

ORMON SATAROV

THE IRADI FRONTIER STORYTELLER

THE RIDER FROM KENKOL

NOW
TRANSLATED
INTO ENGLISH

ARSHA BOOKS

Translated from the Iradi by Aidana Mukash kyzy

КЕНКОЛ АШУУСУ · 1964

THE RIDER FROM KENKOL

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Passages cut from the 1964 edition are restored from the author's typescript and marked in square-bracketed translator's notes.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between the characters and any person, living or dead, is coincidental.

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ONE

THE HORSES HAD BEEN GONE FOUR HOURS WHEN BAYISH Kenje uulu came down the river trail to Chong-Talas, and he knew it before he saw the corral.

He knew it from the dogs. The dogs of the stud farm barked at everything: at wolves, at the wind, at the director's bicycle. Now they were silent, lying flat in the dust by the gate with their ears back, the way dogs lie when men have come in the night and struck them.

He knew it from the mare under him, too. The grey had lifted her head a mile back and smelled the empty air, and she had not liked it.

Bayish drew rein at the gate and sat a moment, looking.

The big corral was empty. Forty-one mares of the riding blood, the long-necked golden ones that the old men called *akyel* and the Red Army called "the Talas remounts", and the black stallion Kara-Jal, who had cost the Soviet power two hundred gold roubles and a war. All gone. The herders had never liked the stallion. A black horse, the old men said, belonged to somebody else. The rails on the west side were down, cut clean with an axe, and the ground beyond them was trampled into a churned brown road that ran off toward the hills and the high cold country.

A man came out of the bunkhouse with a rifle he did not know how to hold. It was Pavlov, the director, a good

engineer from Saratov, who had been sent to Turkestan to build a stud farm and had built one, and who had never in his life been asked to take it back from anybody.

"Kenje!" Pavlov said. It was what everybody called him. It meant the youngest son, though Bayish was thirty-four and had no brothers left alive. "Thank God. They came at two. Eight men, perhaps ten. They tied old Kalmurat in the hay barn. They shot Belka." He pointed at a dog lying apart from the others. "I have telephoned Talas. The militia will come."

"When?"

Pavlov looked at the ground. "Tomorrow. Perhaps the day after. They have one lorry and it is in Kara-Buura."

Bayish nodded. He had expected that. He swung down off the grey and walked to the cut rails, leading her, and squatted there in the cold dust with his hat pushed back. He read the ground the way his grandfather had taught him, and then as the army had taught him again in the Fergana in '21, when there had been men in the hills who would kill you for your boots.



A TRAIL IS A LETTER WRITTEN BY PEOPLE WHO DO NOT know you will read it. Bayish had heard an old *irchy* sing that at a wedding once, and had thought it nonsense, and later in the Fergana had found that it was true.

This letter said a good deal. It said ten riders, as Pavlov had guessed, on mountain horses, unshod, the small round tracks of the Chongtor ponies that the herders rode. That meant men from the hills, men who knew the country. But among them one horse wore iron. A big horse, a cavalry

horse, heavy on the forehand, and its near hind hoof turned out a little, so that it struck the ground crooked and left a track like a half-moon tipped on its side.

Bayish knew that track. He had followed it once before, four years ago, up a dry valley above Andijan, until the man riding the horse had turned in his saddle and shot the boy riding next to Bayish through the throat.

The man's name had been Strel'nikov. He had been a captain in the White army, then a captain of nobody, then a dealer in other men's horses, and at the end of 1921 he had gone over the mountains into China, and everybody had said that was the last of him. Everybody had been wrong about him before.



OLD KALMURAT WAS SITTING ON A FEED BOX IN THE HAY barn, rubbing the rope marks on his wrists. He was seventy, and had herded horses for the Kokand khans' grandsons and for the Tsar's remount officers and now for the Soviet power, and he regarded all three as passing weather.

"West," he said, before Bayish could ask. "Up the Kenkol."

"With forty mares heavy in foal? They'll kill half of them on the pass."

"They don't care. They're not selling foals. They're selling horses." Kalmurat spat. "Over the Kenkol, down the Chatkal, out to the Fergana. There are men in the Fergana still who'll pay gold for a horse that can run all day. You know who." He was quiet a moment. "There's something else." He did not look at Bayish when he said it. He looked

at the barn door, where the light was coming in grey and thin. "Before they came. Around midnight. I went out to check the stallion, and there was a bull on the river path. A black one. Standing right in the middle of the path, looking at the corral."

"Somebody's bull got loose."

"Nobody on this river keeps a black bull," said Kalmurat. "Nobody would."

Bayish said nothing. He had carried a Party card for six years and ridden with the Red cavalry for four, and he did not believe in Morkhan or omens or any of the things old men muttered about on the Talas. He had no more belief in them than in the idea that a horse would kick him if he walked behind it. He simply did not walk behind horses.

"I'm going after them," he said.



PAVLOV ARGUED, AS BAYISH HAD KNOWN HE WOULD. IT WAS madness. It was one man against ten. It was the job of the militia, of the OGPU, of somebody in Talas with a lorry and a telephone and a stamp. Bayish let him talk while he filled two water skins at the trough and packed the saddlebags. Flour. Salt. A twist of tea. Dried curd. A hundred and twenty rounds for the cavalry carbine he had brought home from the Fergana and was not supposed to have. A pinch of juniper in a scrap of white cloth, which his mother had put into every bag he had ever carried from home, and which he put in now without thinking about why.

"At least take a second horse," Pavlov said, when he had run out of reasons.

Bayish turned to the grey mare. She stood quiet at the trough with her ears turned toward him, as she always stood, as if she had been listening all along and had already decided.

She was not a beautiful mare. She was too long in the back and too short in the neck, a Chongtor of no breeding, wall-eyed on the left side, so that strangers thought she was blind and she let them think it. Bayish had bought her from a Kökjal herder for a sack of flour and a pair of boots in the hungry spring of '22, because she was the only horse in the market who had looked at him first. In three years she had never been lame, never been sick, never once refused a river.

"She's enough," he said.



HE RODE OUT OF CHONG-TALAS AT EIGHT IN THE MORNING, with the sun just over the eastern ridges and the frost going off the stubble in long white breaths. He followed the churned road the stolen herd had made, west along the valley floor and then south into the mouth of the Kenkol, where the river comes down white and loud out of the mountains, between walls of red stone.

By noon he had found the first dead mare.

She lay in the river shallows where the trail crossed, a golden mare with a white blaze, her legs broken on the stones in the dark. They had not stopped to shoot her. Bayish got down and did it himself, though she was already nearly gone, and stood beside her for a moment

afterwards with the carbine in his hands and the river noise all around him.

Then he got back up on the grey and rode on, faster.



ALL THAT AFTERNOON THE VALLEY CLIMBED. THE JUNIPER gave out, and then the birches, and then there was nothing but stone and the thin grass of the high pastures, already brown, and the wind coming down cold off the snow. The tracks went on ahead of him, up and up, and the crooked half-moon of the iron-shod horse was always among them, always a little apart from the rest, like a man who rides with a crowd and is not one of it.

At sunset he came round a shoulder of the mountain and saw the pass.

It stood at the head of the valley, a notch in the ridge against a sky going from gold to green to the colour of a knife, and below it the trail switched back and forth across a long slope of scree. Halfway up the scree, small as ants, he could see them. A string of horses. Riders. A dust of snow blowing off the ridge above them.

He was three hours behind. Perhaps less.

Then he looked up at the notch itself, and his hands tightened on the reins.

There was a rider on the pass.

He was alone, a little above the stolen herd, sitting a horse at the very top of the notch where the trail went over. The rider was only a shape against the green sky, and Bayish could not see his face. But the last of the sun was still on the pass, and it had found the horse, and the horse was white. Not grey, as Bayish's mare was grey, but white,

white as milk in a bowl, white as a felt laid out for a bride. And the rider sat there very still, with the whole cold sky behind him, and did not look down at the thieves below him on the scree, or at anything at all, except, Bayish was suddenly certain, at him.

The grey mare stood rock-still under him, her ears up toward the pass. That was what Bayish remembered afterwards: that his own hands were shaking on the reins, and the mare was not afraid at all.

He looked down at his hands. When he looked up again, the notch was empty.

Only the wind, blowing the snow off the ridge in a long white banner. Only the string of stolen horses, crawling up the scree into the dusk.

Bayish sat for a long while with the darkness coming up the valley behind him. Then he got down and made a small fire in the lee of a rock, the way a man makes a fire when he does not want it seen, and put a little of his mother's juniper on it, and watched the smoke go straight up in the still air before the wind took it.

He was a Party man and a Red cavalryman, and he did not believe in any of it.

But he did not walk behind horses either.



[Translator's note: the passage from "Then he looked up at the notch" to the end of the chapter does not appear in the 1964 edition. It is restored from the author's typescript, in which a censor's pencil has marked it "mysticism, cut", and under that, in a different hand, "pity".]

Two

HE SLEPT TWO HOURS WITH HIS BACK AGAINST THE ROCK and the carbine across his knees, and woke because the grey had moved.

She was standing over him in the dark with her head low, close enough that her breath was warm on his face. It was snowing. Not much, a thin dry snow that came down out of a sky he could no longer see and lay on the shoulders of his coat like flour on a baker. The fire was out. The juniper smell was gone. Somewhere up the valley a stone let go and went clattering down the scree for a long time, and then there was only the hiss of the snow.

Bayish got up slowly, because his legs were stiff with cold, and put his hand on the mare's neck.

"All right," he said. "I'm awake."

It was perhaps three in the morning. The thieves would have made their camp on the far side of the pass, below the snowline, where there was grass and wood and shelter from the wind. They would not move again until light. A herd of forty mares heavy in foal does not cross a pass in the dark twice. If he went now, on foot, leading the grey, he could be at the notch before dawn and look down on them while they were still lighting their fires.

He did not think about the rider. He had decided that while he slept, without arguing. He had been tired. The

light had been strange. There were herders in the Talas Alatau who rode white horses, and there was no law that said one of them could not be sitting on the Kenkol Pass at sunset, minding his own business, and then ride on down the other side.

He tightened the girth, checked the carbine, and started up.



THE SCREE WAS THE WORST OF IT. IN DAYLIGHT IT WAS ONLY steep. In the dark, under an inch of new snow, it was a slope of loose stones that moved when you stepped on them, and every stone that moved took two others with it. The trail the herd had made switched back and forth across it, and he could follow it by feel more than sight, a band of trampled ground a little firmer than the rest, the snow lying differently on it, darker where the dung was.

He climbed with one hand on the grey's mane and his head down. She came behind him without being asked, placing her feet in the places where his had been, the way a mountain horse will when she trusts the man in front of her, and twice when he slipped she stopped dead and let him catch hold of her and pull himself up.

Halfway up he found the second mare.

She had gone off the trail at a switchback and slid a little way down the scree and stopped against a boulder, and the snow had already begun to cover her. A chestnut, young, with a white sock on the near fore. Her neck was broken. There was a rope halter on her still, and the end of the rope had been cut. Whoever had been leading her had cut her

loose when she fell rather than be pulled down after her, and had gone on.

Bayish crouched beside her for a moment in the dark. He brushed the snow off her face with his glove.

Thirty-nine, he thought.

Then he went on up.



THE NOTCH WAS A GAP BETWEEN TWO SHOULDERS OF BLACK rock, wide enough for three horses abreast, with the wind coming through it so hard that the snow went sideways and he had to turn his face away to breathe. He stopped below it, in the lee of the eastern shoulder, and waited until the sky behind him began to turn the colour of ash.

Then he went up into the gap, slowly, with the carbine in his hands.

There was nobody there.

He had known there would be nobody there. He stood in the middle of the notch with the wind pulling at his coat and looked at the snow. It lay smooth and fresh across the whole of the gap, a hand deep, unmarked except by the herd's trail, which came up out of the north side and went over and down the south. Forty horses and ten men had passed through here in the evening, before the snow, and their road was a wide grey trough with the new snow lying soft in it.

On either side of the trough the snow was perfect. No track of any horse, white or otherwise. Nothing had stood here since the snow began.

He walked the width of the gap twice to make sure. Then he stood still.

It meant nothing. The snow had come after. Whatever had stood here at sunset had stood here before the snow, and its tracks were under the snow with the herd's, and there was nothing to see. That was all. A man who had read trails all his life knew that new snow lies about everything.

He did not walk the gap a third time.

The grey had come up behind him and was standing in the lee of the rock with her tail to the wind. She was not looking at anything in particular. He found that he had been watching her to see if she would.



THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE KENKOL DROPS AWAY MORE GENTLY than the north, in long benches of grass and stone, down into the head of a valley that runs south and west toward the Chatkal. The light was coming now, grey and flat, and he could see a long way. He went down a few hundred yards below the notch, to where a ridge of rock gave him cover, and lay on his belly in the snow and looked.

The herd was there. They had made their camp where he had guessed, on the first wide bench below the snowline, where a stream came down out of the rocks and there was a little thin birch for firewood. The mares were a dark patch on the white, close together for warmth, and beyond them were the horse lines and three fires with smoke going up straight in the still air of the valley, below the wind. He counted the fires twice. He counted the men in sight. Seven. Eight. Two more moving among the horses. Ten, perhaps, or nine.

And the big bay. He could pick it out even at that distance, standing apart on the horse lines, taller than the Chongtor ponies by a hand and more, with a blanket on it. Strelnikov had always looked after his horse.

Bayish lay in the snow and thought about it.

Ten men in a camp, with the light coming. One man on the ridge above them with a carbine and a hundred and twenty rounds. He could kill three, perhaps four, before they found cover. Then they would scatter into the rocks and the birches and work up the slope at him from three sides, and he would have no way down but the way he had come, and the scree at his back.

And the mares would run. Thirty-nine mares in foal, panicked by gunfire on a mountainside in snow. He would kill more of them than of the thieves.

He lay there long enough to be sure, and then he began to slide back down off the ridge.

That was when the shot came.



IT CAME FROM BELOW AND TO THE RIGHT, FROM A TUMBLE of boulders a hundred yards down the slope that he had looked at and dismissed, and it hit the rock six inches from his face and went away singing. Stone chips stung his cheek. He was already rolling, left, away from the ridge, down into a shallow gully that a stream had cut in summer, and the second shot came through the place where he had been.

Two rifles. He had heard them both. One heavy, an old Berdan perhaps, slow to load. The other lighter and quicker.

A rearguard. Of course there was a rearguard. Strelnikov had been a cavalry officer for twenty years before he was a thief. He had left two men in the rocks below the pass to watch the trail, and Bayish had walked up to the edge of the camp and lain down in plain sight of them like a recruit.

He lay in the gully with his face in the snow and cursed himself for a recruit.

The grey. Where was the grey?

He lifted his head an inch. She was still up by the ridge, in the lee of the rock, standing quite still with her ears pricked toward the boulders. She had not run. A shot went over his head, high, aimed at nothing, and she did not move.

Below, in the camp, men were shouting. He did not have long.

He looked at the gully. It ran down the slope at an angle, past the boulders where the riflemen were, perhaps forty yards to the left of them, and then on down toward the stream. It was not deep. A man on his belly would show his back.

He took his hat off, put it on the end of the carbine and pushed it up over the lip of the gully on the right. The heavy rifle fired at once and the hat jumped and spun away down the slope. He heard the man swear, and the clatter of the bolt, and he was already moving down the gully on his elbows and knees as fast as he could go, while the Berdan man reloaded and the other one looked at the place where the hat had been.

He got thirty yards before the second rifle found him. The bullet went into the snow by his knee. He came up on

one knee in the bottom of the gully and fired three times at the boulders, fast, not aiming at anything, just to put stone in their faces, and went on.

Then he was below them, and to the side, and the boulders were between him and the camp.

He waited. He breathed. There they were, both of them, crouched in the rocks with their backs half to him, looking up at the ridge. One was a big man in a sheepskin with the old Berdan across his knees, thumbing a cartridge into it. The other was small and thin and had no hat.

"Put them down," Bayish said.

The big man did not put it down. He came round with the Berdan, fast for a big man, and Bayish shot him through the body, and he sat down against the rock with a surprised look on his face and the rifle sliding off his knees into the snow.

The small one had turned too. He had his rifle half up. Bayish saw his face, and saw that it was a boy's face, a boy of fifteen or sixteen with no hair on his lip and his mouth open, and he moved the carbine a hand's width to the right and shot him through the upper arm.

The boy screamed and dropped the rifle and fell back against the boulder holding his arm.



BELOW IN THE CAMP THEY HAD STOPPED SHOUTING. THAT was worse. There was the noise of horses, a lot of horses, and men calling to each other in low voices, and the scrape of saddles.

He went down into the boulders. The big man was dead, or would be. The boy was sitting in the snow with his back

to a rock and his good hand clamped over his arm, blood coming out between his fingers, and he was crying without any sound, his mouth wide open, staring up at Bayish and waiting to be shot.

Bayish picked up both rifles and threw the Berdan down the slope into the snow. The boy's rifle was an old single-shot Gras, French, from God knew what war. He worked the bolt. It was empty. The boy had fired his one cartridge and had not reloaded.

"Where are your horses?"

The boy pointed with his chin. Down, behind the boulders, two Chongtor ponies tied to a stunted birch.

Bayish looked down at the camp. They were not coming up. They were moving, and he knew why. The fires had been kicked out. Men were mounted and riding among the mares, getting them up, getting them moving, driving them down off the bench into the valley in a long dark stream, with the big bay at the head of it and a man on it in a long coat who turned once in the saddle and looked up at the pass.

He was too far away to see a face. But Bayish knew the set of the shoulders, and the way he sat a horse, as if the horse were a chair he had been born in.

Strelnikov was not going to waste a morning fighting one man on a mountainside. He had a herd to sell. He would leave the rearguard to their luck and be gone down the valley before the sun was high, and anyone who wanted the mares back would have to come down off the mountain after him into country he chose.

Bayish watched the herd go. He counted what he could. Thirty-nine, or near it. Kara-Jal was among them, black

against the snow, his head up, fighting the rope. Bayish looked at the stallion longer than he meant to.

Then the boy made a sound behind him, and he turned round.



HE WENT UP FOR THE GREY. SHE HAD NOT MOVED FROM THE lee of the rock. She stood there with the snow on her back and watched him come, and when he took her rein she pushed her nose once against his chest, hard, the way she did when he had been away too long, and he stood a moment with his hand on her face.

"I know," he said. "I know. I was a fool."

He brought her down to the boulders. The boy was still sitting where he had left him. He had stopped crying. He had got his belt off with one hand and was trying to tie it round his arm above the wound, and making a bad job of it, and his face had gone the colour of old snow.

Bayish knelt down beside him and took the belt out of his hand.

"Hold still."

He cut the boy's sleeve away with his knife. The bullet had gone through the meat of the upper arm, in at the front and out at the back, and missed the bone. Bayish had seen a great many worse. He packed the holes with snow to slow the bleeding, then with a pad torn from the boy's own shirt, and bound it tight with the belt, and the boy bit on his lip and did not scream.

"What's your name?"

The boy looked at him.

"I'm not going to shoot you," Bayish said. "If I'd wanted to shoot you, you'd be sitting next to him." He nodded at the big man. "Your name."

"Nurdin," the boy said.

"Nurdin who?"

"Nurdin Tölögön uulu. From the Chatkal."

"Well, Nurdin Tölögön uulu from the Chatkal," Bayish said, "your friends have left you."

The boy said nothing. He looked down the valley where the dark stream of horses was going away into the morning, smaller and smaller, and his mouth moved, and then his face closed up like a door.

Bayish stood up. He considered the dead man in the sheepskin, and then the boy, and then the two ponies tied to the birch.

The sun came up over the eastern ridge while he stood there, and lit the whole south side of the Kenkol gold, and the snow on the pass above them blazed so bright that he could not look at it.

He did not look at it.

THREE

THE GROUND WAS FROZEN TOO HARD TO DIG, SO THEY covered the big man with stones.

Bayish did most of it. The boy carried what he could one-handed, small flat stones from the scree, and laid them where Bayish showed him, and did not speak. When it was done there was a low grey mound against the boulders with the man's boots sticking out of the end of it, because there had not been enough stones, and Bayish took off his own coat and laid it over the boots and then thought better of it and put it back on. A dead man does not need a coat. A live one does, on the Kenkol in October.

"What was he called?"

"Sapar," the boy said. "He worked for the bai."

"Which bai?"

The boy looked at him as if he were simple. "Abdyrakhman-bai. At K  k-Saz."

Bayish nodded slowly. He had heard the name. Everyone south of the Talas Alatau had heard the name, the way everyone had heard of the weather. Abdyrakhman-bai owned flocks on six mountains and shops in three bazaars and the soviet of K  k-Saz, which had been elected in 1923 by a show of hands in the bai's own courtyard, with the bai's own men standing at the gate.

"Do you want to say anything?" he asked. "Over him."

The boy hesitated. Then he took his hat off, which was not a hat but a strip of felt tied round his head, and stood at the head of the mound in the wind and said the short prayer that the Chatkal people say for the dead, the one that asks the White Rider to come down off the mountain for a soul and carry it home over the pass. He said it fast and badly, the way a boy says something he has heard old women say a hundred times and never said himself. At the end he said *omin*, and put the felt back on.

Bayish had not said that prayer since his mother's funeral. He did not say it now. But he stood with his hat in his hand until the boy was finished, because it was not his business to stand any other way.



THEY WENT DOWN THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE PASS IN THE middle of the morning, leading the two ponies, Bayish on the grey. The herd's trail was a brown road through the snow, easy to follow, and lower down, where the snow gave out, a brown road through the frost-burned grass, with the dung still steaming in places. They were an hour behind, perhaps two. Bayish did not hurry. He wanted to be an hour behind. An hour behind, he could read their trail. Ten minutes behind, they could read him.

The boy rode one of the ponies, holding the reins in his good hand, with the other arm strapped across his chest in what was left of his shirt. He was very pale. Twice he swayed in the saddle and Bayish thought he would fall, and twice he caught himself and sat up straight and looked ahead as if nothing had happened.

At noon they stopped by a stream and Bayish made him drink, and gave him dried curd, and looked at the arm. The bleeding had stopped. The skin round the holes was hot, but not too hot. Bayish had seen men lose arms from smaller wounds, and men keep them after worse. You could not tell, in the first days. You could only keep it clean and hope.

"Why did you do it?" he said.

The boy did not pretend not to understand. "For the rifle."

"The Gras?"

"He said I could keep it. After." The boy's mouth twisted. "He said every man who rode with him got a rifle and a gold piece. Sapar said it was true. Sapar had two gold pieces. He showed me. They had an eagle on them."

Tsarist coins. Bayish knew them. In 1919 half the Fergana had been paid in them, by one side or another, and the other half had been paid in paper that would not light a fire.

"Who said? Strelnikov?"

"The Captain." The boy said it in Russian. *Kapitan*. "Everybody calls him that. The bai calls him that."

"How long has he been at K  k-Saz?"

"Since the summer. He came over from the Fergana in the summer with six men and some horses. He stayed at the bai's. He bought horses, and he sold horses, and he paid in gold." The boy looked at the stream. "Then in the autumn he said there would be a big job. Over the Kenkol. He needed men who could ride and men who knew the passes. I know the passes. My father took the sheep over the Kenkol every year before..." He stopped.

"Before what?"

"Before he died."

Bayish did not ask how. There were only two ways a man from the Chatkal died, in the years when this boy was small. In 1916 they had gone over the passes into China, the whole valley, with the Russian soldiers behind them, and half of them had died on the ice. And in the years after, the ones who came back had died of what they brought back with them.

"The herd," he said instead. "Where does it go?"

"To K  k-Saz. To the bai's. They'll rest them two days in the bai's yard, and then they go south." The boy pointed with his chin, down the valley and beyond it, to the far brown hills in the haze. "Over the hills, to the Fergana side. There's a man there who will buy them. The Captain says he pays better than anybody."

"Which man?"

The boy looked at the ground. "I don't know his name. They call him the Kurbashi. The Black Kurbashi."



BAYISH KNEW THAT NAME TOO.

He sat by the stream with his elbows on his knees and looked at the water going over the stones, and for a while he was not in the Chatkal at all. He was in a dry valley above Andijan, in the summer of 1921, with the sun so hot that the rocks burned your hands, riding at the head of a patrol of nine men with a boy beside him called Ilyas.

Ilyas had been seventeen. He had lied about it and said nineteen, and nobody had believed him, and nobody had cared. He came from the upper Talas, from a village near

Bayish's own, and he had attached himself to Bayish on the first day the way a foal attaches itself to a horse that is not its mother, and Bayish had let him, because it was easier than not. Ilyas talked. He talked about horses and girls and the city of Tashkent, which he had never seen, and about what he was going to do after the war, which was to breed horses, a whole herd of them, golden ones, on the upper Talas, and sell them to the army for a fortune.

They had been following a band of horse thieves who were selling to the basmachi. The thieves had a White officer with them, everybody said, a Russian, who rode a big bay with a crooked hind foot. They followed the half-moon track for two days up the dry valley. On the third day the man on the bay turned in his saddle at four hundred yards, at a gallop, with the sun behind him, and fired once with a cavalry carbine, and Ilyas went off his horse backwards and lay in the dust with his throat open and his hands moving.

It had taken him a quarter of an hour to die. Bayish had held him the whole time. He had talked to him, though he could not remember afterwards what he had said. He thought it might have been about the golden horses.

The Black Kurbashi had been the basmachi commander in those hills that summer. He had been buying.



"YOU KNOW HIM," THE BOY SAID. "THE CAPTAIN."

Bayish looked up. The boy was watching him with his pale face and his dark eyes, and Bayish saw that he had been watching for some time.

"I know his horse," he said.

He stood up and went to the boy's pony and took the Gras rifle out of the saddle boot where he had put it that morning. He worked the bolt, to show it was empty, and held it out butt first.

The boy stared at it.

"Take it," Bayish said. "It's yours. You earned it. You stood your watch and fired your round. That's more than most of them do."

The boy took the rifle slowly with his good hand. He held it across his knees.

"There's no cartridges," he said.

"No," Bayish agreed. "There's no cartridges."

He pointed west, down the stream, where it went away from the herd's trail toward a side valley and a long brown slope with sheepfolds on it, small grey squares of stone, and smoke.

"Is that the way to your mother's?"

The boy said nothing for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Go home," Bayish said. "Tell her you fell off a horse. Tell her whatever you like. Keep the arm clean. Wash it in salt water, if she has salt. If it goes black, go to the doctor in Talas, not to a *bakshy*." He gathered up the grey's reins. "And stay off the Kenkol."

He swung up into the saddle. He took the rope of the second pony, the dead man's, and turned the grey's head down the valley, onto the herd's road, and rode away without looking back.



HE HAD GONE PERHAPS A MILE WHEN HE HEARD THE PONY behind him.

He did not turn round. He rode on at the same pace, along the brown trail through the burned grass, with the dead man's pony on its rope behind him and the river loud on his right. After a while the sound of the second pony came up a little closer, and then stayed there, fifty yards back, matching his pace.

At the next stream crossing he stopped to let the grey drink, and sat in the saddle looking at the water.

The boy stopped too, fifty yards back, and sat on his pony with the empty rifle across his knees and his strapped arm against his chest, and looked at the water as well.

Neither of them said anything for some time.

"Your mother," Bayish said at last, not loud, so that the boy had to come a little closer to hear, "is going to be very angry with you."

"Yes," the boy said.

"And with me."

The boy thought about that. "Yes," he said. "Probably more with you."

Bayish looked away down the valley, where the herd's trail went on and on into the haze, toward K  k-Saz and the bai and the Captain and the hills beyond, and further than that, the Fergana, and the Black Kurbashi, and a dry valley above Andijan where a boy of seventeen had lain in the dust with his hands moving.

He was not going to have another one. He knew that much. He would send this one home tonight, if he had to tie him to the pony and lead him there himself.

"You know the passes," he said.

"Yes."

"You know K k-Saz. You know the bai's house. The way in and the way out."

"Yes."

Bayish nodded. He picked up the grey's reins.

"Ride beside me, then," he said. "Not behind. A man who rides behind me, I shoot."

The boy brought his pony up level, carefully, on the grey's off side, and they went on down the valley together, and neither of them said any more about the boy's mother for the rest of that day.



THEY CAMPED THAT NIGHT IN A STAND OF BIRCH ABOVE THE river, without a fire. The boy slept at once, with the rifle in his good arm like a child with a doll. Bayish sat up with his back against a tree and the carbine across his knees and watched the dark.

Toward midnight the boy began to talk in his sleep. Fever talk, quick and low, in the Chatkal dialect with its old church words. Bayish could not follow most of it. Once, quite clearly, the boy said "*Ene*", mother, and once he said a name that might have been his father's.

Bayish got up and found the boy's forehead with his hand. It was hot, but not burning. He wet his own scarf in the river and laid it across the boy's face, and sat down again.

Below them in the dark, very far off down the valley, a horse called. One long rising whinny that went on and on and broke at the top, the way a stallion calls when he is penned among strange horses and does not like it.

Kara-Jal, Bayish thought. He was certain of it, though he could not have said why.

He sat and listened until the sound stopped. Then he sat and listened to the silence, and the river, and the boy's breathing, until the sky in the east began to grey.

FOUR

AIMKAN'S WINTER CAMP WAS THREE STONE HOUSES AND A sheepfold on a shelf of the side valley, with a stream below and a stand of poplars that had dropped their leaves, so that the yellow lay thick on the ground and the bare white trunks stood up out of it like candles. There was smoke from one of the houses. A dog came out to meet them, barking, and then stopped barking and ran back again, and a woman came out of the door with a ladle in her hand.

She stood in the doorway and looked at her son on the pony, with his arm strapped across his chest and his face the colour of whey, and at the stranger on the grey mare beside him, and at the empty rifle. She did not say anything.

Then she put the ladle down on the step, very carefully, the way you put down something you might otherwise throw.

"Get off that horse," she said to her son.

Nurdin got off. He did it badly, one-handed, and nearly fell, and his mother did not move to help him. He stood in front of her in the yellow leaves with the rifle in his good hand.

She hit him once, open-handed, across the face. Not hard.

Then she took his face in both her hands and held it, and looked at it, and did not let go.

Bayish sat on the grey and looked at the poplars.



HER NAME WAS AIMKAN, AND SHE WAS PERHAPS FORTY, though the mountains had made her look older. She was tall and straight, with a long face and dark eyes like her son's, and she wore the white *elechek* of a married woman, wound high and tight, though her husband had been dead for eight years. She brought Bayish into the house because he was a guest and there was no other way to treat a guest, and she sat him on the felt in the place of honour, and she brought him milk and bread and a bowl of mutton broth, and she did not once look at him while she did it.

When Nurdin told her who had shot him she was silent for a while, holding the teapot.

"You," she said to Bayish.

"Yes."

"You could have killed him."

"Yes."

She poured his tea. Her hand was quite steady. "Why didn't you?"

Bayish thought about lying, and did not. "I had a boy beside me once," he said. "In the Fergana. About his age. A man with a carbine killed him." He drank some of the tea. It was very strong, with salt and milk in it, the way they make it in the Chatkal. "It's the same man your son was riding for."

Aimkan put the teapot down.

She looked at her son, who was sitting by the stove with a bowl of broth he had not touched, and then at Bayish, and then at the window, where the light came in grey through a pane of thin scraped hide.

"My husband," she said, "was called Tölögön. In the summer of the Great Flight, when the soldiers came up the valley, he took us over the Kenkol and the Suusamyr and the Kōkjal passes into China. Me and this one and his sister. On the ice above the Kōkjal his sister died, and he carried her two days before he would let me put her down. In China he worked for a Chinese merchant for nothing, for a bowl of rice a day, and in the spring of the next year we came back over the same passes, and on the Kenkol he fell in the snow and did not get up." She said it quite flatly. "So my son knows the passes. His father showed him every one of them."

Bayish said nothing. There was nothing to say. Half the families in the Talas and the Chatkal had a story like it.

"And when we came back," Aimkan said, "there was nothing. The houses were burned. The sheep were gone. The Russians had the bottom land. And Abdyrakhman-bai, who had not gone anywhere, who had sat in his house at Kōk-Saz all through the troubles selling bread to the soldiers, he lent us sheep. Forty sheep, to start again." Her mouth went thin. "That was eight years ago. I have paid him back two hundred."

"And you still owe him."

"I still owe him forty. Every year I still owe him forty. That is how a bai lends." She looked at her son. "So when the Captain came and said there was a rifle and a gold piece for a boy who knew the passes, and the bai's man

Sapar said the bai would forgive the debt if he went, what was a boy of sixteen going to do?"

Nurdin was staring into his bowl. His ears had gone red.

"He was going to do something stupid," Aimkan said. "Like his father."



AFTER THE MEAL SHE SENT THE BOY TO LIE DOWN IN THE other room, and he went without arguing, which told Bayish how bad the arm was. Aimkan unwound the bandage herself and looked at the wound and said nothing, and washed it with salt water that made the boy go white and silent, and bound it up again with clean cloth. When she came back she sat down across the stove from Bayish and folded her hands.

"Now," she said. "What are you?"

"I break horses at Chong-Talas. The state stud."

"No. What *are* you?" She pointed with her chin at the carbine, which was leaning against the wall by the door, and then at his coat, where the Party card was, though she could not have known that. "You talk like a soldier. You shoot like a soldier. You go after ten men alone like a fool. Are you the OGPU?"

"No."

"The militia?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Bayish turned his bowl in his hands. "I'm the man who looks after the horses," he said. "Somebody took the horses. So I've come to get them back."

Aimkan looked at him. Then she laughed, once, without any pleasure in it.

"You are a fool," she said. "Listen to me. You don't know what you're riding into. Abdyrakhman-bai is not a thief. He is the soviet. He is the law in this valley. When the commissars came in '23 and said there must be a soviet in Kök-Saz, he called a meeting in his courtyard, and his men stood at the gate, and everybody put up their hands, and now he is the chairman. He has a stamp. He has a paper from Tashkent with a seal on it. If you go into Kök-Saz with that rifle and say he has stolen state horses, he will have you arrested as a bandit by his own soviet, and sent to Tashkent with a letter, and you will never see the Talas again."

"I'm a Party member."

"So is he," said Aimkan.

Bayish put his bowl down.

He had not thought of that. He should have. In 1923 every bai in Turkestan who could read had joined something, the Party or the Koshchi union or the soviet, the way a man puts on a coat when the weather changes. He had seen it in the Fergana. A man who had paid the basmachi in the morning would be at a Party meeting by the afternoon, making speeches about the class enemy.

"And the Captain," Aimkan said. "The Captain is the bai's guest. You understand? Under his roof, at his table. If you touch the Captain in the bai's house, you insult the bai, and every man in the valley who owes him sheep will be

on the bai's side. And every man in the valley owes him sheep."



THEY SAT IN SILENCE FOR A WHILE. OUTSIDE, THE WIND HAD got up and was moving in the poplars, and the yellow leaves went past the window in a slant.

"Tell me about his house," Bayish said.

Aimkan looked at him. "You're still going."

"Tell me about his house."

She told him. She told it well. She had walked past it every week of her life and hated it every time. The bai's compound stood at the top of the village of Kök-Saz, where the valley widened and the river ran slow among reed beds. A mud-brick wall twice the height of a man, with a wooden gate on the village side, and the bai's houses inside, and storerooms, and a big yard with a well and a mulberry tree. Behind the houses, against the hill, a second yard, with stables along the back wall. That was where he kept his horses. That was where the mares would be.

"Is there another way in? Besides the gate?"

Aimkan hesitated. Then she said: "The *aryk*."

The irrigation channel, she said, came off the river above the village and ran down along the foot of the hill, and the bai, who had paid for it to be dug and who took more of its water than anyone, had had it brought in under the back wall of his compound to water the stable yard and the mulberry and his wife's flowers. There was a hole in the bottom of the wall where it went in, with a grating of wooden bars across it. Children went in and out under the

grating in summer when the water was low, to steal mulberries. In autumn the water was low.

"How low?"

"To the knee. Lower, now."

"How do you know?"

Aimkan looked at the door of the other room, where her son was lying.

"Because he was one of the children," she said.



BAYISH SLEPT THAT NIGHT ON THE FELT BY THE STOVE, WITH the carbine beside him, and woke before dawn to find Aimkan already up, kneeling by the fire, blowing it into life. Nurdin was standing in the doorway of the other room, fully dressed, with his strapped arm and the empty rifle.

Aimkan did not look round.

"You can't come," Bayish said to the boy.

"I know the aryk."

"Your mother knows the aryk. She's told me."

"She doesn't know where the grating's loose." The boy's chin came up. "I do. And I know which dog is which. And I know the bai's stableman, Kudaibergen, who drinks. And I know the bai's son, who is a coward, and which room he sleeps in. You don't know any of that."

"No," Bayish said. "I don't."

He looked at Aimkan. She was still blowing on the fire, very carefully, and did not look at either of them.

"If he comes," she said, without turning round, "and he dies, you owe me *kun*. A man's blood-price, for my son. Before the elders. Ninefold."

"I don't have it."

"No," Aimkan said. "Nobody does." She sat back on her heels and looked at the fire, which had caught now, the flames going up yellow round the dung cakes. "So you had better not let him die."

She got up. She went to the chest by the wall and opened it and took out a strip of white felt, a long narrow strip of the kind that is tied to a cradle or a saddle or the branch of a holy tree, and came over to the door, past her son, and out into the grey morning where the horses were. Bayish followed her. She went to the grey mare, who stood quiet and let her, and she tied the strip of white felt to the brow band of the mare's bridle, between the ears, with a knot that would not come undone.

"So that he knows her," Aimkan said.

"Who?"

She looked at him as if he were simple, the way her son had looked at him on the mountain.

"The one who comes down off the pass for souls," she said. "So that if he comes for one of you, he knows which horse to bring back."

Bayish looked at the white felt on the mare's brow. He had a Party card in his coat, and a carbine, and a hundred and fifteen rounds.

He did not take the felt off.

FIVE

HE RODE INTO KÖK-SAZ AT NOON, ALONE, BY THE MAIN road, with the carbine in its boot under his leg and his hat on straight, like a man who had business and nothing to hide.

He had left the boy in a ruined sheepfold on the hill above the village, with the two ponies and the empty rifle and strict instructions, and the boy had looked at him with his dark eyes and said yes to all of them, and Bayish had not believed a word of it. But there was nothing to be done about that. You cannot tie a boy of sixteen to a sheepfold.

Kök-Saz lay where Aimkan had said, where the valley opened out and the river went slow and brown among the reed beds that gave the place its name. Forty houses, perhaps fifty, flat-roofed, mud-brick, with poplars round them and the stubble of the harvest on the terraces above. A mill. A shop with a tin sign in Russian and Arabic letters. A small square of beaten earth with a mulberry tree in it and three old men sitting under the tree on a felt, who watched him ride past and did not stop talking.

And at the top of the village, against the hill, a wall.

It was as she had said. Twice the height of a man, mud-brick on a stone footing, whitewashed once and long ago, with the wash coming off in patches like old skin. A big double gate of poplar wood, studded with iron. Over the

gate, nailed to the wood, a board with red letters on it in Russian and in the old Arabic letters that Iradi was still written in then, which said that this was the Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies of the Kök-Saz Village Council.

The gate was open. Bayish rode through it.



THE BAI RECEIVED HIM ON A RAISED PLATFORM UNDER THE mulberry tree in the inner yard, on a heap of carpets and cushions, with a samovar going at his elbow and a boy to pour. He was a heavy man of fifty or so, with a grey beard trimmed close and small clever eyes in a soft face, and he wore a quilted silk coat over a Russian shirt with a collar, and a Party badge on the coat. He did not get up.

"A guest," he said, and smiled. "Sit. Sit. Tea. You have come over the mountain? In this weather? Sit."

Bayish sat on the edge of the platform. He took the bowl of tea the boy gave him. He looked past the bai, across the yard, to the second gate in the far wall, where the stable yard would be. It was shut. Behind it, quite clearly, came the sound of horses. A lot of horses. And once, high and angry, a stallion calling.

"You have fine horses," he said.

"Horses?" The bai spread his hands. "A few. I am a poor man. I keep a few horses for my sons." He sipped his tea. "You are from the Talas, by your voice."

"From Chong-Talas."

The bai's face did not change at all. Bayish gave him that. "Ah," he said. "The state farm. The Russian's farm. The horses for the Red Army. A great work. A great work

of the Soviet power." He set his bowl down. "And what brings a man from the state farm so far over the mountain?"

"Forty-one mares," Bayish said. "And a black stallion. Stolen four nights ago. Their trail comes into your yard."

There was a silence under the mulberry tree. The boy who poured the tea had stopped pouring.

Then the bai laughed, the comfortable laugh of a fat man at a joke he has heard before.

"Stolen?" he said. "My dear friend. Nobody has stolen anything. I bought them. Last week. In good faith, from a dealer, with a paper." He clapped his hands, and a man came out of the house, a thin man with spectacles, and the bai said something to him, and the man went back in. "You'll see. A paper with a stamp. From your own director. The Russian. He sold them because the state has no money to feed them over the winter. Everybody knows the state has no money. You'll see."

The thin man came back with a paper. The bai handed it to Bayish with a little bow, as if it were a gift.

Bayish read it. It was in Russian, typed on a good machine, and it said that the Chong-Talas State Stud, by order of its director, had sold to the citizen A. Abdyrakhmanov of K  k-Saz forty-two horses of the riding type, surplus to requirements, for the sum of four thousand roubles in chervontsy, paid in full. It was signed *Pavlov*. There was a round purple stamp.

It was a very good paper. It was so good that for a moment, holding it, Bayish was not sure.

Then he looked at the signature again, and was sure. Pavlov signed his name with a great sweeping tail on the

final letter, like a man signing for a whole railway. This one had no tail. Whoever had forged it had seen Pavlov's name typed, but never written.

"It's a fine paper," he said, and handed it back.

"You see?" said the bai happily. "A misunderstanding. Your director has forgotten. Directors are always forgetting. You will go home and tell him, and he will remember, and he will be very ashamed, and we will all laugh about it." He leaned forward a little on his cushions, and his small eyes were not laughing at all. "And if he does not remember, well. There is the soviet. There is the law. I am the soviet, here. You understand me? Here, I am the law."



"HE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND YOU, ABDYRAKHMAN," SAID A voice behind Bayish, in Russian. "He's a soldier. Soldiers never understand anything. That's why they make such good soldiers."

Bayish turned round.

The man standing in the doorway of the house was tall and thin and perhaps fifty, with a long tired face and a short beard gone grey at the corners of the mouth. He wore a good English coat that had been very good once and was now only good, and riding boots that had been mended by someone who knew boots. He had a glass of tea in his hand, in a silver holder, the Russian way. He looked at Bayish with an expression of mild and courteous interest, like a man meeting someone at a railway station whom he has been told to expect.

"Captain Strelnikov," the bai said, with a wave of his hand. "My guest. A dealer in horses. A very honest man."

"Thank you, Abdyrakhman," said Strelnikov. He came across the yard and sat down on the edge of the platform, a little way from Bayish, and crossed his legs, and drank his tea. "And you," he said to Bayish, pleasantly, in Iradi now, a good careful Iradi with a Russian edge to it, "are the man who killed Sapar on the Kenkol. And shot a child. The rearguard told me. The one who came back."

Bayish said nothing. There had been no one who came back. The man was guessing, and guessing well.

"You came up the scree in the dark," said Strelnikov. "Alone. On a Chongtor mare. And lay down on the ridge in full view of my picket like a cadet on his first exercise." He shook his head. "I nearly had the camp turned out for you. Then I thought, no. Let him come. A man who comes that far alone is either a fool or a man with a reason. And I wanted to see which."

"Which am I?"

Strelnikov considered him over the rim of the glass.

"Andijan," he said. "Wasn't it? The summer of '21. The dry valley. You were the scout. You were always out in front. You rode a bay with a white face, and there was a boy with you who never stopped talking." He set the glass down on the carpet. "I'm sorry about the boy. I was aiming at you."



BAYISH SAT VERY STILL. THE TEA BOWL WAS IN HIS HAND. He found that he had to think about not crushing it.

Across the yard, behind the shut gate, the stallion called again.

"I'll make you an offer," Strelnikov said, and now he was not smiling. "Because I liked the way you came up the scree, and because I'm tired, and because I have shot enough of you people for one lifetime. Twenty gold pieces." He took a small leather bag out of his coat and set it on the carpet between them. It clinked. "Tsarist. With the eagle. Enough to buy a house in Talas and a wife to put in it. You go home. You tell your Russian the mares were dead on the Kenkol, or sold, or flown away to heaven. Nobody will ever know. In a month I will be in Kashgar, and Abdyrakhman will be a richer man, and your Soviet power will buy forty more mares from somebody else and never miss these."

"And if I don't?"

Strelnikov sighed. He stood up, and brushed his coat, and picked up his glass.

"Then sometime in the next few days," he said, "somebody will shoot you. Probably me. And I'll be sorry about that, too." He looked down at Bayish. "Think about it. Abdyrakhman will give you a bed for the night. He's very hospitable. You'll be quite safe under his roof. Won't he, Abdyrakhman?"

"Quite safe," said the bai. "A guest is sacred."

Strelnikov nodded, and went back into the house.

Bayish sat a moment longer. He put down his tea bowl, untouched, and left the bag of gold where it lay. He stood up and bowed to the bai, the short bow of a guest leaving, and walked back across the yard to where the grey was tied, and untied her, and mounted.

"You will not stay?" said the bai, surprised.

"I have to see a man about some sheep," Bayish said, and rode out of the gate.



HE WENT BACK UP THE HILL TO THE RUINED SHEEPFOLD, BY a long way round, watching his back trail. The boy was not in the sheepfold. The boy was flat on his belly on a rock above it, where he could see the whole of the village and the bai's compound, with the empty Gras beside him, exactly where he had been told not to be.

"I said stay in the fold."

"You'd have done the same," said Nurdin.

Bayish thought about it. "Yes," he said, and lay down on the rock beside him.

From up there you could see into the bai's back yard, over the wall. The mares were there. Bayish counted them, slowly, twice. Thirty-nine. Packed into the stable yard, which was not big enough for half that number, standing nose to tail in the mud, with hay thrown down on them from the stable roof. In one corner, on his own, roped to an iron ring in the wall, the black stallion, who would not stand still, who kept swinging his quarters and throwing his head against the rope and squealing, so that the mares nearest him pressed away.

"Tonight," Bayish said.



THEY WENT IN AT TWO IN THE MORNING, BY THE ARYK.

The water was colder than Bayish had believed water could be, and came above the knee, and the bottom was soft mud that pulled at his boots. They went along the foot of the wall in the dark, with the water talking softly round their legs and the stars very bright and cold overhead, and came to the place where the channel went under the wall into a low black arch, with the grating across it.

The boy put his good hand on the third bar from the left and pulled, and it came out of its socket in the mud as easily as a tooth from an old man's jaw.

They went through on their bellies in the water, one after the other, Bayish holding the carbine above his head. On the other side was the stable yard. It stank of horses and wet hay and dung. The mares were dark shapes standing close together, breathing, shifting, and the smell of strangers went through them like wind through grass. Bayish stood in the mud with the water running off him and spoke to them, low, in the voice he used at Chong-Talas in the mornings, the nonsense voice that horses like, and the shifting slowed, and stopped.

The stable gate was in the far wall. It was barred on the inside with a beam. Beyond it was the bai's main yard, and beyond that the big gate, and the village, and the road. The plan was simple. Lift the beam. Open the stable gate. Open the big gate, which would be barred too, but only with a beam, because who would steal from the soviet? Then drive the mares through and out and up the valley, all of them at once, at a gallop, in the dark, and let the bai's men try to catch thirty-nine panicked horses in the night.

He had done it before. In 1920, outside Kokand, he had stolen a whole herd of remounts out of a basmachi camp in

exactly this way.

He went along the wall with the boy behind him, among the mares, through the warm smell of them, and put his hands on the beam.

Kara-Jal screamed.

It was high and terrible, the sound a stallion makes when he is fighting. The black horse had smelled the strangers and the water and the cold, and he came round on his rope and reared and struck at the wall with his forefeet, and screamed again. The mares broke. They went every way at once in the dark, a great sliding surge of bodies, and Bayish was thrown against the gate and felt the beam go into his ribs, and somewhere a dog began to bark, and then all the dogs.

A light came on in the house.

"The beam!" Bayish shouted to the boy. "Lift it!"

They got it halfway. Then the door of the house opened and a man came out with a lantern, and behind him another with a shotgun, and behind them the bai's son, in his shirt, shouting. The lantern swung. Bayish saw the boy's face in it, white, with his mouth open, and saw the man with the shotgun see it too.

Bayish fired once over their heads, high, to make them drop, and they dropped, and the lantern went out.

"Back!" he said to the boy. "The aryk! Go!"

They ran. The boy went first, along the wall, among the mares. Bayish came behind him, and as he came someone fired from the house, a rifle this time, not the shotgun, and something hit him in the side like a thrown stone and spun him half round against the wall.

He did not fall. He was surprised by that, afterwards. He put his hand to his side and it came away wet and warm, and he thought, quite clearly, *ribs*, and kept going.

At the arch he looked back. The boy was not behind him.

He was in the middle of the yard, among the plunging mares, on his knees in the mud, and two of the bai's men had him, one on each arm, the bad arm too, and the boy was not screaming, only twisting and kicking like a young horse at its first saddle. The lantern was alight again. In its light, standing on the step of the house in his good English coat with a carbine in his hands, quite calm, was Strelnikov.

He was looking straight at the arch.

Bayish lifted the carbine. He had a clear shot. Forty yards, lantern light, a still man on a step. He had made harder shots.

Then the bai's man holding the boy's good arm pulled the boy up and round, in front of himself, and held him there, and looked at the arch too.

Bayish lowered the carbine.

He went down into the water, on his back, under the wall, and out into the dark, with the cold of the aryk closing over his side like a hand, and the dogs still barking behind him, and the stallion still screaming, and over all of it, quite clearly, as he came out on the far side and began to run, the sound of Strelnikov's voice saying something in Russian that might have been a laugh.

SIX

HE DID NOT REMEMBER GETTING TO THE SHEEPFOLD. HE remembered the cold of the aryk, and running, and the dogs, and then he was in the ruined fold with his hands on the grey's neck and his forehead against her shoulder, and she was standing quite still in the dark and letting him lean.

The boy's pony was there, and Sapar's pony, tied where they had left them. The boy was not.

Bayish stood there a while, breathing. His side was on fire. He opened his coat and his shirt and felt along the ribs with his fingers, and found the place where the bullet had gone along the bone, in at the front and out at the side, a long torn groove the length of his hand. Not deep. No rib broken, or he would not have been able to breathe like this. Bleeding, though. Bleeding a good deal, and his shirt was soaked and cold and stuck to him.

He tore the tail off the shirt and folded it into a pad and pressed it against the wound, and buttoned the coat over it tight. He untied the ponies and turned them loose. They would go home to the bai's, or to Aimkan's, or wherever ponies went. He could not lead them now.

Below in the village the dogs had stopped. There were lights in the bai's compound, moving. Men with lanterns

were coming out of the gate and spreading along the road, and two of them were coming up the hill.

Bayish got his foot into the stirrup on the third try, and pulled himself up into the saddle, and the grey moved off before he had asked her, up the hill and away from the lights, into the dark.



HE LET HER CHOOSE THE WAY. HE HAD NO CHOICE ABOUT that. He could barely see, and he could not think very well, and when he tried to think, the thoughts went sideways and away from him like sheep on a hill. He held the saddle horn with one hand and his side with the other and let the mare go where she would.

She went up. Away from the river and the village and the road, up the long slope behind Kök-Saz, through the stubble terraces and then the thorn scrub and then the open hillside where the grass was burned and the wind came down cold off the tops. Somewhere along the way it began to snow again. He did not notice when. He noticed only that the darkness had gone grey and soft round him, and that there was snow on his knees, and on the mare's mane, and on the strip of white felt that Aimkan had tied to her brow.

He thought about the boy.

He thought about the boy on his knees in the mud, between the bai's men, twisting like a colt. He thought about the boy's mother blowing on the fire, very carefully, and saying, *So you had better not let him die.* He thought about Ilyas in the dust.

He thought he had a clear shot at Strelnikov, and had not taken it, because of the boy, and that Strelnikov had known he would not take it. That was what the laugh had been: a man proved right about something he had hoped to be wrong about.

After a while he stopped thinking about anything at all.



WHEN HE WOKE, THE GREY HAD STOPPED.

He did not know how long he had been asleep, or if it had been sleep. He was still in the saddle, leaning forward over the horn, and his face was against the mare's mane, and it was stiff with frost. The snow had stopped. The clouds had gone off somewhere, and there was a moon, almost full, high and white and very small, and in its light the whole hillside lay silver and silent round him, every stone and bush with its little cap of white.

He did not know where he was. Somewhere high. The valley of K  k-Saz was gone. Below him the hillside fell away into a fold of the mountains he did not recognise, a hollow full of shadow.

The grey was standing with her head down, looking at the snow in front of her.

He looked where she was looking.

There was a track in the snow.

One track. A single line of hoofprints, crossing the hillside in front of them from left to right and going on up the slope. The prints of a horse, unshod. Not a Chongtor. Bigger than that, longer in the stride, a tall horse, light on its feet, the prints clean-edged and sharp in the new snow, as if they had been made a minute ago. They came out of

nowhere on his left, out of the unbroken snow of the hillside, and went away on his right, up over the shoulder of the hill and out of sight.

There was no rider's track beside them. No man's boots. Only the horse.

Bayish sat and looked at it for a long time.

He was a Party man. He was a Red cavalryman. He had read trails for twenty years. He knew that a single horse's track in fresh snow on a moonlit hillside meant that a single horse had crossed the hillside since the snow stopped, and nothing more. A herder's horse, strayed. A wild one, perhaps, from the old herds that ran on the high Chatkal. It meant nothing.

The grey lifted her head. She looked up the slope, where the track went, and her ears went forward.

Then she stepped into the track and began to follow it.

He did not stop her. He did not think he could have stopped her. He sat in the saddle with his hand on his side and the moon on the snow and let the mare carry him up the hillside, step by step, in the prints of the other horse, over the shoulder of the hill and down into the next hollow.

At the bottom of the hollow, among birches, there was a yurt. A white one. There was smoke coming out of the crown of it, straight up in the windless air, and the smell of juniper.

The track went across the snow toward the yurt and stopped at the door.

There was no horse there.



THE MAN WHO CAME OUT OF THE YURT WAS VERY OLD. HE was small and bent, with a white beard down to his chest and a long dark robe and a sheepskin over it, and on his chest, on a cord, a bare cross of carved walnut wood with three beads at the end of each arm, rising out of a flower.

He looked at the grey mare, and at the white felt on her brow, and at the man slumped in the saddle with his hand pressed to his side.

"Well," he said. "Come in, then. Come in. You're letting the cold in."



HIS NAME WAS FATHER MATTAI, AND HE WAS THE PRIEST OF the upper Chatkal, and the yurt was his church. Bayish learned this in pieces, over a long time, between bouts of sleep, lying on a felt by the fire with his coat off and his shirt cut away. The old man washed the wound with warm water and salt. He sewed it up with a curved needle and a thread of white horsehair, quickly and neatly, the way a woman sews felt, while Bayish lay with his teeth shut and stared up at the crown of the yurt, where the smoke went out and the stars showed through. Then the old man smeared it with something that smelled of juniper and mutton fat, and bound it with clean linen, and made him drink a bowl of warm milk with honey in it.

"I don't believe in any of this," Bayish said, somewhere in the middle of it.

"No," the old man agreed. "Drink your milk."

The yurt was hung with felts, white ones, with the cross of the flower worked on them in red. At the far side, opposite the door, in the place where in a herder's yurt the chest of honour would stand, there was a low table with a white cloth on it, and on the cloth a book with a wooden cover, and a small brass lamp, and a black walnut pot with a lid tied on with a thong.

"What's in the pot?"

"Bread," said Father Mattai. "Or the beginning of it. The mother leaven. The *malka*." He looked at the pot. "My teacher gave it to me, and his teacher gave it to him. It goes back to the bread of Janyl, they say. I don't know. I know it has never been let die."

Bayish lay and looked at the pot. His mother had talked about the *malka*. In his village on the upper Talas they had not kept it any more, not since his grandmother's time. His mother had been sorry about that.

"How did you find this place?" the old man asked. "Nobody comes here in the snow. Not even the shepherds."

Bayish was silent.

"I followed a track," he said at last.

Father Mattai sat back on his heels. He did not look surprised. He looked, if anything, a little sad.

"Yes," he said. "Sometimes it's like that."

"There was no horse."

"No," said the priest. "There usually isn't."

He got up slowly, a hand on his knee, and went to the door of the yurt and lifted the felt and looked out at the moonlit snow. Then he let the felt fall and came back to the fire.

"Sometimes he comes for a soul," he said. "To carry it home over the pass. Not tonight, I think. Your mare knows that." He nodded toward the door, where the grey was standing outside under the birches. "What's her name?"

"She doesn't have one."

"Everything has a name."

Bayish thought about it.

"She never needed one," he said.

The old man laughed, quietly, and for a moment, in the firelight, he looked much younger.

"No," he said. "I don't suppose she did."



BAYISH SLEPT UNTIL NOON. WHEN HE WOKE THE PRIEST WAS sitting by the door of the yurt in the thin sunlight with the wooden book on his knees, reading, moving his lips. The grey was grazing under the birches, pulling at the dry grass where the snow had melted off it. There was no track in the snow anywhere round the yurt except his own and the mare's, coming down the hillside together.

He looked for a long time. Then he stopped looking.

"They'll move the herd today," Father Mattai said, without looking up from the book. "A shepherd came by at dawn. The bai is frightened. He's sending the horses south with the Captain this afternoon. Over the walnut hills, toward the Fergana. Two days, perhaps three, to Kara-Jygach." He turned a page. "And the boy goes with them."

Bayish sat up too fast and the stitches pulled and he sat very still until the world steadied.

"Alive?"

"Alive. The bai's no fool. He won't kill a Chatkal boy in his own village, in front of the boy's own people. He'd have half the valley at his gate." The priest closed the book. "No. He'll send him with the herd. As a hostage, in case the man who came under the wall tries again. And when they get to Kara-Jygach, and the Captain has his gold, then perhaps there's an accident on a mountain path. Boys fall off mountains. Everybody knows that."

Bayish was already reaching for his shirt.

"You'll open those stitches," the priest said, without getting up.

"Then you'll have to sew them again."

Father Mattai got up, and went to the low table with the white cloth, and untied the thong on the walnut pot, and took a pinch of something from inside it, a small grey lump of dough, and wrapped it in a scrap of white felt and tied it with a white thread, and came back and put it into Bayish's hand.

"It's given," the priest said. "Never sold. To brides. To new priests. To the head of a family when the herd divides." He closed Bayish's fingers over it. "And to men who are going a long way and might not come back. Keep it warm. Feed it if you can. If you can't, it doesn't matter. Somebody will find it."

"I'm a Party man."

"So you keep telling me," said Father Mattai. "Go on. Your mare's waiting."



[Translator's note: in the 1964 edition this chapter ends with Bayish waking in "a shepherd's hut" where "an old man of the village" binds his wound and tells him the herd is moving south. The track in the snow, the yurt chapel, the priest, the cross, the malka and the conversation about the Rider are restored here from the author's typescript. The censor's pencil runs down the margin of all eleven pages. At the foot of the last page, in the author's hand, there is a single line: "Leave him the horse, at least." The 1964 edition does leave him the horse.]

SEVEN

THE WALNUT FOREST BEGAN A DAY'S RIDE SOUTH OF THE priest's yurt, where the Chatkal hills fold down toward the Fergana and the air goes soft and the snow gives out.

Bayish came into it in the late afternoon, out of the high bare country, down a long slope of dead bracken, and the trees closed over him all at once like water. They were old trees, older than anything he had seen on the Talas, with trunks a man could not put his arms round and great grey branches that went out and out over the slope and met the branches of the next tree, so that the light came down green and gold and broken, and the ground was soft and brown with fallen leaves and the husks of walnuts, black and split. It smelled bitter and clean, of leaf-rot and green walnut and woodsmoke from somewhere far off.

The herd's trail went through it like a river through a reed bed. Thirty-nine mares and the black stallion, eight or nine men, and now the bai's people too, a dozen riders by the look of it, had come down this slope that morning and torn a wide brown road through the leaves, and broken

branches, and left their dung in heaps. A child could have followed it.

That was what worried him.



HE RODE SLOWLY, WITH THE CARBINE ACROSS THE SADDLE in front of him and his side stiff and burning under the priest's linen. He had opened two of the stitches getting into the saddle that morning, as the priest had said he would, and felt them go, and said nothing. The bleeding had stopped again. He did not think about it.

The grey went quietly through the leaves with her ears moving. The white felt was still on her brow, a little grey now with dirt. Twice he had thought about taking it off, and twice he had not.

At the bottom of the slope, where a stream came down through the trees in a little ravine, he found the third mare.

She was lying in the stream with her head on the bank, as if she had lain down to drink and not got up. A bay, heavy in foal, near her time. There was no wound on her. She had simply been driven too far too fast, down off the mountain and through the forest, with the foal pulling at her from inside, and somewhere on the slope her heart had given out, and they had left her where she fell.

The foal had moved once inside her as Bayish knelt there. He felt it under his hand. Then it was still.

He did not shoot her. There was no need. He stayed there a while with his hand on her flank, and the stream going past, and the walnut leaves coming down one by one through the green light and settling on the water.

Thirty-eight.

He thought of Pavlov, standing in the empty corral with his rifle he did not know how to hold. He thought of Kalmurat, who had bred some of these mares from foals and knew all their names. He thought: they don't care. Kalmurat had said it. *They're not selling foals. They're selling horses.*

He got up and went on.



HALF A MILE FURTHER ON, THE TRAIL SPLIT.

It was very well done. Bayish gave Strelnikov that, as he had given the bai his calm. The trail came down the stream valley to a place where the trees opened into a long glade, and there, on a bare patch of stony ground where the leaves had blown away, it divided. One road went on south, down the valley. The other turned east, up a side ravine toward the higher ground. Both were wide. Both were trampled by many hooves. Both had fresh dung on them.

And in the soft earth at the edge of the eastern trail, clear as a signature, the crooked half-moon of the big bay.

Bayish sat the grey at the fork and read it.

The east trail went up. Up toward the high passes, toward the Kōkjal country and the long way round to China. A man who wanted to sell his horses on the Fergana side and be gone would not go that way. But a man who knew he was being followed, by someone who knew his horse's track, might send his horse that way, and go the other.

He got down. He went along the eastern trail on foot, bent over, for fifty yards, reading it. Then he came back

and did the same on the southern one.

It took him a quarter of an hour. When he had finished he stood in the glade with the leaves coming down round him, and almost smiled.

The eastern trail was a dozen horses. No more. Chongtor ponies, mostly, ridden, and a few loose ones driven ahead, and something dragged behind them, branches perhaps, to churn the ground and make it look like more. The dung was fresh, but there was not enough of it. And the half-moon track of the big bay was there, sharp and crooked, but too shallow. The bay was being led. Nobody was riding him. A big horse with a man on him sinks deep in soft ground. This one was walking light, like a horse in a paddock.

The southern trail was the herd. Thirty-eight mares in foal, heavy, slow, their tracks deep and close together. Dung in long trails, the loose dung of tired horses. And among the mares, here and there, the prints of the riders' ponies, and once, in a patch of mud by a spring, the long narrow print of a riding boot. A good boot, mended by someone who knew boots.

Strelnikov had put his horse on the decoy and gone with the herd on something else.

"You clever bastard," Bayish said aloud, to the glade, and the grey turned her head and looked at him.



HE FOUND THE BOY'S SIGN A MILE DOWN THE SOUTHERN trail.

It was a strip of cloth, tied to a low branch at the height of a rider's hand. Grey cloth, dirty, torn from a shirt. Bayish

knew the shirt. He had cut the sleeve of it on the Kenkol to get at the boy's arm.

He sat and looked at it, and had to wait a while before he could ride on.

A mile further on there was another. Then, at a stream crossing, a walnut twig broken and laid across a stone, pointing down the valley. Then another strip of cloth, very small this time, as if the boy were running out of shirt. They were not leading him anywhere. He did not need leading. The herd's trail was a road.

They were a message that the boy was alive, and knew he was being followed, and was not afraid.

Or was afraid, and tying them anyway.



AT DUSK HE CAME TO A WALNUT-GATHERERS' CAMP.

It was in a clearing among the big trees: two felt tents and a brushwood shelter and a fire, and sacks of walnuts heaped against a log, and children, and a dog that came out barking and then thought better of it. A man got up from the fire with an axe in his hand, and then saw the carbine across Bayish's saddle, and put the axe down slowly, the way Aimkan had put down her ladle.

They were Fergana people, from the hill villages below. Muslims, by the man's skullcap and the women's dress and the way the old woman by the fire said *bismillah* under her breath when she saw him. They had come up into the forest, as they did every autumn, to gather the walnuts on the family's plot, and they would be here another two weeks, until the first big snow drove them down.

They had seen the herd. Of course they had seen it. It had come through the edge of their plot at midday, a river of horses, and men with rifles, and the man with the axe had stood in front of his children and not said a word while they went past.

"Russians?" he asked Bayish. "Soldiers?"

"Thieves."

The man looked at him. Then he said something to his wife, and she brought bread, round and flat and still warm from the ashes, and a bowl of walnuts, and a pot of tea, and set them on a felt by the fire, and the man waved Bayish to it.

Bayish sat. He had not known how hungry he was until he smelled the bread.

The old woman watched him eat. She was very old, older than the priest, with a face like a dried apple and eyes that missed nothing. When he had finished, she leaned forward and pointed at the grey mare, who was standing by the tents with the white felt on her brow, and said something to her son in the Fergana speech, quickly, too quick for Bayish to follow.

The son looked uncomfortable. "My mother says," he said, "that the mare has been blessed. By the Christians. The ones up in the mountains."

"Yes," said Bayish. There was no point in saying otherwise.

The old woman said something else.

"She says," said the son, "that in the summer of the troubles, when she was a girl, her father went over the mountain to the Chatkal with the soldiers behind him, and the Christian people up there hid him in their houses for a

week and fed him and did not tell. She says it doesn't matter what God put the felt on the mare. She says a blessing is a blessing." He hesitated. "She says the men who went past today are not blessed by anybody."

The old woman nodded firmly and sat back.

"Where are they going?" Bayish asked.

The man's face closed a little. "South. Down to Kara-Jygach. To the Kurbashi's camp."

"You know the Kurbashi?"

"Everybody knows the Kurbashi." The man looked at the sacks of walnuts heaped against the log. "Every autumn his men come up here and take one sack in five. For the cause, they say. Before, it was for Islam. Now it is just for the cause." He shrugged. "The Soviets came last year and said the Kurbashi was finished. The Kurbashi is not finished. The Kurbashi is in Kara-Jygach with eighty men, and he takes one sack in five."

"Eighty."

"Perhaps more. Perhaps fewer. They come and go."

Bayish looked into the fire.

Eighty men. And the Captain's eight, and the bai's dozen. One man with a carbine and a hundred and fourteen rounds, and a hole in his side, and a pinch of bread in a scrap of felt.

The old woman leaned forward again and said something, and this time she said it slowly, looking straight at him, so that he would understand.

"She says," said her son, "there are soldiers coming. Real ones. Russian ones, from the Talas side. Six of them, on big horses. Her nephew saw them yesterday at the top

of the forest, coming down your way. She says you should wait for them."

Bayish looked at the old woman. She looked back at him with her dried-apple face and did not blink.

"Thank you, mother," he said.

He did not say whether he would wait.



HE WOKE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT AND THE SON WAS gone from the fire. Bayish lay still under his coat and watched him go, a dark shape moving away down the hill through the walnut trees toward the south, with an empty sack over his shoulder.

One sack in five, the man had said. A family that pays the Kurbashi a fifth of its walnuts pays him in other ways too.

Bayish did not stop him. In the morning the son was back by the fire, blowing on the embers, and would not meet his eye. The old woman gave Bayish bread for the road and said nothing at all.

EIGHT

THEY CAUGHT HIM AT NOON THE NEXT DAY, AT A FORD, because he let them.

He heard them a long way off, the way you hear any Russian cavalry in mountains: the clink of bits and the creak of good leather, and big shod hooves on stones, and a man's voice saying something sharp and another man laughing. He could have gone up into the trees and let them pass. He sat the grey in the middle of the ford instead, with the water running round her knees and the carbine across the saddle, and waited.

There were six of them, as the old woman had said, on tall Don horses, bays and chestnuts, sweating and blowing from the hill. Five men in long grey coats with the red star on their caps and rifles slung, and in front, on the best horse, a young man with a leather coat and a Mauser pistol in a wooden holster on his hip and a face that had been shaved that morning in cold water by a man who believed in shaving.

He pulled up at the edge of the ford and looked at Bayish, and his hand went to the holster and stayed there.

"Who are you?"

"Bayish Kenje uulu. Chong-Talas stud."

The young man's face changed. "The horse-breaker," he said. "The one who went after them alone."

"Yes."

"Get down off that horse."



HIS NAME WAS IVANCHUK, LIEUTENANT, OF THE OGPU, Talas district detachment, and he was twenty-six years old and from a village near Poltava, and he was very angry.

"You went over the Kenkol after an armed counter-revolutionary band," Ivanchuk said. "Alone. Without orders. Without informing the competent organs."

"The competent organs were mending a lorry in Kara-Buura."

"Because your director telephoned Talas and said *horse thieves*. Horse thieves! It took him a second call to mention a White officer." He looked down at his boots, scraped grey to the ankle. "I lost a horse on your scree. A good one."

Bayish stood in the shallows with the water round his boots and let him be angry. A divisional commissar had shouted at him for an hour once, outside Kokand in 1920, and then given him a medal. It passed.

"That weapon," Ivanchuk said, pointing at the carbine. "Where did you get it?"

"The Fergana. In '21."

"Is it registered?"

"No."

"Then it's illegal. You're carrying an illegal weapon in a border zone. Give it to me."

Bayish did not move.

The five men behind the lieutenant had gone quiet. One of them, a thickset man with a broad Kazakh face and a

sergeant's stripes, sat his horse very still and watched Bayish's hands.

"Comrade Lieutenant," Bayish said. "I'll give you something else first."

He reached slowly into his coat, slowly enough that the sergeant could see what he was doing, and took out the Party card, and held it out.

Ivanchuk took it. He opened it and read it. He read it twice before he looked up, and something in his face shifted, not much, the way ice shifts on a river in March before anything has really happened.

"Six years," he said.

"Six years."

"And before that?"

"The Iradi volunteer horse, in '19. Then the Turkestan Front, scouts. The Fergana. Kokand. Andijan." Bayish held out his hand, and Ivanchuk, after a moment, gave the card back. "I know the Black Kurbashi. I've fought him. I know Strelnikov. I know his horse. I've followed it twice now." He put the card away. "You can have my carbine, Comrade Lieutenant. When the mares are back at Chong-Talas. Until then I'll keep it, and you can write me up in your report, and I'll sign it."



THEY HAD THE ARGUMENT PROPERLY THAT EVENING, AT THE camp, after the men had seen to the horses.

Ivanchuk spread an old survey sheet on a flat stone and weighted the corners with cartridges. "We follow them to Kara-Jygach," he said, and drew a neat line with his pencil. "We confirm the location. Two men ride back to Talas. The

organs request a detachment from the Fergana garrison, with a machine-gun section." The pencil made a ring round Kara-Jygach. "Then we liquidate the bandit formation."

"How long?" Bayish said.

Ivanchuk calculated. "Two weeks. Perhaps three."

"In three weeks the mares will be in Kashgar. Or in the Kurbash's cooking pots."

"Then they'll be in Kashgar. They're horses." Ivanchuk looked at him across the fire. "I have six men, comrade. You have one carbine and a hole in your side. They have eighty. What do you want me to do? Charge?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Bayish looked into the fire. He could not have explained it. That was the trouble. He could have explained it to Kalmurat, or to the priest, or to the boy's mother. He could not explain it to a young man from Poltava with a map and a pencil and a plan.

"There's a boy with them," he said instead. "A hostage. Sixteen years old. From the Chatkal. If the Red Army comes up that valley with a machine-gun section, the first thing anybody does is cut his throat."

"A boy." Ivanchuk frowned. "What boy? There's nothing in the report about a boy."

"There's nothing in the report about anything."

Bayish took the strip of grey cloth out of his pocket, the last one he had found, the small one, and put it on the map by the fire, on top of the place marked Kara-Jygach.

"He's been leaving me these," he said. "All the way down through the forest. Every mile. With his hands tied

and a bullet hole in his arm that I put there. So that I'd know he was alive." He looked up. "You go back to Talas and write your report, Comrade Lieutenant. I'm going to Kara-Jygach."

Ivanchuk picked up the strip of cloth and turned it over in his fingers.

"You'll get them all killed," he said at last. "The boy. Yourself. The mares. All of them."

"Then come and stop me."

The sergeant with the Kazakh face, who had been sitting a little way off pretending to clean his rifle, laughed once, very quietly, and turned it into a cough.



LATER, WHEN THE MEN WERE ASLEEP, IVANCHUK CAME AND sat down by Bayish at the edge of the firelight, where Bayish was sitting with his back against a walnut tree and the carbine across his knees.

For a while he only sat and watched the grey mare, who was standing a little apart from the big Don horses, asleep on her feet, with the white felt pale on her brow in the dark.

"What's that?" he said at last. "On her head."

"A woman tied it there."

"For what?"

"Superstition," Ivanchuk said, not unkindly. "Up here they're full of it. In the villages. They tie rags to trees, they pour milk on stones. They think a white horse comes down off the mountains." He shook his head. "In ten years it'll all be gone. Electricity. Schools. Tractors. In ten years every

child in the Chatkal will read Lenin, and no one will remember any of it."

"Perhaps."

"You don't believe in it."

"No."

"Then why don't you take it off?"

Bayish thought about that. The fire had burned down to embers. Somewhere above them in the walnut trees an owl was calling, two notes, over and over.

"Because a woman tied it there," he said, "whose husband died on the ice above the Kōkjal, and whose son I shot. And I told her I'd bring him back." He looked at the young man. "If I bring him back, she can take it off herself."

Ivanchuk said nothing. After a while he got up and went back to his blanket.

But in the morning, when Bayish saddled the grey, the lieutenant came over and stood by him and watched, and when Bayish swung up into the saddle, Ivanchuk said, "The sergeant thinks you know what you're doing."

"Does he."

"Sergeant Zhakupov was at Kokand too. In 1920. He says he remembers a scout who stole a whole herd of remounts out of a basmachi camp in one night, and the basmachi never found out how." The young man's face was quite expressionless. "He says the scout rode a bay with a white face."

Bayish looked over at the sergeant, who was tightening his own girth and did not look up.

"It was a long time ago," he said.

"Yes," said Ivanchuk. He swung up onto the big Don bay. "We'll go together, then. As far as Kara-Jygach. Then we'll see." He gathered his reins. "You'll keep the carbine. For now. I'll write you up."

"I'll sign it."



THEY RODE SOUTH ALL THAT DAY, OUT OF THE WALNUT forest and down into the dry hills above the Fergana, where the trees gave out and the slopes were brown and bare and cut by deep stony ravines, and the light was hard and white and went on for ever.

In the middle of the afternoon Zhakupov brought his big Don horse up level with the grey, on her off side, and rode there for a while without saying anything. Ivanchuk was out in front with two of the privates, studying the land through his field glasses and making marks on his map. The sergeant watched him do it for some time.

"The lieutenant told you," he said at last, in Kazakh, "that I remember Kokand."

"He did."

"He has it wrong." Zhakupov shifted the rifle across his saddle. "I never saw the scout's face. What I remember is the horse lines."

Bayish looked at him.

"I was sixteen," the sergeant said. "From the lower Chu. My father had a few horses and a few sheep and a debt, like everybody. In the spring of 1920 a kurbashi came through with his men and took the horses, and took me to look after them. That was how it was done then. They took the boys who could ride, and gave them an old rifle and

the night watch on the horse lines, and if the horses were stolen, they beat the boy." He said it without any feeling at all, the way Aimkan had told about the ice. "So I was on the horse lines outside Kokand. With an old Berdan. On the night the remounts went."

They rode on a little way. The grey's ears had turned back toward the sergeant's voice.

"It was very dark," Zhakupov said. "No moon. About two in the morning. I was sitting on a saddle at the end of the line, half asleep, and I heard a man talking. Low. Not words. Nonsense. The sounds you make to a horse in the morning when you come into the yard, so she knows who it is." He glanced across. "My grandmother talked like that to the mares at milking. I had not heard it since I was small. So I sat on the saddle and listened, and I thought I was dreaming about my grandmother."

"And then?"

"And then I saw him. A shape, walking down the line in the dark, with his hand on each horse as he went by. Cutting the picket ropes. One, and then the next, and then the next. Quite slowly. Talking to them the whole time." The sergeant was silent for a moment. "I had the Berdan on him from the third horse to the last. Forty yards. I could not have missed."

"Why didn't you shoot?"

Zhakupov thought about it, as if nobody had ever asked him before, and perhaps nobody had.

"Because the horses were not afraid of him," he said. "Two hundred horses, in the dark, with a stranger among them, cutting their ropes. And not one of them pulled back or made a sound. They put their heads down to him as he

went by, like they were in their own yard." He shrugged, a small movement of the big shoulders. "I was sixteen. I thought: a man the horses are not afraid of is not a man I want to kill. So I sat on my saddle and watched him take them all away into the dark, and in the morning the kurbashi beat me with a whip until I could not stand. A week later I walked into Kokand and joined the Reds."

He looked across at Bayish, and for the first time since the ford his broad face showed something that was nearly a smile.

"So you see, comrade," he said. "I have been following you for five years. You just did not know it."

Bayish rode for a while without answering. He looked at the grey's ears, and the brown hills going on and on ahead of them in the hard white light.

"It was a long time ago," he said.

"Not so long," said Zhakupov, and touched his heel to the big Don horse, and went forward to see what the lieutenant was writing on his map.

Late in the afternoon, from the top of a long ridge, Bayish pulled up and pointed.

Far off, on the edge of the hills, where they broke down in cliffs and gullies toward the great flat haze of the valley, there was a fold in the land, and in the fold there were trees, poplars and willows, the green of water. And above the trees, going up thin and straight into the evening, smoke. Many fires. More than he could count.

"Kara-Jygach," said Sergeant Zhakupov, beside him.

Ivanchuk took out his field glasses and swept the fold from end to end.

"Eighty," he said at last, quietly. "At least."

Bayish said nothing. He was looking at the gorge.

Between the ridge where they sat and the fold with the smoke in it, there was only one way down. A narrow ravine, deep and steep-sided, with a dry stream bed at the bottom and a path along it. The herd's trail went down into it and did not come out until the far end, where the poplars began.

It was a very good place for an ambush.

He had seen a great many places like it in the Fergana. He had ridden into some of them. The ones who rode out again were the ones who had looked at the walls of the ravine first and asked themselves where they would put men, if they were the other side.

He sat on the ridge in the last of the light and looked at the walls of the ravine, and asked himself.

NINE

"NOBODY RIDES INTO THAT GORGE IN DAYLIGHT," BAYISH said.

Ivanchuk looked up from his map. They were sitting below the crest of the ridge, out of sight of the fold and the smoke, in the last grey light, with the horses picketed behind them in a hollow and the men eating cold bread. The lieutenant had marked the gorge on the map with his pencil, a neat little line with an arrow at the end of it.

"It's the only way in."

"It's the only way in for horses. It's not the only way in for men." Bayish pointed up at the dark rim of the ravine, where it came out against the sky on either side. "If I were the Kurbashi, I'd have three men up there on each side. Maybe four. Behind the rocks, at the narrow place, halfway down, where the path goes close under the west wall. They let the column into the narrow place, and then they shoot the first horse and the last horse, and then they shoot everything in between."

"You don't know there's anyone up there."

"No."

"Then how..."

"Because it's what I'd do."

Ivanchuk stared at him. Then he turned to Sergeant Zhakupov, who was sitting on a rock nearby, chewing, and

looking at nothing.

"Sergeant?"

Zhakupov swallowed. "It's what I'd do too, Comrade Lieutenant."



THEY ARGUED ABOUT IT FOR AN HOUR. IN THE END IT WAS decided the way most things are decided in the army, which is that the officer decided, and the officer was twenty-six and from Poltava and had his orders, and his orders said nothing about scouts going up cliffs in the dark on their own initiative. They would go down the gorge at first light, in column, with intervals of twenty paces, rifles ready, and if they were fired on, they would return fire and push through to the far end at a gallop.

"And you," Ivanchuk said to Bayish, "will ride with the column. Where I can see you."

"No," said Bayish.

He said it quite gently. Ivanchuk opened his mouth, and then shut it.

"I'm going up the west rim tonight," Bayish said. "On foot. Before you go in. If there's nobody there, I'll come down to the far end and wait for you under the poplars, and you can put me under arrest. If there is somebody there..." He shrugged. "Then you'll hear."

He got up, and took the carbine, and went to the grey in the hollow, and stood with her a moment, rubbing her face. She pushed her nose against his chest. He took the white felt off her brow, carefully, unpicking Aimkan's knot with his fingers, and folded it, and put it in the inside pocket of his coat, with the Party card and the priest's pinch of bread.

"Sergeant," he said, without turning round. "Look after my mare."

"I will," said Zhakupov.



IT TOOK HIM FOUR HOURS TO GET UP THE WEST RIM OF THE gorge in the dark. He went a long way round, back along the ridge and then out to the west and down into a side gully that he had marked from the crest in the last of the light, and up its far side, on hands and knees much of the time, with the carbine slung across his back and his side tearing at every handhold. Twice he had to stop and lie flat on the cold stone until the world stopped turning. Once a stone went out from under his foot and went down into the dark, knocking from rock to rock, and he lay with his face against the rock for ten minutes, not breathing, listening, and nothing happened.

By three in the morning he was on the rim. By four he had found them.

There were three. He found them by their smell before anything else: tobacco and sheep-fat and wet felt. They were in a nest of boulders at the narrow place, exactly where he would have put them, lying in their coats and blankets with their rifles beside them, one awake and two asleep. Across the gorge, on the far rim, against the first faint grey of the sky, he thought he could see the shapes of

more boulders, and perhaps a man among them, and perhaps not.

He lay forty yards behind the three on the west rim, in a crack between two stones, and waited for the light.



IT CAME SLOWLY, GREY AND THEN WHITE, FILLING THE gorge from the top down, like water poured into a bowl. Below him lay the dry stream bed and the path along it, pale among the stones. Then the far rim came clear, and on it, as he had thought, three more men, in a line of rocks a little higher than his own.

The man on watch in front of him woke the other two with his foot. They sat up and rubbed their faces and took up their rifles and lay down behind the boulders facing the gorge, and one of them lit a pipe, and the smoke went up thin and blue in the cold.

Then, far up the gorge, from the north, Bayish heard horses.

The column came down into the ravine at a walk, as Ivanchuk had said. Six big horses, twenty paces apart, the men in their grey coats with their rifles across their saddles, looking up at the walls. The lieutenant rode second, behind a private on a chestnut. Zhakupov rode last, leading the grey mare on a rope. She came quietly behind his big Don horse, with her wall eye rolling up at the cliffs, and Bayish lay in his crack in the rock and watched her come and thought, *I should not have let her go down there*, and could do nothing about it.

The three men in front of him had seen the column. They were very still. The one with the pipe had put it

down on the rock. They were waiting for the first horse to reach the narrow place.

Bayish looked across the gorge at the far rim, and the three men there, and calculated. Forty yards to the ones in front of him. A hundred and fifty across to the others. He could take the three in front. He could take them before they knew he was there. But the moment he fired, the three on the far rim would fire too, at the column, down into the narrow place, and the column would be caught in the open.

Unless he fired first. Before the column was in the narrow place. Before they were ready.

He did not wait any longer.

He shot the man with the pipe first, through the back, and the man pitched forward over his rifle. The second man came up on his knees and turned, and Bayish shot him too. The third one was quicker. He rolled into the boulders and fired once, wild, at the crack in the rocks, and the bullet went off the stone a foot above Bayish's head and away into the sky. Then he ran. He ran along the rim, crouched over, away toward the south, toward the fold and the smoke, and Bayish fired once after him and missed, and let him go, because by then the far rim was firing.



THEY FIRED AT THE COLUMN, AS HE HAD KNOWN THEY would. But the column was not in the narrow place yet. It was a hundred yards short of it, in the open, and the first volley came too early and too high, and Bayish heard Ivanchuk's voice come up out of the gorge, very loud and quite steady: "Dismount! Cover! Return fire!"

The big horses plunged and reared. One went down, a chestnut, with a private still half in the saddle. The rest of the men were off their horses and in among the stones of the stream bed, firing up at the far rim. It was the shooting of men lying on their backs among rocks, firing at a cliff a hundred feet above them.

Bayish was not on his back.

He came out of his crack and ran along the west rim to the nest of boulders where the three men had been, and lay down behind the dead man with the pipe, and laid the carbine on the rock, and looked across the gorge.

A hundred and fifty yards. A little downhill. No wind. Three men behind rocks, with their heads and shoulders showing as they fired down into the gorge, and not one of them looking across at the other rim, where their own people were.

He took them one at a time.

The first he hit in the shoulder, and the man dropped his rifle over the cliff and went down behind his rock. The second he missed, and missed again, and then hit as the man rose to see where the shots were coming from. The third saw him. He swung his rifle round and they fired at the same moment, and something plucked at Bayish's sleeve, and the man on the far rim sat down very suddenly and did not get up.

Then it was quiet.

Down in the gorge a horse was screaming. Somebody was shouting in Russian, over and over, a name. Sokolov. Sokolov. Bayish lay on the rock with his cheek against the cold stock of the carbine and his side burning like a coal, and counted his cartridges, because it was something to do

with his hands. He had fired eight. He had a hundred and six left. It had taken perhaps two minutes.



WHEN HE CAME DOWN INTO THE GORGE THE SUN WAS UP, and it was over.

Two of Ivanchuk's men were dead. Sokolov, a boy from Tver with fair hair, had been in the saddle of the chestnut when it went down, and the first volley had taken him through the chest. Bekov, a Tatar from Kazan, had been hit in the head as he dismounted, and was lying among the stones of the stream bed with his rifle still in his hands. The chestnut was dead. A second horse was down with a broken leg, and Zhakupov had shot it.

Ivanchuk was sitting against a boulder with his leather coat open and his right trouser leg cut away and a field dressing on his thigh, already soaking through red. He was very white. He watched Bayish come down the last of the slope and pick his way through the stones toward him, and waited until Bayish was standing over him.

"Two," he said. "Two of mine."

"Yes."

"If we'd been in the narrow place..."

"Yes."

Ivanchuk looked away down the gorge, toward the far end, where the poplars began and the smoke of the Kurbashi's camp went up into the clear morning. His jaw was working.

"You were right," he said at last. "Write that in your report. I'll sign it."

The grey mare was standing by Zhakupov's horse at the side of the path, on her rope, untouched. When she saw Bayish she lifted her head and called to him, once, a short low sound, and he went to her and put his hand on her neck and stood there, and the sergeant looked at the two of them and turned away and busied himself with a girth.



THEY HAD ONE PRISONER. HE WAS THE MAN BAYISH HAD hit in the shoulder on the far rim. Two of the privates had climbed up after the shooting stopped and dragged him down. He was a thin hill man of thirty or so, with a scrubby beard and terrified eyes, and he sat on a stone with his arm hanging and answered everything Zhakupov asked him, very fast, in the Fergana speech.

Yes, the Kurbashi was at Kara-Jygach. Yes, the horses had come in yesterday evening. The Captain had come with them, and the bai's men, and they were all in the camp under the poplars by the spring. Eighty men, perhaps more. The Kurbashi and the Captain were to sit together tonight and agree a price. The money was to be paid tomorrow at dawn, in gold, and the bai's men would go home, and the Captain would go east toward China with his share, and the horses would go to the Kurbashi.

"And the boy?" Bayish said. "The Chatkal boy. With the bad arm."

The prisoner looked at him. "The Captain keeps him. In his own tent. With a rope on his foot." He hesitated. "The Captain says he is a guarantee."

"Of what?"

The man shrugged with his good shoulder. "Of you, I think."



IVANCHUK COULD NOT RIDE. ZHAKUPOV SAID IT, AND Ivanchuk said it himself, after he had tried to stand and fallen back against the boulder with his face grey and sweating. The bullet was still in his thigh. It had missed the bone and the big vessel, or he would be dead already, but it needed a surgeon, and the nearest surgeon was in Namangan, two days down in the valley.

"Then we go back," Ivanchuk said. "We go back and get the detachment. There's nothing else. I have three men who can fight. You have one carbine."

"The Kurbashi heard the shooting," Bayish said. "He'll have every man in the camp up by now. By the time your detachment gets here, the mares will be gone, and so will Strelnikov, and the boy will be at the bottom of a cliff."

"Then what?" The lieutenant's voice cracked. "What do you want? Tell me what you want."

Bayish looked down the gorge at the smoke.

"I'm going to walk into his camp," he said, "tonight. Alone. Without the carbine. As a guest."

There was a silence in the gorge. Even the privates who were digging in the stony ground for the two dead men stopped digging.

"He'll kill you," Ivanchuk said.

"No. He won't. Not under his own roof." Bayish turned to the prisoner on his stone. "Tell me. Is the Kurbashi a man of the old law? Does he keep the guest?"

The prisoner's eyes went to the sergeant, and then back to Bayish, and he nodded, once.

"The Kurbashi keeps the guest," he said. "Three days. Even an enemy. Even a Russian." He swallowed. "After three days, he kills them."

"Three days is plenty," said Bayish.

TEN

HE WENT DOWN THE LAST OF THE GORGE AT SUNSET, ON foot, leading the grey, with his hands empty and his coat open so that anyone could see there was no pistol in his belt.

The carbine stayed behind with Zhakupov. So did the hundred and six rounds. Bayish had handed them over without a word, and the sergeant had taken them without a word, and then, when Bayish turned to go, had said in Kazakh, very low, so that the lieutenant would not hear: *If you are not back by the second dawn, I will come in after you, and so will these two boys, and we will all die very stupidly together.* And Bayish had said, in the same language, *Then I'd better be back.*

At the far end of the gorge the path came out of the rocks into a long sloping meadow with poplars along the bottom of it, where a spring came out of the hill and spread into a marsh of reeds and willows. The camp was there. Tents and brushwood shelters and horse lines all along the edge of the trees, and fires, many fires, and men round them. More than eighty. A hundred, perhaps.

They saw him a long way off. He had meant them to.

By the time he was halfway down the meadow there were twenty men standing at the edge of the camp, with rifles, watching him come. By the time he reached the first

fire there were fifty. Nobody raised a rifle. Nobody spoke. They simply stood, and looked at him, and at the wall-eyed grey mare, and let him walk in among them, and closed up behind him, so that by the time he stopped in the middle of the camp, by the biggest fire, he was standing in a ring of men three deep with his back to nothing at all.

He stood there, and waited.



THE BLACK KURBASHI WAS NOT BLACK. BAYISH HAD NEVER seen him close, in 1921. He had imagined something, a big man, a beard, a face like a hawk. The man who came out of the largest tent and stood in the firelight was small and neat and grey-haired, perhaps sixty, with a short white beard and a quilted coat of dark blue silk and a turban wound small and tight, and a face like a schoolmaster's, mild and tired and very intelligent.

He studied Bayish. Then his eyes went to the grey mare.

"I know you," he said. He spoke the Fergana Iradi, softly, with the Uzbek in it. "Not your face. Your way of standing. You were the scout. In the summer of '21. In the valleys above Andijan." He tilted his head. "My men called you the Shadow. They used to say that if the Shadow was in front of a Red patrol, there was no point in laying an ambush, because he would be sitting on top of it when it went off."

"Your men exaggerated."

"Did they?" The Kurbashi smiled very slightly. "I have six men on the rims of Kara-Jygach who would tell you otherwise. Or I would have, if four of them were not dead and the fifth were not in the hands of the OGPU." He

folded his hands inside his sleeves. "And now you walk into my camp. With no rifle. At sunset. Why?"

"I've come as a guest," Bayish said. "To ask the master of the house for the price of forty horses."

It was the old form of words. The one that a man used on the steppe, long ago, when he came to another man's camp to talk about a theft, or a debt, or a death, and wanted it known that he had come to talk and not to fight. Bayish had heard his grandfather use it once, when he was a small boy, at a camp on the upper Talas, and had not thought of it since. He was surprised the words were still there when he reached for them.

The Kurbashi's face did not change. But round the fire, in the ring of men, there was a sound, a kind of low murmur, like wind going over long grass.

"Thirty-eight," the Kurbashi said. "There are thirty-eight. I counted them myself." He turned and spoke over his shoulder, to a boy by the tent. "Bring tea. And bring the Captain."



THEY SAT ON A FELT BY THE FIRE, THE THREE OF THEM, WITH the tea between them, and the ring of men standing round at a distance, listening. Strelnikov had come out of his tent in his good English coat and looked at Bayish and laughed, as he had laughed at Kök-Saz, softly, without much pleasure, and sat down.

"I told you," he said in Russian, to the Kurbashi. "Didn't I tell you? He walks into things. It's a disease."

"Speak Iradi," said the Kurbashi mildly. "My men like to know what is being said."

Strelnikov shrugged and switched. "He walks into things," he said again. "He walked into my camp on the Kenkol. He walked into Abdyrakhman's house at K k-Saz. Now he walks into yours. One day he will walk into something he can't walk out of." He took a glass of tea. "Possibly tonight."

The Kurbashi ignored him. He looked at Bayish.

"You came to ask a price," he said. "Ask."

Bayish put his tea down untouched.

"The mares are from the state stud at Chong-Talas," he said. "Every one of them is in foal to the black stallion."

The Kurbashi's glass stopped on its way to his mouth.

"Every one of them is in a book in Pavlov's office," Bayish said. "Her colour, her marks, her name. There's a copy in Tashkent, at the remount service." He waited. Somewhere in the ring of men somebody coughed. "There isn't a dealer between here and Kashgar who won't know a Chong-Talas mare when he sees one. They're the best riding horses in Turkestan. That's why he stole them." He nodded at Strelnikov. "It's also why you can't keep them."

The Kurbashi set the glass down without drinking. He was looking at Strelnikov now.

"There's a Red Army garrison at Namangan," Bayish said. "Two days' ride. There's an OGPU lieutenant up in your gorge with a bullet in his leg who is going to be very angry when he gets to a surgeon, and there are two dead men up there who were shot by your pickets. You can kill me tonight. But the lieutenant knows I'm here. If I don't come back, he goes down to Namangan, and in a week there will be a regiment of Red cavalry in Kara-Jygach,

with guns. Not for me. For the mares." He paused. "And for you. Because you bought them."



THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE ROUND THE FIRE.

"That's very good," said Strelnikov at last, admiringly. "That's very good indeed. Did you think of all that yourself, or did the lieutenant help?" He turned to the Kurbashi. "He's bluffing. The lieutenant's dying in the gorge. Nobody's going to Namangan. Nobody in Tashkent cares about forty mares. Pay me, and I'll be gone at dawn, and you can do what you like with this one."

The Kurbashi did not answer at once. He drank his tea, slowly, looking into the fire. When he spoke, he did not speak to Strelnikov.

"You told me," he said, "that these were horses from a bai's herd in the Chatkal. Surplus. With papers. You told me nobody would come looking." He set his glass down on the felt. "You did not tell me they were from the Red Army's stud. You did not tell me they were in foal. You did not tell me you had a Red scout following you over the Kenkol, or that you would leave dead OGPU men in my gorge." He looked up. "You did not tell me a great many things, Captain."

"I told you what you needed to know."

"No," said the Kurbashi. "You told me what you needed me to know." He turned his head a little, toward the ring of men. "Rahim. Ismail."

Two men came forward out of the ring.

Strelnikov did not move. He sat quite still on the felt, with his glass in his hand, and looked at the two men, and

then at the Kurbashi, and then at Bayish. His long tired face did not change at all.

"Ah," he said, under his breath. "So that's how it is."

Then he threw the glass of hot tea into the Kurbashi's face, and came up off the felt with a revolver in his hand that Bayish had not seen, and shot the man called Rahim through the body, and was gone into the dark between the tents before anyone else had moved.



AFTER THAT IT WAS VERY FAST, AND VERY CONFUSED, AND Bayish remembered it afterwards only in pieces.

He remembered the Kurbashi on his knees by the fire with his hands over his face, and men shouting, and men running, and rifles going off into the dark at nothing. He remembered running himself, not after Strelnikov, but toward the Captain's tent, which was the big one beside the Kurbashi's, with a lamp burning inside it. He remembered tearing the door felt aside.

The boy was there. He was sitting on the ground at the back of the tent with a rope tied round his ankle to the tent pole, and his strapped arm against his chest, and his face white and fierce in the lamplight. When he saw Bayish he held up his good hand, and in it there was a knife, a small one, a boot knife, with which he had already cut most of the way through the rope.

"Where did you get that?"

"The Captain dropped it." The boy's mouth twitched. "A day ago. I sat on it."

Bayish took the boot knife out of his hand and cut through the last strands of the rope, and pulled the boy up,

and they came out of the tent together into the noise and the dark.

And then the mares began to run.



HE NEVER FOUND OUT WHO HAD CUT THE HORSE LINES. Strelnikov, perhaps, to cover his escape. Or one of the Kurbashi's men, in the panic. Or no one at all, only the shooting, and the smell of blood, and the screaming of the horse that Rahim had been standing next to when he fell.

But he heard Kara-Jal.

The black stallion's scream went up over the noise of the camp, high and terrible, the way it had gone up in the bai's yard at Kök-Saz, and then there was a sound like the Naryn in spring flood, a great rolling thunder of hooves, and the whole herd came through the camp at a gallop in the dark. Thirty-eight mares, heavy in foal, mad with fear, with the black stallion at their head and the night full of fire and shouting, came straight through the tents and the fires and the men. Felts went down, and cooking pots, and men scattered in every direction or did not scatter fast enough, and the herd poured on through and out the far side of the camp and away up the meadow toward the hills.

Bayish had the boy by the arm. He pulled him down behind a heap of saddles and lay on top of him while the herd went by, and the ground shook under them, and a hoof went down six inches from his head.

Then it was past, and gone up the meadow into the dark, and the sound of it went away and away up the hillside toward the high ground.

Bayish got up on his knees. The camp was wreckage, fires scattered and burning in the grass, tents down, men lying where the herd had gone over them, men running. Nobody was looking at him.

"The grey," he said. "Where's the grey?"

She was there. She came out of the dark between the burning tents at a trot, with her head high and her wall eye rolling white in the firelight, and stopped in front of him, and stood. She had not run with the herd. She had not run at all.

He put the boy up on her back, and got up behind him, and turned her up the meadow after the herd, into the dark.

At the top of the meadow, where the ground rose toward the hills, he pulled her up for a moment and looked back.

The Kurbashi was standing by his ruined fire in the middle of the camp, with his face wet and red where the tea had scalded it, looking up the meadow after them. He did not raise a rifle. He did not call out. He only stood there, a small neat man in a silk coat in the middle of the wreckage, and looked.

Then he lifted one hand, slowly, and laid it flat on his chest, over his heart, and bowed his head.

It was the gesture a host makes to a guest who is leaving.

ELEVEN

ZHAKUPOV MET THEM AT THE HEAD OF THE MEADOW AN hour before dawn, coming down out of the gorge on his big Don horse with the carbine across his saddle and a face like thunder.

"I heard the shooting," he said. "You were not back."

"It hasn't been two dawns."

"I can't count," said the sergeant. He looked at the boy sitting in front of Bayish on the grey, with his strapped arm and the boot knife still in his good hand. "So. This is the one with the strips of shirt."

"This is the one."

Zhakupov took the boy in, from the felt round his head to the boot knife. Then he leaned down from the saddle and held out his hand, and after a moment the boy took it, and they shook, gravely, like two men at a bazaar agreeing a price.

"The lieutenant said to tell you," said Zhakupov, straightening, "that he has written you up for three separate offences, and will add a fourth if you get killed."

"Tell him I'll sign all four."

The sergeant handed him the carbine, and unbuckled the cartridge belt from his own saddle, Bayish's belt with the hundred and six rounds, and handed that across too.

"Where's the Captain?"

"Gone." Bayish buckled on the belt. His fingers knew how to do it without him. "When the herd broke, he went with it. Up there." He pointed with his chin at the dark hills to the east, above the meadow, where the herd had gone thundering up into the night. "He'll catch the stallion. The mares will follow the stallion. He'll take what he can and go east, toward the high passes. Toward China."

"On his own?"

"He's always been on his own."



THEY FOUND THE HERD AT FIRST LIGHT, SCATTERED ACROSS a long bare hillside a mile above the camp, grazing, as if nothing had happened. Mares are like that. A herd that has run itself out in the night will stop where it stops and put its head down and eat, and if you did not know, you would never think they had been mad with fear three hours before.

There were twenty-nine on the hillside. Bayish counted them twice. Three lay dead at the bottom of the meadow, where the herd had gone through the camp and they had gone down among the tents and fires and been trampled by the others. One more had fallen in a ravine in the dark and broken her back, and lay at the bottom of it, still breathing, and Zhakupov climbed down and shot her.

Thirty-five had come out of the camp. Twenty-nine were here.

"Five," Bayish said.

He walked the edge of the hillside, bent over, reading the ground, while the sergeant and the boy sat their horses and watched. It did not take long. The ground here was

bare and soft, and it was all there for anyone who could read it. The herd had come up the slope in the dark and stopped. Then a man on foot had come up after them, walking, one of the camp ponies on a rope behind him. He had gone in among the mares, unhurried, and caught the stallion, which had stood for him, and saddled it. Then he had driven five mares off the edge of the herd, the five nearest, and gone away east along the hillside toward the high ground, on the black horse, with the pony on its rope and the five mares in front.

The black stallion's prints were big and round and deep, a heavy horse with a tall man on him, going fast.

"He's riding Kara-Jal," Bayish said.

"Is that bad?"

Bayish looked east, where the tracks went away along the hillside and up toward a long grey ridge, and beyond it a line of mountains with snow on them, and above the mountains a sky that had gone the colour of slate, low and heavy, with no light in it at all.

"There's snow coming," he said. "And he's on a stallion that's never been ridden in mountains, driving five mares in foal toward a pass. Yes. It's bad."



HE SENT THE BOY BACK WITH ZHAKUPOV, TO BRING THE twenty-nine down to the gorge and hold them there with the privates. The boy argued. Bayish let him argue for a while, and then said, "Your mother," and the boy stopped arguing and looked at the ground. He had not stopped holding the knife.

"Keep it," Bayish said. "You earned it. You sat on it a whole day."

"Will you come back?"

Bayish looked at him.

"I said I'd bring you back to your mother," he said. "I didn't say anything about me." He turned the grey's head toward the east. "Go on. Watch the bay mare with the white blaze, the one by the rocks. She's lame on the near fore. Don't let them push her."

The snow began an hour later.



IT CAME OUT OF THE EAST, INTO HIS FACE, THE WAY SNOW comes in those hills in late October: not falling but driving, flat and hard and fine as sand, on a wind that came down off the high passes and went straight through his coat. In ten minutes the hillside was white. In twenty the tracks he was following were half filled. In an hour he could see perhaps fifty yards in front of him, and then thirty, and then nothing but grey and white and the dark shape of the grey's head with the snow caking on her mane.

But the tracks were still there. Big round deep prints in the new snow, half filled, softening, still clear enough. The stallion was heavy and the snow was not yet deep. Strelnikov was not hiding his trail any more. He had no time. He was racing the storm to the pass, as Bayish was, and he was losing, as Bayish was.

The ground went up. Rock now, under the snow. A long ridge that narrowed and narrowed, with the land falling away on the left into a white emptiness that Bayish could not see the bottom of and could hear only as a hollow

roaring of wind. On the right the mountain went up, a wall of black rock with snow driving across its face.

The path between them was a ledge. A herders' path, used for a thousand years, a yard wide in places, less in others, going along the face of the mountain above the gorge toward the pass.

The tracks went along it.

Bayish got down. He led the grey onto the ledge on foot, with the reins over his shoulder and the carbine in his right hand, close against the rock wall, and she came behind him carefully in his footprints, as she had come up the scree on the Kenkol in the dark, with her nose almost on his back.

They went along it for perhaps a quarter of an hour.

Then the ledge widened a little, into a place where the rock wall bent back and made a shelf, ten yards long and three wide, before the path narrowed again and went on round a shoulder of the mountain out of sight. And on the shelf, against the rock, standing with their tails to the wind and their heads down and the snow piling on their backs, were five mares and a camp pony.

The stallion was not there.

Bayish stopped at the edge of the shelf. The mares lifted their heads and looked at him, and one of them, a chestnut he knew, called once, low, and dropped her head again. They were finished. They could go no further, and they knew it, the way horses know, and they had stopped.

He looked at the snow on the shelf. A man's prints, and the stallion's, going on round the shoulder of the mountain onto the narrow path beyond. Not long ago. The edges were still sharp.

Strelnikov had left the mares. He had seen they could go no further, and he had left them on the shelf in the storm, and gone on alone on the stallion, toward the pass.

Bayish stood there a moment with the snow driving into his face. Then he went on.



THE PATH ROUND THE SHOULDER OF THE MOUNTAIN WAS barely a path at all. A crack along the face of the rock, two feet wide, with the wind coming round the corner like a solid thing, and the gorge on the left, invisible, roaring. He went along it with his back to the rock and the grey behind him, step by step. The grey did not hesitate once. He did not let himself think about what that meant.

Round the shoulder, the path opened out again, a little, into a slope of broken rock and snow that went up toward a notch in the ridge. The pass. It was there, just, a darker grey against the grey of the storm, two hundred yards above him.

And halfway up the slope, a black horse.

Kara-Jal had stopped. He was standing on the slope with his legs braced and his head down and his black mane streaming sideways in the wind, and he would not go on. Strelnikov was on his back, kicking him, hauling at the reins, the arm going up and down with the whip, and the stallion was not moving. He was standing quite still on the slope, a black shape against the white, and looking up at the pass.

Strelnikov turned in the saddle and saw Bayish.

He did not reach for his carbine at once. He sat there on the black horse in the driving snow and looked down the

slope, and Bayish thought he could see the long tired face, the grey at the corners of the mouth. Then the Captain laughed. Bayish could not hear it, over the wind, but he saw it, the head going back.

Then he unslung his carbine.



THEY FIRED AT THE SAME MOMENT.

Strelnikov's shot went past Bayish's ear with a snap like a breaking stick, and behind him the grey threw up her head. Bayish's did not go past anything. He saw it hit. The Captain jerked in the saddle as if someone had caught him by the collar, and his carbine went out of his hands and away down the slope into the snow, and he sat back hard, with both fists dragging on the reins.

The stallion went up.

He went up on his hind legs, high, higher, with his forefeet striking at the air and his black mane flying and the weight of the man pulling his head back and back. For a moment he stood there against the white, black and enormous, upright as a man. Then his hind feet went out from under him on the broken rock and the snow, and he went over sideways off the edge of the slope, into the gorge.

He went without a sound. So did the man.



BAYISH STOOD ON THE SLOPE FOR A LONG TIME.

He stood until his hands were so cold he could not feel the carbine, and the snow was piling on his hat and his

shoulders, and the grey had come up beside him and was standing with her head against his back. At last he went up the slope, slowly, to the place where the stallion had been.

There was nothing there. Only the big round prints of the stallion in the snow, deep and scuffed where he had reared, and then the long raw scrape of his hind feet at the edge, where the rock went down into the roar of the gorge.

And above it, between the edge and the notch of the pass, the snow. Smooth and white, driven into ridges by the wind, unmarked by anything at all.

Then he looked down at his carbine, and at the cartridge belt, and counted. He had fired once. One hundred and five.

He knew where that one had gone. He stood there in the storm and thought about a dry valley above Andijan, and a boy of seventeen who never stopped talking, and he waited to feel what he had thought for four years he would feel. Nothing came. Only the cold, and the wind, and the grey's breath on the back of his neck.

A black horse, the old men said, belonged to somebody else.

He turned round, and went back down the slope to the grey, and took her rein. They went back along the crack in the rock, and round the shoulder of the mountain, to the shelf where five mares and a camp pony stood with their heads down in the snow, waiting for somebody to tell them what to do.

"Come on," he said to them. "Come on, girls. We're going home."

TWELVE

THEY CARRIED LIEUTENANT IVANCHUK DOWN OUT OF THE gorge on a litter of two rifles and a blanket, with the two privates at the poles and Sergeant Zhakupov walking beside him, holding his hand when he thought nobody was looking.

He was fevered by then, and very pale, and talked a good deal. He talked about Poltava, and his mother's cherry trees, and the Revolution, and how in ten years there would be electricity in every village in the Chatkal. At the mouth of the gorge, where the path went down toward the valley and Namangan and the surgeon, he made them stop, and put the litter down, and he lay looking up at Bayish, who was sitting the grey beside him with the carbine across his saddle.

"Give me that," he said, and held out his hand.

Bayish gave him the carbine.

Ivanchuk held it on his chest for a moment, looking at it. Then he held it out again, butt first.

"It's registered," he said. "As of now. Weapon of the OGPU, Talas district detachment, on loan to Comrade Kenje uulu, B., for the recovery of state property." He shut his eyes. "Sergeant, write that down."

"Written, Comrade Lieutenant," said Zhakupov, who was not writing anything.

"Good." The lieutenant opened his eyes again. "I'll put you up for a decoration. They'll refuse it, because of the four offences. But I'll put you up."

Then the young man from Poltava smiled for the first time since the ford, a tired lopsided boy's smile, and lifted his hand an inch off the blanket, and let it fall.

The privates picked up the poles. Zhakupov came over and stood at the grey's shoulder for a moment, and put his hand flat on her neck, and then went after his lieutenant down the path toward the valley without a word.



THEY WENT HOME THE WAY THEY HAD COME, BAYISH AND the boy and thirty-four mares, north through the dry hills and up into the walnut forest. It took them nine days to reach the Chatkal.

It was slow going. The mares were tired, and heavy, and some of them lame, and they could not be pushed. Bayish did not push them. He let them graze where there was grass and drink where there was water, and in the evenings he walked among them with the boy and looked at their legs and their eyes and their bellies, and spoke to them in the morning voice, the nonsense voice, and they came to know it and to come to it. The boy learned it too. By the fourth day he could bring the herd in off a hillside on his own, one-handed, on a borrowed Kurbashi pony, calling to them low.

His arm was healing. Aimkan's salt water and the priest's mutton fat between them had done what they could, and the rest the boy's own young body had done. He could move the fingers now, and on the sixth day he

took the strap off and rode with the arm free and did not say anything about it, and Bayish did not either.

At the walnut-gatherers' camp the old woman with the dried-apple face came out among the sacks to watch them pass, and nodded once, firmly, as if something had been settled, and went back to her fire.

At the hollow among the birches where the priest's yurt had stood, there was nothing. A ring of flattened grass, and a circle of ash, and the snow melting off it. Father Mattai had gone down to his winter quarters, wherever they were, with his felts and his wooden book and his walnut pot.

Bayish sat the grey at the edge of the hollow for a while and looked at the ring in the grass.

He put his hand into his coat, to the inside pocket, where the priest's pinch of bread was, wrapped in its scrap of white felt and tied with white thread. He had kept it there for eleven days against his chest, and it was still soft and still warm. He did not know if it was still alive. He did not know how you would tell.

He took his hand out of his coat, and rode on.



AIMKAN WAS STANDING IN THE DOOR OF HER STONE HOUSE when they came up the side valley, with the ladle in her hand, as if she had been standing there for a fortnight.

She looked at her son on the Kurbashi's pony, with his arm free and a boot knife in his belt and his face burned brown by the hills. She looked at the thirty-four mares spreading out to graze on the slope below the house, and at the man on the grey.

She did not hit him this time. She put the ladle down on the step, and went out across the yellow leaves under the poplars, and took her son down off the pony with her own hands, as if he were five years old, and held him.

Bayish sat on the grey and looked at the poplars.



THAT NIGHT, IN THE HOUSE, AFTER THE BOY WAS ASLEEP, HE gave her two things.

The first was the strip of white felt off the grey's brow. He untied it himself, with some trouble, because his knot was a bad one, and held it out to her across the stove.

"You said you'd take it off yourself," he said. "If I brought him back."

Aimkan took the felt and looked at it. She folded it, carefully, into a small square, and put it into the front of her dress.

The second was the priest's pinch of bread.

He took it out of his coat and put it into her hand, the little warm bundle in its white felt and white thread. She knew what it was before she had untied it. He saw it in her face. She held it in her open palm and looked at it, and Bayish looked away.

"Father Mattai gave it to me," he said. "In the hills. He said to keep it warm. He said it's given to brides, and new priests, and to the head of a family when the herd divides." He looked at the stove. "Your family's herd divided, I think. In the summer of the Flight. And nobody gave you any."

Aimkan closed her hand over the bread.

"My mother had it," she said, very low. "Before. We had it from her mother. I lost it on the ice above the K  kjal. I put the pot down to carry his sister and I never picked it up again."

She got up then, and went to the chest by the wall, and took out a small wooden bowl, and put the bread into it, and a little flour from a sack, and a little water from the jug, and began to work it with her fingers, slowly, in the lamplight, with her back to him.

Bayish lay down on the felt by the stove and pulled his coat over himself and watched the lamp until he slept.



THEY WENT OVER THE KENKOL THREE DAYS LATER, IN CLEAR weather, on new snow.

The boy came with him as far as the pass. Aimkan had said he could. She had said it at the door of the house in the morning, with her arms folded, looking at Bayish and not at her son: *As far as the pass, and then he comes home. And if he goes one step past the pass, I will come over the mountain and fetch him myself, and you after him.* And the boy had grinned, for the first time Bayish had ever seen, a wide sudden grin that made him look about twelve.

They brought the herd up the long south side in the morning, slowly, with the mares strung out along the trail in the snow and the sun very bright, and came to the notch at noon.

Bayish stopped the grey below it, as he had stopped there in the dark nearly three weeks before, and looked up.

The notch was white. New snow lay across it, smooth and deep and blazing in the sun, blown into long soft

ridges by the wind. Nothing had crossed it since the snow came. Nothing at all.

Except, across the very top of the notch, from one side to the other, a single line of tracks.

A horse's tracks. Unshod. A tall horse, long in the stride, light on its feet, the prints clean-edged and sharp, as if they had been made a minute ago. They came out of the unbroken snow on the eastern shoulder of the pass, where no horse could have come from, and went across the gap, and into the unbroken snow on the western shoulder, where no horse could have gone.

They did not come up from the south. They did not go down to the north. They went across.

The boy, beside him, on the Kurbashi's pony, had gone very still.

Bayish sat and looked at the tracks for a long time. The mares came up behind him one by one and stopped, and stood, and steamed in the sun, and did not cross the tracks until he did.

Then he touched the grey with his heel, and she stepped forward, across the line, carefully, so as not to tread on any of the prints. The mares came after her, one by one, all thirty-four, and not one of them trod on them either.



AT THE NORTH SIDE OF THE NOTCH THE BOY TURNED BACK. He did not say goodbye. He sat on his pony at the top of the pass and watched Bayish and the herd start down the long scree toward the Kenkol valley, and when Bayish looked back from the first switchback he lifted his good hand.

Bayish raised his. Then the switchback took him round, and the boy was gone.

The scree was loose under the new snow, as it had been three weeks before, and the light was beginning to go. Far below, the Kenkol ran away north in the dusk toward the Talas, and Chong-Talas, and a corral with its cut rails mended and its gate standing open. Bayish got down and took the grey's rein, and started down ahead of her, with thirty-four mares coming after them one by one in the snow.

He went at her head, the way he always did. He did not walk behind horses.



[Translator's note: the 1964 edition also omits the bread. There, Bayish gives Aimkan only the strip of white felt, and the scene ends as she puts it away. In the same edition the paragraphs from "Except, across the very top of the notch" to "not one of them trod on them either" are replaced by a single sentence: "The pass was clear." They are restored here from the typescript. The censor's note in the margin reads, in full: "No."]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ORMON SATAROV WAS THE NAME ON THE COVER OF ELEVEN of the forty-one Ottuk Library books, more than any other writer in the series. It was not his real name. For sixty years the only facts anyone had about him were the ones he put in his books, and readers in the villages took those for granted: he had been a cavalry scout, he knew horses better than people, and he had ridden over every pass he wrote about.

All three were true. In 2020, when we went through the contracts file of Talas Kitep, the publishing house that had inherited the series, we found the payment slips for all eleven books made out to one man. He was a veterinary surgeon on a state farm in the Chatkal, born on the upper Talas around 1900. In 1919 he joined a volunteer horse unit as a boy, and he spent the early 1920s as a scout on the Turkestan Front in the Fergana. He was demobilised in 1925, the year in which *The Rider from Kenkol* is set, and worked with horses for the rest of his life. He began writing in his sixties, after he retired, in the winter months.

He wrote in Iradi because, as he said in a letter to his editor that survives in the file, “the horses do not understand Russian”. The Ottuk books were meant to be cheap, quick reading for the countryside: twenty-seven *tyiyn*, about a hundred and fifty pages, a painted cover and a chase. He gave the series what it asked for. He also gave

it things it had not asked for, which the censor's pencil found on almost every page of his typescripts: juniper smoke, the malka, priests in yurts, black bulls, and a rider on a white horse at the top of a pass who is never explained. He seems to have known which passages would be cut. Some of his typescripts carry notes in his own hand beside the censor's, and we have printed the one from chapter Six of this book.

The Rider from Kenkol came out in 1964 as No. 7 in the series, between *The Salt Road* (1962) and *The Last of the Ottuk* (1968), the book that closed the series. It sold better than anything else he wrote, and it is the one older readers still mention first. The 1964 edition lost about a tenth of the text. This translation restores it from his typescript, which survived among the Talas Kitep papers, and marks each restored passage in a note.

His family have asked us to keep his own name off the cover, as he did. We have kept the name he chose.

Aidana Mukash kyzy

GLOSSARY

Iradi words are given in the spelling used in this translation. A few Russian and other words that the original leaves untranslated are included.

akyel: the slender golden riding horse of the Talas and the Fergana, prized by every army that came through. The Red Army bought them as remounts.

aryk: an irrigation channel.

bai: a rich man, usually a landowner or the owner of large flocks. After 1917 the word became an accusation.

bakshy: a shaman. The church has condemned them since the days of the Kokand khans.

basmach: the armed bands who fought the Soviet power in Turkestan in the early 1920s. They were part rebels and part bandits, depending on the band and the year.

Chongtor: the short, stocky mountain horse of the herders, hard-footed and unshod.

chervontsy: gold-backed Soviet banknotes, introduced in 1922.

elechek: the white headdress, wound high, of a married woman.

ene: mother.

irchy: a bard who sings the old songs, often on horseback.

Kapitan: Russian, "captain".

kenje: the youngest son.

kun: restitution, the price paid under custom law for a death or injury. *Toguz*, “ninefold”, is the heaviest fine.

kurbashi: the commander of a basmachi band.

kyzy, uulu: “daughter of”, “son of”. They follow the father’s name: Nurdin Tölögön uulu is Nurdin, son of Tölögön.

malka: the holy leaven of the mountain churches, the “mother leaven”, said to descend from the bread of St. Janyl. It is kept in a wooden pot, renewed each Holy Thursday, and given, never sold.

Morkhan: the old bull-headed god of darkness, whom the church identifies with Satan. Black is his colour.

OGPU: the Soviet political police of the 1920s.

omin: amen.

soviet: a council. A village soviet was the local government.

White Rider: the rider on a white horse who, in Iradi belief, comes down off the mountain for a soul and carries it home over the pass.

THE RIDER FROM KENKOL

October 1925. In the night, ten riders cut the rails of the state stud at Chong-Talas and drive off forty-one golden mares in foal and the black stallion Kara-Jal. The militia's one lorry is away in Kara-Buura. So Bayish Kenje uulu, Red cavalry scout turned horse-breaker, saddles his wall-eyed grey mare and goes after them alone, over the Kenkol Pass, with a hundred and twenty rounds.

Ahead of him rides a man he has followed once before, and a debt that goes back four years to a dry valley above Andijan. And at the top of the pass, above them all, a rider on a white horse is watching.

First published in Iradi in 1964 and cut by the censor, *The Rider from Kenkol* is the best-loved of the Ottuk Library westerns. This first English translation restores the passages that were cut.

The Ottuk Library · Iradi westerns, 1962 to 1968 · Translated from the Iradi

