

by Musa Murataliev

EXPLAINING MANAS

part of novel

Author's Note

The book you are holding combines two disparate themes linked by the person of its hero.

Set in Moscow, it describes the collapse of the Soviet empire and the psychological changes which the citizens of that empire underwent as a result. The main protagonist witnesses the impact of those changes on his friends: the rise of Russian nationalism, and the criminalization of society, including of those security service personnel who serve the cause of "managed democracy."

At the same time, the novel provides an overview of the history of the Kyrgyz, one of the most ancient peoples of Central and northern Asia, incorporating episodes from the Kyrgyz epic poem "Manas" to shed light on the fusion of forty separate clans to form the Kyrgyz nation.

Chapter 1

"Should we really serve boorsok? He is an American after all, " asked Bek's wife Sonya, sticking her head round the bathroom door. "He probably doesn't eat dough fritters."

"Feed him U.S. frozen chicken legs courtesy of President Bush," Bek answered laughing, "That's American food, he'll appreciate that. Or hot dogs Moscow-style."

"I'm asking you a serious question and all you can do is joke," complained Sonya and retreated to the living room. The ancient Typhoon vacuum cleaner droned monotonously in her experienced hands, sucking up the dust. Sonya had started cleaning at the crack of dawn even though the Murza household did not generally engage in such activities on a weekday.

"We'll put the round table under the chandelier," Sonya proposed over the hum of the vacuum-cleaner. "There are two of them and four of us, so there will be plenty of room."

"Oh no there won't," protested Bek, "That table's just big enough for him."

"But we can usually get eight people round it..."

"Yes, but he's like a rock! A genuine American. He's huge!"

Sonya pulled the cord out of the socket. It was suddenly quiet, as though someone had stuffed cotton wool into their ears.

"You should have told me that to start with," said Sonya reproachfully. "We need to decide who should do what. Bek, you decide on the menu, so you won't reproach me afterwards that it wasn't proper Kyrgyz hospitality. Your daughter and I will do the cleaning and move some of the

furniture from the big room into the children's room. And you can find yourself something useful to do as well," she added turning to her son.

"If I could only experience the reality of America," Bek Murza said quietly to himself. "America to me is an undiscovered planet, and I'd like to get my teeth into it. Someone approaches you, and you have no idea whether he's a shark or a sturgeon. Not like the average Russian. I've consumed 35 pounds of salt with Russians, crossed a salt desert, crawled side by side through copper pipes and heaven knows what else... Everyone knows that the cultural revolutions in America and Western Europe were the result of prosperity. After all, no one has lofty thoughts on an empty stomach. People there are polite because they're satisfied with their lives. For them the most important things are liberty and security. No wonder it was the Americans who came up with the saying 'Live and let live.'"

"What are you on about, Dad?" Bek's son asked him.

"I was saying that in a civilized world you can't be rude, uneducated and passive," Bek replied.

"But you mustn't be aggressive either! The civilized world rejects people like that."

"But those qualities exist all the same," objected Bek's son.

"What's more," Bek continued his line of thought "in a world that's far from civilized, aggression is the primary weapon, the fundamental means of self-defense, and by extension, of survival. In an environment like that, vindictiveness is endemic and a man's image is more important than his thoughts. That's why anyone who wants to become a leader focuses on honing his image. In that kind of environment it's not considered shameful to violate the rights of those close to you or to humiliate them. That's why anyone who is stronger than others takes advantage of his strength to lord it over the weak."

One day earlier, near the exit from the Pechatniki metro station, Bek Murza had invited the American professor Charles Stevenson to dinner at his home. Since then, Sonya had been totally absorbed by the problem of how to entertain a foreign guest. The American scholar had just delivered a lecture at the Humanitarian University on the semantics of Turkic dialects and Bek, as a native speaker of one of the Turkic languages, had listened to the distinguished linguist with great interest.

It was already March in Moscow, but winter had not relaxed its hold on the capital. The heating system in Bek's apartment building was not functioning properly, so that there were heaters switched on day and night in his children's rooms. Bek himself wore woollen socks the whole time.

When the two newly acquainted linguists left the Novoslobodskaya metro station on their way to the former Higher Party School, which now housed the Humanitarian University, they encountered heavy snow. Huge snow flakes like cotton balls fell from the dark Moscow sky onto the road. The white lumps settled on their faces and eyebrows and caught in their eyelashes, a constant minor irritant.

Professor Stevenson did not speak Russian very well, nor could Bek speak English fluently. They conversed through an interpreter, Adia Sadyk-kyzy, who had travelled from Kazan to help the professor during his stay in Moscow.

After just a few minutes the fresh snow had already formed a thick white carpet, which enchanted the two guests. Then the conversation switched to the situation in the other countries of the former Socialist camp.

"In Russia until very recently the problem of national minorities did not exist," said Bek, speaking as slowly as he could so the interpreter could translate his words into English. "But now I am very much alarmed by how things have changed in that respect."

"I understand," the professor answered somewhat uncertainly in Russian, as though he wasn't sure whether what he had said was grammatically correct.

"My secret ambition is to arrange English language courses in Moscow for children who belong to national minorities and children from deprived families."

"That's a great idea," replied Stevenson automatically, even though he apparently hadn't understood what Bek said. "Please help us," he called to Adia.

The interpreter from Kazan was walking a little way ahead of the two men. Her Persian lamb coat was white with snowflakes.

"What did he say?" Charles repeated.

She translated what Bek had said in a few words, after which the professor asked: "Why English?"

"There's a Russian joke," Bek began. Adia translated verbatim. "The countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States decided to look for someone who could advise them how to live after the collapse of the Soviet union. They had a terrible time looking, but they eventually found someone who could answer the question. He told them "Those of you who are optimists should learn English, the pessimists should learn Chinese, and the realists should go out and buy a Kalashnikov."

When he heard the translation, Stevenson burst out laughing. So too did Adia.

On their way to the Humanitarian University Bek suddenly thought of Vilhelm Thomsen's discovery. On a snowy evening in Copenhagen in 1893, an evening very similar to that evening in 1994 when he and Stevenson were trying to find their way through the snow, the future world-famous linguist Vilhelm Thomsen finished deciphering the ancient Kyrgyz cuneiform script better known as the Orkhon-Yenisei writing system. His subsequent report to the Danish Royal Academy of Sciences was the starting point of a meteoric career as a scholar.

"I assume you know about how Mr. Thomsen deciphered the ancient Kyrgyz cuneiform script?" said Bek Murza. "Do they study Vilhem Thomsen's works at U.S. universities?"

"Oh yes, Thomsen's works are well known in the States," answered Professor Stevenson. "Incidentally, I graduated from Indiana State University, from the faculty of Turkic languages."

"We're learning English, and you're learning Turkic. Does that make you an optimist or...?"

"No, no," the professor interrupted Bek, laughing heartily, "We are realists."

"If you developed an interest in the study of Turkic dialects, then I guess you have Turkic ancestors?"

"No, no! My father's people came from Scotland and my mother's family from Scandinavia," the American explained. "There are a lot of Stevensons in America today, but we are not in contact with them all. I've been married twice, and I have three sons, and they have already presented me with grandchildren."

"You're a Catholic."

"No, I belong to the Church of the Latter Day Saints."

"So you're a Mormon!"

"Yes, that's what people call us."

At dinner the following evening they drank Scottish White Horse whisky. Bek recalled his student years during the late 1960s when he first sampled whisky with friends. The Soviet students choked on the Scotch which they drank from cut-glass tumblers. They were not impressed by it.

"You need to drink whisky... with soda," said Charles Stevenson.

"They had just begin to sell whisky in the Soviet Union, but soda wasn't allowed yet," answered Bek Murza.

Big Charles said a few words that the Murza family couldn't understand, and Adia translated: "How can you give someone a needle but no thread and expect him to sew?"

The whole dining room erupted into laughter.

Chapter 2

Charles Stevenson spent about two hours at Bek's home. The foreign guest wasn't difficult to please, and he enjoyed both the conversation and the food: he tried the boorsok and

the kaymak and kurmys. The only thing he refused to eat was red caviar, which he said he was allergic to.

The American professor sat at the tyore, the place of honor at a Kyrgyz dinner table. Thanks to Sonya's efforts, the dining room was decked out in eastern style. There were Chinese porcelain dinner services in the dark wood cabinet, and on the two opposite walls hung six paintings by Soviet artists whom Charles didn't know. The large round table was set Eastern style. Only the television and the coffee machine looked out of place.

It was the winter of 1994. Several months earlier, with the help of the army, Boris Yeltsin had dissolved the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, effectively destroying the last vestiges of communist power.

"And how is life treating Bek now?" asked Stevenson, and those around the table understood what he meant.

"It's getting difficult," answered Bek Murza. "Life is becoming more expensive. The country is going over to the dollar. To be frank, I have never felt as defenseless as I do now. You turn on the television, and people are being killed, robbed, humiliated ... It's sickening. Sonya and I only watch the late-night news, the rest of the time we try to avoid switching it on."

"Are things really that bad?" asked Charles. "Television is a child of human civilization. The director wants to give the viewer the spiritual strength so he's ready to face up to problems and overcome them, and he's not afraid of anything."

"Harsh times are coming," answered Bek. "Under Stalin, the NKVD could arrest anyone at his home in broad daylight. Some were shot, others were exiled to Solovki, Siberia, Central Asia. And today it's the same thing -- you can be killed in your own apartment or on the street. The saying 'my home is my castle' is becoming a reality. Look at our apartment: the street door is made of steel, with an entry-phone. And the outer apartment door is steel as well, with a second door behind it. My neighbour and I wanted something simpler, but the architects didn't have anything but steel doors."

Charles shook his head. "You can't solve everyone's security problems that way."

"One New Russian said on TV recently 'I have more than 200 bodyguards.' Ordinary people like us can't afford that. It's a sign of the new times," said Bek Murza.

The colour of the porcelain cup by Bek's elbow reminded him of the binding of Edkhyam Tenyshev's book "The Old Kyrgyz Language." Bek livened up and began to discuss that edition with Professor Stevenson, but soon the conversation again returned to life in Moscow.

"When I feel miserable or afraid, I go out on to the street," said Murza. "Reality is the best medication. The people on the street are just like me, and the sight of them helps me calm down. There are thousands of people out there who are as badly done by as I am, and that gives me new resolve. I realize that I'm not the only person in this world who's suffering. There is a black envy in all of us, implanted by the Soviet system. That implacable hatred of the rich has made us envious. In that sense we're all victims of the Communist regime. If the Communists hadn't come to power in Petrograd in 1918, there wouldn't be so many unhappy and lost people on the street today."

"Lost people?" interrupted Charles "What have they lost?"

"Their work, their family, their homeland -- in a word, their future," Adia explained.

Bek was glad that he had so much in common with the American. He decided to change the subject and focus on pure linguistics.

"You remember, Charles, that I was asking you about Tomsen's works, the Danish philologist. He linked the emergence of cuneiform script to the inscriptions on Kyrgyz tombs. The Russian academician Vladimir Radlov shared that view."

"Of course. The academicians Malov and Bernshtam wrote on the same subject, and I think even Poppe too..."

"I still can't understand why that fact has been suppressed for over a century."

"I think that in the Soviet Union the reason was the political situation. In the U.S. no one tried to conceal it."

"Now I'm in a position to affirm that the runic inscriptions of my forefathers are the heritage of my people. Hidden in those inscriptions is the imprint of the hearts and minds of my ancestors. My grandfather Murza always used to say that a man remains alive as long as others remember him. And by extension, we are alive as long as we remember our history and learn from it."

Sonya offered a second cup of coffee, but Charles Stevenson declined politely, saying it was time for him to leave for the airport.

"Bek, my friend, I can see that you are concerned not just for the future of your people but for your past," said Stevenson. "But how can you be so concerned for the past? It doesn't exist. And neither does the future. It's all in your imagination..."

"In fact, my dear Charles," Bek interrupted him, "the history of one man's life is the way of all things. That's why they say that an ethnos that is missing just one particle is not whole."

"I agree. But why grieve for a past which you were not a part of? And for a future, when you will no longer exist? Real life is what is happening here and now, between you and me, Sonya, Adia or your children. At this very minute! That is what is worth fighting for."

With her straight nose, hazel eyes and thick black hair tied back under a scarf, Adia reminded Bek of a gyrfalcon. She had a very feminine walk, taking tiny steps. She always walked ahead of the two men, as though leading them. Adia also had a habit of translating as she saw fit, which meant that some remarks by both the American and the Kyrgyz remained untranslated.

Professor Stevenson's quick, almost unintelligible manner of speech had engraved itself on Murza's memory for all time. Charles's aura of calm and his transparent good nature gave him an air of openness. Bek listened attentively as the American spoke, although he could not always catch the meaning. The American guest turned to Adia:

"Perhaps he would like to return to his historic homeland?..."

"You want to set off home?" Adia interrupted.

"No," Stevenson corrected her quietly, "Historic ... homeland."

"Do you want to visit your homeland?" Adia asked.

"The middle Yenisei? Minusinsk? or the Altai?" quipped Bek jokingly.

"Yes! The Altai!" said the American professor enthusiastically, "The promised land of all the Turkic peoples. Where else does he want to go?"

"Tell mister that I'd like to spend time in Washington, St Petersburg, Seattle, Samarkand, Odessa, Paris, Istanbul, Copenhagen, Tokyo..."

"Stop, stop," as always, the American was totally unruffled, "why St. Petersburg, for example?"

"He who values his talent goes to Piter," said Bek, using the colloquial Soviet-era term. But Adia didn't translate, so Bek continued "Russia has always had a rich intellectual life, but it developed along different lines in different regions. I would be so bold as to describe the Moscow milieu as a den of predators, while that in Piter was a mecca for people with talent."

Adia didn't translate that either. Professor Stevenson looked at her expectantly, but in vain. Then he repeated his question: "What draws Bek to Russia's northern capital?"

"The representatives of five of our clans live in Piter," replied Bek Murza. "The Chernik, the Sayak, the Bugu, the Adigine, and the Sarbagysh. Even though we have forty clans, the Kyrgyz are still not a large nation. Every clan is visible to all the others. We can watch each of them from a distance, but as in ancient times we don't interfere in their life. But it would still be interesting to go and see them up close."

"Why does he want to go to St.Petersburg?" Stevenson asked Adia again.

"There are a lot of Kyrgyz there," she replied shortly.

Chapter 3

"How are things in your homeland, Bek? Do you spend much time there?" asked the American professor a second time.

"Thanks, Charles, things are just fine there," replied Bek. Then he started reflecting.

The last time the translator Bek Murza had visited Kyrgyzstan was before the collapse of the USSR. It was to be his last visit, because he realized that there was no longer any place for him there. He recalled how, during a quiet night in Frunze he slept on the floor in a makeshift bed for four people and his friend Asan Djapar wept at his back.

Asan and two of his buddies had met Bek Murza at Manas airport. They drove in an ancient Moskvich to the Pishpek Hotel where they spent the summer evening at the same table in a corner of the Seyil restaurant.

It was after midnight when Asan's friends left, and Asan invited his old friend to stay the night at his home. While Asan tried to flag down a taxi in front of the hotel, Bek went up to his room, tidied himself up, handed over the keys to the porter, and walked out into the street.

Asan Djapar's family rented a tiny two-room cottage on Rabochaya ulitsa from a pensioner nicknamed Akkoyon, which means "white hare." Bek remembered his name from their first meeting, because Akkoyon had a vicious sheepdog called Murena that only he could pacify. As soon as the taxi came to a halt in front of the house, the dog began barking furiously, and neither Asan nor Bek could make it stop.

"Murena, Murena," Asan tried to calm the dog, "It's me, Murena, you know me. Stupid bitch! I'm your lodger, I've lived here over a year. Murena! Let me pass":

At last a squat, elderly man appeared out of the darkness. Having made sure that it really was Asan outside the gate, he chained the dog to its kennel.

"You're from Moscow?" the old man asked Bek.

"Yes, he landed this evening," answered Asan

"My name is Chaar Bozgunovich," the old man introduced himself. "Don't call me Akkoyon. I'm Chaar Bozgunovich," he repeated in a hoarse voice. "Will you remember?"

There was something in his tone that made Bek repeat immediately "Chaar Bozgunovich..."

The tiny house that Djapar rented stood at the bottom of the garden, by the far fence. His wife Nurgul, who worked as a shop assistant in a grocery store, and his teenage daughter Zhanyl, whom he had recently brought to Frunze from their native Leilek district, were waiting for them on the porch. Murena's frenzied barking must have woken them up.

"Please come in," Nurgul invited Bek politely.

Asan's two-roomed cottage was in fact just a winter garage. When he rented it out, Akkoyon had simply put up plywood panels to divide up the space.

The translator Bek Murza had known the linguist Asan for a long time. Murza had always admired Djapar's ethnographic studies, while Djapar in turn used to praise Bek's translations. They had met professionally almost 15 years earlier, and the friendship between them had grown so strong that sometimes Bek phoned Asan more frequently than he did his relatives in Cheshtebe. Bek knew that Asan had come to Frunze some 20 years ago from the south of Kirghizia, from the broad fertile valley of Tee Zhayloo. He gained his post-graduate degree in the republican capital and became a well-known academic.

Bek had always marveled at his friend's strength of character. Less than five years after arriving in Frunze he was already universally respected. Djapar's first book, an ethnographic study of the ancient Kyrgyz, entitled "White Bone," raised several controversial national problems. The Kyrgyz themselves liked it, but the Soviet censors didn't. The Soviet leadership viewed the philologist Djapar as a dangerous nationalist. His book never reached the shops, and Djapar himself was dismissed from the university where he taught dialectology.

"Sayak, Cherek, Bugu, Deeles, Solto, Kypchak, they're all the same to me," said Asan. "I can barely distinguish a northerner from a southerner, they are both lean and lanky. If you say

something to a northerner he'll nod his head the same as a southerner will. True, the northerners sniff more frequently, but that's the only difference."

"You're two-headed like the eagle on the Russian crest, Asan," said Bek.

"With one head you look northwards towards Moscow, and with the other southwards to Kirghizia. One life, my friend, isn't going to be enough for you."

"It's easy for you to say that, you're a free man," answered Asan.

"Me a free man?" Bek was astounded.

"Whichever way you look at it, my problem can't be resolved without Moscow intervening," continued Asan Djapar. "What's it like there, Bek? Are things going well for you personally? Or are you like me, simply waiting until you die? Can you give me any advice as to what to do? The Soviet Union has clipped my double-headed eagle's wings, but once they grow again, then I'm flying the hell out of here!"

"Where to?" Bek asked.

"America," answered Asan, "Or just to the West."

"Fine, but who are you angry with here? Bide your time until your wings grow again."

Asan didn't respond, but the broad palm he ran over his shaven head was trembling.

"I'm angry with myself," Asan replied. "With Gorbachev! With that scum Akkoyon. I pay him almost fifty rubles a month out of my own pocket for this garage!"

"Then build yourself a barn and rent it out, then the problem's solved!"

"You're boxed in from every side! Nothing but Akkoyons! I'm sick of these half-breeds, they're everywhere!"

"What do you mean, half-breeds?"

"He's half Kalmyk!"

"So that's the problem!" exclaimed Bek. "You should have said so straight away! You, of course, are superior to him in that you're a man of worth and honor! If you don't like the way things are, then impose order, after all you're the representative of the titular nationality! Order has to be the most important thing in your life!"

"You said order?" howled Asan, turning pale, and in a second he had grabbed the kitchen knife that lay on the table and hurled it at Bek.

The heavy knife whistled past Bek's cheek and embedded itself in the plywood screen inches from his right ear. Before he realized what had happened a second knife thudded into the wood to the left of his head.

It happened so fast that neither Bek nor the women had time to react. Only after Asan threw the second knife the two women screamed out, "What are you doing?"

Asan was shaking like a leaf. His eyes were half closed, and his hands were groping at the table as though searching for another knife. Both the women and Bek Murza steeled themselves, expecting the worst. At that moment, someone knocked at the door.

The knock was tentative, and for that reason seemed particularly ominous in the resounding silence. Nurgul and Zhanyl immediately disappeared into the other room, leaving the men in the kitchen. Bek stayed where he was, watching Asan without blinking. His fists clenched, Asan said through his teeth: "Give it a shove, Akkoyon, stop pretending, you know I never lock the door. Come in, I'm not going to open the door to you."

The door opened and Akkoyon appeared out of the pitch darkness.

"You're raising hell again!" he turned on Asan. "Earned yourself a fortune, have you? Your balls are bursting, that's your problem. It's about time you cut them off. It's a good thing your women aren't home!"

"We're here, Uncle Chaar," came Zhanyl's girlish voice from the other room. "It's not Pa's fault they're making him mad."

Meanwhile Akkoyon walked up to the petrified Bek, grasped the two knives by the hilt and tugged. There was a tearing sound as the blades came away, leaving oblique scars in the wood. The old man laid the knives on the table and then slapped first Bek and then Asan across the face. A feeling of relief came over Bek, as though Akkoyon had freed him from a trap.

"That's the kind of people we Kyrgyz are," affirmed Akkoyon "For forty horses we'd sell our soul to the devil, let alone our honor, our parents and the rest of it." Then he turned and opened the door wide, and strode out into the darkness. Bek caught sight of a single bright star in the sky.

The release from tension warranted a drink, and Asan Djapar turned out to have a bottle of local Stolichnaya vodka that they opened straight away. It was a while later that Bek, who had drunk quite a lot, fell into a dreamless sleep.

Bek was woken by a rooster crowing. He opened his eyes: it was still completely dark. The four of them were sleeping on a single mattress on the floor. Asan was lying to his right, shoulder to shoulder, and Nurgul was sleeping snuggled up against her husband's other side. Outside the rooster crowed again. Bek hadn't heard a rooster crow since he was a child. Bek lay on his back, too cramped to turn over on to his side. He was beginning to think about getting up, when he heard Asan's voice, wide awake: "Forgive me, Bek, for acting like a fool..."

"Haven't you slept?" asked Bek, astonished.

"We spend so much time sleeping in the course of a lifetime, what's the point?" Asan challenged him. "As for you, you sleep like an animal, without a sound or a movement, like Lake Issyk-Kul before a storm."

"Tell me this," Asan went on after a silence, "who am I now? Yudakhin once advised me, 'Go into Kyrgyz semantics, no one has done any work on that, you'll be able to make a living.'" Konstantin Yudakhin, a noted philologist, had compiled the standard Kyrgyz-Russian dictionary. "You have to admit, Asan," said Bek, "he may have been born a Russian, but Konstantin Kuzmich was really a Kyrgyz at heart. Whenever I look at his work I can't get that thought out of my head. He was a great scholar, not like you. What did you want to throw knives around for?"

"It was childish of me," Asan replied. "My blood gets so hot and I have knives rather than a spear. Anyway, my heart didn't give out, did it? So everything's fine. You and I are warriors by birth, even if you're from the Cherik clan and I am of the Zhookesek. And because we're warriors, we fools have to keep our powder dry. A warrior without a strong hand is like a saddle without stirrups."

"But you could have killed me by accident!"

"I practice almost every day. I don't know what came over me, forgive me for acting like an idiot," repeated Asan in a fit of guilt. And taking a deep breath, he began to chant:

"Manas, who was standing to one side,
Beat the golden drum.
The warriors stood facing each other..."

At the sound of the lines from Manas, Bek Murza joined in immediately:

"The deadly bows, the painted arrows,
See what miracles!
They fit the arrow to the bow string,
The arrows fly and hit their target,
And now the enemy have all departed this world.
This false world is inconstant!
The fearless warrior Manas
Again beats the drum!"

Asan Djapar's deeper voice joined in. Bek had the impression that the house had become larger. Lying on the floor in the pre-dawn, the two of them continued to declaim

"Seeing this, the infidels
Lost their senses completely
The arrows, whistling, fly from the bows,
The warriors' skill exceeds that of all other nations.
The arrows they fire from their bows
Hit the tassles on the enemy's caps
And sever them.
The enemy sees how the arrows
Sever every last tassle on their caps..."

When they finished, Asan poked Bek in the ribs and began laughing quietly, but stopped when the two women shifted in their sleep. Then a little later, he sighed deeply and said to Bek:

"Let's forget it, tell me instead what's happening in Moscow. Do people in Moscow know who I am and what I've written?"

"I'm not going to try and console you, my dear Asan," said Bek. "People in Moscow don't know about you."

"No one?"

"Not a living soul. You don't exist there just like you don't exist here."

"Bek, you're brutal."

"You want to know the truth? In your place I wouldn't even think about the possibility that Moscow might change its mind about you. And anyway, if you keep thinking so compulsively about yourself you'll turn into either a democrat or a bureaucrat."

"That's humiliating, Bek," protested Asan Zhapar heatedly, whether from the previous night's vodka or insulted by the suggestion that no one in Moscow could spare a thought for him. "How many times have I tried to get up off my knees and nothing comes of it. I'm here, and my fate's being decided there, in Moscow."

When the rooster crowed for the third time it was already so light that the contours of the mountains opposite the window were clearly visible. Nurgul got up first, quickly put on her clothes and went outside. Then Zhanyl got out of bed, and Bek noticed for the first time that she had slept naked. Oblivious to the men's gaze, the girl extricated herself nimbly from their shared bed, calmly pulled her flower print dress over her head, combed her long black hair and plaited it into a thick braid, and jumped out of the window.

That whole episode went through Bek's head like lightning, but he decided not to share it with his American friend.

"Bek, you were so lost in thought that I was afraid to distract you," remarked Charles. "Well, what do you have to say?"

"I was momentarily back at home," answered Bek with a smile.

"And? Is everything all right there?"

"Yes, everything's fine," replied Bek.

Sonya insisted that they each drink a glass of Georgian wine before leaving. The American was flying to Prague, and Sonya was careful to make sure that they were not late for the flight. After they drank the wine, Sonya asked them all to sit silently for a few minutes "before the journey," following Russian tradition, and only after that did she fetch their coats.

When they reached the street, Sonya offered Adia her umbrella, but Adia declined, saying that in Kazan she went without one not only when it snowed but even when it rained. When Bek with his wife and guests arrived at Sheremetevo-2, the check-in for the flight OK-0895 was almost over.

The snow was still falling continuously. Charles gallantly left Adia his family-size umbrella, overriding her protests.

The plane with Mr. Stevenson on board hadn't taken off, and the snow was still falling. Adia tried to open Stevenson's umbrella but couldn't work the knob.

"Let me try," said Bek taking it from her.

"I'm glad that he's leaving in a snowstorm, it's a good omen," said Adia.

"Americans find pity humiliating. They have everything," observed Bek.

"But they have to work hard to afford it all," Adia pointed out.

Bek Murza's strong hands pressed the button on Charles's American umbrella and it spread open above their heads like a dark tent, protecting them from the wet Moscow cold.

"For me spending time with Charles is like a dose of vitamins," said Adia from under the umbrella.

"That's a very apt comparison," said Bek laughing.

"Being with him gives me more self-confidence, and self-confidence gives me more energy, I simply have to expend it rationally."

"Do you have a family?" Bek asked her in Kyrgyz.

The interpreter didn't understand and asked "What did you say? Something about a jubilee?"

"Do you remember your father?"

"He left me a vast number of books. My mother used to say that he knew three writing systems, Arabic, Latin and Cyrillic, because he'd lived through three alphabet reforms."

"Yes, under Stalin we went in for alphabet reforms..."

"Our apartment at home is full of my father's books and I can't read any of them."

"Do you regret that your father couldn't teach you the language of 'Ani tel'?"

"Of course I'm ashamed that I can't read the letters that my father sent me. But on the other hand, you have to agree that the potential of the Tatar language is limited, like that of your native Kyrgyz."

"The destiny of a language molds the destiny of a nation. As long as the speakers of this or that language don't neglect their native language they can preserve their autonomy. But a people that speaks a foreign language can't really call themselves a nation. Acquiring that knowledge is like the process of refining ore into gold -- only then does it shine."

Chapter 4

"Sing something," said Yurii Usta. "I want to get a feel for the language of the Kyrgyz."

That was during their first days as students at the Institute of Literature, during the autumn of 1968, an era that would come to be engraved on the collective memory of an entire generation of students. In August of that year, Soviet tanks had rolled into Czechoslovakia to put an end to the process of liberalization known as the Prague Spring. Yurii had come to Moscow from the steppes of Kuban, Bek from the valley of Cheshtebe in Kirghizia.

Usta was studying to become a poet, Bek Murza to be a translator. The building in which their lectures were held had once belonged to the 19th century writer and philosopher Aleksander Herzen. The students felt ill at ease in the small rooms, which had been meant for living in, and so during the breaks between lectures they streamed out of the building and on to the Tver boulevard just a couple of steps away. The courtyard held little attraction for them. The novelist Andrei Platonov had spent his last years sweeping it after he fell out of favor with Stalin.

But one day the two freshman students found themselves during the lunch break in an empty lecture theater and struck up a conversation. Bek Murza didn't wait to be asked twice, took a deep breath, and began to sing:

"E-e-eh, bayyrkynyn zhomogu
Bashtasa keler orolu,
Ezelkinin zhomogu
Estese keler orolu..."

"Wait a second, I can't understand what you're trying to say," said Usta. "Translate for me."
"I was beginning to recite the epic 'Manas,'" said Bek in some agitation. "But there's no way I can explain the whole thing to you. It has over a million lines. That's why our national writer Chingiz Aitmatov said it's like an ocean."

"Then tell me who Manas was."

"Willingly. The roots of Manas go back to Kara-Khan. One of the sons of Kara-Khan was Oguz-Khan. He was the founder of the clan of Alancha Khan. Alancha-Khan fathered two sons, Baygur and Uyghur. Baygur had just one son, Babyr Khan. His son was Tubey. Tubey had a son named Kegey, and Kegey had three sons: Nogoy, Shygay and Chyyr. Nogoy had four sons: Orozdu, Usen, Bay, Zhakyl. And it was the last son, Zhakyl, who fathered the great Manas."

"Why such a long list of names? Why not simply say 'Manas was the son of Zhakyl?'"

"It's customary for the Kyrgyz to trace their ancestry back to the seventh generation. Any self-respecting Kyrgyz learns his family tree as a small child. If someone can't name even one of the seven generations on his father's side, people ostracize him as a 'kul', a slave who doesn't remember his roots."

"Fine – that's your business. Go on."

"Not just the Kyrgyz but many other peoples who speak Turkic languages trace their roots back to Kara-Khan. So in the ancient Oguz Turk 'Book of Dede Korkut' and in the legends of the Altaic peoples, the protagonists find themselves in exactly the same situations as the mighty warrior Manas."

"I remember reading about the dynasty of the Kara-khanids in Gumilev," replied Yura, referring to the historian Lev Gumilev, son of the ill-starred poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova. "But that dynasty ruled in the 10th or the 11th century and all the epic poems date from much earlier."

"The state of the Kara-khanids existed from the 10th to the beginning of the 13th century. It was an early feudal Turkic state, and it covered an area encompassing Eastern Turkestan, Semirechie and the southern foothills of the Tien Shan mountains. In 1212 it was laid waste by Mukhammed, the Shah of Khorezm."

"Allah have mercy. Let's get back to our sheep, as Rabelais would have said."

"Hold your horses. I want you to listen patiently to what I'm telling you. The point is that according to the epic, the warrior Manas appeared on earth before the birth of Jesus Christ. In those days a strong man seemed like a god to his fellow men. Everyone relied on him. There's a good reason why the epic devotes so much attention to pagan rituals and traditions."

"Bek, this is getting boring. What was Manas's mother's name?"

"Chyyrды."

"What does that mean?"

"In fact she was really called Shakan. She was the wife of Chyyr, Kegey's youngest son. Chyyr was Zhakyl's uncle on his father's side. Chyyr died in battle, and so according to the tradition of levirate Zhakyl married his dead uncle's wife. From then on people called Shakan 'Chyyrды,' which means 'Chyyr's wife.'"

"They can call her La Giaconda for all I care, what difference does it make?"

"It makes a huge difference," Bek replied, "It shows the attitude of the Kyrgyz to someone they respect, even when he's dead. Chyyr was greatly respected, but he had no children, and so Nogoy's family arranged the new marriage to preserve his name."

"Don't you find the custom of levirate odd?" asked Yurii Usta.

"No," Bek replied calmly, and he added "it wasn't confined to the Kyrgyz, it also existed all over Central Asia, in the Caucasus and the Near East, in particular among the Jews."

"Do the Kyrgyz still practice it?"

"Almost certainly not," Bek replied.

"Why did Chyyr's relatives love him so much?"

"He was the last member of Kogoy's family. After his elder brother Nogoy died, the Chinese attacked his lands. Chyyr was killed in the fighting and his warriors were defeated. The Chinese took possession of the Kyrgyz lands and sent the Kyrgyz into exile in distant regions."

"What distant regions?"

"Exactly like the repatriations under Stalin."

"You didn't answer my question."

"The Chinese hounded two of Nogoy's sons, Bay and Orozdu, to the Altai mountains and Usen, the third, as far as Tibet."

"How old was Zhakyl when that happened?"

"He hadn't yet turned 17."

"That didn't stop him from getting married."

"It was force of circumstances."

"And then God sent him a mighty warrior to defend the common people against the Chinese?"

"Not exactly," said Bek. "You're in too much of a hurry and that makes it difficult for me to explain everything in the proper order. Zhakyl and Chyydry were together for thirty years before Manas was born."

The lunch break was ending. The lecture theater began to fill up with students preparing for a lecture on classical literature.

The future poet Yurii Usta and Bek Murza both wrote mediocre poetry. Sometimes doggerel appeared on the walls of the lavatories of the student hostel on Dobrolyubov Street, and the cleaning lady, Nina Akimova, would recognize Yurii's handwriting and know he was the author. Yurii had a child's handwriting.

Chapter 5

"Let's talk about Manas, everything else can wait," proposed Yura.

"Certainly. One of the main characteristics of the poem is that the subject matter is not as fantastic as in most epics. The 19th century scholar Chokhan Velikhanov wrote that Manas is an encyclopaedic collection of all the Kyrgyz myths, fairy tales and popular traditions localized at one point in time and arranged around one protagonist, the mighty warrior Manas. Rather like an Iliad of the steppes. It also includes descriptions of the Kyrgyz way of life, customs, geography, history, religious customs, military organization, folk medicine, and relations with neighboring peoples. For example, the Kyrgyz believe that if a woman develops a craving while she is pregnant to eat the heart of a tiger, her child will grow up to be a great man. The Kyrgyz call that craving talgak, and Manas's mother Chyyr experienced it while she was expecting him. She told a hunter, who brought her a tiger heart and she cooked and ate it in secret without her husband knowing. And Manas's horse Akkula was born the same day as he was."

"Did anything mark Manas out at birth from other children? Was he a giant, or was he far cleverer than other children?"

"No, he wasn't born a giant, although he was a strong and sturdy child. The one thing that was unusual about him is that he was born with tightly clenched fists, and there was blood in his fists. One version even says that he tore out part of his mother's liver. That was an ominous omen that scared his father badly."

"That's not surprising! But why was Manas called Manas? Does the name have some hidden meaning?"

"In fact the name Manas does not exist in Kyrgyz onomastics, only in this epic poem. I think there's a particular reason for that. The Kyrgyz worshipped their hero and it would have been as great an act of blasphemy to name a child after him as it would for a Christian family to call their child Jesus. This profound respect for their beloved hero lasted until the end of the 19th century. It was only during the Soviet period, when the old traditions were devalued, and when the poem was no longer published and reciting it publicly was banned, that the Kyrgyz began to name their sons Manas. No one would have dared do that before."

"So who gave Manas this unique name?" asked Yura.

"It was a tradition that infants were named in the presence of every person in the entire district. The ancient Kyrgyz believed that a person's name had magical qualities. 'It accompanies a person throughout his life and influences his fate,' they used to say. That was why the name for a newborn infant was selected with particular care. Manas's father Zhakyp summoned wise men to choose a name worthy of his son, but they couldn't reach an agreement. And then a stranger, an old man with a white beard, showed up in the village and suggested calling the infant Manas..."

"What did the future hero do as a child? Did he do battle with monsters and defeat the enemy?"

"No, Yura, our hero was completely different from ordinary heroes. He lived with his parents until he was eight. And when he was eight years old, Zhakyp sent him as a herd-boy to his herdsman Oshpur. It was when he was nine, and pasturing his father's cattle, that Manas first took part in a battle against the enemies of the Kyrgyz."

"Meaning who?"

"After the Chinese conquered the Kyrgyz lands they sent several Kyrgyz clans to the Sayano-Altai mountains, including Zhakyp and his brothers. At that time it was the Kalmyks who controlled the Altai, and so the young Manas's first experience of battle was against them."

"Who in particular did he fight?" asked Yura persistently.

"A band of horse-thieves led by a man called Kortuk suddenly attacked Zhakyp's herd of horses. The young Manas killed them all easily. The disappearance of Kortuk and his band didn't go unnoticed, and the next day Kalmyk troops under the command of Domabil rode up to Zhakyp's village. Zhakyp wanted to offer them kun, restitution for the dead Kortuk, but Manas forestalled him and attacked them."

"And of course our hero, dressed in white, effortlessly slaughtered the lot of them singlehanded!" commented Yura sarcastically.

"You guessed wrong. The neighbouring Kyrgyz clans, the Noyguts, Naymans, Kazakhs, Kongurats, Uyshuns, Alchyns, Argyns, they all sent help to Zhakyp's family. Together they mobilized 780 men against the 800 Kalmyks. In a fierce battle, 413 of Domabil's men were killed while Manas's force lost only 44. The 10-year-old Manas took part in the fighting and killed more of the enemy than did any grown man. But that wasn't the end of the tribulations of Zhakyp's family. The Kalmyks immediately informed Esen Khan, the lord of all the Chinese, of their defeat at the hands of the Kyrgyz and they mentioned how strong Manas was."

"Hold on, Bek. Don't you have the impression that this Chinese has an un-Chinese sounding name?"

"So you've developed an interest in ethno-linguistics, have you, Yura? There's enough information on that subject for several doctoral dissertations, and for that reason I don't want to get into it. But I will tell you that the Chinese too used to write Kyrgyz names in their own way and distorted them, you can see that in the annotated translations of Chinese imperial chronicles by the 19th century Russian Sinologist Nikita Bichurin. And they changed geographical names as well. In one place they would translate the toponym in question, and in another they would transliterate it as a new name. My grandfather used to say that history is like the wandering sand dunes in the desert, it's difficult to keep track of their movements. It may be impossible to halt the forward march of history, but it's the easiest thing in the world to rewrite the historical record. But I don't want to go into that."

"Fine by me. But to get back to this Chinese..."

"Esen was deeply worried, and he dispatched his spies to the Kyrgyz disguised as ordinary merchants. When the caravan arrived in Zhakyp's village, the young Manas was playing at ordo with the other children of his age."

"They were playing at what?" Yura interrupted.

"The game is called ordo, the Kyrgyz have played it since ancient times and still do, both adults and children. The rules are complicated to understand and it's difficult to explain them. You can only understand them if you were born a Kyrgyz."

"I find that difficult to believe..."

"Take my word for it. Meanwhile the spies, without stopping to think, decided to snatch the young hero. The area where the game takes place is considered special, no one apart from the player and the referee is allowed to set foot in it, and suddenly a whole caravan appears. Manas quickly realized what was happening, threw himself on the Chinese, hurled the chief spy to the ground, sat on his chest and tore off his head."

"Now that is impressive."

"From that time the young hero became the Khan Esen's worst enemy."

"To be honest, these skirmishes aren't really on a level with the battles in epic sagas, they're more like childish pranks."

"I agree. The first time that Manas took part in a serious battle was when he was 11. With a force of 600 men, he took on an army more than ten times that size led by the Chinese warrior Neskara. Neskara was young too, but not as young as the Kyrgyz, he was nineteen. The battle began with warriors from both sides volunteering for single combat to the death. After the Kyrgyz had lost two such bouts and won one, Manas himself entered the fray and killed three Chinese knights. Enraged, Neskara whipped his steed Chabdara and bore down on Manas. But his courage failed him, his heart sank to his heels at the dread sight of the young paladin, and he fled in terror from the battlefield. According to the unwritten rules of such engagements, the side that is defeated in single combat is required to capitulate. As soon as Neskara skedaddled, his army surrendered. It says in the epic that they numbered 6,300 men:

Neskara retreated and fled,
All the others, trembling,
Looking guiltily, ingratiatingly,
Begging mercy, sobbed,
They all yelled loudly, as one,
Four hundred and thirty of them were Sarts,
The remainder -- Chinese and Kalmyks,
Placing their hands on the crown of their heads,
They said "Now we shall no longer encroach on you."

"What does 'placing their hands on the crown of their heads' mean?" asked Yura.

"They begged for mercy," Bek explained. "That was how prisoners of war used to demonstrate their submission."

"And what happened to them after that?"

"What do you think?" Bek answered Yura's question with one of his own.

"Manas couldn't exterminate 6,000 unarmed men, that's too ridiculous. Better to make use of them as laborers."

"That's logical, but it's still the wrong answer. The Kyrgyz never slaughtered foes who surrendered without a fight. Manas disarmed the Chinese and sent them home in peace."

Chapter 6

The yellowing leaves were falling from the birch trees that lined Gogol Boulevard. Murza and Usta, now in their fifth year of study, were sitting on a bench and continuing the conversation they began years before.

"You have to admit, Bek, that Manas was a murderer from an early age! Why don't your bards call attention to that fact?" Yura asked his friend.

"And in your opinion, Yura, given the situation Manas was in, should he have waited until he was 18? I fear that in that case he wouldn't have lived to the age of nine!" exclaimed Bek. "On the contrary, it was the actions of the foreigners who were prepared to kill a child to preserve their own power that were immoral!"

"Calm down, old son. What did Manas do in his leisure time?"

"The same as his contemporaries. He used to go hunting with his friends. The young lads would go off into the mountains or the forest where the grownups couldn't see what they were up to. On one occasion, 84 young men set off to hunt in the Knko mountains together with our hero. The oldest among them was 25 and Manas was the youngest at 15. It was then that his companions chose Manas as their khan. And soon afterwards in a similar procedure the elders chose Zhakyp as their khan."

"They didn't have a khan before that?"

"No, Yura, you see, Zhakyp's entire family was in exile. What made the Kyrgyz choose a chief was the external threat from enemies, the Chinese and the Kalmyks. 'He who has a khan will not fall into misfortune,' Zhakyp said when he took office. The khan was the main organizer, the responsibility for the lives and wellbeing of his people was on his shoulders. So the title of khan was in itself a great honor."

"So, we are in the camp of an adolescent who is to become the savior of his people," said Yurii with a wink. "And he has just been elected khan. How did that happen, by the way?"

"The election process was quite simple. The young men selected their leader, and after he was chosen they automatically became his comrades in arms. Only it wasn't that simple: some opted out, some nominated themselves but the others didn't approve them. When Manas's turn came, he didn't want to become khan but his fellows elected him anyway because of the valor and feats of courage he had already accomplished at the age of fifteen."

"Fantastic, the hero has already become the leader of his clan. What happened then, wasn't it time to demonstrate his prowess?"

"One thing at a time. Ten years passed after Manas was chosen as military commander. During that time the Chinese ruler Esen sent troops more than once with the aim of conquering the Kyrgyz, but every time his warriors were defeated. During that time Manas acquired no small number of comrades in arms, including the famous warrior Koshoy."

"How did that happen?"

"At the behest of the council of elders, Manas set forth to attack the city of Dagalak in order to settle accounts with the perfidious Kyrmus-Khan, who was constantly intriguing against the Kyrgyz. Manas defeated all the enemy's strongest paladins in single combat and forced the enemy to conclude a treaty on peace and goodneighborly relations with the Kyrgyz. It was during the sack of Dagalak that the warrior Koshoy came to Manas's aid, and after the battle they merged their respective forces."

"In their Altai mountain exile, the Kyrgyz realized how great a force Manas represented. They wanted to return to their homeland. Manas had faith in the strength of his army and he knew that the Chinese empire was becoming weaker. What he didn't know was whether his own people would support him. So he decided to put the idea of returning to the land of their ancestors to the council of elders headed by Zhakyp. The council endorsed the idea without further ado, and Manas began to accumulate forces for the campaign."

"Tell me how it happened?" Yurii Usta showed a lively interest.

"He assembled the entire male half of the population, all those aged between 17 and 70.

Selection was extremely rigorous, not everyone by a long way was capable of bearing arms.

He told the old men with pendulous bellies,

The young lads who were not comely,

Those who were all aches and pains,

"Go, protect your wives."

He turned away 200,000,

The dumb who could not speak,

The deaf, whose ears could not hear,

The blind, whose eyes could not see,

The weak, whom you could only pity,

The cripples with maimed legs,

Those who could not talk sense.

He inspected all
The frail old men.
He turned away 200,000,
He did not let them sharpen their weapons.

From those who remained, Manas put together an army of 600,000 men. Before they rode forth, the elders determined in advance which tract of land each clan should occupy. For that reason they travelled by several different routes. Each large clan set out for the land of its forebears by a different route."

"And how many battles did the Kyrgyz fight along the way?" asked Usta.

"Too many to count," replied Bek. "For example, there was Manas's victory over the enchanted horde of the Kumyk Khan, Tekes. There is one brilliant detail: during the celebration of that victory Manas engaged in single combat with the Kalmyk warrior princess Saykal."

"Now that's something different! Usually such battles end with a wedding," commented Yura.

"In fact they did marry, but not in this world," Murza said meaningfully. "As the Kyrgyz army advanced it encountered ever more troops of Kalmyks and Chinese. But they all suffered defeat at Manas's hand."

"Did anything else happen apart from one Manas victory after the other?"

"It certainly did! Here's an example," said Bek Murza. "After the Kalmyk warrior Erge perished in battle against the Kyrgyz, his widow Samankul came to Manas with three adolescent boys. Two of them were her sons and the third was the son of the Kazakh Yraman, Erge's Vezir. And the widow said to Manas:

"If you wish to kill me -- here I am before you,

I beg you, I implore you,

Spare the lives of my two sons."

Then Manas answered her:

"Hear me, wife to the khan," he said,

"I forgive your children their offense.

It is clear you are a good person,

You measure your words.

May your children live in prosperity,

This is your city, live here if you wish,

Live here and enjoy good health.

Karatay, son of Yraman,

Has shown the whole people

The clarity of his intelligence.

If it is your desire

We shall remain with you forever,

May his company bring me joy," said the warrior Manas.

"And then? She forgot to say thank you?"

"Very witty," said Bek, smiling. "The thing is that in the epic Karatay becomes one of Manas's forty chosen comrades-in-arms. But he's better known as Yrchy, which means "singer." Some critics are inclined to consider him both the actual author of the poem, and the first bard to sing it."

"You mentioned the name of a Kazakh. Were there warriors of different nationalities serving in the Kyrgyz armies?"

"Any number of them. There was one brigade in Manas's army commanded by the Kazakh strongman Kekche, and another headed by the Kypchak commander Urbu."

"And did each of the Kyrgyz clans have its own brigade?"

"That's a matter for conjecture. The epic doesn't mention separate clans."

"You Kyrgyz certainly are an enigmatic bunch," commented Yura with a wink.

"Every nation has its secrets," replied Bek. "Meanwhile Manas continued his victorious progress. His army took the town of Bulagysyn after a siege during which Manas routed the forces of Akunbeshim Khan. Some historians refer to it as Balasagyn, that was the name that the 11th century Turkic lexicographer Mahmud al-Kashgari used later in his writings. The next places to fall were Merke and Tashkent, where Shamyn-shah and Pannus-Khan, who had sought to oppress and destroy the local Kyrgyz population, were defeated. All these shahs, khans and petty princelings owed allegiance to Esen Khan, Manas's greatest foe. It was Esen who had driven the Kyrgyz out of Talas, and now his underlings were putting up fierce resistance to the Kyrgyz advance."

Chapter 7

"The forty Kyrgyz tribes occupied an expanse of territory equal to present-day Europe and the Baltic states," Bek continued. "And each tribe lived as a sovereign state. The only things that could unite them were great wars or fearful epidemics, or traditional festivals or the funeral feast for a great man, like in the epic to mark the anniversary of the death of the wealthy Keketey. The rest of the time each tribe lived on its own land and concentrated on agriculture, mostly livestock breeding. To keep livestock you need huge tracts of land with extensive grazing grounds. For that reason, land was the alpha and omega of existence for the Kyrgyz."

"Forget about the land. Get back to the war," Yura interrupted.

"A huge army with Manas at its head sets forth from the Altai to Andidjan and Alay."

"Those are real names?" Yura interrupted again.

"Of course they are! All the places described in the epic really exist, with a very few exceptions. You don't know your geography very well, Yura! Have you forgotten where Andidjan is? Have you forgotten the fertile Alai valley encircled by mountains?"

"What a know-all you are! Go on, where's Seliger? And what is Mezen and its frozen earth?"

"I have a friend who comes from Mezen, Volodya Tuchkin. As for Seliger, is there anyone today who doesn't know that lake?"

"Okay, okay. How old was our hero when he embarked on this venture?"

"At that time he was a grown man, 32 to be precise. People had already begun to address him as Tere, which means Lord. The bards describe his countenance in terms that are unusually expressive for Kyrgyz poetry. Listen, and I'll recite it for you in the original."

And Bek began to declaim:

«Алтын менен күмүштүн ширөөсүнөн бүткөндөй,
Асман менен жериндин тирөсүнөн бүткөндөй,
Айың менен күнүндүн бир өзүнөн бүткөндөй,
Алды калың кара жер жердигинен түткөндөй!»

"But I can't help you here, Yura. Of course I could translate literally, but you wouldn't experience the profound pleasure that I feel as a Kyrgyz," Bek added.

"Then to hell with you," responded Yura angrily. "What was the point then? To me it's simply double Dutch."

"Yurii, the Kirghiz language deserves respect for no other reason than because it's the language in which the epic Manas was written."

"What are you getting at? You want me to learn your language? Fat chance!"

"You're an uneducated yob, Yura."

"So now you're feeling morally superior?" snapped Yurii Usta. "So what happened next? Manas returned to his old homeland..."

"The next foe he encountered was Alooche, khan of the entire Fergana valley. Alooche's scouts reported to him the approach of the Kyrgyz army. Alooche Khan assembled an army of 500,000 men, hoping Manas would be intimidated by their sheer numbers. But Manas did not let himself be drawn into a pitched battle, instead he left his men to rest beyond the high peaks and rode forth with a small group of warriors to meet Alooche's hordes. Alooche's men were struck with terror at the sight of the fearsome Kyrgyz warrior and they let him pass without offering the slightest resistance. This is how the bard describes this episode:

Alooche was sagacious, it seems,
He watched from afar,
And espying the dread figure of the warrior
He trembled in amazement.
Before Manas there come twenty
Brave warriors, fearless marksmen,
Companions to the lion,
Tigers who kill with one stroke.
Preparing to fire
They raise their weapons to eye level,
They take aim,
As one they descend
On Khan Alooche.
Behind Manas there ride twenty
Truly brave warriors
Bearing fearful spears with smooth shafts.
Pointing their spears, they stand behind Manas
Deafening all with their shouts.
To the right of him twenty warriors
Whose courage exceeds that of many,
Draw their swords
Ready to slash,
Raising their right arms,
Opening wide their eyes.
To the left of him twenty
Of those who are wolves to the enemy
Whose arrows are as thick as a child's torso,
Whose wrath is like the scirocco.
They fit the arrow to the bowstring
As though preparing to shoot,
They ride beside him.
And before him
There ride six zhasools at the head
And in their midst the steed Akkula
Twelve djasaans lead him without a rider
Seven bodyguards, riding at the trot,
Shout "Make way, watch out!"

Alooche came to meet Manas and beg for clemency, and the mighty giant spared his life. And so Manas received as a gift from Alooche his eldest son Boke, who thus became one of Manas's choro, the forty handpicked warriors of his entourage."

"What do you mean, as a gift?" asked Yura.

"That was the tradition then. The defeated side could secure the trust of the victor by giving a son or daughter as a barymta -- a hostage. True, it was only the aristocracy who could bargain for their lives in that way. That explains why the bogatyrs and khans all had more than one wife."

"And so what happened in the end?"

"And so Andidjan was liberated," Bek replied promptly. "All that remained to be freed was the fertile Alai valley which Shooruk Khan had occupied, but his army too was crushed by Manas's forces, and Shooruk offered up his daughter Akylay and with her thirty beautiful maidens who became the wives of Manas's warriors. At this point I have to tell you that while the Kyrgyz army was engaged in taking Shooruk's lands, Alooche, nursing his grudge against Manas, fled to Peking where he complained to his patron, the Chinese khan Esen. And on the way he encountered Konurbay, one of his sixty sons."

"Sixty? That's not many. Why not a round thousand?" asked Usta, puzzled.

"Because, you simpleton, it was perfectly normal then," explained Bek. "By the way, it was Konurbay who together with Esen became Manas's most formidable foe."

"And what was this Konurbay from the kennel doing in China?"

"You really are a source of endless witticisms, Yura. Konurbay was studying in Peking, and he was travelling home for the vacation when he met up with his father. "

"So he was studying at a college? Or was he still at school?"

"Most likely at college, at that time he was 18 years old."

"Wasn't that a bit young to think of matching his strength with a grown man of over 30 like Manas?"

"Who can say?" answered Bek Murza, and paused before adding "He had no choice! Manas was 14 years older than he was."

"No, Konurbay was 14 years younger than Manas," Usta contradicted him.

Chapter 8

Bek Murza was walking in Berlin with his friend Leonard Links. There was a group of young people flitting ahead of them, and a woman was pushing a child in a baby carriage, but Bek paid no attention either to them or to the grandiose architecture around him. He was looking at a crow that was sitting at the edge of the road. For a moment the bird's coal-black eyes rested on Bek, which automatically caused him to cough.

"Wait a second, don't fly away," Bek mentally addressed the bird. "Do you know something about me?" The crow folded its wings again and kept looking at Bek.

"Of the forty clans of the Kirghiz, the most numerous was the lost clan of Karga. The Karga met a tragic fate, they were annihilated within 99 days." Still mentally engrossed by the behavior of the bird, Bek resumed the conversation they had begun the previous day.

"Was that a long time ago?" Links asked his friend.

"It was at the time of Lycurgus," answered Bek, still watching the bird. "It was Lycurgus who in the seventh century B.C. established the framework of Spartan military society, he was a law-maker and overseer of the city state of Sparta, but he fell victim to malice. A young Roman put out one of his eyes."

"Perhaps the street lighting was inadequate," Links joked.

Once again Bek Murza became aware of the bird's attentive gaze.

"Far from it. Lycurgus was attacked in broad daylight, but that's not the point. The Karga clan was a large one, and its members occupied the best of the Kyrgyz lands, from the Sayan mountains to the Ala-Too mountains, from the banks of Lake Baikal to those of Lake Issyk-Kul."

"What does the word Karga mean, Bek?"

"Karga translates as crow. In ancient time the Kyrgyz regarded animals, plants and natural phenomena as objects of religious veneration. That sort of religious conviction – it's called totemism – is inherent to many peoples. The Kyrgyz did not just believe in the supernatural

power of the totem, they depicted it on their war banners and marched into battle chanting its name."

"But why a crow of all creatures?" asked Links, crossing the threshold of the Hotel Zum Elefant in Weimar. "To my mind it's not a terribly respectful name for a people. Don't get me wrong, but for centuries we Germans have looked askance at crows. Some even call them scavengers..."

"There's a legend about the true nature of this bird, it was handed down to the present-day Kyrgyz by the last Kyrgyz of the Karga tribe, the old man Kese-Chal. According to the legend, it was thanks to the crow that the Kyrgyz took possession of the land, rivers, daylight and much else besides. Karga created the earth, and then water, and later people, animals and the plant world. But all the creatures she created lived in darkness. The sole source of light was Karga itself, its feathers shone brighter than any fire. The bird could not bring warmth to all living creatures at once; it would fly over a mountain peak and behind it the trees would die and calamity would overcome the population. Despairing of being able to help all creation, the bird resolved to fly so high into the heavens that its light would reach all humankind. Forty nights passed before Karga reached the zenith, but even there its light did not illuminate the whole world. The sacred bird wanted to fly even higher but the firmament of heaven prevented it from doing so. For forty nights Karga tried to break through the firmament, and at last it succeeded, and the radiance of the sun, the master of the universe, poured through the breach! From that moment the bright rays of the sun banished the eternal darkness from the world forever. But Karga suffered more than anyone else from its exploit. The sun scorched the bird without mercy, its feathers were burned to cinders, and its supernatural power was extinguished, but the Kyrgyz continue to honor its feat."

"Bek, this sounds familiar!" Leonard was clearly puzzled.

"The same image occurs in Tatar oral folk poetry. The Tatar version is

Attim karga

Toshti karga

Karga toshte ak karga...

"That's not what I meant. I meant the legend about the world having been created by a bird."

"You're right, that legend is common to the peoples of Central Asia, northern Asia, North America and even Australia. In Russia there are parallels with the Yakuts, the Evenks, the Koryaks, the Chukchi, and the Itelmens," Bek went on, listing some of the native peoples of Siberia. "Also some Indian tribes from the west coast of the United States, for example the Tlingits and the Kwakiutl, but they believe that a crow created the world after the Great Flood..."

"How do you explain that?"

"It's possible that at some point in history there were close ties between those Indian tribes and the Kyrgyz, and those contacts lasted a long time. I don't even exclude the possibility that the ancient Kyrgyz were in contact not just with the peoples of North America but also the ancestors of the population of the islands that constitute present-day Japan. That could substantiate the hypothesis that from time immemorial the Kyrgyz have been drawn eastward, rather than westward."

"Yes, it's an entertaining story," Leonard continued their discussion, this time sitting as a guest in Bek's Moscow apartment on Ulitsa Rabochaya, which is two stops from the Taganskaya metro station. "But what interests me is something else. How did it come about that the entire Karga tribe vanished at once from the face of the earth?"

"The tragedy vanished into oblivion with them," Bek replied, handing his guest a tiny glass from Samarkand filled with Stolichnaya vodka as clear as a teardrop. "In those far-off times people went to war over petty things. Sometimes plain vanity would serve as the pretext for a battle.

Legend has it that the Karga clan was destroyed by internecine fighting sparked by a quarrel over whose family was the most ancient. The most ancient families were at odds with the more junior ones, and when enemies attacked the older ones, the younger ones would not always come to their aid."

"How can you seriously debate a question like who appeared on earth first?"

"The representatives of some tribes were offended at the thought that it was an alien totem creature that created the earth, provided people with water and broke through the darkness to bring people light. They reacted particularly acutely to those tribal eponyms that had names connected with animals, like Bagysh, Bugu, Azyg, Kushchu, Toru and others."

"Bek, please don't try to make me become a Kyrgyz linguist."

"I'm sorry, Leo. The reason for the demise of the Karga was the indifference of the other Kyrgyz tribes to this one tribe that was truly great in all respects, when the Karga fought for exactly ninety-nine days and nights and one more day against their southern neighbours Su Yu. The entire tribe perished, and the surviving tribes' only memory of them was a traditional ornamental device."

"What kind of ornamental device?" asked Leonard with interest.

"My son and I see it every morning. It's in the form of a bird with its wings spread. You see it most often among household objects on traditional Kirghiz floor rugs made of different-coloured felt. We call such carpets shyrdak. The surface is decorated with an intricate pattern. The Kyrgyz women who are experts in making such rugs don't cut them according to a ready-made template, but on the basis of the visual memory of the carpets they have looked at since their childhood."

"So each individual rug-maker has her own design?"

"Yes, but her memory provides her with the essential elements. Aysha, my mother, used to say that every detail on the shyrdak had its own special meaning. For example, the Karga symbol on any shyrdak was always at the outside edge. My mother usually explained that by saying that "we all come from there." Perhaps what she meant was the antiquity of the cult," Bek observed thoughtfully. "I'm inclined to believe that interpretation, after all the legend of the old man Kese-Chal depicts the crow as the creator of the world, and consequently the most ancient being."

"What about the old man, who was he?"

"His fate was tragic, you could even call him the Kyrgyz Lycurgus," Bek replied without any great enthusiasm. "Kese-Chal had no children and therefore he could not have an heir in the normal way. In order to resurrect his tribe he decided to gather together all the Kyrgyz orphans, the homeless, the outcasts, and become their father..."

"My God," breathed Leonard quietly, "That's something I can identify with."

Bek looked up at his friend in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

"You know that it's unlikely I will ever have children," Leonard said, visibly saddened, "although I always wanted a worthy heir, after all I always considered myself the son of a great nation, of great men..."

"Leo the son of Nietzsche, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Kant, Bach..."

"Exactly."

"And of Hitler and Goebbels?"

"Them too, you can't selectively exclude them."

"Leo, like most Europeans you look at yourself with a dose of cosmopolitanism, as a part of a nation, whereas for the Kyrgyz the self is above all a part of a family, for us father and mother are the primary points of reference. And after them the seven generations of their ancestors, then the tribe, and after that the whole people. It's on that respect that our love for the Kyrgyz is based."

"You know, even though my father was born in Hungary, in Pecs, and I have Hungarian relations, I'm still an ordinary German. If I had children, they too would think of themselves as Germans."

Bek Murza recalled Leonard's wife, the charming Charlotte, who worked as a translator for the publisher Volk und Welt. Leonard and Charlotte had been married for over twenty years but they had no children.

"It was the great Germans who created the history of the nation," Leonard went on, "and I'm proud to feel even a slight degree of involvement in their deeds, of proximity to their descendants. God granted them the right to be the fathers of us all. And we, who are their scions, achieve greater or lesser degrees of success. Some are destined to become a father in the original sense of the word, or the father of a nation, while others like me weren't meant for the great enterprise of fatherhood. But let's get back to the story of Kese-Chal."

A youth named Ayyp had been out in the burning sun since early morning sharpening his pocket knife. Once it was to his satisfaction, he glanced into someone's house, and having made certain that there was no one at home, he stole a few things he took a fancy to, and some food. But for several days the young thief could not stop thinking about the gold of the Karga tribe. Rumor said that Kese-Chal had given orders that it be kept deep under the hearth. And every member of the family of the Karga tribe guards his hearth above all else.

One day Ayyp asked the young man who had stayed to guard the fire for the night "What sort of gold is it?"

"I have never seen it," the young man confessed, and he added "They told me that it is just like red coals. It can be red, and it can be white. It's called Ak altyn, or white gold." He touched the nearest ember with the end of the copper poker, and it gave off a ringing sound.

"Bayke!" said Ayyp. "Give me a little piece."

"It's not allowed," said the young guard sternly, "Kese-Chal forbade us to touch it. We simply guard it."

"You don't need to touch it, I can take a piece myself," suggested Ayyp.

"You'd do better to go and sleep, you shouldn't be here in the first place," replied the guard.

"Why shouldn't I stand guard with you here too? I can stay awake until morning."

"It's not allowed. You'll distract me with your chatter," the young man answered. And he added "Orders are orders, I just have to fulfill them."

Suddenly the sturdy verzila, the guard commander, appeared in front of the two speakers. At the sight of Ayyp, he grabbed the boy by the collar so roughly that the lad's old sheepskin jacket ripped apart at the seams.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sternly.

"I'm trying to get warm," whimpered the terrified Ayyp. "I'm not well."

The young lad realized that there was no point in trying to struggle with the verzila, it would only make things worse. The hefty commander held the uninvited guest suspended in the air and after cursing him roundly carried him to the door and tossed him outside. Sitting on the cold ground, Ayyp didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He had barely caught his breath when the door opened again and his felt hat flew out and hit him painfully in the face.

"Get out of here! And don't you dare show your face here again at such a late hour!" the verzila's voice bellowed over the threshold.

Ayyp walked away, accompanied only by the barking of the dogs.

But not a month had passed before the lad again crept into the house where the gold was stored, this time through the window. That meant he had to pass through several chambers to reach the hearth. On that night a little old man was guarding the hearth. He was not as tall as Ayyp, and so the lad acted boldly: he sat down at the hearth, picked up the copper poker, drew several red coals towards him and swiftly threw them into his hat.

The guard, who had been watching all his movements, asked:

"Hey, why did you steal into the house through the window?"

Ayyp remained silent. Then the old man asked him "Why are you putting gold bars into your hat?"

"I came to fetch coals," the lad replied.

"Then where's your shovel?"

"I must run," muttered the young thief in confusion.

"The door's there, behind you," pointed the watchman.

Ayyp was heading for the door when his hat caught alight. The flames burned his hands and he dropped the hat on the floor.

The noise around the hearth awakened Ayyp's old acquaintance, the verzila who had thrown him out of the house, who stormed into the chamber and roared:

"The thief's hat is on fire, he's stolen the tribe's gold!"

But the unsuccessful thief was too busy fighting with his burning sleeve to pay attention to the guard

The little old man bent down, filled a copper jug with water from a wooden bucket, and threw it over the burning Ayyp. When the flame didn't die down, the old man poured water over him straight from the bucket.

"Didn't I warn you to keep away from here?" asked the verzila threateningly, bearing down on the sheepish lad.

But the old man unexpectedly stood up for the thief:

"Don't lay hands on an orphan, there's no honor in it."

The verzila dropped his fist, which was about to connect with Ayyp's head, and the lad realized that the old man commanded authority. Meanwhile a crowd of people had gathered around the hearth. The whole community was alarmed and perplexed by the appearance of an uninvited guest in the middle of the night.

"Esteemed Kese," the verzila addressed the old man. "This young man is not just a thief but a trickster. This isn't the first time he's fallen into my hands. Give him to me, and I'll break all his ribs – that will stop him trying such tricks again."

"Ai-ai, ai-ai," the old man tried to calm the guard commander. "Evil is always at a man's elbow, not everyone can avert it. Calm yourself, my son, the gold was in the fire, he wasn't able to carry it away."

With a copper shovel, the zdorovyak collected the molten bars that Ayyp had wanted to steal and cooled them by pouring cold water over them. Everyone saw the gleaming ingots of gold, as big as a child's fist. Verzila picked them up, together with the remains of Ayyp's hat, and handed them to Kese-Chal, who took them in his hands and said:

"The boy does not know that all human misfortunes come from this metal. For him the yellow metal is a plaything, I doubt he can see its value. That is not his offense."

Those round the hearth fell silent. The old man Kese flung the gold bars into the fire together with the boy's hat. The company dispersed, and the old man turned to Ayyp:

"You will stay here with me. You won't grow to manhood deprived of a father's care. The mountains and valleys alone cannot give a man the knowledge of life that he needs."

Chapter 9

The old man's words were not at all to Ayyp's liking. He was accustomed to a life of liberty and did not want to abandon his roving life style. But thinking it over, he concluded that if he stayed he might still succeed in stealing the gold.

Having recovered from the fear of retribution, the young thief remembered that the verzila had addressed the old man as Kese. Ayyp found that amusing, because Kese is a name given to those men who have no growth of hair on their cheeks and chins. There was in fact not a single hair on Kese's face, moreover he looked the frailest and smallest of the entire community. He was the same height as Ayyp.

Kese was born prematurely, with both male and female sexual attributes, but he was brought up among young men. Kese enjoyed rude health despite his slight build, but he had one weakness: he was terrified of sharp objects. He survived both his parents, his closest relatives and then all the other members of the Karga tribe. When Umut (Hope), as his parents called him, grew old, his true name was forgotten, and instead everyone called him Kese-Chal.

"We both have dirty feet, so we're both wretched," the old man began speaking to him from a distance. "You need the shelter of a home, and I need a family. Why shouldn't you be my son?"

"Where are your family?" Ayyp interrupted him with deliberate rudeness.

"In their graves," the old man replied. "Surely that can't be of any interest to you?"

"Everything is of interest to me," replied the thief abruptly.

"Then listen to me," the old man began reluctantly. "I married against my will, and my wife left me. Now I live alone. I am gathering homeless and poor children."

"What the devil for?"

"I want to make them my tribe," answered Kese-Chal in all seriousness. "They will prolong the Karga tribe. Will you become one of them?"

"You're out of your mind," jeered Ayyp. "This community is bursting with people without me."

"That's simply your impression. You can never have too many people."

"You've already got one foot in the grave," Ayyp shot back even more rudely. "Think of yourself!"

"Dying is not the most important thing in a man's life," said Kese-Chal peaceably. "To bring a man up, now that's a worthwhile undertaking that I have made the aim of my whole life."

Ayyp was listening to Kese-Chal with only half an ear, he could still see the hearth with the gold.

"I'm going outside, I want to take a short walk," he said and headed for the door. But the door to the street was locked from the outside. Ayyp threw his whole weight against it and then started to shove it with his shoulder. Suddenly the door opened inwards, depositing Ayyp on the floor. In the gap he saw the familiar guard commander, who recognized the boy and pounced on him. "You rotten thief! Just you wait, if you try any tricks again, I'll break all your arms and legs for you!"

"I didn't lay a finger on him! Elder, did I offend you?" wailed Ayyp.

Kese remained silent. Then the verzila was out of the door as swiftly as he had appeared, and Kese-Chal resumed his tale as though nothing had happened.

"I'm not asking a great deal of you: to call me ata – father, and to live with me. Everything else in your life will take its own course."

"That's fine by me. Tell me about the Karga clan," said the youth with feigned interest.

"There used to many of us, a great number even. The Karga clan used to number one million mounted warriors."

"It must have been difficult to rule such a mass of people."

"On the contrary."

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"You can rule millions of people by applying the law. But when you're dealing with just a few dozen, you have to try to find a common language with each individual. Our state had its own unwritten laws, and every citizen knew them by heart. They comprised thirty one points. Thirty points applied to every Karga citizen, and one only to the tsar."

"What were they?"

"For example: who are there more of, you or the people? It's better to work for no wage than to be idle. It's better to be a stable-hand among good men than a leader among rogues. If you can respond to evil with good, you're worthy of praise. In a well-run community even a slave is strong, but in a badly-administered community even a warrior is weak. If we don't know ourselves, how can we come to understand others? When you're surrounded by enemies, protect your honour rather than your life. When you're weak, act courageously, and let the enemy feel fear."

"It seems strange," the lad mused aloud. "People believed in unwritten laws as though they were written down? And the country was ruled according to them?"

"You didn't live there, that's why it seems strange," answered Kese-Chal, explaining as clearly as he could. "We had a ruling elite, forty aksakals elected by the citizens. They were men who commanded respect, who had demonstrated their honesty, and everyone obeyed their orders. That grouping was called the Kenesh, or assembly. It convened every three weeks. Its members debated any issue and handed down a ruling immediately. And when there was a need to address major questions, in the first instance how to establish contact with neighbouring countries or

elect the tsar, they summoned all the citizens to a great gathering in which all men above the age of twenty participated. Each one threw a pebble into a goatskin bag, with the help of which they determined the place in the hierarchy of the country of one or another applicant for a high position. The Karga brought their children up strictly. All the residents of each aul served as the guardians and teachers of every child. From the age of nine, boys were brought up separate from their parents. Until the age of 20 their primary occupation was to help the warriors. They cleaned the stables, took the horses to graze, were responsible for looking after the weapons, saddled the horses, stood watch to keep order..."

"And if I were one of them I would stand guard over the hearth?"

"No, you would become the biggest shepherd boy of them all," answered the old man without malice.

"But perhaps I could stand by the hearth and watch like them?" asked Ayyip, still remembering the gold in the ashes of the hearth.

"The watchmen are selected from those who are trusted," replied the old man, annoyed. "The Karga clan is violating the law by keeping gold and silver. These metals, which have brought the clan immeasurable suffering, were removed from circulation for ever at the command of the Kenesh. Since then any Karga despises them, that's why we keep them together with the ashes."

"Why were you left alone?" asked Ayyip abruptly. "Who destroyed your tribe?"

"Don't be offended, my son, but I cannot tell you."

They remained silent for a moment, then Kese-Chal said to the thief:

"In all this to-do I never asked you your name."

"I'm called Ayyip," the lad answered.

"Do you remember your mother and father?"

"No," said Ayyip with satisfaction, "I'm an orphan."

"No, that's not so," said the old man. "From today, you're my son."

"I don't belong to anyone!" protested the young thief and yawned broadly.

"You can't not belong to anyone!" argued the old man. "You and I are formed from the same dough. We are Kyrgyz. You will prolong the most ancient and glorious clan of the Karga."

"I told you, I don't have a clan!" said the youth firmly.

Suddenly a pretty young girl appeared on the threshold, carrying large bowls filled with soup, pieces of boiled meat, bread, and two small teapots containing hot tea with coarse sugar.

The young lad consumed his meal with enjoyment. The old man only drank tea.

"The Kyrgyz select their warriors on the basis of their appetite," commented Kese-Chal with satisfaction. "You can eat mine too, I'm not hungry."

Ayyip ate every mouthful of the old man's food.

After the meal he fell silent, on the assumption that after the night watch came around the old man would fall asleep. And after a while Kese-Chal did doze off.

The youth quietly went outside and headed for the house where the gold bars were hidden in the embers. There was no one by the hearth although the fire was still burning strongly. Ayyip took the tongs and began to poke around in the ash. Then out of nowhere two young guards, each as massive as the verzila, bore down on him. One of them seized the lad by the left arm and the other by the right, lifting him clean off the floor.

"Caught in the act!" crowed one of them.

"Now you'll get what's coming to you!" shouted the second angrily.

"What shall we tell Kese-Chal?" asked the first.

"We'll tell him that he's been punished," replied the second confidently. "Ask this thief what kind of punishment he likes."

"Do you prefer bitter or sweet treatment?" he asked Ayyip enigmatically.

"I won't do it again..." Ayyip began to splutter.

"Let's try the sweet punishment," ordered the first guard.

And they both started to tickle the young lad. There was nothing Ayyip could do but laugh hysterically and beg for mercy, but they went on tickling him. After less than one minute tears were pouring from Ayyip's eyes even though he was still laughing. He ran out of breath, his lips

turned blue, his eyes protruded and seemed about to burst out of their sockets. Only when he no longer had the breath to laugh did the two young guards leave him in peace. In order to bring the unconscious boy back to his senses they poured water over him from the wooden bucket, then they left. Weak and soaked to the skin, Ayyip managed with a great effort to get to his feet and stood by the hearth to dry his clothes.

After that incident Ayyip realized that it would not be easy to steal the Karga's gold from the hearth, and so he abandoned his attempts to do so. He led a carefree life: he ate when he felt like it, and slept for as long as he wanted. Kese-Chal took care of him. Every morning began with him learning and reciting from memory the next of the 31 points of the legal code of the now vanished Karga clan. Then Kese-Chal would take ages explaining it to him.

Ayyip soon found out that the people of the community did not belong to the Karga clan; they called themselves Kargaday, meaning like the Kargins. They all voluntarily served Kese-Chal, the one man who could ensure the continued survival of the Karga. These people came to him by various paths, but they all had misfortune and a long period of wandering behind them. Almost all of them had committed some crime for which they had been expelled from their clan. Kese-Chal welcomed all who came to him. And when he became the sole surviving member of the Karga, the Kargadays began traveling to villages and collecting orphans in order to bring them up as Kargadays.

Chapter 10

One summer day Kese-Chal announced that they needed to leave the village to look for new recruits to the community, and so the next morning the Kargadays rode off with Kesechal. The men took several youngsters with them, including Ayyip, to watch the horses during the night. They passed several villages in the Cheshtebe valley and towards evening they made a halt at the village of Yellow Valley. The bai, the village headman, welcomed the unexpected guests warmly, unlike the other villagers who greeted Kese's plan with derision. The bai gave them dinner, and when the time came to sleep, individual households took in the Kargadays.

Ayyip and three other lads went out to keep guard over the horses, and they agreed that each would watch from one point of the compass. When the moon rose from behind the silver mountains it was suddenly as bright as day.

But instead of keeping watch over the horses, Ayyip made his way resolutely to the yurt where the bai's family was sleeping. The whole evening he had been unable to think of anything except the bai's metal trunk. He had noticed it when he and the others first entered the bai's extended yurt, and now he intended to rummage among someone else's belongings. As an honored guest of the Karga clan, Kese-Chal was sleeping in the bai's yurt. Avoiding any unnecessary noise, Ayyip slipped inside the yurt, and just as quietly he made his way over to the metal trunk. Taking out his pocket knife, he opened the trunk without any difficulty. Groping about in it, he found fragments of silver moulded like human figures. He took one, and then another, and hid them inside his shirt.

Ayyip left the yurt, but found himself face to face with the bai's watchmen. The little thief took to his heels, but in vain: the watchmen were faster. Ayyip's yells as he tried to tear himself away, and the shouts of the watchmen as they struggled to keep hold of him, woke up the entire village. People came out into the street and surrounded the bai's yurt.

Popular custom demanded that the first time a thief was caught, his right arm was cut off at the elbow and he spent the rest of his life as a herdsman in the village where he had committed the theft.

"Who knows this thief?" asked the bai of the village of Yellow Valley.

Kese-Chal groaned, then addressed the bai timidly. "He's ours. We're trying to reeducate him."

There was dead silence, broken only by the lad's sobs. Then the bai asked "What has he stolen, and from whom?"

"Bai, forgive the lad," implored Kesechal.

"Forgive me, merciful Bai, it's the first time I've stolen from anyone," sobbed Ayyip.

"Indeed, this is the first time you've stolen from someone," said the Bai with a wry smile. "What clan are you from?"

"I'm an orphan," answered Ayyip quickly.

"You can't say that," protested Kese-Chal. "You're my son, remember?"

Everyone laughed. The bai went on: "Seeing he's so young, don't cut his arm off at the elbow, just cut off his hand."

"Let everyone see what happens to you if you steal," someone shouted from the crowd.

Kese-Chal groaned again, and implored the Bai: "Have pity on me!"

"Punishment to be carried out before dawn," added the bai.

His guards began to make ready a place to cut off Ayyip's hand. They dragged over a wooden block with an axe embedded in it, and found a piece of felt in which to bury the severed hand in the ground.

There was absolute silence as people waited for the sentence to be carried out. Then Kese-Chal spoke again. "Good people, let me say a few words," he addressed them all. "This poor brat is not of my blood but I want to make a decent human being out of him. All the Kargadays bear responsibility for him, as you do, because we are all Kyrgyz. He isn't old enough yet for noble deeds. As they say, he's young and crazy as though he'd been smoking opium. Every grown man remembers what a hot head he had when he was younger. Bai, this time let me redress the wrong done to you. Show consideration to my son. Let him keep his hand."

"Venerable Kese of the Karga clan, I understand your concern, but it was not I who instigated this custom. When a thief is caught, his right arm is cut off, if he is caught stealing a second time -- his left arm, and if he commits the same crime a third time -- his head! This custom is universal, and to waive it would be to abet a criminal. Venerable Kese, this procedure will be of benefit to him."

"There are no mouths that do not err, nor hooves that do not stumble."

"Can a dog that has eaten from another's bowl forget the taste?"

"If he has not understood his offense today, then Tenirim will punish him!"

"Your grey hair has made me acquiescent, venerable Kese. I do not harbor a grudge against you," answered the bai. "You can take your adopted son with you, but first his hand shall be cut off."

The bai's guards grabbed the boy, who was shaking with terror, and gagged and blindfolded him. Then they dragged him by the arms to the block. The axe flashed in the moonlight above the watchman's head. Seeing the blade, Kese-Chal was filled with terror, and he fainted a second before the hollow thud and the youth's bloodcurdling scream.

A local sage took archa-wood ash from the hearth, a piece of felt and a sheepskin thong to stop the bleeding from the wound, otherwise Ayyip could have bled to death. The villagers looked on as the sage uttered a spell over Ayyip's arm. The boy lay there unconscious from fear and pain.

After that Kese-Chal cut the expedition short. The Kargadays were deeply demoralized by what had happened. Earlier expeditions had lasted from several weeks to half a year and they had always returned with dozens of new members of the Kargaday community.

"I brought my son home from this expedition," Kese-Chal told the community. "We nearly had to leave him in the village of Yellow Valley as a hostage for his misdeed. I couldn't stop them cutting off his hand, but at least they let him return home alive. And for that we should offer up a sacrifice -- let it be a white goat with a yellow head. And may Tenirim help us!"

Turning back half way is considered a bad omen. The Kargadays were alarmed, but they fulfilled Kese-Chal's commands to the letter.

As autumn approached, Ayyip returned to health and the stump of his arm healed. He found it difficult, but not an impossible task, to work only with his left hand. He even began to shave the down on his chin with his pocket knife.

One morning Ayyip was shaving in front of the mirror when out of the corner of his eye he saw Kese enter the room. Suddenly the old man shrank from him in fear. Ayyip realized that Kese was afraid of his pocket knife. Without a second thought, the incorrigible thief decided to take advantage of the old man's weakness and take possession of the gold. He walked over, holding the knife, and the old man fell to his knees in terror.

"What are you doing, Ayyip?" muttered Kese-Chal.

"The gold! Tell the guards not to stop me taking it from the hearth!" ordered the youth. As he approached, the old man turned first white and then red. When Ayyip reached him he took his whip from the hook and held it out to the thief. "Show them this and they'll let you approach the hearth," Kese said, avoiding looking at the knife.

"Will they come after me?" asked Ayyip menacingly.

"No! I'll tell them all to leave you in peace," the old man answered quickly.

"Tell them now," Ayyip insisted.

"Then I'll have to go with you," answered Kese, "Come on."

"You stay here," said the one-armed youth. "I'll tell them you sent me to fetch the gold. You lie down on the floor and don't move!" he shouted, and when Kese fell at his feet he held the knife blade to the old man's throat.

"No, my son, no! I only want what is good for you. It was wrong of your parents to abandon you. It was wrong of us! I beg you, Ayyip, don't destroy your father!"

"All right, all right, I'm only testing it ...Shut up," whispered the lad, bringing the blade closer and closer to the old man's throat.

"Curse you, you ungrateful wretch," muttered Kese. Suddenly Ayyip noticed that fluid was running down Kese's trousers on to the floor. The puddle grew wider, and Kese stopped speaking. But as soon as the tip of the blade touched his skin he cried out hoarsely "Help! He's killing me!"

Then Ayyip struck home. The old man's whole body convulsed violently for several seconds, then he was still.

Ayyip stood over Kese-Chal's body, frightened by what had happened. The old man's eyes were wide open as though asking him "Why?" Ayyip stood there for as long as it takes a cauldron of water to come to the boil. Only then did the murderer realize that what he had done could not be reversed. He closed the old man's eyes with the palm of his hand, then closed the pocket knife and put it away in his side pocket.

"Now I can go wherever I want," Ayyip consoled himself, "Tenirim created me to be free. To be my own master, always."

The old thief prayed all night to Tenirim that the sky would be cloudless the next day. He wanted to warm his back, the ache had kept him awake all night.

The morning dawned clear, and the blood-red sun shone down from the mountains. The solitary old man came out of his delapidated hut at the edge of the village, found a suitable spot and knelt down with his back to the sun. After a while he felt the sun's rays warming his aching back. Screwing up his eyes in pleasure, he lay there as though in a trance. When he opened his eyes, he saw Ayyip's back as he walked away. It was odd to see him alone at that early hour.

Chapter 11

The future poets and translators congregated in Room 76 of the hostel of the Institute of Literature at 1 Griboedov Street from the early morning. That day the Moscow City Komsomol Committee had scheduled a meeting on Pushkin Square in support of the struggle of the

Vietnamese people against American imperialism. Classes had been cancelled and all the students had gone off to attend the meeting, but neither Bek Murza nor Yurii Usta went with them. The two friends sat reading Western classical literature, and towards midday the Kuban Cossack suggested to the son of the Ala-Too mountains that he resume telling him about Manas.

"With a bit of application, you could have learned Kyrgyz by now," said Bek.

"There are any number of peoples in the USSR besides the Kyrgyz, you can't learn every single language," protested Yurii. "That's simply not possible! I'll make do with Russian."

"All the younger brothers of the Russian people speak Russian no worse than you do. And you, the eldest among us, can learn about the great epic of the Kyrgyz from a fellow student..."

"Don't try to talk me into it, Bek. The Russian language is eternal. And small rivers have to flow into larger ones. That's a fact. The Russian language was fated to be great, to give support to all at all times. So forget it, tell me instead whether Manas ever encountered a worthy opponent, or was he superior to all other warriors?" said Yurii.

"The mighty warrior lord Manas had one main opponent, the paladin Konurbay. And one of Manas's comrades in arms, the warrior Almambet, was almost as strong as Manas."

"How many comrades in arms did Manas have?"

"Let me count: Koshoy, Bakay, Almambet, Chubak, Syrgak... What is interesting is that they were both descended from Chinese tribes that were at war with the Kyrgyz -- Almambet was the son of a Chinese military commander while Konurbay was one of the sixty sons of the Kalmyk khan Alooche."

"To hell with them. Don't be so long-winded, get to the point."

"You're the one who keeps sidetracking me with stupid questions, and then you complain that I'm too longwinded."

"Stop being such a pain in the neck, just explain to me how the Buddhist Almambet could have co-existed peacefully with the Muslim Manas."

"It's not that simple, Yura. Almambet wasn't a Buddhist, in fact he was the most ardent Muslim in Manas's entire entourage. and anyway Islam isn't as widely practiced in the epic as paganism, or to be precise tengrianism..."

"How did Almambet come to join Manas's entourage in the first place?"

"Almambet was born when his parents were already elderly. His father, Sooronduk, and his whole family were Buddhists," Bek began. "But they brought in a woman named Izzat to nurse the baby, and she was a Dungan."

"What is a Dungan?"

"The Dungans are Chinese, but Muslims," explained Bek Murza.

"It was Almambet's nurse who inspired the future hero to live by the Muslim faith. Mind you, some Manas experts claim that this is a later addition to the text. That's because the Almambet story line doesn't fit with the general fabric of the work, it's clearly contrived and lacks credibility. For example, when out hunting, Almambet encounters the Kazakh warrior Kekche, who tells him about the basics of Islam. His account lasts for three days and three nights, but even that isn't enough for Kekche to teach Almambet the fundamentals of Islam. But Almambet converts to Islam all the same, and when he returns to Peking he tries to persuade his parents to do the same. But his parents refuse to renounce Buddhism, and Sooronduk even orders his son to be killed. Almambet runs away from home, but Chinese warriors bar his way: Muradyl, Zholoy, Konurbay and Sooronduk himself, but he defeats them one after the other."

"Which of course is not surprising," commented Yura sarcastically.

"One should note that as a child Almambet was surrounded by the best of everything, as befits the son of a top Chinese military commander," continued Bek, ignoring his friend's acid remark.

"As a young man he mastered to perfection both the art of war and that of sorcery. When he had completed his studies, Sooronduk appointed his son to succeed him as lord over the lands that bordered China and as commander in chief of the entire Chinese army."

"And he said no? Why?"

"The main reason was his conversion to Islam."

"That doesn't sound very convincing," observed Yura sceptically. "Never mind. How did Manas meet the runaway?"

"The Kyrgyz giant welcomed his guest gladly and gave him a lavish welcome. Suddenly Chyyrды began lactating, which was a good omen, and she suckled Almambet with one breast and Manas with the other, which is how they became brothers."

"A man of thirty suckling like an infant?" exclaimed Yura in derision. "What utter rubbish!"

"Part of the impact of the epic is that it preserves certain ancient traditions that have vanished without trace. To be honest with you, when I first heard that passage recited by a Manas sage I asked the same question. But then I realized that that custom probably dates back to pagan times and that the Kyrgyz have preserved it until the present. It's enough for a woman to take a child from someone and breast-feed it together with her own child, and they become breast-brothers or sisters, the popular term is 'emchektesh.' After that they remain linked by family ties for the rest of their lives."

"I've had enough of these fairy tales," growled Yurii and walked out of the room.

"What's wrong with you?" Bek called after him indignantly, but the future poet didn't deign to reply.

Chapter 12

"You've mentioned Manas's wives more than once, and it's always a different one," observed Yurii Usta.

"That was customary in feudal times," replied Bek. "True, some of them were the spoils of war. For example, Karabyrk and Akylay were the daughters of khans with whom Manas had crossed swords, and after those defeats they presented their favourite daughters to Manas in order to establish family ties between their clans. But all the same Manas dreamed of marrying for love, and he rebuked his father for not seeking him a wife. Zhakyp accepted that rebuke and set off to search for a bride for his son. On the search for a worthy wife for his son, he travelled to Samarkand, then to Ura-Tyube, then he crossed the Syr-Darya river and headed for Tashkent, Khiva, Bukhara and Keyyip. That has to have been a local name because we don't know of any town of that name. But it was in Keyyip that Zhakyp found a bride for Manas."

"What was her name?" asked Yurii Usta.

"Her maiden name was Sanirabiga," replied Bek Murza. "In popular tradition she has three names, of which the most commonly used is Kanykey. But Manas himself generally used the diminutive, affectionate form, calling her Rabiga or Saani or Sani."

"Sonia, then," said Yurii. "So why was she called Kanykey?"

"Because no one dared address the wife of such an illustrious warrior by her given name."

"What does Kanykey mean?"

"Translated from Kyrgyz, it means 'wedded to the khan.'"

"Why not simply call her Tsarina the way the Russians did? Or simply Tenth Wife if in fact she was the tenth?" snickered Yura.

"You're simply uncouth, son of Usta," Bek responded in a fit of anger.

"What's wrong with that? Being uncouth and uncultured is nice and easy."

"I'll overlook that remark," said Bek, and went on with his tale. "Zhakyp held preliminary talks in Kayyip and then an entire delegation headed by Manas arrived with the kalym."

"Yes, I know that, kalym is the bride price," interrupted Bek's fellow student.

"Can't you just shut up?" Bek lost his temper and raised his voice. "One more word out of you and I'll send you out for bread!" The students in the hostel took turns to go and buy bread, but if one of them disgraced himself in some way he would be sent whether or not it was his turn.

"What are you so upset about," asked Yura. "Fine, we're in Kiev, and the Kyrgyz have brought the bride price for Sonya..."

"Manas was accompanied by the forty members of his entourage and by the mighty warrior Almambet. Two days after they arrived in Keyyip and were relaxing after the journey, the bride had still not been brought to the bridegroom. At that point, in violation of tradition, Manas went alone to Sanirabiga's residence. She was outraged by his lack of tact in appearing before her without permission, and exclaimed:

"If you are Manas among the Kyrgyz,
In Keyyip I am Sarabiga..."

She threatened him with her dagger and demanded that he leave her presence, and when Manas tried to wrest the dagger away from her, she stabbed him. Manas thrust the girl away from him in a fury, stormed out of the palace and deployed his army against Atemir, the father of his prospective bride.

"And of course he crushed his father-in-law's troops and took possession of his Sonya," broke in Yura.

"Wrong," said Bek quickly. "It was Rabiga herself who with much effort nonetheless succeeded in mollifying Manas. She was attracted to him at first sight, and we shall see later that whatever his emotions, our hero never forgot his love for Sani and always heeded her opinion."

"Wonderful!" commented Yurii Usta.

"Not so fast," said Bek Murza. "After the standoff between the two young lovers, the representatives of the two families negotiating the marriage became more careful and decided to take precautionary measures. They housed all the guests in separate palaces. Manas, too, was allocated a palace built especially for him. But the servants sent to wait on the young giant did not dare even to enter his presence, he looked with such wrath on those who approached him that they were consumed with terror. As a result, Manas was brought nothing to eat or to drink for two days. When after two days his forty companions headed by Bakay decided to visit him, he turned his entire pentup rage on them."

"Meaning what exactly?" asked Yura. "He yelled at them and sent them out for something to eat?"

"Nothing so innocuous! He literally set on them with his fists, and then in a rage he decided to take up arms against Atemir a second time."

"Sure, being starved for two days is a perfect pretext for a battle."

"That's what would have happened if it hadn't been for Rabiga," answered Bek. "She saved our hero a second time by taking all the blame on herself."

"Clever lass," commented Yurii Usta. "But that's enough of her. Tell me instead what kind of men Manas's forty companions were."

"That's a good question. Each of them was a renowned warrior in his own right. The Kyrgyz regard Bakay, Koshoy, Almambet, Chubak, Syrgay and many others with no less affection than they do Manas. I think that they represented the forty Kyrgyz clans.

By the way, on the day of Manas's wedding they too married forty maidens from Sanirabiga's entourage. The festivities lasted for exactly one month and ten days. Quick, how many days is that?"

"Forty," replied Usta after a second's thought.

"That's enough to send you out for bread," said Bek firmly.

"Then give me some cash!" growled the future poet. "If Mayakovsky's futurism remains incomprehensible, then you'll be the one to blame, or rather your appetite."

"There's just enough here for a loaf of black bread and some tea."

"Come on Bek, give me enough for a bottle of vodka! Why do you grudge it?"

"We won't have enough to last until next month's allowance," Bek protested.

There was no point in arguing any longer with Yura, and Bek couldn't face half an hour's cursing, so he snatched the worn Soviet bills out of his friend's hand and walked purposefully out of the room. Usta flung himself down on the bed, but he didn't have time to doze off before he

heard Bek coming back, declaiming something about the merits of a healthy diet, which meant he'd brought back some alcohol.

"Today we feast!" announced Bek calmly, putting a bottle of White Horse whisky on the table. "They're selling it freely. I collected all the honorariums I was owed and bought a bottle. Let's sample Western booze."

"Let the tasting begin!" declaimed Usta. He turned the bottle in his hands and put it back on the table. "Let's see what kind of stuff it is. Go ahead and pour!"

"You know, Yurii, " remarked Bek, "The Kyrgyz have a saying 'like the wake for Keketey.'"

"When they drank Scotch whisky?" joked Yura. "By our standards it's just fortified wine."

"The Kyrgyz make that comparison when a feast is on an unusually grandiose scale, a landmark occasion."

"Pour me a full glass," said Yura holding out the cut-glass tumbler he always kept under his bed. "I'm not sure about grandiose, but we ought to try this stuff."

"People in the West can drink this every day, and for us it's the first time. Doesn't that count as a landmark occasion?" asked the future translator.

The future poet emptied his glass at one go, held his breath for several seconds, turned beetroot red, and then exhaled loudly.

"Splash out some more. Stop messing about! It's good stuff, eh? Fill it up to the brim."

"Leave some for me," said Bek indignantly.

"I'm the one who ought to finish off this muck," argued Usta, "you ought to be drinking Georgian chacha or sake or kumys."

"You mean 'East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet?'"

"Exactly. On that score I agree with Kipling."

"I don't understand you, Yura. Why are you so interested in Manas? It hasn't even been translated into Russian."

"I'm filling my spiritual space," answered the future poet. "I am Yurii Usta and not Velimir Khlebnikov," he continued referring to the brilliant futurist poet who turned his back on the 1917 revolution and died of starvation in a remote village in Astrakhan at the age of 36. "The difference between us is that Velimir would never have made a point of discovering Manas for himself while I shall."

"Of course you're the greatest, Yura! But when it comes down to it, I'm narrating all this for myself. After all, not every Kyrgyz knows about Keketey's wake. Every Kyrgyz acknowledges that Manas is a great epic but no one understands it completely. It's like an iceberg, most of which is under water."

"Oof! This stuff burns! It's wonderful!" exclaimed Yura with a shudder, and added, "Come on, Bek! Let's get back to Manas!"

Chapter 13

"The wake for Keketey, who was one of the great Manas's advisors, was truly a landmark event. In fact that part of the epic represents an ethnographic snapshot of Kyrgyz society at that time."

"Bek, you've blundered into the wrong steppe, as our Professor Artamonov would say. Get back to the point and tell me about the wake itself," protested Yura.

"Let me explain this my way," snapped Bek. "The wake for Keketey was organized by his son Bokmurun with Manas's blessing. After all, Keketey was one of the first to support Manas's march on his historic homeland, and from that time the warrior and the wealthy Keketey had remained friends. And one of Manas's goals was to demonstrate the military might of the Kyrgyz to the whole world."

"And how did he manage that?" asked Yura.

"Very simple. Among the guests invited to Keketey's funeral were Manas's sworn foes. And the invitations made very clear that if they did not come, they would be destroyed."

"That's brilliant! Mark my command! Forward march to the funeral!" Yura bawled with laughter.

"You can laugh, but they even invited Manas's old enemy Konurbay. This passage reads:

"Let him come to this wake, tell him
If he does not come to this wake,
Let him know that misfortune awaits him!
His melon-patch will be plundered,
All his orchards will be cut down.
Bokmurun the son of Keketey
Will give him no rest.
He will turn his spring days to autumn,
He will scatter his hay ricks and turn them to dust.
He will burn his fortress and turn it to ashes,
He will defile his holy places,
He will slaughter every last one,
He will totally annihilate the enemy,
Truly he will destroy everything."

"And how did they send out these invitations?"

"They sent a messenger, Aydar. He spoke sixty languages, which is why he was entrusted with a mission of such magnitude."

"Impressive. So the guests were invited from various countries..."

"Every delegation was accompanied by some of its best fighting men," Bek went on. "Some military commanders brought up to a thousand warriors. Each of them wanted his own men to be victorious at the competitions that were a part of the wake. Today you could go so far as to call it an Asian Olympic games."

"And where did the Kyrgyz accomodate all these people?"

"The organizers asked themselves the very same question," laughed Bek. "The elders took counsel and decided to hold the wake in the Karkyr valley, which is close to Lake Issyk-Kul. Numerous small streams run through the valley, which solved the problem of how to supply the guests with fresh water. And there was no problem with other provisions, as Keketey had been fabulously wealthy. The hosts provided all the guests with food and accomodation and provided for their security. And there were prizes for the winners of the various competitions."

"Gold and silver?"

"Not only," answered Bek. "For example, the owner of the horse that won the race was entitled to 80,000 horses, one thousand camels, 100,000 sheep, and also 9,000 cattle, 90 yurts, and two slave girls and one male slave."

"That's certainly generous! And what did those who finished in second and third place get?"

"The first sixty horses to finish won prizes."

"How many horses took part altogether?" asked Yura.

"One thousand!" Bek replied.

"Exactly one thousand? Not 999 or 1,001?"

"You make me sick, you know that? Let me explain. The horses to compete were selected on the eve of the race, and the umpires only approved 1,000 of them."

"Umpires? What were they needed for?"

"To make sure the competitors observed the rules and safety procedures during the entire race. They sent horses to cover the whole distance from start to finish. The race lasted eight days and the horses traversed a distance equal to that from the Caspian Sea to Issyk-Kul, which is why they needed no fewer than 6,000 umpires."

"And who won?"

"One of Manas's war horses named Akkula. And Kyrgyz won almost every event after that. The Kyrgyz strongman Koshoy defeated the Kalmyk Zholoy in wrestling, and Manas defeated Konurbay in the jousting. There were many other memorable contests, for example, this is the description of the archery:

Manas, who was standing to one side,
Struck the golden drum.
The warriors stood opposite one another,
Their bows were deadly, their arrows were painted,
They were marvellous to behold!
They drew their bows,
The arrows flew to the target .
And now they departed this world.
This false world is transitory!
The valiant warrior Manas
Struck the drum again,
When the infidels saw,
They lost all reason,
The arrows flew whistling from their bows ,
The warriors surpassed all peoples in their skill.
The arrows loosened from their bows
Hit the bones fastened to their caps
And tore them off.
They saw how the arrows shot from the bows
Tore off every single
Bone on their caps.'

In short, the Kyrgyz more than demonstrated their military superiority to the whole company. But Konurbay was not pleased by the Kyrgyz show of valor and sought a pretext for a fight. At his command, the Chinese troops that had accompanied the honoured guests to Keketey's wake drove away the cattle that were meant to be awarded to the prize winners over the next three days.

The hosts could not overlook such an insult, and the Kyrgyz warriors took off after the Chinese, overtook them and slew them, taking prisoner the Chinese warrior Neskara. Konurbay was wounded by the young Bokmurun, while Manas wounded the Kalmy Zholoy. In a word, the wake for Keketey only fuelled the existing mutual enmity.

Chapter 14

The next time Leonard Links came to Moscow, the translator Bek Murza invited him out to dinner. Within his publishing house, Leonard specialized in Russian literature, and as he spoke Russian fluently, that was the language he and Bek conversed in.

"I've earned quite a lot of money, we can afford to eat out," said Bek jokingly en route.

"Money is garbage, if you have it you should spend it as fast as possible," Leonard agreed.

In less than an hour they were sitting at a side table in the restaurant of the Central House of Literature that was too small for anyone to join them, and ordered a lavish repast.

"Citizens should accomplish heroic deeds to the glory of their nation, otherwise they simply become a disgrace to it," Bek launched in on a new train of thought.

"What are you getting at, Bek?" Leonard broke in.

"One example of what I mean is the tale of the heroes who routed the hordes of the Tyurgesh, the Telengits, the Huns and the Kibs," explained Bek, listing the peoples against whom the Kyrgyz were constrained to defend their territory in the seventh century A.D.

Leonard, as always, was listening with considerable interest.

"These glorious warriors were from the Sayak clan. One of them lived to be a hundred, and in line with tradition their exploits were to become the glory of the Sargabysh clan."

"What tradition was that?"

"The essence of it is that if a man lived a long and glorious life, then the memory of him lived on for centuries and he was universally revered."

"Rather like an Artist of Merit or a People's Poet in the USSR?" suggested Leo.

"No, this is a bit different," countered Bek Murza. "It was the common people who used to decide who was most worthy of such honor, not the authorities. And in order to take that decision they would convene a special Supreme Council called the Uлуу kenesh..."

The two friends were already beginning to feel the effect of the vodka they had drunk and, absorbed in their conversation, they did not notice an overweight middle-aged woman making her way to their table. The two men, who until then had been focussing on each other, turned their heads simultaneously when a waitress drew up another chair to their table. The poetess Mariam Kazak was standing looking down at them.

Kazak had been born in Siberia, and as a young and ardent member of the Komsomol she spent several years chronicling the construction of the Baikal-Amur railroad. When the Soviet authorities formally acknowledged that her poetry conformed to the party norms of "patriotic in spirit and Communist in content," she found her way to Moscow, where she quickly succeeded in establishing useful contacts within the literary bureaucracy and very soon landed herself a leading position in the writers' professional organization. From that point onwards, Mariam Kazak was re-elected time and again over a period of at least ten years as a secretary of the USSR Union of Writers. Confronted in the late 1980s with the existential choice presented by Gorbachev's perestroika, she realized very quickly which way the wind was blowing and switched to the democrats' camp, a move that brought her a new post in the new Union. She would stop at nothing to get what and where she wanted, and was indifferent to her appalling reputation among her fellow writers for the simple reason that her contacts with the KGB were infinitely more effective than any honest literary labor. People not only disliked Kazak, they were afraid of her.

"Whom do I espy in my house?" she exclaimed, intentionally raising her voice. "Leonard, how glad I am to see you here! What brings you to Moscow?"

"Thank you, Mariam," replied Leonard with a gesture of welcome. "I'm just passing through Moscow. Let me introduce my friend Bek."

"Colleagues, may I have your attention!" Kazak addressed the room, ignoring Leonard. Several people stood up and bowed to her in greeting. "A round of applause, please, for our German friend. He publishes our authors."

Meanwhile, the waitress laid an extra place for Kazak and asked her "What would you like to order, Mariam Ivanovna?"

"Bring us an unopened bottle of Stolichnaya!" barked Kazak.

"Mariam Ivanovna, the meal is on me. Please feel free to order whatever you like," said Bek.

"And who the hell might you be?" the woman turned on Bek unexpectedly.

"What do you mean, who am I?" Bek was flustered. "I'm a normal human being."

"You call yourself a human being?" the poetess's face contorted in a grimace. "You're wogs, not human beings! How are things out there in Chukotka?" she asked, referring to the home of the hapless ethnic minority that served as the butt of countless racist Soviet jokes.

"Bek is a Kyrgyz," Leonard interposed mildly. "He's a well-known translator, we've published several of his works."

"Oh yes, a major talent! However much you try to educate a wog, he's still a wog. They don't even read their own writers."

"I'm proud of being born a Kyrgyz," Bek affirmed resolutely.

"Have it your own way. But I don't want anything to do with you. If it wasn't for us, all of you, Kyrgyz, Chukchi and all the rest of you, you'd all have died out long ago!"

"Some of Bek's work is outstanding," Leonard tried again to get a word in.

"He writes about the Kyrgyz nation."

"Leo, you're a white man, why do you need this?" Kazak turned to the German. "If it wasn't for us they wouldn't exist." And turning to their fellow diners, she added loudly: "But that's not enough for them. They're breeding like rabbits all around us, they're taking our jobs, they take over our wives and husbands and now our guests as well..."

"Aren't we getting perilously close to the limits of decency?" Leo asked with his usual gentle laugh.

But the words were barely out of his mouth when Kazak rounded on the waitress, addressing her in the humiliating second person singular:

"Why did you bring an open bottle? I told you not to open it!"

"I swear to you, Mariam Ivanovna, not a single gram has been poured. It's just our custom to bring a bottle already open," protested the waitress.

"And who can guarantee that it hasn't been watered down?"

The head waiter came over, picked up the bottle from the table without a word, and headed for the buffet with Kazak following after. The other guests resumed eating, only glancing occasionally at Bek and Leonard.

Translated by Liz Carlson