattle brand, a memento of his last meeting with that swine Salmen. An exact copy of this scar was now indelibly etched into his heart, and his heart filled and bled to overflowing.

He knew only too well what cruelty and what treachery existed in the world. He knew only too well...

"Well, if those are indeed the master's words, and if Kokysh is not lying, let my lips be sealed and may I be as silent as the grave. Do what you will, take my life and burn it, it is worth less than that of a dog. There once lived a poor devil and now that poor devil is no more — who cares? There is just one final thing that I want to say to you: I believed you... I trusted you! Well, so what... to hell with you, it serves me right..." Bakhtygul let his head sink to his chest, and without another word, got up and left the yurt.

Outside he set off like a blind man, biting his lips to stop himself from howling like a beaten dog, and at that moment he saw the *volostnoy*. Zharasbai was discussing something with four other rich, fat men in their fine robes. They unhurriedly crossed his path and then carried on their way. Zharasbai did not even acknowledge Bakhtygul's greeting. He didn't turn a hair! The baseness... The shameless effrontery!

And for the first time, Bakhtygul ground his teeth, just looking at the rich man's receding back.

At that moment a messenger came running up to summon him to hear the verdict of the court. Bakhtygul set off behind the messenger.

The judges ordered that Bakhtygul forfeit five horses as just recompense for the five that had gone missing. And that as a brigand and thief he should be sent to prison for three years.

8

Two strapping men led the convicted outside. There was nowhere in the steppe equipped with bars and no other permanent building suitable for locking a man up. Therefore, to be on the safe side, before sending them to the city, prisoners would be fitted with a set of chains with a large lock hanging from each link.

At first, Bakhtygul had been so shocked that he didn't really understand where he was being led. He looked at his escorts and in his stupor thought: "What a weak and feeble pair these two are..."

"Stand here," said one of them, while the other went off to fetch the chains that had rusted to a burnished red. Sizing up Bakhtygul's legs he began to turn them over in his hands.

At that moment Bakhtygul contemptuously knocked him to one side, hitting him so hard that he could barely keep his balance while the fetters went flying into the dust with a plaintive clatter. The other guard sprang out of his way with the swiftness of a mountain kid.

Bakhtygul walked calmly up to his horse, jumped into the saddle and set off at sedate trot between the yurts deliberately shouting: "Farewell, one and all..."

The escort was unarmed, and could have been held at fault for only raising the hue and cry once the famous *barymtach* was already in the saddle:

"Hey, where are you going? Stop him! Catch him!"

But catching a Kazakh in the steppe is liking trying to pin down the wind in a field. While the guards were still shouting, the fugitive was already deep into the precipitous ravine on the other side of the hill from the *aul* and had soon disappeared into the mountains. And once again one could perhaps have found fault with the posse that had been dispatched in pursuit when they lost his tracks... But what could they do, they weren't tracking dogs... The *volostnoy* was impotently furious, and the judges cursed everyone roundly, threatening to send the guards who had let the prisoner escape to the gendarmerie in his place. Their prize trophy had escaped.

He had escaped against his own will to a life that he had always avoided and from which there could be no return.

Without stopping once, Bakhtygul galloped all the way home. Without a word, Khatsha immediately understood what had happened, and without tears or wailing she set about packing him his warm clothes.

Bakhtygul quickly saddled up his other horse — a roan thoroughbred; knowing that from that day forth this horse would be his only friend and companion. He slung his ancient, percussion hammer, muzzle loading, cartridge rifle over his back and stuck the revolver that he had taken on the honour raids that summer into his belt. This time it was most definitely not for show.

Then he went out to the nearby Black Cliffs. Here he slaughtered his last female lamb and quickly butchered it. One half he left for his family, the other half he salted well, packing it carefully in a sack made out of a dried, cleaned sheep's gut. That evening in the dusky twilight, Khatsha brought him a large bag of pounded millet and he gave her the fresh lamb. He also took with him a fattened chestnut horse.

Their parting was brief. Committing his family to God and without telling his wife when he would return, Bakhtygul melted into the night.

Even then Khatsha refused to cry, simply muttering through her dried lips:

"Curse you Zharasbai, the two faced, the fork-tongued! May your wife suffer what I am having to suffer! May your children go through what mine will have to go through..." And she looked up into the starless sky, strong in the faith that her curse would find its mark.

That very same night the *volostnoy's* men arrived at the fugitive's home unannounced and unawares. But they learned nothing from Khatsha.

"He left this morning to see you," she said with a sweet and innocent smile. "Tell me, what has befallen him?" But her eyes shone with pride and fury.

Two weeks passed. Zharasbai decided to take matters into his own hands and gave the orders for a full-scale manhunt.

Day and night a dozen riders combed the mountains from north to south and from east to west, never leaving the saddle. They knew that it would be no mean task to find Bakhtygul in Burgen and Chelkar and that he wouldn't give himself up easily. Therefore Zharasbai decided to capture him through a process of attrition. Regularly changing riders and horses, the *volostnoy's* men scoured the mountains and the valleys, the villages and the winter camps, leaving traps and patrols everywhere in their wake, so that neither the fugitive nor his horse would have a moment's respite. They would run him to ground and capture him, exhausted and terrified by the hunt. Famous hunters, who knew each rock and each fissure in the mountains like the back of their hands were sent after him, notorious thieves who could see in the darkest night and crawl under the noses of the most skittish flock searched for him.

Bakhtygul escaped them all like smoke in the night, but things were hard for him.

The terrifying spectre of jail, silent and wall-eyed with its bottomless, stony maw, snapped at his heels like an evil spirit. And glancing back at it, Bakhtygul would pray out loud:

"Oh God, save me... Give me the strength to escape!"

The enemy hunted him doggedly and relentlessly, like the fairy tale in which the witch Baba-Yaga chased the bold hunter Kulamergen on her fleet-footed, single-humped camel. Sometimes Bakhtygul dreamed that a huge wall of forest fire was spreading his way or the long blue tongues of a flood were sneaking up on him unawares and he would wake up in a cold sweat. Sometimes these nightmares would loom up on him during his waking hours when he was unsure whether he was awake or asleep and he would superstitiously spit over his shoulder to chase the apparitions away and break free from the invisible embrace of these evil spirits.

There were times when his horse carried him away from his pursuers while he was practically unconscious, and it was a small miracle that he hadn't fallen from his saddle. Waking up on these occasions, Bakhtygul thanked his lucky stars for having such a friend and in a feverish delirium he would whisper into his horse's ear:

"I won't surrender... They'll never take me alive... I'll die in the saddle first... I will surrender my soul to God, but not to that scheming *bai*... Better a precipice than the prison door..."

But more and more frequently, despondency would seize him by the throat and he would literally begin to wheeze like a horse that has been caught in a tight lasso. Sooner or later these fat, greasy fingered gluttons would catch up with him and put him in chains. He didn't want to die. The blood flowed hot through his veins in his exhausted body. Sitting on his haunches in front of his pitiful, spluttering campfire, he would raise his head to the cliffs like a wolf on a frozen moonlit night and shout:

"Zharasbai, don't push me too far..." And the cliffs would sympathetically repeat his words back to him in a clear and reverberating echo.

Zharasbai suspected that the poorer *auls* might be regarding the outlaw with favour, providing him with food and shelter. So he sent messengers in all directions with the frightening and threatening news that:

"While the outlaw was still at liberty, there would be no peace for anybody. At any time now, the city might threaten to send a police detachment into the region... Then there would be real trouble. Because of one troublemaker, dozens, perhaps hundreds of innocent people would suffer... The old would groan and the women and children would weep, but it would be too late by then!"

At the same time, Zharasbai sent his most trusted servants to the most influential elders to ensure that they weren't sitting idly by. The cunning fox drove fear into the hearts of the timid and bold and the kind and evil-hearted alike. He unleashed eagles into the skies and borzoi hounds across the steppe.

And the secret shelter and alms that Bakhtygul had previously enjoyed were removed in one fell stroke. Before even a week had passed, he sensed the trap closing in on him, like a great bear surrounded by a circle of cowardly yapping dogs. Even the wilds of the mountains were no longer a reliable refuge. Word reached him of the scare tactics employed by Zharasbai and his men. Tried and tested scare tactics... Now there was no trusting anybody; at the sight of him some would drive him away, others flee and others might have betrayed or even killed him in their fear.

The last time Bakhtygul had spent the night with other people had been a foul and rainy night. He had arrived exhausted at a small mountain *aul* in a wretched yurt that nestled off the beaten track under an overhanging rock face, close to the source of the seething, white-maned Talgar.

From the very outset, he sensed that something wasn't quite right and that things weren't as they should be. His hosts greeted him with a frown, looking down either at his feet or over his shoulder as if he was being followed by a poisonous snake. That night for a long time he listened to the disturbed and secretive whispering of his hosts as if they were concealing something from him. And when they quietened down, he didn't go to sleep. He slumbered for an hour or so, to ease his aching and tired back, and long before dawn got up and left the house, unheard and unseen. Without bothering to groom the roan, who was sleeping on his feet, and carefully checking that no one was spying on him, he left the *aul* without anger but with a sense of bitterness and regret. Thank God, for now, people hadn't started accosting him on the road.

Bakhtygul had a good friend in Burgen — a Russian, a very brave man but, like Bakhtygul, dogged by misfortune. Three years ago, they had been on a number of raids together when Bakhtygul was still serving Salmen, and they had become firm friends. His bravery was unheard of: he had taken on the city authorities and they had landed him in prison, despite the fact that he was a Russian like them. He had spent a year behind bars and, while he was there, Bakhtygul had done what he could to help his large family with bread and meat. He returned from prison a broken man, but he recounted his stories of prison life with a chuckle that sent goose bumps down Bakhtygul's spine. As soon as Bakhtygul had bid farewell to his wife and children, his Russian friend had been the first person he had gone to. Without any ado, his friend had gone outside and dug up a hidden cache of gunpowder and shot for the rifle and bullets for the revolver and handed them over to Bakhtygul.

This man was a real friend. He had no fear of the police. But he lived far away, out on the open steppe, where there were many prying eyes

Bakhtygul had another retreat further along the Talgar River near the Red Cliffs, in the home of a poor man called Katubai. Bakhtygul had been to this house more than any other in his wanderings and had always found shelter there. After being separated from his own hearth and home, Katubai's became the warmest and most precious to him. So Bakhtygul decided to risk looking in and warming himself with a glass of tea, if they would give him one, listening to the news from these parts, if they would tell him, spoiling his horse with the luxury of a dry stable and, with the evening and twilight, head back out into the mountains.

He rode out of the edge of a pine grove, having first climbed to the top of a precipitous slope and cautiously looked around. Down below the Talgar was roaring furiously, filling the whole

ravine with its racket. It didn't appear that any strangers were hiding in Katubai's house and in the yard, there were no saddled horses to be seen. Bakhtygul rode slowly up to the gate, dismounted his horse, tied it to a post and went into the house.

Together with his wife and two children, Katubai lived a settled life, separated from their close kinsmen who were nomads and migrated all year round. They didn't meet often and then largely by chance and with little interest in each other's affairs. In the summer, Katubai harvested wheat for bread, in winter he looked after his livestock, consisting of a horse and several goats. The poor man was quite content with his holding. He added to this meagre diet by hunting, skilfully laying traps and nets for small prey and shooting larger animals; Katubai was passionate about hunting. Bakhtygul shared his precious shells with him and himself loved to follow tracks that were invisible to others and to shoot his prey with a single long distance shot. And this also made them closer.

When Bakhtygul entered the house, the entire family of four were home. Katubai was cleaning his rifle, his wife was roasting *kuurdak* and the children were huddled next to the hearth waiting for their dinner. The much-anticipated tea was boiling on the trivet.

As befitted his fifty years, Katubai had some silver in his small beard, but his cheeks were as rosy as a young man's. He was a mild, amiable and easy-going man. His wife was handsome, shapely, fair-faced and rosy-cheeked like her husband. Her features and body were on the large side and slightly masculine, yet she was as kindly and naive as a young girl or soft-hearted old lady. The spirits of the ancestors had brought these two together to find true happiness. The children were the spitting image of their father and mother. Two boys: modest, clean, welcoming and unassuming.

Tea was immediately served. Then meat as well. And of course, the fugitive was allowed to stay the night... Bakhtygul warmed himself and ate his fill as if he were under his native roof with his family. Bakhtygul's lonely and frozen heart softened and melted. He went out to the yard to his roan horse, peacefully munching hay in the quiet of the night. He hugged him around the neck and stood like that for a long time, chewing his moustache with a heavy heart.

Katubai and his wife were aware of Bakhtygul's plight but only his account of it. Beyond that, they had heard nothing. Katubai didn't go to visit other people, he didn't have any needs and didn't have any business to keep him in the *auls*. He wasn't interested in rumours and could live quite contentedly without gossip. It was evident that the kind-hearted soul knew nothing, judging by his generosity and how much he was risking by hiding a fugitive and brigand. Was this perhaps the real reason why Katubai was being so reckless? Not knowing the extent of the manhunt?

Bakhtygul spent several bitterly cold autumn nights at Katubai's. He would come and go after dark in order to avoid unintentionally betraying these sweet, kind people. He would leave reinvigorated and try not to come back empty-handed but with game of some sort or another.

"It's not us helping you, but you who is helping us," Katubai remarked after a late supper one evening. "God has a place in his heart for the lonely and fugitive!"

And Bakhtygul thought to himself: "*If someone has to hand me in... Then let it be this man!*"

"I heard that there is a frightful and terrible man roaming these parts. More devil than human... The *volostnoy* has ordered that all God-fearing folks should do their utmost to capture and detain this villain. Recently in the village downstream, a whole band of riders arrived unexpectedly on the lookout for him..."

Katubai finished with a deep, good-natured chuckle: "This devil they're talking about isn't you by any chance my son?"

Bakhtygul understood that it was time to leave.

He immediately saddled his roan and set off along the banks of the Talgar.

The roaring and booming voice of the white-maned torrent could be heard from a long way off. But close up this seething, ice-cold mass was a terrifying sight. A brutal cold fanned out from the green water with an implacable force that was woven into the fast moving current. You take an involuntary step back from the bank but still can't tear your eyes away from the mesmeric water! It is as if a mass of huge serpents, writhing and swelling, have constricted themselves into an inextricable embrace, suffocating each other, belching out wreathing plumes of snow-white foam. Instead of waves, it seemed as if a thousand frenzied, wild animals, carried along by the current, were clambering over one another in a terrified panic and a deafening thunder of hooves.

Bakhtygul halted his horse in a narrow, dark crevice above some large rapids, glancing down at the raging water as if sizing it up. In summer, the Talgar runs deep but even then in deep autumn, it was full of water and wasn't roaring and seething without good reason. The river bent here as taut as a bow. Upstream the water flew out from under a huge overhanging rock face that looked like an enormous granite nose, and disappeared downstream under another rock face that undercut it at its base in monstrous great gulps as if into a yawning abyss. It seemed as if one mountain was pouring water down the other's throat, unable to slake its insatiable thirst.

Missing a turn, Bakhtygul came out on to a steeper incline in a small open vale. The river was wider and shallower at this spot, but here too the idea of trying to ford the current was terrifying. Just the sight of the flat smooth waves was enough

to make your head spin. They moved softly by, covered by thick, greasy slicks of foam that slowly coagulated as if they had solidified on the spot in perpetual flight.

"The bridge is next to the village downstream," Bakhtygul thought to himself. "And there's no way I'm going to ford it myself..."

At that moment the roan tossed its head and pricked up its ears. Bakhtygul looked in the direction that the horse was looking and his heart shuddered.

Two riders had ridden out from behind a treeless escarpment, about half a mile from the bank. These were no ordinary people: they wore their tunics over their left shoulder, keeping their right free to wield the clubs that they held ready in their hands. Their horses were fresh and well fed.

Bakhtygul quickly looked around and noticed behind him another four horsemen on the incline of a cliff, and it looked as if one of them was armed with a rifle.

So. They seemed to have him surrounded. He was completely fenced in. The roaring, white-maned Talgar cut off Bakhtygul's escape route to the deserted, inaccessible mountains.

There was nowhere to hide. Could he fight his way through? He'd never get away. They weren't going to stand on ceremony with him. They would rather shoot him than let him escape.

And there was no time to think. The horsemen had spotted him and immediately started to gallop after him, their clubs waving, their mouths wide open in a wild, ferocious yell. There were three in front, six or seven behind — there was no time to count. Their long piercing whistles cut through the roar of the Talgar.

There was only one way out, one hope...

Almost without thinking Bakhtygul tightened the strap of his rifle, checked the waterproof leather pouch with his cartridges under his tunic and shifted his six-shooter into his pocket. He

chose a place by the bank that seemed to be a bit calmer, struck the roan with his whip and sent him into the water.

And his roan didn't let him down. He lowered his head as if getting ready to take a drink, and then slowly and carefully entered into the icy cauldron of water.

By the bank, the horse was already up to its knees. Then he was dragged in deeper, caught up under his belly and given a shove that pushed him to one side and then carried him off. Everything — the river banks, mountains, skies — were thrown out of control and span with a roar before Bakhtygul's eyes, like an enormous black, red and green carousel.

"God help me... Ancestors, come to my aid..." Bakhtygul prayed as he lay flat on the roan's back.

Hard, powerful undertows sucked him and his mount under and then up again, carrying them along with the current at breakneck speed. The water punched, stamped and hammered Bakhtygul from head to toe, like a thousand cudgels, a thousand chains trying to dislodge and tear him from his horse. But he clung on to him, going numb with the effort and clearly feeling that underneath him his roan was fighting for their lives with all his strength. Now he stumbled on and was hit by concealed underwater rocks, but he held on and wouldn't surrender, determined to save his rider and master. As soon as the horse weakened that would be it! Would the roan's legs and body still be in one piece and unharmed? Where was the right bank and where the left? Bakhtygul wasn't sure of anything... The ravenous, green maw of the river suddenly opened up in front of him and, somersaulting head over heels, he flew into it, distinctly conscious that he was flying towards his death. In his heart, contracted in his final fatal struggle, he knew he didn't have the faintest hope.

But that instant the horse lifted itself up above the water up to its chest, and suddenly Bakhtygul saw a black, wet, stone mass

looming up in front of him... The thought flashed into his head: "This really is the end!" Another moment and they would be flattened against this rock face, pitched in different directions... But neither one nor the other happened. By some miracle, the roan had managed to hold on in front of a large, black boulder, and had even found his footing, standing, pressed up against it by the force of the water. Bakhtygul looked around, coughing and spluttering. Merciful God! The bank was only two or three more steps away...

But at that very moment, he could feel the roan beginning to slip away from the sheer, slippery rock face. The river was about to carry him away! The horse began to wheeze, baring its yellow teeth, squinting its fiery eyes. Any second now they would be washed away and drowned. Bakhtygul gave a delirious cry, not remembering himself whether it was "goodbye" or "forgive me". He climbed up on to the horse's back, and then, stepping onto its head on the space between its ears, he pushed off and leapt with all his strength and in utter desperation in the direction of the bank...

The water hit his legs like a cudgel and he thought to himself: "That's it. All is lost!"

He came to face down on a boulder next to the bank, bloodied, his clothing in shreds and shivering from the cold and pain. But his first thought was for his horse: "My roan!" With a groan, Bakhtygul lifted his head but could see nothing through the crimson fog that clouded his eyes.

His right side and hip was torn and ripped as if he had been mauled by a wild animal, his entire body was grazed and bruised, but there had been no damage to his bones and head. His rifle was also in one piece as was the pouch with the cartridges; only his six-shooter was missing — lost when the entire pocket of his coat had been torn off.

Blind and grunting from the pain, Bakhtygul climbed higher up the side of the bank, and when the bloody film covering his eyes lifted, he stared at the Talgar like a maniac. If he had had the strength, he would have bellowed with grief. His roan was nowhere to be seen. His whip hung from his arm mockingly.

No, it was clear that he wasn't fated to die in the saddle... His roan was no more! His fearless, yellow-toothed friend was gone and he wasn't going to come back out alive...

Grinding his teeth, Bakhtygul stared at the far bank with utter hatred.

Well over a dozen horsemen were watching him on their skittishly prancing mounts, at a respectful distance from the river, fearful of even going near the water. Both horses and riders were shocked and terrified by what they had just seen. The devil had somehow managed to cross the Talgar!

Bakhtygul raised his bloodied fist, and shaking it weakly croaked:

"Just you wait, my dear master and benefactor..."

9

Bakhtygul roamed a harsh, deserted region above the Karash-Karash pass. At night he hid in the pine forests and in the thorny undergrowth of a stone hollow he would light a meagre, smoky fire to boil some weak tea or a very basic broth. With the rising of the sun, he would descend down to the grey ribbon of road in the pass winding through the deserted, dejected ridges

Bakhtygul would spend whole days, chewing his moustache, never taking his narrowed, inflamed eyes off the road. Sometimes he would descend down onto it, walking to and fro, looking around in all directions as if looking for something. Sometimes he would sit down on his haunches or lie on his stomach

overlooking the road, first one side, then the other in gloomy meditation, incomprehensibly muttering into his beard and staring incessantly at it with one eye, like a bird of prey.

Bakhtygul's face was grey, not a drop of blood in his cheeks. It seemed as if his vital juices had dried up within him. His hands shook and shuddered as if his gnarled and crooked fingers were clenching something unseen. His breath was uneven and he would sigh heavily with his whole being, causing him to cough hoarsely and restlessly.

He was tortured by anxiety and impatience. His long moustaches hung over his swollen, feverish lips, like the wings of the eagle hunched over a fox that it has pinned to the snow.

Day in and day out, he would crawl from the steep slopes to the road that traversed the pass, and having kept a watch on it, raise his head to the fading autumnal pastures on Mount Asa, patched with early snow. Bakhtygul gazed at them with his reddened eyes, squinting from the blinding glare of the snow and there was no telling whether they gleamed with tears or cold hatred.

As God was his witness, he had no more desire to carry out the plan he had conceived than he had previously wanted to go on the honour raids that had won him so much fame, or his secret horse rustling expedition that had won him such dishonour. He had been brought to the edge, and without a glance back he had grappled with death, crossing the Talgar. It had been his fate to survive. He had evidently not drained his cup to its last bitter dregs and he was preparing to drain it now here at the Karash-Karash pass.

The Karash-Karash is situated between three craggy, bared headed mountains, girdled with pine and fir forests: the Great-Karash, the Middle-Karash and the Lower-Karash... Black mountains, funereal, slate-coloured rock faces, permanently dark, dense forest... The pass here is difficult and high but

the only one in the whole region. In the summer, one after the other, the caravans crawl up it at a snail's pace on their way to Burgen and Chelkar. Bleating and whinnying, the flocks of sheep and herds of horses flow along it like a river on its way to the tantalising grass of the mountain pastures. Now, in the grey autumn, on the very eve of the snow storms and avalanche season, travellers rarely made their way across the pass, urging on their horses and keeping a wary eye about them for wolves descending down into the valley on the trail of the livestock.

The only person who remained in this place was Bakhtygul. He knew that his destiny lay in wait for him here. Constantly and patiently, he scanned the road for it.

He had chosen the Central Karash as his waiting spot. He had climbed and reconnoitred all around, in every crevice and every bend; he had sniffed out the mountains like a dog and knew them better than a Mullah the Koran. He was looking for a place where he would be able to spring out as if he had literally emerged from under the ground, and then immediately disappear back down again. He had found his spot. The road wound up the slope of a stony ravine, leading the traveller on a wide semi-circle, revealing his trajectory from a long distance away. Closer to the pass the road climbed up along the edge of a precipice, next to a sheer cliff wall. If you were to meet someone here, you would only be able to get past by holding on to each other. Opposite the road, along the other side of the ravine, on a sharp escarpment, closely pressed against each other as if they were growing from the same set of roots, were three old aspens. Immediately behind the aspens was a dizzying descent, covered with outcrops of red boulders, on which only a goat could have kept a foothold. And at its foot was a dark forest providing an easy hiding place for a man on foot or horseback.

On arriving at the pass at sunrise, Bakhtygul would spend many an hour lovingly caressing the matte-silver trunks of these aspens on this dizzying slope with his coarse, chilled hands.

He looked around at the world in which he lived with despair and no hope. The autumn sky became increasingly overcast, with a dim, dirty-grey gloom and the distant silver-haired peaks wrapped in a turban of clouds. Gloomy shadows fell across the stony countenance of the mountains and even at midday the sides and peaks would frown, lowering their shaggy eyebrows as if displeased with something. All around was as silent as the grave. In the light of the dawn, piercing forth from underneath the storm clouds, the road opposite the aspens would turn a dense crimson as if bloated with blood. Red dots glittered on the surrounding cliffs.

"If that is how it is to be, so be it..." Bakhtygul whispered, chewing on his moustache.

Sometimes on clear days, he would ascend a little higher up the pass to breathe more freely and lighten the oppressive load that weighed down on his soul.

Far away to the south, in the direct sunlight, the coniferous stubble of the Sarymsakty forest could be made out. From here, it resembled the rump of a mighty dark bay horse. In this forest, smelling of wild garlic, Bakhtygul had hidden with the mare he had stolen from the herd of his previous masters, and back then he had been so hungry that even the scent of the resin had made him drowsy... That had been but a year ago! This past year, life had seemed to him oppressively easy and unusually sated...

On the other side, protecting the pass from the breath of chill winds, rose the Nazar mountain range. Their bluish piebald contours sticking out like the veins on the back of a herdsman's hand, blackened with sweat and dirt. Densely packed, ancient, yellowish-red pines and green-black firs stretched skywards on

the slopes of the mountain. In places, some had been felled near the summit, their branches broken and torn by the rains, their immense brown trunks with their powerful network of roots resembling the skeleton of an immense ancient folk hero. A giant who has fallen and is now decomposing and under whom nothing can grow.

Higher up above the slopes and clouds, glittered the untouched, virgin snow and ice of Mount Ozhar. Ozhar has a wise, old, grey head on his shoulders and is so named because Ozhar means "Brash" or "Bold". At nights it would glow white in the sky, and occasionally it would appear to Bakhtygul that it beckoned to him with its magnificent and untamed appearance, inexorably drawing his gaze towards its wild, threatening heights, where there is no pity, where everything is cold and cruel.

Sometimes the mountain would talk with Bakhtygul as if its cloud-shrouded, icy head were reading his thoughts, aware of what lay in his lonely, hunted heart that had despaired of living in the beloved, native land of his fathers.

It had turned out to be a warm, calm day. Bakhtygul was standing above the pass, mutely communing with white-headed Ozhar, when suddenly something made him turn round. He cautiously crouched under a rock face, anxiously looking all around him. Then he saw, far away in the distance, on the road under the gloomy walls of the Middle Karash, a dark, tightly bunched group of riders.

They were riding from the direction of Mount Asa, crawling along the impenetrable shade of the ravine as if they were gradually sinking into it.

Bakhtygul gave an involuntary cry and jumping down, rushed along the scrunching scree to the three old aspens.

Stealing up, he lay behind the bluish-grey trunks, breathing heavily, covered in a cold sweat. And at that moment he glanced up at Ozhar. The blinding, white, "brash" head looked

at him directly in the face, as if exulting, with a thousand eyes sparkling with mischief and passion.

Bakhtygul placed his hand on his heart; it was almost jumping out of his chest, his ears ringing like a bell. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced at Nazar's forest, and it seemed to him that the prickly firs had moved from their places and in chains and waves were running upwards along the hump of the mountain slope, like a myriad host of warriors about to make their final assault on a fortress... But a minute later, he seemed to see something quite different: there weren't any waves... In human fashion, the firs and pines were stretching out their branches, running away from him, terrified at what he was intending to do.

Bakhtygul rubbed his inflamed eyes with the back of his hand, lay down flat on the ground to calm his beating heart and thrust his face, wet with sweat and distorted by suffering, into the earth. The earth remained silent, but the distant muffled clatter of horses' hooves travelled through it.

With great difficulty, Bakhtygul raised his head. Almost exactly beneath the trunks of the aspens, the flood water rill channels descended steeply downwards. They were like wrinkles, along which dirty grey, winding channels flowed like the traces left by tears.

No, they would not be going their separate ways on this road! Bakhtygul clenched his jaw until it became painful.

"No, what must be, must be," he said to himself slowly as if chanting an incantation and shifted the barrel of his rifle forward from under his right elbow.

In the sky blue haze, as if concealed behind a transparent silk curtain, fifteen horsemen emerged onto the narrow curve of the road.

These people weren't shepherds or couriers but important well-to-do folk. Most of them were on pacer stallions, selected

for the light markings of their coats. Their saddles and harnesses were evidently expensive and from a distance glittered with silver. They were riding at a leisurely, indolent pace. The best fed, stouter members of the group rode in the middle with the thinner more wiry riders at the front and the rear. The women stood out, dressed to the nines as if they were on their way to a great festival. Their snow-white silk dresses and rainbow coloured shawls with their sumptuous hems and tassels were particularly striking against the background of the black rock face. Everyone was merry, carefree and excited. Their lively voices and rolling laughter were already carrying to the other side of the ravine. Where the road was wider, they rode two to three abreast; where it was narrower they stretched out in single file. They were shouting to each other, turning around, chatting and laughing loudly, reclining back in their saddles. A distinguished, rich and merry band!

Squinting and biting his lip, Bakhtygul searched among the riders for the one he was looking for... And quietly groaned as he spied and recognised him! There he was, smooth-skinned, important and amiable, with his high, fair brow, on his immediately recognisable golden-roan stallion with its white mane, off-white tail and little white socks at the bottom of its legs. A marking known as a skewbald. The horse was in fine fettle, its coat shone richly, dripping with a pure, fiery gold. It was on this very horse that Bakhtygul had led his men on the honour raids... "Oh, what a horse! Oh, what a rider!" The women were riding right behind him and from time to time would draw closer, joking with him, amusing him and playfully laughing themselves. It was clear they were having a good time.

A chill suddenly seized Bakhtygul with its invisible icy paws. His muzzle sight shook. It was impossible to take proper aim.

Then Bakhtygul took another look at Ozhar... and it was as if the chill had been lifted by an unseen hand. The white head

had cast off its turban of clouds and proudly, majestically shone from its crown to its shoulders. Bakhtygul took this as a sign of command. Up there on the summit a wild, raging, predatory wind was now probably whistling as strong as the current of the Talgar, strong enough to knock a man off his feet. And taking hold of his old rifle, Bakhtygul began to growl as if singing along with the old mountain. The festive cavalcade stretched out along the path above the precipice under the sheer black stone wall. Closer to the pass, hanging off its very edge over the precipice, several black currant bushes were growing. The ripe, juicy berries were as black as the rock of the Karash-Karash. Approaching the bushes, one rider after another leant down from their saddles and plucked the black fruit. Only the rider on the golden stallion refrained from reaching over. But as he self-importantly sailed past the bushes, Bakhtygul already had him firmly in his sights.

He was waiting for the moment when the handsome lord would turn his face towards him.

The horses' iron-shod hooves reverberated sonorously against the stone path as they drew closer. Finally, the road turned in a sweep towards the three aspens. The prancing legs of a light grey horse flashed before Bakhtygul's eyes, behind which emerged the skewbald. The horse was walking calmly, holding its golden head high, lifting its front legs with an indescribably easy and fluid grace. Behind Zharasbai's back, Bakhtygul could see the small figure of his younger wife, wrapped up in her shawl. This, of course, was Kalysh of the Dosaev clan, Zharasbai's second wife who had been wooed and paid for at the feverish height of the elections. The happy husband had brought her back to his *aul*.

"Wait! Hold your fire..." Bakhtygul muttered to himself. It would be foolish to risk putting a bullet through the pair of them. Let him just move himself a little bit further forward.

The handsome lord stroked his well-groomed beard in a self-congratulatory way, glancing up at the ears of his horse. The instant that Bakhtygul smoothly and gently pulled the trigger a jagged hole appeared in the *bai's* fox fur and blue brocade coat, above it rose a translucent stream of light blue smoke. The horse reared up on its hind legs and its rider fell backwards, flying out of his silver-trimmed saddle, his fur coat carpeting the ground in a wide arc.

Bakhtygul involuntarily jumped to his feet to see how the rider had fallen from the saddle. The *bai's* companions also looked, struck dumb and controlling their frightened horses with difficulty.

Then Bakhtygul rushed down the intricate slope behind the aspens, jumping from one red outcrop to another like a goat; at his back he could hear Kalysh's piercing scream:

"Oh no! Bakh-ty-gul!"

He shuddered and with his head hunched into his shoulders ran into the forest without a backwards glance.

By evening, Bakhtygul was far away from the Karash-Karash, but his heart was still beating as wildly as it had back at the three aspens. The feverish agitation that had taken hold of him would not pass. And although it wasn't cold, he repeatedly began to shiver violently.

In the blue twilight, he met up with an unknown hunter with the carcass of a wild mountain ram across his saddle. Bakhtygul called out to him, stopping and inspecting his haul, and then said with a sinister crooked smile:

"I also shot myself a mountain ram today..."

10

Bakhtygul was in prison.

He was alive, he was breathing, walking and speaking, but it was unclear how he survived, how he kept body and soul together.

After the shooting at Karash-Karash, Zharasbai's kinsmen mobilised the entire Tanys people. The city administration sent them an officer of the gendarme to help them. But Bakhtygul didn't want to run from his native land, he didn't even try to escape to a different administrative district. And he was captured.

Ashes and dust were all that was left of the area where the small beleaguered Sary people had settled after the all-powerful Tanys clan had finished with them. There had only been a total of twenty households... The meagre property that these people owned was entirely devastated and ransacked by the Tanys. They didn't shrink at tearing up their dirty, smoke-stained, felt blankets, reducing them to the last threads on their backs. They laid waste to them completely and chased them to the four winds. Young and old alike were hounded from the places in Burgen and Chelkar that they had always settled. Khatsha and the small children were also utterly ruined.

Bakhtygul was waiting for a new trial in the city and the sentence of the Russian judges.

Khatsha worked as a servant for a well-off judge in the city. She lived with her children in a state of constant hunger: dividing her meagre food allowance into four...

Choosing the right moment, Bakhtygul threw himself at the prison governor's feet. And within a few days, the door was opened and into the dark cave-like prison cell walked Seit!

The boy remained in the prison.

Meek, thoughtful and taciturn, he soon proved popular with the other prisoners, Kazakh and Russian alike, many shared their bread rations with him. When Bakhtygul saw this his heart was wrenched in two.

Afanasii Fedotich, a Russian prisoner sharing Bakhtygul's bunk, got hold of a book, bought a pencil and some mottled squared paper and began to teach Seit to read and write,

just as the Mullah Zhunus had. Bakhtygul looked on with reverence and awe.

Seit did not sleep well, he would shout loudly and angrily in his sleep, waking up in tears. Sometimes he would jump out of bed in the middle of the night, screaming incomprehensibly in his half-asleep state, looking wildly out at the moonlight from the small barred window, as if he were imagining that it was the doorway of a yurt. At times during the day, he would just sit in silence, chewing his prison bread, while yellow tears, the colour of barley grain, flowed down his cheeks.

The boy had seen how the Tanys had caught his father, the elusive *barymtach*, near their wintering grounds.

Seit struggled in his mother's arms as she held him back with all her strength, her voice wailing:

"Oh my poor boy, see how they are killing your father!"

And now in this brick-enclosed, prison pit, the boy revisited the episode every night in his sleep: the cudgels, the whips, the fists, the boots... He watched and witnessed, struggling all the more in his mother's arms...

Bakhtygul showed no affection towards his son and didn't console him, just occasionally waking him up when he began to whimper too loudly in his sleep. But one day, early in the morning when all the others were sleeping and Seit was up and wandering around the bunks, his father softly called him over to him:

"Seit... Come over here, my son..." He drew the boy close and nuzzled his nose against his cheek that was wet with tears as if breathing in his scent. "I have thought long and hard and now I am ready to tell you what I have come to understand. My dear boy, as my eldest son I tell you that you must never take your head out of those books of yours. If somebody gives you a chance in life, they will be all you need! Do you see, everything that's happened to me is because I am illiterate and unlearned."

"You are not to blame..." Seit whispered hotly. "It's them... they did it... to you! I saw it all."

"Not everything, my boy, not everything. But if you study, you'll be able to thumb your nose at the masters and tribal court elders. Your eyes will be opened, and you will open theirs to something different. I am not fit to do this, but you can, it is your duty to do this! Put all your strength into your books... Beyond this, I have nothing to teach you. I have neither the brains nor the learning to pass anymore on to you."

Tears poured down Bakhtygul's grey cheeks. He brushed them off roughly and released Seit from his embrace.

"Now go back to your books and paper."

After this conversation, Seit stopped crying out and weeping in his sleep.

Afanasii Fedotich was not only kind but a merry soul, never letting his head drop. Each day he would lead Seit out into the prison yard, covered in withered grass, for a walk and to play tag.

Together he and Seit would boil water for his father and the other more senior prisoners. His father loved tea.

Sometimes the Russian man would ask the boy, winking at him with his blue eye:

"What are you thinking about Seit? Spring has come to the yard... No doubt you're missing the *aul* and the free open spaces? Eh? Why are you so quiet?"

The boy languidly shook his head.

"No, Uncle Afanasii... It's not that..."

"Now don't tell fibs! That can't be true."

"But I'm better off in here, Uncle Afanasii... It's better here..."

Bakhtygul lay with his face to the wall, biting his greying moustache, clasping his hand to his throat.

"My dear son... The apple of my eye..." He thought.

Afanasii Fedotich lifted the boy up in his arms, pressing him to his chest and Seit didn't resist or object.

"Do you hear what he's saying, lads? Oy, Seit, little Seit! You'll kill me with words like this... And do you know what the most frightening thing is? It's the fact that not a single one of these words came from his books!" And Afanasii began to pace up and down the cell with Seit in his arms.

And that was how they lived, day after day and night after night.

The quiet, bright, assiduous, swarthy, young boy completely covered the first mottled sheet of paper with writing and more had to be acquired. Uncle Afanasii taught him to write, smile and to see what his father was unable to see — the light of a different future life.

While Bakhtygul waited... Waited for the verdict of the court and penal servitude...

1927

TURBULENT TIMES

THE TALE OF THE UPRISING OF THE PEACEFUL ALBAN PEOPLE

Chapter 1

It was in the summer of the late and unlamented year of 1916. It was in the Karkara Valley in the foothills of the mountains — the maternal cradle of the Kazakh Alban people, a numerous people, who had become strong through the richness of their land, their livestock and their hard-working hands, but famous for their down-to-earth, plain-hearted disposition.

The warm downpours that had been falling since spring feed the pastures of the Karkara like intoxicating life blood and the grass shoots up to the great joy of shepherd and herdsman alike. The Albans' summer pastures are fabulously rich. Not so much meadows as cradles covered with green pavilions. They entice and caress the eyes, they nourish and feed. The pastoral tribe bathes in these grasses and meets its guests who have come to trade.

Each summer there is a great fair in Karkara. It is only once a year but it doesn't pull any punches. A well known place. People gather and mix at this junction of nine roads from all the corners of the earth. Merchants of the Russian towns from

the Volga to the Irtysh come here, Uzbeks travel from Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent and others even arrive from Kashgar and Kuldja. They travel bringing their goods with them; they leave with other people's.

Already, for over a month this huge marketplace had been at boiling point and would continue to simmer for another three. With each day, it became ever more noisy, crowded and opulent. It seemed as if the whole valley was full to the brim, and the goods flowed in day and night like the riotous spring streams.

Thousands of herds of sheep, cows and horses neighed, lowed and bleated, tramping and cropping the Alban summer pastures. Karkara languished and moaned under thousands and thousands of hooves. But the cattle continued to be driven in: by the Kyrgyz from the snowy mountain tops, by the Kazakhs from the foothills, all entering into the boiling market cauldron as if into the abyss.

To all appearances, the market at Karkara is a carefree, dissolute holiday held in honour of summer's abundance, but in actual fact, it is the site of regular and daylight robbery, fat pickings for the merchants and easy pickings at that.

The wolf in the steppe stands with its face to the wind, catching the scent of the herd. From a good distance, it senses the feeble breathing of its victim's living body flowing with warm blood; like a spider through its gossamer thread, it runs, it stalks, never breaking the thread until it sees with its eyes that which it could sense with its nose. And so it is with the merchant. He has the wolf's sense of smell and the wolf's habits. For hundreds and hundreds of miles the merchants had followed the trail of the human Alban herd. And their senses had not deceived them; the humans and their animals here made for a succulent and tasty feast.

The great summer fair is lousy with merchants. In the light of the day, the market here is like a giant, gluttonous catfish that swells and glistens in its wanton greed, but at night it is like the cunning, predatory badger, which breaks into the sheep pens and, having sunk its teeth into the sheep's fat tail, sucks its thick, rich blood.

They say that clever hands can set the snow alight. But the easy-going Alban people have no need for such artful tricks. They are like the she-camel, obediently presenting its teats to the wily and insatiable, suckling infant, as though consoling herself with the generosity with which she feeds it with her thick, rich milk. And when it comes to milking, there's none can rival the merchant! The choicest horses, the finest dairy cows, the fattest tailed sheep have all been flowing out along the nine roads that lead from Karkara. Meat and milk, draught cattle, fine wool and thick leather. Capital...

Kuyryk-baur is a dish made from liver and the fat of the sheep's tail. A miraculous dish — you can cure a consumptive with it. It is also a rich dish fit for the most honoured guests, most often reserved for honoured matchmakers. Well, aren't all merchants matchmakers? There wasn't a single merchant guest in Karkara who had not filled themselves to bursting with lamb's tails and liver until they were hiccupping like donkeys. And it was for this reason that this modest place (no more than about one hundred miles from the town of Verny) was known throughout the merchant towns of Siberia, Turkestan, Kashgaria and China. By word of mouth — for its great summer fair, but for those in the know — for its lamb tails...

Everyone knows that merchants are partial to fat. Soon, these wide-trouserred, tight-fisted men began to rival the Tsar's own tax collectors in their conceit, their necks swelling with arrogance and swagger. Confident of the power of their fat purses, they began to spit into the well from which they had

been drinking and abuse the teat that was feeding them. It would slip their minds that once upon a time they had arrived in Karkara on a single, sad little cart. Now they nodded haughtily at the caravans that they now had at their disposal. They would ridicule the local bumpkins, who every now and then they would wag their fingers back at them, saying: "It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest..." In years when there's a famine and a lack of fodder, it sometimes happens that the master throws the carcasses of the cattle that have perished to the dogs. But once satiated on flesh, the dogs then throw themselves on their master.

The land of the Karkara is a wonder, the summer pasture a marvel. The grass is thick and as juicy as cooking oil. No matter how much it is trampled, no matter how much it is grazed, it is inexhaustible. After the rains, the meadows return to life. Within the space of even a single night, the valley is renewed, amazing everybody in the morning with its freshness and purity and the sheer verdant brilliance of life. The Greater Karkarinka, a beneficent river, meanders through the valley, its waters more than sufficient for land, beast and man alike. Truly, this is a God-given venue for a fair!

Even so, the local people's long suffering forbearance was beginning to wear thin. Their herders' meekness and humility had melted away. It was as if their bile was swollen and in flood, and the milk of the Karkara had begun to sour.

* * *

July was sultry. The fair, dusty. It clung to the bend of the river like an unsightly dried scab. At the very centre of the bazaar on a high pole, a white flag with the double headed eagle fluttered lazily. Here lay the authority, the power that decides and rules; here resided hatred.

The all-powerful head under this flag and the wider region was the superintendent of police, a corpulent man with an ox-

like neck, covered from head to toe in weapons and who was known by the nickname Grizzled Grey Mane. Surrounding him were his Kazakh adjutants, the *tolmach* interpreters, also pot-bellied and bloated from their sated appetites.

Grizzled Grey Mane looks around him threateningly, while the *tolmachs* have perfected two looks of their own. One for the police superintendent who they make eyes at like a wanton young wife who has just defiled the marriage bed, and the other for everybody else, full of condescension, covetousness and the cunning of a polecat. The police superintendent and his servants were busy doing one thing and they understood each other without having to communicate a word. It was no coincidence that the most cunning *tolmach*, closest to the leadership, was called Zhebirbaev, which means *Pilferer* in Kazakh.

They would steal from everybody who fell into their hands: from simple folk to the *volostnoy* rulers, from shepherds to the merchants. The annual summer fair meant rich pickings, and big bribes to boot. Only the day before, Zhebirbaev had sent three hundred head of sheep and fifty head of cattle back to his *aul* through his kinsfolk who had been circling nearby like a mob of crows over a dead body. But that was only the first course. In Grey Mane's divinely ordained presence, Zhebirbaev gorged himself boldly and richly.

And today the superintendent's chancellery was as noisy as ever. Soaked in sweat, Grey Mane was upbraiding three Kazakhs and stamping his feet. His honour was in inspired form. Which was why Zhebirbaev's face was so glacial and inscrutable. It was as if the *tolmach* was looking at the petitioners but did not see them. Just as the cheating young wife tries to appear utterly faithful in the eyes of her cuckolded husband. But with the superintendent, he was like a trained hunting dog anticipating his master's every move.

“You dolts! You utter cretins!” screamed the superintendent. “What made you think you could bring your complaints against this man! Who brings the goods that you and your cattle so need? If it wasn’t for your brother the merchant, you’d have to go one hundred miles to the town of *Verny* every time you needed something. Pray, tell me, how did the merchant spoil your land..? What is there to understand, you cretins? The mother earth belongs to the Tsar! And the merchant’s cattle belong to the Tsar. And the merchant himself is the Tsar’s obedient servant. He brings benefit to you and profit to the treasury. Where did you get the idea that you have the right to tell the merchant where he may or may not graze his cattle!? I’ll show you your rights, you son of a dog! I’ll grant you the right to rot in prison!”

The *tolmach* deferentially, threateningly and breathily translated the superintendent’s speech.

“Taksyr... lord... your grace...” Husain, the elder of the plaintiffs, exclaimed, mangling and mutilating Russian and Kazakh words in his eagerness to ingratiate himself with the superintendent. “But we are also the Tsar’s servants... And our cattle is also the Tsar’s cattle...”

“Silence! That is not for you to judge! I’ll show you... One month in prison for the lot of you...”

The superintendent grabbed a piece of paper, a pen and, his sabre clanking and his sword belt creaking, he printed out on the sheet the frightful words that he was now spelling out through his clenched teeth:

“Off-i-ci-al Pr-oto-coll!”

The poor herdsmen had little idea just how cunning the buffoon standing before them was. It now seemed that even a bribe wouldn’t help now. With mute hope they looked beseechingly at the *tolmach*, searching for support from their fellow countryman. But he just stared at the document with

the terrifying words written on it, his mouth agape, playing the same game as the superintendent.

The petitioners glanced at each other and lowered their eyes like a shy, newly-wed bride. The herdsman were bewildered and offended... They had come here seeking truth and the law. Instead, their arms by their sides and their heads bare, they had meekly subjected themselves to a trial by ordeal. What had they done to deserve a month in prison?

"So the conclusion from this case," said Kartbai, the youngest of the three, turning to the others, "is that because I am a herdsman that means I must be guilty? Any wrongful accusation made against me and I am guilty! What am I, just a slave with no right to reply? This merchant, this money-grabber from Kazan, tells the most unconscionable lies about us and they won't even listen!"

"Enough!" The *tolmach* interrupted him. "We know what a trouble maker you are... We have heard stories..."

However, even old Husain couldn't restrain his temper:

"Where else could we have gone? Your grace! You have to see reason... Surely, this is no way to rule the people. That's what I don't understand."

The superintendent sprang at the old man with his fists and shoved them right into his beard.

"You addle-brained idiots! You old dog! Now, do you understand?"

"What is there not to understand," said the young Kartbai, looking the chief of police straight in the eye. "It couldn't be clearer! You can only judge the authorities by the way they rule."

The old man held him back by the sleeve of his threadbare quilted *chapan*. "Don't overdo it." But the superintendent was already scarlet with rage, his nostrils flaring like a horse at the races.

"You...scum! What did you think you were up to? By what right did you beat Mukhametkerim the merchant's servant? Who are you to take the law into your own hands? I'll teach you what high-handedness is... I'll have you locked up and you'll quickly come to your senses!"

And with that, the chief of police summoned the Cossacks who had been having a sneaky smoke out on the porch, behind the door in the hall.

Kartbai sneered. As he was dragged off by two guards, he defiantly shouted:

"I'm not afraid of you. I won't beg at your feet for anything... It's as clear as day that the merchant is richer than us and that's all there is to it. You don't fool us."

But the chief of police wasn't even listening to him. He only had ears for the sound of his own voice.

"Take them away! Get them out of my sight. I'll put you on starvation rations... I'll beat some sense into you..." He screamed at old Husain, Kartbai and a third man who hadn't even muttered a word, as they were led away from him.

Once they had been escorted away, Grey Mane's mood immediately calmed and he sat down, puffing and panting, looking contentedly at the *tolmach* as if to ask him: "Well, what did you make of that performance?"

Zhebirbaev obsequiously darted forward into a silent bow, to express his veneration, admiration and amazement in the presence of his honour's undisputed talents. The superintendent loved this sort of flattering eagerness.

"Nothing but brigands," the *tolmach* hissed dejectedly. "What would happen to the great fair if everyone started waving their fists at the merchants! These Alban fools need to be taught a lesson." Zhebirbaev the *Pilferer* was from a different tribe.

"No, let them suffer. I wouldn't let them out under any

circumstances!" the superintendent pronounced and, straight away noting the *tolmach's* servile smile, added tersely: "For one hundred roubles, maybe!" And with that, the conversation was ended.

"You mean for one hundred and twenty, your honour..." the *tolmach* insinuatingly corrected him, and Grey Mane immediately understood his hint.

Needless to say, Mukhametkerim the merchant had paid a visit to the superintendent of police's chambers ahead of the local Karkara men. He had also made a complaint. The sheep that he had amassed at the fair had already trampled the meadows of the surrounding *auls*; after all, where else were they meant to graze? One of his flocks had wandered into Kartbai and old Husain's *aul*, they had eaten all the grass right up to the yurt itself and had become mixed up with the owner of the land's sheep. The locals had ridden out to peacefully remonstrate with them, but the merchant's shepherds were a pampered and wilful lot. The richer the merchant, the more daring and impudent his lackeys. Just you try remonstrating with them! They have one answer for all occasions — 'up yours' and that's that... They are great collectors and masters of profanity and the foulest language. Well, a confrontation followed. Kartbai chose the most impudent of the bunch and hit him hard. The others galloped away. But the venerable Mukhmetkerim rushed off to the superintendent's chambers with a small envelope on his person, and in that small envelope was a small consideration to the tune of eighty roubles. He had handed over the envelope on his way out when strictly he should have given it on his way in. He was not yet acquainted with all subtleties of doing business in these parts. Nevertheless, the merchant had done what he needed to do.

And then the naive locals turned up as if they had just arrived from the moon. As if they didn't know that no one goes to see "his honour" empty-handed.

As was proper, the chief of police had a healthy respect for both sides in any argument. Just as nature had endowed him with two arms and two hands, so his notion of justice was blessed with two faces. It would have been foolish to take the side of one party before you have seen what the other side has brought to the table. There was no getting round it for either party. That was the way things were done in these parts and only a fool wasn't aware of the procedure.

Zhebirbaev was only too aware of the procedure. There was no way that a Kazakh steppe dweller would be able to survive for long under lock and key. For them, this was a fate worse than death. They might dig their heels in until the third petition for their release, but then their kinsmen would give in. And rush to their rescue. Then the worldly-wise *tolmach* would impress on them a few basic truths. Such as when eighty roubles is an acceptable bribe and at what stage one hundred and twenty is the going price.

* * *

The next case on the superintendent's list was a very different and unusual one; it was a lot more important than the great summer fair and, indeed, all the other business on his hands. Initially, "his honour" had got slightly cold feet because the matter didn't simply involve trading, but God forbid, politics. It concerned the war department, and perhaps for the first time in this Asiatic backwater, the superintendent was reminded that for two years already the Russian Empire had been fighting an unending and bloody war with the German Empire. Suddenly, it was as if the war had drawn closer to these quiet parts, and the war department was known to be heavy handed... However, on this occasion, the superintendent decided to handle matters his own way.

A wily sneer spread across his lips and he chuckled into his beard. What was the matter with him? Had his nerves

deserted him in his twenty-five years of service out in the steppe? Admittedly, the situation he faced was unprecedented and out of the ordinary. But if handled skilfully, could be turned to a fantastic profit, it seemed. Or so it seemed, once he had the entire Alban people in his pocket.

And this is how the situation stood. That morning the government postal bag had arrived and, along with it, an official document in a formal envelope, sealed with a welter of wax seals and stamps. A decree from the His Majesty the Emperor, the White Tsar himself.

Although truth be told, what it purported was far from clear. Starting from the rather fancy and intricate title... '*On the call up of non-Russian minorities for work of a military exigency behind the lines in the rear*'. He'd never heard of such a thing. But one thing was clear — it was a decree! And out here in the wild steppe, it was tantamount to a divine commandment.

Grizzled Grey Mane was capable of interpreting laws. The law consisted of articles and, between them, plenty of great white empty spaces. It was these white spaces between the lines that were of the real essence. They are like the ruts and bumps in a straight road. You could hide a whole camel, have a person killed or conceal a hoard of gold in the smallest of these ruts. And a decree from the Tsar is a law above all laws. Before such a law all previous laws are but trifles, small change.

The chief of police beckoned the *tolmach* over with his finger and showed him the document, topped with the two headed eagle. When he saw the interpreter's saccharine expression, he nearly shook with repressed laughter. It was as if Zhebirbaev believed and yet could not believe this unexpected happiness; it seemed as if his two puffy eyes were winking at each other. The chief of police confirmed his belief with a nod of the head. And he became more entrenched in it himself.

The superintendent's right-hand man was sergeant Plotnikov; a lanky, gaunt Cossack with a long forked beard, his features and bearing remarkably like that of a borzoi hound. Sergeant Plotnikov spoke Kazakh fluently and was the authorities' all-seeing eye at the summer fair. With a blink of this eye, the guilty would be found and arrested or at least as many as "his honour" needed and required. He was the first of the Russian officials to be handed the Tsar's decree by the superintendent. *Forkbeard* did not have a strong grasp of his Russian letters and written documents were not his forte. However, he did understand that his boss was happy and, for the time being, decided to keep his opinions to himself. From sheer joy, he blew his nose, pretending that he was even shedding a tear.

The superintendent also informed the other Russian officials — the judge, the investigator and the inspector, and they exchanged knowing nods and sneers with each other on their rounds around the dusty market, because they were all spinning and working the same web.

The investigator was more far-sighted than the others — it was not for nothing that he wore glasses with very thick lenses. He also understood the Kazakhs better than the others.

"This whole matter will be a strange and unusual one for these steppe people. It wouldn't be a bad thing to take some advice on how we can best propose it to them."

"By all means, take some advice! But I like to do things differently!" The chief of police objected. "And I like to do things promptly!"

"Personally I'm not a great lover of procrastination either. But the people here are like their cattle: untamed and half wild. They are used to wandering over the steppe, supping their *kumiss*."

"That's why they need to be told to pull their necks in, sir, so that they don't get any ideas into their heads. So that they

don't remind us at a later stage of any of these proposals, as you put it... If we start consulting them on things, they might get wise to us. No, there should no discussions under any circumstances!"

"Assuming that's the case. We should assume you are right..."

"Good, then that's agreed!" the superintendent interrupted. "We'll summon the *volostnoys*, read out the decree and that will be that; no arguments and no discussions! No need to encourage them, no heel dragging. Orders should be carried out at full gallop, no time for dawdling. It's at times like these we need to get things done quickly and smoothly. And if you need any advice, then I am completely at your service."

And with that, Grizzled Grey Mane contentedly clenched his fat fingers into a fist.

The investigator kept his peace. He could plainly see that the superintendent was nothing like as calm as he was pretending to be. It was not without reason that Rakhimbai's name was the first to come to the superintendent's mind when calling for a meeting of the *volostnoys*. He was a man who wasn't so much clever as resourceful and one of the most zealously accommodating and toadying men to boot.

* * *

The annual summer fair was the biggest annual gathering of the great and the good. Everyone lived on top of each other here, like in the city. All the most influential, distinguished and powerful members of Alban people were here at the fair and, around them, a countless swarm of toadies and hangers-on. They busied themselves with buying and selling but devoted most of their time to indolence and secret intrigues. Others, lounging on the piled carpets of their richly appointed yurts, sipped *kumiss* and played cards, while others sat in the

chaikhanna tea houses from morning to evening, eating *sorpa* mutton stew.

Normally, a *volostnoy* chief would keep to his own *volost* like a princeling to his realm. The master of all they surveyed, they would strut around their fiefdoms much like the pure-bred alpha-ram roams the paddock — with his sharp horns and swinging scrotum. Here, among their equals, and more senior ranked peers, the *volostnoys* deported themselves more modestly than usual. They didn't shout as much as they would when they were at home. And they were slightly more circumspect with the people they met. However, for each of them, a suite of followers was an indispensable must. A ubiquitous and ever-present *tolmach* and, of course, a courier with an unfeasibly large brass medal on his chest, and, at least one or two impressive and haughty looking elders. Any self-respecting *volostnoy* would be ashamed to be seen without a suite of at least this size, like a woman without at least several different skirts. After all, the *volostnoy* is the proud owner of his own stamp and seal. And these accoutrements are as important to him as the sharp horns and swinging scrotum are to the proud ram.

These people's primary and beloved business is intrigue. They are all politicians and at the summer fair, the entire ruling elite is present. One might be on a friendly footing with the sergeant of police, while another might even be on first name terms with the chief of police himself. At the end of the day, it is the Russian officials who decide each quarrel, dispute or feud. The *volostnoy's* greatest talent lies in his ability to persecute one person and protect another, to trip up the wise man and swindle the fool. This has been the case since time immemorial. Wherever you see a *volostnoy*, you will always find infighting and muddied waters. And everyone knows that where you find muddied waters, there's always a juicy fish.

Volostnoy Rakhimbai had a reputation as an excellent deal maker. He was younger than the others and could more or less make himself understood in Russian; he knew how to rub people up the right way and was on close terms with the local high-ups and this gave him a certain weight. There were times when the superintendent himself even greeted him by name, offering him his hand and inviting him to take tea. A privilege more valuable than money! It was believed that Rakhimbai was well received at the superintendent's house and at the fair everyone knew him. When he appeared, people would even elbow each other aside in order to get closer to him. And this was why Rakhimbai held the superintendent of police in such high honour and esteem and why he would wander around the fair like a cockerel, sticking his nose into any affair and patronising everyone he met.

The superintendent's messenger found him surrounded by admirers at the Uzbek *chaikhanna*, where he was dining, as was his wont, at someone else's expense. That day, he had been at the bazaar with his wife and cosseted young son, when an elder from one of the richer *auls* from his native *volost* caught his eye. There was nothing for it but to pay the man his respects and grace him with the favour of his company: "Er... you see, my wife... wants to try the *manti*... it's the only reason she's here... So why not pull your horse over and treat us to some of these Uzbek *manti*!"

Well, they made themselves comfortable in the *chaikhanna*, and the *manti*, *sorpa* and *kumiss* began to arrive, accompanied by a generous helping of lies, swagger and ostentation.

At that moment, the messenger from the chief of police himself, no less, approached him and announced that his presence was required at the chancellery. Rakhimbai did his utmost to ensure that the whole *chaikhanna* heard. As if to say: 'look at the people we rub shoulders with'.

"Saddle my horse!" He commanded the elder and with a self-important grunt began to get up from his place. "I expect my old friend has something he wants to tell me?"

By the time Rakhimbai had galloped up, all the other *volostnoys* were already assembled. But he, ignoring everyone else, barged right up to the superintendent, although he seemed to be a bit gloomy today. Sergeant Plotnikov and the four-eyed investigator were also frowning.

"Good day..."

And it was as if Grizzled Grey Mane had brightened up in an instant.

"Ah... He's come at last. Sit down, sit down."

The *tolmachs* also immediately brightened up, and immediately rushed to greet Rakhimbai as well, seeing as he had been the only *volostnoy* who the chief of police had deigned to greet.

Puffing out his neck and grunting so loudly and self-importantly that he looked as if he were about to lay a golden egg, Rakhimbai finally sat down.

The chancellery was crowded today. There were about a dozen other *volostnoys* and, in total, including the *bii* and *aqsaqals*, about 50 people. Many were sitting on the floor, holding their hats in their hands.

The chief of police rose. He slowly reddened from the strain. His voice was unnaturally booming, but his speech was flat and inarticulate. Of all the high-ups, Grizzled Grey Mane was the most distant. Despite being a little bit more literate than Sergeant Plotnikov, he was not a great deal more learned... He had never quite got the hang of making speeches.

"There's a war on, chaps, a war," he began. "And it seems that you and I each have to do our bit... Our father the Tsar has sent orders about this... It's not good enough to be supping *kumiss*, when there's a war on, you know! The whole country is

making sacrifices, blood is being spilt... A decree of the highest order has arrived on this very matter. I would ask that you all rise! While I read you our Lord and Emperor's decree..."

The decree, it turned out, was also quite brief.

Zhebirbaev was meant to do the interpreting, but he was only any use when it came to pulling in bribes; when it came to anything else, he was quite out of his depth. Apart from anything else, Zhebirbaev was not one of the Alban, so they would have listened to him with extreme suspicion anyway.

The investigator proposed his *tolmach* by the name of Ospan. He was like his master — intelligent and more decent than the others, he had a respectable countenance and even a kind disposition. Like all the other *tolmachs*, he had profited from his close proximity to the authorities and had developed a taste for the high life. He didn't worry his head with such idle notions as convictions or ideas. There was no place for such idle vanity in his heart. But, all the same, he dressed himself up with a certain degree of affability and decorum. Weasels are just plain vicious, but the fox has a smile on its face as it devours its defenceless prey.

Recently, he had heard that somewhere in Kazan in distant Tatarstan a newspaper was being printed in Kazakh about the affairs of the steppe peoples. But he had waved these rumours away, like a dog waves off a horsefly, and then snaps at it with his teeth because it is so persistent.

He wasn't too worried about the decree. What bothered him much more was the fact that the bigwigs seemed to be out of sorts. He tried to be accommodating without bringing too much shame upon himself. The translation was not too difficult and he didn't have to think about it too much.

He interpreted well and fluently. With a bright, clear, kind-hearted smile. What did the decree demand? The decree demanded that the Alban surrender up their young men with

immediate effect. Which young men you ask? The ones aged between nineteen and thirty-one, not a day older and not a day younger. What were they needed for? To help the war effort. It said, however, that they wouldn't be fighting, or bearing arms, but busy carrying out important work behind the lines in the rear. That is precisely what has been decreed word for word.

The only interruption came when the term "behind the lines in the rear" was mentioned. "Where is this terrible sounding place? Which *volost* or *uyezd* is it located in? God forbid, it's not a new name for that terrible place Siberia, where people are driven about by dogs?"

On this point, the *tolmach* decided to take the cunning course and, bowing apologetically, turned towards the investigator. The bigwigs like it when you are in difficulty. The bigwigs know that you can't possibly know what they know. Seize the moment, admit your ignorance and inferiority with shame and childish naivety — and you can't go wrong. Only a perfect fool or a blissfully blind man would ever let on to the bigwigs that they were more intelligent than them.

And Ospan, in his wisdom, decided to trip up on this little-known military word. And was lost in admiration, as the investigator patiently explained that their very own Karkara was behind the lines in the rear.

Once the *tolmach* had finished and lifted his gaze from the document, he saw something that he had never before witnessed in the superintendent's chambers. None of the many previous documents that Ospan had translated had ever caused so much consternation. And he found this flattering somehow.

The place had never been as quiet as this before. And the mood was so dark that it was as if there had been an eclipse of the sun. Everyone was reeling, rulers and servants alike, and, it seemed, even the high-ups themselves. The *volostnoys*, their eyes wide open and unblinking, stared at the *tolmach* and the chief of police, their eyes full of fear.

Everyone had been struck dumb. Even the rosy-cheeked Rakhimbai had gone pale and his neck sagged like a scrawny, plucked chicken as if he had suddenly deflated and wasted away. Fear curled in the air like tobacco smoke. Grizzled Grey Mane imposingly bided his time, his boots and sword belt creaking, but you could see that he was evidently taken aback at their reaction.

And so they stood in silence...

At that fateful time, the *volostnoys* were a relatively decent bunch. At the last elections, some relatively energetic people had been elected, young men no older than thirty; many of them even knew a bit of Russian. They were pretty good at giving orders but none of them actually had much authority. There wasn't a single important matter that was decided without the say-so of the rich and high-born *bais* who had made these young men *volostnoys* in the first place.

And now each and every one of them was asking themselves what these elders would do in their place, what would they say? They pondered and pondered, each waiting to hear what someone else would say. Dozens and dozens of seals of office... But not one of them had the slightest conscience or spirit. All of them stood there with their tails between their legs.

The chief of police cleared his throat and looked significantly at the investigator, mistaking the *volostnoys'* cowardice for obedience.

"So there we have it, that's the decree," he said. "It needs to be implemented immediately! It's a decree from the Tsar himself. So you have to make a start on the lists of available men. Everything else can be postponed and put to one side. Make a report with the lists of your finest young *dzhigits* to the enlistment office. I will be asking questions personally with all the rigour of martial law. There's a war on, gentlemen, a war!"

The *volostnoys* stirred uneasily. Heads hanging low, they secretly and slyly glanced at each other and began to start whispering. And it looked as if they were baring their teeth and growling at each other.

However, at least one of them seemed to have found his tongue and wasn't at a complete loss. This man was Aubakir. He was also one of this young crop, with a piercing, flint-like gaze and a hot-blooded disposition. He spoke to the bigwigs plainly, consistently and without ceremony, both to their backs and to their faces. The superintendent had already come across this fine young buck a couple of times and he had conceived a savage dislike for him from the first.

He had been expecting Rakhimbai to answer him first, but instead, it was Aubakir who replied:

"The decree has been read to us and we have listened to it. But we have never heard such a decree before. It is like a bolt out of the blue and we have been burned black from head to toe by this lightning bolt. As long as the Kazakh have lived in the wide world, they have never seen nor heard such words from the Tsar! What can we say right now? Send us back to the people, we will take counsel with the people. How can we act otherwise? Surely this is what needs to be done?"

And immediately the tension was broken. Everyone else started speaking at once, interrupting each other, their tails up.

"Yes... that's absolutely right..."

"He's speaking the truth..."

"How could it be otherwise?"

"What else is there to say?"

"It's all completely out of the blue..."

"We need to take counsel!"

"With the people!"

Now it was the investigator who inclined his head significantly towards the superintendent, and Grizzled Grey Mane went green at the gills.

In his twenty years of impeccable service in the chancellery, he had never heard so much backchat and open rebellion. He thought he knew these swarthy, high cheek-boned people through and through. In these situations, the *bais* would always pass the buck onto someone else when they didn't agree with something. Grizzled Grey Mane was well aware of this. But he also sensed something else. In the past, a Rakhimbai of one sort or another could always be trusted to put himself forward and vouch for all the others: "Don't worry, we won't let you down, we'll carry out your orders!"

Where was that cunning toady Rakhimbai today? There he was, hiding behind the backs of the others... What disloyalty! He was meant to be the leader of the pack but on this occasion was nowhere to be seen... He was always trying to please, hustling and bustling others out of the way, but didn't have a word to say for himself... Today, there was evidently no point expecting any initiative from him.

The chief of police stared searchingly first at one and then another of the *volostnoys*. Raising his authoritative eyebrow at each... They followed his eyes, like soldiers on parade, but held their tongues.

What a confounded annoyance all the same. What a happy occasion! It had all seemed such a straightforward business. All he needed to was to rein them in, terrify them and they would fill his bottomless pockets when the time was ripe to take it off them. And there you have it!

Such a gentle, passive, pliable little people, the quietest people on the boundless, silent steppe... You look at them and what do you see? Slaves and herdsmen, not too pious but not wife-beaters either, who are generally sober and respect their elders and every third one of them — a songwriter! You could flay the skin off their backs and they would just sit there singing and strumming away on their *dombras*... But this new breed of

volostnoy, they want to seek the counsel of the people, don't you know!

It was as if someone had secretly substituted the lot of them. You could hardly recognise them.

Up until today, Grey Mane had only known one power — the one ordained by God above, the most terrifying power of all. Therefore, there must be another power? Unfathomable, diabolical and even more terrifying than his power, and consequently anything else in the whole wide world.

But this wasn't even a thought, not even a hunch but a sudden sense of foreboding, and the superintendent inwardly shuddered at this terrifying premonition and, glancing at him, the investigator and the sergeant also shuddered. It hadn't slipped their attention, how the superintendent had involuntarily raised his hand to his breast, pinching his thumb and forefinger together, as if imperceptibly making the sign of the cross. "Ghastly... ghastly..." The investigator muttered to himself. He also had not expected this level of discomfiture.

Aubakir... Now everyone's gaze was turned towards him. The *volostnoys* vacillated towards him as if he were an *aqsaqal*... A dangerous man. The sort of man who needs to be kept under the thumb. He had long been on their mind but they hadn't been sufficiently alert. Forbearance had led to negligence!

"So... That's how it stands..." The superintendent said at last. "You've made my day, truly made my day. You can be assured that this will be taken fully into account gentlemen! As far as I can remember, in all my years of service, neither you nor your people have ever had to do anything for your father, the Tsar. And this is how you show your loyalty. This is how you serve the Lord your Emperor! I will remember this, gentlemen, I will remember this. Well, what's to be done... so be it... I will give you... three days. Go back to your homes,

seek your counsel. It might as well be with the devil or it might as well be with your sheep and rams for all I care, do as you please. But just be sure that you have those lists of recruits on my desk within three days! I want the lists within three days!

“Otherwise, you’ll only have yourselves to blame. I’m not a man who likes to mince his words. Is that clear! Right! Our conversation is over... Off you go!”

Everybody went their separate way in silence as if they had just been to a wake. Rakhimbai and the other two that the chief of police had counted on began to edge their way towards him, to show him that they weren’t like the others, they were his people, his eyes and his ears. They were all hoping to hear a special word of confidence.

But old Grey Mane was not in a tender mood today. It was only on his way out that he said out of the corner of his mouth to Rakhimbai:

“Get it sorted! Or are you going to play the same game as the others? I’ll give you what for if you do!”

Chapter 2

The short night passed and the sun rose on a black day. By the morning everyone everywhere, both young and old, had learned of the decree. And over every *aul* there rose the shrieking of the women and the weeping of the children. On everybody’s lips were the ugly, frightening, incomprehensible words: ‘call up... behind the lines... in the rear...’ The old lamented, and the young looked in the direction of Alatau with its gorges and forests. The livestock, left uncared for, lowed mournfully. Messengers galloped from one district to another, whipping up their horses with their crops, and people with their sinister, half-crazed cries. Rumours followed one after the other, each more absurd than the previous one.

At around midday, a lonely cloud scudded across the blinding, sultry sky over the steppe. It was like the broken, loosely hanging wing of a dragon. And under the cloud, reaching up from the earth to the sky, a wedge-shaped whirlwind twisted and weaved, neither thundering nor whistling, terrifying in its silence. When the cloud reached the meadows, the grass was uprooted and flew skywards and, over the river, a monstrous water spout was sucked up into the sky.

The dust devil passed over the great summer fair, instantaneously blowing up a pillar of sand, dust and debris, tearing up roofs, carpets and felt blankets, overturning and scattering stalls, tethering posts and carts, tossing hides, calicoes and silks in all directions and playfully sweeping up a twinkling curtain of combs, mirrors and threads beyond the realm of the highest flying bird. And then it set off on its merry way further off into the steppe, right up to Kegen and beyond to Tuza where it suddenly dissipated and disappeared.

But already by the evening everyone, throughout the entire district, in all the *auls*, in all the summer camping grounds, knew that a great omen had been seen over Karkara. The spirit of the great ancestor had visited in the form of a July dust devil. He had manifested himself in order to stand up for the innocent and defenceless Alban people.

At least that was how those skilled in the art interpreted the omen. It was an admonition to the chief of police, "Do not wrong and scatter my people...", and to the people, "take heart, I won't let you be wronged" And many people listened to these counsellors and believed. They congratulated each other with tender tears: "They will let them go free! They will cancel the decree! They won't drive our young men from their homes!"

The fair became deserted. For a whole day, there wasn't a single Kazakh who bought so much as a box of matches. The huge street fair had been frozen where it stood and went to sleep, like in the fairy tales.

The bakeries no longer belched out smoke. The *manti* no longer filled the air with the sweet fragrance of oil, pastry and meat. The cast-iron cauldrons and copper kettles stood by idly and uselessly. Like weeds in an overgrown pond, the horse harnesses swung in the breeze, unwanted, unneeded and without purpose. In the stalls, fabric and dresses were shunned like the clothes of the recently departed, which no Kazakh will touch for a whole year. There wasn't a single living soul in the shops and not a single horse at the tethering posts. It was as if all nine roads from the great fair and from all directions of the wide world had been swept away. The dead roads were sinister and empty like the paths that lead out into the desert. The silence was oppressive, the torpor soporific.

The only sound came from the rumbling of the hungry merchants' bellies. The merchants were mad with rage; they berated and cursed these simpletons and bumpkins and their entire wretched tribe. And what had induced this wild, savage behaviour? Yesterday there had been dozens of them laughing their heads off, hundreds of riders on their horses, the stalls rattling from the sheer number of people, so packed that you could barely breathe. And not just men either — there were old women, young women and young girls, giggling away foolishly; they would pay whatever price you asked without even haggling. But today, they would have been happy if a poor field hand had exchanged a rawhide or a worthless clump of wool for a small drinking bowl just to get trade moving... And they would have been happy with the bargain and seen the customer out with a curtsy.

What had happened to yesterday's kindness and generosity? A generosity that is so considerate that it is almost funny, as if embarrassed at its own inadequacy and insignificance. But now everyone shunned the fair as if it were a cesspool and the merchants as if they had the plague. And the lowliest

ragamuffin who yesterday would have been embarrassed to meet their gaze, today looked at them right in the eyes, lips pursed, his whole bearing betraying contempt, like a Khan looking down on the common people. As if, in one fell stroke, everyone had grasped where all their misfortunes had come from and what their real place on this earth was...

Meanwhile, in the steppe, in the blooming Karkara, the weeping and wailing, the prayers and intercessions continued unabated. Bad and good now exchanged places with the swiftness of the wind and then wrinkled and fell like the autumn leaves. Each summer pasture camp had its own homegrown prophets, and people heeded them greedily and with unquestioning hope. But no matter how much they believed in the spirit of the ancestors, they knew and saw that this black day had not ended with yesterday's sunset and would not end with today's sunrise.

No, this disaster was not going to pass by of its own accord as many had dreamed and foretold.

Batyr Uzak and Zhamenke were old friends. Men of property and men of no property would come to see them in their droves. They would come from morning to evening from Kara, Labas and Syrta...

The sacrificial animal had already been eaten. Before all else, it was understood that the sacrifice had been made with a heartfelt prayer. This is what people would do when their kinsmen had fallen sick, or when the rains hadn't come; when you ask God for a blessing you must offer one up yourself. It was from these beginnings that the counsel on the hill of Tanbalytas near Uzak's *aul* came into being.

Uzak was silent. That whole day, he had been listening to everyone who had come to see him one after the other. But all he heard were snivelling complaints and sob stories. Uninterrupted moaning and groaning. "We lived as best we could. But now, our world has come to an end." No one could

say anything pertinent or useful, even a particularly respected old man who spoke longer than all the others.

This idle talk had been increasingly irritating Uzak since morning and he spat to one side with annoyance.

"So, you're going to give up are you? Weeping like a widow for her departed husband. I didn't come up with this decree, so no use complaining to me about it. Go and weep and wail to the superintendent. I won't stop you. Or have you come to talk to me about a matter of real importance?"

The *batyr* was famous for his stern temper. But, given the way he had just cut short the grey-bearded old man and how grimly he scowled and bored people with his small keen eyes, it was clear that he wasn't quite himself either. He was contemplating something and was waiting for something from those who had come to the gathering. He was in his right mind. But it was clear that he too was troubled... Zhamenke understood this and didn't want to distract Uzak from collecting his thoughts and finding in the people what it was that he was looking for.

However, everyone was waiting to hear what they would say. Like small children, the Alban people desperately seek affection but on a day like today, it would have been a sin to offer consolation.

The silence lasted a long time; it was met with patience and respect but was heavy and onerous on such a day and at such an hour. Eventually, Zhamenke spoke:

"We the Alban people are like newborn infants. We are warm and comfortable close to the maternal breast... I have lived for a long time, although there are those who are older than me and, in our times, we have never suffered famine in the Karkara or a major plague upon our cattle. Neither have our people been subjected to plague. No matter how much we have been oppressed, no matter how much we have had to endure,

as God is my witness, these times have been a golden era for us! Today, our happy lot has passed us over. Misfortune has swept down upon the peoples of the steppe. There it is, *batyr*, there it is hanging over our heads! Don't take it amiss, when people ford a river they put their heaviest burdens on the biggest camel. So whether you want to or not, we're all going to have to offer our up backs. The two-headed eagle will sweep down on you first, *batyr*... in the person of that Grizzled Grey Mane... because the people have come to you. We know that you don't think of yourself. What good is our prosperity to me and you, if the people are at an impasse! Who will show them the way? So now... speak *batyr*!"

Uzak replied immediately and angry was his reply:

"You say, it was good, yes, it was good... Why anger God by saying otherwise; our summer pastures are the envy of everyone! But did we not experience hardship in your golden era, Zhamenke? Is it really only the steppe dweller who suffers now? When, I ask you, whether we ever lived undisturbed and in peace? Do you think that this year is the first year they have tried to clip our wings? And likewise, in your memory, have they really never caressed us with their bullets? Is this really so, Zhamenke? Is this really so, *aqsaqals*? Can you name me a single day when you have not lived in fear, praying for salvation? Why are you now so alarmed, what is the cause of your moans? And before the White Tsar arrived... was it not also like this..? This Tsar's decree was not conceived and born in a day. It has been in the making for a long time. Do you not see and understand this? Hey, you non-Russians!" Uzak suddenly cried angrily. "Are you really a people..? Are you really like the free-roaming horses..? It is time to rear up and kick out and trample them with our hooves. There can be no other destiny for us. Hold on, be strong, brother, day by day, year by year, and so through your whole life until death comes for you. That is my word. I have spoken... And whoever thinks

otherwise, good riddance, let him go running to the chief of police for his call-up papers...”

Present at the gathering was Serikbai from the distant summer pasture of Dongeleksaz, where he was the leader and a contemporary and friend of the *volostnoy* Aubakir. He had come to hear Uzak's words. And he had not come in vain — where else would you hear such words?

“Who wants to give themselves up to the superintendent?! Who is happy to bow their head and offer their neck to the decree?!” Serikbai questioned hot-temperedly. “If that was the case we would not have come to you. The people have trusted you in the past and we trust you now. That which you have in your head lives in the soul of the people. Everyone wants us to say: ‘We will not give up our men!’ Well, now it has been said... it has been said, good people! And this is what we should go and say to Grizzled Grey Mane.”

Uzak, narrowing his eyes, looked piercingly at Serikbai. Uzak respected this bold young man, he liked his eagerness and mettle, but his soul was uneasy. What has been said, has been said... But it is not in words that one takes heart, but actions. What can we count on, on who can we rely on? Uzak had been thinking about this all day.

“I think... I hope...” he said slowly and deliberately, “that other Kazakh tribes, not just our one, will also rise up and refuse to submit. If we could rise arm in arm with them, as one force together... We the Alban have become soft... we have become used to avoiding action and leading ourselves by the nose. We take too long measuring things up as it is. But there comes a time when you have to make the first cut. Because, after all, that is what is going to happen! You can't expect peace now. The Tsar will not back down, the chief of police will not forgive us. So what's to be done? Tear up our

roots... Move away from the land of our birth with our children, families and animals... beat our breasts and leave? Leave our blessed Karakara, where there is neither famine nor pestilence... Where would we go? As uninvited guests to a foreign land! To sand and wasteland... to bow down to the devil... our fathers into bondage, our children into slavery!"

This was on everyone's mind. Their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had never forgotten how they had gone into exile, in Xinjiang... Verily to the devil himself. They had returned ragged and naked so that they might breathe their last in the ancestral wellspring, from which their mothers had washed them when they had breathed their first. And how many of them hadn't returned, having died in a strange land among strangers. This was what was on everyone's mind.

And again Zhamenke was the first to speak:

"The chief of police gave us a deadline of three days. Don't expect any compromise from him. The man is a plague and a pestilence. What are we waiting for? We would only hamstring ourselves, and dissipate the people's anger. It has been said: we will not hand over our men. So be it! We will muster the people."

Muster the people... It had been a long time since such words had been heard. Sacred words.

"My soul is inclined towards this path!" said old Zholaman, raising his voice. He was a poor man as his father had been before him, he had remained silent since morning, while all the others had been whining and groaning. "It is a great truth that the longer you draw things out, rushing between the people and the authorities, the worse things will turn out. They will always find venal scoundrels who will turn everything on its head to please the authorities. And they will succeed in doing this! You need to send them a warning so that they will fear to sin against their own people. We, too, will unite to get the better of these

base opportunists. We should tell all the *volostnoys* that we are not going to give up our young men. And then send them to the superintendent, so that they will say: 'you must listen, for this is what the people have decided...' the people have decided!'"

Uzak sighed: the old man had hit the nail on the head. The *volostnoys*... they would exploit everything to their own advantage.

"This is where we need to start," said Uzak firmly, "and not fritter away time on the *volostnoys*. They have no reason to hold their heads high, seeing as nine out of ten of them are barely old enough to wipe their own noses." The people present nodded their heads and laughed. We need to be stricter with them. Keep a close rein on them straight away! Say to them from the first that if anything happens... we will show them no quarter. Enough of leading the people a merry dance with their empty talk. What the devil do we need of a *volostnoy* who sits down to fill his belly with the authorities but behaves in a totally different way with his own people!"

Uzak's speech was greeted with loud laughter.

"That's what they are like, *batyr*, that's what they're like..."

"Yes, that's how things are done around our way."

"For those of us who live on the steppe, their authority isn't worth the paper it's written on," Uzak concluded. "What we need are wider horizons, lusher grasslands and a free and unfettered life!"

"God willing..." The general murmur went up.

This had been on everyone's mind and Uzak had unerringly and pitilessly hit a painful spot.

"Grey Mane sits high on his throne, and below, sucking us dry and driving us like cattle, are our own superintendents, sergeants and constables, enlisted from our own people. A free and unfettered life... Where can we find it, *batyr*?" Zhamenke asked.

We must burn our bridges, Zhamenke thought to himself so that the *volostnoys* will have nowhere to hide, petrified of divine retribution and the will of the people.

And with that in his mind he said:

"Tomorrow I will slaughter a sacrificial horse and invite the *volostnoys* to come to see me. I think they will all turn up. But you'd have to be a very special fool to believe that they will join us. However, this is where we can put the shackles on them in the presence of all honest people. To solemnly warn them that we will chase them from our tribe forever as shameful traitors and enemies."

And on this also, they were all agreed... And at that late hour, everyone's hearts were filled with wonder and glory, under the blood red sunset, that presaged a great wind. The counsel descended from the hill to the *aul*, where they embraced. They congratulated, thanked and blessed each other. They sang but did not laugh, most of all they shed tears.

But in the *aul* riders were sent in all directions, those with roads and those without; with wild cries, with jubilation, carrying the good news off into the moonless, starless night. The elders had spoken: "we will not hand over our men!"

* * *

The next day, bright and early, *dzhigits* from all the branches of the Alban people rode into Akbeit for Zhamenke's sacrificial offering. *Aqsaqals*, *bai* and *bii* from all the *auls* were gathered. All ten of the *volostnoys* who had heard the chief of police proclaim the decree came as well.

Zhamenke's yurt was in the centre of the *aul*. There were so many saddled horses around it that it was as if a new summer fair had been opened in the village. The entire near bank of the river was teeming with people. Riders, and more riders... They were as numerous as the pines in the Labas forest on the other side of the river.

Fires blazed, cauldrons smoked, giving off so much heat and steam that you couldn't get near them. Here, there and everywhere cattle were being slaughtered, the *kumiss* flowed like a river. The vital ingredients for any assembly of Kazakhs. They drank *kumiss*, they made merry and the people began to open up their hearts to each other.

The most eminent, distinguished and powerful men were all sat in a large circle on the meadow. Everyone else kept to their yurts where they were given tea and *kumiss* so that they wouldn't get in the way and under their feet. Those who were experienced in these matters proposed that it was the duty of the elders to make the decisions and that the young and the poor would only be a distraction and waste everyone's valuable time. However, their efforts were in vain. From every yurt *dzhigits* of all rank and station rushed to the meadow, surrounding it in a packed circle.

At the centre of the circle, frowning, their black lambskin hats thrust low down their brows, sat Uzak and Zhamenke. The *volostnoys* ostentatiously and luxuriously dressed, avoided their gaze. Both sides looked at each other menacingly. Both sides remained silent.

They remained silent for a long time as if waiting for the other to make the first move. And it seemed as if the silence would decide who was in charge, who the host and who the guest, who the judge and who the accused. The silence dragged on, but the graver and more ceremonious it became, the weightier the first word and the more important and significant the meeting became. This was no summer fair, no place for haggling; this was a place of counsel, a court of honour.

Who would set the ball rolling though?

"Sons of the Alban!" said Serikbai, jumping lightly to his feet, neither the youngest nor the oldest, already well-known but not yet renowned. "Why have we come here? At such a

difficult time can we really take refuge in silence? Yesterday, we heard the words of the elders. They are known to all of us. Tomorrow you will have to give your reply to the superintendent of police. The people want to know what your reply will be!"

"Yes, yes... that is true! The people are waiting..." voices rang out from all sides.

People began to stir and whisper. The elders among them coughed.

"Indeed, we are listening and waiting!" said the young Turlygozha in a booming tone to Serikbai. "Everybody knows at whose summons and for what reason we are gathered. It may not be like the old times... but we are the Alban people and we are not without our leaders. Let them take the lead! We are ready! Let the *aqsaqal* speak..."

"What are you saying my children... your *aqsaqal* has already spoken..." Zhamenke began diffidently and, despite the darkening anger on his furrowed face, his voice remained even, sad and cordial. "They say that the old ram has long years but the young one a keen mind. We have among us young men capable and worthy of leadership. It is time that they spoke. Better a new calico cloth than a faded silk one... We have become old, my kinsmen, our hats are worn and creased; where once there was strength there is now infirmity and feebleness. Our time has passed, your time approaches. A new time and a great test for you, the Alban people. He who feels for the people, let him gird himself in readiness... I have lived and partaken of my share of life — what more do you want of me? Go and demand of fortune what you would wish to know from me. And the same can be said for you *batyr* Uzak. Those who join us will see we are not afraid to offer up the life that remains to us. We are old but we will take our place alongside you in the ranks of the people! This is what we said yesterday... It is what we say today... and it is what we will say tomorrow! Judge

for yourselves whether this road is to your liking or not. And we will listen to you, the young, in whose hands the reins now lie. So, what do you have to say?"

A quiet murmur swept over the meadow, the murmuring of the old. Some of their voices sounded pleased and sympathetic, but in others, tears and sadness could be heard.

"Well said!"

"He has not brought shame upon himself, he has not let us down..."

"You speak from the heart brother..."

The young men remained silent. But their agitated faces burned with anger, just like old Zhamenke's, and that was exactly what he had wanted.

The *volostnoys* had lost their lustre. Zhamenke's speech appeared to contain no threats, just bitterness but, nevertheless, it was as if the *volostnoy* rulers had heard a new decree, and it was more terrifying and dangerous for them than the Tsar's. Such a turn of events was both expected and unexpected for them. For two days they had been racking their brains to contrive a way to avoid committing themselves one way or another in the eyes of the people. And now they were glad when again the first to stick his head over the parapet was this upstart Aubakir.

"Thank you *aqsaqal*," he said hotly and rapidly. "Everybody has heard you. Everyone is grateful. You could not have better expressed the aspirations of the people. Nobody has served the people better. We will not hand over our men! It cannot be otherwise... That is good... Well then! As *batyr* Uzak said yesterday, we the Alban people have but one fate: to run where our eyes lead us! Uzak is friendly with the Kalmyk leaders. Could he not see to ask of them some land for three years or so? And after three years the war will be over."

Aubakir was interrupted by a rumbling of discontentment, and he looked around him in bewilderment. He had not been heard out, and he could not understand why.

“He speaks too lightly!”

“It’s all very easy for him to talk about the fate of the Alban people — to run wherever their eyes take them.”

“No, that is not so. That is not how *batyr* Uzak put it yesterday.”

“Our dear, courageous Aubakir is too hasty! He will run — and there’ll be no catching up with him even on horseback.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” said Serikbai coming to his aid. “Why are we jumping ahead of ourselves? You said that we will not give up our young men. That is good... That is what we have heard. But what do the rest say? We have not heard from them!”

“We have not heard from the *volostnoys*... We have not heard a thing!” Echoed Turlygozha with his booming voice.

“Why are they silent? Why are they dozing?”

And throughout the meadow, both young and old shouted: “We are listening and waiting!”

“Rakhimbai fidgeted in his seat, grunted and cleared his throat. For two days now, the superintendent’s phrase: ‘Get it sorted!’ had been ringing in his ears, torturing him both day and night. The poor man had become completely exhausted. Maybe at the last minute, he would be able to pull something out of the hat...

“Well, what about the *volostnoys*?” He cried suddenly. “They explained everything about the decree and the lists to you... And now they will pass on the expression of your will back to the superintendent. What is a *volostnoy*, after all? As God is my witness, he is an intermediary! Therefore, why do you shake your heads and shout at us? Would it not be better for us all to deal with this problem and work together?”

His Excellency, the superintendent explained that there's a war on! This is a military decree; it affects everyone the same be they Kazakh, Kyrgyz or Uighur. It's logistical work away from the front, he said... they need workers, he said... we have to buckle down and hand over our men, he said... There's a war going on, he said. What can the *volostnoys* do in this situation? If only authority and power lay in our hands... I was ordered in front of all the others: to 'get it sorted!' You have to understand what this means. The Tsar has many servants; they are as numerous as the trees in the wood... No matter what you do, everyone complains that you are harming the interests of your own *volost*... and your own people. Is this not so?" Rakhimbai asked the other *volostnoys*, trying to divine from their expressions whether he had overdone it or not.

"Indeed it is so..." Two or three disjointedly replied; the others simply looked at Uzak and Zhamenke in silence.

"Well..." Zhamenke murmured. "You take a lot of pride in your eloquence! But you speak with a forked tongue, Rakhimbai. You swim like an undernourished race horse... You probably think that if you were to leave us in the lurch, it would be the end of the world and there would be nobody left to guide the Alban people!"

"You are a lame old woman," said Uzak. "A tattered and worthless windbag. Do you think that you alone know the truth? You've never looked for it in your whole life! The only truth you know is the chief of police and his sergeant... And they know you... but only as a drinking partner! You're frightened of the Tsar? Then you'd better start praying and crossing yourself... Imperial servant Rakhimbaev! Go ahead and write your lists. Drive our young men off as a gift to the Tsar. You're the boss, you win... Let's all follow this black sheep, this degenerate. Why are we wasting our breath here?!"

And *volostnoy* Rakhimbai's heard the sentence handed down to him. And with that the people began to sound off:

"We know why he's singing this pretty song, we all know! Given half a chance, he would sell the whole *volost* if it brought him a profit."

"Drive him out with a good horse whipping!"

"Get out of our sight... you son of a dog!"

"We'll destroy you and your entire house before we give up a single one of our men."

"We'll slit your throat before a single one goes! Slit it like a fattened sacrificial ram!"

The *bais* and *biis*, the traditional custodians of the customs and procedures of these great formal gatherings, had never heard such violent remarks at such a meeting. What made the whole thing even more surprising was that not only the good and great Aubakir but also all the other *volostnoys*, every single one of them to a man, also gave their brother *volostnoy* the tongue-lashing of his life. They had put two and two together and realised what they needed to do, how to serve their own interests. And they hadn't miscalculated because they were duly forgiven. But Rakhimbai just sat there, his head bowed, praying to God that it wouldn't soon be parted from his shoulders.

It was with difficulty that the *aqsaqals* eventually calmed the people and not before all the young and the poor who had not been summoned to the meeting had fully given vent to their feelings. However, they decided that the following day neither the elders nor the *volostnoys* would go to see the chief of police but other, younger, bolder and more reliable representatives. Thus, Serikbai, Turylgozha and Aitpai were elected.

They then swore their allegiance on the blood of the horse that had been sacrificed. Zhamenke and the most honoured elders of all the clans of the Alban people blessed their kinsmen and everyone felt in those few minutes that they had been united in spirit like the children of a single father. The huge

crowd, that was packed in right up to the river, heeded to the old men and called upon the spirits of the ancestors, praying that they would not be left in misfortune and strife.

And thus, the first seed of the uprising was sown, one of those small seeds out of which grew the harvest of the uprising of 1916, the precursor to the great revolution.

Chapter 3

Uzak was returning from that memorable meeting together with his brother Tungatar and they were accompanied by a crowd of other riders.

Tungatar was a rich man, the reigning lord and master of one of the largest of the Alban tribes. His power lay in his long purse. His men would drive herds of over one and a half thousand horses out onto the summer pastures. For this reason, the *bai's* eldest son walked among the leaders of the people, and his grandsons ruled the roost among the younger generation. The only thing the *bai* feared was famine and drought but both were a rarity in Karkara.

The Tsar's decree was no great misfortune for him. He had already made a visit to the people that mattered among his own people and the Russians. And he had come back satisfied: he had nothing to worry about as far as his sons and grandsons were concerned and the same could be said about his livestock. But Uzak and that old troublemaker Zhamenke had frightened him.

A rambunctious pair. The *bai* was not at all satisfied with them. He was incensed with them.

Seeing how *volostnoy* Rakhimbai had fared, Tungatar had chosen to keep his mouth shut but noted that his brother Uzak had taken far too much power into his hands. His brother had forgotten himself and had not taken the *bais* into account! This was a sin that no one would forgive.

As evening drew in, they approached their own *aul* and were met by one of Tungatar's young *dzhigits*, who galloped towards them, taking his master to one side.

"At midday... Out of the blue... Six cossacks descended on the *batyr's* aul. They searched the whole *aul* and asked: 'Where is the master?' But we closed ranks and told them: 'Perhaps he is at the fair?' And their senior officer, Old Two-Beard, just laughed."

"Right. I see," said the *bai*.

"It turns out that at the chancellery they know everything that has happened today: who said what and how things went with *volostnoy* Rakhimbai — everything!" said the young man.

"No need to shout. I am aware of that. They didn't search my house and they didn't ask where I was, did they?"

"No, they didn't even stick their noses in! But they frightened everyone in the *aul*, nevertheless. I was sent to meet you. Should we go home or not? Your wife ordered me to warn you. You and the *batyr*... Will you tell him yourself... Or what?"

With a sneer, the *bai* stroked his moustache with fingers adorned with two rings.

"This was only to be expected. You play games with the White Tsar at your own risk. They're going to give him a pasting! And it would seem that he himself is keen for them to teach him a lesson. As if he really wants to get it in the neck from the chief of police. Well, so be it, I say!"

Tungatar dismounted and led his horse to one side away from the road, sending the messenger for Uzak with a nod of his head.

Uzak responded unwillingly to this brother's call. For a long time now the *batyr* had avoided the *bai*, each meeting weighed heavy with him since that dark, thrice cursed day when Uzak's heart had been cleft in twain.

They had no choice but to meet up, but no warmth smouldered in their hearts for each other, nothing to suggest that they were brothers and that the same blood flowed in their veins. At times, you could be forgiven for asking yourself if they were even kinsmen at all.

The *bai* was like all *bais*: mercenary, greedy, and cruel, he had no qualms about resorting to dirty deeds and he thought only of himself in all matters, great or small. Nevertheless, he kept things secret from his brother, trying to hide his dirty hands, but the *batyr* saw through his intrigues, and there had been occasions when he had forced him to do the right thing.

Every time they had to meet, Uzak suffered terribly. He found each encounter nauseating. But Tungatar pretended not to notice this. With each passing year, Tungatar got richer and richer, and Uzak, greyer and greyer.

However, today the sparks were going to fly. Tungatar was sitting on a high grassy mound when Uzak dismounted next to him. Those accompanying them rode off to a respectful distance leaving them to their *tkte a tkte*. The sun was low and the men and their beasts drew long shadows.

The *bai* waited for his brother to sit down next to him and then, without looking at him, said:

"You crow like a cockerel! Your tail is really up... Who are you planning to wake up with your crowing? Who have you already awoken? The superintendent's ear is much more sensitive to your clucking than the Kazakh! Six men have already been searching for you in the *aul*. Sergeant Plotnikov came himself. Do you hear me? Who do you think you are crossing swords with here? Even when things were quiet and calm, the chief of police gave you three months in prison to teach you a lesson. That was just an advance payment. Now, your head could roll for this! And what will we do without that head of yours! The Alban people will be left without their father."

Uzak looked around sadly.

“And what do you want of me? Who do you think you are trying to frighten? What is it that’s bothering you — your conscience or your wallet? Old Grey Mane gave me a lesson, so what..? Thank you, for that advance payment. And now what? The entire people are suffering! What are you so bothered about? What of it that six men have been to my *aul*? Do you think I haven’t ever seen Sergeant Plotnikov? Do you think that the earth will swallow me up? Or that I will be unmanned? What is your command for your brother? That I should kiss Grey Mane’s backside, like Rakhimbai? I am not capable of doing what you have taught me to do. I am too old to go changing my ways.”

“You have always been this way.” said the *bai*, irritably, his shoulders shuddering as if he had caught a chill. “You are constantly putting your fingers in the fire! The *batyr* has lived to a ripe old age, he has fought and fought and what has he achieved? The Tsar has power on his side — the earth bends under his feet. Do you really think he’s not going to be able to deal with you? Who do you think you are to rise up against him? When are you going to come to your senses and mellow? If you have no pity for yourself, then feel some for your family, for your kith and kin. Have a care for your children, so that people won’t point at them and say: Those are that dolt Uzak’s children!”

“Ah, Tungatar... God has stripped you of all hope... You have reined so hard at the bit that my soul is cut to pieces. You have trampled me completely into the muck. What more do you need from me? Tell me!”

“Yes, I will tell you! Listen... I have been probing certain people. As you know I have contacts... Even the chief of police himself... If we spend a little money in advance... we’ll be able to smooth over this problem. Thank God, I have been blessed

with many cattle. I have sufficient means to save one person. But the others will have to look after themselves! I swear to you, just give me the nod and I will remove one man of your choice from the call up lists. Don't worry, we won't be ruined, we'll sow a kopeck and reap a rouble."

Uzak raised his eyebrow in amazement:

"Did you seriously think you could bribe me? Can this really be true?"

"I am saving you!! Stop now, before it's too late. Don't incite and confuse the simple folk. The common people must be restrained! We will be the first to go up in flames... They listen to you. They would follow you to the devil — even to the Kalmyks. But this would be a catastrophe for us. We would lose everything! If we go there I would no longer be a *bai*, but a common pauper. No matter how much land you ask, there will never be enough to feed my herds and flocks. You and I will be the first to suffer — see how much cattle I have! What am I going to do with them? Who is going to take them to pasture? They will be stolen. They will strip us to the bone... Heed my words, you must pacify our herdsmen and my servants! At least at home, on our native land," the *bai* suddenly whispered, "otherwise the poor will destroy us if you give them their liberty. Have you thought about this?"

"Have you said all that you wanted to say?"

"Yes, all. If you are a brother to me, by the honour of our people and the memory of our ancestors, I exhort you!"

This was too much; it was enough to infuriate anyone: Tungatar and the honour of the people... the sacred memory of the ancestors! The *batyr's* eyes filled with blood.

"Get out of my sight, you base dog! Before Allah strikes you down with lightning, and damn me for listening to your lies and nonsense! Be gone from my sight, you two-legged mongrel! You have no right to call yourself the son of Sauruk. Get thee

gone! I never want to see you ever again. Never interfere in my affairs, never cross my path. When I die, don't you dare presume to bury me, don't you dare bring shame upon my dead body? I shall take the grief and shame that you are my brother with me to the grave. Be gone!"

The *bai* hadn't seen Uzak so furious and uncontrolled for many years. The *batyr* trembled, grabbing the curved knife that hung at his belt. He was evidently recalling the past...

'He will never bend,' the bai thought. 'This troublemaker will have to broken, broken!'

"Well, I tried to do my duty," Tungatar muttered querulously as he climbed up onto his horse. "It's over. From this day forth we are no longer brothers."

Uzak followed him with his gaze, blind with hatred. The *bai* rode into the sunset and a blind, gloomy, crimson sun also followed him from under its heavily lidded clouds.

And a vision returned to the *batyr's* mind's eye that he had recalled every day for the last twenty years and would never forget until his dying day.

* * *

Her neck was tender and swarthy... Around the neck a noose. A speckled, mottled loop of horse hair lasso, plaited out of three separate strings.

The cold, senseless body hanging from it. The face deathly white. Only the eyes were slightly open and the gaze alive. The eyes screaming: "Father... My father..."

She had screamed for him in her final minutes and he had not responded. He had not listened. But, now twenty years on, how he listened... And he answered her: "I am coming."

Bekei had been his only daughter. Since childhood, she had always been special, unlike the others. It was not without reason that he loved her so much, although he had never, and

especially in those times, been noted for his soft-heartedness and sentimentality. His daughter was good looking; there were other girls more beautiful but none as clever. He was also proud of her because Bekei was learned!

At the time, the impetuous Uzak, son of the recently deceased *batyr* Sauruk, also became a *batyr* and came into his own renown and glory. He and his daughter were two birds of a feather.

As was the custom, Bekei had been betrothed at a very young age. Her bridegroom was the son of a rich *bai*. The father and son's only interest was cattle and livestock, they themselves were almost cattle. But Bekei was used to her father, the *batyr*, conversing and listening to her. Even the elders paid heed to her words. And it was clear that she disdained the house of dullards that she was destined to join. Bekei was modest and pure, but her soul was as defiant as her father's, and she defied her parents' will. She found a friend who was more after her own heart and mind.

On a clear, star-filled, summer's night, the time for dreams and love, Bekei heeded the calling of her heart and set off for her chosen one, leaving her parental home. Despite her intelligence, she left without thinking, throwing caution to the wind.

And perhaps because of her intelligence, she trusted not so much in human kindness but in her father, the one person among her numerous kin who would have the daring and courage to follow her over the fateful threshold of custom and taboo that others dared not go.

The misfortune was that Bekei had absconded with a young Kyrgyz, the son of Manap, from the distant, blue, celestial mountains of Baltabai. This misfortune was compounded by the fact that Uzak had two brothers, and one of them was Tungatar.

Manap had long been an enemy of Uzak and his people. To take the daughter of your enemy for a respectable, honourable bride price would mean reconciliation; to steal her away was a deep insult, graver than murder. In the heat of the moment, not letting his heart master his hot head, the *batyr* disowned his daughter and pronounced a curse upon her.

When he came to his senses, he was surprised at himself. He had not wished any evil towards his daughter. He loved her. It was then that his brothers Tungatar and Kozhamberdy intervened.

Bekei was too great a prize for the tribe of Manap, they said, and that was true. But between themselves, the brothers swore that they would kill her or lay down their lives in the process, and that was an act of vile villainy. But Uzak did not discern their villainy and was not on his guard; his hatred for Manap and his son, who had taken his Bekei, his most priceless possession, had robbed him of his wits. They goaded the *batyr* to take revenge, and he desired it, without reflecting who exactly he was revenging himself on.

Impetuous, headstrong, and by now already confused and muddled by his brothers, Uzak rushed off in pursuit. He bribed the authorities in Karakol and Bekei was summoned to the chancellery.

Uzak's daughter thought her father would be quite different when they met. On seeing him, she saw something that he did not see: her own death.

"Your blood is in my veins, father. Do not force me to have to face our fellow kinsmen," she beseeched. "If I have committed an offence, kill me here on the spot with your own hands. Punish me by parting me from my beloved, give me away to the first man you meet, but only let him be a Kyrgyz. Do not disgrace me in front of my own people.

Uzak agreed, giving his word on the Koran. And Bekei signed a foolish document, stating that she had disowned her beloved... But, having won his daughter back, Uzak, without thinking for long, brought her home to their native *aul* .

He tricked and betrayed her. He tricked and betrayed himself. He was not as clever and not as learned as his daughter.

In the meantime, his deadly curse began to take effect. Bekei perished and dwindled before his very eyes. Small, beautiful, innocent Bekei... She was struck dumb and trembled like a lamb that has been lashed across the eyes with a horsewhip.

Grinding his teeth, Uzak struck his chest with his fist, because he realised that she was in possession of a living, beating heart and not a soulless, black stone. Suddenly he realised that instead of saving his daughter he had ruined her, that she was as broken hearted as the heroines of myth and songs. He was appalled at what he had done, perhaps for the first time in his life, he felt pity and empathy for a woman.

His brothers Tungatar and Kozhamberdy dogged his footsteps, tugging at his shirt hem. Tungatar excelled himself with the refinement of his loud denouncements. "The shame," he said, "a stain on our entire family." And he frightened everyone with tales of divine retribution. Listening to him, Uzak curled his lip. But Tungatar could raise the quick and the dead with his indignant cries. The entire clan turned against Uzak. The fork-tongued custodians of honour harried him, like wolves circling a lone traveller in the steppe in a hungry winter. The *batyr* was left completely isolated. No one even wanted to listen to him.

That was when Uzak understood how brave and great-hearted his little Bekei was, and how cowardly and base he had been. The blood of his father, *batyr* Sauruk, boiled in Uzak's veins.

“I will never betray you. I will never submit!” He told his daughter.

And again he miscalculated his strength just as Bekei had miscalculated hers.

Evil people lay in wait and when he went away for an hour, they stole into his house and hanged Bekei under the dome of her father’s yurt, with the mottled lasso, plaited out of three different coloured strings. Drunk and in his cups, it was Tungatar who did the deed before the eyes of Bekei’s own mother, who clung to his strong hairy hands, desperately trying to fight him off.

Uzak’s wife took to her bed and did not rise again for many months. The brother Kozhamberdy also suffered a mysterious attack. When he came to, he began to low like a cow and howl like a wolf, he was no longer able to distinguish the cakes of dung for fuel from cakes of bread; he would spit out the bread and eat the dung. He lived like this for a year and that was how he died.

Tungatar alone rose in the world, his waist and backside spreading, and where he had once had one neck, he now had three.

* * *

Every time Uzak returned to the past in his mind’s eye and saw Bekei hanging from her noose, with her semi-open, living eyes, it was as if he had been shot right through the heart. And it had been shot through a thousand times.

But he would return there nevertheless... and gaze into Bekei’s eyes. And thirstily, with a heavy and sickening intoxication, he would drink all the bitterness, all the poison of his guilt and this incurable festering wound. Sweet, tender words that had been alien to him in his youth now clawed at his heart, because she had been his beloved child, his swallow, his turtle dove, innocent and sacred.

Here was the land that had given birth to her, fed her and into which she had passed away. Here was the *aul* that had borne witness to her last days. This place was called Tanbalytas, meaning the 'Marked Rock'. There was no washing the stain from it.

To the north of the *aul* there is a cliff as black and speckled with grey as Uzak's beard. The cliff is drawn towards the red pine forest, standing on the threshold of the heavens at the very edge of the world. Bekei would often go to that cliff as if it were her father. She would return as withered and dry as a fallen leaf.

She would also wander under the pines in the dusk of the evenings, as the pines faded and grew dim, like her young soul. And almost against her will, she would return to the *aul*'s meadows, dotted with patches of exposed grey clay, like the scabs on the hide of a mange-ridden sheep.

And Bekei's sadness filled the river, a narrow ribbon crawling down into the Karkara valley like a long, plaited lasso. And the ill-favoured, lifeless salt marshes in the sunset. And the dismal teeth of the ravines, that had been worn down by the wind and resembled a huge mantrap.

Bekei's suffering lived on everywhere, silent and inconsolable. Closer to the yurts, the fires of the evening hearths glittered, and they too contained the yearning of her heart. No matter where you looked you could see the untimely premature wrinkles that lined her face.

But the sparks of her trampled, extinguished pride were nowhere to be found.

"An accursed time... an accursed place..." Uzak thought, his drawn face frozen and distorted, his back so crooked and bent that it looked as if it had been broken.

What had changed over the past twenty years? To that day Bekei's executioner still walked her land, a shaggy tarantula in

the shape of a man, a slave of mammon. And he continued to rip up and burn everything that Bekei stood for and held dear... He still walks, and judges, and sentences, and punishes, and swears by the family's honour and the shadows of the ancestors, brandishing them like the noose of a lasso, plaited from three differently coloured strings.

He would have killed his own mother if he had thought she was a threat to his herds.

And Uzak also pondered his own mortality, how these last twenty years had tired him out, how hard of hearing he had become, how weakly he now heard Bekei's voice, her screams, the testimony of her final words: "My father... father..." But Tungatar does not grow old and does not grow weaker; he has many faces and many hands, his herds multiply and his power increases.

And thinking thus, the *batyr* groaned and raised his eyes to the heavens, asking that he be given new strength, and in exchange, he would be prepared to give up his life.

"I am ready, take me... But in the way that Bekei would have wanted! So that when I stand before her I will not be burning with shame. Take me as a sacrifice for the people! A sacrifice for the people... My darling one, I understand that it is not for nothing that your shadow has appeared. I will go! I go to join you. And I will join you..."

For twenty years he had been confessing his thoughts to Bekei. And now the thing he desired most was to justify himself in her eyes. To surpass her bravery and wisdom, which had been more abundant in her than the entire male line of the Alban people.

Turning his face to the west, he made a prayer. He prayed for Bekei's soul, and secretly to her spirit and that of the ancestors, the most sacred thing of all for the steppe dweller, equal in holiness to God himself.

Then he set off down towards the *aul*. His horse trailing behind him.

It was already deep night.

Chapter 4

The three-day deadline set by the chief of police had passed. But was everything going as he had planned? When was this meek tribe going to come running and fall down at his feet, praying and beseeching, offering money and livestock, thinking only of their stomachs? It seemed that this wasn't in the offing.

What were they up to there, what were they cooking up in their much-vaunted summer pastures?

The genial *tolmach* Ospan pretended that he was ashamed on behalf of his countrymen, sighed apologetically and moped around mournfully, trying to demonstrate how dejected and downcast he was as well. The chief of police stopped paying him attention.

He had another set of ears and, through them, he heard every word uttered for dozens of miles around the chancellery. Day and night, Rakhimbai had been listening to what was being said and where, and had been reporting back to the superintendent. Other unknown spies arrived from an anonymous personage, but Old Grey Mane knew his name well — the wisest and cleverest of all the *bais*. Not long ago, the chief of police had had a very pleasant meeting with him, and this *bai* had been the first to take the hint and make a payment that befitted a royal decree!

It was beyond comprehension how the brother of this *bai* could be the main instigator and rabble-rouser. Even the three months in prison that had been handed down to him on his brother's advice hadn't taught this troublemaker a lesson.

The chief of police was used to being treated like an idol, surrounded by general adulation and servility. And was he not an idol in this wild steppe? But now he could not understand the fearlessness on display in the presence of his graven image. He was offended and wrathful.

His first order had been to seize the free-thinking rabble-rouser immediately but the investigator and sergeant had initially deterred him.

They had said that it would have been too risky. Dear God, how guarded and circumspect they had become! There was no denying, they would have had to put one in five of those who were agitating against the sovereign Emperor's decree behind bars and that would have been exceeding their authority somewhat. How modest these small-time, trade fair officials had become...

The denunciations kept arriving. His spies were in a cold sweat to hear that the whole tribe had risen up and that the steppe was on fire. Even before the decree, there had been a good degree of residual outrage but now the cup was overflowing. No one talked about this openly but everybody was thinking it to themselves.

It was bad enough already that the people had suddenly left the great summer fair at a single signal, as if by secret agreement. This was nothing less than banditry and daylight robbery. There was only one way to describe the whole affair: it was a political protest!

However, the investigator stuck to his guns:

"Circumspection and care are what is required. I repeat: circumspection and care! To arrest their leader at this precise time would be a gross lack of circumspection. We would be making a grave error. It would be better to show restraint. We'll be creating a lot of trouble for ourselves. As a rule, arrests only serve to stir things up... In an atmosphere such

as this, it wouldn't go amiss to consider persuasion... and even kindness... These pastoral peoples are very susceptible to kindness."

"We are going to have to bring him in all the same. There's no getting around it," said the sergeant. "It's going to have to be done, but best do it when the time is right..."

"As you wish, we'll wait and see," the chief of police replied with a condescending sneer. "Nevertheless, gentlemen, disorder is disorder... And arrests exist in order to nip this sort of thing in the bud! These steppe peoples soon calm down if you rein in their leaders. Without their grey beards, these herdsmen are as easily led as their sheep. And that is precisely what my plan was — so why do we need all this circumspection!"

"You are absolutely right," the investigator agreed. "Your steppe dweller is hot blooded only initially. He blusters and boils for a bit and then cools down. And then everything returns to normal. It stands to reason that it won't be Uzak who gains the upper hand, but his brother — a very circumspect individual! The equal of our own favourite Rakhimbai. Therefore, it's critical that we support them in every way we can. We shouldn't be creating any obstacles or stumbling blocks for them."

"Agreed! And we can thank God that that is exactly what I am going to do," the superintendent declared. "So, Plotnikov, would you be so good, my friend, as to take half a dozen or so men and make a search for this man at his *aul*. That will do for a start. And then I can start showing them how tender I can be! Do I make myself clear?"

Over those three days, the chief of police was more threatening than usual, puffing himself up in front of the clerks and the *tolmachs* and concealing his fear from them and himself. Using abuse and threats, Old Grey Mane showed everyone that he was very much around and that he was calling the shots.

He stopped the only man who had come to the bazaar that day, literally tearing him out of the hands of the merchants and gave his soul full rein. He grabbed his horse and waving his fists at the man's black beard, shouted:

"Are you a Kazakh? An Alban? A spy? I'll clap you in prison!"

* * *

The fourth day arrived, the day that the reply was due. This was the day that everyone had been waiting for. It had been the only subject of discussion around the village hearths and pastures. Their answer would be clear and simple for everyone. It had come to this. So that was how it would be.

But... All the same, how would it turn out? It wasn't easy to imagine how these ordinary mortals, these simple herdsmen would dare to come and say no... And not just to anybody... But to Old Grey Mane himself! Was such a thing really possible?

They had been told that they needed to stand firm together, in perfect harmony, like a wall, as if the entire Alban people were acting in perfect unison. Then things would turn out fine. It was just a question of thinking it and believing it and it would happen...

And so since morning, a multitude of people found themselves on the move along the nine roads that led to the fair. Everyone who could sit on a horse had risen, to stand together like a wall.

They had ridden from all the summer pastures: from Dongeleksaz, Koktebe, Kokbulak, Syrt... and from Labas, Akbeit, Tuz and Kegen... Wave after wave of horsemen flowed down from the mountain meadows, through the gorges and ravines down into the Karkara plateau. Wave after wave rolled as far as the eye could see, on every slope and incline like the serried banks of cumulus clouds before a July thunderstorm.

It seemed as if the mountains themselves, the snowy ranges had suddenly disgorged ancient stores of native resources stored deep in their secret entrails and they had poured forth as hordes of horsemen into the green valley. An innumerable tribe moved in an endless, countless and riotous stream. A horse-loving, restless people rode forth, an unbounded, unfettered people of the harsh steppe.

Before they reached the summer fair, they lingered on the broad heights between the great fair and Uzak's aul. Muslim holidays and festivals were normally celebrated here. This place was called Ait-Tobe, which means the Prayerful Hill. It drew horsemen to it like a magnet. The crowds flocked and swelled here, flowing as a huge, single, living whole, and below, from the fair in the valley, it seemed as if a tall, dark forest had grown on the hill and was now being shaken by a rumbling, echoing wind.

Uzak and Zhamenke had already arrived at Ait-Tobe. Serikbai and Turlygozha were also here. Many had dismounted, their horses tied to a tethering post. They sat with their legs crossed, waiting. More and more new arrivals rode in to join them. Some raced up, prancing on their hot-blooded horses, raising them up on their hind legs. But for the most part, they rode in a dignified manner in disorderly flowing ranks, restraining their horses that were chewing at the bit.

At Ait-Tobe, special marching procedures had been put in place. The first to ride in were those whose job it was to welcome new arrivals. There were many of them. They stuck together in pairs on strong, spirited horses. They are the first to arrive anywhere, and their horses never cease tossing their heads, demanding their freedom... And you could see how glad the new arrivals were to be met as is right and proper. It showed that here, everything was in good order, everything was as it should be.

Those meeting them were also glad that so many people had travelled so far to join them at Ait-Tobe.

The time for lunch was approaching. Many had gathered and they had gathered from far and wide. People, horses — a show of force! The sun was at its zenith, fiery, merciless.

The people of the Dongeleksaz, famous for their friendliness, stood out from the others. They had been led here by old Husain and the small and pugnacious Kartbai who had only just been released from the small jail at the fair for the princely sum of one hundred and twenty roubles!

Kokbai was also with them, a strapping, rugged young *dzhigit* with a small beard astride a tall horse. He squinted into the sun, winked at friends and strangers alike and joked:

“There are times at that rotten lousy flea market of a fair when five or ten merchants gather together and convince themselves that they’ve got a crowd! Let them just see us now, a curse on them. We’ll sweep aside whoever we want, isn’t that right lads?”

He was answered by Kartbai, who looked around him with evident satisfaction:

“Congratulations, brother. I wish you every success. I see that the Alban here are all united as one! God willing...”

Voices rose up from all sides and plaited themselves into a knot:

“How could it be otherwise! And so we should be if we want to call ourselves a people!”

“Just you wait now, mister chief of police!”

“See how many of us there are brothers! The bigwigs won’t know what’s hit them.”

“They’ll hole up in their lairs no doubt. But we must act like eagles! Don’t lose heart.”

“As soon as we get there, we’ll scatter and trample the lot of them underfoot. Arm in arm, the people will make merry hell.”

In the old men's voices, there was a pride that had long been slumbering, in the young men's — a long desired boldness.

The young men, as is their wont, bragged and joked but not at each other's expense as was usual. Today the conversation had a different feel and was accompanied by friendly, mischievous laughter.

"Hey, Kokbai, tell us how the big wigs are getting on down at the fair?"

"How do you think? Their eyes are bulging and so are their britches."

"Hey, Kokbai! How are the bigwigs going to interrogate you?"

"How do you think? On the run, fertilising the land as they go."

"What interrogations are you talking about?! The hill is black with us. You can't interrogate us all."

"Let them try interrogating me. All they can talk about is the Tsar. The Tsar doesn't frighten me!"

"We should chase the lot of them out of here."

"How much longer are we going to have to put up with Old Grey Mane?"

"First things first, to the fair! All these *tolmach pilferers*! Have stuffed their faces for too long. Enough is enough."

"Hold your horses, hold your horses. Hey, Kokbai haven't you bought your supply of chewing tobacco yet, have you not had your fill of manti...?"

"Go on, be honest: did you not get a taste of the sergeant's whip instead?"

Nearby, competing with Kokbai in mischief, was another young man with reddish hair by the name of Zhanseit, which translates as 'Dear Seit'. He was also poking fun at the merchants.

"I'm not going to pay for my tobacco anymore. I'm just going to help myself and that's that. I'll just take it off them."

The others challenged him in a tender but gibing manner:
“Zhanseit, Zhanseit! How do you plan to take it off them? The merchant will be upset. He and I have been friends for a long time...”

“Old friends isn’t the word. I promised I’d upset these old friends when they were still in their mothers’ wombs!”

This promise met with noisy approval.

“Zhanseit, Zhanseit! And how do you plan to upset them? Which merchants do you love more, the ones from Tashkent or the ones from Kazan?”

The red-head coughed hoarsely.

“I wouldn’t touch the ones from Tashkent because I love their *manti* too much. I’m a dull boy when I don’t get my share. I would say to him: ‘Sit tight and cook me some of your manti. And if you don’t I’ll singe your beard’.”

“And the merchants from Kazan?”

“To the Kazan merchant, I would say: ‘Your eyes are green and your nose pointed. You’re no use to me. You’ll have to give up your dirty work for the Tsar and live off the steppe like the rest of us, but you are a merchant, what are you good for? Go back to your lords and ladies and serve them. Stick to what you’re used to! You can offer me whatever you want, I wouldn’t take you with me.’ That’s what I’d say. I’d warm his back with my whip and send him on his way.”

Laughter again.

“Zhanseit, ah, Zhanseit! And what would you do with their women?”

“What women?”

“Well, for example, that fat one... who belongs to the superintendent?”

“I’ll take her beyond that outcrop over there, I’ll starve her for three days and then she’ll forget all about her superintendent, she’ll forget all about her god as well! When she gets a bit

thinner I'll give her away to Zhamenke our *aqsaqal*. He could do with a second wife to warm the water for his ablutions."

Laughter, whistles and cackling. The ringing clatter of hoofs merged into a rumbling thunderous roar. It drowned out the riders' voices and they kept asking each other to repeat who had said what, and they rolled with laughter, their bellies shaking in the saddle. Suddenly they were interrupted by a piercing whoop and with a shrill cry broke into a gallop. Their gallops were brief but fast and quickened the blood, raising the spirits. And the people became intoxicated at how freely they breathed, how friendly everyone was and that their numbers were becoming ever greater and greater. There were fleeting snatches of conversation with rumours that six riders, including the sergeant, Forkbeard, had carried out a search of *batyr* Uzak's aul, that there were six of them there, that it was all a bit of a mystery.

By midday, the whole of the Prayerful Hill and the slopes approaching it were teeming with shaggy black hats, like an ant heap reaching right up to the heavens. As if at an imperceptible signal, it would strangely and unexpectedly go quiet, as if it had stopped dead. Then it stirred upwards towards the sky, like a mirage, and slowly and leadenly crawled downwards again along its entire, undulating, shimmering mass towards the fair, where a white flag with the two-headed eagle shivered on its high pole.

A whole people rode forth. An entire peaceful tribe was on the move. They rode in silence at an unhurried pace. The horses stretching their heads towards the grass as if they were grazing. And it was as if the clatter of their hooves muffled everything around. It did not thunder out but crept its way forward. There were no cries, whistles or laughter. Just fleeting, furtive glances that seemed to say: "Here we go!"

But this silence, this calm, unprecedented, menacing collusion contained the strength of the steppe, of the very land itself. It seemed as if this quiet march of black hats would obliterate the fair like a slow-moving mudslide.

* * *

Since morning, all eyes in the chancellery had been fixed on Ait Tobye. And nobody even bothered to conceal their fear at what they saw.

The chief of police and other officials had secretly removed their families to two safe houses. They had even concealed their whereabouts from the *tolmachs*. They had armed everyone that they could. Even the superintendent's fat wife had been given a revolver. Cossacks and soldiers remained in the saddle. Ordered not to dismount. And the chief of police had officially and publicly declared that all appropriate measures had been taken.

Having heard him, the four-eyed investigator sneered and set about doing his own thing. He dragged a large black box with a round, owl-like eye on its front out of the chambers and set it up on a tall yellow tripod near the porch. The box was smooth and as black as the holy stone of Mohammed.

The chief of police greeted his guests with the full force of his power. The investigator wanted to look into the Albans' very souls.

The *tolmachs* clung to their bosses until the last moment, wagging their tails like village dogs, and pre-empting the sergeant and the chief of police. They shouted abuse at the few Kazakhs who lived near the fair, but they kept a weather eye open just in case. Early that morning, both Zhebirbaev the "pilferer" and Ospan the "kind-hearted" had sent their wives and children to the nearby *auls* on the pretext of visiting relatives.

Ordinary folk stayed out of harm's way. Only a select few who were considered more shrewd than others suggested

that no good would come of all this. A punitive detachment would be sent. Blood would flow... Troops were stationed in Zharkent. And in Karakol, there were more cannons and rifles than flies at the meat market!

Usually, these words of warning would have flown like bullets into the *auls*, crushing people's spirits on the spot. But today, they fell harmlessly at their feet like goat droppings.

When the people set out from Ait-Tobye, the Cossacks rode out to meet them. The chief of police had sent them out to test the waters. But they shouted in vain, waving their whips helplessly in the air as if they had no intention of hitting their mark. The assembled people calmly carried on their way, ignoring the Cossacks completely who, spinning on their horses, retreated in front of them. It all resembled a big game: the huge host of Black Caps and in front of them these Cossacks dancing on their horses.

The people were divided according to their *volost* districts. Already in sight of the chancellery, two bearded men galloped up to the Black Caps, led by *volostnoy* Rakhimbai.

"Halt! Where do you think you're going? You can't all come in... It's against orders. Why not select one of your number to go in! Get down from your horses!"

And once again, Rakhimbai decided to test fate.

"Dismount!" He cried out in a choked voice.

And he began to get down from his horse. Following his lead, several of his attendants dismounted.

There had been no agreement on this point in advance. But seeing the *volostnoy* and his suite dismount, the people from his *volost* followed suit. And seeing how they had dismounted, and thinking that that was what was required, the people led by Aubakir also began to dismount from their horses. And so all the others from the different *volosts* did likewise...

The momentum had stalled and came to a stop. Men and beasts pressed together and were restricted. Then, out of necessity and logic, Rakhimbai and his attendants began to tie up their mounts. And everyone else around began to tie their horses, leaving one of their number to look after them.

And immediately it was as if a thousand mighty heroes had been transformed into a thousand pygmies. Once dismounted, the huge horde of black hats lost its menace. They had succeeded in diminishing themselves...

The chief of police and other officials who had been standing on the chancellery porch were visibly emboldened. A Kazakh on foot is a pale imitation of a Kazakh on horseback. If you wait long enough, he'll tear the black cap from his head and start wringing it in his hands.

With a truly martial gesture, the chief of police sent the sergeant with the *tolmach* Zhebirbaev to the petitioners, (because the fact that they had dismounted from their horses obviously meant that they had come to submit and that they were now petitioners).

With all the bravado he could muster, the sergeant sucked in his stomach, however, it behoved him to behave in the same way as his superiors.

"Dismount! Silence!" He began, approaching them from the superior vantage point of the saddle. "Who's the advocate here? Follow me... to his honour, quick march!"

The people stood, their heads bowed.

"There are three of them," Turlygozha replied loudly, suddenly stepping forward. "They have been chosen by the people! They will go... they will speak on behalf of the people... But we will all of us go, all of us! To hear for ourselves what the chief of police has to say. Is that not so, men of the Alban?"

And instantly a mighty echo rippled over the crowds:
"Everyone!"

"Halt, take a step back, halt..." The sergeant muttered, barely able to sit on his horse that was now recoiling in fear. "It's not allowed, it's against orders!"

"Where? Over there?" The Black Caps' spirits were revived.

"Our people aren't dogs for you to order about!"

"We've said we're going. And go we will, why shouldn't we go?"

"The authorities shouldn't hide from the people."

"Let's go, everyone!"

"Let's go!"

And so they set off on foot and the sergeant rode before them in such a frantic and skittish gallop it was as if he had decided to prance on the spot to amuse the assembled people.

The entire company on the chancellery porch collectively let out a cross between sigh and gasp. For a moment there was a collective impulse — to make a run for it!

"They've gone completely mad," the chief of police muttered under his breath. "Hold fast, damn it... Keep your cool."

"That's right. That's right..." Said the corpulent superintendent huffing and puffing as he tried to hold them steady. "Don't pay any attention and pretend that nothing has happened... For God's sake gentlemen, deport yourselves as befits a servant of the state..."

Only the investigator, pushing the glasses back up his nose, bravely descended from the porch and stood near his box on the tripod.

Loosening his tightly belted belly, for a fat stomach is respected in the steppe, and leaning on the hilt of his sabre hanging from a luxurious sword belt that even a police chief in the capital might have admired, the superintendent stared at the sea of Black Caps with the look of a boa constrictor about to strike. And indeed, he was like a hero ready with one look to stop an avalanche in its tracks.

But his efforts were all in vain; there wasn't a trace of the usual fear and humility on the faces of the Kazakhs that he so loved. It was as if a dam had been breached! They looked at him as if he were an equal... They looked at him derisively. They looked at him severely. They looked menacingly... And Old Grey Mane felt himself beginning to tremble. He felt tempted to retreat backwards and duck down out of sight. Another minute, another second — and he would be unable to stop himself and start prancing on the spot like Plotnikov on his horse.

Others sensed this, in particular, the *tolmachs*. It seemed that the moment had arrived when it would be an astute move to distance themselves from his excellency. Only Zhebirbaev and the doctor, Zharylgap, were left standing next to the big wigs on the porch. Ospan the “kind-hearted” had long disappeared. He wasn't anywhere to be seen.

“I'll make a start,” the investigator declared and dived under the tripod. He covered his head with the velvet cover and quietly panned round together with his black box and its round eye in front pointed directly at the crowd of Black Caps.

There was no outbreak of thunder, but a pale white hand snaked out from under the velvet curtain, felt around for a thin black tail under the box and grabbed it, a clicking sound was heard and the eye at the front of the machine blinked once. Everybody saw and heard it.

And the black box proceeded to run from one position to another on its human legs blinking its eye at the ranks of Black Caps arrayed before it.

Soon, the box became the only thing that people could think about. It was as if it contained some magic glass. Look at it closely and you could see what has happened in the past... And, of course, what will be in the future!

But for now, the Black Caps hesitated, they stamped their feet, shifting their weight from one foot to another and turned away. People surreptitiously spat over their shoulder to drive away the evil eye and avoid being possessed by the devil. Once jinxed — you'll die in torment in hell!

The crowd stopped in its tracks. And went dumb. It was frozen to the spot, like a lynx that has had a black sack thrown over its head.

And then Ospan was finally found, he had slyly slipped out of the crowd and was now standing in front of the porch as if nothing had happened.

"Tell me, who these people think they are!" the chief of police barked, despite his trembling knees. "Who have you chosen?" His throat gurgled and he breathed out with his entire belly.

"Salaam to you all..." Ospan wisely translated. "Where are your chosen representatives? I am ready to listen!"

This 'salaam' caused a fair degree of consternation. Someone from the back rows shouted:

"You've been told that three men have been chosen. And you already know who they are! So, you can stop your *tolmach*-interpreter lies, right there."

"May it please your honour," Ospan translated. "They have chosen three."

"Three, then so be it," the superintendent nodded. "Step forward!"

Serikbai, Turylgozha and Aitpai stepped up to the front of the crowd.

The black box promptly moved closer to them resting on its tripod to the side of Serikbai. And the superintendent and the corpulent judge involuntarily smiled, seeing how it caused Serikbai to shudder. His attractive face with its handsome beard blushed as pink as a young girl's. He desperately wanted

to spit over his shoulder himself, his lips moving silently — the poor fellow was suffering terribly!

The chief of police jabbed his finger at him and said.

“Well... What have you got to say for yourself? How do you find the Tsar’s decree? Speak up...”

Serikbai was still unable to master himself. He was crestfallen that he had reacted timidly instead of angrily. He had wanted his words to be full of righteous wrath but they came out plaintive and pleading, each word dragged out like a heavy stone.

“It’s not easy for our people... to hand over their young men! It’s hard on the people. It’s a matter of blood and family... it concerns the whole people... Look, here are the people! Let them speak for themselves...” Serikbai turned to the crowd and straining his voice shouted: “Are you prepared to give them our men?”

“No! No!” The Black Caps shouted back. The chief of police saw the enmity in their faces and the fire in their eyes.

But he also noted something else — a certain lack of spirit in one, doubt in another and agitation in a third...

Turlygozha, disconcerted at the way Serikbai had lost his bearings and terrified that he himself might start mumbling and let everyone down, suddenly became indignant with himself. The blood burned in his veins. He took his friend strongly by the arm and without any further ceremony waved him aside.

“No, that’s not the way to do it... That’s not how we were instructed to speak by the people!”

His voice rang out loud and strong. His voice like a trumpet. And his words like a slap in the face. Impossibly impudent words...

The chief of police stepped up to the edge of the porch to cut him down and put him in his place. But with a crooked little smile, the judge held him back.

"The common people's hearts have been hardened," said Turlygozha becoming increasingly freer and bolder. "People get angry when the Tsar tramples justice underfoot with his royal power. The Tsar has ruled us... And we have remained silent... But with this decree, he has broken his royal word. Half a century hasn't even passed since we became a part of Russia and we joined willingly. But the Tsar promised not to take any of our young men into his army before fifty years passed. And he also promised not to levy taxes above one rouble and twenty kopeks a yurt. But what is happening now? He is going to take them! He levied taxes upon every Kazakh from the age of twenty-one to forty-five. He levied taxes just like the Khan of Kalmykia! This was the second thing. And then he took their land away and exiled them from the places they'd been settled for a long time. He even took water away from the people! So that was our third issue with him. What did the Tsar think he was he up to, selling our own land back to us!? And treating us as if we were his step-children! And that is why people are angry; this is why their hearts have hardened. We don't like being lied to. And this is a big lie! We had nurtured the hope that our Tsar would make up for his mistakes, would realise that he had upset us Kazakhs... A Tsar should keep to his word. Yet what have we Kazakhs got from him? A decree! Requisition! A great lie! Our patience has run out. Our silence is at an end. From the day that decree passed his lips our people no longer trust the Tsar! And as for you, his officials...his *tolmachs* and his merchants — we trust you even less. We don't trust you an iota. We don't trust anyone. What do you expect if you issue such laws..? Listen to what our people are saying — we will not give you our young men!"

Turlygozha raised his arms and the thousand-strong crowd that filled the fair all the way from the chancellery to the nearby meadows, rose up in all its might and boomed with the combined power of their male voices:

“You will not have our men!”

Never in all his twenty years on the Steppe had Old Grey Mane seen or heard anything like it. And neither had anyone else.

The superintendent could now sense no sign of indecisiveness. The Black Caps started to crowd in on the sergeant and his thin line of mounted Cossacks and soldiers and push back at his *tolmachs* and servants. Here and there, a tanned fist flew up in the air in defiance. Swearing and curses filled the air. The chancellery was surrounded from all three sides as if held by the throat.

A grey-haired old man walked out onto the small dusty patch of the meadow where Turlygozha stood. Barefoot and in a patched up *chapan*, he pulled a skinny ox behind him on a string:

“Whoever so much as lifts their finger to hand over our men, will be cut down by me with this!” And he pulled out a long knife with a bright blade and black handle from under his coat and showed it to the superintendent.

Turlygozha embraced the poor old man. And others started to embrace him too. The superintendent stood motionless, neither alive nor dead, but trying, nevertheless to seem unperturbed.

“So there you have it,” said Turlygozha, once the crowd had quietened down. “Let the Tsar take our cattle as he has done before — but not our menfolk. And if he really can’t manage without our men, he’d better say so upfront. And let it be so, without any more lies! Let him give our men proper weapons. Let him give them a horse with a saddle, a rifle and cartridges. Let him give them decent clothes and shoes and a belt....and epaulettes, too, no worse than those the Cossacks have upon their shoulders. Our horsemen are no worse than theirs! It is not good to be sent into war empty handed! This can only lead to shame, they will be sacrificed for nothing; we

will not give up our menfolk like that. Give us weapons! Give us caps with cockades! That is what the people want.”

These words pleased the crowd most of all. They struck a particular note in their hearts.

And, with this, Turlygozha finished his speech. And then the third elected man, Aitpai, began to speak, but no one bothered listening to him. A din of voices washed over the crowd. Everyone began talking among themselves, shouting angrily, repeating Turlygozha’s demands:

“They think we’re just bumpkins.”

“Just give us a rifle! And a horse! And a belt! And epaulettes! And a cap with a cockade!”

“We’re no worse than the Cossacks!”

“Take our men, but don’t take away their honour!”

“Why are you treating us like poor relations?”

The longer it went on, the brighter the fire of their words burnt. Old grudges and bitterness bubbled and spilt like boiling water into the fire. And the people’s eyes and snarling teeth were lit up by the embers of this fire. This meek tribe now showed its burning heart.

The authorities were frozen and petrified. Even the brave investigator with his magic black box was getting worried. Nobody noticed him in the crowd. He was getting increasingly irritated himself at the superintendent’s buffoonery and helplessness.

Leaning heavily on the porch handrail, the superintendent leant over towards the judge. Looking at their faces you would have thought they were discussing matters of vital importance to the state. But judging by their lips they were purely mouthing nonsense in order to keep up appearances and pull the wool over everyone’s eyes.

For one moment, the superintendent turned his back on the Black Caps, crisscrossed with his belts of authority. And at that

moment, Zhanseit, having lost his comrades in the commotion, felt his spirits rise and the palms of his hands to itch.

“I’m going to warm that son of a bitch’s backside!”

He pushed his way through the crowd onto the steps of the porch and was about to let loose with his decorative black and white whip... But the elders dragged him back in the nick of time.

“What do you think you’re doing? Wait old son, the time will come soon enough when you can tan their backsides. But you don’t hit a man when his back is turned to you.”

But in their eyes, Zhanseit could see that if he had given that fat boss’s backside the whipping it deserved no one would have said a word. But more importantly, Zhanseit saw that if he laid his whip on the superintendent’s back, nothing would have remained of his authority, and nothing, neither his belts nor his buttons would have been left of him, even as a keepsake for his fat wife.

“What a missed opportunity...” Zhanseit complained jokingly, nevertheless sensing that he had accomplished his task.

Everyone had seen how he had raised his hand and threatened the unassailable. And if he had spared him because the elders had begged him to, then so be it — that is after all the duty of old men.

The fact remained that Old Grey Mane, the idol of the steppes, had finally fallen.

And although, to all intents and purposes, he was still standing there with his back half turned towards them, twisting his moustache, as if deep in thought, he was already nothing more than ash and dust. As far as the people were concerned, his words and wishes meant nothing.

And so, the Black Caps started shaking their heads, clicking their tongues and sniggering at the light-hearted antics of the red-haired Zhanseit, immensely pleased with the largesse of

their spirit, without realising the extent of their naivety. What they had set out to do, had been done. They had said their piece and had said it freely and wildly. In the same way that they rode their horses, pastured their cattle or protected them from the wolf. As for the future — well, God would provide. But for now, they had said things as best they could...

And soon, the Black Caps began to scratch their heads impatiently and tighten their girths. And finally, spitting in disgust, they looked for their horses and started to disperse. By the time evening prayers were called, hardly anyone was left in the marketplace.

The wave of anger, which had risen up so easily, ready to destroy everything in its path, rolled back and dispersed, as effortlessly as it had emerged.

Chapter 5

Mountains. Blistering sun, cold waters... To the west, a great mountain range rises, its rocky shoulders steep; wide meadows nestling on its chest, a white foaming river running through them. Next to it stand long rows of yurts, some on the green hills and some next to the banks carved out of the naked stone.

This is the site of the Dongeleksaz summer pasture and Serikbai's *aul*. All around, beyond the ranges and ravines lie more villages, and more meadows, all much the same. The entire Alban tribe had been camping up here since the spring. But Serikbai's *aul* was higher up than all the others.

Above the meadows, there are thick pine forests which resemble huge, shaggy, furrowed brows. But in some places, where the pines thin out and run down from the mountain tops to the meadows, they resemble the sparse beards that adorn the chins of the Kazakh men. The courses of the mountain streams,

dry and wet, cut through the steep mountain sides, resembling soft, fine wrinkles. The lush greenery of the mountain meadows climbs up along their banks; the higher it rises the more tender it becomes, eventually reddening like a rosy blush on the dark-tanned skin of the mountain stone. The mountain's face has a manly youthfulness and courage about it.

Beyond the crested dark rim of the range, the forests and ridges of the distant mountains shine a bright, clear blue. Beyond them, the grey heads of the most distant peaks turn white under the clouds that hang over their snowy caps. Below, where two green mountain tops stand together in an embrace as if in a blue fog, the huge side of Mount Kulyk peeks through like a mythical warrior.

The evenings are short up in the mountains. But its sharp swift shadows don't immediately snuff out the green fire of the meadows and the tips of the old pines turn pale-pink behind the village. The chill evening wind sighs long and hard through their thick needles. It is already dark under the pines now. But in the bright heavens above, the skylark still bravely sings out its challenge to the day, while the indefatigable kestrel swoops and races over the meadows. Boy-shepherds sing out in friendly harmony behind the hill.

Wherever you cast your eye, there are herds and flocks. The sheep climb the highest, grazing in a tight huddle, never scattering; there are so many of them that from a distance they seem to curl and eddy like a cloud. The horses with their different markings move around more freely.

In the evenings, when the pastures empty out, the voice of the village rises up to the mountains and forests and drowns out the summer thunder of the river.

The sheep are the first to return. They have already been milked and they press themselves close to the village. Their bleating creeps low and close to the ground, while the thin,

descant voices of the kids and lambs rise up to the heavens. If you listen to them, it sounds as if a disaster has struck and people are intoning a mournful, pitiful prayer. The cows start up their lowing when they see their calves and the foals, the most accomplished of all the herd's singers, begin to neigh. From time to time, one of them pours forth a high, ferociously resonant note that soars and ends in a powerful short braying sound that sounds more like a roar.

The women summon their cows tenderly. The men emit short demanding shouts. You can hear the weak but commanding voices of the elders as they advise, approve and scold. Children's voices splash in small waves of babbling, shrieking, laughing and crying.

And then, of course, there is the barking of the dogs. This dies down later than all the other noise, and sometimes not at all. Its intonation is remarkably human. One can hear the soft yelps of a hurt puppy here, the cantankerous yapping of an angry bitch there; the cocky baying of the young males and the more dignified bark of the old dogs. They respond to every rustle and whisper of the steppe, the yurts and the pastures, they meet and escort those who arrive and those who leave. As soon as one dog starts up, the rest jump to their feet too. And at the threshold of night, when the hearths begin to flare into life, a frenzied deafening barking breaks out. Once the dogs become excited by the fires, there is no shutting them up. They are so keen to let man, sheep and horse know that they have nothing to fear of the darkness — we are here, we are on guard.

The life of the *aul* has a harmony of its own. The sheer beauty of its everyday existence becomes apparent in the evenings. It is the busy hour when the frenetic, last-minute jobs are completed that crown the slow labours of the long summer day. A time when no one is about in the village and only a dull silence reigns. By the evening, the mountains and meadows

come back to life, as if shaking themselves out of a lazy stupor. The skies breathe out cool air and everything you turn your hand to is done quickly and efficiently. The evening *aul* speaks in many voices and tongues. It is as crowded and cramped and noisy as the summer fair...

* * *

Yet how remote everything was here from the summer fair!

A strange routine had taken hold up here for some time; it was already into its second week and it didn't seem to be coming to an end anytime soon. The young had been making merry, drunk on *kumiss*; they hadn't even bothered to unsaddle their horses for days and nights on end. Their idleness irritated their elders but they also understood the need for the young men to be at the ready. The *dzhigits* were restless and unsleeping... Many of them were guests, made welcome by the people.

Everybody was waiting for something but no one knew what. They were consoled somewhat by the fact that the *dzhigits*, at least, were ready.

Serikbai looked sadly at the beauty of the mountains and the meadows stirring back into life in the evening light. He thanked and blessed fate for his father's house, for the land and the sky, which he had inherited from his family, his clan. Was it not this land that made the Alban one of the most prominent peoples in Kazakhstan? But, thought Serikbai: *Is it possible that this house is too prosperous? Is it possible that it has been too greatly blessed?* And search as he might, he could find no answer in his heart.

Was it really possible that the world wanted the hard yet free nomadic life and *aul* ways that they had become so used to and which were so native and dear to them to come to an end?

People would often come to Serikbai, asking questions and seeking answers. He was loved and held in high esteem by his people... But what could he say to them?

Here was one of them. Zhaksylyk, a small, thin, old man. You could see from a mile away that his lot was a hard one. Zhumatai, his only son, was the family's only breadwinner. He was as strong as an ox and had turned many a girl's head. He would be among the first to go on the lists... The old man and his wife had probably already shed many a bitter tear, bemoaning their fate and that of their son. Today his humble yurt was relatively well off but tomorrow it could be reduced to nothing. He would become a stranger in his native *aul* and the rest of his life empty and desolate. Everything that he had been through had been nothing compared to this grief!

Zhaksylyk was modest to a fault. He would approach silently and, on the rare occasion that he did ask for something, he would do so quietly, almost mumbling. His eyes, full of bitter, sad thoughts silently beseeched: *Is there any news? And if there is, please tell me it is good news?* But Serikbai kept his peace, for it was better to remain silent than to say that nothing had changed.

The others present were more than happy to answer the old man. They spoke on behalf of Serikbai and they had a lot to say.

The two that were closest to him were two of the poorer *dzhigits* — Baimagambet and Oteu. They had travelled with Serikbai everywhere and they knew everything.

"Some more guests arrived in the village below today," said Baimagambet nodding in the direction of some young men who by dusk were already singing as they rode into the village. "They must have gone through thirty or forty sheep today alone!"

“A lot more than thirty!” Oteu objected with a giggle. “If you count all the *auls* in Kokteb, it’d be more like fifty. The people round there have been very generous.”

“Your reputation for generosity is all very well,” Baigambet interrupted him, looking askance at Serikbai. “But people don’t tend to be so generous with their portions when it’s their own animals they’re stuffing their faces with. We should have taken some off the Cossacks, they’re rich enough...”

His head hanging morosely, Zhaksylyk joined the conversation, reluctantly forcing each word out as if with a great effort:

“Never you mind about the Cossacks, son... You’d be better off thinking about your own cattle. And it would be even better still if neither you nor the Cossacks went anywhere near each other.”

“Is that what you really want? And what if they don’t want to leave us alone? How long would we have to put up with that?”

“I’ve had more than enough to put up with. And as for you, lad, I’ve not seen anything happen to you yet. They haven’t done anything to you, have they? So what’s the point in shooting your mouth off? No good will come of all this.”

“But the people around here like a bit of a fight! And if you’re going to fight, then you might as well do it properly,” exclaimed Baimagambet.

“Then why are you permanently in the saddle when you could be looking after the flocks and the fields?” Oteu added.

“We’re getting our weapons ready...” Baimagambet retorted.

“A fat lot you know, I can see,” sighed Zhaksylyk, “I don’t like this one bit. Who’s going to do the fighting? Where are these weapons of yours? I don’t know. I don’t see it myself. You seem to be like my Zhumatai. You seem to think you can stick a bit of metal on a stick and call it a lance! Do you reckon

any soldier worth his salt is going to stand around waiting for you to gallop and spear him with it?”

The young men fell silent, embarrassed. Everyone was waiting to hear what Serikbai would say. But he didn't say a word.

Baimagambet blinked,

“What do you reckon, Serikbai?”

“If there's a war, we'll figure something out. It won't be our fire power that defeats them but our courage. All we need to do is put the frighteners on them and their soldiers will drop their weapons and run, then we'll go and take them off them...”

“What do you say to that, old man?” Oteu repeated. “I don't like it when the enemy caves in too soon. If war comes, I'll drive our cattle to some remote and secret place, deep in the mountains, out of harm's way...”

He made the enterprise sound so boyishly and foolishly daring that everyone burst out laughing.

The expression: “If war comes...” was on everyone's lips because of the rumours that were doing the rounds about the Kyrgyz. Only that day in a neighbouring village, they had slaughtered a ram and been drinking *kumiss*. There had been horse races and freestyle wrestling competitions with cunning trips and brutal throws, when suddenly someone arrived from the fair with fresh rumours about the Kyrgyz, and the talk had only been about them ever since.

“Just look at the Kyrgyz,” said Baimagambet shooting a glance at Serikbai. “They say the soldiers are running away like rabbits up there near Karakol. Are we any worse than the Kyrgyz?”

Oteu also piped up. He had believed the rumours unquestioningly:

“Once the Kyrgyz get the bit between their teeth there's no stopping them. They're pinning their hopes on us, the Alban. Or at least that's what people are saying!”

Old Zhaksylyk turned to Serikbai with a note of timid hope in his voice:

"So, if they're fighting up there, that must mean they're armed? Do they have weapons?"

"I doubt it!" Said Serikbai. "But I have great faith in them. They are a brave people, a warrior people. May God grant them success..."

The old man was pleased that Serikbai had finally broken his diffident silence and now he almost begged him:

"And what about us? What are we going to do? The whole of Karkara has risen. They say that *batyr* Uzak has taken the best horses from his brother, Tungatar's herds and given them to volunteers who don't have their own... What a cunning old spider that Tungatar is! But is it true what they are saying?"

But again it was Baimagambet who responded:

"And what about us as well? Throughout all the Dongeleksaz pastures the horses are on a short rope and at the ready. Just say the word and we'll be there!"

And Zhaksylyk's head dropped again and he began quietly and unhappily muttering into his beard. Serikbai was distractedly tapping his soft new boot with his whip. He was thinking about what the old man had just told him, that all the best horses had been given to those without their own... And what a cunning old spider that Tungatar was...

The old man had hit the nail on the head. And Oteu responded to him in the same vein without realising it and, jokingly shaking his head, he said:

"I only have one horse and I plough and gather the hay with it every day. And now you want me to put a saddle on it! I just hope there's enough life in him to kick Old Grey Mane all the way back to Zharkent! Eh? And what about that ginger-headed Zhanseit... He only has two horses and he's gone and given one of them to Kanapie. How can I complain after that? I'll happily give up my life and possessions as well!"

On hearing Zhanseit's name, Baimagambet couldn't help interrupting:

"He gave it away, did he, the sly old dog! As if that wasn't enough... He told me, 'I gave mine away. Now, let anyone who doesn't have a horse come to me and I'll get them in the saddle! If push comes to shove, I'll take *tolmach* Ospan's entire herd if I have to, if it means that no one is left without a mount'."

"He's a bit of a wag, that Zhanseit," Serikbai interjected with a crooked smile. "Ospan is Zhanseit's relative but they are as far removed as Tungatar is from *batyr* Uzak. So he's threatening to give away the *tolmach's* herd, is he? Well, believe me, he most definitely will! And it's no more than that old crow, that rotten parasite deserves... Not only does he refuse to help the people, he actively looks for the chance to suck the life out of them in that spider's web of a chancellery that he inhabits. He wouldn't lend a single one of his horses if it was up to him. It would be totally against his nature."

Zhaksylyk listened to Serikbai with unconcealed relief.

"What is he hoping will happen?" he asked calmly. "He's decided to stay at the fair, but what if they kill all of us Albans? Who will he be left with then? He's learned their Russian letters and now he's gone and forgotten everything that matters in the world, his family and his forefathers... He's as thick as a post."

"He's stupid, but he's certainly no fool," said Serikbai. "If he leaves the fair, folks will say he's changed sides. What does he care about his people? He's only concerned about his bosses at the chancellery. What a crook and a traitor that Zhebirbayev is as well! Once you get a taste for the chancellery's soup you'll be poisoned for life. If you ask me, Ospan and his ilk are more dangerous than any police sergeant."

"You've hit the nail on the head," said Baimagambet. "It's not so much bribes that matter... It's the way he connives with them, swindling and selling out his own people."

Oteu added scathingly: "He'll be telling them tomorrow or the day after that the people have calmed down and are as meek as lambs again... And it's then that he'll tell them to punish us hard..."

"Who will they punish?" Zhaksylyk asked.

"You'd be better off asking who they're going to spare. They'll punish the lot of us..."

"But they won't go after you Zhaksylyk, it's Uzak they want," Baimagambet assured him. "It's about time these Ospan's got a taste of their own medicine."

"Yes, it's time that Zhanseit pulled that rotten tooth," Serikbai muttered through his teeth. "You need to teach the snake to fear you if you don't want to be bitten!"

All of them exchanged significant glances. Zhanseit's name didn't seem quite so funny anymore.

At that moment, Karashal walked up to them. He was Serikbai's right-hand man and in charge of running his herds and household affairs. The conversation took a new turn and it suddenly became clear what had been on Serikbai's mind all this time.

"I don't know all the ins and outs," said Karashal, "but for the time being, Ospan's *aul* doesn't seem to have too much to worry about. He keeps himself to himself there, nothing seems to be bothering him. They seem to be the only people in the entire Alban tribe who are looking after their fields and flocks. He's sent his wife and children back to the *aul* to be on the safe side..."

"I see," said Serikbai. "Where the goat sees its own skin, the butcher sees meat. He's become very rich these last five years... Richer than anyone else!"

Karashal clicked his tongue. "Better richer than poorer. And speaking of which," he said, "we need to talk about farm matters. Our wheat has also ripened; it's time for the harvest. And we need to get a move on with the hay as well for, otherwise, we'll be too late. This is no time for a holiday. The harvest is already upon us. The wheat and the hay are rotting in the fields! Surely we're not going to let it all go to waste?"

"Oh, do stop moaning," said Serikbai irritated, and more than a little bit guilty. "You've been droning in my ear like an autumn fly, and there's no getting rid of you. Do you think this is all just a big joke for us? This is more like a funeral than a holiday for most... Just you see!"

"Well, for now, all I see is that we need to feed ourselves..." Karashal objected. "As our forefathers always used to say: Even if you're due to die at noon, make sure you've set aside your daily bread."

Serikbai exploded, and from the way he spoke and the way he slapped his boot with his whip, you could see that his life had been turned on its head, and how much it was affecting him.

"Well, my daily bread can rot for all I care! I'm not like your Ospan. I would rather die an honest man at midday than a rich man tomorrow."

"And why do you so desperately need to become a poor man?" Karashal asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

"Do you want me to be trembling with fear worrying about my riches... Where is the joy in that?" Serikbai shouted.

"Have you gone mad, master! Is this some sort of joke?"

"Do I look like I'm laughing? My heart is heavy with tears. If I start bringing in the harvest today, everyone else will have gone back to their homes by tomorrow. We're all in the same boat. Which of us doesn't need bread or hay? We're not that rich. Not that rich at all!" Zhaksylyk and Otey nodded their

heads in agreement. "But if we take to the fields, we'll have to leave our horses. And the horses must be ready! They are our only weapon and our greatest hope."

"I don't understand. It's as if I don't know you," Karashal muttered.

"You would understand only too well if you could force yourself to think beyond our lands and our small *aul*!" Serikbai replied. "I have told everyone that we need to be ready, the harvest can wait. Share what you can with each other but be ready to take to your horses the moment the hour and the time comes! Stay close and in touch by day and by night. We must be hospitable to our guests because, if not today, then tomorrow, ordeals will be upon us, the likes of which we have never encountered before... And until we get through these ordeals, our lives will not be our own and no good will come of anything. Because if we don't pass through these ordeals, we can kiss goodbye to everything, our cattle and crops included."

"God help us," said Karashal. "If you ruin yourself, it will be Ospan who profits. You can bet he's not sitting idly by all this time."

"Don't you go shoving your Ospans in my face! Show a little conscience! Just look around you — the poor are sharing out their last possessions. Zhanseit is one of the poorest of men and he has given away half his possessions! And wouldn't you rather have an honest man like our *volostnoy* Aubakir ruling over us rather than your Ospan...? And who was the first person that *batyr* Uzak disowned? Why, that old spider of a brother of his, Tungatar! I will give up everything alongside my people..."

Karashal wiped his face with his sleeve. He was in a cold sweat.

"What are you talking about? For the love of God, tell me."
And slowly and deliberately Serikbai replied:

“Should the dark day come, I will round up my herd and give my horses to every man on the Dongeleksaz pastures who can ride them. I will give them away without drawing a breath. Now, do you understand me?”

This was what everyone had been hoping and waiting for... And yet, no one could quite believe it. Rich men had been fleeced on the steppe before. But to give up their horses, well that was unheard of!

Zhaksylyk stood to one side, his arms by his sides as befitted his station.

Ah, Serikbai, Serikbai, he thought to himself. You are still young, oh so young. What would your father who gave you your name and your fortune make of you now?

* * *

Two weeks had passed since the Alban had ridden out and told Old Grey Mane that he wasn't getting their men, but everything remained much as it was before.

Uzak's *aul* was like a military headquarters with news and rumours flowing in from all quarters. And reliable messengers carried them out to Zhamenke, Turlygozha and Serikbai's *auls*, and from there to all and sundry. The most eminent men from these *auls* hurriedly rode in for counsel. They talked and talked and what was said was not kept a secret.

News and rumours came from far and wide — from Karakol, from Zharkent and from the town of Verny, but the most important news of all came from the fair in Karkara where the chief of police was based. And all eyes were fixed on Karkara.

But the authorities had melted into the background. They were uncommunicative... The *tolmachs* and other learned Kazakhs were also keeping their counsel. Nothing could be learned from them. And it would have been foolish and dangerous to trust them. What the *aqsaqals* needed was their own man to be

their eyes and ears at the fair. And in Sultanmarat they found just such a man.

He was an Uzbek trader from Tashkent, the brightest and most courteous of all the merchant guests. He lived close to the Chancellery and kept an eye out for everyone who went there, merchant, official and messenger alike. He had even made it into the superintendent's circle. These were alarming times and a glass of vodka with smoked sturgeon and music from his gramophone helped him calm his nerves. However, it was difficult to make contact with Sultanmurat without arousing suspicion.

The fair was empty with the exception of five or six poor herders, mounted on their oxen. People were few and far between and business was slow. But no matter how trifling the purchase, a Kazakh is never in a hurry, doing the rounds of all the merchants and all the shops, even the largest and most expensive. And, just for the hell of it, these poor customers on their shabby oxen would stop at each shop, asking the price of everything and haggling down to the last penny until they were blue in the face and their throats hoarse. However, for the desperate merchants, they were a welcome break from their enforced indolence. And it was in this company of chancers and jokers that messengers would be sent to receive whatever news the merchant might have without arousing suspicion. New people were always arriving.

And this was how the first priceless news of the uprising first came to light. It arrived at the same time as a report from a very reliable source in Karakol and the two accounts coincided...

Without hesitating, Uzak commissioned two men to ride out to Serikbai. They had galloped into Dongeleksaz in the middle of the night to the frenzied barking of the dogs, waking up the entire *aul*.

It is hard to recognise a rider in the dark. The horses had been pushed hard, they were wheezing heavily, their bridles jingling and their saddles creaking. One of them was easy to recognise, his saddle and stirrups gleaming with silver. This was Kokbai an honest blade, popular among the *dzhigits* for his good humour. His companion, to all appearances, was a messenger.

Entering the yurt, Kokbai had barely removed his sweaty hat and caught his breath before he announced in his deep bass:

"News from Karakol and from Sultanmurat... In a word, it's all started. Our people, the Kyrgyz and the Uighurs have all had enough of the Tsar. Everyone has risen up from Lepsy to Taldy-Kurgan. Nobody accepts the decree! They're having nothing to do with their wretched lists! They are threatening to leave the Tsar... There have been attacks on the towns and skirmishes with their soldiers. Further away, there are uprisings near Pishpek, Verny and Karakol. There's a real war going on out there! It seems that the Kyrgyz and Uighurs are a step ahead of us. They have attacked a military caravan with weapons, which was on its way from Pishpek to Karakol. They say that every last man of them is armed to the teeth. The authorities are frightened..."

Oteu was unable to contain his excitement:

"I told you it would be the Kyrgyz who start things off! Once you get them going there's no stopping them."

"But it's not just them but the Uighurs as well! There's a people for you. We should be out there with them!" Said Baimagambet.

Serikbai stroked his beard calmly.

"Listen, to what extent do we know all this for sure? Has Sultanmurat been asked?"

“Almost definitely. He should have been, for sure,” said Oteu.

Kokbai interrupted him:

“A messenger also came from the Kyrgyz to see us. He says that messengers have been sent to Verny and Pishpek from their top leaders!”

“Which of their leaders?”

“Batyrykhan, Kydyr and Saudambek, they say... The whole people has risen up. Not a single one of them has been left skulking in the bushes... They are asking that we all act together. They want us to support them by taking and scattering the summer fair. They are asking after our leaders — Uzak, Zhamenke... And you, Serikbai...”

“Well done lads, well done!” Said Oteu, throwing his hands in the air.

Meanwhile, Baimagambet paced impatiently around the yurt, jumping up from his place and then sitting down again.

“What is there to discuss here? To action! That’s what real men would do...”

Serikbai remained unperturbed.

“What does Uzak say?”

“He is waiting for you... He thinks that this news has already reached the superintendent. And if it has, then that means it must be true and Old Grey Mane will make a run for it with his escort. But that old wolf won’t go quietly. He’s incapable of it... We must keep our ears close to the ground. By tomorrow at the latest, everything will be clear.”

“And what are we going to do before tomorrow? Sit quietly and wait?” Serikbai said impatiently.

Kokbai burst into laughter.

“Those are the very words Uzak used! Three men have been sent to Saudambek. We want to work hand in hand with him. That’s the first thing. Secondly, our messengers have been

sent to the Red Caps out at Mount Asa. I have a feeling in my bones that there will be news from there any minute now!"

The Red Caps were another branch of the Alban people, but not as peaceful and accommodating as the Black Caps.

"From Mount Asa, you say? It's quite possible." Serikbai murmured thoughtfully.

And hearing the news, the old men wiped away a tear and pronounced their blessings:

"May the ancestors grant you good fortune..."

Even Karashal, who unlike Oteu did not give much credence to any rumour, perked up. But Karashal's mood soon turned when Serikbai stood up with the words:

"Baimagambet, saddle up my horse..."

"Where are you going?" Karashal exclaimed. "Who will stay to look after things here? Without a head, the legs won't travel far."

And for a second Serikbai became thoughtful.

"Aubakir shall stay at home. He will tend to our families..." And with a light heart, he got up and left.

Although Serikbai was soon to bitterly regret having done so.

That same night, this momentous and happy news had flown like the wind throughout the whole of Shirganak and not only Shirganak but all the meadows and pastures for dozens of miles around. The steppe peoples' spirits were lifted and their hopes revived.

The dogs barked ceaselessly throughout the night at messengers as they galloped from one *aul* to the next. The hearths remained lit, their fires burning bright. Sparks flew up to the heavens and the sweet aroma of *beshbarmak* billowed up from the cauldrons. No one wanted to sleep, not even the elderly and children. Outbursts of laughter, the protracted singing of men and women, games, sparring and sports turned the night into a holiday.

Serikbai rode through the night until morning and was met with a merry commotion and joyful excitement in every village on his way. Everyone waylaid him to tell him the news that had been brought by Kokbai... They offered him meat and *kumiss* and invited him to play games that entailed forfeits in the form of a song or a joke, and rewards in the form of a kiss from a dark-eyed village beauty.

The sun had long since risen when Serikbai rode into Uzak's large *aul*. The green slope was adorned with a carpet of white yurts. In the nearby meadow was a great flock of sheep. And next to the yurt stood the most magnificent war horses, their manes streaming as they stamped and danced. Some were tied with lassos, others with their front legs hobbled. There was no one to be seen except for the old shepherds who keep watch come sunrise or sunset. The *aul* was sound asleep, but evidently also after a noisy, sleepless night.

Serikbai did not want to wake anyone, so he tied up his horse and laid himself down on the grass next to the central yurt to catch up on his sleep after his long journey. It was already lunch when he awoke.

Turlygozha was standing over him and next to him a man in a russet coloured lambskin hat.

Serikbai jumped up, alarmed: "Have I overslept?" With a single glance, Turlygozha reassured him he hadn't.

"Congratulations," he said. "Good news, and you owe me a *suyunshi* for bringing it." And he deftly tore the cap from Serikbai's head.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this?" Serikbai muttered. "What's happened?"

"What's happened?" Turlygozha echoed in his booming voice. "The whole of Mount Asa and the Red Caps have risen up! This is one of their men. They saw off the governor's soldiers, tore up the lists and chased them away..."

"Is that true?" Serikbai asked in bewilderment.

The stranger silently nodded his head and all three of them went into the yurt. It was packed with people, both young and old and all of them loudly exchanging news. A bowl of *kumiss* was placed before each of them.

Uzak and Zhamenke were sat in the place of honour. Greeting them from the door, Serikbai shouted to them:

"Is it true?"

Amused wrinkles gathered at the corners of Zhamenke's eyes.

"It's true, it's true. The Red Caps have beaten us to it, my boy... They have sprung into action while we were all waiting. They are laughing up their sleeves at us, and it serves us right. Now it's our turn to strike the authorities before they come to their senses! Sit down to eat, and we'll talk..."

But not a single person who went in or out of the yurt, noticed a strange figure standing near the sinister and cursed Marked Stone.

Everyone who was in the yurt knew him well but none had summoned him. He was not interested in their affairs; his interests lay in a different direction.

He had spent the night in a small, quiet *aul*, oblivious to the revelries of that momentous night. The *aul* was concealed in an out-of-the-way forest, famous for its boar. The man might have been travelling home, or might have been on his way to or from the fair. When suddenly, next to the white yurts, as pure and clean as the first snow, he saw a large number of saddled horses, spattered with dirt right up to their saddles and covered with sweat and foam. The horses were drawn to the grass, gnawing at the bit. It was clear that they hadn't been fed or watered and had been ridden at speed all night.

The man had a well-trained eye. Among the many horses tethered there, he quickly and easily recognised Serikbai's

famous roan pacer. But even more remarkable were the two stallions with undulating billowing manes. Evidently, horses that belonged to the Red Caps.

At a safe distance, the man cautiously scouted around the *aul*. Apart from him, there was only one other person about. A decrepit old man who was wandering around on the steep slope, picking herbs with his crooked fingers and sniffing them. The stranger approached him cautiously. The old man was glad to have found someone to talk to, and spoke freely and effusively:

“You see how many there are? They’ve come from miles away. They only got here this morning. Among them, there’s Serikbai, Turlygozha and Zhamenke... They’ve all come to decide what’s to be done with Old Grey Mane... Besides, blood has already been spilt... Over at Mount Asa on the Red Caps’ lands! One of their young *dzhigits* has made it over the pass from there. Those two stallions standing over there are his. Can you see them?”

The old man was a bit hard of hearing and the stranger could hear every word he said quite clearly. However, he was so friendly and inquisitive that he rode up to the old man and began to ask him all sorts of questions.

Then he quietly and politely made his farewells and went on his way. He went off at a trot, but as soon as the *aul* was concealed from view he set off at full speed, putting his horse into a gallop and not sparing the whip.

Chapter 6

Rich is the land of Asa high up in the mountains of the Alatau. From time immemorial, the Red Caps have lived here, a large and powerful branch of the Alban people. And side by side with them, the neighbouring Zhanys and Kangly clans have settled with them, torn from their ancestral roots and

crowded out of the land of their birth next to the town of Verny. They arrived here naked and unshod, like travellers who have been robbed on the open road. Asa, with its fertile, long, deep and cradle-shaped valley, gave them shelter. To the west soars a prominent mountain, adorned from the side by thick tresses of firs. The living image of a great beauty, her thick, black braid draped over her shoulder, she stands tall over her cradle, sheltering it from the winds with her back. To the east, small, round mountain tops cluster together like plumped up pillows.

There is water aplenty and everything here remains pure and lush until late autumn. The waters flow down from the mountain heights to the abundant and majestic river Kokozek.

The green valley is seething with life and movement, which is the first thing that strikes and delights the eye. Wherever you look there are flocks of sheep and herds of horses on the open, capacious meadows. Even at the end of summer, the grass remains unscorched, untrampled and uncropped. The yurts stand out white against this exuberant greenery like goose eggs in the marsh reeds.

With the arrival of August, the nights become colder, the rains more frequent. In the mornings the world is shrouded in mist, which lifts and returns as a fine, tender rain. By midday, the sun tears this white veil asunder, the sky bursts forth fresh and newly washed and, like in the fairy tales, all is well with the valley again.

Tousled locks of mist rest on the surrounding mountains, clinging to the luxuriant firs. Meanwhile, on the snowy battlements of the Alatau, the thunder clouds turn black and blue. Smooth, slanting sheets of rain hang there and, deep within them, lightning glitters. But above the meadows, the clouds are now fluffy, white, indolent and gentle.

At the edge of the valley, between the green of the meadows and the blue of the skies, a wall of gloom rears up. These are the forests of pine. It's as if someone has concealed himself in a fur coat that has been turned inside out, his head wrapped in a turban of fog. He frowns, yearning for the clear spring days, but nevertheless, luxuriates in the peace and freshness of the August noon.

The clouds sail away slowly behind the mountains, reassuringly bidding us farewell. Light, smoky shadows flit over the meadows, as if they are playing in the light and gloom. In the same way that a light, joyful, blithe spirit can suddenly be overshadowed by a pall of inexplicable sadness. So it is in the summer pastures on the mountains, during that bright but short time when autumn still lies ahead and summer is already past.

To the south, a ravine stretches along the river, framed by age-old pine trees. Here, on the best land around, the Red Caps have pitched their *aul*, perhaps the richest *aul* of all the Alban people. This place was the native refuge of the ancestors of Darkembai, the father of Dauletbek, and Dauletbek was now the most influential person in the whole of the vast Verny district, a region equal in size to any European power.

The inhabitants of this *aul* could trace their bloodline from a single, common ancestor. From generation to generation, the number of these descendants had swelled and multiplied and so had their prosperity. This large *aul* family now already numbered over three hundred souls, and the old *baibishye*, the original mother of all three hundred was still very much alive.

Dauletbek, son of Darkembai, owned many thousands of animals and, consequently, countless herds and flocks. They were led to pasture by dozens of his servants and herdsmen. The wealth and power of his clan gave Dauletbek almost unheard-of power and honour that verged on veneration. He was addressed in no lesser terms than: "most Honourable and

Benevolent". And there was a time, not so long ago when he could command and punish as he saw fit. He could deprive a man of his property or even his life. And that is what he did, enriching himself and his kinsmen in the process, as his ancestors had always done before the Russians came and for quite a few years after.

* * *

Mr Klubnitsky, assistant governor to the entire administrative district, arrived in Asa from the town of Verny with a substantial retinue. With him were a junior official, a *tolmach*, two shrewd clerks and a detachment of soldiers, consisting of nine privates and one sergeant. This fact alone belied the extent of the administration's nervousness and the high esteem in which Mr Klubnitsky was held.

From time immemorial, the Red Caps had been considered a well-behaved clan and held up as an example of model behaviour among the local peoples. However, when they arrived, it was as if Asa was slumbering. The Red Caps had remained stubbornly and mysteriously silent. And this had worried the high-ups. In all likelihood, they surmised, the people were frightened and bewildered. And, thank God for that, they thought, after all, a people divided are more easily cowed. A wild and ignorant people. But there may be troublemakers and malcontents lurking among them. And for this reason, it had been deemed prudent to send the strictest and most capable administrative officers to the *auls*, accompanied by a detachment of soldiers to help the *volostnoys* draft the lists and accompany the young men to the enlistment posts under armed guard. The important thing was to seize the moment and the people would put their heads in the collar of their own accord. They would see that the first of the young men had been taken and the sky had not fallen on their heads. They would see that

all was in order and offer themselves up in order of rank. All that was needed was an example and the goats would follow the sheep. And what better example could be found than the Red Caps.

Klubnitsky chose Dauletbek's *aul* as his base and place of residence. He had driven here on a well-sprung coach but felt as if he had been sitting on nails the whole journey. He already knew what had happened at the summer fair in Zharkent District and was aware that there was unrest among the Kyrgyz. There was no point pretending the people of the Alatau weren't bristling like the forests on their mountains. The smouldering embers of dissent were evident everywhere you looked... It was the lists that were the sticking point and Klubnitsky was well prepared for all eventualities. But what he encountered on his arrival was unlike anything he had ever come across before.

The people were surly. They looked at him askance like a malevolent dog on a chain. There wasn't the slightest sign of hospitality. A yurt for the visiting dignitary was found with only the greatest difficulty. Not a single person offered to help put it up. And unusually, not one of them had come rushing out to meet him bewailing their lot and begging him to solve a problem or settle a score. One of the *volostnoys* eventually lent him a yurt, but Klubnitsky didn't know which one. It had been no easy matter either, getting hold of a young lamb so that the guests might be offered the traditional *beshbarmak*. There wasn't any *kumiss* to be had either. The swine hadn't even given him the wherewithal to refresh himself after his long journey. A guest of his rank and standing! All the way from Verny itself, a town where forty thousand faithful servants of the White Tsar live!

The *volostnoys*, elders and other local leaders were wandering about as if they were half asleep. One of them

would be scratching himself, while others would yawn right in your face like a dog. And they avoided any order entrusted to them by passing the buck to each other.

Klubnitsky dealt with them masterfully, he took them in hand... He had frequently visited the Kazakhs for inspections and was known for his severity. He was more heavy-handed than dishonest. And on this occasion, he was able to entertain himself to his heart's content. He shouted at the *volostnoys* and *biis*, not giving them an opportunity to even open their mouths. He gave them the tongue lashing of their lives in front of their servants and children. He stamped his feet and rolled his eyes. He chased them out of his yurt, regardless of their name or rank. He ordered two of the elders to be arrested, and personally slapped the pair of them around the ear.

But it did not escape his attention that two others had slipped out after this incident with a contented smile on their faces. They had left to go to sleep!

Klubnitsky pulled in his horns and immediately ordered that every official in close proximity to the *aul* should quietly join him as a matter of state importance. Clerks, officers of court, rural officials — everyone! They promptly and dutifully arrived, despite an unexpected downpour and a mudslide. In total, around twenty men joined him, all of them armed.

Then one of the *volostnoys* approached Klubnitsky. He was a podgy, bow-legged man, usually silent and slow to speak, but now he did so:

“Please, sir... the people are really suffering...”

And he explained that the *volostnoys* would be unlikely to settle matters on their own. They didn't have the authority. But among the elders, there were two *aqsaqals* — Dauletбек and Zhylykбай, who did. A Kazakh can neither live nor die without the say-so of their *aqsaqal*. A Kazakh cannot get by without his *aqsaqal*...

And Klubnitsky took his advice.

“Call for them! Let them come.”

And that was how Dauletbek, the Venerable and Benevolent ended up in Klubnitsky’s yurt. Zhylkybai also came and along with him several other old men.

They spent a long time with Klubnitsky, nearly a whole day. The explanations, reprimands and rough treatment continued in their presence. The old men heard various men timidly trying to persuade Klubnitsky to hold off for a while until all the petitions had been received, weighed and examined. But their beseeching fell on deaf ears. Apart from threats and curses, the only question on Klubnitsky’s lips was: “The lists, the lists, where are the lists?”

Zhylkybai and the other old men did not have any great expectations of their *volostnoys* and Klubnitsky didn’t frighten them. But they were frightened and perturbed by quite a different thing – Dauletbek’s silence!

The old men whispered among themselves in shame.

“What is going on, will we all die, without having uttered a word?”

“Why won’t you say something? You need to tell us what to say.”

“Dear, respected Dauletbek... You know the people, you know what they are hoping for... How will we be able to look them in the eye? Are you really going to just submissively hand over these evil lists to him?”

“You have caught and hobbled us with your lasso, Dauletbek...”

But Dauletbek just sat there like a stone idol. And his silence was louder than the thunder.

Zhylkybai grumbled peevishly:

“And who is going to listen to you? Can you not see how he is pressuring us?”

Zhylykбай was very old, tired and unhappy with life. His back was broken with pain.

Let them get on with taking what they want... even these lists... He thought to himself through the ringing that reverberated in his ears. *Why should we old men have to go to prison over a few bits of paper. Bits of paper are one thing but people are quite another... When it dawns on the young men, then we'll see how it turns out! We won't give you our men. Just you try taking them...*

This is what Zhylykбай thought to himself, all the while never opening his mouth once.

And in the event of just such a misfortune, some lists with names that would do for the occasion had been found. It was anyone's guess what had been scratched onto them. But having purred: "Ex...cellent! I forgive you all! And I will reward you all!" Klubnitsky sent a *tolmach* and two guards to fetch them but didn't let the elders go.

The old men began to murmur:

"What's going on? What is the meaning of this insult...?"

"Why are we stuck in here, like a ring of rotten, ant-ridden tree stumps?"

"We are being treated little better than dogs or slaves!"

"My dear *aqsaqals*..." protested Klubnitsky peering closely at Dauletбек. "You are my esteemed guests. You have nothing but my greatest respect. I have no intention of remaining in your debt..."

He had twigged Dauletбек's game long before his kinsmen had. Dauletбек knew exactly what he was doing because his silence was an old trick. An astute and lofty trick — to remain silent at the right time and place as if you are a prophet among your people.

What majesty lay upon his brow! What bitter suffering in his eyes. It couldn't be said that he had said "yes" to the

administration and it couldn't be said that he had said "no" to the people? But it could be said with one hundred percent certainty that he was a true and loyal servant of the Tsar. And Klubnitsky understood this. As long as he had this man on his side there would peace, calm and forbearance out on the summer pasture.

Two weeks previously, there had been a nebulous moment when he had allegedly let slip that he would not give up his young men! But then his eldest son had arrived back from the city. He was a new breed of man among the sons of their tribe, who had fathomed the secret of the Russians' letters and money. As a merchant, he had made himself rich at a speed and ease that a steppe dweller could only envy and marvel at. And with him, he had brought words of greeting from the city and beseeched his father to keep his peace so that the Tsar might be better heard.

And Dauletbek, son of Darkembai, kept his peace, and on the summer pasture and in the *auls* the people did not know why he remained silent but waited peacefully and with hope.

However, the whispering in Klubnitsky's yurt would not subside and now it was not only the elders who conferred with one another.

"It would be better to be banished to the outer reaches of the world than live like this."

"Let us depart, let the ruler do as he sees fit."

"Let him do whatever it is that has taken his fancy."

"He is not going to kill us! He's not going to stop us..."

In the meantime, the *tolmach* who had been sent for the lists had galloped up and rushed into the yurt with the papers in his hand. The guards that Klubnitsky had assigned to him, stopped at the door their swords unsheathed. The lists had arrived!

And then something happened that even Dauletbek had not expected, Klubnitsky had not expected at all and perhaps even the Red Caps themselves had not anticipated. With the exception of Dauletbek, everyone present to a man jumped up. Slowly and painfully Zhylykbai also got to his feet... And with a cry exclaimed: "We're leaving! Let's go!" And with that, they began to file out.

In vain did Klubnitsky scream and shout at them. In vain did the soldiers block their path with their rifles, threatening them with their rifle butts. The elders and *volostnoys* simply stalked away from Klubnitsky's yurt and away from Dauletbek's aul towards the nearest neighbouring one.

"We are no longer *volostnoys* and no longer elders. They are over there. Detain them... We are leaving! We are leaving!" And with that, they simply left.

When they came out onto the sloping, wooded hill nearby, they were met by people from the neighbouring *aul* and from many other *auls* beyond the hill coming out of the forest. The crowd consisted of women, the elderly and children. They had been gathered, waiting there all day in the rain that had been drizzling down from under the tattered blanket of mist that hung over the ravine. They had been standing separately in family groups, but now they bunched together. There were at least a hundred of them. Their faces sad and dejected, some stern, some angry. The women and children's faces tear-stained.

On seeing them, the men who were departing Dauletbek's *aul* began to cry out to them:

"They are going to take them... All is lost... They've given up the menfolk..."

Hearing this, the women began to wail the *zhoktau*, a keening song for the dead in a voice that would shake the hardest soul:

“My tower, my strength, my only support!”

The two crowds, both large and small, merged and mixed together. They began to talk noisily and all at once. The women and old people clung to each other, moaning and sobbing loudly. The crowd jostled and pushed, raising a multitude of grieving and menacing fists to the sky and, suddenly, with a roar, fell on Dauletбек’s *aul* and Klubnitsky’s yurt, where the soldiers were standing in a ragged line, their rifles at the ready.

* * *

That morning, the whole district had been in a state of alarm after Klubnitsky had summoned all the local officials from the surrounding villages. The old people had gathered and the women and children had run to the mustering post on the meadow near the *aul*, shouting to each other at the tops of their voices. The men, however, were nowhere to be found.

“This big wig from Verny... is like the devil himself... hitting people and tearing the lists to pieces.”

“A swarm of soldiers have arrived with bayonets and swords...”

“They say that Dauletбек and Zhylykylbai are being forced to keep their lips sealed. Can that be possible?”

“It’s all over. The young men have had it!”

“Where are our men? Where have they got to? Have they no courage?”

The crowd rushed from one place to another, running round in circles like children playing blind man’s buff, sometimes drawing closer to Klubnitsky’s white yurt, at others drawing back. It stood all on its own on the rocky banks of the river, on a steep bend, around the foot of a mountain that was overgrown with pine trees. It beckoned and repelled them, like an evil spirit in a remote forest in the middle of the night.

“What are you standing here for? We need to go in...”

"We need to find out and ask what's going on. Surely, we're allowed to ask?"

"Let the high-ups see our tears. Are they happy to see the people suffering?"

"Where are the *volostnoys*, where are the elders? A curse upon them..."

"They're hiding their bruised faces!"

"Why are the *aqsaqals* sitting with this infidel? What could they possibly have to do there?"

"They seem to have made themselves nice and comfortable. This bodes no good."

"They should have sent him packing immediately without the lists. They didn't offer him *kumiss* when he arrived and they should have thrown him out on his ear..."

"And the *dzhigits*, where are our young men? Why aren't they on their horses? Who, if not they is going to show them that we are human beings as well?!"

It was as if the men had been swallowed up by the earth, leaving their mothers and wives fearful and the old men and women angry. "What shame and disgrace have they brought down on our heads? They have simply abandoned us without even burying or mourning us."

An old shepherd came up to them and joined them. Listening to them all, he began to chuckle into his beard. And raising his crook over his head, he shouted:

"What are you shouting and making all this fuss about? Has your fear completely deprived you of your wits? The *dzhigits* will be with you sure enough! And they'll be coming from that forest over there."

"Is that true?"

"How did they get there? How come we didn't notice?"

"Well, I'll tell you what you didn't notice. I saw a herd of horses at the edge of the forest... and there wasn't a single

herdsman with them... There should have been at least one! That means that's where they are hiding.

"Oh, God help them, don't abandon them..."

"Oh, sacred ancestors, grant us strength and protection..."

The old women and young girls burst into tears. But the old men perked up. They began to grunt contentedly and stroke their beards.

"Who summoned them? Are there many of them?"

"They didn't plan or arrange anything... and didn't fit themselves out... And now you see, they're ready!"

"What was there to plan or arrange here anyway? At times like these, you need to have a sixth sense about where your friends are."

"At times like these," said the old shepherd with a chuckle, "you can lose your nerve in a second, like the milk turning sour in a thunderstorm. Evidently, they haven't lost their nerve. About two to three hundred of them have joined forces. Some of them have rifles as well..."

"Yes, some of them should have them..."

"Someone definitely should have something. Some spears and clubs... But their senses are as keen as the wolf."

"As soon as one of them said: 'follow me', the rest of them responded. And right now, many more of them are riding to him. Our baby boy Matai immediately rushed off on his three-year-old filly."

"Who was it who summoned them?"

"Well, someone must have summoned them... There must be someone..."

Then the old man whispered:

"Ibrai!"

"Good man! That's as it should be. When your people are up against it, the brave and the bold must come to the fore..."

"He has a cunning head on those shoulders, that one. He knows what his business is about... He's taken on the Chinese, the Kalmyks, the Kirgыз and even our fellow Kazakhs."

"Give him a weighty enough club and he could stand up to five men."

"May God bless him and grant him protection."

Ibrai was known by everyone, from his native village right out to the merchants who plied the caravans that led to Xinjiang. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, thick-set man, a couple of years shy of his thirties with a moustache as stiff as horse hair and a bristly beard. At table, he appeared fat and sluggish, but on horseback, he moved like a whirlwind. Some considered him a great hero, while others vilified him as little more than a horse thief. In reality, he was both. He had gathered around him ten *dzhigits* who were as strong and daring as himself, armed them with clubs and pole-axes and gone out with them on raids against the richest and biggest Chinese, Kyrгыз and Kazakh herds. He would steal their horses and give them away to the poor and starving. Ibrai also had some old Berdan rifles and revolvers hoarded away for a rainy day. He was a reckless, skilful and kind-hearted horse thief. Everyone knew that here was a thief with eyes as sharp and wings as mighty as the eagle, but that in his breast there beat a human heart.

And now his hour had come. Ibrai and his *dzhigits* had rendezvoused in the forest with the Red Caps' young men who were, as the Russians say, 'still a bit green around the ears'. They had been summoned so secretly and cunningly that even the women, old people and children didn't notice their absence.

Of course, the new recruits were all outwardly champing at the bit but inwardly anxious and afraid.

"To your horses and follow me," Ibrai told them. "At stake today are the most important things a man has in his possession — his life and his happiness... But no matter how many times

you've been into battle, be it your first time or the fortieth, only those whose final hour has struck will die today. The rest will live to fight another day. Such things are out of our hands. So have no fear and put your best foot forward! What is there to wait for? And keep your wits about you..."

The young *dzhigits* were encouraged and heartened by Ibrai's intoxicating words. They were inexperienced and lacked mettle, but they were the only men Ibrai had available to him.

He led them along hidden, hard tracks that only he knew, across ravines and gorges, collecting more and more new recruits from the more distant *auls* on the way, and, all the while, testing his men and their horses. He drove them on tirelessly so that their passions might cool and so that they might get used to each other. Then suddenly, he led them to the forest directly leading to Klubnitsky's yurt so that his men might remain unseen even though the yurt was little more than a palm's breadth away.

"This'll do," said Ibrai. And ordered the new recruits to wait while he and his trusted *dzhigits* set off under the pines along the river.

Two huge cliffs soared up behind Klubnitsky's yurt like the gates of a giant's castle. Here Ibrai dismounted, hid his horse behind the cliffs and began to observe the soldiers stationed next to the yurt. He was pale with fury, his moustache bristling. He was furious because he valued the lives of his comrades and was used to guarding his weapons, the most precious things in his possession. But today, in all likelihood there would be serious losses of both. What's more, the young men from the *auls* hardly knew each other, did not know how to shoot and, out of youth and stupidity, were showing off and putting on a brave front. How could he mould them into a fighting force? There were too many of them...

Yet he had done what he could and now he waited, like the great golden hunting eagle for the long-anticipated moment

when the master removes the hood from his eyes and he can sweep up into the skies to spy the fiery red tail of the fox secreted in the rocks and grass below. His blood flowed hot and hungrily through his veins. It yearned for life and the fight and, despite several years of adventure, was still yet to cool. Ibrai ground his teeth, attempting to rein himself in.

His comrades had concealed themselves nearby, men he was proud to call his brothers. He was responsible for them. They were the only real force available to him. And they were his family.

Ibrai observed as the furious red-faced elders rushed out of Klubnitsky's yurt, shoving the soldiers aside on their way. He heard the funereal keening of the *zhoktau* break out in the distance beyond the hill... And he never stirred a muscle.

But when he saw the unarmed weeping villagers, mad with grief, set off from the hill in the direction of the white yurt, straight towards the soldiers, with the women and children in front, without a thought for his concealment or safety he let out a cry, ran off to the cliff and jumped on his horse.

Without thinking or hesitating, he dashed out from the craggy sentinel gates. He literally tumbled down the steep slope of the cliff, not sparing his beloved horse and placing life, limb and trust in his steed's strong legs, animal dexterity and unhesitating loyalty. And his horse carried him from under the precipice and, easily and joyfully anticipating what his master required of him, rushed headlong to cut off the women and children, without any urging and without bridle or whip, fleeter than the wolf and faster than the wind.

Ibrai did not look back and did not have to hear the thunder of hooves and the familiar whistles to know that all ten of his *barymtach* comrades were dashing headlong in his wake. They all had only one thing on their minds: to defend these frightened and defenceless women and children with their bodies

and horses and distract any fire with their terrifying brigand appearance.

The young men emerged from their forest hiding place higher up the river, but they were soon scattered in disorder, spinning on their bewildered mounts that had been pulled up by their frightened and heavy-handed riders. They were separated from Klubnitsky's yurt by the women and children running in front of them and their horses refused to gallop past them. Their womenfolk were nevertheless pleased that their *dzhigits* had arrived on the scene.

As the owl sees the mouse in the darkest night, so, even at this mad gallop, Ibrai could clearly see what was happening near the yurt. And with relief, he took a deep breath and began to calm his horse... Next to the yurt, something unimaginable and absurd was unfolding.

Klubnitsky had mistaken the crowd advancing from behind the hill for a large force of enemy fighters and had fatally taken fright. Taking one glance at Klubnitsky, the sergeant hysterically and repeatedly shouted: "Stand to, stand to!" The soldiers spun around at his cries, released the breeches of their rifles and placed their cartridges between their teeth to show that they were ready, but the sergeant, completely losing his head, continued to scream his order, unable to understand why his soldiers were not obeying him... Others tugged Klubnitsky by the sleeve, some pointing in the direction of the cliff and others in the direction of the grove:

"Look there they are, there they are..."

"Look over here, over here..."

A few of the soldiers, without waiting for the command, fired, almost without aiming at the men galloping behind Ibrai. Then two or three others opened fire at the young *dzhigits* at the edge of the forest, but this time more accurately.

None of the young men had a rifle. From the whistling of the bullets and the crack of the rifle shots their horses immediately ran amok — kicking out, rearing up on their hind legs and carrying their riders all over the place. Vainly, the riders lashed out with their whips. And one of them flew out of his saddle and onto his back, wounded, his horse riding away with a plaintive neigh.

“Shoot!” Ibrai piercingly cried.

And at the gallop, raising himself slightly in the stirrups, he let off a shot from his Berdan rifle. One of the soldiers next to the white yurt fell.

The white yurt responded with another volley of rifle fire and the *barymtachi* returned fire with their revolvers and short barrelled rifles.

The mountains and the forests responded with a long, drawn-out echo. Grey puffs of gunpowder smoke hung in the air like billows of fog.

Never before had such ferocious gunfire and such a frightful echo been heard in this place. But the villagers who had set off from the hill did not stop. They carried on walking, crying and weeping, towards the whistling bullets and the grey clouds of gunpowder smoke and, leading from the front, oblivious to fear, were the women, their arms held out in supplication and the small boys struck dumb and trembling. They did not see the young *dzhigit* fall from his horse, they did not see the soldier crumple next to the yurt, and did not realize that the firing all around presaged only death. Its echo only seemed to spur them on.

And the soldiers, who were now standing in a thin but disciplined line, began to lower their rifles and back away, looking all around them. Klubnitsky finally pulled himself together and found his tongue.

"This is madness... idiocy... Stand down! Stop firing! Everyone withdraw... Quick! Down below along the river..."

"Retreat, retreat!" others cried. "Don't get separated, keep close..."

"They'll kill us ... Send someone out to call for a truce!" cried a third.

But by now no one was listening to anybody.

They were running away on foot, leaving their horses, carriages and belongings, every man for himself, without a glance back. Only the soldiers kept a disciplined line, providing cover for Mr Klubnitsky's back.

The only people left next to the white yurt were Dauletbek and his henchmen. It was only later that Zhylykбай was spotted collapsed in exhaustion on the grass.

All of Klubnitsky's possessions, his briefcase with its silver monogram and, most importantly, the lists, were now in the hands of the Red Caps.

* * *

That was when the frenzy started. As soon as the shooting died down and they had got their horses under control again, the young *dzhigits* caught up and overtook the weeping women who had now flocked to the white yurt, crying with joy. They began to smash it with their clubs, hack it with their axes and slash it with their knives. With yells and whistles, more and more of the young *dzhigits* galloped up. There wasn't room enough for them all, so they began setting to work on the neighbouring yurts. Others sliced up their walls, leaving nothing but the frameworks and the bindings that kept them standing up. The small boys climbed up on top and danced on the sagging roofs, rocking and smashing the wreckage into small pieces.

The Russian officials and their subordinates had fled but many of the *volostnoys* and the elders were left trapped in the

yurts. While the shooting had been going on, they had been hiding behind trunks and under felt blankets. All of them were Dauletbek's men, and the yurts were also Dauletbek's, as was this *aul* — the dwelling place of the rich and the elect. The *dzhigits* shook them out of their hiding places, like rats out of a sack of cheese. They crawled outside on all fours, covering their heads with their hands. Laughter and scorn poured down on their heads.

Then the *dzhigits*, women, old people and children stormed into the yurts and began to destroy everything that came to hand. They tore clothes, carpets, blankets, pillows but, above all, paper, anything that was made out of paper. Klubnitsky had left some books in the white yurt with wonderful colour illustrations that he had brought for the journey. They were passed from one hand to another and torn to shreds. A large office ledger with lined red and blue pages and a thick cover was obliterated. Everyone had a piece of it in their hands: a scrap of paper, a thread from the spine or a remnant of leather from the cover. The women hurled themselves at Klubnitsky's uniform greatcoat with its fine piping and bronze buttons and in a trice had reduced it to a pile of rags. Using large stones, the small boys flattened the buttons into wafer cakes, in much the same way as they did with the local tarantulas. There wasn't the slightest trace left of anything that might have remotely resembled the lists. Feathers and down from the pillows and tiny pieces of paper swirled in the air like a whirlwind. Dust, rubbish and ashes rose in pillars everywhere.

In the meantime, exhausted, Zhylkybai had dropped off to sleep. But Dauletbek kept a vigilant eye on his bondsmen and especially those who had gone after Klubnitsky.

Initially, Ibrai's men had chased after him.

"Come on! Let's surround them! Surround them!"

But Ibrai held them back:

“Wait, don’t go looking for trouble! Where do you think you’re galloping off to? To catch a bullet?”

The young *dzhigits* would also have rushed off in pursuit since they were many, the shooting had stopped and there was little or no space for them in the few nearby yurts.

Ibrai managed to cool them down as well and gathered them all into a group around him. And as he started to speak he hesitated, as if trying to justify himself:

“They are running away and I say let them run... They have no horses. Do you think they’re going to get far? You are unarmed. And to take them you need to be... The fat officials will soon lag behind the soldiers and that’s when we’ll grab them. We’ll catch the lot of them. And as for the soldiers... This is what we’ll do... We’ll need to cut them off from the city and drive them into the mountains. Then we’ll take their weapons off them without bloodshed.”

Ibrai was hesitant because he had seen how well the soldiers had fought without orders from their commanding officers, when he and his men had surprised them, and how they had independently stopped firing when the women and children approached. He looked out and saw that Klubnitsky and his men had made about a mile down along the river, marching at full speed and without stopping. Ibrai and his men followed after them, almost unwillingly. The soldiers now only threatened them with their rifles but refrained from shooting. Only occasionally, so that they didn’t think they had run out of cartridges, they loosed off a shot two into the air. Ibrai did the same, just to let them know that he wasn’t going anywhere either. And he would match the soldiers shot for shot with his trusty old Berdan rifle.

He had always been a top hunter and rarely needed more than one shot for his prey. But now he deliberately missed his mark, but only by a whisker and always right next to his

target's ear...and watched with satisfaction as they ducked his bullets. It was as if each shot was driving them along to pick up their pace.

"Drive them on lads, drive them on, but don't shoot to kill! Aim so that the bullets kick up the dust under the heels of their last man..." he commanded and then laughed with excitement.

But then suddenly he saw two clean-shaven Cossacks, who were evidently younger and lighter on their feet, abandon the others and run at full speed in a different direction. Where were they going? They were running full pelt through the meadow now. There was nowhere there for a man on foot to hide from a horseman right up to the very walls of the mountains. Ibrai looked over their heads and let out a cry of dismay. He now understood that he had been tricked like a young sparrow with an empty husk of chaff. Trotting to meet the two Cossacks was a small herd of *bai* Dauletbek's finest horses.

It would have been no easy matter to catch any of these stallions, but at the front of the group were the very best in the herd and, by an accident of coincidence, they had their bridles on... The Cossacks quickly had the situation in hand and were soon astride two fine chestnut stallions with white stars on their foreheads. The herdsman immediately drove the rest of the herd back where they had come from.

And Ibrai heard Klubnitsky's hysterical screams as the Cossacks galloped past:

"Go to Verny, without stopping! It's war! The locals have risen up and are shooting at us! Send a squadron here as soon as possible! A squa-aadron!"

Without delaying for a minute, Ibrai selected twenty to thirty men. And now it was he who was shouting at the top of his voice:

"After them! Don't let them escape!"

Encouraging each other with their cries, the *dzhigits* immediately galloped after the Cossacks. The Cossacks soon

disappeared behind a bend in the river. And the *dzhigits* disappeared not long after.

Ibrai continued to chase Klubnitsky and those who had remained with him until late in the evening when it was beginning to get dark. Onwards and onwards he drove them from the lower reaches of the river right up to the mouth of the ravine. By that time, only the eight soldiers and their sergeant remained with Klubnitsky.

None of Ibrai's men had been hurt. Klubnitsky, who for the first time in his life had seen just how angry these simple shepherds and herdsmen could be, had become so frightened that he ordered the soldiers not to shoot at them. He was afraid of savage revenge and a cruel death. When they found themselves in a tight spot, the soldiers shot the horses from under their riders, and defended Klubnitsky with their bodies, thrusting their bayonets in all directions. Thus, Ibrai was unable to get his hands on Klubnitsky's ammunition and weapons, although they had already cost him dear.

Once it got dark, Ibrai led his *dzhigits* away.

"Well, I'll be damned..." He thought. "He can count himself a lucky man to have soldiers like that..."

Little did Ibrai know that once again Dauletбек had got the better of him. The rich, generous *bai* had no intention of leaving Mr Klubnitsky without a horse. And in the morning, Dauletбек's faithful servants rescued the Russian overlord and drove him alive and well back to the town of Verny. An action that was to earn Dauletбек his eternal gratitude.

On the way to the *aul*, Ibrai and his men picked up five wounded officials, confiscated their revolvers and took them back with them.

Later that night, the *dzhigits* who had been sent after the two Cossacks returned to the *aul* empty-handed. Catching up with the Cossacks on fresh horses, when they had been on

theirs since early morning, had proved a fruitless undertaking. However, they did manage to plant a bullet in one of them. They had fired at the other but their rifle had misfired. In the heat of the moment, Ibrai had given them his old rifle. They had pinned their hopes on their superior numbers.

But of course, by morning, everyone in Verny would know the news and with each passing hour, their retribution would be approaching ever nearer.

As soon as the Red Caps considered the situation they decided that, whatever the cost, they would have to leave!

"Pack up your things and decamp. The White Tsar will show us no mercy... We must leave, there is no other option."

And that same night all the *auls* on the land around Mount Asa, all the settlements of the Red Caps, with the exception of Dauletbek's, packed their yurts and set out on their journey. They were headed to the Black Caps, to the bountiful valley of Karkara, the cradle of the Alban people, where they had sent two messengers with spare horses the day before. And from there — they would go wherever their luck might take them...

Chapter 7

That day in Uzak's house the worst thing that could have happened did.

Tea had been prepared. People talked while they ate — each reporting what they had found out. Smiling sombrely, Uzak declared:

"We have much to thank our rulers for! They have succeeded in uniting us, impoverished nomads... into a single stormy cloud. Do you not agree?"

"The village dogs spend their days fighting each other," Zhamenke responded, "but the moment they see the wolf, they collect into a pack. The same is true of people. Misfortune brings people closer!"

“Ekh... Our path would be a happy one...” Serikbai added with a bitter sigh. “If only God would listen to the tears of his children... If only he would send us mercy.”

But Turlygozha interrupted him indignantly:

“What are you groaning about?! Didn’t you hear what the Red Caps did to the assistant district governor? Surely that is happy news?”

Uzak sneered. He was gloomy, as if he sensed and was expecting something ominous was about to happen but did not want to admit it.

“Well, no matter how they persecute and bully us,” he said. “Thank God, at least, I have lived to witness this in my twilight years... People are looking and finding each other, like lost children in search of their only father! What I regret is that I didn’t see this in my younger years. That’s what I’m sorry about. But what can you do...”

“The years have slipped by,” said Zhamenke. “And what for? How many quarrels have there been...? And what were they fighting for? To be the first to scratch the authorities’ backs and give them a bribe. Now we have wasted away and can barely drag our dried out old bones from one place to another...”

And Zhamenke sighed so hard and so mournfully that for a second Turlygozha felt irritated and flustered.

“What is it about the minds and hearts of old men? What is it that they are seeking to bury today — their past fights and quarrels... or themselves? It would be interesting to know,” said Turlygozha with a cheerful cunning, “which of you in your youth warmed his whip against the face of the red-headed district governor in front of everyone during the elections... Right on the head, between the eyes! That’s what I would like to ask...”

Turlygozha was reminding Uzak of an incident that had taken place fifteen years earlier. Back then, the district governor had promised that he would appoint a man that Uzak had backed as *volost*, and had accepted a chestnut pacer stallion of extraordinary beauty from him as a part of the bargain. But in the heat of the election, the governor had been unable to constrain himself and sided with Uzak's opponents. Then at a large meeting, Uzak had stepped forward and said to the district governor: "Well, if that's how things stand, give me my horse back! He is worthy neither of your rank nor honour!" And saying that, Uzak had lashed at him so hard with his whip that the governor was left with a permanent scar under his hat. He then calmly mounted the chestnut pacer that was standing at the hitching post and left.

"Yes, that did happen," said Uzak, repressing a chuckle. "I was strong... I was revelling in my daring and youth. And he wasn't the only gentleman I ever laid my hands on. But what's the good of it all? Where does it lead to? We quarrelled and fought with our own kin. And so the years have passed in an intoxicated haze of worthless deeds, pointless bravado and loud fame that have brought no good to anybody... The glory assigned to me is nothing more than a hangover, my brothers!"

His words were as direct and cuffing as the blow he had struck the district governor that day. And again Turlygozha thought to himself: *What need have we of these words now?*

"You question whether or not you were a great *batyr*?" Zhamenke pronounced in gentle reproach. "But my dear friend! What is destined to be done today cannot be done yesterday. Our dealings today are but the stuff of yesterday's dreams!"

However, Uzak remained obstinately gloomy.

"In our day, in yesterday's times... The Kazakh people went like lambs to the slaughter and were butchered into twelve different parts... And back then, we still considered ourselves

people..? We might have lived under the open sky, but we chose to live under a felt blanket. For as long as I have lived, I have never seen the Kazakh people march under the same banner... But this is all the stuff of fairy tales!”

“Yes, it really would be a fairy tale, *batyr*,” Turlygozha muttered quietly, tears welling up in his eyes.

Zhamenke pondered, shaking his head approvingly and sadly. And he said with an unexpected, seemingly reckless resignation:

“What can you say? Life has passed and gone. Like dust that is blown to the four winds...”

Uzak’s huge fists clenched on his knees. A streak of grey hair blazed on his bulging temples.

“Better not say anything at all, brother, as a certain young woman once said to me: ‘Your shoulders once bore the head of a hero, but today it bears little more than a cake of dried dung!’ That is what she said. And truly that it what remains to this day...”

At these words, everyone fell quiet. For a long time, they remained silent, leaving the bowls of tea and *kumiss* untouched. Everybody understood full well who the woman he was referring to was... Bekei was the only person who could have said such a thing. The shadow of the young, spirited Bekei entered the yurt and stood sentinel over her father’s pale head.

“May God have mercy on her and preserve her memory...” Serikbai declared with an involuntary, concealed apprehension and quickly exchanged meaningful glances with Turlygozha. “But, *aqsaqals*, what are you saying? Has our time really passed? Are we not now closer to that which we have all dreamed of? To achieve something good that will remain in the people’s memory for all time! We shall pass through fire and water with our heads held high — why not wish and hope for the best? And die, with the honour of having fought for the good...”

And in his support, Turlygozha added, never taking his burning eyes from *Batyr Uzak*:

"Father *Batyr*! I can barely recognise you... It's as if you are bidding us farewell! But we have not come here to hear your last will and testament..."

Uzak frowned, turned away and in a muffled mumble said: "Well, that's what you say..."

But at that moment a man ran into the yurt:

"Dear God, what are you still sitting here for... Do you have no idea what's going on..? The chief of police has us surrounded..."

Silence. Outside, not a sound could be heard. Uzak slowly turned his bowl in his hand and distinctly pronounced:

"Drip, drip. That can only mean one thing: Oh, the shame of it all."

Zhamenke raised his hand commandingly.

"Those who can escape must do so immediately! My curse will be upon anyone who refuses! Thank you all, now let us be on our way."

But it was too late. Shots could be heard outside. Soldiers rushed into the yurt, pointing the barrels of their rifles right in their faces.

In came Sergeant Plotnikov with his forked beard and a revolver in each hand. And he sighed with evident relish:

"So... If it isn't the lot of you gathered all together in one convenient place. Best of the morning to all of you... What a lovely surprise to see you all!"

Uzak got up and, with the heel of his boot, crushed his drinking bowl underfoot.

* * *

Old Grey Mane had not grown much wiser since that unforgettable day when, by a miracle, he had remained in

one piece thanks to the mercy of the Black Caps. However, he did keep himself informed. During these troubled times, he had a lot of reading to do. Messengers on horseback were constantly shuttling between Karkara and Karakol with thick packages covered with wax seals, containing long-winded, official government documents.

The following was typical of most:

The Kyrgyz are increasingly taking part in uprisings (back then the Kazakhs were often mistakenly confused by the authorities with the Kyrgyz). These insurgents are burning villages, robbing, beating and driving out their residents. Their actions are fraught with dangerous consequences. They are criminals and brigands. The small Cossack settlements can no longer sit idly by. Especially serious is the threat to those villages, which are located among the native population. It is a matter of urgency to summon and arm the local residents there. Constant care must be taken to ensure that these weapons do not fall into the hands of either the rebellious Kyrgyz or the peaceful ones either. All firearms must be vigilantly guarded and the same goes for all weapons made out of cold steel, including knives. Until special instructions are provided, no Russian smiths are to shoe any horses belonging to the Kyrgyz. They are brigands and unchristian infidels. An irregular force of militia volunteers of at least one hundred to one hundred and fifty souls should be convened to protect the summer fair. Stay close together and be in a constant state of alert. Volunteers should be enlisted from Cossack and wealthy peasant families. Peasant labourers, exiled settlers and any non-Christians, atheists or students should be excluded without exception. Use all means to encourage and increase the numbers of those natives who are loyal to the empire. Keep them constantly on the move

so that they can provide you with new information every day. Seek out all possible information about the leaders and instigators of these uprisings. Keep a strict watch on any suspicious individuals living with the nomads that might have arrived recently from Kazan and Orenburg, or any printed or hand-written documents found in their camps that have been forbidden by the authorities. "Scribblers and scoundrels, the lot of them." Grey Mane muttered to himself. We are awaiting important instructions from the governor's office in Verny...

Old Grey Mane read the papers to himself out loud and tried to understand them as best he could. He recruited some excellent volunteers from the villages and Cossack settlements of Zhalanash, Naryshkol and Sarzhaz. He personally interviewed every single one of them, checking their credentials with a fine-tooth comb. Now he had at least a hundred fine fellows at his disposal! Many with deep pockets and their own weapons. They were eagerly waiting for the order to march against those *auls*, with which they had had land disputes. This was the main source of the superintendent's support, a malevolent force who would be more reliable than a whole company of soldiers.

But he also had another powerful, secret force of allies at his disposal. They were headed by his old acquaintance, Tungatar, an unpleasant man but the cleverest of all the *bai* landowners, and this group had been of particular help to the superintendent.

Old Grey Mane was as thick as thieves with this group. Their greatest dream was to see the day when Uzak and Zhamenke would be arrested and thrown into prison.

But that day had started out being quite a troublesome one. In the morning, terrible news arrived from Mount Asa. It was brought by merchants, who had witnessed how Ibrai's *barymtachs* had chased the assistant district governor all the

way down the Kokozek River. The merchants were Russian and were travelling from Issyk and Turgen to the summer fair. When they saw Ibrai, they separated from their Tatar and Uzbek fellow travellers and drove their horses hard; they rode all night without stopping, and at dawn, they woke the sergeant.

The evening before, the chief of police had stamped and sealed an order for the immediate arrest of the Alban leaders. *In accordance with the previously submitted list, as well as an additional list there should be a total of seventeen people.*

He was particularly pleased with the expression: *a total of seventeen people*. And already in these words experienced a sense of encouragement. But it's all very easy to say *immediate arrest!* but quite another to make it a reality. As a rule, catching any Kazakh, even the most incompetent horse-thief, is like catching the wind in the fields, but their leaders would be even more difficult to pin down. Till late in the evening the previous day and with a fresh head that morning, they had been considering how and where to spring their trap. And then on top everything else the merchants had arrived with their worrying news...

But at one o'clock in the afternoon, an old acquaintance and his *dzhigit* galloped into the summer fair, covered in dust and sweat and dismounted at the chancellery in full view of everyone. He had brought a gift fit for a king.

"All of them ... every single one of them is in Tanbalytas! And apart from them, there isn't a single living soul in the whole village except for a deaf old man collecting sage on the outskirts. And there are also horses... horses belonging to the Red Caps... All the way from Asa!"

"Well, what are you waiting for!" cried the investigator, shaking with impatience.

The chief of police shook himself and barked his orders:

“Well, Plotnikov! You’d better listen to me and listen to me good! If you let them escape, I’ll have that fork-bearded head of yours on a plate!” Then he summoned his valet: “Hey, you there... a glass of vodka for Mr Rakhimbai.”

And the rest was history. With a single sweep of the net, they caught all of them. They were led away on a single rope and kept at the summer fair, out of sight from prying eyes.

* * *

The whole of Karkara shuddered. Some openly wept, others beat their chests with their fists. They howled in pain, staggering like blind men as if they had been struck across the eyes with a riding whip. Grief and woe. Nobody knew what to do or how to behave. The only thing they did do was to confide their anguish to each other and to curse the tyrant who was tormenting them. Young and old alike poured forth their curses:

“May you die and never see the light again!”

“May you burn in hell and your name is wiped from memory!”

“May you be punished by the ‘Kerman’!”

This latter was considered the most appalling curse of all because in 1916 the Kerman (the German Kaiser was considered the most frightful of all of Satan’s horde of demons).

These were times of unimaginable dismay. Even the news from Asa was not as encouraging as it had first seemed. The people listened to the stories of the Red Caps’ fearlessness in the face of gunfire, how the lists had been torn up, how the soldiers had backed away from the women singing the *zhoktau* song of mourning, and they found it hard to believe their ears.

Little by little, however, they began to wipe away their tears and gather their thoughts.

And these were some of the ideas floated: “Let us all go to the fair again in peace, like we did that last time... We’ll give

them a strict ultimatum to give us back our elders! Tell them how it is... Surely, they can't be guilty..? We are all to blame, so blame us, mere mortals... If you need to punish someone, then punish us all..."

And this was how the recent events were discussed throughout the *auls*. And once again, the Black Caps found themselves pouring like a living stream along the many different paths and roads that led to the summer fair.

This time, however, there were fewer people. They were unable to draw as many numbers because there were some folk in other more distant pastures who questioned the need.

"Surely they will just question them and let them go?"

"Perhaps we'll see what happens to them first?"

The hearts of these people were filled with fog and uncertainty. And even those who had risen and did go were more subdued and less united than the first time; they arrived in random, disjointed groups. When the earthly body loses its head, it is led by the heart, and though the heart has faith in the justice of its cause, it has greater faith yet in god-like mercy.

However, the people of the Dongeleksaz summer pasture gathered earlier and more willingly than others. There were about two hundred of them and they were led by the unaccommodating and outspoken *volostnoy* Aubakir. As they rode, they were joined by people from other places along the way, as the river is joined by its tributaries and streams, and their number swelled to three hundred.

They rode at a trot along the flowering valley. Karkara burned and sparkled with a green fire, as it had in July. But now there was no hubbub, no whoops, no whistles and no singing. Not a single human voice could be heard. Neither Baimagambet's boasting nor Zhanseit's mischief-making. Just the dull thud of the horses' hooves on the bare earth.

Suddenly, a short distance from the summer fair, a group of thirty to forty horsemen came galloping out of nowhere to

meet them like an ambush. They weren't dressed like soldiers but they were just as well armed with rifles, sabres and pikes and in stout, well-made boots. They sat in their saddles, their arms akimbo, twirling their moustaches, their white teeth set in a snarl. At their head was a Cossack with a streak of grey hair on his head who spoke Kazakh fluently.

"Whoa! Stop where you are! Don't try anything funny!" he shouted at them as if he were addressing a dog or a horse. "There's nothing here for you at the fair. Get back to your homes. Disperse the lot of you! There'll be no trading today."

With these very words, he had already seen off a large number of the Alban who had been loitering near the summer fair that day, easily recognising them by their searching, sad and yearning eyes. They had all been looking for the prison, or guardhouse, as it was known locally... However, the moment the arrested men had been brought in from Tanbalytas the day before, the road to the summer fair had been closed to all Kazakhs.

"We are aware of that," said Aubakir. "But you need to know who we are... We are representatives of the people. Messengers sent here to carry out negotiations. We want to find out what has happened to our people and to present our petition. So — let us through."

"Look at you! Let you through... A horde like yours doesn't go around making petitions or asking favours. So turn around and go back where you came from!"

A murmur arose in the crowd:

"We want to see our kin and to talk to the authorities. Are you the authorities?"

"These men are not at fault; the people as a whole are at fault, we are to blame! That is all that we have come to say."

"We want to make a statement!"

And with that, the riders in front urged their horses forward at a slow walk in single file around the Russian horsemen.

The Cossack launched his sword from his scabbard and shouted:

“Get back! You shall not pass and that’s that! I have orders not to let you through. You’re not the first ones we’ve turned away today...”

But Aubakir shouted back with all his heart:

“How can this have been ordered? How can this be? What kind of leader is it that does not listen to the will of the people?”

The Cossack looked askance at him and thought to himself with a lazy sneer:

Well, I did warn you. “I won’t let everybody through. But maybe one or two. You may go!” He said jabbing his sword in the direction of Aubakir. “Shall we go?”

“I will go! I will go alone...” said Aubakir, spurring his horse after the Cossack.

Kartbai, a daring young man, followed behind Aubakir, like his armour-bearer.

The rest of the crowd were soon moved on away from the fair by the Cossacks with a gruff sneering laugh:

“Off you go. Don’t you worry; they’ll be back soon, bringing the others along with them... They’ll turn up just like that and the whole lot of them will be set free!” And with that, they drove them away.

On the way to the chancellery, Aubakir saw Ospan and involuntarily nodded, turning his horse towards him, but on seeing Aubakir accompanied by a Cossack with his sword unsheathed, Ospan turned and walked briskly away, pulling his head into his shoulders like a hen in the rain.

“How dare you ignore me!” Aubakir burst out. “Go on, get out of here you, rotten egg!”

Ospan didn’t even look around.

Old Grey Mane and the investigator were sitting in amiable conversation after a hearty dinner. When the Cossack led

Aubakir and Kartbai into the chancellery, they were already pink-faced and in a mellow mood from the generous libations they had offered themselves.

Old Grey Mane's jaw dropped in amazement. His eyes lit up with tender affection.

"Ah!" he growled at last and laughed so much that his shoulders shook. "Who do I see here! The reinforcements have arrived. Our cup is now full to overflowing. I must commend you for coming of your own accord! You, my dear boy, have been on my mind for a long time. From the very first moment I first announced the decree, you've been right under my skin... And he pinched a plump flap on his arm to show him.

Aubakir bowed, greeted them and was about to declare what he had come to say... But they didn't even deign to listen to him.

"You are a *volostnoy*!" The chief of police shouted as if admiring the hoarse tenor of his own voice. "Why do you think you were appointed? In order just to chew the fat? Have you forgotten the Tsar and the authorities?! As if that weren't bad enough, you've been helping these rabble-rousers and you are no better yourself. In fact, you are the worst troublemaker of the lot!"

Aubakir answered without fear, as an equal to an equal:

"You would appear to have a very high opinion of my qualities, sir. But trouble-making is not one of them. Is it your will to roast and eat me alive? Then good luck and good health to you... But as God is my witness, trouble-making is not a sin that can be placed at my doorstep. There is nothing you can do to an innocent man! The troublemaker in this instance is you, sir. And the sins that you have committed are dark and many."

"Take him away!" the chief of police ordered the Cossack with the grey streak in a tense voice. "Take him away and lock him up. And as for that one. Throw him out on his ear!"

And no matter how Aubakir objected, no matter how he tried to make his case, he was taken away and locked up, while Kartbai was taken by the scruff of the neck and hurled out onto the street.

Chapter 8

Kartbai did not leave the fair after being chased out of the chancellery. Meekly, with the air of a beaten dog, he trailed behind the escorts, who led Aubakir to the guardhouse. There he saw the iron lock being opened, the iron bar lifted and the new prisoner pushed into the darkness. Then he heard a loud voice from inside — hopeful that its message would be heard by those still at liberty:

“Pass on our greetings to the people! Tell them to stick together. Tell them not to be afraid...” It was Turlygozha’s voice.

Kartbai replied with the mournful cry “Wah! Wah!” and led away his and Aubakir’s horses, as if he were leaving the fair. An hour later, he doubled back and managed to sneak into the house of the merchant Sultanmurat.

Sultanmurat was beside himself with the chief of police and sergeant’s monstrous behaviour. His words were scolding, but the most cuffing of all were reserved not for the authorities or Rakhimbai, but the people...

“Naïve, foolish people,” the merchant repeated over and over again.

He had expected the worst and had not been mistaken. The chief of police was evidently anxious that his guardhouse might be broken into and his prisoners rescued. He decided therefore not to try his luck.

At night, when the fair was asleep, the locks and bolts were quietly slid open. The sergeant accompanied Uzak, Zhamenke,

Aubakir and seven others onto the street, ten men in total. They were put onto two carts, cordoned off by a double ring of escorts and taken away.

Sultanmurat and Kartbai had been on the lookout all night and heard old Zhamenke shouting to those left behind:

“Farewell, farewell...” God willing we will meet again in this world. May the ancestors be our strength and support.”

Turlygozha and Serikbai didn’t seem to be on the carts.

“Where? Where are they going?” Kartbai whispered. “Are they going to kill them?”

“Perhaps,” said Sultanmurat. “It doesn’t look good. It’s clear they’re being taken to Karakol! Take both horses and gallop for help. Only make sure you don’t get caught. This is the last chance to intercept and save them...”

Kartbai managed to escape the fair unseen, between his two unsaddled and seemingly grazing horses, and immediately galloped off to Dongeleksaz.

The moon had risen. Karkara was lit up with a cold light. The road along which the two carts were being driven under escort led to a point about thirty miles away where the Alatau range turned towards the lands of the Kyrgyz. The carts thundered along; the horses weren’t spared and were regularly forced from a trot into a gallop. The two-horse carts were sturdy with iron clad wheels, and the horses were well fed and quick. Reaching Karakol would require a whole night on the road!

The horse under Kartbai was soaked with sweat, so he moved to the other. He clearly saw the place on the road, bleached white under the moon like a horse’s skull where he would be able to lead an ambush. *If only we get there in time, if only we’re in time!* That night he would have had no qualms about laying down his life for Uzak and Zhamenke.

When he arrived at the summer pasture, the *aul* was sound asleep. Baimagambet and Zhanseit, who had just returned from

the fair without Aubakir, were also fast asleep. Their sleep was strong with the weight of youth and fatigue. Their horses, usually tethered, had been let out to graze...

It was a pretty pass when Kartbai got everybody to their feet! Everybody had been caught off guard... They had all assumed that Aubakir had simply been detained at the chancellery. He was the *volostnoy* after all, he knew best! If anything were to go wrong, he would send Kartbai... But why had Kartbai left it until the middle of the night to let them know what had happened to Aubakir?

No one in the summer pasture had been expecting they would need to gather their forces and act with urgency that very night.

Nevertheless, without any further ado or recriminations, a hundred men armed themselves with whatever they had to hand and galloped to the south-east, neither sparing their horses nor themselves, ready to risk their all in battle with the escort.

On the way, their line stretched out and they became separated. They galloped in twos and threes, and some on their own. But the first fifty men, including Baimagambet and Zhanseit, were all in one group when they came hurtling out together onto the road that skirted round the Alatau range. They began to circle the place that shone white in the moonlight like a horse's skull, cooling their sweating horses and waiting for the others to catch up. When everyone was gathered and ready for the ambush, the day was already beginning to dawn. But where were the prisoners and their escort?

Finally, three carts and a lone waggon appeared on the road. Judging from their hats, they were Uighurs. When they saw the horsemen, they frantically drove their horses on in their fright. They were soon stopped. It turned out that they were travelling from Karakol and had left at midnight. They were frightened because they had taken the Kazakhs for Cossacks...

That night, the Uighurs had already met a number of Cossacks who had driven them off the road and, through the thunder of their carts and horses, they had heard a Kazakh voice shout out into the darkness: "Send our greetings to Karkara! And stay united!" Where was it? A long way from here, way beyond the Kurdai Pass. Now they must already be near Karakol...

With a groan, Baimagambet buried his head in his horse's mane and began to belay himself with his fists.

"This is what our carelessness has brought us to... The source of our suffering is our own utter foolishness. We have surrendered our best people for a pittance. What will happen to the people now? Who can we rely on?"

And the others chimed in like fashion.

"We have been sleep-walking. Surely we can at least free those who have been left in the guardhouse at the summer fair?"

"Are we going to let Old Grey Mane laugh at us again?"

"No matter the cost... tomorrow night... let us sweep down on the fair and smash it to pieces... release our leaders and give the chief of police the whipping he deserves..."

Such and many more were the speeches made by Baimagambet, Zhanseit and others, on their way back to Dongeleksaz.

The heads of the men and horses drooped despondently. For a long time, they lamented their fate. And these men were no strangers to lamentation.

* * *

In the morning, a pair of two-horsed carts, their passengers and drivers, covered with mud and dust, slowly and cautiously drove into Karakol from Karkara under escort.

This small quiet place, more like a large settlement than a town, was destined to be the witness of a number of outrageous

and resonant events. Day and night, Karakol lived in fear of attack from the strong, courageous and vindictive Kyrgyz.

The settlement was open to the four winds and threats loomed from all sides. Despite this, Russian peasants, Cossacks and their families flocked in from the surrounding and distant small villages in ever increasing numbers. But this only served to stoke up fear in Karakol even further. These people had been humiliated, robbed and stripped of their lands and villages that had been subject to attacks and had witnessed bloodshed. They were no longer settlers but more like refugees. All of them had lost their houses, cattle and stores and many had lost loved ones. They had seen the blood of their fathers, sons and husbands spilt. And the streets of Karakol were filled with the weeping of orphans and widows.

A turbulent and bitter time. It was as if the wild silent mountains and eternally silent rocks and stones had suddenly found their voice and fires of brutal revenge burned in every fissure of the immense Alatau mountains. The Tsar's rotten and corrupt policies had set neighbour against neighbour, and people feuded with each other for the land on which they lived and worked hard, and for its pastures and waters. And they robbed, burned, and attacked each other, Russian peasants attacking Kyrgyz pastoralists, and vice versa. In a frenzy, these poor sons of the earth hacked and clubbed each other. And the dead and the orphaned continued to multiply.

The lands around Karakol were turned into a bloody stench-filled swamp. The bodies of the dead were left to litter all the lands around, unburied and criminally abandoned. The mortal sin of murder and robbery, common to all peoples, regardless of their beliefs or faith, stalked the villages and *auls* like a plague. With each passing night, these deeds became ever more terrifying and barbarous. The land and mountains of the Alatau screamed in pain, and the hearts of men turned to stone.

Day and night, refugees poured into Karakol, seeking shelter and protection. And day and night ever more troublemakers and murderers were arrested and driven into Karakol. The tiny jail swallowed ever increasing numbers of people alive, like an insatiable glutton. And the small settlement swallowed up rivers of humanity, like the husk of millet, on which Allah will fit the countless peoples of the world on the day of the great flood.

At nights, more space would become available in the jail for the living and the ravine behind it, ever more crowded with the dead. Wolves and badgers and black and grey crows flocked to the ravine for the grisly feast. There lay the ruddy-faced, dark-eyed men of the steppe.

It seemed but yesterday when the days were bright and peaceful and their rosy-cheeked children cheered their fathers' doughty hearts... Now the children's cheeks have turned blue with tears, their fathers no more than rotting flesh, tormented and torn to pieces by wild and feral animals. Some rot in black cesspools, while others are dried out, like a mummy, in the burning sun. And their hearts, which only yesterday were so full of the joy of life, respect for their elders and love for their women and children, are shrivelled and wrinkled like grapes that have withered on the vine; they have ceased beating, having known the vilest insult of all, the shame and horror of an untimely death.

And it was past this ravine that the renowned and desperate criminals from Karkara were driven. Covering their mouths and noses with their sleeves, they exchanged a silent look, understanding each other without the need for words, trying as best they could to hide their fitful trembling.

* * *

They were greeted with great interest in Karakol and did not have to wait long before being seen. As soon as the carts

drove into the prison yard, the jailers led Uzak, Zhamenke and Aubakir away for questioning, having first given them a quick wash.

They were told that they would be seen by the district governor himself. He was a relatively young, red-haired man, who was extremely fat, morbidly pale and known for his bad temper and cruelty. However, in the office, there was another high-up, waiting to see them, who the Black Caps had never seen before. His seniority was immediately clear from the severe, restrained and fastidious way that he held himself. His face and hands were as soft and pale as a woman's. He was none other than the chief prosecutor, all the way from Verny.

In the two days since their incarceration, the detainees had agreed that, come what may, they would endure and overcome. The day before at the guardhouse, Uzak and Zhamenke had greeted Aubakir somewhat coldly, for he had given himself up into the hands of Old Grey Mane even more cheaply and foolishly than they had themselves. However, their common destiny and common error soon reconciled them.

Karakol was terrifying. However, Uzak, Zhamenke and Aubakir were subdued but not crushed. They were modest and courteous, but they held themselves in a free and dignified manner. *We are guilty of nothing*, their eyes declared. *Only those who have disgraced themselves are guilty*, their souls declared.

The prosecutor chose to start with Zhamenke. The old man's white beard and clean-furrowed wrinkles seemed more accommodating to him than Uzak's sullen brow and the younger Aubakir's pursed lips.

Holding his stub of pencil with two fingers and dismissively poking it in the direction of the elder, the prosecutor asked him his name, age, *volost* and *aul* with a delicate and supercilious abhorrence. The *tolmach* interpreter who was an Uzbek translated his questions into Kazakh distinctly and intelligibly.

Exhausted after his journey, Zhamenke was not looking his usual impressive and spirited self. But his face, poise and gestures provided ample evidence of the habitual and unfeigned calm that comes with wisdom and old age. He answered tersely, blinking now and then, sometimes slyly, at others seemingly absent-mindedly.

What use am I to anyone now? The old man thought to himself. *But seeing as they're interrogating me, they must need me for something? But not this fine gentleman. I wouldn't even bother opening my mouth for him. But seeing as they need me, I will answer as best I can.*

"Is it true that your people, your tribe... are opposed to the draft? And refusing to give up your men? Is what they're saying true?"

"What they are saying is true."

"Who agitated... incited... and implanted these seditious ideas into the people's heads? Who taught and ordered them to say such things? Who is behind all this? Who is in charge among you?"

"No one is in charge. We have no need of a chief... We have the people. I am capable of speaking falsely but the people are not. We are reluctant to hand over our *dzhigits*."

"Why the re-luct-ance?"

"The people say that this is unjust and that the authorities are unjust. They have taken our land, they have taken our water and have driven us ever higher into the stony and mountainous wilderness! We regularly pay our dues and taxes, and we do as we are ordered. But they treat us ill as if we were enemies! To this day you treat us unkindly, like strangers in our own land... They say that the authorities are deceitful. They say that the authorities are lying. They promised not to take our land. They promised not to take our men into the army. Their words are cajoling but their actions violent... What's more, the people say

that the authorities have become slow to listen and their rulers hard of hearing. If we complain — instead of listening they punish us. Can such rulers be said to be good? Can the people continue to be obedient to such rulers?”

“So. There is a reluctance to obey these orders. Is this reluctance absolute, or are there certain conditions under which you might not be so reluctant? Are there sober heads among you, those of authority who would be ready to make concessions if you were ready to meet us half way? That is subject to certain conditions of course...”

Zhamenke pricked up his ears. Every fibre in his body tensed, like a wolf confronted with a trap that has been laid unseen under the pure, unsullied snow. He was not expecting to hear talk like this here in Karakol!

“The people say that they agree that the young men may go, but not as dishonourable and menial labourers,” Zhamenke said firmly. “Let them be taken into service and be taught to be soldiers. Let them be real soldiers. If you had only explained and promised this from the very beginning, then...”

“But don’t you see, if they are sent to work in the rear, they will come back intact and unharmed... Trained soldiers are sent to the front to be shot at by the enemy! You do know this, don’t you? Why do you want them to be trained up as soldiers?”

“Are our men no less courageous than yours..? And our *dzhigits* are men, not women. We are happy to fight and die for our land! If you will give us the weapons to do so... That is what they say.”

“Int-er-esting... And, from whom are you requesting these weapons, may I ask?” He added with frank mockery. The question cut like a dagger.

“From you...” The simple and wise old man replied. “Let our young men be given weapons. Let them be trained to fight

in full sight of the whole people. We have never sent our men off unarmed to war. We want to know what is going on! And when the people see that their sons are armed, trained and able to stand up for themselves, they will calm down. Then you will take our young men and send them to the front."

"Listen old man. As far as I understand, you are the *aqsaqal* of this people. A man, one would hope, who is capable of being reasonable. What do you personally think and how are you personally disposed towards all this?"

"The same as everybody else."

"But this is just foolish talk! The idle bragging of young men! No one would dream of enlisting their soldiers from another people in this way. It's not the way it's done with the Indians, the Chinese, the Arabs or Africans. This is just empty fantasy. And it is your sacred duty to explain to your kinsmen that this is not possible; they are making up this nonsense as they go along. Things will not be arranged as they want, not now and not ever!"

"Then they will not listen."

"But you must go and try to convince the people. You must give them reasonable advice. This is within your power and authority. It is your duty! Otherwise, things will go badly for you... And you will be punished. No mercy will be shown what-so-ever! Do you understand me? Will you do what I have told you to do?"

"God forbid... How could I say such a thing! I don't have the authority. You're the biggest authority around here! And they won't listen to you! I am just a mere mortal like everyone else. I don't have any position or authority."

"You're lying... And I don't like it. You are the head of your people. When you speak — they listen."

"I am an old man sir and I am not lying."

"Well, to cut to the chase, I will say this," the chief prosecutor interrupted unexpectedly, throwing his pencil on the

table and amiably baring his gold teeth. "Firstly you must force your ignorant and insane people to admit their guilt and ask for forgiveness and, secondly, you must hand over your *dzhigits* without any conditions or reservations. Otherwise, you will have to take the blame yourself! And you will be punished as no Kazakh has ever been punished before or since. Answer!"

Zhamenke smiled tiredly and weakly. This was a tone of voice that he already knew only too well.

"I'm not going to lie to you, sir. This affair is beyond my power. "You will not succeed in carrying out your orders."

"We will force you, old man, we will force you! But it would be better for you if you were to do it of your own free will."

"I can't."

The Prosecutor squealed like a stuck piglet:

"You old swine... You will do it, you will!"

And Zhamenke involuntarily laughed out loud.

"All right, I'll do it, never you worry, but this old pig is going to have to learn to fly first..." And his eyes flashed mischievously.

"Take him away," the prosecutor whispered calmly and coldly. "And send the other one in."

Uzak was brought in. His interview was considerably shorter.

"I've already heard what you want," Uzak said to the prosecutor. "You are wasting your breath. We will never understand one other. Take me to your superior."

"What is the meaning of this brazenness?!"

"The meaning is that you and I have nothing to say to each other. The old man just got the better of you. Do you want me to do the same? No, I have nothing for you, neither in my heart nor my head."

"So it's a no? And do you have nothing more to say?"

"Yes, I do. You are a man of violence. A despicable man of violence. What possible conversation can there be with you about honour, goodness or love?"

The prosecutor let out a falsetto scream:

"It's me who asks the questions, here!"

"Ask away then. But I won't answer you."

And that is exactly what he did. No matter how the prosecutor needled or threatened him, Uzak remained silent. And indeed, threatening a *batyr* like Uzak was a fool's errand.

Eventually, the prosecutor ordered him to be taken away.

Then came Aubakir's turn. He was boiling with rage and his eyes were filled with blood. He was barely able to control himself.

"This is all that I have to say to you: do what the elders have told you to do! Or return everything that you have taken from us Kazakhs — our land, our water... and our blood that you have spilt so carelessly. Then we will be even! That is my answer. I have spoken."

The prosecutor, with look of disgust, leant over towards the district governor:

"And this boy, this hothead is one of your *volostnoys*?"

"God knows what's going on... Karkara is a complete hole!" The district governor said through his gritted teeth.

Then the prosecutor called all three of them back and began to look them over, tapping his pencil against his shining gold teeth, as if considering them for the first time.

"So, these are the Black Caps... And very nice it was making your acquaintance too!" He said malevolently.

Chapter 9

The days and nights in the prison dragged by without joy and without meaning. There was no news to be had from the outside world at all. And no voices nor footsteps from the next prison cell. Their jailers were impassive to all approaches. Only the new prisoners brought fragmented and contradictory

rumours that buzzed irritatingly and monotonously in their ears like autumn flies.

Apparently, the Uighurs had risen up in rebellion... Allegedly, the Kyrgyz people's leaders had been captured and imprisoned. And rumour had it that the people of Kashgar had declared war on the White Tsar and wanted to free all their fellow Muslims... What could be believed and what was there to hope for? There was no knowing if there was anything to live for or if there was anyone still alive anywhere.

Uzak and Zhamenke did not believe anything; they did not expect anything, and, looking at them, the younger men simply lay on their bunks in silence for hours on end.

There are certain breeds of bird that cannot survive captivity. And there are certain breeds of people who are no different. Uzak and Zhamenke slowly pined away, unable and unwilling to expel the mortal anguish that filled their souls.

There are animals who cannot stand humiliation. And there are people who are the same. When Uzak crushed his drinking bowl with his foot just before his arrest, it was as if he had crushed himself. While Zhamenke cursed himself roundly when he discovered that the *aul* had been surrounded. But Aubakir's arrest was the final straw for both of them. They sensed that on the outside the Alban people were now completely rudderless and that it had all been their fault.

At nights they expected the worst. They listened with trepidation to the sound of the prison warden's footsteps and the jangling of his keys and, beyond the cell walls, they remembered the horror of the ravine outside Karakol... In the morning, as soon as it dawned, and the dawn arrived distressingly late in the cell, all the inmates would set about divining their fortune using *kumalaks*...

The best *kumalaks* are dried beans, but pebbles and grains of wheat will also do. Aubakir had managed to save some

dried peas. A handful of peas—forty-one in total—are thrown or dropped from the palm of the hand onto the floor and the future is then divined according to the patterns that they make. Those with the gift and the knowledge could divine everything from these patterns and would impatiently anticipate and look for new reasons to do so. Uzak and Zhamenke also looked at the *Kumalaks* with spellbound, almost enchanted, eyes as if pondering the embers of a fire.

“Hey, Aubakir,” the young Sybankul called out, “Why don’t we have a try at the *kumalaks* today? What about Kashgariya? We’ve forgotten all about it. We may as well try to find out something... Bring your *kumalaks* over here.”

“All the same, let it be good news,” his friend Nukye piped up. “They say that a kind word is the half-way house to good fortune. I can feel it in my bones that something good might be coming from Kashgariya...”

Aubakir shifted himself to the middle of the wooden bunk and silently cast the *kumalaks*. Everyone went quiet, huddled together on the bunks; they examined the lie of the *kumalaks* with bated breath. Then they began to nudge each other, as if afraid of jinxing the process:

“Go on you say what you think...”

“No, you say...”

And as the *Dombra* player strums the strings of his instrument, so they fleetingly touched the *kumalaks* that lay in groups of three or four and especially those that lay in the middle. There, in the centre of the pattern, lay three peas. These were touched with particular tenderness as if they were placing a spell on them.

“These are perhaps the most promising *kumalaks* of the lot. See how they lie, see how wonderfully they lie!”

“Judging by them... there’s good news and it’s coming our way...”

“That’s the crux of the matter: There is a sign here! A hint that there will be a battle and bloodshed!”

“Whatever happens, has already been destined to happen,” said Kariboz, the most experienced of all the fortune tellers. “God willing, we will leave this place alive and in good health. And that all will end well.”

And everyone who was looking at the *kumalaks* began to speak in a loud and prayerful whisper:

“God grant that your words come to pass.”

“May your divination be a prophetic one.”

“Let us hope that God himself has put these words in your mouth.”

But Aubakir shook his head in disagreement. He was staring at Kariboz as if he had just uttered a blasphemy.

“No... What you say is not what is written in the *kumalaks*...” said Aubakir. “Where did you see all this? If I know anything about *kumalaks*, then I sense that these bear bad tidings... There will be misfortune. Half of us will die and half will be saved.”

Everybody cried out:

“May God strike your tongue! And cleave it to the roof of your mouth!”

“Touch wood! And touch the earth for good luck as well!” Nukye exclaimed.

And Aubakir did touch wood.

But then suddenly, two bright blue eyes appeared at the peephole and the men quickly quietened down and silently crawled back to their plank beds...

Used to living on the open steppe, they couldn’t get used to these eyes. They always caught them off guard and the men felt as if they pierced through them, like needles. They seemed to penetrate into the most intimate spaces of their being, instilling a hypnotising rabbit-like fear. These eyes could have knocked

them from their feet and swallowed them alive! And, of course, everyone knew of the power of the evil eye to hex and ruin even the strongest of men. The two bright blue, unblinking eyes looked at them for a long time...

Zhamenke, who was lying in the corner furthest from the door, sensed that something was amiss in the cell. He looked at the door, met the gaze of the light blue eyes and gave out a sudden weak but almost melodious wail, like a wounded fallow deer.

The peephole in the door snapped shut, the *kumalaks* were tidied away and while they boiled their milk, Zhamenke's strange and unearthly cry resonated in the ears of the other men. But what happened next was something that neither the men nor the *kumalaks* had foreseen.

Zhamenke tossed on his bunk and sighed hoarsely... The others thought, that it was his soul troubling him. But the old man let out another cry, clamped his hands over his stomach and curled himself up into a ball.

"I don't understand..." He muttered as if in surprise. "What's the matter with me? What is happening? I am lying here but can't settle down. I am burning up from the inside out... Is this what dying is like?"

The other prisoners jumped up from their bunks and crowded around Zhamenke.

"What's he saying? What's happened to him?"

"Oh, God grant him recovery... What's caused this?"

"Where does it hurt? What is the pain like?" Kariboz asked, leaning his distraught face over the old man's.

Zhamenke groaned quietly and pitifully, utterly exhausted. He was in a very bad way.

"It's no accident... Whatever happened, this was no accident... Whatever I had this morning is burning me up from the inside out. I can't stand this for long. I don't have

the will to live... This is probably the end. My death has come... Whoever survives — pass on my blessings to my wife, my children and our people. Farewell, all of you. My dearest people...”

He doubled up and then straightened and stretched himself convulsively. He went pale and then blue before their very eyes as if something were draining the lifeblood out of him. His breathing became heavier, more frequent then shorter. His eyes clouded over and went white. And then stopped seeing altogether. He closed them imperceptibly... He closed them tight. And didn't bother opening them again, as if he didn't want to see anyone and only wanted to be on his own, eye to eye and toe to toe with his suffering.

The men standing in front of him spontaneously clasped their hands in prayer.

Regardless of whether he had lived a good or a bad life, he had lived a full and honourable life; he had seen much and achieved much. He was a kinsman to each and every one of the Black Caps present, he was their father, he was their head. And thus fate had drawn the final line under his deeds, dreams and delusions.

When you have seventy years behind you and you have lived a hard and honest life, death is bright, it is a deserved rest. But dying in prison was a hard punishment.

Zhamenke was stifled by a fatal affliction. His body repeatedly shuddered and writhed in convulsions and the heat of a fever, as if he were being torn to pieces. He was delirious, and his incoherent ramblings were as full of poison as his body. But when he became lucid for brief moments and gathered the emotional and mental strength to speak to them, there was nothing that could console him:

“I'm about to die... In captivity... If only I were out on the open field... dying... of my wounds... To lay down..... my old bones... for the young... to take revenge... My dear people...”

And those were his final words to them...

My dear people...

Tears welled up in the eyes of everyone present. And, looking at Zhamenke, their thoughts became frightful and terrible, as if the poison of his delirium had dripped into their souls. In the morning, the guard brought some slops that he claimed was soup.

"This is for the old man," he said, placing the bowl in front of Zhamenke. And the latter bowed, thanking him saying: "May God grant you compassion..." He was lacklustre but nevertheless had woken up before the others. Usually, these old men know in advance when their day has come and anticipate it. Zhamenke had no such premonition.

But Uzak did... Ever since the first day of their arrest, when the chief of police had laughed at the *batyr*, jabbing his finger at him, and ever since the initial interrogation in Karakol when he saw the prosecutor's womanish hands and face... Uzak had been waiting for the punishment and torment that would be meted out to himself and Zhamenke and this had somehow reassured him. Nothing bothered him, neither rumours about uprisings in Kashgar nor whisperings about the Uighurs. Not even the fortune telling incident, so auspicious to begin with and so terrifying at the end, could touch his serenity. He looked at Zhamenke dispassionately, without saying a word or shedding a tear.

Zhamenke was his oldest friend. For a lifetime, they had lived in perfect harmony, understanding each other perfectly with a half-word or the arch of an eyebrow. In their time, there had been no friendship stronger and more beautiful than that which existed between them. Whatever the problem, together they found the answer without difficulty and without dispute. And the two of them were able to fathom and unravel at a glance many things that appeared a great mystery or a confused

tangled web to others. They loved and believed in each other and the people were in great need of them together.

If they had been in the steppe, under Uzak's native roof, Uzak would have been weeping uncontrollably, holding Zhamenke's head tight in his embrace. He would have said goodbye to him, and been inconsolable, he would not have been ashamed of his grief. But to shed tears in prison would be a great dishonour.

"Today it is your turn, Zhamenke, tomorrow will be mine. You would not understand it if I were to grieve over you, saying: 'my brother you are dying!' You would have thought that it was very amiss of me... Whatever happens, we will endure. As you and I talked about, without ever agreeing in advance. See, I will not grieve in this place and I will not allow myself to torture and humiliate you by doing so."

Such was the *batyr's* nature. One half of his soul was dying before his very eyes, and the other half was incapable of living on... Things were bad for him. But, like the wolf, he would remain silent, refusing to yelp even if you were to slice, burn or even kill him. Uzak sat dumb, withdrawn, like an idol, only his eyes glittering with malevolent anger.

One time he did go up to Zhamenke, at an almost appointed moment. And at that very moment, Zhamenke opened his eyes and looked at Uzak with a mortal weariness.

"Goodbye old man. Goodbye, my friend," said Uzak, in reply to Zhamenke's gaze. "What else is there to say? I commend your soul to God. I will soon be with you. Don't punish yourself. You have nothing to regret."

And again he turned in upon himself, as insensible as stone.

The other Black Caps began to sob and Kariboz read a prayer.

Zhamenke got worse and worse. It had already been a long time since he had said anything. His strength had long ebbed

out of him. And his broken body writhed in pain. A blue foam appeared on his lips.

His mortal illness was crushing him. Many times it broke the old man completely, stopping his breathing, and it seemed that the end had come. Colic and cramps muddled his senses. The seal of death lay over his bloodless face, which was as cold as a mask. His kindly and proud wrinkles were totally unrecognisable. His white shaggy eyebrows crept low over his eyes and covered them completely. Suddenly, for a brief moment, they rose right up his forehead revealing his faded, unseeing eyes with their indistinct pale pupils, but there was nothing in them but a lifeless fog. His eyes slowly rolled up under his eyelids, as if escaping and hiding in terror from the vision that confronted them beyond the frontier that separates the living from the dead. His wrinkled lips and thin moustache became crumpled and pinched, leaving no trace of the iron will, wisdom or kindness that had formerly dwelt there. The surge of the cruel storm that was wracking his body remained as a frozen expression on his face.

The old man's breathing was now a loud and angry rattle. And it lasted so long, that those around him thought: how can his body and spirit remain so strong? His strength might have sufficed for a lot longer.

But finally, he stretched out and fell silent.

Two bright blue eyes blinked and stared through the peephole in the door...

The rest of the day and all through the night, the Black Caps prayed and lamented for their dearly departed *aqsaqal*.

And the next morning, because of the exceptional circumstances, they were allowed one person in from outside to visit and make their condolences. There were many at the prison gate who wanted to get in but, in the end, only one woman was allowed in. This was Aubakir's wife.

When she saw her husband in the prison corridor, she let out an involuntary scream. Aubakir almost let out a bellow on seeing his wife himself, doubling up and crumpling as if someone had thrown a hot coal into his stomach. They did not even have time to greet each other.

“Say nothing,” he said, mastering himself and wiping a tear from his cheek. “Tears are held cheaply here. If you start crying — I’ll send you away immediately. You shouldn’t have come here. And from so far away. But seeing as you’re here... We don’t have much time to talk. Zhamenke died yesterday. He died after eating something. We think they slipped something into his food. There’s nothing more to say. Pass this on to whoever is left of our people. And get yourself home as quickly as possible. Go... Farewell! I entrust you and the child to God and God alone...”

And having said this, he sent his wife away, without even letting her speak.

Turning on his heel, he immediately walked back into his cell.

* * *

Meanwhile, in Karkara, rumours and whispers were grasped at like straws as people tried to fathom what would happen and where. Where would it start... where would it kick off... Because something somewhere would have to happen. And all the indications were that something must! People waited for this from one hour to the next. But the fact of the matter was that they didn’t really know what was really going on and where. They lived on the move and off the beaten track, and generally had little knowledge or understanding of what was going on in the world. After the Red Caps had risen up and the chief of police had captured their messengers, no one knew for certain what would happen next and where the Red

Caps had disappeared to in the boundless steppe. And yet in Karkara, there was a feeling that something big was brewing and about to come to a head. And it was about time!

The chief of police seemed to have decided to clean up his act and, although he hadn't become a good and fair leader overnight, he had at least become a little better. He no longer stuck his nose into dealings at the summer fair. He had stopped bullying them for the lists. Although, admittedly he had continued to detain the men he had arrested for far too long. The question was, why?

Baimagambet and Zhanseit grew bolder. They made threats that they could scatter the fair to the four winds at any day and any moment. They would free Serikbai and Turlygozha and wipe the guardhouse from the face of the earth, so that from that time on there would be nowhere to imprison anyone ever again.

However, it was clear that this was not a practical option because the prisoners in Karakol would pay for it. And the entire weight of the White Tsar's revenge would fall on their heads. Or so people argued... And the people assured themselves that it was only this that was holding them in check.

By hook or by crook, rifles and revolvers were obtained. Some were procured and others had been hoarded and hidden. They guarded their weapons jealously like rare family jewels. As had always been the case, only a few men knew how to handle them and these people were looked up to like *batyrs*. Most other people were afraid to even hold them in their hands, for fear that they might go off! But they were all of one accord. Weapons needed to be at the ready and horses in the saddle day and night...

It was during these days of trepidation that the sorrowful news came that Zhamenke had gone to meet his maker.

Some of his kinsfolk were in Karakol. At the permitted time, they brought messages to the remaining prisoners and bribes to the jail warders so that they might not be so savage and cruel. When Aubakir's wife returned from prison, these family members ran to the head of the prison with tears in their eyes, asking that the body of the venerable deceased be released. The head of the prison told them that he would check protocol with the district governor, and, having done so, flatly refused to give them the body.

Zhamenke's kinsfolk immediately set to work. They knocked on the doors of everyone they knew and did the rounds of every single official in Karakol. Some listened, yawning and shamelessly sneering and snarling at their petitioners. Others rushed to make assurances that Zhamenke would be buried at public expense and in accordance with the Muslim rites and customs, while at the same time insisting that, according to the law, the corpses of criminals could under no circumstances be given up to their relatives for burial.

The family were in despair. Some took to walking to the ravine near Karakol and searching for Zhamenke's body there. But it couldn't be found.

When they heard about this in Karkara, the people went berserk. It was not the death of the old man that was so shocking as the fact that he had not been given a proper burial. It was an unheard of outrage, an unheard of infamy.

Nobody summoned anybody else. Nobody gathered the people around them and took charge of them. Everyone went of their own accord, without previous consultation or agreement, on the same day and at the same hour, from all the summer pastures and from all the *auls* far and wide. They came in large crowds and they came on their own, all to one and the same place — to the summer fair.

For some time now, the Alban people had been forbidden entry to the summer fair. And the chief of police and highest district authorities had declared they should not be allowed within a cannon shot of the chancellery and guardhouse. From the reports made by his watchmen, informers and spies, the chief of police was well aware what was going on around the fair, and where, in what number and for what reason the Alban had gathered in such a crowd.

And yet, what was happening seemed impossible and unthinkable. At exactly noon, the long-deserted market square and all the nearby streets and alleys were crammed full of Black Caps, on horse and on foot, in the saddle and in carts, pulled by their buffaloes and mares accompanied by their foals.

You couldn't have planted a needle in their midst, let alone step forwards, backwards or turn around. Some folks stood on their carts. The horsemen pressed close to each other, stirrup to stirrup; those on foot could barely raise their hands and, having done so, found it difficult to lower them again.

And dotted here and there in these huge crowds were the Cossacks, soldiers and other hostile forces, some sticking together, some separated but all hopelessly overwhelmed and pressed in from all sides by the Kazakhs.

The people came unarmed and as they were with whatever they had to hand. But they knew their *dzhigits* were armed with their meagre arsenal of clubs and spears. They came without knowing whether they would have to fight or not — all would be as God ordained. They came because somewhere in Karakol an old man by the name of Zhamenke had remained unburied, and this was dishonourable, sinful and unnatural.

The chancellery was besieged from the front and the sides and resembled a small raft, floating on a human sea, surrounded by small islands of market shops and stalls. The guardhouse was also closely surrounded and its warders squeezed in behind their own locks and bolts.

The people stood sullenly and in silence. That afternoon they had been moved by a single, common, impulse, a single unstoppable power. And they thought to themselves: maybe it has already begun... Maybe this is the moment that everyone has been waiting for... But what is going to happen next? Will we get straight to the point and seek out our goal or are we going to wait for something else to happen? And when the people thought about their goal, it seemed to them as if it was something towering, inviting and mysterious, like a deity; but nobody knew what the nature of this deity was...

Old Grey Mane paced around the chancellery, moving from the windows to the doors and from the doors to the windows, adjusting his straps and sword belt.

He had summoned everyone he could, even the Kazakh *tolmach* interpreters, whom he had been avoiding and keeping at arm's length until recently, but whom today he treated kindly, not letting them out of his sight. As if their presence might prevent the Black Caps from tearing his head off his shoulders! Or prevent the district governor from punishing him, although, as God was his witness, he had done nothing to deserve it.

Nobody could say how it had all happened. But when the fair and the steppe around it became very crowded the superintendent said to his sergeant:

"How can I be sure that I haven't missed the signs that things are looking bad..."

And the sergeant had said to the superintendent:

"You won't notice... and you won't see it creeping up on you..."

It was already too late; the avalanche was roaring its way towards him, and the chief of police was caught in his own trap, turned from hunter into prey.

Only the investigator, philosopher that he was, had kept his reasoning faculties intact:

"Everything is possible in the steppe. Wild impulsiveness, the most primitive laws..." However, even he listened out with a shudder for the clang of rocks against the iron of the guardhouse and the booming voice of Turlygozha or Serikbai in front of the chancellery. But neither one nor the other thing happened...

And the investigator took off his glasses, went up to the chief of police and led him out onto the porch.

"Keep it simple. Let them know how difficult your position is."

The superintendent rested for a moment, quickly crossed himself and went out onto the porch. Grey Mane started talking, barely taking the time to catch his breath:

"Well...? What have you got to say for yourselves? What have you come here for? Which of you is in charge here? Let him step forward and speak... We are waiting."

In the very front, stood the people of Dongeleksaz and, among them, Baimagambet, Zhanseit and Kartbai, buzzing, angry and as fierce as a swarm of wasps. But there was no leader to be found, and the men in front all shouted at once, their faces turning red, the veins on their temples pulsing:

"Give us Zhamenke's body!"

"Give the order for his body to be returned..."

"You arrested him! You put him in prison! Give us our chief elder back."

And penetrating through these furious cries, came a single muffled barely audible voice:

"Release our men from your accursed guardhouse!"

The chief of police and the investigator immediately began to nod their heads thoughtfully and with exactly the same devious and inscrutable faces as the porcelain Chinese divinities that the merchants sold in the bazaar. Of course, it was terrifying to hear how they yelled... It made your flesh creep. But they had no leader. And they wanted something, God, what did they want?

“That’s the people for you!” murmured Old Grey Mane with feeling and almost a tear.

The investigator whispered something to him and added: “Naïve children of nature!” And they both thought to themselves: *No matter what, the Kazakh love a fair speech...*

“Listen first to what I have to say. Who am I after all? I am just the most local of your leaders! There are others further away and greater than me whom I serve... The boss in Karakol is more senior than me. If he says that I have to die, then I will die. And what can I say to him? If he wants to, he will listen, if he doesn’t he won’t. It’s true your *aqsaqal* has died, and, er... may he rest in peace... But he is in Karakol. The district governor is in charge there. Do you know what rank that is? What can I do? What will he say?”

“I would say,” Baimagambet replied as if entering directly into the superintendent’s theoretical negotiations, “that you arrested him, that you sent him there under escort and that you will get him back for us. The entire people is in mourning, the entire people is angry. And seeing as you say that you are our most local boss, then write one of your letters, place one of your stamps on it and send a messenger to Karakol! Write and tell them how things are! And show us what you have written...”

“And I will show you!” cried the chief of police following a sudden intuition, and the investigator meaningfully raised his index finger at him. “And if Karakol says no, and my hands are tied...? What do we do then?”

“Then you send a dispatch to Verny! On that machine of yours, the one that you tap on... That we have made our request to you and that we have made it fairly, and that you are not opposed to returning his body back to the people. Send a dispatch to Verny!”

“A dispatch!” Zhanseit joined in. “Is it not enough that you killed him... Now you must give him back to us.”

And once again cries could be heard from the crowd:

“You did it! You are the one to blame! If you don’t try, we will consider that it was you who did it! We know what sort of person you are!”

And for the first time the chief of police heard his scurrilous nickname and understood it without the help of his interpreter:

“You, yes you, Old Grey Mane! Look the people in the eye when they speak to you. Don’t try and weasel your way out of it!”

The chief of police took an involuntary step back. The investigator held him in check with difficulty, holding him by the shoulders, and hastily prompted him:

“As you see fit... so be it...”

The chief of police trembled like a small bird and repeated after him to the people:

“And I say... So be it... Let it be as you see fit... We’ll ask for the body of the departed. We’ll send the dispatch. We’ll put this mistake right...” Then another idea dawned on him: “But what I don’t agree with is that if we are to send a dispatch on behalf of the people... then we should have everyone’s signatures... Which of you will sign it?” And suddenly he screamed in a new found fit of mock rage: “All those wishing to sign... Step forward! All those who don’t... Stand down!”

Once again the Black Caps went quiet... The self-confident tone of the screamed commands perturbed them. However, the chief of police pressed home his advantage, as each man tries, to the best of his abilities and customs. He said that a mistake had been made. In addition, he had given them good advice on how to go about doing things... But as soon as he said that something would need to be signed, a space opened up in front of the chancellery porch.

Not everyone could clearly hear what was being said on the porch of the chancellery, even those standing in front, and those further back couldn't hear anything at all. The ones at the back drowned out the ones at the front and waited to see what the ones at the front would do. When the ones in front went silent, the ones in the middle of the crowd debated among themselves what had been said at the porch, and then, from there, a wave of voices surged back to the front. The voices were not angry but inquisitive.

"Hey you, listen up, who's leading the negotiations there... We can't understand what's going on over here."

"What's there to understand here? That he, poor man, can't do anything, can't you see that he's only doing his best?"

"Don't let him get out of it, you see, he will come in handy."

"If he's promised, let him do it. Then we will see."

"Let him do it now, on the hoof, no point dismounting."

"Now, now! You lot over there, tell him to do it now! Hey, you over there, who's leading the negotiations..."

And so on, several times waves of questions and answers rolled back and forth from the same people. The sea of people breathed evenly. People relished the sound of the word *d-i-s-p-a-t-c-h*.

Seeing that Old Grey Mane was not his old self, and was waiting for what they would say next, Baigambet and Zhanseit stood in front of the porch, impatiently and questioningly glancing at each other, desperately trying to remember what else they needed to say to the superintendent...

The investigator caught their mood. These young bucks had all the cunning of a young girl who is dying to be kissed but fighting off her lover like a kitten. Despite his fright, the chief of police understood this as well and cleared his throat in a business-like manner.

"Well, if that's all agreed, good people, then I suggest we break up and everyone goes home... What's the use of us all

crowding around like this? We have more than enough people who can stay behind if they wish... to... er... sign the dispatch... Don't expect a reply within more than... two to three days. I can't make any promises earlier than that. When there's a reply I will inform you; there's no need for you to wait around here. In the meantime, as far as you and I are concerned, let's have some peace and calm..."

The Black Caps nodded, moved, twisted, jostled, murmured and began to turn their backs to the chancellery. Slowly, tightly-packed and amicably, they parted ways. Peace was good, peace would be good for everybody...

Then Zhanseit checked himself and suddenly remembered. He went up to the porch and said loudly so that more people would hear:

"If you want to be seen as a good boss, then let our people out of the guardhouse... It's not any one person who is at fault but the people as a whole. Serikbai, Turlygozha did not come up with anything themselves. The people agreed on it together. That's how it was, as God is my witness! Do the right thing, we can agree on this at once without having to wait. Otherwise, on your head be it. You have not yet not cleansed yourself of your sin, Grey Mane..."

And those next to him seized upon his words with fervour:

"That's true, let them go now..."

"These people have had enough... you've worn them out... they are innocent..."

"Every single one of us here before you are just as guilty... Whatever you do to them, you should do to us and everyone else!"

But the rest of the crowd did not hear their angry voices. All that could be heard where they were was the tramping of many feet, the dull clatter of carts and the heavy bustle of the crowd. They were sweating from their sheer numbers and their minds

were now on other cares: how to stop their harnesses getting tangled and their wheels broken, and how to ensure that no one got trampled. The people left as they had arrived, without being ordered or summoned and without being led by anyone. And the investigator saw with joy and trepidation how one soldier, then a second and now a third... were picking their way through the human tide towards dry land, safety in numbers and the leadership of the sergeant.

Seeing this, the chief of police began to chide Zhanseit good-naturedly and querulously like a patient, long-suffering father:

“Old Grey Mane, you call me? Ay, yai, yai! Do you think I’m your *aqsaqal* that you should address me as such! Your *volostnoy* Aubakir spoke to me much more politely... You are in a bit of a hurry, my friend. There was an order from high up to arrest him. When we get a new order we will release him. You need to be more patient. And seeing, as you say, that you are all to blame, then give it a bit of time, and we’ll put the lot of you in jail...”

The *dzhigits* took alarm and began to try to cry foul:

“Then know this, and mark it well. You will have no peace! The people will rise up and rebel!”

“Don’t you go insulting us. You are only the boss here for as long as things remain calm. And if you snarl at us, we’ll snarl back at you. And you won’t know your grey mane from your grey tail!”

“We don’t care whether you’re a grey mane or you’re piebald, it’s all the same to us who you are. We won’t wait to see what your markings are!”

“We’ll wait two to three days... But if you are tricking us! If you are lying to us!”

But the hotter under the collar they got and the louder they threatened him, the calmer and more sneering Old Grey Mane

became. There were many of them, too many to arrest... But they had nothing to back them up but an impenetrable cloud of dust from the thinning and scattering crowds.

And the *dzhigits*, sensing this, began to gallop about on their horses, exciting them, riding them around in circles like driftwood in a whirlpool, and then drawn by the outflowing flood of humanity, galloped away en masse and then scattered in all directions.

The superintendent, hunched over and, shuffling his feet, went into the chancellery. He flopped down on the first available chair, muttering meaningless curses and trying in vain to understand the terror and absurdity of what had just happened.

An indiscriminate and elemental force had risen up, playfully breaking its age-old chains of ice and nearly fatally flooding the summer fair. Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, it had returned back as flood water into the ground, from whence it had originally emerged...

Chapter 10

Naturally, the chief of police sent the dispatch to Verny, as was promised. He also sent a document to Karakol. And he took great care that this document and the dispatch were seen by people from the Alban clan. As he had been advised by the investigator. They looked at them, confirmed that everything was done, and then went back to their pastures.

Their understanding of Russian, however, was about as sound as their knowledge of Arabic. They knew that Muslim letters were written from right to left, and Russian from left to right, but the meaning of either was a complete mystery to them. And that is exactly how things turned out.

The investigator instructed Ospan to read the letter and the dispatch to his fellow Kazakhs, and he read it and translated

it clearly and faithfully. The dispatch also ended word for word with a humble request from the superintendent of police and the people that Zhamenke's body be returned... Nothing suspicious in this whatsoever.

However, Old Grey Mane's brow was low and dark with foreboding. After the Tsar's decree of June 25, everything had seemed clear and simple — the *dzhigits* would be sent to the rear and the bribes and money would go into his pocket, but now everything was vague and foggy and he was enjoying neither peace nor profit from the whole situation.

The Lord had not given him a good understanding of politics, and politics had lowered its horns and charged at him like a bull at a red rag. Since the middle of the summer, this vile politics had begun to take a different turn and it seemed that, for the time being, it would not be necessary to pacify the uprising. There was nothing to fear from it and, on the contrary, there was a lot to be said to encourage it. If they wanted to rise up, then so be it. By all means, let them rebel a little so that they would have no one to blame but themselves... And then, the moment they go on the attack, turn up the heat and give them what for! The *auls* would be razed to the ground without pity and without mercy, and then our own people would be settled on this excellent and fertile land.

Whatever happened, this seemed to be how things were going. And this seemed especially likely judging by how they had dealt with this Zhamenke character and how they were provoking the Alban people to ever greater extremes. The local officials in the districts next to Karkara weren't the most worldly-wise when it came to politics either, but this time they had surpassed themselves. They had heaped insult upon insult on the local people and spilt their blood brutally. At any other time, an interfering journalist or government inspector might have cried "tyranny and despotism!" from the rooftops. The

chief of police desperately wanted to find out about any such plans from his superiors, in order to avoid getting his own fingers burned in the fire they were fuelling... But he prudently kept his mouth shut. He would only have ended getting himself into hot water.

The one thing Grey Mane did encourage was to increase hostilities between the Russian settlers and Cossacks and the local population. He took this new unspoken policy on board and tried to make a go of it. And he managed the rest of his affairs easily and firmly. He looked after and fed his detainees. These men were valuable hostages. He already knew in advance what their fate would be. *Just between the two of us... One fine day... er... well you know what... Right down to the last man...* There could be no halfway house on this one. These new measures would be applied to the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz and the Uighurs. And Old Grey Mane was absolutely certain of this.

Meanwhile, the unrest and insurrection continued to flare up. The raids on the postal service, on military convoys, the arson and the murder... When was it all going to stop? It seemed that the hour for reprisals had come. A general of police arrived in Verny from St Petersburg. And it was quite clear that he hadn't just arrived to offer bouquets of flowers and kiss the hands of the local ladies, although many a ball had been given in Verny in his honour...

The Kazakhs immediately found out about this. "A big wig police general has arrived..." And his words were heard loud and clear. From the Kyrgyz mountains to the borders with Xinjiang and from Turgai to Orenburg. Soon after his arrival and, barely having drained his first bowl of *kumiss*, the big wig general announced in no uncertain terms that: "The grass will be scorched from the earth in any place where the blood of any of the Tsar's officials has been spilt!" And to the local

people, these words had the ring, authority and menace of a stanza from the Koran.

* * *

The conditions in the prison in Karakol remained as isolated and terrible as an abandoned well. The only food they received came from friends and relations on the outside. The *kumalaki* hadn't been touched for a long time.

But that day, not a single Kazakh or Kyrgyz had been allowed close to the prison gate since morning. And even those who had kept their distance in the hope that they might later be let in were driven away. They were driven a long distance away. Anyone standing their ground was beaten with rifle butts and lashed more brutally than you would whip your cattle.

On that day, the prison routine was stricter than usual. From the neighbouring cell, an occasional meaningless and persistent knocking sound could be made out as if a woodpecker were flying in and out. Evidently, someone there was trying to distract themselves from the boredom, much as the Black Caps had tried to amuse themselves with the *kumalaki*... But beyond this, there wasn't the slightest sound... And at the peephole every now and then — the bright blue eyes would appear...

"There's something afoot today," said old Kariboz. "And it doesn't bode well... What could it all be about?"

And Kariboz felt as if someone had just scattered a large handful of *kumalaki* beans in his soul. Some had fallen fortuitously and others less so, and the irrepressible agitation that overcame him restricted his breathing. It was the elders' duty to forewarn and prepare the others.

But the younger men were not at ease either.

"Something is going on in this prison," Nukye murmured. "You can always tell what is happening in the *aul*, from the barking of the dogs. Right now I can hear a whole pack of them howling in my ears..."

From the very first thing that morning, all of them had been restless, as if they had infected each other with some kind of inexplicable and oppressive anxiety.

At last Uzak, who had been lying on the bunk in the corner and had not uttered a word for several days, rose and went to the door. He waited until the peephole opened, and then buried his nose in it, literally sniffing to get a sense of the smells in the corridor out there beyond the door.

"Hey, why haven't you let us out for our daily walk? And why haven't you let our people in to bring us our food? What day is it today? What's with the enforced fast?"

The bright blue eyes stared for a moment and narrowed. Then the disembodied voice belonging to them finally said:

"You'll have to wait ... At six o'clock there's going to be a proclamation."

The peephole slammed shut.

"Proclamation..." Uzak murmured in a broken voice, leaning back against the door.

It did not bode well. What could this surprise proclamation at six o'clock be about? A pardon for all the prisoners? Uzak found this hard to believe. Exemption from the draft? No one believed that for a moment.

Looking at Uzak, Aubakir went cold and turned pale, the premonition on the day of the fortune telling and Zhamenke's death surged back into his memory, and he also leant his back against the wall and muttered to himself:

"He wasn't telling the truth... They're hiding something... I'm afraid all that remains for us now is to make our last farewells. Let the elders start by saying a prayer."

Everyone remained silent and frozen on their bunks. Uzak lay down. And Kariboz, devoutly folding his hands, quietly began reciting the final rites. His hands were shaking, and his voice trembled and cracked, and the expression on his face

betrayed more fear than calm and devout decorum. However, he mastered himself, wiped every trace of worldly vanity from his face with the palms of his hands, and a pure and melancholy voice free of all empty passion filled the cell. And, immediately, it was as if the cell had turned into a crypt, and the people lying, sitting or standing there — disembodied ghosts. The prayer gave them courage, readying them to meet their maker.

Only Aubakir was unable to master himself, even though he had initiated the whole thing himself. His mind was racked with an animal sense of impending danger, with its proximity and its slow, inexorable approach. Fear filled his every fibre, just as it does the birds before a violent storm and the beasts on the threshold of an earthquake.

He was well known for this supernatural sensitivity, which was why his premonition during the fortune telling had had such a powerful effect on everyone. But now they looked upon him with sympathy, as one does towards women for whom misfortune is so much more difficult to bear than men, and for whom no consolation can be found.

Suddenly, with the softness of a cat, Nukye lay himself down at Aubakir's feet, laying his head on his knees.

"Why don't you snuggle up to your little son..." He said in a squeaky womanish voice.

A word in jest is always much wiser than an angry one. Nukye was Aubakir's son-in-law... Aubakir smiled and began waving his hand in front Nukye's face, pretending to whisk the flies away from him much as you would with a small child.

Although there wasn't a trace of carefree playfulness in any of their hearts at that moment, this pure show of childish affection raised everybody's spirits.

Then Aubakir tensed and began to listen intently, as did all the others.

A vague faint noise reached them from far away. It intensified.

A minute later, the entire prison was shaking with the sound of tramping boots, the screeching and slamming of doors, the clang of locks and bolts and echoing gunshots that thudded and rumbled through the cramped corridors and cells. A minute later, men's desperate voices could be heard, wild, plaintive screams, cries of horror and pain, curses and groans.

The prisoners from Karkara huddled together, one stretching out his neck to see what would happen, another crouched over double from the clamour of the shooting, then they separated, pressing themselves against the walls, never taking their eyes off the dark narrow door. Instead of the thin thread of light that usually penetrated into the cell through the narrow gap under the door, a wreath of blue gunpowder smoke now curled.

The peephole clicked. The two bright blue eyes appeared and then disappeared. A small door inset into the larger one swung open with a crash and two smooth, burnished, rifle muzzles poked through. Like the bright blue eyes, for a second they surveyed the inmates unblinkingly, and then spewed fire, smoke and deafening thunder at them. Then they began to point around to the right and left, and then down where the bunks and the men were, quickly and rapidly spitting short wisps of smoky fire and invisible slugs of lead. Death broke into the cell and began to rush fiercely in all directions, touching everyone around greedily and senselessly like a mad wolf. Four human screams hammered against the four walls:

"Oh, ancestors, ancestors..."

"Farewell! Brothers, farewell..."

Aubakir saw Kariboz and Nukye fall on the same spot... The wounded were crouched and frozen where they lay, others tried to crawl away. Blood splattered their clothing, the floor and the walls.

The survivors threw themselves under the bunk, dragging the wounded behind them, trying to hide from the deadly gaze

of the burnished blue muzzles. Uzak, Aubakir and Sybankul squeezed themselves behind the stove to the side of the door. Uzak and Aubakir were bleeding: The elder man had been shot in the stomach, the younger one in the shoulder.

But the shooting did not end; it continued to roar, turning the cell into hell on earth. It was so full of smoke that it was impossible to distinguish the bunks from the people hiding beneath them. Light from the small window high in the wall washed weakly over the smoke. Meanwhile, the flashes of gunfire flared ever brighter.

“Oh God! Oh holy spirit!”

“Is this really the end?”

“We are all going to die. Allah, Allah...”

Aubakir elbowed Uzak, who jerked up his head and nodded. Something in the mood of the prison had changed.

Somewhere in the distance, the shooting had diminished, and from the same place increasing in volume there came different sounds, new voices, fierce, challenging and very much alive. Out there was a large cell. Where the Kyrgyz had been kept. It was the sound of their voices.

“Get out, run! Quick...”

“Hit them! Smash the lot of them!”

“Die, you dog! Take that!”

“Don’t move any closer or I’ll kill you!”

“Not before I kill you first...”

At that moment, Uzak stepped out from behind the stove, dashed to the door and, disregarding the gunfire, grabbed both rifles by the barrels with his iron grip and pulled them out of the guards’ hands, dragging the weapons into the cell. From behind the door came the disorderly sound of the guards running away.

Uzak looked out of the small inset door. Prisoners were running along the corridor. The jailers were nowhere to be seen. But their cell was still locked with an iron bar and stout lock.

"Dismantle the bunks and break down the door," Uzak shouted, leaning the rifles against the wall.

People began to crawl out from under the bunks, dragging the wounded to one side and ripping off the boards.

Uzak tore out the heavy frames from under the bunks, lifted them up over his head and brought them crashing down onto the door. It reverberated like a stretched bull's hide. Uzak lifted the frames and hit the door again. This time the door cracked. And then the *batyr* smote it a third time. The trestles shattered into pieces, but the middle plank of the door was broken right above the bolt. Uzak fell, holding the wound on his chest. Blood pouring over his hand.

Then Aubakir, as if unaware of the pain in his shoulder, began to pound the door with a heavy thick board, reproaching and cursing a God who could be all-seeing but still remain silent:

"If one of the three supreme forces has a tongue in him let him speak. Is it possible that out of eighteen people you cannot let at least one escape?"

And all the others who could stand on their feet started pounding the door with boards and beams from the bunk frames and rifle butts, and it was reduced to a mess of nails, iron plates and splinters of wood.

They broke and tore off the fragments. All that was left of the door was the iron bar and the lock. With a bestial howl, curses and prayers to the almighty, they climbed through the breach and ran, stumbling, falling and crawling on all fours; they dragged each other along the smoke-filled, blood-smeared prison corridor and out towards freedom.

There were no guards to be found in the prison at all. When the Kyrgyz burst out of their cell, bloodied, unbeaten and having deceived death, they had thronged together like the undead, freshly risen from their graves and immune to the

bullets of mortals. The jailers and soldiers took one look and, forgetting themselves, fled. Some threw their weapons away, others had theirs taken from them, and they leapt like goats down the stairs to avoid being shot.

But in the prison yard, a dozen or so guards who had kept their weapons formed themselves into a line at the iron gates and doggedly began to shoot at anyone running out of the doors into the prison yard or climbing the prison fence.

It was evening, the sky was thick with cloud and the twilight fell quickly. And this is what rescued those who were destined to be saved.

Aubakir and Sybankul, supporting the heavily bleeding Uzak under each arm, ran out into the prison yard together. Running in front of them was a young Uighur who climbed up onto the fence and dropped over the other side. They rushed after him. Aubakir and Sybankul sat Uzak down; Aubakir climbed up the fence, dragging the helpless and exhausted Uzak behind him. At that moment a shot rang out nearby. Aubakir heard Sybankul give a quiet cry.

“Ah! They’ve got me. Farewell,” and slowly he slipped back down the fence and collapsed on a large rock in the prison courtyard.

With a moan, Aubakir picked up the wheezing Uzak who was getting heavier by the minute, put him over his shoulder and, bellowing with pain, staggered away from the fence onto a wide wasteland overgrown with weeds. Aubakir’s wounded shoulder had become completely numb, he was bleeding and his legs were collapsing beneath him. Soon he was wheezing and rattling himself and fell down with Uzak onto the cold, dewy earth, oblivious to everything around him.

When he came to, the earth and sky had already darkened. Not far from the prison fence they were shooting again. *Batyr* Uzak was lying on Aubakir’s back, his arms outstretched as

if trying to shield him and the entire world from the bullets. Aubakir's back was wet with his blood.

The *batyr* was alive and conscious, but unable to move and Aubakir was unable to carry him any further. Aubakir was now faced with the most difficult decision of his life.

The shooting had become less frequent, but more distinct and precise. The guards had evidently fanned out from the prison gates and were perhaps even making their way along the fence.

"Go," Uzak said. "Try to escape. I can't... But the man who comes to finish me off will embrace death alongside me tonight."

He lay on his back, his arms and legs spread out, like a warrior, who has fought and fallen on the battlefield, and at that moment he seemed immense, like a great hero from a folk tale.

"Go..." Uzak repeated. "And do not renounce life, as I have done... Give up your life so that the people may live. And one other thing: in your fight against the Tsar, seek Russian friends. Remember — Russians."

Aubakir leant over Uzak, looking long and hard into his tormented and anguished face.

"I won't forget... Dear father of our people, God be with you, forgive me... Forgive me, father..."

"There is nothing to regret," Uzak replied. "Bekei is waiting for me."

Aubakir briefly rested his cheek against Uzak's bloody and wounded chest, stood up and staggered off into the darkness.

Not far away, he stumbled upon three strangers. But by the way they grabbed him and led him away into a back alley, he realised that they were friends. Apart from himself, there were two Uighurs and a Kyrgyz. Together, the four of them fled away from the prison through back yards and down back alleys, eventually taking shelter in an abandoned house with boarded-

up windows. Here, they bandaged up Aubakir's shoulder. The bullet had gone clean through and the wound had not become infected.

They waited until Karakol fell asleep, and ran for the mountains.

A pack of dogs sensed their fear and chased them madly for half a mile into the outskirts of the town. Fortunately, people did not come out to see what all the commotion was about. Their progress wasn't helped by several rows of large carts that had been stationed across the streets, their front and back axle shafts pinned to the ground with stakes. Barricades against possible raids from the wild mountain Kyrgyz, as they were referred to at that time.

On the outskirts of the town, Aubakir and his companions nearly fell into a deep pit. Negotiating their way around it, they realised that it was not a pit, but a long, large ditch that had recently been dug to defend the inhabitants against cavalry raids. That's how frightened they were of being attacked by the local peoples. The very sort of ditch that the Alban's *dzhigits* were being requisitioned to dig against the Germans... The ditch had clearly been dug to see off a very large force, like in a real war.

Aubakir sat down for a rest and thought bitterly to himself. *Had there been such a large force here, outside Karakol? Why hadn't they jumped over the ditch and the bristling carts and swept into the town seeking heroic revenge? Why had they not broken into the prison and saved the leaders that the people so desperately needed? Why had they not crushed these foul executioners at the site of their monstrous and obscene crime? Why was it so quiet in Karakol on this fateful night, when Uzak was being reunited with Bekei, and the dogs were barking madly at lonely fugitives who had somehow miraculously escaped death? Where were they, where were these forces?*

Silently the Uighurs and the Kyrgyz came up to Aubakir, lifted him to his feet and led him further away up the foothills of the steppes...

Aubakir walked and saw Uzak's gloomy face with his bulging temples looming up before him. He walked and, with a shudder, wiped his moustache and lips with the palm of his hand, still encrusted with Uzak's blood. As he walked, he murmured the *batyr's* last cherished words, repeating them in his head like an incantation.

It was on this night that Aubakir fully and finally understood the mighty souls that inhabited *aqsaqal* Zhamenke and *batyr* Uzak's great hearts and the protection they had provided the people.

Chapter 11

The cup of human misery was full. The bloodshed in Karakol had filled it to overflowing. Uzak's blood had fallen onto the grass of Karkara, kindling a fire of hatred. As if in a single moment, the good and trusting nature of the peaceful Alban tribe dissipated. Now, all the hopes of the past provoked only bitter laughter. No-one now believed in peace or salvation. For the first time that turbulent summer, people were gripped by a single passion: to take revenge on the fiends that ruled them, and to leave this land, on which a curse had fallen; to leave in desperation, as the Red Caps had left, over the hills and far away.

In Karkara, they heard of the fate of the Red Caps. One night, they had risen and fled, just as a wild beast flees a steppe fire, but by afternoon the soldiers had caught up with them. The men had left their animals and their belongings, slipping away at night, trying to save their children and their women. What became of them after that, no-one knew; no-one save the steppe and the birds that flew high above it.

There were rumours that a horse thief by the name of Ibrai and his comrades, also horse-thieves, had vowed to take revenge and that Ibrai was roaming the steppe like an angel of death, killing as he went.

When they heard this, the Black Caps saw an abyss open before them yet, still, they vowed to leave. They knew of no other way. And while they were still in their own nests, before they were pulled up by the roots and scattered to the winds, they cursed their humility of old, that patience for which they had been praised, and their hearts ran over with hatred, as if bound by an oath: to spill blood, burn property and destroy life for all the rest of their days.

So it was in this mood that they ate their bread and rocked their children to sleep. And the bread stuck in their throats, and the children in the cradles grew frightened, but this was all the Alban knew or could know. And so the men prepared cudgels and axes, and the women prepared bundles; just one or two, no more, as if they had not been women.

For the sake of life, you will sacrifice everything you have. But if there is no life, what need have you of anything then? Your beasts, your hearth, the land — all these things are good as long as your son, your protector, is still alive and well, and as long as you are burying the dead and not the living. These were the thoughts of both those preparing to send their *dzhigits* into battle and those who had none to send.

There were some who thought otherwise, not as people think. But these were not people. These were the Tungatars, the Dauletbeks and the other rich landowners like them, together with their bondsmen. They had felt uneasy that summer — just as Tungatur had felt uneasy when he had met his brother Uzak, but they said not a word — just as Dauletbek had said not a word in Klubnitsky's white yurt, and they hid — just as Rakhimbai had hidden on the day of Uzak and Zhamenke's

arrest. A rebellion is like a famine in the steppe: one thing for the sheep, another for the wolf.

What the old man knew, the child knew also. And what one man said, all men said. But no-one could tell what lay at the bottom of the abyss that beckoned them. Would there be land? Would there be freedom? And would there be a way back? No one knew. And so they all kept asking.

Few remembered how harshly Uzak had spoken on the subject, on the day that the spirit of the great ancestor had swept over Karkara in the shape of a whirlwind. The most important of those who had heard were far away — some in prison and some in the grave, and the humbler, more ordinary people dared not utter the words of Uzak: “fathers into captivity and children into slavery...” Now they would have been beaten for this, spat upon as cowards and heretics. For now, they remembered Karakol.

Just as before — when the Black Caps, grieving for Zhamenke, had descended on the fair, and that deluge had brought about the dispatch to Verny — there was no man to lead the Alban people with wisdom and fine speeches; and as before, the people were guided not by reason but by their hearts, and by the howl of pain from Karakol. But this time, they did not grieve for their dead or suffer at their going unburied. And there were fewer prayers, fewer threats and blessings and words of any sort. The Black Caps wondered at themselves, as one wonders at a child who has learnt to walk.

There were no words or speeches, and yet the call to vengeance could be heard on all sides.

The news from Karakol arrived in the afternoon, and at night hundreds of *dzhigits* attacked the villages around the fair, and the steppe was lit up by a new flame and from the fair, a red glow could be seen in the sky.

That night each *aul* acted separately; choosing a village nearby, and there was but one thought in their minds: first,

they must stock up on weapons and ammunition. Because tomorrow (they knew without arrangement), tomorrow, they would ride on the fair!

Before dawn, the glow hung over the *auls* of Akbeit, Zhelkar and Tanbaly. Huts and sheds and hunter's settlements nearby burned, and animals bellowed as they were driven away. Not one *dzhigit* was killed or wounded, though five had their horses shot from under them. In the early morning, their appetites whetted, they attacked Zhalanash. But this was an old Cossack village. The Cossacks had long been expecting the *dzhigits*, and did not allow them near. Zhalanash snarled with gunfire, shots flashed out like the eyes of wolves, and neither horses nor men dared approach. Not far away, in the ravine, in the grey light of morning, the raiders caught sight of a cart full of travellers, delayed on the road. The travellers had rifles. The raiders killed them.

Then they galloped away, yelling:

"The fair! The fair! The guardroom!"

* * *

The day of great resolve dawned. Now, the frightful celebration of violence that had begun that night advanced on the fair. Now all the people's might was gathered into one fist. And any man who feared for his own skin was an outsider. Everything that was good in the tribe of the Alban was prepared for the task, the violent celebration of violence at hand.

The women of the *auls* did not clutch at the men's stirrups, neither did the old men recite poems of mourning. They merely fed the men well, and put those who returned from the night raids to bed for an hour or so. There were none of the tears of emotion so commonly shed in the wind of the steppe. All thoughts rested with the men who were just a hair's breadth

away from death at the hands of Grey Mane; everyone recalled with disgust at how they had hoped the superintendent would be a good leader.

By midday Kokzhota, a green hill to the west of the fair was swathed in a dark cloud of Black Caps. And behind them were still more. Thousands of them.

Many sat astride trained stallions, the most spirited of steeds: bays and roans, chestnuts, greys and piebalds. The burnished golden-red of their coats with their white paddle-shaped patches gleamed in the sun.

A pure, fast-flowing stream, a tributary of the Karkarinka, encircled the hill. Here, the men who had not managed to make it home the night before cooled and watered their horses. Tightening up their saddle straps, they patted their thin-legged companions, secretly entrusting them with their lives.

The men stood in bands of a hundred, and messengers ran back and forth between them without a break. It seemed there were as many commanders as there were messengers, and the messengers had no peace.

They were armed, as was their custom, with cudgels, spears and pole-axes with half-moon blades. The axes glittered and shone like crescent moons, and the spears bristled like the hair on the chests of the great mythical heroes. There were long-handled clubs too — *soils* — indispensable in hand-to-hand combat. To the Kazakh, the *soil* is as the sabre to the Cossack: a beloved sister.

But it was clear that today many had armed themselves with guns, too, as many as they could get hold of. There were few rifles, most of them Berdans or single or double-barrelled hunting rifles, loaded with buckshot and slugs for hunting birds and wild sheep. Some were armed with revolvers, holding them close to their chests. A piece like that will not shoot far; you can throw a stone further; but all the same, it can shoot. And today, they needed as much firepower as they could muster.

Their aim was to strike fear in people's hearts...And the *dzhigits*, when the hour came, were to fly like the wind so that their horses would have no time to be frightened by the gunfire. Otherwise, they would not be able to get close, just as they had not been able to get close to Zhalanash.

They did not know what else would be needed. But they all had faith in themselves, and they were all spoiling for war. They wanted to look death in the eye, as they had long promised to do.

Among the chieftains, there were still some who made their way round all the detachments, the whole warrior host. These men were Baimagambet, Zhanseit, Kokbai and Kartbai. They could have been taken for the army command. What did they do? They gave speeches.

Bold Kartbai spoke at length, passionately and with spirit, inspiring all those who heard him. He reminded everyone of how the *dzhigits* had let slip the convoy carrying Uzak, Zhamenke and Aubakir.

However, the finest speech of all was made by the mighty and jovial Kokbai and his words were heeded, as he had been the last to see Uzak at the Marked Stone and to see Serikbai after he had been sent to him by Uzak.

"*Dzhigits*, let the spirits of our ancestors guide us and let us succeed in our task. Today we are all gathered here together as one, young and old. Surely, together, we will prevail. In Karakol, they smote at our very hearts. We have no strength left to bear their insults; to bear the yoke and the whip like oxen. While we are still together, let us die as we lived — together. Let us fight to the last. Some of us are fated to die. But if we die, it will be on our own land, for our freedom, for our honour, just as Uzak would have wanted! What man among us is better than those who are dying, and dying for us? What man among us is prepared to carry on living in this way?

If we refuse to fight, we shall never see the bright dawn. Never have we fallen so low as we did yesterday, and never have we stood so high as we do today. Godspeed, brothers!" cried Kokbai and, as of old, he called on the ancient glorious Kazakh tribes: "Where are you, Uisun, Alban, Kipchak, Argyn, Kerei and Kanly? Where are you, spirits of the ancestors Raimbek and Sauruk? Grant us your presence, speed and protection!"

And these words were so simple, so dear and so close to the heart that thousands of voices took up Kokbai's cry. And at that moment it was as if an unseen commander had given a wave of his hand and said the word: "Forward!" and, raising their banners, they began to move...

With a muffled, low roar, like some noise emanating from deep underground, a great torrent of Black Caps streamed across the green hill, spread out wider, fanning out and in a moment gained momentum and, with a high echoing thunder, at full gallop now, with all the might of their warhorses, charged down on that pile of matchboxes that was the fair.

A wall of dust rose over the steppe, as high as the mountains; as high as the heavens.

The horses ran well, thoroughbred steeds, nourished not in stables, but among the free, wild herds of their fathers, selected by nature herself, on the lush grass of the Kar Kara! From birth, these horses had known and loved this savage, whirlwind chase over pathless terrain, as if trying to outrun a wolf, with the rider-deity himself submitting to their will. And although they felt no bridles, still they tossed their heads so that their manes flew, and champed their teeth, as if they were biting at their knees.

What earthly shot or volley could have been heard through that thunder, when the earth was riven asunder, as in an earthquake, and it seemed that the cliffs would roll down from their steep heights, tearing loose like an eagle taking flight, blotting out and breaking up the horizon of the steppe?

And they heard no gunfire. And they saw no gun smoke. The fair was silent and appeared empty. No-one was shooting from the fair! And they were only about a quarter of a mile away...

Still, the *dzhigits* did not hear a single shot. Only the horses heard it from one side, with their right ears: a regular, rapid rattle, like the angry cackle of birds, and they were not alarmed by it. But a mass of unseen, shrilly whistling threads hung for a moment before the cavalry charge. It hit them like a gust of wind. And the first five, ten *dzhigits*, galloping at top speed, suddenly went flying head over heels like toy soldiers. And after them another five, another nine. And more and more ...

A long, disorderly, motley heap of fallen and struggling horses and men stretched out on the grassland a quarter of a mile from the fair. Many rode through the line, looking back with horror and it grew ever wider, as more horses and men were toppled and joined it. There was a long and plaintive whinnying of horses.

Still unaware what it all meant, or what this force was that kept mowing down the riders at the front, the cavalry charge turned sharply to the left of the fair, packed unthinkably close together so as not to trample the fallen.

And the *dzhigits* who had ridden through that terrible line pulled round their horses and came flooding back. And then they saw the dead lying motionless, and the wounded lying struggling.

* * *

The superintendent knew that he had no room in his head for more than one thought at a time. But that rascal of an investigator could keep several in his head at once! That summer, the superintendent had learnt to heed advice, and the investigator had had plenty to give.

And for that reason, in good time, before the execution in Karakol, Grey Mane had done three things.

First of all, he had gathered every single trap and cart he could find at the fair, confiscating them from merchants who were getting ready to leave, and declaring them army property. Then he had used them to block all the roads and lanes that led to the market, the chancellery and the guardroom, securing them with straps and fixing them with stakes. He had girded the fair around with a double circle. This he managed in a single day. Like a field-marshal, he had charged the other state officials and their servants with this task.

The second task was twofold. First, he sent some dependable young Kazakhs to drive out a flock or two of sheep from one of the nearest *auls*. This was for food in case of a siege. Second, he sent men out to drive back a herd of draught horses for his stables, so they would have animals to harness to all the carts and traps. This was in case they might have to make a dash for it. The investigator described this as a *retirade*.

The third thing he did could have cost him his office. A dispatch was sent to Verny, composed by the investigator; a dispatch of astonishing insolence. And in it, the superintendent asked for something impossible! But he had received an extraordinary favour from the general in Verny: a thing of burnished steel in a tarpaulin cover, sent in a wagon of hay under armed escort, and an official document stating that should this thing be lost, even in battle, or damaged, even inadvertently, the superintendent would face a field court martial.

"I'll put it away this minute", said the superintendent, looking in panic at the general's gift.

"Do so and I'll report you this minute", threatened the investigator, cleaning his spectacles.

But when the next day Grey Mane saw for the first time what the lengthy bursts of machine gun fire could do, and how

the horsemen went somersaulting into the air, and how the stream of riders was forced to retreat, he was delighted. And he rejoiced, jumping up and down behind the waggons.

"Get them! Cut 'em down! Mow 'em down! They're retreating. Get 'em in the back. Good God, man, why are you giving it to them in dribs and drabs? Stop dragging your heels!"

"Shame on you, sir!" Said the first gunner, an old Cossack. But at that moment, he fell with his face on the burnished black breech casting.

He had been killed by a bullet to the head.

All those who were standing up behind the carts crouched down. Every one of them, soldiers and civilians alike, could tell that this was no stray bullet, but a carefully aimed one. But where had the shot come from? As far as the distant valleys, and as far as the bluff above the Karkarinka, nothing could be seen but the green and level plain.

"That could only be a Russian shooting."

* * *

Kokbai was galloping ahead of the rest on his long-legged horse, shouting at the top of his voice, when his horse crashed to the ground and he flew out of the saddle and up into the sky like a soul flying out of the body at the hour of death. When he came to his senses, he was lying on the ground. It was silent, but the whinnying of horses echoed in his head. He asked God if he was about to be taken. No. He seemed to be alive. Casting around, he saw his horse, its face set in an everlasting rictus. He rose to his feet, groaning, legs sprawling like an old man. He found his gun in the dusty grass. He looked around — people and horses lay about him, groaning.

From somewhere nearby, he heard an angry shout.

"Over here! This way! Get down! Lie flat..."

Kokbai understood that the shout was directed at him and that he was being fired at. His legs gave way and he fell to the ground.

In the direction of the Karkarinka, a group of grey, bare rocks stood out against the landscape. A young *dzhigit* — a man Kokbai had never seen before with a copper-red face, was peering out from behind the rocks. It was he who had shouted. Kokbai crawled towards him on his hands and knees.

There were another ten strangers behind the rocks. Kokbai was amazed to see that every one of them was armed.

Kokbai could no longer hear the whinnying of horses in his head. Suddenly, he heard the heavy tread of hooves once again and saw the cavalry charge, now curved into an arc. The riders were retreating, but both horses and people kept falling again and again. The charge left in its wake a motley trail of felled horses and human bodies.

“What’s going on? Why is this happening?” cried Kokbai, his voice shrill as a woman’s.

The red-faced man did not answer, but the others turned Kokbai’s face towards the fair and gestured to their ears. Then Kokbai heard a noise like the sound of birds cackling.

They all stared at the red-faced man. He was lying behind a rock, taking aim at the far left corner of the fair. He held a genuine rifle in his hands. He took aim for a long time.

A shot rang out and the rattling noise stopped.

“Got you!” exclaimed the ten men under their breath.

Redface bared his wolf-like teeth and said to Kokbai, pointing towards the cavalry charge (the riders were now no longer falling):

“It’s called a *mashing-gun*. A Maxim. If that superintendent hadn’t been jumping around behind the carts I wouldn’t have spotted it. It’s called a *mashing-gun*. Shoots a thousand bullets a minute. Kills *Kermans*.

“Who are you?” asked Kokbai.

“You’ll know soon enough. Can you walk? Take the lower path to your men, along the Karkarinka. Tell them to gather up their wounded. But let them do it quickly, on horses. And then ride off in different directions. Each rider takes one man. Understand? Tell them they’ll be fired on, but we’ll cover them. We can be like a mashing-gun, too! But mind you do exactly as I say. Now, go on, while the superintendent is under the cart.” And he bent Kokbai’s head toward the ground.

Kokbai crept along like a lizard and then ran to the green hill and sought out Baimagambet in the indescribable turmoil.

Both of them knew perfectly how to carry out orders — far better than they knew how to issue orders themselves. Less than fifteen minutes later, dozens of horsemen galloped out, strung out in a sparse chain, dashed up to the terrible line and began to gather up the wounded, just as the red-faced man had ordered. They picked them up on the move, as deftly as *dzhigits* playing at goat-dragging.

Inside the fair, the men who had been hiding under the carts took a moment to realise what the movement was out on the field; they began to fire in a cursory, irritated fashion, but all of a sudden they came under such controlled, targeted and accurate fire that they threw themselves to the ground under the carts.

The shooting was so fierce they could not even raise their heads. They could not tell where it was coming from.

Kokbai and Baimagambet and others were also shooting, from horseback, as they rode, and from their positions, and it seemed it was their fire that had forced the gunners back under the waggons. But the Cossacks, the older ones who had fought outside Mukden and Laoian, were not looking for their enemy on horseback or up on the hill, for there was a genuine enemy concealed somewhere nearby.

"They're using rifles, sir. They've dug themselves in!" There was admiration in the Cossacks' voices.

The superintendent was furious at this. He began to yell, but then, when he heard someone say:

"Your epaulettes, sir, they stand out like a priest's cassock. You can see them from a mile away..." he quickly ran for cover in a nearby house.

And it was this that saved him.

The *dzhigits* gathered the wounded without any further losses. In fact, they were not even pursued.

Behind the faceplate of the machine gun, a new gunner lay down, took careful aim at the grey rocks over towards the Karkarinka and pulled the trigger. The gunner shook and swore, keeping the sights steady until a whole belt of cartridges had been used up. A shower of shrapnel and dust flew up over the rocks. But already, there was no-one there.

Red Face had guessed what would happen and hadn't waited around. He had left — the eleventh to go, in one piece and unscathed, as he had come.

Now, with its lashing fingers of lead, the machine gun scoured the bluff over the Karkarinka, the distant valleys, shrubs and hillocks, but failed to find what it sought. It whipped at the green hill, where the Black Caps could be seen. The shots reached one man, then another, but left them with no more than bruises and warm bullets cooling in their hands. At that range, the machine-gun fire had lost its deadly force.

The *dzhigits*, too, searched for some time for the man with the red face, and were already beginning to think he had been killed when he called out to Kokbai beside the river, in a voice that seemed to come from underground:

"Why are you wandering about? What do you want?"

"We want you!"

"Don't come towards me. Go away!"

Kokbai understood, walked away, and then approached again from behind so that he could not be seen. Red Face and his nine men were still in a position, where no-one thought to look for them, in a place that gave them a full view of the fair, right up to the chancellery. They lay behind a damp fold in the earth, as if behind a stone wall.

"All right", said Red Face. "Can you walk? It's time to leave the horses. That mashing-gun swallows riders whole, but only chews at foot-soldiers and gets a mouthful of earth. Do you understand? Let the riders stay where they are. They'll be needed soon enough. Take only foot-soldiers, armed. Go right round the fair and take up positions on every street. Put more men on the road leading to Zharkent. But do exactly as I say! You mustn't be seen or heard. And no shooting in broad daylight. You can't scare them with gunfire, they're not like a horse, the only thing they fear is a bullet! We need to keep them there until evening, so they don't even think of untying the waggons. And at night, the mashing-gun is blind! Then you get on your horses and go for them. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you! This is more like it! Where were you before?"

"I'm here... I'm everywhere..."

"Listen, do you have enough ammunition to last until evening?"

"You look to your own. We won't waste bullets. Don't worry about us."

Kokbai gave a grunt of respect.

"You — you are a real man! I admire that! Good luck to you..."

"All right. Save your praises for later. Tonight we'll see. Now go, quick." And again, he forced Kokbai's head down to keep himself low to the ground.

From that moment on Kokbai forgot his horse, and began to crawl along the ground, feeling a fierce pleasure, where once

he would have felt shame, or laughed heartily, like the born horseman he was, who had learned to ride before he could walk.

Baigambet and Kartbai and the laughing Zhanseit also marvelled at the red-faced man.

“A real *shaitan*!”

“Mashing-gun — Swallows horses and chews foot-soldiers. How about that?”

They took his words as an order. Sixty snipers were chosen — from all the bands of warriors. They were made to dismount, taken off and posted stealthily: five here; six there — at the side of the nine roads and more at the side of the road that led to Zharkent, just as he had bid them to.

And soon after noon, those inside the fair felt they were surrounded. There was shooting from all directions, particularly from the north and west. The gunfire was not heavy, but calculated, not designed to startle, but on target. True, they could barely hear any rifles, but they could not see the gunmen, and buckshot and slugs are no joke either. Now the enemy was everywhere, in firing positions...

The machine-gunner was at a loss which way to look and who to fire at. There was not a man at the fair who could have shown him a target. The soldiers and Cossacks had scattered and were firing separately, in turn, as they deemed fit.

The superintendent was sitting in the chancellery because one of those heathens that were shooting was a real devil — a holy terror. Or perhaps there was more than one man? The man shot only rarely, from different positions. He was trying to hit the superintendent. All the windows in the chancellery had been smashed to smithereens.

Kokbai wanted to find Red Face to ask if they were doing all right. But why tear him away from the work at hand? And in any case, Red Face would not let himself be found unless he

called out. And as he hadn't called out, things were probably all right...

* * *

The best warriors, the doughtiest men had left, taking the guns with them, and the chieftains too. Down there, around the fair, there were dozens of men. Up here, on the green hill, there were thousands. Down there, they did battle and watched the enemy lying under the carts, pressed to the ground by gunfire. Up here, they waited for night to fall and watched their wounded screaming and dying. Some were taken away to the *auls*, but others it was frightful to touch: impossible to lift them onto a horse, their insides riddled with bullets.

Hundreds and hundreds of *dzhigits* recounted their experiences of that afternoon.

"What was the thing that shot at us? Was that his cannon? That must be it — a cannon...."

"The damn thing never stopped for a minute. If it had only taken a rest now and again. But no hope of that!"

"Rat-tat-tat-tat — one bullet after another, like a man with the runs."

"Thank God we got away. How come it didn't mow us all down?"

"Some red fellow stopped up its throat, so I heard."

"What red fellow? A likely story. And how could you stop its throat? It went on firing afterwards, didn't you see?"

"That was when it went after the red fellow. It went for him on his own — out of spite."

"So what was left of him after that?"

"Who knows? A heap of red dust."

"But they say the police chief doesn't have a cannon. I've heard so myself; you can't hide a cannon — it's as big as a yurt. It seems that our 'good chief' really put on a show for us fools, the dirty dog!"

"We don't even have Berdan rifles. If the worst comes to the worst, we're as naked and defenceless before him as before God. Do you really think we can take him bare-handed?"

"I don't think he'll let us. There might be hundreds of us or thousands, but that cannon will blow us all away."

"They say that was no cannon. Who says it was a cannon?"

"A cannon has a single shot — wherever it fires, it leaves a crater. This was different."

"So what is it? What's the beast called? Does anyone know?"

"A mashing-gun, they say"

"A what? There's no such thing, my friend!"

"Well, that's what they're saying. They say it might be terrible, but it's afraid of foot-soldiers."

"I like that! Afraid! It didn't seem afraid. What about you — are you afraid of foot soldiers? You can just slash away at them."

"What does it matter what the thing's called? So it's not a cannon. So what? It cuts down ten men two at a time, like a scythe cutting grass. Isn't that just as bad as leaving a crater?"

"Well... I was only saying what the others were saying..."

One of the groups of warriors kept itself separate from the others. These men had gone last into the cavalry charge. Now they kept silent. A large band of men.

These were the Alzhan. The Alzhan were a scion of the Alban people, like the Red Caps, but while the Red Caps were liked and respected, the Alzhan were not; indeed, they were not in favour with the Alban, and hence the two were at odds. The Red Caps lived close together in the rich lands around Asa. The Alzhan lived scattered here and there, in different districts and considered themselves weak, although they were known to be strong fighters. There had been talk for some time that they were not Alban at all... Others kept them at a distance.

It is a bad business to be in a tribe that is not of your bloodline. It was no accident that of the two *tolmachs* at the fair, the people had only heeded the words of Ospan, but not Zhebirbaev. After all, that scoundrel Ospan was an Alban, whereas that scoundrel Zhebirbaev was not...

And for their part, the Alzhans were wary of the Black Caps, they followed them cautiously, keeping their wits about them. "What's meat for the Black Caps is poison for us", they would say, or "Whatever we do, the sweat is ours and the glory is theirs"; "Do a great job, and you're an Alban. Do an average job, and you're an Alzhan." And they spoke the truth. That was indeed how it was.

And so that afternoon, when Kokbai had begun to gather together the men with guns and lead them away, not one man from the Alzhan band had dismounted. They had no guns among them, nor any man who wished to join the ambush ordered by the red stranger — a stranger who was, nevertheless, trusted by everyone as if he were one of their own, while the Alzhan were ignored. Later, they waited wearily for night to fall, and while others were waiting for night in order to swoop down on the market, the Alzhan were waiting to slip away. They might have made a move in the afternoon, had they been sure that the superintendent could not reach them with his cannon. As soon as they rode out from behind the hill, they would be sent flying, head over heels. The cannon could shoot a distance of two miles. They could not hope to escape it.

The Alzhan did not involve themselves in any of the debates. They turned their backs and walked away a little. What was the use? They would only be roundly abused. People would simply say "Alzhan". So when they were left alone, they talked in low voices, indifferent and hopeless.

"It's a bad business. Asking for trouble. We shouldn't be thinking of it."

"Let others do as they like. They have minds of their own. Look how many of them there are! But are there many of us? We should leave while we're still alive."

"That's right. Let's go. They won't notice. What do we matter to them? We're no more than dirt to them."

"All the same, it's bad whichever way you look at it. Even if we thrash this bigwig, we can't thrash all of them. All this fighting won't bring peace. Even if we win here, then what? There are only one or two hundred people at the fair. But everywhere else?"

"Try to get the better of this lot, first."

"Not likely. More likely they'll get the better of us. God knows who'll come out on top."

And just as, in the heat of a quarrel, the Black Caps would torment the Alzhan, now the Alzhan began to torment all the Toktasyn in their band. There were barely a dozen of these poor souls — who were neither of the Alban nor the Alzhan tribes. And the Alzhan began to peck away at them, like geese pecking at ducks. They were trying to work out where the loyalty of the Toktasyn lay. Because they themselves did not have a clear conscience. The Alzhan felt ashamed.

At this point, the gunfire around the fair began to die down, as if each side had been testing the other. The sun sank in the sky and the shots rang out less often. Evening shadows flowed down from the mountains.

Kokbai and Zhanseit returned to the green hill, drenched in the sweat of battle. They drank thirstily from the stream until they had half drained it, then plunged their hot heads into the water. The barrels of their guns were smoke-blackened and their hearts warmed by the flame of the first success in battle, welcome and unexpected.

The men surrounded them, embracing them tightly and shaking them as if after a long absence. But it was strange

to hear their questions; it was as if Kokbai and Zhanseit had simply gone to tea with the superintendent and asked him about his weapon.

“What’s the matter with you?” asked Kokbai, amazed. “Not one of you has congratulated us...Look at us: we have bullet-holes in our *chapans* and our caps.”

“What? How? From that cannon again?” Now there was a stream of questions.

And then they all began to shout out over one another:

“I told you, it’s a deadly thing! How did you manage to survive?”

“These two were probably the only ones to survive...We saw it with our own eyes, didn’t we?”

“What did you see? You were sleeping under a bush with your arse in the air!”

“And what about you? Where were you? Now you’re the expert, are you? God help us!”

Now the Alzhans were shouting with all the pent-up injury of old as if trying to justify their own cowardice and lack of faith.

“We know it may not have been a cannon, but some damn thing like it.”

“That’s right. About as much like a cannon as an Alzhan is like an Alban!”

“Hey!” said Kokbai, shaking his gun over his head. “A fine bunch of warriors you are! It’s a shame that red-faced fellow isn’t here — then you’d see a real *dzhigit* for yourselves! ...Right this minute, he’s keeping that Grey Mane in a noose of bullets. He’s got no time to be listening to you lot yapping away...”

The *dzhigits* fell silent. Then Zhanseit took charge. Today he was in fine fettle, and his tongue was as sharp as in days of old. It was as if he had climbed back into his own skin and was

bristling with fighting spirit. In an instant, he had made light of the men's fears and their foolishness and told them clearly just what this "mashing gun" was, why they needed to set off on foot with rifles, and why they would mount their horses again that night. He described, too, how Red Face had smashed the police chief's windows and, as some would have it, the investigator's spectacles...

"I'm looking forward to tonight, like the night after a wedding feast. My blood's up, I tell you. We'll raze that fair to the ground. We'll burn it to ashes. And I won't leave until I've drunk down its black dregs."

At that moment, they were distracted by an unexpected sight. Not too far away and not too close, from the direction of Shirganak, not too fast and not too slow, a herd of horses was making its way along the valley... The *dzhigits* did not realise at first that the horses were headed for the fair, as it looked as if no-one was driving them on. But when they did, they shouted out:

"It's them! Soldiers! Going along the valley!"

"That's who's driving the horses. It's them!"

"They've just raided Shirganak..."

And indeed, it was the detail sent out by the superintendent to collect draft horses. Fifteen junior ranking soldiers, headed by the police sergeant Plotnikov.

Only that morning they had been at a summer pasture nearby, where about ten *auls* were huddled together at a vantage point. The police sergeant, an old cavalryman, had himself chosen to join the detail. In the *auls*, he had picked out about a hundred excellent broken horses, stallions and well-fed mares without foals. In the process, he had happened to spot—quite by chance, for such treasures are hidden away like gold—a horse in a thousand. Plotnikov had ordered the horse to be saddled. The horse's owner was away, it seemed;

otherwise, it's unlikely they would have taken it. A horse like that is worth defending with your life.

That afternoon, when he heard the machine-gun fire, Plotnikov had put two and two together and realised where the horse's owner horse was. He lay low in the hills for several hours. When the gunfire died down, he decided to slip past the green hill. And he might have managed it, if he had not been greedy, and if he had abandoned the herd.

He was forced to abandon it anyway as hundreds of *dzhigits* came sweeping down to cut him off.

All the police sergeant's hopes rested with the machine gun. And it stuttered into action at last, but more as a warning than anything else. It was awkward for the gunner: he tried to open up fire to cut off the enemy, but the police sergeant and his men rode straight towards the fire, afraid that they would be pushed back into the steppe. And soon the *dzhigits* and soldiers were caught up in a melee.

The Cossacks from the fair wanted to rush to help, but they were unsure and unprepared. The first of them, the most skilful and deft of them, who leapt over the waggons on their horses, were forced back by the ambush — Baimagambet and Red Face's men, and after that, it was too late.

Soon, things began to heat up. Within sight of the fair, in the open field, in broad daylight, finally there was hand-to-hand combat. This was the hand-to-hand combat they had been waiting for so long — when man, horse, cudgel and the earth beneath would all merge into a single, living whole.

At first, they fought rank on rank, maintaining order. The police sergeant gave the command to "have at them lads!" and his men (like young eagles) stood up boldly onto their stirrups with their daggers in their outstretched hands — no fools, and skilled with the dagger, not the sort to fear a crowd, not even a hundred men. But they were not facing a crowd, as their

attackers did not want to get in each other's way. A couple of dozen of them rode out ahead — Take your pick!

But it's hard work to get at a rider brandishing a long cudgel when you only have a dagger, especially when that crazy club won't let you near him. It keeps spinning round, flashing like a windmill's sails, and then it whacks you, the rascal, just as if you were tied up, on your knees, your elbows, your head. They can keep fighting, the devils, even on the run. They're running away, and you're left breathing your last.

Kokbai went into the fight first and came out last, without his hat and his ear split open.

Only one soldier made it through to the fair, a bearded man with eyes like a hawk. He left five *dzhigits* wounded. He had been slashing away with two daggers, to the right and the left.

And the police sergeant escaped too.

At the height of the skirmish, the men spotted that stallion, which was known to all the Alban, a chestnut with a white mane and tail, the winner of every race in the villages and fair, and they cried out "Matai!" "Matai". But it was not Matai in the saddle, but Forkbeard!

Half of the hundred gave chase. Zhanseit — on the fastest horse from *tolmach* Ospan's herd. They went forward in a pack and out on the flank ahead of the sergeant, surrounding him...But that wonderful horse was used to getting away from his rivals, and he got away now, too, effortlessly, as if he were being chased by foot-soldiers.

All this was watched by the *dzhigits* on the green hill. They saw the hand-to-hand combat, and many men felt their hands itching as they watched. They saw that the "mashing gun", which was hammering furiously, had failed to mow anyone down, and was chattering away in vain. The horses had been standing about for too long, and the men had been waiting too long. So when Zhanseit set off in pursuit of the sergeant, they

could no longer restrain themselves. What is a quarter of a mile for a horseman? Some of the wilder ones dashed off to join the chase. And the rest flooded after them...

Kokbai, galloping to meet them, shouted out in a voice that was not his own, but it was no use. They did not catch what he said and would have trampled him if he had not ridden off ahead of them.

To the fair! To the fair! Once again, the cavalry charge set off...

This attack cost them, dear — more so, even than that afternoon. The “mashing gun” had its revenge. Fifty or sixty men were left lying in the blood and the dust on the meadow, and among them was Kokbai.

The rest rushed back to the hill — more dead than alive.

Everything was lost. Everything had died — all inspiration, boldness and faith. As evening fell, Baimagambet and Kartbai came back from their ambush, and with them came the strongest and bravest men. But even they, when they spoke, were heard out in silence or with grumbling. Many wept, some for brothers, others for fathers or sons. These men would not now go into battle. To look at them was to lose the will to live. They had been transformed from rebels into meek and pious mourners.

The Alzhan looked impatiently at the sunset, willing the glow of evening to come quickly. But when it grew dark, it was not only the Alzhan that left the hill. Many others began to move on, leaving only a third of the thousands that had gathered that morning on the green hill.

The commanders of the bands that remained came together and spoke as follows:

“Won’t that do for a first try? The men and horses have had enough. Let’s come again in the morning, earlier. There’s nothing to eat here, and nowhere to sleep. And we have to take away our wounded. Better to come back tomorrow. Far better tomorrow.”

“Do you think we came here to sleep? Why do you think we were waiting for nightfall?” Zhanseit was furious.

But Baimagambet and Kartbai were silent.

Some argued with Zhanseit, weakly and unwillingly, and then, without reaching any decision on what would happen tomorrow and bickering as they went, they began to disperse. The wounded were gathered up by their relatives.

When the time came to sleep, not a single Kazakh was left on the green hill.

At night, when the moon had risen, the first to find Kokbai on the meadow was the red-faced man with the rifle.

“Is that you, Zhanseit?” croaked Kokbai.

“Ah, brother. ..Don’t you know your own people? We’re from the Asa Pass.”

Kokbai grasped him around the shoulders and the head, pulling him towards him to embrace him.

“Ibrai” he cried out with his last breath.

* * *

That day at the fair, soldiers and civilians alike were scared out of their wits.

In the first place, there was the fact that the rebels had had enough powder to keep firing all day. They were well-armed, by the look of it. Those snipers were stubborn and persistent, and somebody—God knows who—had trained them well. And what a fierce, wild lot they were! They even charged straight into machine gun fire... devils, not men! And this lot had been known as a peaceful tribe! And while there’s some truth in the saying that “fear has big eyes”, there really were hordes of them...

The superintendent was on the verge of hysterics. Swallowing his pride, with a heavy heart, he threw a cloak without military insignia over his shoulders, because his shoulder straps stood

out like a priest's cassock. He was being hunted, like the *Tsar-Liberator Alexander II*. Say what you like, that sniper was Russian, a student, a political exile. There was a distinct whiff of politics about the whole affair, God forbid. But that wasn't for him to decide.

Moreover, a great many had been wounded at the fair and there was only one medical assistant attending to them, and a Tartar into the bargain.

When he saw Plotnikov's miraculous escape, the superintendent had begun to sob; he simply sat down and began to sob, while his orderly passed him a handkerchief. If only he could escape! Just hang on till nightfall somehow or other, and then, as they say, under cover... under cover...this was all that the superintendent could think of.

The investigator had mumbled something into his ear about there being the possibility of an attack that night. But the superintendent just waved him away with his handkerchief.

Nothing happened that night. All had gone quiet and still. The fair was quiet, too. A good hour after it had got dark, the superintendent was still waiting and whimpering, complaining that it was a scandal, because the investigator (holding some field-glasses for some reason), and the sergeant, both standing nearby, would not let him get up from a very hard wicker chair. However, no attack came.

Then the fair began to stir, to bustle and come to life, but quietly, keeping the lamps unlit. All the carts and traps were quickly distributed and harnessed. They were loaded with possessions, a metal box of documents and some government and personal valuables. The machine gun was placed in its own carriage, with an escort, like some eminent personage, and all the axles and springs oiled well, so they wouldn't squeak.

A long chain of waggons formed. Slowly, through the growing night chill, they made their way out onto the dark road leading to Zharkent, then off they went.

The office now stood empty. And the guardroom too.

* * *

The day before, Ospan the "kind-hearted" had gone with the investigator to Sarzhaz. The investigator had taken the *tolmach* Zhebirbaev with him too. In Sarkhaz a high-ranking official—a member of the government commission that selected horses for the state's military requirements—had been murdered. Some madman had beaten this official's head to a pulp when he had stepped out at night to answer the call of nature. Four-eyes had investigated the case; as he said himself, he had discovered not one criminal, but several.

The investigator had a nose like a bloodhound. He could sense what was brewing in the *auls* and he left Sarzhaz quickly, bringing the interrogation to a close and saying goodbye to the criminals as politely as he could.

On the way back, at one of the outposts, the investigator had left the *tolmach* on the pretext of going to find more staging horses. His idea was to put the young men to the test by leaving them alone without a guard.

They waited a day, then set off for the fair and had already passed the Karakarinka at noon, when the rebels swooped down from the green hill on their first attack. The *tolmach* ran away into the steppe.

Some men they knew fell in with them, asking them about this and that. All the talk was of one subject:

"The fair's done for. Are you going there? Or are you on your way home?"

Ospan and Zhebirbaev muttered the first thing that came into their heads

When the men left they drove their horses back and crept into the fair before the *dzhigits* surrounded it with men in ambush.

For some time now, Grey Mane had regarded the *tolmachs* with suspicion. He had not let them near him, however hard they tried to attract his attention. But now, seeing Ospan, he clapped him on the shoulder and gave him friendly tug on the cheek.

“Look at you! I thought you’d run off to your own people. But it turns out you’re here, you son of a bitch — look at you!”

In the evening, when the shooting around the fair had died down, the investigator came to Ospan.

“It would be good to hear from the horse’s mouth just what they’re planning to do”, he said. I wouldn’t put it past them just to be waiting till nightfall. Just till nightfall. Do you understand? Zhebirbaev is no good. I’ve got no-one else I can rely on.”

“Certainly, sir. I can find out”, said Ospan.

“I thought so. If they’re getting ready and planning to attack, you slip away quietly and keep a fire burning to the left of the hill, a bit further away, for about an hour. A small one. I have field-glasses, I’ll be able to see it. And then ride back to the ravine.”

Ospan mounted his horse and rode off by a circuitous route, preparing to lie for his dear life. But when he got to the green hill, everybody had gone, and when he returned to the fair, again by a circuitous route (crawling the last bit of the way, after chasing his horse away, because somebody on the meadow had shouted his name and was following him) there was nobody there, either.

On the market square, in the moonlight, Ospan was confronted with a terrible sight.

The superintendent had got in a flock of around five hundred sheep, in case of a siege. Before they had left for Zharkent he decided to dispose of them.

“There’s no-one to herd them”, he said. “And in any case, it would take too long. Kill as many as you need, look lively now. You have my permission.”

And so the slaughter began. Every government official, tradesman, and servant — everyone except the soldiers, took one or two sheep and cut their throats.

But it was impossible, of course, to take all this away with them to Zharkent. Where could they butcher the meat or boil it? So they threw down the bloodied carcasses of the sheep in the dust and left them where they fell. And already the fair dogs, which had become feral in an instant, were tearing at the bodies.

A shepherd will kill a sheep for the pot without a qualm, but also without a qualm he will shield it from a wolf with his own body, warm a new-born lamb in the snowstorm or in the icy cold, and look after its weakened mother. Only traders and wolves could have done what was done that day on the market square

Even in Ospan’s hard heart, a feeling of indignation was stirred.

“What a waste! All for nothing.”

But a moment later that same heart was yearning for Zharkent. Ospan was eager to see the superintendent and the investigator, to kowtow to them and catch their haughty nods, without noticing how they kept their distance from him, as though he were filth and scum, as if he was not a man, as if he did not work for them! Ospan was ambitious, and far from spineless, but now, like a wife who has been abandoned by her husband, he wanted only this: to chase after them and throw himself at their feet, to be kicked and spat on.

It seems that Ospan’s prayer was heard in heaven. In the early hours of the morning, a lost and frightened Tatar merchant rode into the fair. He had been rendered speechless by what he

had seen out on the meadow. This merchant's waggon was in good condition, however, and his horse well-fed. With barely a word, Ospan picked up two of the fresher sheep's carcasses, climbed into the cart and turned the horse toward the Zharkent road.

They got away from the fair without incident.

Three or four miles outside the fair they saw dead bodies lying beside the road. Some lay five paces away from the road and some fifteen as if they had tried to escape before they had been killed. Some lay separately, some in groups of two or three as if they had died embracing one another.

Serikbai was lying on his back facing east. He looked as if he had been shot at close range. The short hairs on his right temple were scorched. A hole the size of a copper coin gaped in his skull. The dried blood had blackened already. But there was not a trace of fear or perturbation on his face. A long crease lay straight as an arrow between his knitted brows. A frown of anger and dignity. His lips were pressed together in an expression of resolve — stern and cold. His face, still youthful, unaffected by death, displayed the strength of righteousness and purity.

His body had been covered by a grey *chapan* by kind and respectful hands. This was the man who had promised to give away his possessions in a time of trouble, and now the time of trouble had come, and he was dead. He had nothing more to give.

Nearby lay Turlygozha, whose trumpeting voice could once have knocked a bull off its feet, Serikbai's friend and his rival in courage, honour and fine speech. He lay face down with his mouth open as if he had wanted to taste his own dear native earth before he died. He had probably been beaten and left for dead and so had tossed and turned, speaking to the earth as he died.

Death—unsightly and treacherous—had seized these men, just as it had seized their brothers in Karakol, but they had died with the faith that they were dying for the sake of their people. They had had bold dreams. Fine words had inspired them. They had suffered for the sake of the call of the people.

Ospan drove past the dead without stopping, and now his heart felt no indignation, as it had when he had looked at the slaughtered sheep. Off he drove, in a trader's cart, trailing after those who had transformed these men into corpses. It was an insult to the dead. Like a vulture, he was defiling their bodies.

Now he was saving his own skin by betraying them. So the slain men cried out after him, but he felt no pang of conscience, and he was unrepentant. He stroked his face with his hand, self-importantly and piously, but his face was calm — monstrously calm. It bore not a shade of compassion but instead showed curiosity. He looked into the faces of the dead with interest, as if he was looking at the faces of sleeping men. "Ah ha", his meek eyes seemed to say: I am travelling on, and you are lying there. I will travel a long way away while you lie there."

The horse snorted, and he urged it on.

In the morning, a mighty bonfire burned on the spot where the Karkarina fair had been. Blinding swords of flame shot up into the sky, the steppe was veiled by huge, dragon-clouds of smoke. It burned for a long time, with tremendous heat, shooting out great, burning embers that set the grassland smouldering where they landed, and it was impossible to go within a distance of a quarter of a mile. The crackle and roar shook the mountains round about.

And in the auls, they were taking down yurts, loading up carts and saddling up their camels.

The rebels had come to the market square by dawn. For the first time in many years, the white flag with the two-headed eagle no longer fluttered on its high pole. And the

Tsar's authority was gone. Gone, too, Old Grey Mane, the fork-bearded sergeant and the cunning, four-eyed investigator; gone were the judge, the inspector and the fat *tolmach*. The chancellery was empty. Sheep's carcasses, half-devoured by dogs, lay before it. And the guardroom was empty, too.

As they had left the fair, the merchants had abandoned many belongings of all kinds in their houses and in the streets, in shops and stalls. Household objects lay scattered all about, and goods in perfect condition — cloth, garments, boots, dishes, harnesses, fuel oil, paraffin, rugs, rings, gramophones. A great many things. The rebels did not even look at them.

The fair was deserted. Only the surviving sheep bleated in their pens. And in one yard, they found a half-blind old nag. They drove the sheep out into the steppe and took the old nag by the halter and led it to the outskirts of the fair. The trilling song of a canary echoed in the trading rows. They opened the bird's cage and set it free. And still, they walked around, looking to see that not a single living creature was left.

And then, without taking a thing, they set the fair alight from nine sides. The fair was built of wood, which had been well-dried by the scorching winds of the steppe, and it blazed up like tinder.

For many years, it had devoured everything around it, gorging itself until it was fat-bellied and proud as a merchant. Now, it choked on black, foul-smelling smoke, disappearing from the face of the earth.

That was the end of the fair. They had settled their score with it. The huge fire was still smouldering and reeking of ash when the peaceable tribe of the Alban moved on from the blessed and bountiful land of Karkara. Thousands of people stretched out in long skeins like migrating birds — wild geese leaving winter behind.

The mountain pastures of Alatau were now deserted. In the valleys that lay sheltered from the wind, countless herds of

stray sheep were left. From high up on the craggy and forested heights, wild sheep, elk and roebuck listened in alarm to their pitiful bleating.

The dear, bountiful, sweet land. Ever since the Alban had been the Alban, she had never let them suffer a steppe famine in the winter, nor a drought in the summer. And now they had left her, and it seemed that an inconsolable howl of abandonment spread over the land from end to end.

Behind them, the White Tsar, before them, freedom. The people cursed everything that was behind them, but above all, they cursed that fateful hour when they had left. And they thought of going back again, they thought of how, unless the sun hides its face, after winter will come spring. And their tears flowed and flowed. They were driven on by despair and led on by hope.

They were heading into a wasteland, into gloom and uncertainty. They were looking for freedom, but giving themselves into the hands of uncertainty, throwing themselves on its mercy.

And just as the Red Caps had left behind them the landowner Dauletbek, that false saint, so, in the mountains of Tekes and Syrt, did the Black Caps leave behind the landowner Tungatar, that evil murderer. Both men were rich men with the souls of beggars. And left behind too, with the Tsar and the superintendent, were Rakhimbai, Ospan the "kind-hearted", and Zhebirbaev, the "pilferer".

1928

GLOSSARY

Aqsaqal

A village elder. A position that commands great respect in the *aul* and in the wider community.

Atkaminer

A general word used in Kazakh or Kyrgyz to denote a member of the rich or elite.

Aul

Generally means village. In Kazakhstan, the *aul* represents the very heart of traditional Kazakh values and culture.

The following is a definition of *aul* written by Auezov himself: "In the nomadic way of life of the Kazakhs, the *aul* was a group of yurts, united by household and family ties. The *aul* had its own natural boundaries for nomadic movement: *kokteu* — in spring, *zhailyau* — in summer, *kuzeu* — in autumn and *kstau* — in winter, where wooden and clay structures were erected. These natural boundaries were secured with a given *aul* under agreement between the clan elders and they were a constant reason for infighting between individual auls and entire clans."

Bai (Turkish *Bey*).

A title for chieftain, traditionally applied to the leaders of small tribal groups. Also a general term used for rich landowners.

Baibishye

The first/eldest wife of a *bai*.

Baigi

Horse races held on the steppe that can cover many miles.

Barymta

Horse or cattle stealing. However, on the steppe *barymta* was sometimes seen as a legitimate (albeit not legally sanctioned) punishment for an offence committed by a neighbour or fellow steppe dweller.

Barymtach

A man who carries out *barymta*.

Batrak

A Field hand/labourer who received payment in kind, in milk, wool or an agreed number of cattle for slaughter.

Batyr

A hero, warrior and defender of the land.

Berdan rifle

The standard issue rifle in the Russian army from 1870 to 1891. So, already an old weapon by 1916.

Beshbarmak

The national dish among nomadic peoples in Central Asia. The term Beshbarmak means “five fingers”, because nomads used to eat this dish with their hands. The boiled meat is finely chopped mixed with boiled noodles, and spiced with onion sauce. It is usually served in a big round dish.

Bii

A judge. A *bii* would consult rulers on matters pertaining to the common people, passing judgments on crimes (given the

absence of written law in nomad societies) and negotiating with enemies (like a modern-day diplomat).

Chaikhanna

Tea house. A term widely used throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Chapan

A long quilted robe.

Chekmen

A type of fairly tight-fitting tunic that reaches down to just above the knees. A standard type of clothing by men of all ranks throughout Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dastarkhan

A richly patterned cloth laid out for guests on which food is placed.

Dombra

A Kazakh long-necked lute that can be played by plucking or strumming.

Dzhigit

A word of Turkic origin which is used in the Caucasus and Central Asia to describe a skilful and brave equestrian, or a brave person in general. In certain other contexts it is used to describe menfolk in general.

Dzhut

A famine caused by the large scale loss of livestock either to extreme weather or disease. In winter, often caused by extended ice storms on the steppe.

Khalat

A long robe reaching right down to the ground.

Kumgan

A tall pitcher with a long spout, often made out of metal used for washing hands and other similar jobs.

Kumiss

A mildly alcoholic drink made from fermented mare's milk. The mare milking and hence *kumiss* fermenting season traditionally runs between mid-June and October.

Kuurdak

A traditional roast meat dish usually made out of mutton but sometimes beef or offal.

Kuyryk-baur

A dish made from liver and the fat of the sheep's tail.

Malakhai

A man's fur hat

Manti

Large dumplings usually containing spiced meat that are boiled or steamed.

Mirza

A word commonly used throughout Central Asia to refer to a lord or noble or someone of noble lineage (literally 'son of an Emir'). To this day it is still used as a term of respect.

Shokpar

A wooden club with a thick, heavy end sometimes with sharp protrusions like a mace. Not as long as the *soil*.

Soil

An extremely long-handled club for use in hand-to hand combat on horseback and for protecting flocks from predators.

Sorpa (Shurpa in Russian, Chorba in Turkish)

A type of stew made from mutton and popular throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Suyunshi

Is a Kazakh tradition whereby the bringer of good news is given a present.

Tolmach

The equivalent of the Dragoman in the Ottoman Empire, *tolmachs* acted as interpreters between the Russian rulers and the Kazakh people. This gave them a large degree of influence over the dealings between their countrymen and their Russian rulers. As a result many of them became rich and distrusted by their fellow Kazakhs.

Tor

The place of honour in a house or yurt opposite the door where the master of the house sits.

Treukh

A three-flapped hat. The flaps can be lowered at the sides and back to protect and warm the neck and ears.

Tsar Liberator Alexander II

Tsar Alexander II, known as the “Tsar Liberator”, passed the law emancipating serfs from bondage to their landowners in 1862. He was later assassinated by revolutionaries in Petersburg in 1881. Hence the slightly ridiculous references made by Grey

Mane here to students and political exiles out in the Kazakh steppe.

Uyezd

An administrative district consisting of several *volosts*.

Verny

The Russian Tsarist name for the town that was later to become the city of Almaty.

Volost

Volost was a traditional administrative subdivision from early Russian history and throughout the Tsarist Empire.

Volostnoy

Elected Chief of the Volost who headed the Volost Assembly. A figure of considerable autonomous power in the more remote parts of the Russian Empire such as Kazakhstan.

White Tsar

The notion of the “White Tsar” (*belyi tsar*’) probably originated in Muscovite times. However, it largely fell into disuse after the Middle Ages, until it was employed in relation to Asian nationalities in order to legitimate Russia’s claims to dominion over the East in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Among many of the Asian peoples under Russian imperial rule it also denoted a certain mythical, invincible and sometimes religious status applied to the Russian Tsar.

Zhoktau

A keening song sung for the dead.

Classics of Kazakh Literature

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Mukhtar Omarkhanovich Auezov

Writer and academic

Born 28 September 1897, died 27 June 1961.

Mukhtar Auezov is considered to be one of Kazakhstan's greatest writers and academics.

After graduating from the Semipalatinsk Teacher's Training College in 1919, Mukhtar Auezov won a place in 1923 at the Modern Languages Faculty in Leningrad State University. After graduating from there in 1928 he started a course of postgraduate studies at the Central Asian University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In 1937 he left for Moscow to work with the highly respected and renowned Russian writer Leonid Sobolev. Together they wrote the tragedy *Abai*, a collection of folk literature entitled *The Epic Tales and Folklore of the Kazakh People*, and published a collection of *Songs of the Kazakh People*. With the beginning of the war, Auezov returned to Kazakhstan to work in the Institute of Languages, Literature and History of the Kazakhstan Branch of the Academy of Sciences. In 1942, he published his first novel *Abai*. In 1952 his opus magnum *The Path of Abai* was published in Kazakh for the first time. That same year in order to avoid arrest he was forced to secretly escape Moscow where he had been working as a lecturer in Kazakh literature in the Department of the Literature of the Peoples of the Soviet Union, Moscow State University. On the occasion of his 60th birthday on 28 September 1957, Mukhtar Auezov was awarded the Order of Lenin and granted the title "Honoured Academic of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic". In 1959 he was awarded the highly prestigious Lenin Prize for *The Path of Abai*.

After his death in 1961 one of the main streets in Almaty was named in his honour, and later a whole district of the city. In 1963, his house on M. Tulebaev Street in Almaty was turned into an official museum to honour the writer's work and achievements.