

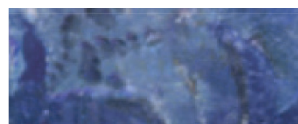
Ilyas ESENBELIN

THE NOMADS

DESPAIR



“APPB”
2015



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LBC 84(5 Kaz-Eng)-44
E 75

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The trilogy of Ilyas Esenberlin is a multivolume, multifaceted work that reconstructs the history of the Kazakh people from the XV century to the mid XIX century.

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TO READERS OF “THE NOMADS”

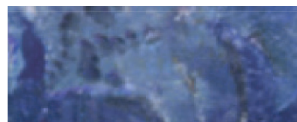
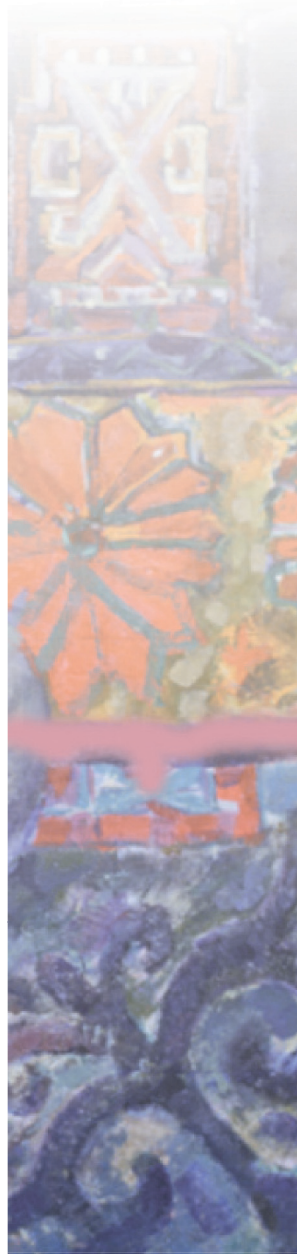
Dear friends, you are about to read the English language edition of the historical trilogy “The Nomads”, written by Ilyas Esenberlin, a famous Kazakh writer. You will discover a new world in the Steppes, both tragic and unique; the life and grand history of the Kazakh people.

The vast territory in Central Asia, located between the two great powers—Russia and China—has for centuries been the arena of political and military collisions. The Steppes still remember the innumerable cavalries of the great conquerors: Alexander Makedonskyi, Genghiz Khan, Timur. It still holds the memory of the great explorers who discovered our country for Europe: Marco Polo and Paolo Carpini, the Flemish diplomat and monk Rubruk, the German scientist Pallas, and many others. My country is the fatherland of the contemporary Kazakh forbearers—the Hunnes, the ancient Turks, the Kypchaks, the Usunis—our freedom-loving ancestors who defended their land from numerous enslavers and created a unique culture.

The book by Ilyas Esenberlin, a thoughtful writer freely traveling through the centuries, will introduce you to that world. I hope you will appreciate the work for its true value, a work of high emotional incandescence combining historical method, elevated poetics and a love for people. I would sincerely like you to be imbued with the spirit of my ancestors, their optimism, and their desire for independence. Today, the centuries-old dream of the Kazakh people has come true. Kazakhstan is an independent state where the behests of the forefathers are honored and remembered.

In conclusion, I would like to thank “Exxon”, an American oil company, for making the publication of this remarkable book possible.

*Nursultan Nazarbayev,
The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*



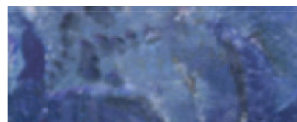
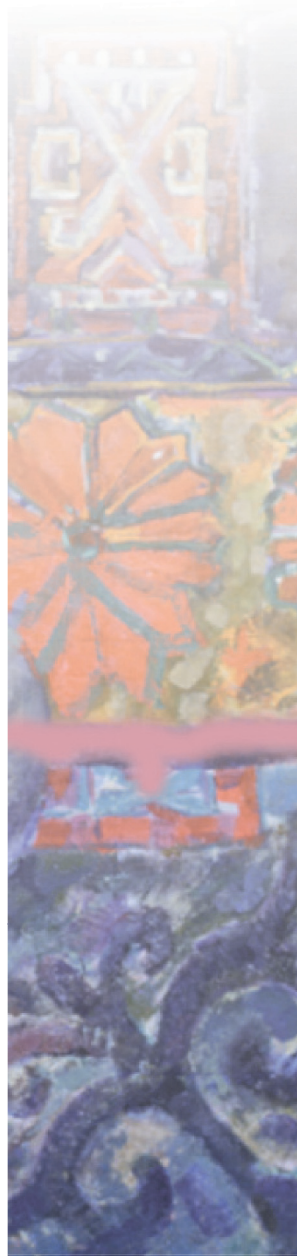


DESPAIR

Part One

The highest mountains in the world surround the Great Kazakh steppe in a gigantic thousand kilometer horseshoe from the southeast. They are the natural border of this region, open to all winds, both gentle and destructive. These mountains are difficult to pass through. But in one place, where the rocky Tien-Shan Mountain Chain sloped to the ground, and only the Altai sticks up through the fog, nature itself left a gate from where, century after century, along with the icy hurricane winds, bloody devastating invasions broke onto the boundless Eurasian plains. Wave after wave of the hordes of Attila and of Genghiz Khan and the faceless regiments of the great khans' armies poured from there. Big and small tornadoes broke out, first of all on the ancient people, who grazed their herds, built cities, and cultivated the land near the mountains from time immemorial, and then rolled on across the whole Kazakh steppe, leaving dust and bones behind. Only did the signal fires on the knolls start burning, all in the steppe able to hold a weapon rushed here to block the path of the enemy with their bodies...

For over a week already, a terrible battle had been being





waged between the Kazakh volunteer army and the regular Chinese army at the Dzhungar gates by Soikynsai. Like wolves, people cut each other down, and bloody flowers sprung up in the valley. The Chinese soldiers struggled to climb over the mountain of corpses, but the indifferent commander, his face expressionless, kept ordering them forward no matter what. A blue faceless mass, they came from behind him, reached the Kazakh warriors and fell, cut down like scant winter grass. Nevertheless, on the eighth day, the great emperor Kanshi himself came in a green silk palanquin born by forty slaves—coolies.

— How is the battle going? — he asked the commander, though he well knew from his many spies.

And the commander, whose face looked like that of an old woman without mustache and beard, bowed to the ground.

— The battle is going under the sign of the dog, Great Emperor.

This meant that the battle was going on with alternating success, like dogs fighting over a bone.

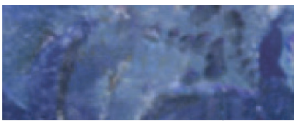
— Fool... — the eyes of the emperor were as indifferent as those of the commander. — The battle is going on under the sign of water. No matter how much you cut it with a sword, the waves keep washing up. The Tan dynasty jabbed this steppe with its sword for three hundred years, and then had to put up a wall to protect itself from it.

The commander bowed even lower, spreading his puffy hands far apart. This was a sign of full obedience.

— Tigers are fought with the head, not the hands... — the Emperor said quietly and evenly, and the words rustled like the feathers of a fan. — There is just one tiger before you... Where do you see another?

The eyes of the commander ran over the tassels of the palanquin.

— Throw the Oirot tiger a piece of someone else's meat



beyond these mountains. And then come, when they are both worn out and only have the strength to crawl up and lick our hand!

— Another bigger tiger could come to the aid of the first. I'm speaking about the Lussi, Great Emperor.

The emperor looked over the heads fighting somewhere far to the west. — Yes, I haven't forgotten about the Lussi. But while they get here, this steppe tiger will turn into an ox. And an ox has a big skin. One can give up part of it to the late-comers.

— As you say, my sovereign, — the commander said and gave the sign to retreat.

The next day, a large group of emissaries carrying gifts was sent to the Oirot Kontaichis...

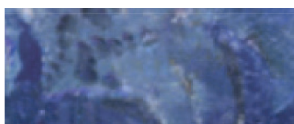
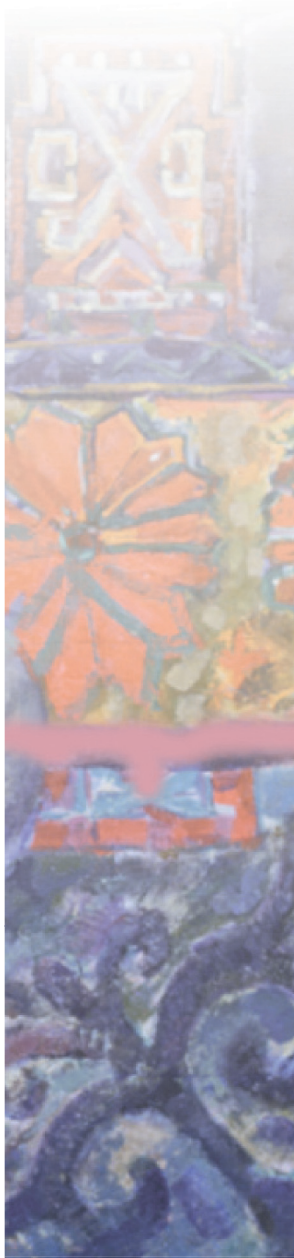
The country of the Kazakhs was like a freshly skinned sacrifice ready for Kokpar, the ancient festival of slaughtering a goat. Enemies from various directions were all set for this bloody game, and the numerous sultans inside the country were not asleep either. Whoever is stronger and has taken away the bleeding carcass from another, raises it under his shins in the saddle with a whoop and a whistle, and rushes to the smoking fire. And on the way, they tear the sacrifice from under his legs and rip off chunks of meat, the legs, the head...

And sensing all this bloody turmoil, someone had to size up the situation and determine how a whole people could escape destruction in all four winds of history.

The experience of the people, wisdom, and tenacity should have said its weighty word.

There were no doubts as to where the first most merciless player would appear from...

The Mongol khanate created by Genghiz Khan had not existed for two hundred years yet. But after Khan Khubila moved the capital from Karakoruym to Peking, it, in essence, ceased to be Mongol. However, the emperors





coming after him, the imperial dynasty, took advantage of this, and century after century, claimed not only ancient Mongol lands, but almost all the countries conquered at some time by the red-bearded “Shaker of the Universe”. It didn’t bother them that Peking itself was under the heel of a conqueror, who at one time considered turning the whole empire into a peopleless pasture for cattle.

The numerous kins and tribes that had been part of the great Mongolian tribal union did not have it easy when the empire of Genghiz Khan broke up. It was especially difficult for the western kins—the Oirots, Choras, Torgauts, Tuleuts, and Tulenguts, who later became part of the Dzhungar and then the Kalmyks nomadic state. Constantly and mercilessly squeezed out by the Chinese army, they lost their ancient pastureland—the Dzhailyau—and had to move west in search of new pasturelands. This was fine with the Chinese emperors—no matter what dynasty they belonged to—for they saw the belligerent tribes as the vanguard of their expansion into the Kazakh steppe, Siberia, and Central Asia. When some of the Kontaichis got out from under this cunning policy and turned their weapons against the Chinese and then the Manchurian army, they were systematically and mercilessly annihilated. Whole aimaks of nomads were massacred—everyone from old men to women and children.

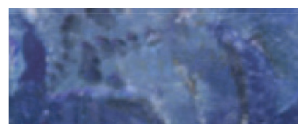
Many of the kins moved to Siberia, Priirtyshye, and the Tarbagatai Mountains, squeezing out the local inhabitants. Others went further and, crossing the Kazakh steppe, formed their Kalmyks aimak beyond the Volga near Astrakhan.

The Oirots Kontaichis, who had settled in the Tarbagatai Mountains, in the floodlands of the Eel River, and on the shores of Lake Zaisan, had been making bloody raids on Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomadic camps since the 1630s. The

situation got even worse when the big Dzhungar khanate formed there, having united the once dispersed tribes and kins around itself. The supreme Kontaichi Batur, the son of Khar-Khul, became its leader. He set his eyes on the land north of Lake Zaisan, in the upper reaches of Irtysh. He succeeded in gaining influence over many west Mongolian tribes, and the Dzhungar khanate became a power which greatly worried Chinese politicians.

After Batur's death—he had had many run-ins with Tauekel-khan and then with Khan Esim—a son of his, Seige, began to rule the Dzhungars, and then another son, Galden. Carrying out the orders of the Chinese emperor, he cruelly dealt with an uprising of the related eastern Mongolian tribes. Mongolia was depopulated after his bloody raids of reprisal. But later, Galden-Kontaichi himself bared his fangs at China. He transferred his seat to the Chinese border, and wanted to return the lands that the Chinese had seized to the Mongols. Utterly defeated by the greatly superior forces of the Podnebesny Empire, Galden-Kontaichi cut his own throat.

His nephew, Syban Raptan, who seized power in Dzhungariya, turned out to be no less obstinate. Not giving any peace to the Kazakhs and peoples of Eastern Turkestan—the Manchurian-Chinese politicians gladly assisted him in that—he also repeatedly attacked the Chinese, who had settled on the former Mongolian lands. And in 1714, he, together with his son Galden-Tseren, plundered the Chinese city of Khaly. It was then that the Chinese emperor Kanshi of the new Manchurian dynasty of Tsin issued a decree according to which all lands adjacent to China be taken away from the Dzhungars. And in compensation, the Dzhungar Kontaichis would clearly have a free hand in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. As demanded by the Chinese Emperor, a special Dzhungar kurultai was to be convened. If they refused, the emperor



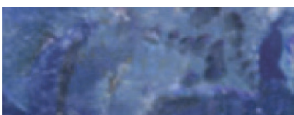


threatened to annihilate the Dzhungars. The Kontaichis had no choice but to do as the Chinese Emperor said. Syban Raptan transferred his seat back, and the numerous Dzhungar detachments flooded Semirechye and the Kazakh steppe...

As soon as the pressure of the Dzhungars let up on the borders of China and their fierce attacks turned in the direction of Kazakhstan and Central Asia, the Chinese arsenals again opened to the Kontaichis. And Manchurian-Chinese military advisers again appeared among the assorted troops. At that time, they carefully watched to see whether the crafty Syban Raptan would turn his cavalry against the empire once more. A non-commissioned officer named Renat, a Swede who was a subject of Russia, was of great help in organizing the Dzhungar army—he had been taken captive when the Dzhungar's had wiped out the Russian expedition lead by Bukhgolets, not far from Ust-Kamnya.

By this time, the country of the Kazakhs looked like a big summer pastureland, where herds of horses roamed without an experienced herder, and each stallion was the total master of his herd, jealously protecting its inviolability. Those herds whose stallion was strong and mean felt relatively secure, grazing freely. The steppe wolves avoided such a herd, knowing that they wouldn't even be able to get a colt. The stallion usually didn't even let the pack of wolves get close to its herd, but raced toward them neighing, flailing its steel hooves, biting and bearing down with its powerful chest...

Since time immemorial, the ancestral biys and warriors had been such all-mighty masters of the steppe. They decided where to set up camp in the spring and where to spend the winter; they administered justice and met out punishment. It was they who organized the resistance to the numerous thieves from the neighbouring tribes and



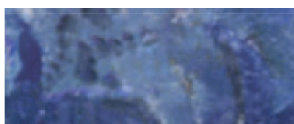
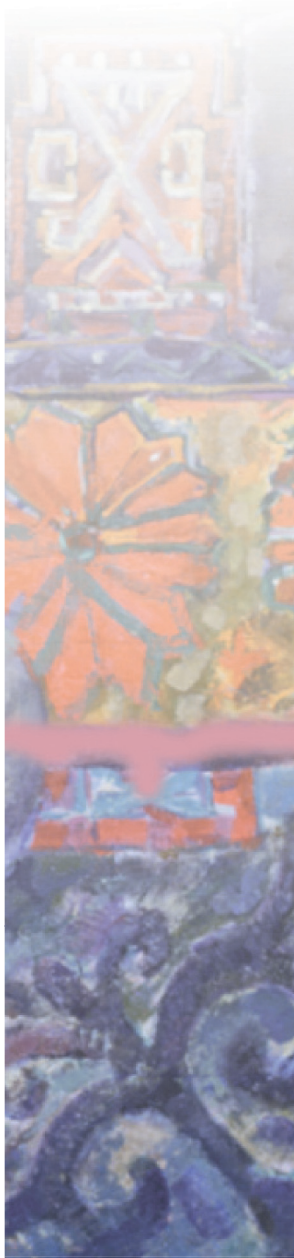
kins, who drove away the cattle. Sometimes, they came to the aid of a neighbour camping nearby, but only them. The dispersed ancestral leaders were powerless before big enemy invasions...

True, Bulat, the third son of Khan Tauk and the grandson of Yesim-Khan, was considered the khan of all three zhuzes—the so-called Big Horde—by that time. But he was spineless, eternally sick, and didn't have the necessary authority in the steppe.

Actually, the khan of the Middle Zhuz was Samek, his younger brother. The more so since the khan of the Junior Zhuz, Abulkhair, didn't obey Khan Bulat. At that time, the Senior Zhuz was ruled by Zholbarys-Sultan, who also did not have much authority. The numerous branches of the kin of the Naiman, though they were part of the Middle Zhuz, lived apart on the border of the Kazakh steppe with Dzhungariya, and looked on themselves as almost a separate khanate. They were ruled by Shagai's grandsons, the opportune Sultan Barak and Sultan Kuchek.

It wasn't bad while the White Horde still existed, even though so split up. That was thanks to the previous Khan Tauk who, not without reason, was called Az-Tauk—Wise Tauk—by the people. Actually, Tauk-Khan was the first to really understand the danger of the Dzhungar threat and all the craftiness of the Manchurian-Chinese. It was he who recognized all the advantages of the Kazakhs coming together with Russia, where the genius Peter the Great had appeared at that time. Already in 1702, he sent his ambassador to the Russian fortress on the shore of Lake Yanysh, but the Oirots were laying in ambush and he perished. And in 1715, envoys of Khan Tauk, headed by Takhmur-Biy, arrived in Ufa. And the governor-general of Ufa sent a message of peace back in the name of the Russian Czar. But Khan Tauk didn't live to receive it.

Though Tauk-Khan wasn't as influential as his





predecessor, and he didn't rule all the Kazakh territory, he did all that he could in the hard years when the Kazakh lands were disintegrating. He fought many battles, rebuffing the attacks of the rulers of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand. But his main merit was that he, together with his allies, the Kyrgyz kins, held off the Dzhungar Kontaichis.

It was during his reign that the first overtures to Russia were made. And when Az-Tauk-Khan died, his heirs continued to follow the same policy, for it had become a tradition. Kaip, having taken over for his uncle, immediately answered the letter of the governor-general in Ufa, and soon sent envoys to the governor of Siberia, Prince Gagarin, who was in Tobolsk. The most respected people of the Middle Zhuz—Yekesh-uly-Biy and Buri-uly Baidaulet-Elder—headed the group of envoys. And in a letter to the “White Czar,” there was already mention of uniting: “We, with all our heart, would like to live in eternal friendship and concord with you, and we are ready to immediately provide a detachment of twenty to thirty thousand horsemen to jointly fight the Dzhungar Kontaichis...”

Yes, now not just individual wise people, but the whole nation, understood that, to counter the terrible threat from the east, the country of the Kazakhs could find real support only from Russia. In their turn, the envoys of Kaip-Khan assured the governor that any Kazakh leaders of kins and separate warriors who began to attack Russian cities and caravans would be executed or given over to be tried in a court in Tobolsk.

Such letters were sent to Kazan and Ufa.

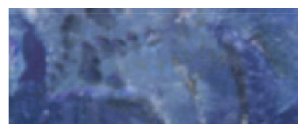
Prince Gagarin immediately sent the message of the Kazakh khan to St. Petersburg. The Senate looked on it favorably, and Czar Peter I personally approved it. But, understanding who was getting the Dzhungar Kontaichis to go against the Kazakhs and who was playing into

whose hands, he asked the Kazakh khan to be cautious. At that time, the Russian envoys felt out the Kontaichis themselves, trying to prevent the ripening conflict. “The Kyrgyz-Kaisaks Horde must live in friendship not only with us, but also avoid military conflicts with states friendly or subordinate to us,” such were the instructions of Czar Peter I.

But no one doubted that sooner or later, the inevitable attack of the Dzhungar’s would come. Prince Gagarin sent envoys, headed by the son of the noble Nikita Belousov, to Kaip-Khan in Turkestan. He was to become acquainted with the Kazakh’s country and learn what they had and what they needed in case of a war. Nikita Belousov spent a whole year in the khan’s palace and in Kazakh camps. In his letters, his insistently proposed supporting the Kazakh khan in standing up to the Dzhungar Kontaichis

The historically irreversible aligning with Russia, right up to accepting Russian citizenship, became the policy of Kaip-Khan and Khan Abulkhair. And as if confirmation of the correctness of this policy, a bloody war broke out in the Ayaguz region—opposite the Dzhungar gates— when the forward part of the army of Syban Raptan attacked the united Kazakh army in 1717. All understood that this was the test battle which Genghiz Khan usually waged before a big attack. It was a precept which was remembered by his successors for centuries to come.

At the end of 1717, a special envoy headed by Boris Bryantsev was equipped to go to the Kazakh steppe on Czar Peter’s orders. The twenty-first of the second month of the Kustoksan calendar, or in 1718, according to Russian calculation, the envoys crossed into Kazakh territory. And the fifth of the month of Kokek, roughly May on the Russian calendar, the official meeting between Bryantsev and the khan of the Junior Zhuz, Abulkhair, took place. Having received a military escort from him, the envoys





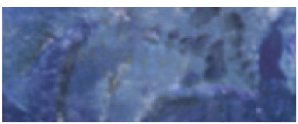
headed into the steppe, and on the twenty-fifth of the month of Ekaztoksan, arrived in Turkestan—the seat of Kaip-Khan.

The envoys became convinced of the truly unlimited possibilities of trade and the development of relations with the Kazakh steppe. Roads leading to the fairy tale countries of Asia, and first of all to India, passed through here. These roads beckoned the impressionable soul of Peter the Great. The wide door to the traditional Asiatic markets at once made the Russian Empire a great European state.

The peaceful merging together had an effect on the many countries and peoples who joined this movement. One way or another, but that arrival of Russia—even with all the horrors and injustices of the colonial expansion—helped the Kazakh people and the peoples of Central Asia survive and remain in history.

That the envoys were sent and reached Turkestan without any difficulties shows how far the friendly relations between Russia and the Kazakh khanates had developed. Only several months before this, a one and a half thousand strong detachment of prince Davlet-Kizden-Murza, or Alexander Bekovich Cherkassky, as he was called in the Russian military, was insidiously massacred on orders by the khan in the neighboring Khiva.

However, soon after the departure of Bryantsev's envoys, Kaip-Khan was removed by an unknown hand. The circumstances of his death are unclear to this day, but it is obvious from the further development of events whom it was advantageous to. Having replaced Kaip, the weak-willed and rather dull Khan Bulat got bogged down in the internecine fights of the Middle Zhuz. The other zhuzes didn't even nominally obey him then. There was no one then who could speak with the Russian on behalf of all the Kazakhs. And the seventy thousand strong cavalry of Syban Raptan with several cannons stood ready for battle



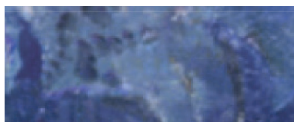
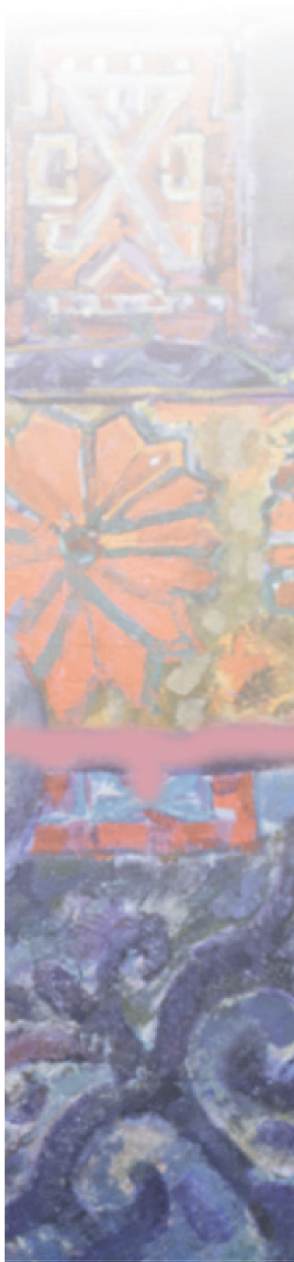
at the Dzhungar gates. And behind them, the contours of the Chinese Imperial dragon loomed on the horizon.

The Kazakh steppe could have come forth with many times more bold and brave warriors, but there was no one to bring them all together and to lead them into battle for the good of all. They stuck to their ancestral biys, elders, and warriors like a herd of sheep to its shepherd. And those, in their turn, didn't want to take orders from anybody. They couldn't see the big picture. There wasn't anyone among all the sultans who could claim to rule everyone. The ancestral leaders removed the weak-willed and obedient khans from their own zhuzes. That was the logic of the ancestral system.

And the Czarist government was unusually cautious and circumspect when it came to affairs in Central Asia, assuming that, sooner or later, it would have to smooth over the relations between all the participants of the ripening tragedy. An envoy was sent to the Kazakh Steppe and Dzhungariya at the same time. After the sudden death of Kaip-Khan, the government took the position of wait-and-see, hoping to get the most out of the situation.

The tactics of a pack of wolves getting ready to hunt deer was always characteristic of the wars which the Kontaichi Syban Raptan got ready for. His youngest brother, the Kontaichi Shuno-Dabo-Bagadur, took the general leadership of the Dzhungar army upon himself. The invasion was to be made from the east in two flanks. One flank would go through the Karatau Mountains and the floodlands of the Talas and Chu rivers. The other—into the region of the Chirchik River. To do this, the Dzhungar army was divided into seven parts, and each carried out its assignment. Some were to frighten the victims, others to drive them in the direction of those waiting in ambush, still others were to chase them till they dropped, and some would cut off their heads...

Seven ten-thousand-strong detachments of Kontaichis





under the general command of his brother, Shuno-Dabo, took up the initial positions for the invasion of the Kazakh lands at the sources of the rivers and on the slopes of the mountains. Long banners with dragons painted on them were stuck into the ground by each headquarters. The first detachment took up a position on the slopes of the Alatau Mountains, not far from Lake Balkhash. They were commanded by Galden-Tseren, the son of a Kontaichi. The second detachment was concentrated between the Kokterek and Koktal rivers, to the north of the Eel River in the valley between the Altyn-Emeliye and Koibyn mountains, and was commanded by Khoren-Batyr, the brother of a Kontaichi. The third detachment, consolidated on the eastern shore of the Naryn River, was commanded by the 17-year-old grandson of the Kontaichi Amursam. The 18-year-old son of Galden-Tseren, Syban-Dorzhi, commanded the fourth detachment, which was at the source of the Chelek River. The second son of Galden-Tseren, Lama-Dorzhi, commanding the fifth detachment, hoisted his banner on the shore of the Issyk-Kul, on the land in between the Aksu and Kois rivers. And the sixth detachment, commanded by the Noion Doda-Dorzhi from the Merkit kin, had taken up their position at the point where the Big Keben River merges with the Chu. The seventh detachment was commanded by the Kontaichi Syban Raptan himself, and the main banner of Dzhungariya fluttered over his gilded tent by the wall of the city of Kuldzh...

And the Dzhungar Kontaichi chose the very best time for the invasion—spring. He knew that was when the Kazakh stockbreeders castrated the two-year-old horses, and half of the herds were not in any condition to move over big distances for two weeks. It was also difficult for the flocks of sheep with their newborns to move at that time. Moreover, the numerous steppe rivers swelled

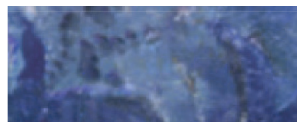
in the spring, and though they didn't serve as a serious obstacle to the cavalry horses, they did hinder the driving of peaceful herds.

It was the first warm spring day. And that day, the people in the steppe felt just like sheep, cows, dogs, and other animals on the eve of an earthquake. A heavy premonition of a great disaster bore down on the steppe. The wind coming from the direction of the Alatau Mountains brought the spicy fragrance of the flowers blossoming ahead of time. And it also seemed that there was the smell of fresh blood in the steppe... And one day, rumors about a horrendous murder in Turkestan spread across the steppe. It heralded something terrible

Nurbike, one of the wives of Khan Tauk, was from the ancient and respected kin of Altyn-Khan. Sometime long ago, she and her two-year-old son, Ablai, went to visit their distant relatives and died there. "We have lost our only daughter, — her parents wrote the khan in Turkestan.

A clear stream quenching our thirst has dried up; the only ray lighting the way for us through the darkness of life has gone out. But let her offspring at least be a consolation to us in our old age, and let your son Ablai remain with us until he comes of age. You have other children, and we would watch over him like a hen over a chick. When he grows up, he'll find the road to his father's house himself."

Tauk-Khan, not wanting to hurt their feelings, agreed to let them bring up the two-year-old Ablai. And evidently, excessive love is worse than reasonable hatred. When Sultan Ablai appeared in his father's home fifteen years later, Tauk-Khan involuntarily shuddered. His son was dark, with high cheekbones, and had bulging sheep's eyes in which something inhuman could clearly be read. They never blinked, but looked out dully like those of a corpse. It was as if the putrefaction of the grave had wafted over the father. He remembered that a character in a story, Shagai-Khan, had such a strange look...





However, Khan Tauk didn't attach any significance to his impressions, and soon arranged for his son to marry the fifteen-year-old beauty, Zeren, the youngest daughter of his old friend, the influential Kyrgyz nobleman, Ties. He gave his son a herd of innumerable horses and put up a yurta with a whole aul of servants not from his own. In a year, the beauty Zeren gave birth to two wonderful twin boys. They were given the names Valyi and Balkhy.

On the day of the feast to celebrate the birth of his grandsons, Khan Tauk became a witness of the incomprehensible cruelty of his son. Any Kazakh nomad was capable of slaughtering a sheep or horse for a holiday without batting an eye. But no one asked to do this for the pleasure of it. The more so the son of a khan—it did not suit him well to be doing so

But his son Ablai pleaded to be allowed to do it. He almost ripped the legs off the Tulengut, and personally slaughtered a huge number of cattle. Blood was dripping from his hands, and his dull eyes had lit up, a look of agony blazing in them. People looked at him in horror, and the old men whispered prayers.

At first, Khan Tauk thought his son had inherited this trait from his Genghizide ancestors, for whom human blood was cheaper than water. But even the cruelest of them were indifferent to spilling blood and didn't get sweet satisfaction out of it. Some loved to sing songs, others to hunt, still others loved women, but to spill blood.

“Why is he that way? — Tauk-Khan wondered to himself when he was alone. — Maybe the Altynkhans slipped me this bloodthirsty youth instead of my real son? Or is God punishing me for my sins?” Later, the ill-fated khan remembered the tale of the cuckoos that laid their eggs in others' nests and decided that nature was punishing him in some mysterious way. Right up to his very death, he was afraid to leave Ablai with his other



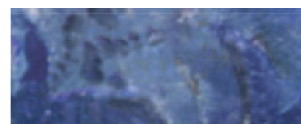
children, and though he had to let him into the palace, he saw to it that Ablai didn't stay there overnight.

But the wise Az-Tauk didn't know that it would be the descendants of this bloodthirsty son that would make his kin famous. At eighteen, Abulmansur, the grandson of Ablai fathered by Valyi, led the Kazakh army in one of the battles with the Dzhungars, shouting "Ablai," and he was given the name of his bloodthirsty grandfather after that. He went on to become the legendary Khan Ablai. But that was sixty years later; in the meantime, the son of Khan Az-Tauk was only known for his cruelty.

After the death of his father, he did all that his father had feared. One of his brothers went away to Sairam, another to Tashkent, and the third ran as far as possible from this monster. When there is a snake in the house, who can remain calm there?

Turkestan became almost unpopulated. Fearing Ablai, Khan Bulat moved his seat to the northern kins of the Middle Zhuz, and no one remained in the former capital of the khanate. The majority of the houses stood empty, and caravans went around the city where this monster lived. Even the people closest to him called him "Ablai the Bloodthirsty".

One such person, still living in Turkestan, was the head of the city, Kudaiberdy-Bagadur, who was respected by everyone. That night, Ablai and his bodyguards—they were criminals specially picked by him in the various dungeons—sneaked into the palace of the honourable hakim and were intending to kill him. But he was long gone. Some kind soul had warned the head of the city about plans to kill him, and he had escaped to Sauran the evening before. Only Sulu-Aiem-Bike, the chief's wife, remained in the palace with her baby. The old steppe legends rarely mention instances of women with children being murdered, even to revenge an enemy. But this time,





the unheard of happened. The servants who came to their mistress in the morning only found the finely cut up bodies of the mother and child. Pieces of their bodies were scattered all over the palace. The people said in a whisper that blood had appeared on the stones of the mausoleum of Saint Khodzhi Akhmed Yassavi that morning...

And, after drinking his tea in the morning, Sultan Ablai, his eyes lucid, went to the head of the city's palace, pretending that he didn't know about the murder. Having ordered no one be let into the palace, he sat down where the ruler had and rubbed his left hand over the thick nap of the rug, which was still soaked with blood.

— From now on, I am the khan and God here! — he said morosely.

— Yes, you are our Khan and God, — his accomplices and guards on all sides echoed.

— And you...you are my henchmen!

— Yes, we are your loyal henchmen...Even if you send us to fight the Iblis, we will go with you, our Khan!

— What if I want you to die?

— If you say die, we will, our Khan!

— Then listen to my first order as a khan.

— Today there will be a big feast... — Ablai smiled, and a truly devilish glint came to his eyes. — But what kind of feast can it be without the smell of enemy blood? The traitor Kudaiberdy-Bagadur didn't want to remain with us, so we will flavor our dinner today with the blood of his people!

— Off with their heads! — the henchmen shouted.

But the bloody feast didn't take place that day. For the door, which had been given a powerful shove, flung open, and a huge warrior and his four guards burst into the palace.

— The enemy is here, Sultan Ablai!

Not a single muscle twitched in bloody Ablai's face.

— Which enemy? — he asked indifferently.

— The Kontaichi Syban Raptan...From seven sides and with seventy thousand warriors.

— That's a bit many... — Ablai feigned a sigh and shrugged. — I only have seventy henchmen. What can I do against the famous Syban Raptan?

— But the glorious Turkestan always came forth with ten thousand horsemen in one day, — a warrior shouted.

— We have no people, — Ablai said and grinned. — No one is left ...Oh, soon much blood will be spilled on the ground. Few people will remain alive. Much blood will be spilled.

The warrior Kara-Kerei Kabanbai, a Naiman, looked on Sultan Ablai in amazement. The sultan's burning lips blackened, and his big mouth appeared bloody. His eyes burned with the fire of madness. The hand of the famous warrior involuntarily gripped his sable, ready to cut off the head of this vampire in a single blow. But he remembered about the Dzhungar Kontaichis galloping across the steppe and about the smoke over the auls, and lowered his hand. This horrible man sitting before him was a Tyure-Genghizide, and it was they who, as a rule, headed the counterattack against the enemy. That's why they were respected century after century.

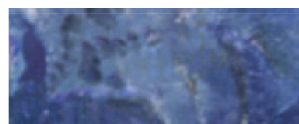
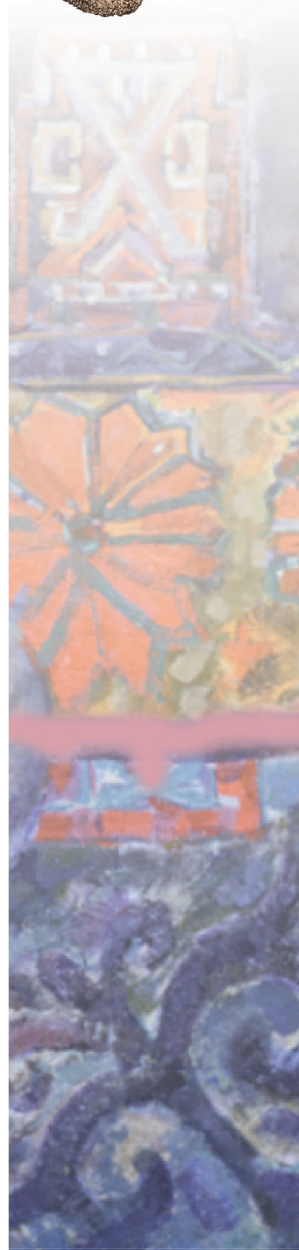
— How do you, Sultan, plan to defend the glorious city of Turkestan? — Kabanbai-Warrior cried out.

— And who told you that I intend to defend this heap of vacant ruins? You yourself just said, warrior, that the Kontaichis have seven ten-thousand-strong detachments ...

— What do you plan to do?

— Go away somewhere with those loyal to me. Let the wretches defend themselves!

The warrior, who didn't belong to the dominant caste—the Tyures—and didn't have the right to be in





command in Turkestan, took his head in his hands. Such Tyures never cared about other people. How many times the people had paid for their blind faith in a Tyure! No, no Tyure would save the city and the country. In each aul, there were brave young men and non-ancestral warriors. Yes, and simple shepherds become lions when they go to defend their campgrounds! The alarm must immediately be sounded all over the steppe and messengers be sent to the other zhuzes to inform Abulkhair, Sameke-Khan...

Ablai slowly got up from the pillow and straightened up to his full height.

— Who will you leave the city to? — the warrior asked.

— To my son Valyi...

There was a weariness and indifference in Ablai's voice. His eyes dimmed and took on a sleepy expression, like that of hyenas that have just eaten carrion.

— My grandson Abulmansur will be in charge of defending the city, — he said, and went towards the door.

The warrior watched him go in amazement. The khan's grandson Abulmansur had just turned fourteen...

Kabanbai-Batyr, together with several horsemen, had set out across the steppe when they learned about the invasion. The nearest of the big Kazakh cities was Turkestan, and he went there driving extra horses. He didn't think and didn't guess that the city was in such a straight, and that there was no one to head its defense...

Kabanbai-Batyr headed for Maidan, the big square in front of the mausoleum of Khodzhi Akhmed Yassavi. The people usually gathered there, the khans edicts were read there, and there was a gallows there...

It turned out that, even before he got there, the people somehow already knew about the impending misfortune. The warrior had ridden three horses to death to bring this news, which no one could have known. "It was apparently the intuition of the people," — the warrior Kabanbai

thought when he saw the inhabitants of the city silently standing there. He was also amazed at the great number of people in Turkestan. It only seemed that the city had died. As soon as they heard about the enemy invasion, they all came here: people from the nearby areas, from the steppe auls, from the surrounding settlements, and other nearby cities, where they had gone to escape the cruelty of Sultan Ablai and his butchers. All were here—even the old men and old women, women and children had come. The mighty sat on their horses holding spears, bludgeons, and ancient pole-axes. There were also many men on foot with simple slingshots. The numerous dervishes, scholars, and church clergy, not relying on God's help alone, were armed with long knives. All thirty thousand people of Turkestan were standing there.

— Where is the head of the city, Kudaiberdy-Bagadur?
— the warrior Kabanbai asked, having ridden up to the elder standing in front of the crowd before the temple.

— He has run away!

— From the Dzhungars?

— No, from his brother, who was thirsty for human blood...

Kabanbai-Batyr lowered his head, thinking of what he should do. He heard bits of conversations between people in the crowd.

— They say that the bloodthirsty Ablai left his son, Sultan Valyi in charge.

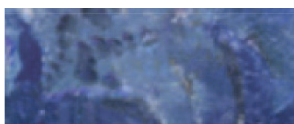
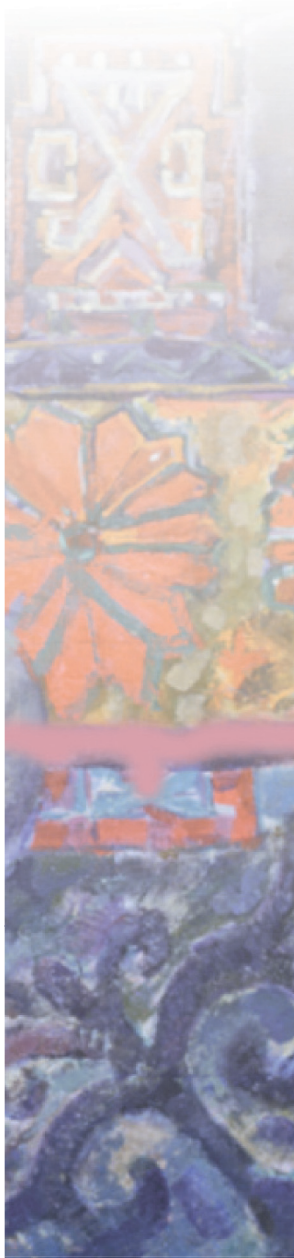
— Valyi only knows how to pray, not fight with Shurshuts!

— Why, we've beaten these Shurshuts more than once!

— Now seven Tumens of them are coming at us. Seven fire-breathing mountains covered by bloody clouds...

— A boundless sea of 'Shurshuts'. It's clear the end has come for the glorious country of the Kazakhs!"

"Shurshuts" was the derisive name for the Chinese





warriors who had never won in these parts. Each time, they had to retreat in defeat. Now, the people called the Dzhungars “Shurshuts”, knowing who was pushing the Dzhungar Kontaichis from behind.

Kabanbai-Batyr threw the reins of his horse to one of his horsemen and stepped up on the rise in front of the temple.

— My people! — He spread out his arms as if trying to embrace the whole square, the whole steppe to the very horizon. — I’m not from here, but we all—big and small, red and black haired, nomads and tillers— have the same roots. I am the warrior Kabanbai, from the kin of Kara-Kerei. Have you heard of me?

— Yes, we know you, famous Kabanbai-Batyr.

— Lead us against the cursed “Shurshuts!”

— Long live Kabanbai!

Kabanbai suddenly lowered his right hand.

— A terrible, unseen danger is advancing on us. The winds of war are blowing from the East. That wind has never brought joy to our cities and villages. The Kontaichis are only servants of the emperor of the “Shurshuts” and are coming here to wipe the country of the Kazakh’s off the face of the earth. Our strength is in unity and steadfastness. But in order to successfully defend ourselves from such a terrible enemy, we need to have a leader. I must go elsewhere, for a “Shurshut” dragon with seven fiery heads has crawled onto our steppe. But I can sincerely recommend a warrior to you, whom I have seen in battle. It doesn’t matter that he is not from an important kin and is young. The greatness of a true warrior comes out in battle, and youth is the guarantee of success.

All the people of Maidan shouted in one burst:

— Tell us his name, warrior!

— We are listening to you, Kabanbai-Batyr!

Kabanbai-Batyr raised his hand and pointed at a huge warrior standing off to the side of the crowd.





— There he is—Yelchibek, whom you yourselves once named “Bala-Paluan.”

Yes, they knew him in the city, though he only came there from time to time from Chirchik. Yelchibek-Batyr looked like a young leopard—he was tall, fit, and wore a wide belt. He had taken part in all competitions since the age of 15, and always came in first among the horsemen. That was how he got his nickname, “Boy –Hercules”. Though he was only a little over twenty, he already had taken part in several battles with the Dzhungars and been given the rank of lieutenant. All understood that only his poor lineage kept him from becoming a colonel in the khan’s army. Tales spread from mouth to mouth how he and two hundred horsemen routed a half-thousand strong detachment made up of Dzhungars and Khunkhuzes, after stripping them of all the booty that they had taken in the peaceful villages...

— Lead us, Yelchibek-Batyr!

— Thank you for your good advice, Kabanbai.

Yelchibek-Batyr went up in front of the crowd and silently bowed to the people. It was impossible to read his stern face, the face of a warrior. All understood what a difficult task he had been given—to defend this city, which had been abandoned by all its leaders, from the terrible Dzhungar Kontaichis. To defend it without a regular army, without the necessary ammunition and without any hope of someone coming to their aid.

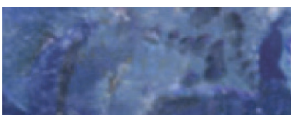
From somewhere in the heart of the market, some people shouted:

— Make way!

— Make way for Sultan Valyi, our defender!

— This way, my Sultan!

A man of thirty went up on the mound. His black mustache stood out on his pale face. He was wearing a brocade coat and tall fur hat made of sable. His intelligent



dark eyes ran over the crowd, and the hand in which he was holding a black book trembled.

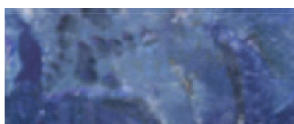
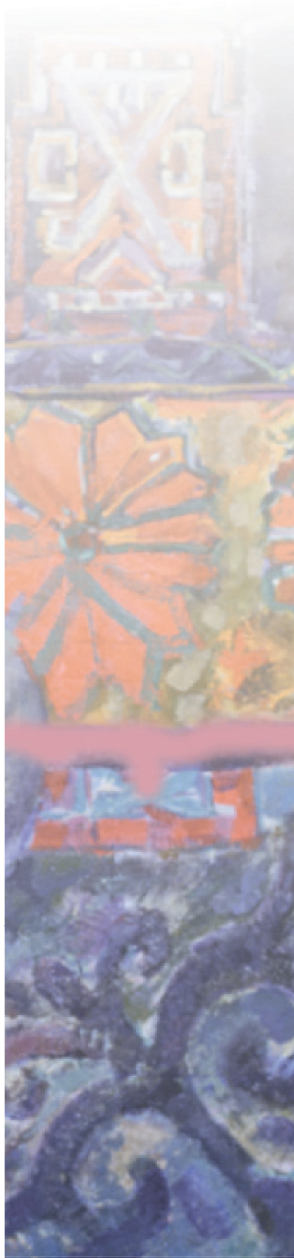
— Residents of the city of Turkestan! — he began quietly, and the people on the square at once fell silent. — My father left me and my fourteen-year-old son Abulmansur to lead the defense of the city. But as you know, I have never held a spear in my hands. I have another passion—science. I was very glad when I heard the great warrior Kabanbai suggest that my friend, Yelchibek-Oglan, head the army in this time of trial. As far as I can, I promise to assist him...

And Sultan Valyi, known for his scholarliness, held out his hand to the simple horseman, with whom he had long been friends. There was thunderous applause. And only on the right side of the mound, where the important and rich people were standing, did someone shout in disapproval: — It's not good for a Tyure to yield power to some commoner.

— When the “Shurshuts” raise your foolish head, which has been separated from your body, on a spear, let's hear you shout about the glory of all Tyures who abandoned us to the whims of fate! — someone in the crowd derisively answered him.

— Those who would like to and can fight the enemy, remain. The rest of you, please leave the square! — Yelchibek-Batyr ordered in a loud commanding voice, and the people, jostling one another, began to divide into warriors and those who would play an auxiliary role in the defense of the city. For there was not a single person in the city of Turkestan who would have ran away in a time of trial.

The next morning, the great warrior Kabanbai left with his horsemen. When he came up to where the horses were tethered, he felt someone lightly touch his sleeve. He turned around and saw a slim girl with long blonde braids. She





couldn't be called pretty, but there was something unusually sweet in her fine nose and wild brown eyes. Her sable hat, which set off her high open forehead, became her.

— Let me accompany you. It's a tradition, our warrior, — she said and, without waiting for a reply, took the reign of the famous battle horse nicknamed Kok-Daul—“Blue Storm”. He really was a bluish shade. It seemed that just one blow of the heavy hooves of this horse, which there were hundreds of songs about, could turn the girl into dust. But the horse calmly let her lead it and this struck the warrior. — Take the reins, Kabanbai, — the girl said.

The warrior took the reins from her, and she held the stirrups for him while he got in the saddle.

— What is your name, miss? — he asked, looking her straight in the eyes.

— My name is Gaukhar. That means pearl. I am the sister of Malaisar-Batyr of the Basentiin kin. — She held out a thin white hand to the warrior. — May you have a good journey...And may God protect you in all battles. And let him help us meet again.

— Yes, our wish will come true, Gaukhar, — Kabanbai-Batyr said in all seriousness, and dug his spurs into his horse.

The battle horse left Turkestan in a swirl of dust, its heavy hooves thundering across the wood bridge over the moat. Kabanbai looked around only when he got to a knoll. The small figure still stood by the palace tethering pole, which was well visible from the knoll. She raised her hand and waved a white handkerchief. The warrior raised his hand, which was in heavy black chain mail.

— So long, Gaukhar! Pearl! — he shouted, but the wind carried his words away somewhere into the steppe.

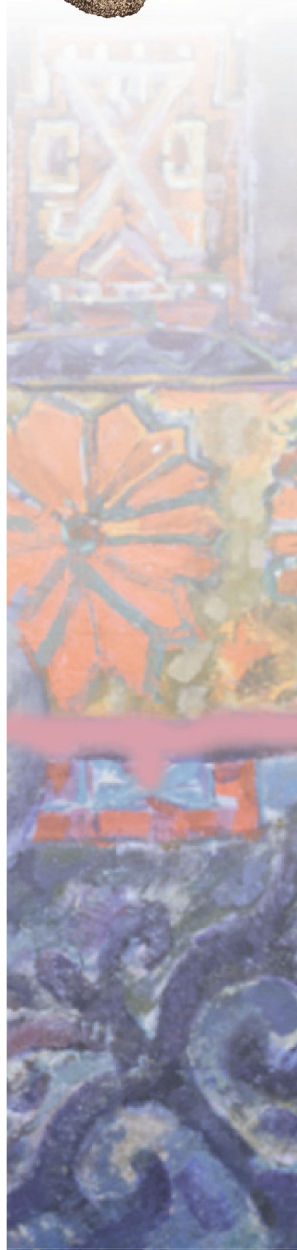
Gaukhar kept standing there and looking into the empty steppe...

In three to four days, the whole country of the

Kazakhs—from Semirechye and the Altai to the Zhaik and the Yesilye—knew about the terrible invasion. But what could they do, not having a common and regular army? The seven heads of the Dzhungar dragon entered the body of the country like a knife through butter. They burned the cities and villages of Semirechye, Pribalkhashiye, and Turkestan, which were caught unprepared. Ravens pecked corpses in the burned out ruins, undisturbed. That's where the terrible saying about land soaked with human blood originated from...

Only the people of a few Kazakh and Kyrgyz auls survived, by leaving most of their cattle behind and going high in the mountains, where the Dzhungar cavalry couldn't reach them. But a terrible fate befell most of the population. The Dzhungars drove all the young women into their camp, tying their braids together so that they couldn't run away. All able to carry a weapon were killed on the spot, while the old men, women, and helpless children were driven with whips into the desert, where they died of thirst. When raiding a village, the Dzhungars began by raising all the children over seven on their spears and laughing wildly. Then, they raped the girls right in front of their relatives. The parents tore out their hair and went crazy, but this saved them, for the only people whom the Kontaichi soldiers didn't kill were the insane. They couldn't be touched according to an old Mongol tradition. Thousands of crazy people roamed the steppes, filling the air with their wild screaming and moaning ...

After conquering half the steppe, the detachments of Kontaichis advanced on the cities of Northern Turkestan. What could the poorly armed defenders without a common leader do? Battering rams, made according to Chinese drawings, destroyed the decrepit walls, and when that didn't work, cannons were used.

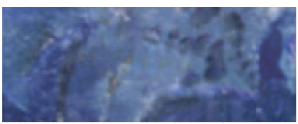




Endless files of caravans and people running away stretched across the steppe like migrating birds lagging behind the flock. People, by miracle remaining alive, were running away from Semirechye, from the shores of the Chu and Talas, and from the foothills of the Kazykurt, Karaspan, and Karatau Mountains. The people of Northern Turkestan, who had rebuffed the cavalry of the Kontaichis, went to the upper reaches of the Seikhundarya and to the Aral; refugees of the Senior and Middle Zhuzes skirted the city of Sauran and went through the flood-lands of Lake Alakul in the direction of Fergan, Andizhan, and Samarkand, while the refugees of the Junior Zhuz went to Khiv and Bukhara.

In the famous poem “Kalkaman-Mamyr,” the tragic love of a Kalkaman youth and a Mamyr girl is described. The old leader of the Argyns, the ninety-five year-old Anet, the fair mentor and judge of the Middle Zhuz, accused the young warrior Kalkaman of falling in love with the beautiful Mamyr who was related to him. Kalkaman, according to the sentence, handed down by the just Anet, would have to ride his horse through a line of archers, who would shoot deadly arrows at him. If none of the arrows struck him, it meant he was innocent and justified. In other words, none of the men in the kin would consider him guilty. His life and death were in their hands...

Kalkaman rushed through the line of archers. Clouds of arrows were shot at him, but not one of them touched him. However, offended by Anet’s sentence, the wild warrior Kalkaman, not lessening the pace of his horse, went away to the distant Semirechye. The Tobykty kin, which Mamyr belonged to, got its fastest horses ready to go after their warrior, but that was the year the Dzhungar Kontaichis invaded the country. The following song tells this tale:

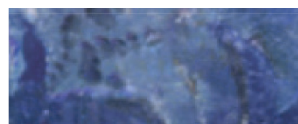


“In that unlucky year
The war with the Dzhungar’s broke out...
Syban Raptan, an expert in matters of war
Was their commander.
The Kazakhs and Dzhungars stood as a wall
Checking how many cowards there were in each army,
Five sons of Anet were brought down by arrows,
And the Kazakhs shuddered...
They lost three out of every five
In this terrible battle.
And then they ran to Sary-Arka,
Having left the succulent pasturelands...
Thus, Kalkaman remained unfound by his relatives.
For it was too late to look for him.
And old Anet remained on the route of flight
To die abandoned on the barren hills!”



In the poem “Kalkaman-Mamyr,” it says that the Dzhungars annihilated three fifths of the Kazakh population, and that is close to the truth. The Kazakh people had never experienced such a catastrophe. Even Jutchi, in his famous campaigns against Sary-Arka and the flood-lands of Seikhundarya, only annihilated a third of the local nomadic population. The matter was that Jutchi needed military allies for their wars, while the Dzhungar Kontaichis, pressed by the Manchuro-Chinese armies, needed only pastureland and cattle. That was the horror of the “Shurshut” invasions from the East on the lands of Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The Chinese officials calculated that there were around two million Kazakhs. That meant that over a million people were killed during the Dzhungar invasion. If even the distinguished Anet was left to die alone in the steppe, what can be said about the common people! To this day, they find heaps of human skeletons on the routes of





flight in the steppe. Left without cattle, the nomads were doomed. They ate grass, drank the juice of birch trees in the spring, and searched for steppe mushrooms, but in the end they gathered by some hill and died together. Thus began a four century tragedy named “Aktaban Shubyryndy, Alkakol Sulama”, i.e. the time when the whole nation, with the soles of its shoes worn out from flight, lay powerless around a lake of grief.

It was in those years that the unconsoling song “Yelim-ai” —“Oh My Much-suffering People” originated:

Caravans of grief are coming down from the mountain Karatau,

And next to each caravan despondently plods
An orphan camel calf.

Oh how hard it is to be deprived of one’s country
Big tears make it hard to see the world...

Oh what a time has come—a time of suffering!
The bird of happiness has left our bitter steppe.

The people run from their native parts like birds
scattered by a storm

The white tracks left by them are colder than the severe
winter snowstorms

Oh what a time has come—a time of great grief!
And there is no ray of light ahead...

How lonely is the only tree in the woods remaining
I dip its branches in a lake of bitter tears.

Oh how hard the black earth is when you sleep on it
naked.

Where is that unending stream of grief and suffering
coming from?

It is hard to walk over this ground,
Where are our fast horses?

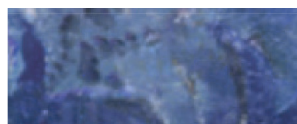
Oh what a time has come—a time of separation
Children have remained on earth without their parents

There is nothing harder than parting
When you don't know if you will meet again!

The seven-headed Dzhungar army rolled across the steppe like a wave. And it also swirled and broke, like a wave in the ocean, around Turkestan, as if it had run into a stony cliff. The city defended itself for several days. Several times a day, the enraged Kontaichis sent their cavalry to storm the low land rampart encircling Turkestan in those days. The cavalry charged with a wild yell, but each time, it rolled back, having come up against the furious resistance of the inhabitants of the city. A day before the Dzhungar's came, the families of the defenders were sent out of the city, and each day the Kontaichis were kept by the walls of the city, they got further away...

The night before the attack on the city, a bad sandstorm began. All the wells in the city filled with sand. Nothing was visible even two steps away. And, taking advantage of this, a small group of horsemen led by Yelchibek-Batyr left the city and went into the steppe.

The next day, the sun shone brighter than usual—the way it always did after a storm. When the Kontaichis burst into the city, they saw only corpses in the houses and on the walls. The furious Syban Raptan ordered the city wiped off the face of the earth. And they did exactly as the red-bearded forefather of the Kontaichis had five hundred years before. The ashes swirled over the dead Turkestan for many days to come.





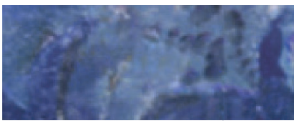
II

“**H**ow could such a misfortune befall us? What happened to the might we had two hundred years ago?”

Who would answer that question?

A wrinkle of doubt appeared on the big open forehead of the wise man and poet Bukhar-Zhyrau, who was famous all over the steppe. His beard, like a pointer, turned towards a 14-15 year-old youth sitting lower. The boy's age could only be determined by his pale face, which had never been touched by a razor blade. His shoulders were wide and manly, and he was as tall as a large purebred Tekinsky horse. His eyes caught one's attention—they were big and gray and unblinking. There was a majesty in his whole appearance, and the way he moved was untypical of a simple cattle breeder. He clearly wasn't born in sitting shack such as the one they were sitting in. There was no deceiving the eyes of the poet

Together with the khan of the Junior Zhuz, Abulkhair, the prophetic singer Bukhar-Zhyrau landed in this smoky dark yurta of some shepherds completely by accident. During one of the campaigns against the Dzhungars, the khan, having invited Bukhar-Zhyrau, decided to go on reconnaissance himself. Both excellent horse riders, they



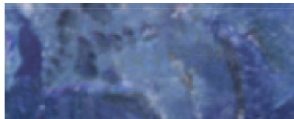
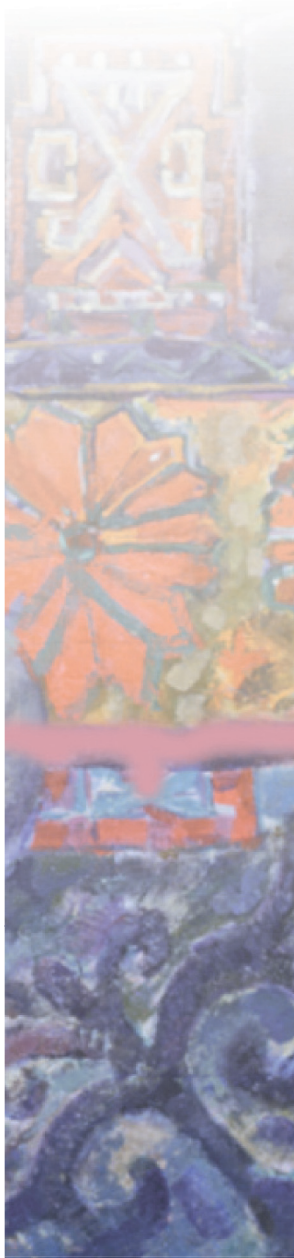
broke away from the khan's horsemen and were searching for the road to the salt-marshes, when they came upon a nomad shepherds' camp in Seikhundarya, which was right on the border with the Senior Zhuz. Abulkhair, a tall stately man of 30, with his stern, handsome face and well-groomed black mustache never looked in the direction of the shepherds...



There were just two shepherds in this yurta. The second one, a stooped old giant with a broad and thick beard and face leathery from the sun and wind, was clearly a commoner. Bukhar-Zhyrau kept wondering what could have brought together this youth from an important family and a simple slave. The sharp eyes of the poet had already noticed the mark of a slave on the giant's hand...

The poet wasn't mistaken. The gray-eyed youth was a son of the ruler of Turkestan, Valyi-Sultan, and the giant Oraz—his slave. During the siege of Turkestan, both of them were taken captive. The fourteen year-old son of the sultan, Abulmansur, to whom his grandfather, Ablai the Bloodthirsty, left Turkestan, concealed his true identity to avoid a worse fate, and they, chained together, were taken to the slave market in Khiv to be sold. They escaped from there together and, thanks to the agility and experience of the old slave, managed to hide in the camps of Seikhundarya. Already for the second month now, they pretended to be simple shepherds and herded camels belonging to the biy of the Senior Zhuz, Tole, waiting for a chance to get to relatives in the sultan's family.

The conduct of both gave them away. The younger, basically still a boy, sat motionless, while the old man hustled around. Even the arrival of such important guests didn't bother the boy. Bukhar-Zhyrau, as a commoner, also left his master, the khan, and went out after the old slave, as if to help him. Later, they returned together, bringing a bowl of rice and a pot with the meat of a young lamb. All four sat down to eat.





Abulmansur informed the guests that he had been herding camels for a long time and immediately changed the subject. His unblinking eyes had already met with the penetrating eyes of the bard two times. And Bukhar-Zhyrau understood that the youth had guessed everything. And he was right. When they went out of the yurta together, the slave Oraz, having learned that the friendly guest was the famous bard, told him everything. The young sultan owed his life to his loyal slave. Now, the bard became anxious for the fate of this old man for some reason. The youth had a very unusual glance.

The young sultan suddenly pointed at Oraz, who was sitting at the very entrance of the yurta:

— He's almost a father to me. If it were not for him, I wouldn't be alive!

He said this so sincerely, that even the much-experienced bard believed in the kind feelings of the youth toward the slave.

— I know!

He nodded his head, and at that moment, understood that he had involuntarily doomed the slave to death. After all, he had seen that unblinking glance of the Genghizides before. He had known Ablai the Bloodthirsty. How could he have been taken in by the youth!

And Abulmansur pensively looked at the unsuspecting old man by the entrance and turned away. Something had to be done, and the bard touched the sleeve of the torn robe thrown over the shoulder of Abulmansur:

— Yes, my boy, the slave told me all about your trials and torments in captivity. It is great luck to have someone so loyal in our days. Such people are loyal in bad and good times, which is even rarer...

The prophetic bard spoke, and with each word, became more and more convinced that the fate of the poor slave was sealed.

The young shepherd looked him straight in the eyes, never blinking even once. A shiver ran down the bard's spine. "My, how his eyes are like those of a snake! — he thought. — Shining and impassive. He got these eyes from his vampire grandfather, who was called Ablai the Bloodthirsty. And of course, he wouldn't fail to kill the kind man who had saved his life. One of the axioms of the Genghizides was not to leave any witness of their disgrace or ignominy alive, or simply people who knew too much about them. Oh, how could he save the ill-fated man?"

Khan Abulkhair interrupted his thoughts. He asked the question which gave no one any peace on the steppe.

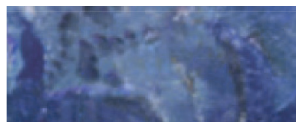
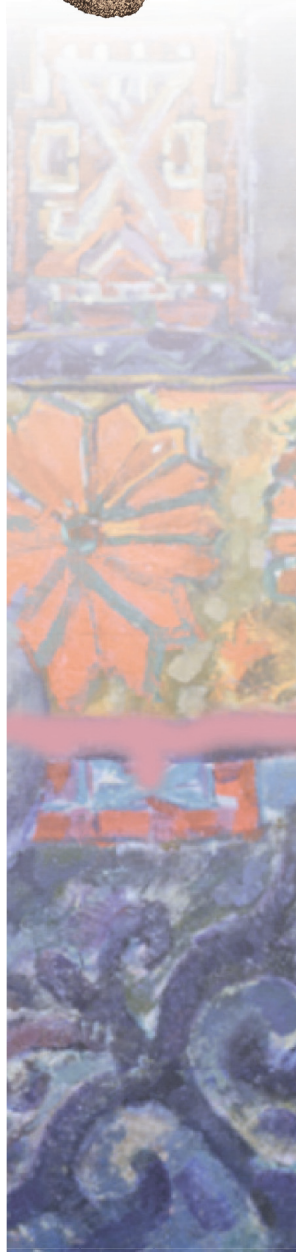
— How did it happen, my bard, that such a misfortune could befall us? Why did our tribes and kins run like antelope from the Dzhungars? Where is our former strength?"

It wasn't an easy question to answer, and the bard only glumly shook his head. But Khan Abulkhair didn't let up:

— You are called the preserver of our past, bard. You are known as being wise all over the steppe. Tell me, why is all this happening? Has no one among our people been born since Kasym-Khan who could foresee such a misfortune and force the people to prepare to rebuff the enemy?

— Why, there were such people, — Bukhar-Zhyrau waved his hand. — But it's one thing to want to do something, and another to be able to rule the people in the steppe.

We're nomads, and anyone, as soon as he doesn't like something, gets on his horse and rides away. Not even Kasym Khan coped completely with the willful elders of the kins. Didn't he die at the hands of those same biys whom he wanted to unite into one khanate? And the cities of Turkestan, which he fought for his whole life, later went from hand to hand, didn't they? While the





people themselves don't understand that their salvation is in unity, no one can succeed.

— Is that so?

Khan Abulkhair, who up till then hadn't paid any attention to the shepherds in the hut, turned around in amazement. That question had been brought up in a quiet but firm voice by the young shepherd. So the bard, in order to distract his attention, spoke up:

— Yes, that is so. And to prove it, if my khan permits it, I will tell you the story of Khaknazar, who followed in his father Kasym's footsteps, but stumbled and perished at the very end of the road...

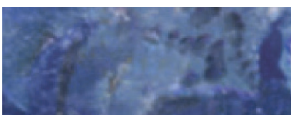
— Yes do tell us about it, bard, — said Abulkhair, turning away from the strange young shepherd, who had dared to speak as an equal with the noble guests.

— Listen then.

Bukhar-Zhyrau put his hands on his knees, closed his eyes and froze, as if trying to see something through all the years. And when he began to speak, the walls of the poor shepherds' yurta immediately moved apart, and all present saw live visible images from the past...

— What is more bitter than repentance in this fleeting world? Death is like when you, having yielded to the superior fore of the opponent, learn the bitterness of defeat. It is an unbearable feeling for the heart, — began Bukhar-Zhyrau. — But it is even more bitter and unbearable when, blinded by the knowledge of your own might, you give in to contemptible generosity and free the enemy. And that enemy, shown so much favor by you, stabs you in the back with a knife, and then you cry not from pain, but out of shame for the unworthy kindness!

Neither jokes, nor the ringing laughter of the young, which filled the huge twelve wing yurta, could disperse the glum thoughts of Khan Khaknazar. The most beautiful girls and daring and fun-loving horsemen gathered in his



yurta. That always helped in such situations, seemingly imbuing all around with eternal youth, which quickly forgot grief. But this time, the wound turned out to be too deep.

He sat silent, only absently looking from time to time at a huge jug taller than a human being. On the jug, the following lines were written in ancient Turkic:

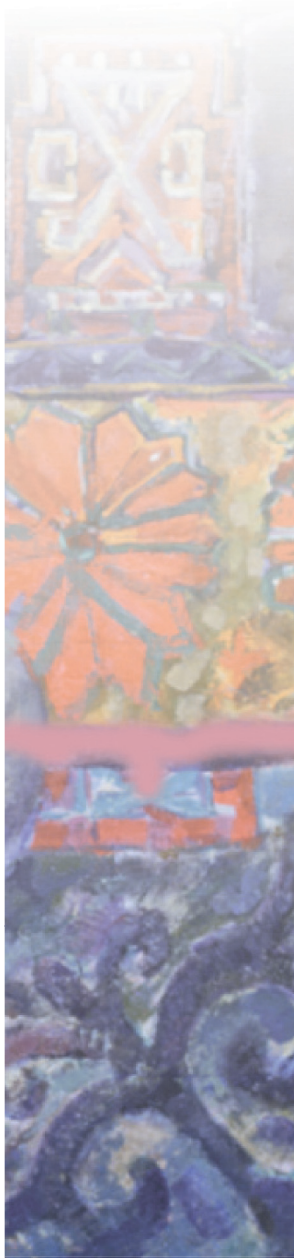
This jug must be filled with gold.
Or pure ringing silver.
Or the sweet thick wine.
If not with them, then with bitter human tears.

The khan remained one even to the dear chattering of his future sister-in-law, the spoiled beauty Akbala who, having tenderly leaned on his right knee, whispered offenseless biting remarks in his ear.

— Oh my sovereign brother-in-law! — Laughing, she pinched his hip through the velvet pants embroidered with gold. — If you would only smile, great khan; if you would only bestow a couple words on us. There are guests, but you sit like Kulmes-Khan, who never once smiled at anyone his whole life!

The playful relative, according to all the laws of the steppe, had every right to do this, but he must answer in the same spirit, not to spoil the wedding ceremony taking place. So he lightly pulled his sister-in-law towards him by the waist. But there was a darkness in his eyes, and his chest seemed as if it had been sprinkled with red hot coals. His thoughts kept returning to the news which the messenger had brought him. The time hadn't come since...

The fidgety Akbala laughed again somewhere by his ear and tugged his sleeve: — They say that you are a fearless tiger in battle, but are afraid of the girls of Saraichik. Don't worry, we don't eat glum rulers!





Only then did Khan Khaknazar remember where he was and how he should act... Yes, he was in Saraichik.

On the ruins of the Golden Horde, three khanates rose: the Kazan, Crimean, and Astrakhan. But the great Sarai on the Yedilye, where the trade routes came together, where caravans with unheard of wealth came from all corners of the earth, and where half the world waited the khan's orders, had perished. Instead of it, there was now Saraichik, a small city on the shores of the Zhaik. The white-stoned inns looked run down, and the light blue cupolas of the temples and palaces, where the Astrakhan and Nogailin biys and myrzas lived now, were faded and cracked. The walls of the fortresses around the city had settled and the towers crumbled. Nevertheless, life hadn't died out here. Caravans went through the city as before, and the religious filled the temples, and the gold halfmoons shone in the sun and the moonlight. So what kept this city from regaining its former might?

The Nogailin biys, mostly Mangyts, the dominant kin, made Saraichik their capital after the fall of the Golden Horde. Later, many Kazakh tribes and kins camping along the Yediliye and Zhaik joined the Nogailin khanate, and Saraichik became the centre of a big multi-tribal country. But the Nogailin leaders fought among themselves and, together with their subjects, gradually went their different ways: some to Kazan, others to Astrakhan, and some to the Blue Horde. Nevertheless, many remained and intermingled with the Kazakhs into a single White Horde, and only the ancient name and that city—Saraichik—remained of the once mighty Nogailin khanate. That is how it was when Khaknazar, the khan of the Kazakh White Horde, arrived there from his eastern capital of Sygnak with a big army and a secret goal...

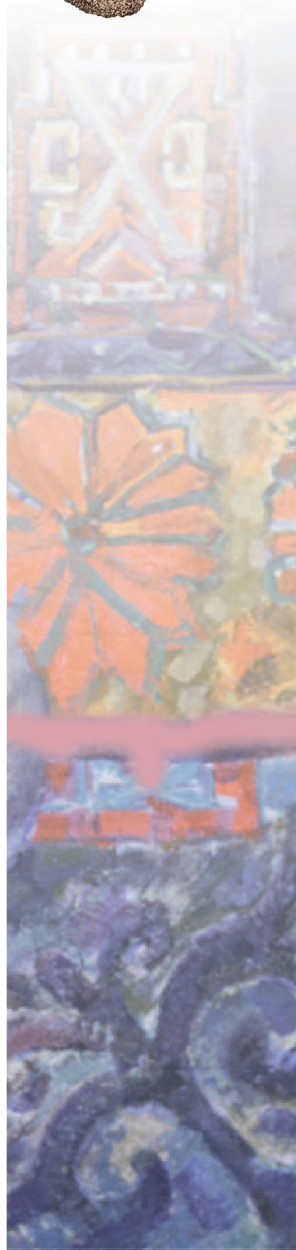
His father, Khan Kasym, had taken the ancient Kazakh lands along the lower reaches of the Seikhundarya and the

green flood-lands of the Karatal, Sairam, Talas, and Chu rivers from the descendants of Abulkhair and the Lame Timur, while simultaneously taking part of the Kyrgyz, Karakalpak, and Nogailin lands, which remained without a strong protector. And though Khan Kasym himself usually was at Karatal, his cavalry could cross the Kazakh steppe in any direction in a few days, and come down on the unruly or those who eyed regions of his. Like his great forefather Genghiz-Khan, he gave lands of his to his sons, near relatives and retainers, not permitting anyone to go against his will as a khan to the end of his days. Nevertheless, Khan Kasym perished in the internecine strife when he, at the head of a big army, crossed into the lands of the Nogailin to reconcile some rebellious subjects, who wanted to get out from under the rule of the strict khan and go over to the Astrakhan ruler.

After this, the Uzbek khan Abdullah and the khan of Mogolistan, Abdrashit, united, invaded the Kazakh lands, and divided a significant part of them between themselves. Most of the Kazakhs camped on the lands of the Sary-Arka, which were still free then.

But a people are eternal, like the fairy tale diamond sword. And there's no putting them in a knapsack. Deep in the Kazakh steppe, at the foothills of the ancient Ulytau Mountains, the remaining tribes and kins raised the thirteen year-old Khaknazar, the youngest son of Khan Kasym, on the white mat just a year after the invasion.

And Abdullah-Khan couldn't do anything. Ferment was ripening in his own army, and it was dangerous to send the Uzbek volunteer corps deep into the steppe to fight a related people. Only part of Semirechye, which was populated by the Kyrgyz-Kazakh tribes, remained under Abdullah-Khan's rule, and that up to the fortress Zhadan. The remaining part was taken by the Mogolistan khan Abdrashit, as pay for his assistance.

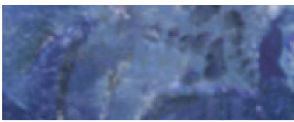




Of course, there was betrayal too, graphically showing that, often the narrow feudal interests of the rulers come higher than the general state's and peoples'. At that time, when the Kazakh kins and tribes were on the border of extinction, Shagai-Sultan, the son of the elder son of Kasym Khan, came to an understanding with the conquerors and, having given them part of Turkestan out of the khanate he had inherited from his father, proclaimed himself an independent ruler. It was clear to all that his independence was only a sham ...

Yes, a long time had passed since then, but they seemed like one big and hard day now to Khan Khaknazar. And three hundred years would be enough for many other states, which were mountainous or defended by seas, for what had happened to the open steppe khanate in these three decades. Like his father and grandfather, and like all the other steppe rulers before him, the young khan at once went about uniting the scattered Kazakh kins and tribes. It seemed that after the crushing defeat, all would have to be begun from scratch again. However, he was glad that the eternal enemies, the Chinese Bogdykhans, were busy quarreling among themselves and were leaving the Kazakh people alone for a while. But nothing passes without leaving a mark. The century long efforts that his far-sighted predecessors had made to unite the people had not been in vain. The songs which the great bards had sung, calling the people to unite, continued to be sung. The grain was already there. Though the ground where it landed was the hard-caked Kazakh virgin lands, good grain sprouted as soon as a new rain fell on the steppe!...

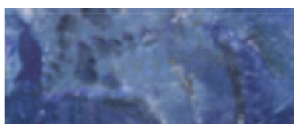
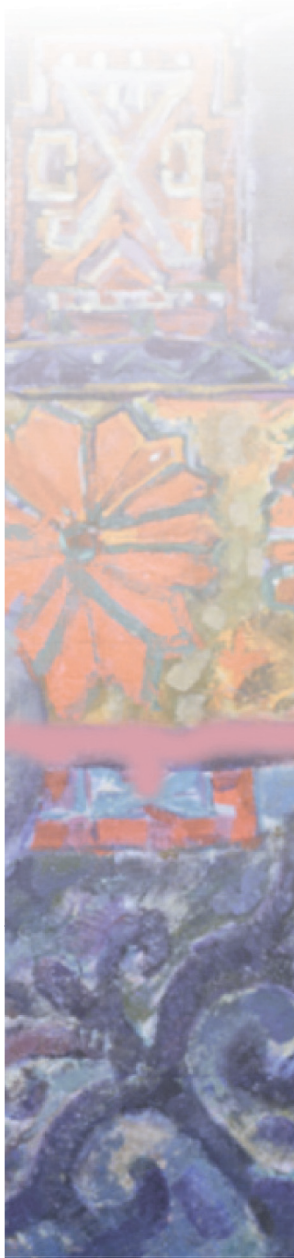
One way or another, the people had to again be gathered under the single banner of the Kazakh and related Kyrgyz and Karakalpak kins and tribes. All the cruel fights with the autocratic steppe biys and sultans, and the innumerable bloody conflicts and big wars, had



to be lived through to reach the set goal. The battle for the liberation of the ancient Kazakh cities along the Seikhundarya, which had been seized by the Sheibanid khans, required especially big sacrifices. After the death of the terrible Mukhammed-Sheibani, his khanate was weakened by internal strife and didn't dare disturb the Kazakh lands, fearing the fleet cavalry of Kasym-Khan. But when Khaknazar became a khan, Abdullah-Sultan, a direct descendent of Abulkhair, was on the golden throne in Bukhara. That young leopard looked like his mighty great grandfather, and tried to imitate everything he did, including making forays into the steppe. Having enlisted the support of his older brother Ubaidulli-Sultan, he began to make campaign after campaign, considering all lands at one time conquered by Abulkhair and Mukhammed-Sheibani to be his. But God gives a butting cow short horns. The heavy stone of all his cousins and nephews, who also wanted fame and power, hung around his neck. The internecine strife, which was already considered a normal phenomenon, turned into a real war. It became even worse when the Kazakh khans and sultans interfered in it. That was the way it always was when a war broke out in ancient oases, and that's what happened this time too...

Having seized part of Turkestan and separated from the main Kazakh khanate, Shagai-Sultan supported Abdullah-Khan, the descendent of Abulkhair, in this war. Khaknazar, again uniting the Kazakhs, took the side of his enemy, Baba-Sultan, who was also related to Abulkhair, but, at the same time, closely related to the Timurides. And the fiercer the battle between Baba-Sultan and Abdullah, the stronger Khaknazar became in the steppe.

Shagai-Sultan sat in his separated lands of the reviving state like a poisonous thorn in the side. These were the most developed regions of the khanate, where necessities for nomads were produced, where trade took place, and





where cultural ties with the southern neighbours were kept. The constant discord between the Kyrgyzes, who had united with the khanate, and the Karakalpak tribal leaders also hindered a complete union. And then, as the khans who had tried to unify the people before him, Khaknazar went deep into the steppe, to the Ulytau and Argynatis. The kins and tribes in these places, and also the river valleys of the Yesilye, Irmysh, Tobol, and Nur, and on the shores of the Blue sea, became, as in ancient times, the backbone of the united peoples. However, they clearly didn't have the strength for the coming long and difficult battles with the descendants of Abulkhair—the Sheibanids, not to speak of the on-going threat of the Dzhungars and the Chinese. And, as soon as the peoples of the steppe weakened, the Oirots Kontaichis, informed about it by their advisors, at once increased their raids on the Kazakh auls, swooping down from Dzhungariya and the Altai. Somewhere there, in the north-west, beyond the wide Yedilye, the outlines of a Great Russian state were taking shape, and Khan Khaknazar turned his head more and more often in that direction. When you rule in the open steppe, it is necessary to have a keen nose and see way into the future. Who knew what might come from that side: a new enemy or an ally in the battle with all the leopards, wolves, and tigers who snarled from three sides at the bloodied khanate?

It was then that Khan Khaknazar decided to move to the Yedilye with his whole army. Before entering into a decisive battle with the descendants of Abulkhair—the Sheiban khans—for the cities of Seikhundarya, he had to put things in order here, and also find out what could be expected in the near future from the new powerful neighbour. The Kazan and Astrakhan khanates were located between Russia and his khanate, but it was possible to notice that a new terrible force had appeared on the

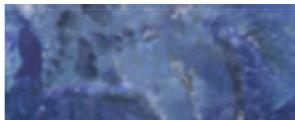
Yedilye by the sudden subduedness and compliancy of the Kazan and Astrakhan rulers, and by the nervousness of the Crimean gireys...

An excuse can always be found if you have an army to take with you. And Khan Khaknazar took quite a large number of troops with him to the shores of the Zhaik. Smoke rose from campfires all over the flood-lands on both sides of the river, from Saraichik to the very horizon. The people silently watched the galloping horsemen in full battle gear. It was nothing unusual; the great khan of the White Horde came from time to time to pray over the dust of his father, the mighty Kasym-Khan. And it was not right for him to ride around the steppe alone. The more horsemen with him, the more respect he evoked in his subjects and neighbours. Such was the law of the steppe...

But “God hears a whisper”, as they say in the steppe. The kins and tribes of the Mangyts, Alshins, Baiulis, Alimulis, and Zharalbailis, roaming the flood-lands of the Zhaik and Yedilye, well understood that the khan’s piety was always connected with earthly interests. They spent their evenings trying to guess what the arrival of the khan to their villages would bring with it. The more short-sighted and hot-headed looked on themselves as free people, and thought they could live in such a disputed region without anyone’s help or support. Others saw themselves as subjects of the Astrakhan khans, though these khans were subjects of the White Horde. But after the death of Timur-biy, there had already been troubled times for ten years in the Astrakhan khanate.

The famous bard Shalkiiz said his weighty words then.

— No matter what we may think, we are closest of all in spirit and blood to the White Horde, — the wise bard said. — Let’s greet Khaknazar like a close relative and listen to what he has to say to us...



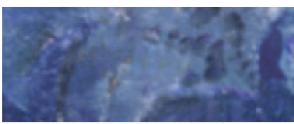


The khan and his escort made the main palace of the Nogailin biys their quarters and quickly put it in order. Moreover, white yurtas were pitched right on the shore of the Zhaik, because the steppe rulers weren't used to stone walls and felt better in the usual surroundings. Huge herds of horses and thousands of flocks of sheep had been driven there to feed the troops. And, as always, they held competitions between the horsemen, followed by feasts at which the singers and story tellers competed. But that just distracted attention, while negotiations were held with the local biys and sultans in the background...

Since time immemorial, in the country of the Kazakhs, such negotiations were begun by the wise biys. No matter where they took place—in Sary-Arka, in Semirechye-Dzhenysu, or in the camps—the first one to speak was the tobe-biy, i.e. the supreme biy. And, in correspondence with his position, he sat on a raised place. After him, the tole-biys, i.e. his assistants, begin to speak. That is what happened here on the shores of the Zhaik, only the main biy is called the bas-biy or the kazyk-biy in these parts, and his assistants—urymtal-biys or ushymdi-biys. The urymtal-biy noted the weaknesses in the position of one of the agreeing sides and wanted to exclude them from the negotiations. The ushymdi-biy should have immediately seized the thought and developed it to his advantage.

Since the old Shalkiiz-Zhyrau no longer took part in such meetings by this time, his place was occupied by the main biy of the Nogailin region, Koisari-Biy of the Alshin kin.

— Fall deep into thought and your heart contracts at once from the sufferings of the soul. You lose sleep and don't want to eat. But if you plunge into a sea of fun-making, the heart expands, you sleep calmly and eat with joy! — That is the way the unsurpassed master of words began his speech. — We have already lived in friendship



and joy with you, dear Khan Khaknazar, for many years now. Our shepherds on the Dzhailyau are friendly, and our caravan leaders are friends on their distant journeys. That is why we are not asking the real reason of your appearance in our parts with such a big army. Nor do I want to begin my speech by raising questions to our esteemed guest. Moreover, my old ears heard the rumour that you came here with the worthy goal of praying at your father's grave and building a mausoleum with a cupola over it, as is fitting a great khan...

All the biys from the local kins nodded their heads in agreement:

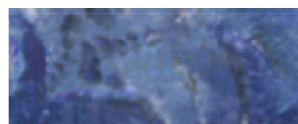
— You are right, our supreme biy!

— Well said, our silver-tongued one!

— Yes, since the great Kasym-Khan was your father, we look on him as the protector of the country of the Nogailins. We haven't let the halfmoon on his grave get dull, — Koisari-Biy stretched out his hand in the direction where the khans and the wisemen of the Nogailins were buried, having hinted to the guest thus that he needn't have brought such a big army with him just to decorate his father's grave. — Unfortunately, we couldn't save him then. But does fleeting time and the insatiable earth ever spare anyone? How many great people has it swallowed since peace has reigned. No matter how long the road, death lies ahead all the same!

The biys and elders sadly sighed and nodded their heads. And Koisari-Biy, having waited the proper amount of time, started the next part of his speech.

— We won't speak about the past and about all bad that has happened between us. It is time to think about the future. All our hope lies in the future. And we think that our brothers have made the long and hard journey across the whole steppe to speak about the future over old graves. We welcome such a visit!





And all important and respected people from the local kins and tribes stroked their beards and blessed God in a whisper.

Then the tyube-biy of the White Horde, Aksopi-Biy, spoke:

— You began your speech very well, Koisari-Biy, by mentioning past times. We know that it has seemed to some people that the times of the united Kazakh khanate, for which your and our ancestors gave their lives, have gone with the fog. But when a mighty pine forest turns into wind fallen trees, don't the cuttings remain behind? And don't they turn green after the first rain? That will happen, and a steppe hawk with its powerful untiring wings will make its nest at the top of the biggest oak as before... And if the sea dried up, only a blind man wouldn't see the spring, which remains and gurgles, turning into the future mighty waves!...An antelope dies, but its spindly legged calf remains, grows up, and runs further and further into the steppe!

Don't we Kazakhs live by the same laws? The eagle of the White Horde, Kasym-Khan, is no longer on this earth, but Khaknazar-Oglan has saddled his horse. My Kazakhs, you all saw how a fierce hurricane from the north and south, and from the east and west, broke the supports of the yurtas of our White Horde, which Janybek, Kerei, and Kasym-Khan had put in place.

The walls had already begun to tumble, and a black whirlwind seized the white felt cover and was about to lift it up into the sky. But then, at the critical moment, a worthy son of Kasym-Khan took the frame in his strong hands, firmly propped up the cupola, which was tilting to the side, and put our common house in order.

Much time has passed since then. And we hadn't managed to patch up the walls when new winds started arising on the borders of the steppe. There are many

wanting to live off what is left of our camps. And the first among them is the Sheiban Abdullah-Khan, who has managed to get the upper hand over the other rulers in his parts and is already threatening our camps in the east with full enslavement. Not only the descendants of Khan Abulkhair and many Timurides, but also our brother Shagai-Sultan. You may say that our houses and pastures are far from that crafty and merciless enemy. But the Ulytau are also far from us. And who of you elders doesn't know, that if the powerful enemies haven't annihilated us for centuries, it was only because the fierce cavalry of the White Horde was already deep in the steppe. And our enemies here knew that this cavalry would always come to our rescue, considering us part of the united Kazakh khanate. I ask you, biys and elders, what will become of us tomorrow if our common banner falls there in Sary-Arka under the blows of the Sheibanids?

There was silence. The biys and elders of the Nogailin camps fell to thinking. And suddenly, a relatively young voice rang out:

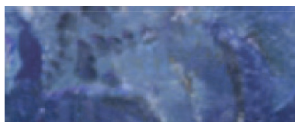
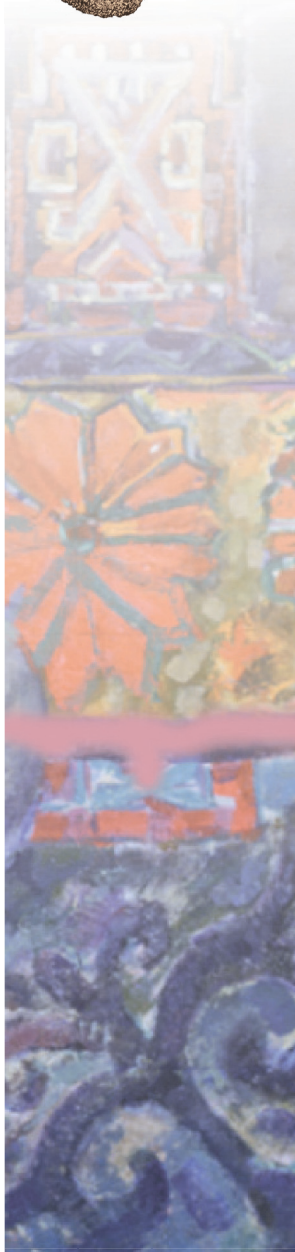
— You spoke very well, wise Aksopi-Biy. But did they need to bring such a big army in order to say that to us?

The elders shook their heads. They all well understood that the wisest words and best wishes never had any force in the steppe, unless an army stood behind them. And now, someone of them had displayed his stupidity by expressing doubt in this immutable rule.

— No, dear biy... — a thin smile appeared on the lips of Aksopi-Biy when he turned to the one who had asked. — If we come here with an army, it is not to frighten you, but only to gladden our brothers with our force and might.

And all the heads nodded in approval at such a wise and polite answer.

— We are very glad you have come, — said Koisari-Biy with a wide wave of his arm, to show that the local





kins and tribes were ready to restore the union which had existed between them and the White Horde in the previous century.

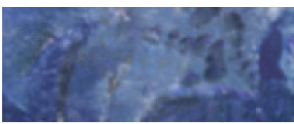
After him, the biys spoke in order of seniority, and after them, the simple elders and warriors took their turns. These conversations lasted three days more, for if a matter was not thoroughly agreed on, it was not considered binding. Khaknazar gave his speech only at the very end.

— The Khivin and Bukhara rulers want to trample our khanate once and for all, — he said, pointing to the south. — They are all related to us, for Abulkhair and the Lame Timur went there from our steppes. But such children are always ungrateful, and no mercy can be expected from them. Theirs is another life, and they have other interests. We have nowhere to go if we leave our steppe!

Thus, an old feud, connected with the death of Kasym-Khan, who had perished here at the hands of the Nogailin Kazakhs, was smoothed over. Ten thousand horsemen vowed that they would fight against Abdullah-Khan here for the Prisyrdarin lands and cities. The decision as if confirmed the unification of these lands with the Kazakh khanate. And, as a sign of loyalty and firmness of this union, the richest and noblest man, Karasai of the Zhagalbaili kin, agreed to give his daughter in marriage to Khaknazar-Khan. That was the way friends were always made...

The Zhagalbaili were one of the important Bashkir kins, and the girls from that kin were noted for their incomparable beauty. But it seemed Karasai's daughters, Aktorgyn and Akbala, surpassed all rumors and legends. They had such small waists, such long thick braids, such rosy cheeks, and huge radiant eyes that one involuntarily remembered the ancient tale about divine girls striking down mighty warriors with one glance of theirs...

The Nogailins decided to give the older one, the black-



eyed Aktorgyn, to the khan of the White Horde to make up for the death of his father.

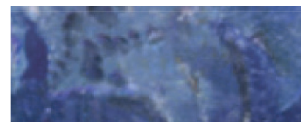
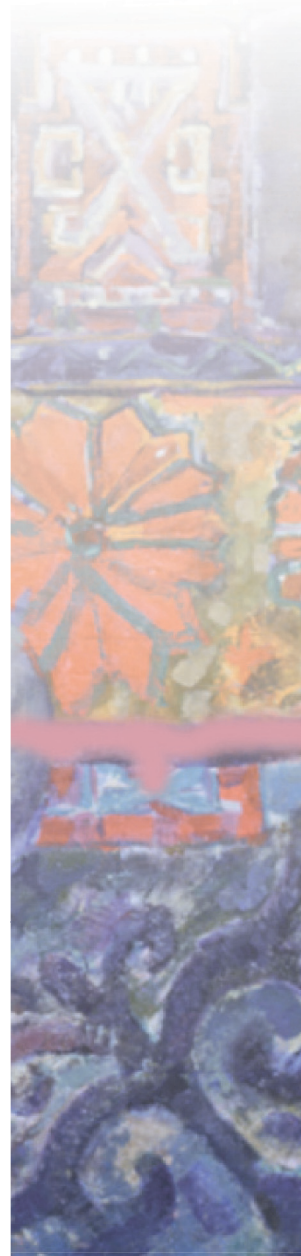
But why is the khan of the White Horde so worried? He had accomplished what he had come to do with his army. The country of the Nogailins, which was populated by various steppe tribes, again acknowledged being a subject of the White Horde and put up ten thousand warriors for the general cause. And that had taken place not with the usual blood spilling, but through agreement. In any case, the khan saw that the more far-sighted and wise people here well understood the importance of preserving a united Kazakh khanate for all the steppe tribes and kins without exception.

In the morning, the wedding ceremony began. Saraichik looked like a disturbed beehive. The girls and horsemen, all dressed up in silk, looked like unusual flowers.

The sounds of horns and drums could be heard coming from all the inns and caravanserais. And on the squares, wrestling competitions, games on horseback, and the shooting of arrows into bags of gold and silver were already taking place.

At midday, noble influential people—people “with white bones”—from all the kins and tribes of the country of Nogail began to come to the main palace, where Khan Khaknazar, the elder Shalkiiz, the leading biys of both sides, Koisari and Aksopi, and also Karasai-Biy with his relatives already were. But Khaknazar got up to go to the yurta of the bride.

According to an ancient custom, the groom had to play the role of a fool in the game “Tyuiebas”—Camel’s Head. And the khan would have done that to show his simplicity and politeness to the kins returning under his banner, but the women didn’t let him go. They only sat him down again on the silk pillows and joked





a little. The Khan turned his head to the right and only then saw his future seventh wife. She fully justified her name Aktorgyn, which meant “white muslin”. In a snow-white cloak and tight fitting dress with a gold braid, she barely audibly strummed the strings of a small dombra, and a whole handful of eagle feathers softly swayed in her round headdress in time with the sounds. And her long eyelashes, which covered her big black eyes, slightly fluttered...

— Oh, we forgot to pull the curtains! — A young and beautiful aunt of the bride jumped up and, with a graceful movement of her white hand, concealed the girl from male eyes. — You’ll have to reward me, dear brother-in-law, for such pleasure.

All laughed. Now Khan Khaknazar’s eyes lit up. The wrinkles on his stern face smoothed out, and it immediately became evident that he was still relatively young. His eyes involuntarily looked in the direction of the pulled curtain. And at that moment, a messenger ran into the yurt. From his clothes, it was possible to guess at once that he was from the Prisyrdarin kins, and from the layer of dust on him, that he had ridden day and night without stopping in order to bring the news to the khan. Having glanced at those present, the messenger bowed to the khan:

— My Khan, I bear urgent news!

The khan looked intently at him, recalling:

— Aren’t you Kiyak-Batyr?

— Yes, my Khan.

Silently bowing to the beautiful relative, Khan Khaknazar went out into the garden with the messenger. Those present began to whisper. It became known from somewhere that Kiyak-Batyr had ridden from the distant Karatal. But no one knew what news he had brought. Soon, the khan returned, but the messenger, having changed his

lathery horse for another, immediately rode back to the White Horde...

— It was just the usual report, so go on with the ceremony, — said the khan in a low voice, and all continued to celebrate.

Khaknazar fell to thinking...

Bukhar-Zhyrau interrupted his story. Just at this moment, the slave Oraz went to prepare food for the guests again. He scraped up the coals of the campfire into a mound, and it became lighter in the yurta. The young Abulmansur looked at the fire without blinking. Suddenly, he said:

— Khan Khaknazar trusted that slave in vain.

— Why? — Bukhar-Zhyrau asked in surprise.

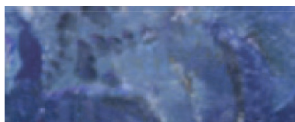
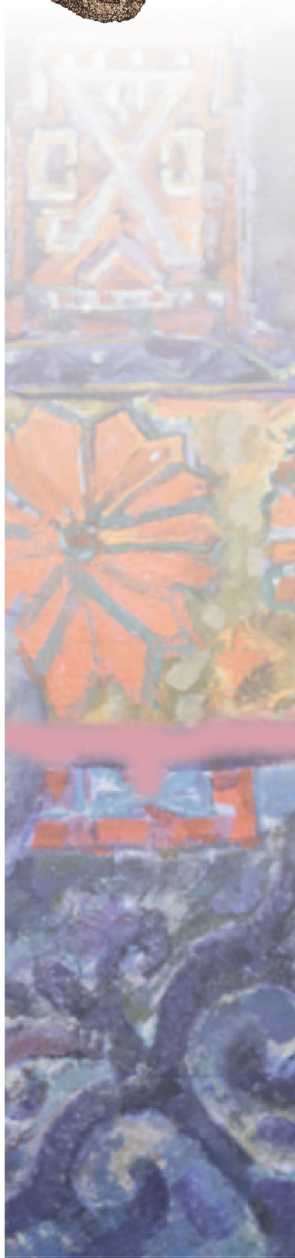
— Kiyak-Batyr is a slave who knows the secret thoughts of this master, like a snake in one's bosom.

A shiver ran down the spine of the bard again. Did this youth not have a human heart? He wasn't mistaken in his premonitions—an axe hung over the head of the one who was preparing their food right now.

Oraz returned with a jug and basin for washing their hands. Bukhar-Zhyrau continued to observe Abulmansur. If he was pretending to be a shepherd, it wouldn't hurt him to be more modest. Only the blind wouldn't notice that, while the elder fussed near the wayfarers who had gotten lost on a hunt, the youth conducted himself as an equal with the important guests. Together with them, he went up to the basin, and the slave courteously poured water on his hands...

They silently ate and rested after eating. The khan's Tulenguts didn't show up, and the bard continued his story about the past...

There was something for the khan of the White Horde, Khaknazar, to think about...The relations between Khan Khaknazar and Sultan Shagai had long been bad.





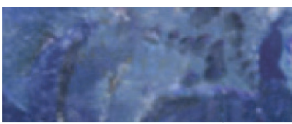
And when Shagai caused the split in the White Horde, the still young Khaknazar declared him outside the law. Taking advantage of the young age of Khaknazar and the boundless despotism of Takhir-Khan, Shagai separated a big part of Turkestan from the Kazakh khanate and, in violation of all the laws of the steppe, proclaimed himself an independent ruler.

It was possible to accept this and form at least a common union of related states. But the imposter went even further in his treachery, concluding an agreement with the worst enemies of the Kazakh khanate—the Sheibanids, the descendants of the bloody Abulkhair. It was impossible to forgive that. So the sons of Kasym and Zhadik, the offspring of Khan Janybek, turned into mortal enemies.

And, one time, returning from another raid, Sultan Shagai stopped to rest in an aul of one of the former Abulkhair warriors of the Konrad kin. He was modestly dressed and no one recognized him. In the steppe, one did not ask someone staying the night who he was and where he was from.

Shagai-Sultan spent the night in the yurta of the elder Abulkasym, the great grandson of Urchi-Batyr. And it so happened that the young daughter of the host fell in love with the stately hooknosed wayfarer, though Shagai by that time was already over 40. He didn't remain indifferent either and at night, lay with her. This unopened bud was so to his liking that, after returning home, the sultan kept his word given in a moment of blind passion and sent matchmakers to the elder Abulkasym, as well as gifts in payment for the bride.

But the elder Abulkasym was very loyal to the Kazakh khanate and was on the side of Khaknazar in the feud. When he found out that the hated Shagai-Sultan had stayed overnight and, in addition, wanted to become

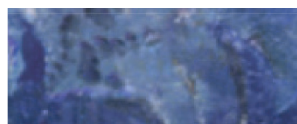
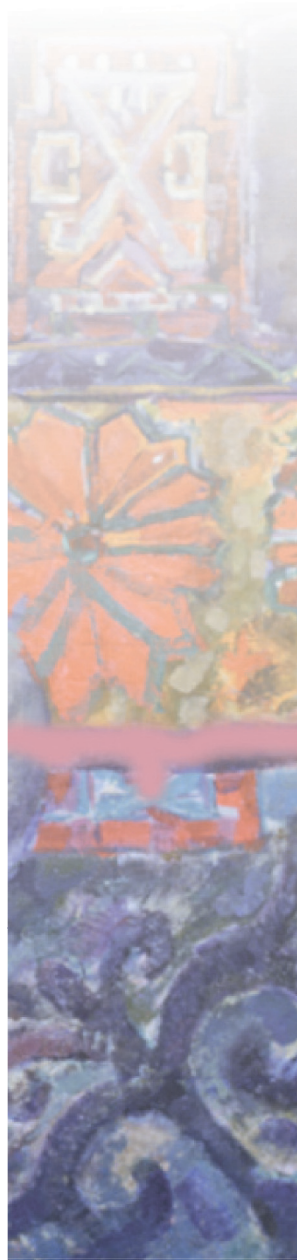


related to him, he flatly refused to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him. The elder also feared that Khan Khaknazar, if he learned of this, might think badly of him. And that very same day, he sent a letter to the father of the betrothed groom of his daughter, the ruler of Sozak, Suleimen-Khodzhi: — The fruit promised you is ripening in our garden. It is time to gather the harvest before migrating birds are tempted by it...

Not even a week passed before the wedding was held, and the burning with passion Shagai had to bite his own elbows in fury. He got angry with his plump clumsy wives, whose caresses seemed passionless to him in comparison to those of Kunsan. And in exactly ten months, news that the bride of the ruler of Sozak had given birth to a son reached him. It was as if a fragment of a knife had remained in his heart from all this.

Years passed, and like silver that lies without being used, his unappeased love for Kunsan began to dull. But Shagai heard from the mouth of a caravan driver, who had arrived in Tashkent from Sozak, that the son of Suleimen-Khodzhi had died of an ulcer, and his wife Kunsan was, according to the law of "amenger"—the succession of the wives among relatives, going to be given to the eldest son of the ruler of Sozak. And then, the dying flame in Shagai-Sultan's chest flared with new force. A yellow film of jealousy came over his eyes, and he no longer saw or thought about anything except the distant wife of another, whom he had slept with once...

That night, having changed into ordinary clothes, Shagai-Sultan, together with ten loyal bodyguards, set out. He knew that the widow was at Suleimen-Khodzhi's still. When he got to Sozak, Shagai-Sultan noiselessly broke into the house of the ruler and, having tied up the guards, took Kunsan and the fourteen year-old Tauekel, whom he considered his son. The news about the abduction of the





woman and her child spread in Sozak only in the morning. The military leader of the city sent men in pursuit, but is it possible to catch up to the wind?

And no one in Sozak knew that Shagai-Sultan's whole detachment had fallen into the hands of the henchmen of Khaknazar-Khan. Detachments of the White Horde rode along the southern boundaries of the khanate every day, protecting the subjects from the raids of their restless neighbours. One such detachment came upon the horsemen of Shagai, who had stopped at a waterhole on the way home and, suspecting something amiss, surrounded them and tied them up. By dinner the next day, the captured men and Shagai-Sultan had been brought to Khan Khaknazar in Sygnak.

Khaknazar, at first, was boundlessly happy that his most irreconcilable enemy was in his hands. But he was young and didn't possess all the wisdom of a state leader yet. According to an unwritten law, it wasn't right to deal with an enemy seized accidentally, and not on the battlefield. If a more experienced ruler had been in Khaknazar's place, he wouldn't have done so. He would have simply accompanied his enemy with respect like a guest, but on the way, the enemy would accidentally fall off his horse and break his neck. Or the guest would eat something at the dinner and then suddenly die. All would have understood what happened, but no one would have judged such a ruler, for he followed all the rules.

Khaknazar also thought about the people's opinion of him. What would his subjects say and do, if two brothers, sons of a khan, began to kill each other. No, this was unworthy and unwise. Peace between men means peace between states. Thus Khan Khaknazar had decided, and was now tormented by it...

Nevertheless, the Khan of the White Horde couldn't refrain from a triumphant smile, when he saw his hateful

brother in a torn homewoven shirt like that of a brigand, not a sultan. Seeing Khaknazar's smile, Shagai became really scared. He imagined what he himself would have done with an enemy who had been captured.

But Khaknazar got up from his gold embroidered pillow and stretched out both his hands to Shagai, as if paying tribute to the eldest in his family.

— Did you get here all right, Shagai-Sultan? — he asked, and never forgot how his voice trembled in excitement. — Hey, you, untie my brother.

And those who had brought Shagai obediently untied him. The only thing which the khan allowed himself was to call his guest a sultan. But that was right according to the laws of the White Horde, for the Kazakhs could only have one khan. When they did, the feuds and quarrels would end...

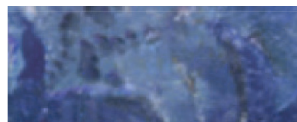
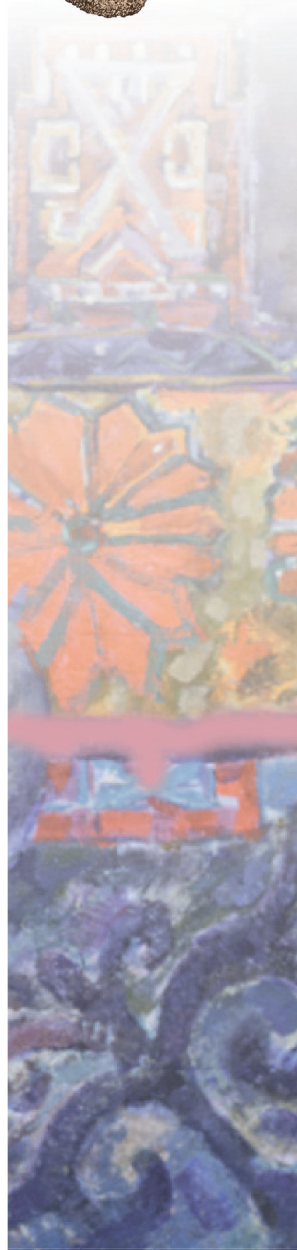
The henchmen also began to cut the ropes on Shagai's guards, who had been captured with him. Just then, something happened, which Khaknazar would never forget. Shagai moved his hands and stretched them out in front of himself. One of the henchmen thought the worst and made for him with a drawn sabre. Shagai turned pale, staggered, and fell to the floor. It was at that moment that Khaknazar saw the eyes of a woman opened wide. She was looking at Shagai, amazed at his cowardice. A fourteen year-old boy with the eyes of his mother was standing next to this woman of unusual beauty, who was in only an undershirt of Samarkand silk.

— Take this woman and her son back to her home in Sozak! — Khaknazar ordered.

But the woman stood rooted.

— I'm not going anywhere! — she said quietly, looking straight into the eyes of the khan.

— Don't take Shagai-Sultan away from me. This is his son, and I want to be with him for the rest of my life...





— Your whole life? — the khan of the White Horde looked at her mysteriously. — But if we execute him for destroying the unity of the Kazakhs, your head will also roll together with his. That is the custom.

— Yes! — she said firmly.

— And what will become of your son then?

— How can I help him if that is his fate!

Khan Khaknazar thought about this woman a long time. Either she had been so offended by the relatives of her dead husband that she was willing to go anywhere, so as not to return to their family, or she truly so selflessly loved this man with a hooked nose... His father had named him just Aknazar, but the people later called him Khaknazar, i.e. “the Just Nazar”. And then, he waved his hand and let Shagai go together with this woman and her child...

— Sultan, God and the people are waiting to hear what we have to say to each other, — he said to Shagai. — We have met unexpectedly, let’s come to the agreement that they are waiting for in our steppe.

— Speak, Khan!

— I could say that you must be with us, dead or alive. But I don’t want to compel you. I will let you go, but please have nothing more to do with the cunning emir Abdullah. Leave the enemies and return to us. Let the Kazakh khanate become united again.

Shagai was probably sincere at that moment when, full of joy and gratitude for being let live, he fell to his knees and raised his hands to the sky...

— I swear to God my loyalty to the White Horde and to you, its khan, Khan Khaknazar. I will wash away my guilt before you with blood. And let my eyes no longer see the sun if I break this vow.

Khaknazar suddenly saw that the woman and her boy had gotten down on their knees next to Shagai. Both

raised their hands as a sign of joining in Shagai's vow.

This decided the fate of Sultan Shagai, for if the khan hadn't given special orders, the Kazakh horsemen could have killed him on the way home. But the khan gave him his own escort. It can't be said that the khan hadn't heard about Shagai's cunning and treachery. But who knew another's soul. Khaknazar believed in his sincerity.

Khan Khaknazar wavered again when he caught the glance of Kunsan, when she got up from her knees. She looked at her saved husband with some strange disgust. And there was disdain for their ruler in the eyes of the forgiven guards. And then the khan thought that he had done the right thing; that punishing this man wouldn't have brought him any glory. A feeling of pride came over Khan Khaknazar, and he forgave his enemy again, blinded by this treacherous feeling.

— Accompany the sultan to the very border! — he ordered the head of his guards and turned to Shagai. — And you, my brother and sultan, thank first of all your brother and father Zhadik that fate is favorably disposed to you. But if you don't keep your vow, the shadow of our great grandfather Janybek, the creator of the Kazakh state—the White horde, will never forgive you!

— Yes, my Khan!

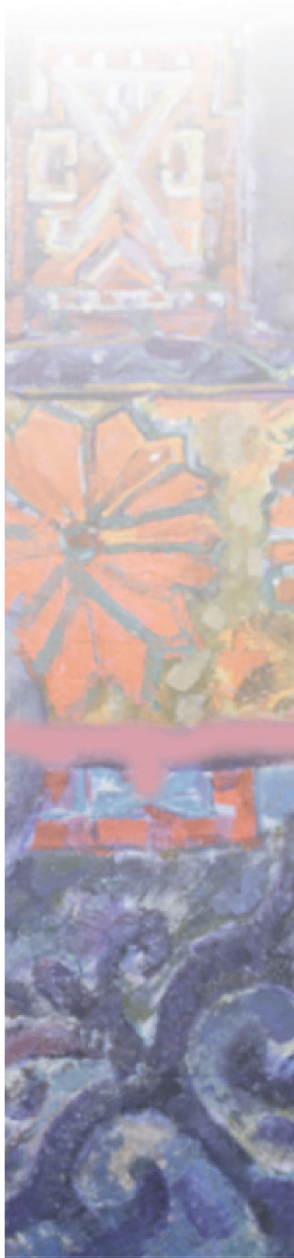
Shagai bowed his head.

But upon arriving in Tashkent, all ten guards, who had seen their khan disgraced and knew of his vow, were immediately executed. The night of his return, he spent with Kunsan, but in the morning ordered her, though she had saved his life, to be killed too.

Kunsan guessed his intentions and got down on her knees before him as he was leaving:

— Oh my "Tyure," have mercy on me for the sake of our son Tauekel!

Sultan Shagai turned away.





The little Tauekel turned and cried in bed when he heard the screams of his mother at night. That morning, Shagai-Sultan ordered that he be given over to one of his loyal subjects to be brought up.

In two weeks, a huge army given to the traitor by Abdullah-Khan, crossed the borders of the White Horde. Brothers went against brothers, yurtas all over the steppe burned, the orphaned children cried, and those remaining among the living ran as far away as possible. And there was no one to defend them, because after the capture and pardon of Shagai, Khan Khaknazar, together with his army, had set out for Saraichik. But, before reaching the Zhaik, had to turn back. A messenger sent by the remaining governor general on the southern border had caught up with the army then.

— How many yurtas have been destroyed? — the khan asked the messenger this time.

— Fifteen thousand, my Khan.

The messenger looked the khan straight in the eye, and there was something unusual in his glance. This was one of the many small peasant warriors who had been in the cavalry of the White Horde since the times of Khan Janybek, not asking for any reward or gold for their service. The most well-off of them had a yurta somewhere in the vast steppe and two or three dozen sheep to feed the family. But Khaknazar, in spite of his youth, knew that such people were his strength. It was their yurtas which suffered first from the raids of Shagai-Sultan with Abdullah's troops, and they, the poor and unimportant, were most of all interested in a strong state.

— What do you and your friends think, warrior?

Amazement appeared in the eyes of the messenger. In the steppe, they weren't accustomed to a khan asking the common people such questions. But the khan waited, and the messenger, looking him straight in the eye, said:

— The people say, my Khan, that the innumerable descendants of the sultan will tear apart our steppe like wolves a chased deer.

— So am I to have supreme power?

— Better the paw of a lion than the teeth of innumerable wolves.

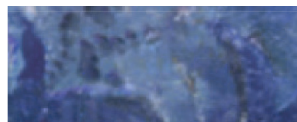
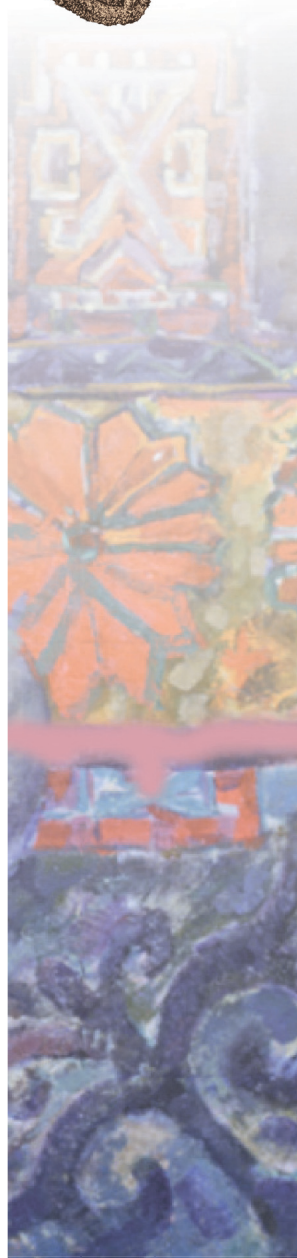
— Well said, warrior...And now go and tell the governor general to call up the volunteer corps and guard the routes leading to the steppe. Let the remaining auls move away from the border of Turkestan. It is unlikely that Shagai will go after them with his army now...

— What should I tell him about you, my Khan?

— That this time, I won't be on the shores of the Zhaik.

Yes, because of Shagai's intrigues, he didn't succeed in strengthening the Kazakh khanate on his west border. Janybek, Kerei, Kasym—all the khan unifiers first of all strove to do this, for they understood that without the Nogailin nomads in the west, the White Horde couldn't be considered a real khanate. Without their support, it couldn't begin to fight for ancient Kazakh cities in Turkestan. Behind the traitor Shagai's back, his patron Abdullah, with his innumerable army, quickly rose up. And without passage through the cities of Turkestan on the caravan route to the Big East, there was nowhere to sell the wool, leather, felt mats, ore, and salt the steppe was rich in. The traders from Bukhara, Kokand, Tashkent, and Geram gave a pittance, explaining that they ran into many difficulties when transporting the goods, and that the caravans had to pay big duties to that very same Abdullah and all the other numerous rulers—descendants of Abulkhair: the Sheibanids, Timurides and the Mogolistan myrzas. It was a vicious circle that had to be broken.

And now, after so many years, when wiser and more experienced, he had finally gotten to Saraichik, and





when all was going so well, again a messenger came from those parts. And again, all because many years ago, he had permitted himself to be generous and forgive the rat Shagai. Evidently, the mistake of his youth would remain a thorn in his side for the rest of his life. But now it was not Shagai, but his snake offspring Tauekel, that very boy who had gotten down together with his father on his knees vowing eternal loyalty. It would have been easy then not to let this boy and his ill-fated mother go with Shagai. It would probably all be different now!

Everything repeats itself. The current ruler of the Turkestan region, Baba-Sultan, a descendent of Abulkhair, was famous for his fickleness: depending on the situation, he wavered between friendship with the White Horde and with that same Abdullah. Quite recently, when the fierce cavalry of Khan Khaknazar was on the borders of his region and could appear by the walls of the city overnight, he again vowed eternal loyalty. Moreover, Baba-Sultan finally agreed to give back the cities of Yass and Sauran, which used to belong to the White Horde, but asked that he and several merchants be given time to take their belongings out. And he, as soon as he heard about the khan's army advancing towards the Zhaik, sent a letter to Abdullah asking him to forgive his betrayal, for he had been forced to. In reward for his loyalty, Baba-Sultan demanded that he be given part of the Fergan valley with the city Andizhan. Abdullah, who at that time was hunting by the Zheikhundariya not far from the city of Chardzhou, became furious and gave orders, through a messenger, not to enter into any negotiations with the Kazakh khan until his return. Having learned this, Baba-Sultan instantly turned back to Khaknazar again and gave him the cities he had asked for. Out of the bargain, he got the Kazakh cavalry to promise to come to his aid in the coming war with Abdullah. While he was still away

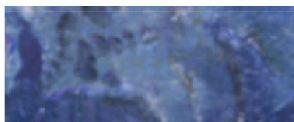
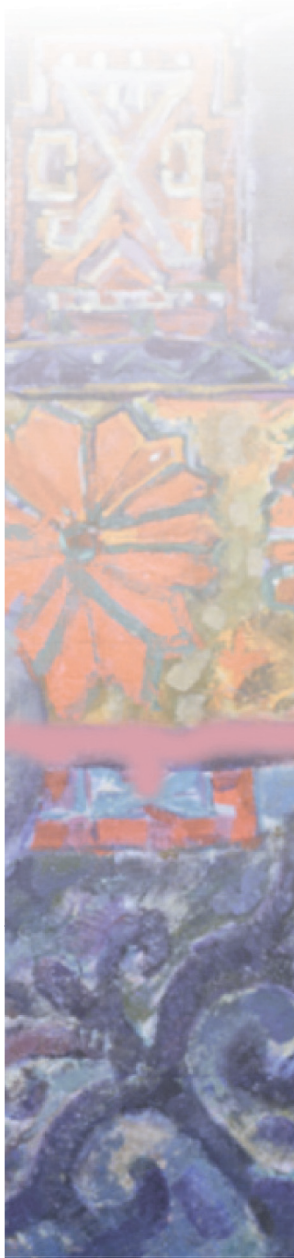


on his hunt, the worthy Baba-Sultan, together with his relative Buzakhur-Sultan, decided to forestall his return by attacking the rich Bukhara and Samarkand oases.

All this played right into Khaknazar's hands, and he decided to head out towards the Zhaik. While the Central Asian sultans were arguing and sorting things out among themselves, he could strengthen the west of his khanate and, with the additional troops he would pick up there, return and deal a death blow to his enemies. It was evident that Baba-Sultan had seriously fallen out with Abdullah this time and, as a sign of his trust, the Kazakh Khan Khaknazar sent two of his own sons and two of the sons of his relative Zhalim-Sultan to him to bring up in Tashkent, but these youths remained hostages of Baba-Sultan...

And now, when he had gotten what he wanted and was celebrating the wedding in Saraichik, incarnating the blood tie with the Nogailin Kazakhs, the messenger showed up once more, as many years ago. This messenger even looked like that one long ago, who hadn't been afraid to tell him the truth about the relations of the common steppe people to their khan and all the "white boned". Yes, it was the very same Kiyak-Batyr, but now mature and wide shouldered...

The messenger said, as befitting, only what he had been told to relay. The main ruler of the Sheibanids, Abdullah, turned out not to be as simple-minded as he was thought to be. Sensing a mortal threat to his state in Central Asia, he had interrupted his hunt and quickly made his way from Zheikhundariya to Bukhara and Samarkand. Messengers with orders to call up the troops flew out from him, fanlike, in all directions. And on the way, he sent the beautiful fifteen year-old daughter of Baba-Sultan back to him in Tashkent with a reliable guard. The Abdullah had invited her to Balkh, intending to make





her his youngest wife. On one hand, that showed that the great emir Abdullah, a guardian of faith and morality, so respected his Turkestan governor-general Baba-Sultan, that he wouldn't lie with his daughter without his consent. On the other hand, it was a warning to Baba-Sultan that all the relations between them could be broken...

Baba-Sultan again began to toss between two fires. He would have probably betrayed Khan Khaknazar again, but a big detachment of Kazakh cavalry, which had come at his request, was already inside the walls of the city. And the detachments of the rebellious sultans going against Abdullah kept arriving in Turkestan every day. Many of the Timuride beks and sultans of the Samarkand vilayet, long famous for their feuds, were especially set against the emir Abdullah.

And now, when the forward ranks of the huge army of Abdullah were approaching Tashkent, Baba-Sultan simply ran away to the north, to the Turkestan fortresses, counting on the proximity of Khan Khaknazar.

On the advice of Abdullah, the ambassador of Koskulak-Biy, the temporary ruler of the city, Sultan Takhir, immediately gave the emir the comrade-in-arms of Baba-Sultan, Shakhsaid-Oglan. Abdullah had Shakhsaid-Oglan's head cut off and sent to Baba-Sultan in Yass.

— What is the situation there now? — Khan Khaknazar asked the messenger.

— The main army of the emir is still near Tashkent, but part of the cavalry is advancing on Turkestan towards Yass, Otrar, and Sairam.

— Has the elder Zhalim returned from Baba-Sultan?

— No... — the messenger bowed his head understandingly. — His sons, just as yours, are with Baba-Sultan who doesn't let them leave him!

It was as if someone's cold merciless hand had squeezed

Khaknazar's heart. He greatly loved his young sons Khasen and Khusain. And he no less loved the sons of the elder Zhalim, the twins Zhadigei and Adygei, who had grown up in his yurt. Perhaps the bloody emir Abdullah had already gotten to them. The fortress walls of the Turkestan cities were not reliable. Nor were the people there. Baba-Sultan might buy his life from the emir at the price of the lives of the children hostages...

— Where is emir Abdullah himself? — the khan's face remained expressionless. Is he still near Tashkent or has he come with the cavalry to Turkestan?

— Emir Abdullah isn't with the army.

— Where is he then?

— In Dzhuzak.

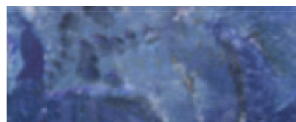
— Who is leading the army?

— The son of Shagai-Sultan, Tauekel, is in command of the whole army!

For a moment, the khan was overcome with despair, but he continued to look the messenger directly and coldly in the eyes all the same. Oh, if only he could go back to that minute when the fate of the cursed Shagai-Sultan was his to decide with only a wave of his hand. Now, that thin boy who had noiselessly fallen on his knees next to his cunning father, was leading an hostile army on the lands of their fathers, and tomorrow, might cut off the heads of his children!

The khan ordered the messenger to spread the word on the steppe that he was returning with his army. Baba-Sultan was told so that he sent the elder Zhakim with his and the khans sons to meet him. It was not a request, but a demand. When Baba-Sultan heard it, he became among the ranks of his enemies.

And though the snake of anxiety gnawed the khan's heart, he had to sit out the wedding to the end. But the khan couldn't show his anxiety if he wanted his subjects to remain calm and confident.





— You're frowning again, my Khan! — the small Akbala capriciously pouted and tugged his sleeve. — Have you become speechless after seeing my sister?

Khan Khaknazar smiled, as was fitting at his own wedding, and began to watch the guests having fun.

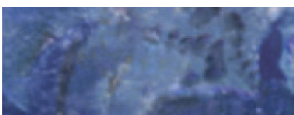
The khan heard songs, but the curved swords of the emir's butchers, not the silver decorations on the dresses of the girls, flashed before his eyes. He clearly saw the cut off heads of his sons, and there was no torment worse than that...

What had blinded him then when he had let the traitor Shagai go alive and unharmed? Over these years, the Kazakh khanate had gotten back almost all lands belonging to it in the times of Khan Kasym. And would that very Baba-Sultan have given back the Kazakh cities, if it had not been for the growing power of the White Horde. Sozak, Sairam, Sauran, Otrar, and Yass, one way or another, served the steppe and its interests.

But clouds were forming over the White Horde again. Its innumerable enemies again wanted to tear it apart.

No, this would not happen. "The high road of Kasym" — this was the policy bequeathed to the steppe, and Khan Khaknazar would stick to it too. Let the best detachments head back to Yass, the current capital of the White Horde, today, not waiting for the end of the wedding.

A voice inexpressibly sad and full of tender pining broke into the reflections of Khan Khaknazar. According to tradition, after the song "zhar-zhar", the girl, accompanied by her peers and friends, went around to all houses in the aul and sang a good-bye song. This song was about the secret dreams of girls, about uncommitted sins, about the secret love that each bride has. The girl aired her complaints and wishes to the remaining brothers and sisters and her parents. In the "synsu", the "swan song," she could also hint at her dissatisfaction with the groom



and her in-laws. But later, she would pay her whole life for it. Seldom did anyone do that, instead, they expressed their sadness indirectly, mainly with their voice. Girlish wit, ability, and mastery were a guarantee of fitting in well in the husband's family.

The voice of the beauty Aktorgyn was famous all over the Kazakh steppe, from Zhadik to the blue sea—Balkhash. Such good renditions of the songs are imprinted in the people's memories and passed down from generation to generation, from camp to camp. That is why Khan Khaknazar became attentive when his seventh wife began to sing.

And Aktorgyn seemed to understand his current state. The song was very sad but cautious. The girl avoided directly reproaching her future husband; though, using her position, she could have permitted herself much more.

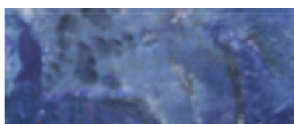
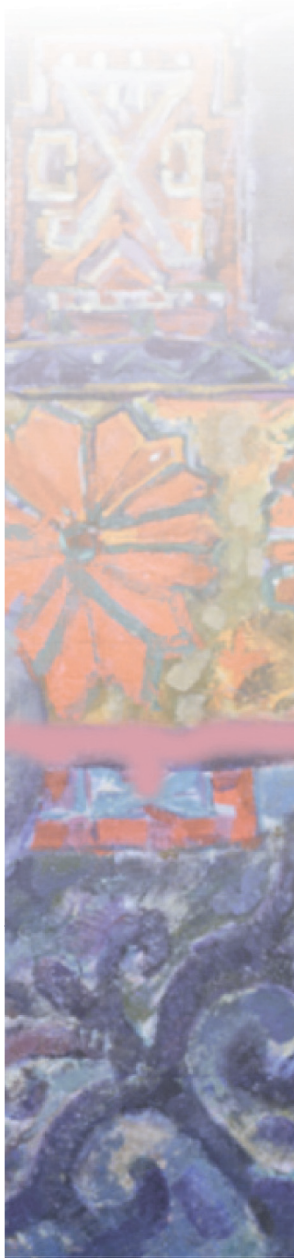
Girlish dreams melt, melt like a mirage in the steppe.
I had thought that the rose in the garden was only for
the nightingale.

My heart aches and aches over the fate of this rose.

For instead of a nightingale, a fierce eagle flew to it...

Khan Khaknazar's thoughts drifted once more... What had the messenger, the common warrior Kiyak, said to him? The people in the steppe remained poor, and every winter, starvation awaits them. But today, he had also said that the "best people" would be taxed. Twenty years ago, there was no mention of such a thing.

His army was made up of them, the common horsemen. And they were his strength. They didn't follow their biys very willingly now, when they tried to break away from the horde. Hadn't nearly two-thirds of Shagai's horsemen left him when he had broken away from the Kazakh khanate? The common people needed a united





khanate, because Khaknazar was the only one whom they could count on to defend them from the oppression and lawlessness of their ancestral rulers. And a common army could defend them best from the current enemy. All the southern camps, from the Aral to Kashgariya, were suffering from the incessant raids of the numberless Sheibanid, Timuride, and Mogolistani rulers. The Kazakh detachments answered in kind, and each winter, black rags of hunger hung on the huts on both sides. There was nothing left to steal from each other.

Yes, it was the way of Khan Kasym! To gather all in, and then establish law and order. And later, having secured the borders, it was possible to go about redistributing the wealth. What was this common horseman, who had told him the truth today, guilty of? Only that he was born the son of a slave, and, according to ancient laws, didn't have all those rights and revenues which the free-born had. Many old laws would have to be changed in order for his khanate to become strong and invincible. But for now, he answered the horseman correctly. He would have to wait and endure life as it was a while more...

On reaching this point in the story, Bukhar-Zhyrau suddenly stopped, not even completing his thought, and looked searchingly at Abulmansur. He recalled the comment of the young sultan, that Khan Khaknazar had trusted his slave Kiyak-Batyr in vain.

Abulmansur understood why the bard had stopped and, as if continuing the interrupted conversation, said:

— There, you see bard, that slave will find a way to sting his master!

“No, murder doesn't leave this young sultan's head,” — thought Bukhar-Zhyrau. — “The slave is doomed if he remains here. He must be warned somehow.”

Staring at him with his cold unblinking eyes, Abulmansur sat, waiting for him to answer. Bukhar-Zhyrau wiped his forehead, as if in thought:





— You may be right...But it was Kiyak-Batyr who later helped Tauekel-Sultan find himself and his people. No?

— Maybe, — the young sultan looked somewhere over the bard's head. — But he let out the secret. And it was not a matter of the khan finding his people. The people must obey their lawful ruler.

— But what is a ruler without a nation? — the bard hotly objected. — Not even a hundred khans could have saved the White Horde from defeat without the people...

Suddenly, Abulkhair laughed, wickedly.

— Since when have you been measuring khans by the hundreds? — he asked. — Isn't a body without a head simply carrion? What is a khan to the people if not its head!

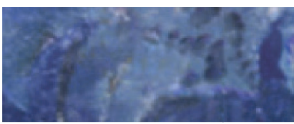
— There are heads which only have big mouths, — the bard muttered.

— Best you go back to telling your story...What happened to Khaknazar then?

Having glanced at the immovable Abulmansur and anxiously looking around at the old slave sitting in the entrance, Bukhar-Zhyrau continued his story...

All had been agreed on ahead of time, and the elders of the Nogailin Kazakhs only officially gave their assent to be Khaknazar's subjects at the meeting. Khan Khaknazar informed the Nogailin elders that he would be going back into the steppe right after the wedding. The Nogailin military detachments given to him would follow with his new wife Aktorgyn...

As was the custom when there was serious business at hand, the talk of the elders went on until evening. When the red sun touched the horizon, Khan Khaknazar, accompanied by the elders who had all become his relatives, left the walls of Saraichik and set out for his white-winged yurta. They had not gone two-hundred



paces when one of the khan's horsemen let out a cry of alarm. The khan glanced to the side, and it was as if a cold knife had stabbed his heart...

A horseman was rushing at full speed from the east, where it was already getting dark. He was dressed in black and he was on a black horse. That made the white handkerchief fluttering on his lance stand out all the more. Having gestured the rest to go on, the khan remained behind to meet the messenger alone without witnesses.

It was Tuyak-Batyr, the twin brother of the messenger who had come the day before. Seeing that the man standing alone was the khan, he jumped down from his horse, fell on his knees, and was about to throw a belt around his neck as a sign of the death of some in the khan's family. But the khan stopped him with a wave of his hand.

— Don't Tuyak...You're not at home. Don't do something which others might notice...

— I have sad news, my Khan!

— I know...

— Your sons...Khasen and Khusain...

— I know...

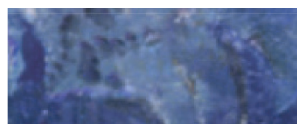
Tuyak-Batyr looked in amazement at his khan. It was impossible that someone could have brought this terrible news faster than him, and there was no one else to do it.

— Who did it?

— Baba-Sultan, my Khan.

The warrior told him what had happened. A man, who had come from Yass at the instigation of the people of emir Abdullah, supposedly informed Baba-Sultan that Khaknazar had ordered him killed.

The corresponding written report stating that all was ready for the murder of the head of the Turkestan vilayet was shown to Baba-Sultan. It was the work of experienced hands and had the stamp of the White Horde on it. That





made Baba-Sultan furious, and he secretly gathered his loyal people and worked out a detailed plan.

Besides Zhalim-Sultan and the four young hostages, a significant detachment of the Kazakh cavalry was in the seat of Baba-Sultan. They were there to take part in the battle with Abdullah. The evening before the slaughter, Baba-Sultan ate a sacrificial lamb, together with Zhalim-Sultan and the other Kazakh elders, in the name of the coming victory over their common enemy and invited them to come to him the next morning for advice. When Zhalim-Sultan and his pupils and accompanying horsemen rode up to Baba-Sultan's palace, the sultan himself took the reins of his horse. Sensing trouble, the elderly Zhalim-Sultan started to reach for his sable, but his head already rolled from his shoulders, cut off from behind with a yatagh. At the same moment, the four boys, the sons of Khan Khaknazar and Zhalim-Sultan himself, were raised on the lances of Baba-Sultan's lashkars. And almost the whole detachment, with the exception of a few horsemen who succeeded in breaking through to the gates in a close formation and galloping away to Yass, were just as cunningly cut down. This was described many years later in the chronicle "Sharaf-name-jishakhi" as follows: "Red blood spilled on the steppe as if from the womb."

All burned inside Khan Khaknazar, as if he had drunk a Tibetan poison. But his face, though now pale, was calm, and he coldly gazed somewhere into the distance. Tuyak-Batyr looked in amazement at his khan. In such cases, it was permissible to display one's grief, at least for appearances bring one's hands to one's face or eyes. Or was what some people said about him being heartless true?..

— Is Emir Abdullah already in Tashkent? — Khan Khaknazar asked dryly.

— No, having given Shakhsaid-Oglan over to the bloody emir and not receiving the promised favour,

Sultan Takhir fortified his city and didn't want to let the emir enter...

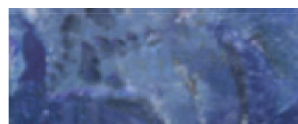
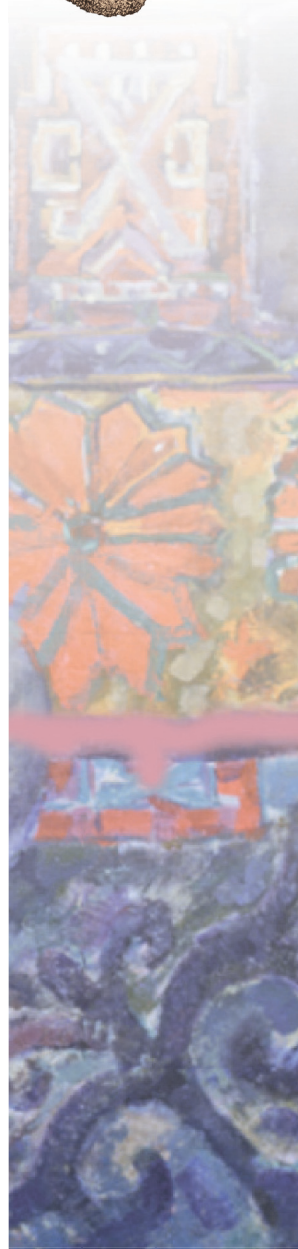


Khan Khaknazar continued to impassively ask question after question. And the warrior Tuyak told him about everything that had happened on the borders of the khanate these days of trial. On the day of the defeat of the Kazakh allies, Baba-Sultan received a letter prepared earlier from the emir himself, proposing that he become his subject and give over his brother, Buzakhur-Sultan for reprisal. If nothing else, the emir was to send him the cut-off head of his brother, and as a reward, he would again make Baba-Sultan his governor-general of the Turkestan vilayet. Baba-Sultan understood that he had been too hasty in punishing the Kazakh sultans, so there was nothing left to do but consent to all the conditions of Emir Abdullah. He had sent his brother to launch a surprise attack on Khan Khaknazar as he approached. But now, he sent another detachment after Buzakhur-Sultan to cut off his head. He, learning about all this somehow, turned towards Semirechye with his cavalry and robbed and drove away the herds from the Kazakh and Kyrgyz camps. Carrying out the orders of Emir Abdullah, Baba-Sultan set out after them, leaving Turkestan under the protection of the emir's cavalry.

In general, all was as usual on the border. The sultan's of all kins and blood were cutting each other down like mad wolves—not even normal wolves attack their brothers in vain. The road to the Kazakh steppe was wide open to the cavalry of the emir, but he, the khan of the White Horde, was serenely listening to wedding tales here...

— There are many corpses not in Turkestan, — said Khan Khaknazar. — I wonder where that old jackal Shagai is. He is always drawn by the smell of blood!

— They say that Shagai-Sultan is somewhere in Talas...He is waiting for the outcome of the skirmishes between the brothers Baba-Sultan and Buzakhur-Sultan.





Khan Khaknazar nodded his head, satisfied.

— I thought so... And that Emir Abdullah is cunning. He will set the Kazakh sultans against each other, roil their sultans up, set us against them and the Kyrgyz leaders, and them against us... We won't really be so stupid, will we?

Tuyak-Batyr continued to look at the khan in amazement. His voice was so calm that it was as if he hadn't any sons. He didn't even ask about the details of their terrible death.

— And where is Tauekel-Bagadur now?

— He is in Talas, with Shagai-Sultan. So they say.

— All right... Don't tell anyone that we met, warrior. Now ride to our camp beyond the river.

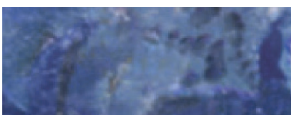
“Stone doesn't have veins filled with blood, and the khan doesn't have a heart.” — That is what Tuyak-Batyr thought to himself as he rode away. He never would have imagined, that in two weeks, the khan, remaining alone at the grave of his sons, would beat his chest and cry in sorrow like a white camel which lost its baby...

The sun hadn't come up yet the next morning, but the cavalry of the army of the White Horde was already advancing towards the east in full formation. The inhabitants of Saraichik looked in amazement on the empty shores of the Zhaik, where the campfires were still smoking. Soon, even the smoke dispersed...

The Nogailin troops that had been given to the khan were raised in the middle of the night and left together with him. The Nogailin elders shook their heads in wonder. Various rumors spread among the people.

— Now he is our khan, and he will decide what is best for us, — the old man Shalkiiz-Zhyrau said firmly when they told him about it.

In thirteen days, Khaknazar arrived in Yass. There, he learned about the skirmish between the armies of

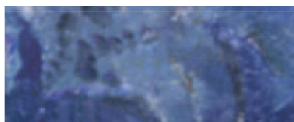
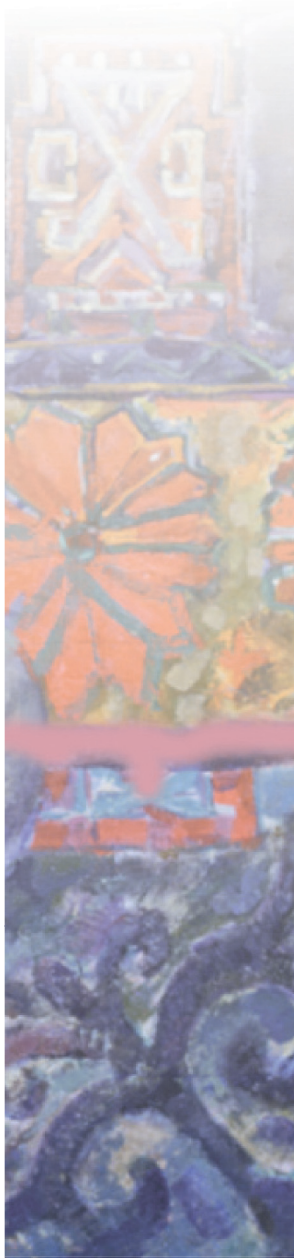


Baba-Sultan and Buzakhur-Sultan in the Talas valley. The defeated Buzakhur-Sultan managed to get away, and the furious emir Abdullah sent Baba-Sultan a black market—a sign of death. Then, the fresh army of Shagai, under the general command of Tauekel-Bagadur, attacked the bloodied army of Baba-Sultan. But Baba-Sultan survived this time by making a timely retreat. This made it possible for Khan Khaknazar to return to Yass unimpeded. It was clear that emir Abdullah wouldn't start conquering the cities, the more so wouldn't go into the steppe, until he had dealt with both sultans, who had run to the allies for defense and with his own numerous enemies.

Khan Khaknazar had never been one to give in to his feelings, and the people remembered him as a just, but hard as stone man. But that wasn't really so. One time, his emotions overcame him. That was the night he visited the graves of his sons. That night, against the interests of the khanate, he went with his cavalry to the east. For Baba-Sultan, the man who had murdered his sons, was there staying with the ruler of Kashgar, Khan Abdulatif.

By doing so, Khaknazar only strengthened his main enemy—Emir Abdullah—whom the fugitive sultan was preparing to battle with. People already came from Baba-Sultan with repentance and stories about the innocence of the sultan who had been duped. A new union against Abdullah was even proposed. But Khaknazar's feelings predominated over reason. So three days later, Khan Khaknazar was riding at the head of his Kazakh-Kyrgyz cavalry to Aks. There were many sins on Abdulatif-Khan's conscience in regards to the White Horde, but now it would have been a good ally against the terrible Abdullah...

At night, Khan Khaknazar's cavalry burst into the city from four sides. And Khan Khaknazar, blinded by





fatherly grief, killed Abdulatif-Khan, who had not even had time to dress, with his own hands.

Having heard about it, Abdulatif-Khan's brother, Abdrashit-Khan, the mighty ruler of East Kashgar and Dzharkent, raised his hands to his temples and moaned in his great grief. He gathered his army and went after the worn out army of the White Horde. Near Zhasyl-Kolya, in Irtysh, he attacked. The White Horde was poorly prepared for such a battle. The battle lasted several days. Finally, after breaking through the last ring of the khan's warriors, the Kashgar cavalry cut all there to pieces, including Khan Khaknazar...

Thus, not having taken the usual precautions and given in to ordinary human weaknesses, the last great khan of the White Horde was gone. He had united the restive and ill-assorted Kazakh tribes and kins for a short time and almost revived the Kazakh khanate in those borders which had existed in the times of Kasym-Khan.

The Kazakh and Kyrgyz warriors who survived, took his body and buried it in the mausoleum of Khodzhi Akhmed Yassavi. A white granite stone was put there with the corresponding inscription. And in the country of the Kazakhs, all the zhuzes, kins and tribes splintered like broken glass, and turned into sharp worthless fragments. The future held nothing but despair...

— There's the answer to your question, my Khan, — said Bukhar-Zhyrau. — Not even the mighty Khaknazar, the son of Kasym-Khan, could unite our fractional people. Who of our current khan's can? The khan and the people rarely go in the same direction.

Abulkhair was silent, gnashing his teeth. His views were more and more at odds with the prophetic bard. Someone touched his hand. He looked around. It was that youth with the unblinking eyes.

— You haven't told us Tauekel's secret yet, bard.

— Yes, Khan Khaknazar told his loyal warrior Kiyak about the secret of Tauekel's birth just before he died, — the bard said and shut his eyes, indicating that he didn't want to speak anymore.

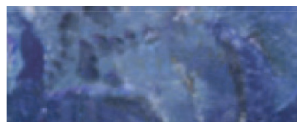
The fire in the yurta had gone out long ago, and it seemed even darker because of this. Only the even snoring of the sleeping men and the quiet groans of the camels sleeping nearby could be heard.

The bard, agitated by his own tale, couldn't fall asleep. The large steppe stars peeked through the torn mat roof at him, and he lay and thought about the fate of his people. They had lived through so much, what awaited them in the future?

Yes, black clouds were gathering over the steppe, but the people were being drawn into bloody internecine strife by the innumerable ancestral rulers and wouldn't be able to stand up to the Dzhungar Horde. They needed a man with an iron fist now to unite the tribes and kins, by breaking the backbone of those not wishing unity. But who would this khan be? The old Bulat? Samek? The mad sultan Barak?.. No, the most likely one was the thirty year-old Abulkhair. He was a bold and smart ruler, but, as any khan, put his own people first. But where could you find a khan who wasn't ambitious? That was the way God made them. But what about this huge youth next to him, with his arms flung out and snoring louder than three warriors? After all, he had the right to become a khan. He was the son of Valyi-Sultan, a Genghizide...

Bukhar-Zhyrau grinned. Abulkhair, of course, would leave not having found out anything about Abulmansur. What he wouldn't give to see the face of the khan of the Junior Zhuz, when he later learned whom he had met in that dilapidated shepherd's yurta.

Why was he drawn to that youth with the unblinking eyes? Perhaps it was necessary to cast a spell on the steppe





right now with such a cold glance. When talking to him, the bard had had the opportunity to become convinced that the young sultan was capable and reserved. The poet's intuition was always right. It was bad that he was unable to value the service done him by a common man. But maybe it only seemed that way to him, and Abulmansur didn't intend to punish his rescuer.

Anyway, it was too soon to think about his youth as a future khan. Such wolves as Samek, Barak, and this Abulkhair wouldn't let anyone push them aside. The bard fell fast asleep only towards morning. It was as if he had descended into a black, bottomless pool.

The bright sun shone in his eyes, waking him up. The Tulenguts in the khan's entourage were walking around the yurta. At dawn, they, nevertheless, found where their master had spent the night. The servants had already saddled the horses. Bukhar-Zhyrau looked to the side. The young sultan was still snoring, his big strong hands stretched out. But the bard, no matter how long he looked, could not see the old slave Oraz, who had attended to them these two days.

— I don't see your partner Oraz, — said Bukhar-Zhyrau to Abulmansur, who had finally woken up. — I wonder if something has happened to him?

Abulmansur looked him straight in the eyes as usual, and a shiver ran down the bard's spine.

— What should have happened to him, did, — the young sultan said calmly. — You guessed it would...

The bard lowered his head. Yes, evidently such was the fate of slaves in this terrible world.

— When did you manage to do it? — he asked.

— It doesn't take but a second.

There was indifference in the young sultan's tone.

— But he wasn't your enemy, — noted the bard, just to say something.

— All are my enemies now, — the youth answered.

— If you will be so...so heartless, you won't get far, sultan!

The bard's blood boiled in anger. — We have two enemies: one is external; the other is the biys and sultans of the kins who are pulling us in all directions. So he, who can unite the people, must reckon with the people, not kill loyal people, and in vain at that.

— Who will find out that it was me who did it?

— But I know! — the bard shouted.

— You won't tell anyone.

— Why?

The young sultan looked him in the eye again with his unblinking glance: — Because I will become the head of the White Horde, and you want it to be united.

When Bukhar-Zhyrau was already on his horse, the young sultan touched his stirrup.

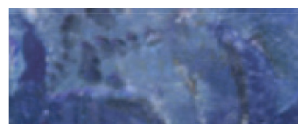
— I will change my name.

— How will you call yourself?

— Ablai... That name is feared in the steppe.

— But Ablai was bloodthirsty... That's how the people called your grandfather.

— Let them call me that.





III

A sand storm helped the brave warrior Yelchibek leave Turkestan. Hiding in the reeds during the day and moving only at night, he and a detachment of brave men set out for Sauran in order to rebuff the Dzhungars there.

Some of the inhabitants of the city, who hadn't gone with Yelchibek, set out for Tashkent, skirting Sauran.

The rest, especially the visitors, decided not to go far and hid in the reeds by the Seikhundarya.

The defense of Turkestan and several other cities slowed the advance of the Dzhungar's army and made it possible to save at least some of the refugees. But at the war council held on the ruins of Turkestan, it was decided to put off advancing until the next summer. The Dzhungar Bagadurs and Noions proposed taking the whole country of the Kazakhs into deadly pincers in the spring of the following year. Having driven a wedge between the Central Asiatic khanates, and then descending to the Aral along the Seikhundarya and Dzheikhundariya, the Tumen of the Dzhungar Kontaichi had to get to the Zhaik and Yedilye, which some Kalmyks from Dzhungariya had already reached and were camping. And another army was supposed to attack from the side of the Dzhungar gates

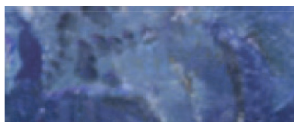
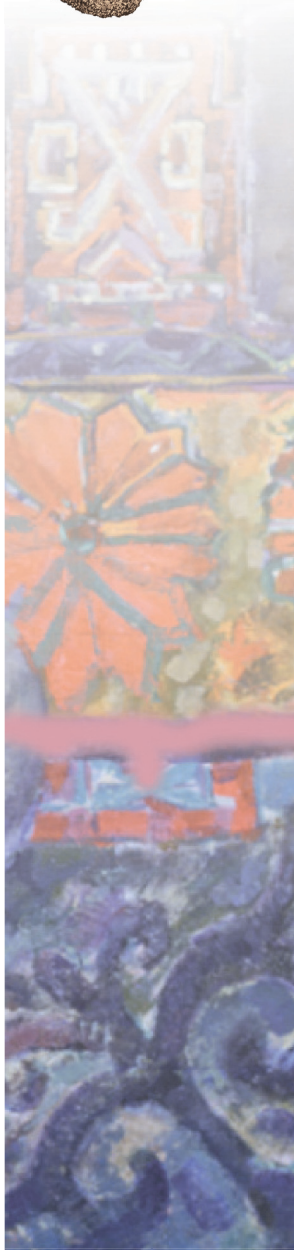
and the Altai. Both flanks were to join up at Astrakhan, forming a new Great Dzhungar Khanate. Syban Raptan even claimed part of Siberia, which already belonged to Russia—the new cities on the border, including Tomsk. And though he threatened China from time to time, it was no secret who was urging the haughty Dzhungar kontaichi on in his aspirations.

All this was reminiscent of an ancient Indian python hunt. In order to lure the python, a sacrificial deer was put in its hole, backend first. The nearsighted python would begin to swallow the deer from the tail, but when it got to the head, the large branching horns wouldn't even go down the python's big throat. And that's when the experienced hunters stepped in. The Dzhungar kontaichi Syban Raptan was just like the python now, for the horns of the Kazakh deer, which he had fought so hard to reach, had the wide Russian border at its back.

They say that God, before turning away from a man, takes his reason away. In late fall, the kontaichi Syban Raptan, together with the troops of his son Galden-Tseren and daughter Khocha, set out from Turkestan and headed for Zhan-Kurganu. This time, there were forty thousand horsemen with him—he had left the rest of the troops to completely ravage the seized lands. And suddenly, a messenger came galloping back from Khocha's troops who were riding ahead, and reported that an innumerable horde of Kazakhs was coming towards them. The confident Syban-Raptan was surprised. According to his information, there could be no talk of any Kazakh resistance.

— Tell my daughter Khocha that if she took a herd of sheep and horses for an army, then let her warn us and we'll send some shepherds! — he ordered the messenger.

But soon, the kontaichi would become convinced that his daughter hadn't been mistaken. Another messenger came from her shouting:





— It's the cavalry of the Junior Zhuz of the Kazakhs. Khan Abulkhair is at their head...There are at least thirty thousand...To the right of us are the horsemen of the Middle Zhuz...The brother of Khan Bulat, Samek, is leading them. There are about thirty thousand of them too.

The daughter relayed that both Kazakh armies would join up at the flood-lands of the Shieli River and suggested they wait for them to do that. — Then they'll all be in one bag, and all we'll have to do is tie the knot, — the messenger relayed her words.

In the Dzhungar army, they didn't write down their communications, so the messengers had to have an excellent memory.

No less blinded by his pride than his worthy daughter, Syban Raptan was about to go along with his daughter's proposal, but his adviser Renat, the twice captured Swede, dissuaded him. He recommended retreating and avoiding a battle with the superior forces of the enemy.

— No, we'll destroy them one at a time—first Abulkhair, and then Samek, — said the kontaichi.

— What will you do if Samek's army approaches just at the moment we are fighting Abulkhair? — asked Renat.

— The Dzhungar sword strikes like lightning—fast and devastating! — answered the kontaichi Syban Raptan.

— But what if it happens nevertheless? — insisted Renat.

— It won't! — answered the kontaichi.

— Then we will be defeated, — his son Galden-Tseren said quietly but firmly.

Galden-Tseren suggested bringing up another twenty thousand horsemen, and then taking on the Kazakhs. The old and wise kontaichi laughed:

— Then we'll be overrun for sure!

— Why? — his son asked.

— There are twenty thousand paths along which Kazakhs are going behind our backs. If we summon twenty thousand troops here, the Kazakhs will see them and come along all these paths. Don't you know that to be shot from behind by one is more dangerous than being shot in the face by fifteen?

— But who...who will come from behind? — Galden-Tseren asked in surprise.

— The dead, — Syban Raptan said in all seriousness.

The Swedish officer Renat looked at him. No, the kontaichi was not joking.

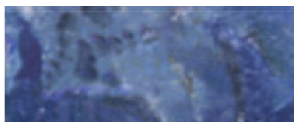
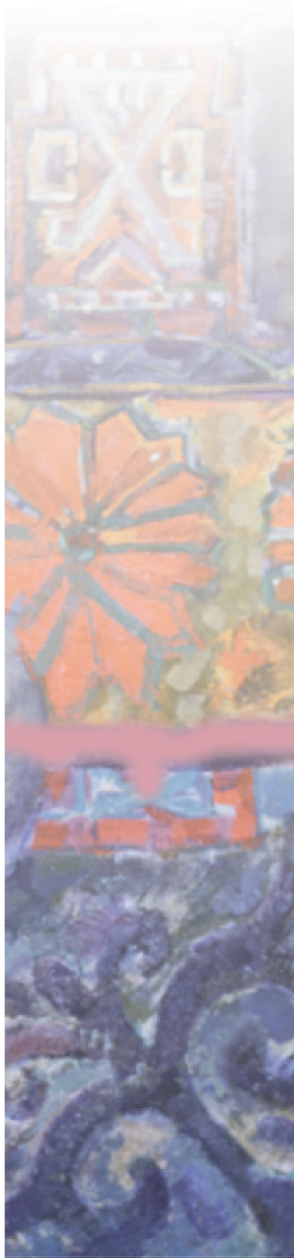
It was decided to march as fast as possible in Abulkhair's direction, in order to overrun his army and trample it into the ground before the arrival of the cavalry of the Middle Zhuz.

— When only one path is left, ride at a gallop! — the kontaichi Syban Raptan said.

The advisor Renat barely noticeably shrugged his shoulders. He thought to himself that the invincibility and might of all the great warrior ancestors of the kontaichi was in the natural simplicity of their decisions.

So the Dzhungar army advanced at night at a gallop. The steppe thundered from the thousands of clad hooves, and the wind whistled from the streaming shaggy manes and tails of the horses. At night, they reached a lake overgrown with reeds not far from the Shieli River, where Abulkhair's camp was. Khocha, with her men, was waiting there for her father. She went up to the kontaichi and helped him get down from his horse, and lead him to her tent covered with reeds.

Galden-Tseren and Renat also entered the tent and sat at the entrance. The girl started to silently shake the horse milk in a jug. And then, still not speaking, gave a big cup first to her father, and then to her older brother and Renat. Syban Raptan quenched his thirst from the





journey with two to three long draughts, and then looked at the men standing in the doorway.

— Where is their commander Shangrek-Noion?

Khocha shook the jug a few times more and poured her father some fresh horse milk.

— He is lying dead behind the tent...

— Who killed him?

— I did.

— Where is he?

She led her father down a barely discernible path in the moonlight, and pointed at a corpse. The youth was a broad-shouldered twenty-five year-old in fine clothes. An arrow was sticking half-way out of his chest, right where his heart was.

— He did wrong and I killed him, — said Khocha. — I sentenced him to death.

— What did he do? — the kontaichi asked.

Shangrek-Noion was the son of one of the most distinguished people in the Dzhungar khanate of Bagadur. He was from the Merkit kin of Doda-Dorzhi. The Bagadur had proposed that the thirteen year-old daughter of the kontaichi marry his son, and Syban Raptan had consented. The wedding was to take place that winter. For some unknown reason, Khocha wasn't happy about it.

The matter was that she understood how the young and handsome Noion felt about her. For him, she was only the daughter of a kontaichi. Recently, she had found out that Shangrek-Noion had brought another Dzhungar girl to his tent. If the girl hadn't been pretty, the daughter of the kontaichi wouldn't have paid any attention to it. But the pretty Dzhungar had been even prettier than she was, so he had hurt the feelings of the bellicose Khocha...

— He didn't deal as he should have with this horseman, — she said, and pointed at another corpse.

A young Kazakh was lying behind a bush. Renat,

who went up together with Galden-Tseren, noticed that the dead Kazakh was in plain clothes and had a simple birch bow on his back. Khocha let go of the branch, and it covered the Kazakh horseman.

— Tell me what happened, — said Syban Raptan.

— Yesterday morning, a girl was riding all out on that side of the lake...— Khocha pointed with a rolled whip in her hand. — She was going to Abulkhair, and even my horse Kumai-tos barely caught up with her. I threw a rope around her and...She was very pretty.

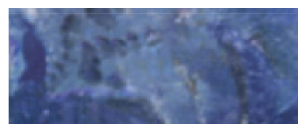
— What happened then? — her father asked, glancing at the dead Shangrek-Noion.

— I began to ask her questions, but she said that she would rather die than talk. So I told her she would die then. But Shangrek-Noion didn't want that. He said not to kill her until morning—maybe she would tell him something during the night...And all the men agreed with him. After all, they were all Merkits too. They stood around me with their hands on their sabres. Then, I decided that, to spite Shangrek-Noion, I would let my brother Galden-Tseren have the pretty Kazakh girl. I had the right to do what I wanted with her since I had caught her!

— So what happened then? — the kontaichi repeated, his tone the same.

— I ordered the horsemen to all guard the captive, and Shangrek-Noion to just guard her horse. But later, the men seized a Kazakh horseman on the other shore of the lake and brought him to me. He didn't want to answer my questions either. I decided that the horseman and the girl were probably related, so I ordered his hips to be squeezed with a horse-hair rope. When they had wound the bristly rope around him two times, he screamed like a girl and began to bite his lips. But the horseman couldn't take it. He promised to tell everything he knew.

— What did he say? — asked the kontaichi.





— When I ordered the rope loosened, he said that he had been sent to Abulkhair. And it was he who told me that Abulkhair's army was camping on the shores of the Shieli River, and that he had thirty thousand troops. He said that they would attack us as soon as Khan Samek from the Middle Zhuz joined up with them, and that Khan Samek also had thirty thousand troops experienced in fighting us.

— When will Abulkhair and Samek meet up?

Khocha's thick brows eyebrows knit on her forehead.

Here is what happened. She hadn't finished asking how soon the two Kazakh armies would meet up, when the Kazakh girl suddenly jumped like a lynx and slit the horseman's throat with a small curved knife. Then, Khocha grinned and ordered the girl put in Chinese shackles. They were immediately put on, but at night, on Shangrek-Noion's orders, she was unshackled. He himself led her out into the steppe and let her go...

— I myself heard him say to her: "My little bird, fly away from this cruel snake!" — shouted Khocha, her eyes flashing.

— And she answered: "Thank you worthy warrior. Though you are an enemy of my tribe, you are just. You have a human heart. Maybe we will meet again..." — Then, I drew my bow and... they will never meet again.

— So where is her body? — the kontaichi asked.

— While I was drawing the bow a second time, her horse disappeared in the reeds.

— That means that Abulkhair knows we are approaching.

— Yes, — his fourteen-year-old daughter answered and blushed, recalling how hurt she had been.

Syban Raptan's upper lip curled in fury.

— Why you wet frog! How is it there are disgraceful drops of water in the eyes of a daughter of a kontaichi!

Only rabbits and deer cry out of their own weakness. It's not natural for a person.

Khocha straightened up, her tears dried, and she walked over Shangrek-Noion's dead body, stepping on his face.

— This coward won't see heaven... — she said.

— Yes, it's Doda-Dorzhi's fault he had such a faint-hearted son, — the kontaichi nodded in agreement, and strode on his short bowed legs to his horse. Before getting up in the saddle, he turned to Galden-Tseren:

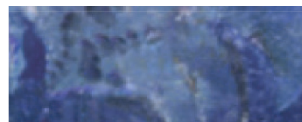
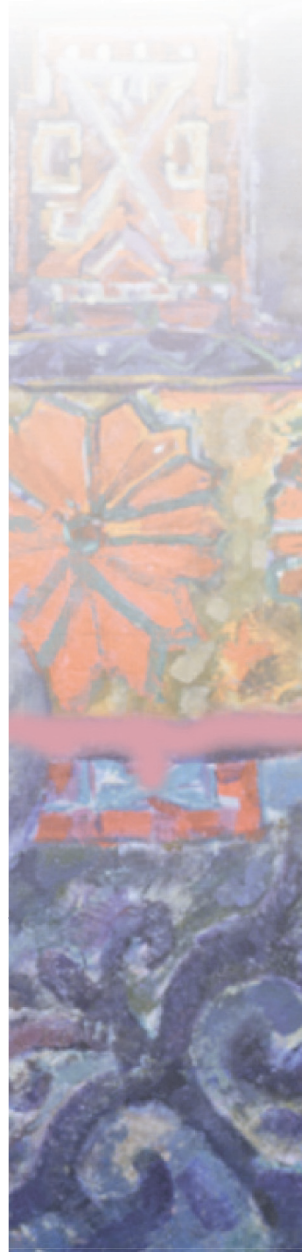
— Don't forget about the Merkit horsemen who saw everything.

— Of course, father.

In spite of his sixty some years, when the toe of the Kontaichi's boot had just touched the stirrup, he easily jumped into the saddle, and the shaggy bay stallion carried him back to the troops. Behind him, in the white light of the moon, sobs could be heard. It was Galden-Tseren's guards, cutting off the heads of the Merkit horsemen who had seen Shangrek-Noion's death, with short accurate swings of their heavy Dzhungar sabres.

The girl who fell into Khocha's hands and was let go by Shangrek-Noion was Gaukhar from Turkestan. She was the sister of the young warrior Malaisar from the Argyn kin of Basentiin, who lived near the Ulytau Mountains at that time. Two times a year, the auls of this kin sent caravans, escorted by large detachments of horsemen with wool and leather, to Turkestan, Tashkent, and some years, to Bukhara and Khiv. Tea, sugar, clothes, and household utensils and goods were brought back.

This year, a caravan had been sent to Turkestan, escorted by Malaisar himself. Gaukhar, with a group of girls who were getting married soon, went with the caravan. The brides usually took part in choosing their wedding dresses.





The wealthier members of the caravan had gone on to Tashkent, while the less wealthy had remained behind in Turkestan. And that was where they still were when the Dzhungars invaded. The women and children hid in the thick reeds of the Seikhundarya, while the horsemen took part in defending the city. Those of them who were still in one piece, escaped during a big storm and joined the women and children.

They sent men out in various directions. And one happy day, they learned that a thirty thousand strong army of the Junior Zhuz, headed by Abulkhair, was approaching. And soon “uzun kulak”, the famous steppe “long ear”, brought news that Samek-Khan’s cavalry was going to join up with Abulkhair. The joy of the people, who had been hiding in the reeds for many weeks, knew no bounds. But one time, when the men went a ways from the reeds, they heard the heavy thud of thousands of hooves. The cavalry of the terrible kontaichi Syban Raptan had ridden at a gallop at night. And they were riding in the direction of Khan Abulkhair’s camp...

Gaukhar could ride a horse better than many horsemen. And her horse was the fastest. All the other horses of the fugitives had been crippled in battles or had broken their legs in the flight from Turkestan. Moreover, the Dzhungars might not pay any attention to a lone woman riding a horse, while they would have been suspicious of a man on horseback. Gaukhar jumped on her horse and, accompanied by only one horseman who followed at a distance, set out for Abulkhair’s camp to warn him about the approaching danger. On the way, she was captured by the very daughter of the kontaichi...

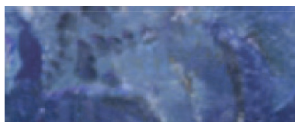
Furious, Gaukhar killed the horseman who couldn’t take the terrible torture of the braided horse hair rope wound around him. That was the first and last person she killed in her life. And then, she read such passion in

the eyes of the young Dzhungar-Noion that she knew she would be saved. When he personally unshackled her and led her beyond the reeds, she thought that he wanted, like his kinswoman, to outrage her. Gaukhar had already prepared—she held the sharp silver clasp off some old jewelry of her mother’s, ready to cut the violator’s throat. But the young Dzhungar gave her the reins to her own horse and pointed towards the steppe. So, before getting on her horse, she kissed him...

He shouted something after her. But, riding off at a gallop, she didn’t hear how Khocha’s arrow whistled and Shangrek-Noion moaned, mortally wounded.

By midday the next day, Gaukhar had reached Khan Abulkhair’s camp. The khan winced when he heard how close the Dzhungars were. The trouble was that half of his army was still on their way. There were only fifteen thousand troops with him in the camp. To enter into battle with the Dzhungars was certain death. Abulkhair ordered preparation for battle, and himself convened a military council. At it, he proposed retreating. But the bellicose warriors from the kins of the Adai and the Tam disagreed. They reminded him of the ancient saying that one mustn’t begin a big war with a bloodless retreat. They could retreat only after there was enemy blood on their lances. It was decided to enter into battle with the Dzhungars, after having sent messengers to Khan Samek asking him to hurry up and come.

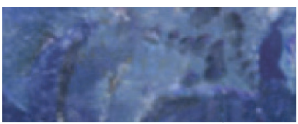
When Kabanbai-Batyr, who had set out from Turkestan, arrived at Nura, the aul where the seat of Khan Bulat was, it was already summer. The khan, as usual, was ill. His numerous ailments usually worsened when he had to make some important decision. So in these hard times, all responsibility lay on the shoulders of his brother, Samek. He sent messengers to all corners of Sary-Arka, crying out “the enemy is coming!”





The word “war” was nothing new to this country and the people who had been living in it from time immemorial. It seemed that not a single year had passed without blood being spilled on this land. Beginning with the migrations, waves and waves of innumerable conquerors rolled across it, following the rising sun century after century. And stream after stream of its sons left it. They all learned to fight at some point. And it is not accidental, that for thousands of years, all the sultan and khalif palaces of the East bought the youth that had been captured to use as their warriors and guards. Now, a new wave of human hatred was foaming with blood on the eastern borders. And a mighty wave of national anger boiled up and rose to meet it almost spontaneously.

These rallies weren't easy. The absence of a common ruler and an iron fist became apparent especially during enemy invasions. Nevertheless, the most obstinate leaders of the kins obeyed the orders of Khan Samek. But the Kazakh kins were scattered all over the steppe, and the men couldn't be mustered up quickly like a regular army. While they rounded up the battle horses from the herds, got together supplies for the road, and made their way to the khan's seat, much time went by. Only three weeks later did Khan Samek move at the head of the thirty-thousand strong army of the Junior Zhuz that had finally been rallied. There were mostly mustache-less young horsemen in his army. But in twenty years, many of them would become illustrious warriors, whose feats would be sung by bards for centuries to come. There was Bogembai of the Kanzhigali kin, Syrymbet and Malaisari of the Basentiin kin, Baigozi of the Tarakti kin, Janybek, the son of Koshkar of the Kipchak kin, Orazymbet of the Baranali kin, and a dozen famous horsemen of the Kerei and Uak kins, including the legendary warrior Bayan. All their names went down in the history of their nation. But



for now, many of them were in old patched up chapans, and their only weapon, their grandfather's metal covered bludgeons, hung from their saddles. It seems that it was this simple but terrible weapon that made all the liberating armies on earth like each other...

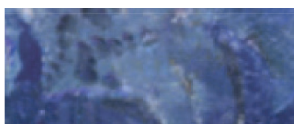
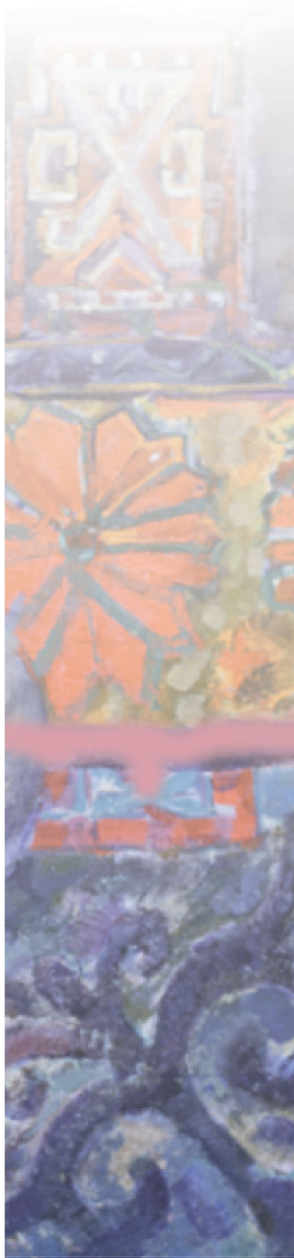


While the troops were being mustered and the detachments were on the way, summer passed. Moreover, it rained during the second half of the summer, which was unusual for Sary-Arka. Not waiting for the main forces of the Middle Zhuz, Bayan-Batyr rode to Seikhundarya with his thousand warriors.

A messenger from Khan Samek caught up with him and informed him that the khan of the Junior Zhuz, Abulkhair, was waiting for the volunteer army of Sary-Arka in the flood-lands of the Shieli River at Zhan-Kurgan. They were to meet no later than the month of Karash—roughly September.

Khan Samek was not known for his wisdom, but for his military feats. He had been made the head of the volunteer army only because of the poor health of his brother. And from there, in his opinion, it wasn't far to the khan's throne, and the dull-witted Samek, like all such people, began to already conduct himself like a sovereign. The numerous retinues of kin leaders and leaches always surrounding such people helped him in this. Moreover, he had recently married his youngest son, Kudaimendi, to the daughter of one of the offspring of Bukei-Sultan, and the best people of all three zhuzes had been invited. This swelled Khan Samek's head all the more, and he was slow in preparing for the campaign and didn't listen to the good advice given him.

The main army of the Middle Zhuz, which was coming along behind the front detachment, was advancing slowly. One of the reasons was the weather. It seemed as if all the genies had been let out of the bottle to go against the army.





Hurricanes raged day after day, and it was impossible to see ahead through the sand rising from the ground. The horses refused to go against the wind, and it was impossible to put up any tents when they stopped for the night. Moreover, during the storms, all the sheep, which the army had taken with them to eat, died. Hunger set in.

Soon, when they turned away from the “Blue Sea”—Balkhash—to the west towards Seikhundarya, the hard ground changed into sand dunes, and the army advanced even more slowly. Before reaching the crossing to Ak-Mecheti, Khan Samek ordered the army to stop in order to heal the wounds on the legs and backs of the horses. It was there that he heard about the battle that took place between the Dzhungar kontaichi and the army of the Junior Zhuz. Abulkhair was defeated in that unequal battle, but, thanks to his taking measures in time, the army was not caught off guard and retreated in an orderly manner.

Khan Samek seemed to have been waiting for that to happen. He gathered the top leaders of the volunteer army in his tent and made the following speech.

— Winter will be upon us soon. The kontaichi will also cease fighting. The Dzhungar cavalry won't get to our Sary-Arka in the winter. And right now, it would be stupid of us to attack them. If Syban Raptan could conquer Abulkhair, then he won't have any trouble with our wary army, and we will have died for nothing. Wouldn't it be better to follow the wise advice of the elders, who say in such a case: “Look for your native home before your mind grows dull.” With God's help, we will beat the kontaichi next summer!

The army turned back...

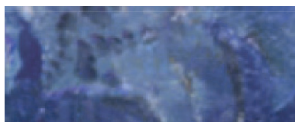
Syban Raptan's cavalry did not succeed in striking an unexpected blow to Abulkhair's army. Gaukhar arrived ahead of the Dzhungar forward detachment only in the

time necessary to boil water in a pot, but that was enough. Abulkhair managed to alert the troops, divide the army into three parts, and have them get in battle formation. He attacked the Dzhungars, who were not expecting to be rebuffed, from two sides. The third part of the army was hidden, waiting in ambush, in the reeds...

The Dzhungar cavalry, stretched out as they marched, didn't withstand the first blow, and, on Syban Raptan's orders, the first thousand horsemen turned back. The Kazakh cavalry pursued the retreating Dzhungars, but the further they went, the more tired they got, while the strength of the Dzhungars kept increasing as the Tumens coming up from behind joined them. Soon, the kontaichi gave the signal for them all to go on the attack. But the Dzhungar horsemen were still bunching for the charge when the shout "Brownskins!" rang out, and the five-thousand strong detachment commanded by the loyal warrior Kabanbai came out of the reeds, where it had been lying in ambush, and attacked them.

Thinking that this must be the army of the Middle Zhuz having come, the kontaichi Syban Raptan again ordered his troops to retreat. He didn't change his orders even after seeing that this was just an ambush by a small group of warriors. Meanwhile, the Kazakh warriors who had given chase saw that they were now surrounded by enemy forces many times exceeding them in numbers. To the south, the whole horizon seemed to smoke. It was more and more Dzhungar troops coming.

The whole Kazakh army, together with Khan Abulkhair himself, were surrounded. — Don't let one out alive, and drag Abulkhair on a rope! — ordered the kontaichi. Several Dzhungar Tumens rushed at the surrounded men with a wild yell. The people intertwined on one big bloody ball, and the half-wild horses also blindly went at each other, biting and kicking. Abulkhair himself had already





been wounded and no longer directed his men. It seemed that the battle would be over any minute...

But suddenly, a black column of dust rose to the north, and the battle cry “Aruakh! Akzhol!” which the Dzhungars knew well, literally shook the steppe. The fierce charge of the cavalry overran the attacking Dzhungars from behind and broke through the deadly ring. It was the famed Bayan-Batyr. Having arrived way ahead of Khan Samek, he entered into a battle to the death. On the way, his army had grown to three thousand men, but entering the already lost battle was, nevertheless, the same as suicide. However, having been in for many surprises that day already, the kontaichi thought that the main Kazakh volunteer army had come and again gave the order to retreat. This time, the Kazakhs, having learned by bitter experience, didn't pursue them. Abulkhair's troops began to head north in marching formation, escorted by Bayan-Batyr's detachment. Dusk set in... And on the next day, the Dzhungar cavalry, remembering about the presence somewhere nearby of Samek Khan's army, decided not to pursue the retreating army. And two days later, the weather turned cold early, and the Kontaichis headed back to Turkestan.

Sauran, the ancient capital of the Kazakhs, was built long, long ago, at the same time as Otrar and Sygnak. The city was surrounded by a moat twenty five arshins wide and fifteen arshins deep. The walls, from the bottom to the top, were about fifteen arshins tall and up to thirty arshins thick. They had hardened over the centuries, and it was impossible to crack them. There were legends that this was the only fortress which the heavy Chinese wall rams, which Genghiz-Khan had brought, couldn't break through, and the city had only surrendered after its defenders had died from starvation.

Three days after leaving Turkestan, Yelchibek-Batyr



and his comrades-in-arms arrived at the famed city of Sauran. It turned out that the hakim of the fortress, Tursum, afraid of the Dzhungars, had recently fled to Tashkent. So the inhabitants unanimously agreed to entrust Yelchibek, a warrior renowned in these parts, with defending the city. Yelchibek and his comrades-in-arms began to vigorously prepare for the Dzhungars...

And a day later, the prophetic Bukhar-Zhyrau arrived in the city. The national poet, who had no wealth besides his dombra, was loved by everyone, and in these hard times, always showed up where his words were needed the most. So now, he had showed up in Sauran, a city which had always been the symbol of the people's resistance against foreign conquerors.

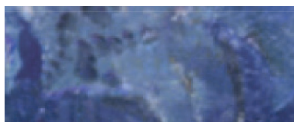
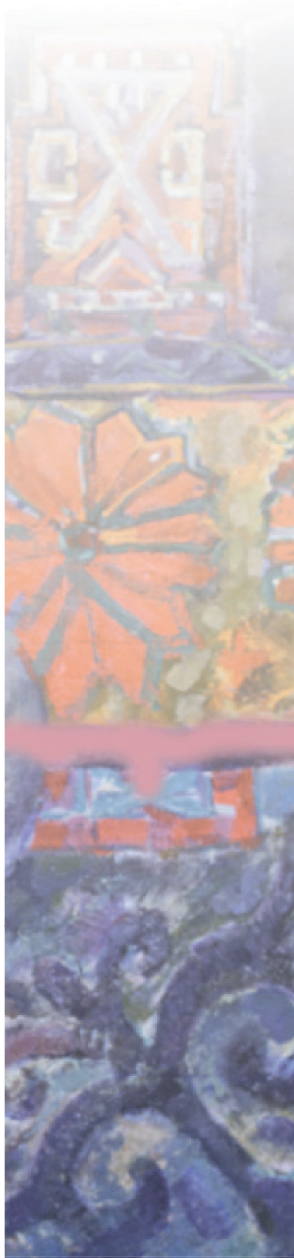
Not getting down off his horse, Bukhar-Zhyrau rode along the walls of the fortress. Work was already in full-swing: they were bringing shields and heavy stones, carrying vessels with oil and pots for heating it, and here and there, filling in holes made in earlier sieges. The prophetic bard suddenly reigned in his horse. A warrior in an iron helmet and holding a heavy bow in his hands was standing on a corner tower, which was higher than the others. Not paying any attention to all the activity going on behind him, he stood looking out into the distance.

— I know you, — Bukhar-Zhyrau said loudly. — You're the blacksmith Nauan, a descendent of renowned warriors!

— Oh, it's you, our bard!

The warrior bowed his head to the bard. The people around, learning who had come, quickly began to gather. Bukhar-Zhyrau took in everyone. He well knew how important lofty words were before a battle.

— I have come to you, the people of the famed city of Sauran, to tell you about your glorious past. That is the way it has always been done in the steppe. Going to his





death, a warrior asked the support of his ancestors and, if his cause is good, they stand with him unseen.

— Speak, bard!

— We are listening!

Hundreds of defenders of the fortress, not wanting to flee and leave it to the enemy, had gathered here on the square in front of the tower. More and more people came out of the streets and lanes. Bukhar-Zhyrau waved his hand.

— See these walls...Genghiz-Khan himself couldn't break through them, and the Mongols entered the city only when its last defender had died of starvation...How many rulers have there been, who wanted to take Sauran after that: Timur, the Mogolistan khans, the terrible Abulkhair, the crafty Abdullah-Khan. But it's not about them that I want to talk. I want to tell you about your famous ancestors, Nauan!

The people glanced at one another in bewilderment. They were used to bards who told of the glorious feats of khans and sultans. What feats could the ancestors of a common blacksmith have accomplished? Besides, all in the city knew that the Nauan kin had been slaves.

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And a day later, the prophetic Bukhar-Zhyrau arrived in the city. The national poet, who had no wealth besides his dombra, was loved by everyone, and in these hard times, always showed up where his words were needed the most. So now, he had showed up in Sauran a city which

had always been the symbol of the people's resistance against foreign conquerors.

Not getting down off his horse, Bukhar-Zhyrau rode along the walls of the fortress. Work was already in full-swing: they were bringing shields and heavy stones, carrying vessels with oil and pots for heating it, and here and there filling in holes made in earlier sieges. The prophetic bard suddenly reigned in his horse. A warrior in an iron helmet and holding a heavy bow in his hands was standing on a corner tower which was higher than the others. Not paying any attention to all the activity going on behind him, he stood looking out into the distance.

— I know you, — Bukhar-Zhyrau said loudly. — You're the blacksmith Nauan, a descendent of renowned warriors!

— Oh, it's you our bard!

The warrior bowed his head to the bard. The people around, learning who had come, quickly began to gather. Bukhar-Zhyrau took in everyone. He well knew how important lofty words were before a battle.

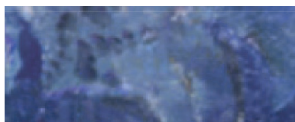
— I have come to you, the people of the famed city of Sauran, to tell you about your glorious past. That is the way it has always been done in the steppe. Going to his death, a warrior asked the support of his ancestors and, if his cause is good, they stand with him unseen.

— Speak bard!

— We are listening!

Hundreds of defenders of the fortress, not wanting to flee and leave it to the enemy, had gathered here on the square in front of the tower. More and more people came out of the streets and lanes. Bukhar-Zhyrau waved his hand.

— See these walls... Genghiz-Khan himself couldn't break through them and the Mongols entered the city only when its last defender had died of starvation... How many





rulers there have been who wanted to take Sauran after that: Timur, the Mogolistan khans, the terrible Abulkhair, the crafty Abdullah-Khan. But it's not about them that I want to talk. I want to tell about your famous ancestors, Nauan!

The people glanced at one another in bewilderment. They were used to bards who told of the glorious feats of khans and sultans. What feats could the ancestors of a common blacksmith have accomplished? Besides, all in the city knew that the Nauan kin had been slaves!

— Yes, my Nauan... In Sauran, it always happened that the hakims who were charged with defending the city fled, and common men took stations on the walls. Thus it was under Abulkhair, when Orak, an ordinary batyr nicknamed the One-Eyed, defended the city. And during the last siege, when Abdullah Khan, the emir of Bukhara, wanted to enter the city, two batyr brothers, slaves by birth, blocked his way. They were your ancestors, Nauan!

— I've heard about this, — Nauan the blacksmith said in the silence that had settled round them. — But nobody knows how it really was. People say different things about this.

— I will tell you what actually happened!

The zhyrau settled himself down right on the ancient stones and touched the strings of his dombra...

A smile gleamed in the eyes of Abdullah Khan, the emir of Bukhara, his moustache bristled and stood up slightly, and there appeared a touch of colour in his cheeks. An outsider would immediately decide that the formidable emir was glad about something. But Khasen Khoja, his adviser and vizier, saw at a glance that he was in a raging temper. He knew all too well that whenever the emir's greyish eyes lit up with joy and a faint smile stirred his lips, someone's death was soon to follow...

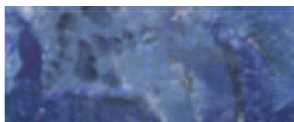
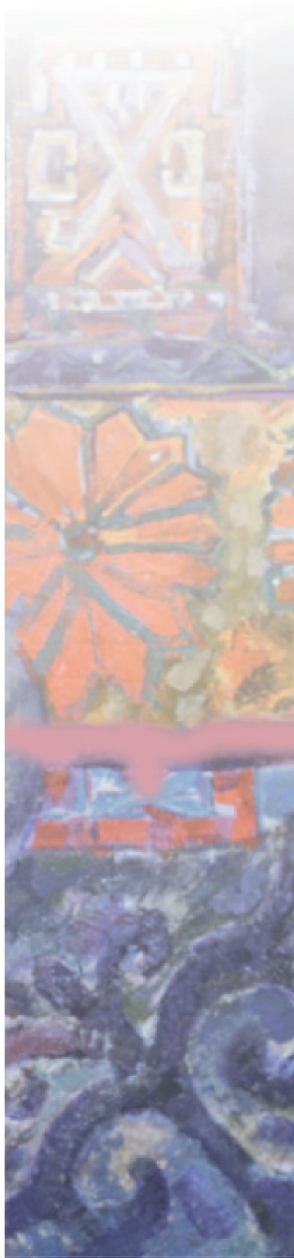
Over many years of his service, Khasen Khoja, a

learned scholar, never got used to this trait of his lord. They say that crocodiles shed tears before eating their victims. Crocodiles, however, do this in anticipation of a meal and not out of pity. Abdullah Khan, unlike crocodiles, laughed, and not wept, in anticipation of someone's death. He normally did this in front of his victim. But now, there is no one else in the palace except himself, Khasen Khoja...

What is it with which he, an obedient and dutiful khoja, has put his suzerain lord in a rage? Is it because he has failed to inform him in good time about the battle of Talas in which Baba Sultan, in effect, routed Khan Shagai, Emir Abdullah's loyal vassal, a few days ago? Maybe it is still not with him that the all-powerful Abdullah Khan is so angry? O may Allah will this! Inshallah!

Having turned on his heels, Emir Abdullah came up to a stained glass window. The palace's tower, where he now was afforded a fine view of the entire holy city of Bukhara, was all covered with gardens as far as the eye could see. Here and there, the sea of trees was interspersed with slender minarets and the elegant roofs and towers of innumerable palaces and caravanserais reaching out towards the sky. The walls, doors and gates of the houses, painted in all the colours of the rainbow, are adorned with verses from the Koran executed in fanciful patterns. For the lord of Bukhara is not just a khan: he is also an emir, an authority in matters relating to the faith and sacred law, called upon to enforce the refinement of morals in every khanate and sultanate in this part of the world.

Not a sound is to be heard here from the vast city slumbering in the noonday heat. Only the water is softly murmuring in the canals round the palace, and a rustle of leaves, created by birds flying from branch to branch in the palace garden, can be heard now and then. And yet this is the second largest city in the khanate. Its first one is the eternal city of Samarkand, which Muhammad Sheibani,





Emir Abdullah's formidable great-grandfather, won from the Timurides at one time, together with the holy city of Bukhara. Many things happened afterwards, and in the 964 year of the Hegira, that is, in 1557, Abdullah himself, who was then twenty-four years of age, recaptured it from the very same Timurides. In Bukhara, he left his headquarters and his father, Khan Iskander, and it was he who founded the Khanate of Bukhara.

The emir stepped back from the window. He glanced his eye over the red Khorasan carpets on the floor, over the swords, sabres, yataghans and daggers of damask steel in scabbards ornamented with gold and precious stones, and over a low round table of polished juniper laden with vases on curly legs, porcelain pialas with sherbet, and gold plates with sweets and fruit. But his thoughts were elsewhere.

— I need your advice, khoja. — The emir's greyish eyes were still laughing. — What should I do if an enemy whom I have in my employ favours another one of my enemies?

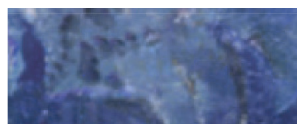
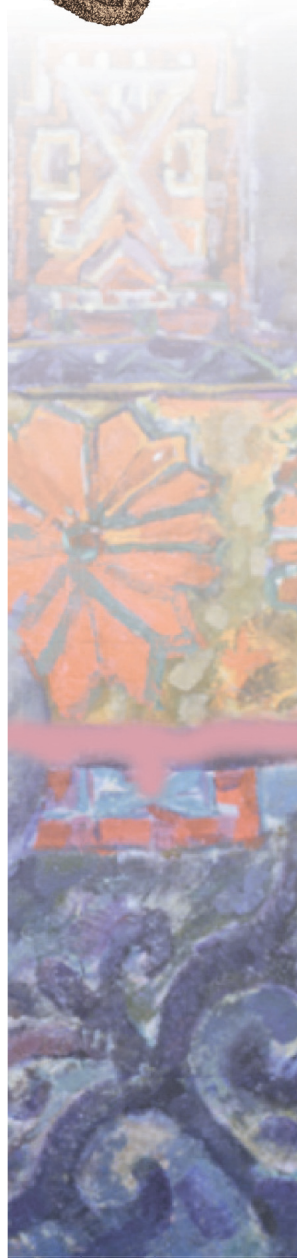
— You should put him to death, Most Holy Emir!

— Well... Khan Shagai, who has defected to us, and his son, Tauekel, did not want to bring me Baba Sultan's and Buzakhur's heads. I yield to your advice, wise vizier. It is only your persuasion that has me decided to do this! But this will only happen after the capture of Turkestan, Sauran, and Sygnak...

After a three-day period rest to which the troops were entitled, Emir Abdullah Khan began preparations for a storm. In keeping with astrologers' divinations and according to old beliefs, the first Wednesday of the month of Rabia II (28 March 1582) was a lucky day. The rays of the rising sun fell upon fifty thousand warriors clad in blue armour and sitting on strong-legged, broad-chested chargers. They surrounded Sauran in several rows, each

row riding horses of a different colour. Besides the lines of mounted troops, an attack-thousand stood in front of each gate in wedge formation. Slaves, being driven forward with whips, were dragging battering rams and carrying long ladders and bundles of reeds for filling the moat. Near the town's western gate, Ubaidulla Sultan's attack-thousand, on grey Akhal Teke horses, were standing, and on its northern side, a thousand led by Sultan Abdumumin, the emir's heir apparent, were getting ready for a storm. Here, all the horses were black, and a black flag with a representation of the rising sun on it was flying above the troops. Standing on its south, under a blue flag with a lynx embroidered on it were the lashkars of the Khiva and Turkmen begs, subordinate to Bukhara. They were riding fiery red horses. Next to them were the emir's allies, Kazakh sultans. A symbol of war, the horsetail, was flying above their heads, and their horsemen were holding under their knees their famous clubs with forged knobs in readiness for an attack. On the east, numerous mercenary lashkars, hired by the emir from among vagabonds from the four winds—from Cathay to Rome,—were waiting for a chance to storm into the town and seize rich booty..

A mounted detachment glittering with expensive armour and weapons started moving from the emir's white tent on the right bank of the river. At that very instant, karnais started bellowing furiously and frighteningly, their deep, harsh sound accompanied by the penetrating nasal tone of zurnas, and the booming beat of hundreds of drums, resembling the beat of waves on a beach, woke up the sleeping steppe. The townspeople were watching the never yet seen spectacle with awe and wonderment. The detachment was preceded by a tall, well-built man riding a great white horse of a breed unknown in these parts, and his magnificent bushy black moustache could already be seen quite well. He was laughing, looking at





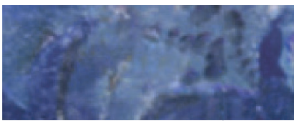
Sauran, and the whole of Central Asia knew what Emir Abdullah's laughter promised...

The forehead, mighty chest and sides of the emir's horse were clad in chain mail made of silver rings. Between the horse's ears, a small snow-white red-footed falcon was sitting: according to an ancient steppe custom, it was being tested as a "bird of luck". If the falcon does not fly away in terror during the first engagement with an enemy, the batyr will come off victorious. If it does fly away, one should not join battle because it may be fatal. Islam rejected all these superstitious beliefs, but the descendants of steppe chieftains still remembered and respected ancient shamanic rituals.

As soon as the emir came abreast of the front line of his troops, the thunder of countless drums, the harsh roar of karnais and the shrill cry of zurnas sounded once again. Quite a few among the fortress's defenders felt creepy at the sound, and some of them drew their bows. Meanwhile, having made a smooth turn, the retinue rode after the emir along the fortress walls. Not one of the thousand of his mounted escorts moved his sabre or turned his head. They were riding with terrifying inevitableness in a closed circle, never getting either a step closer to the wall or a step farther from it. Abdullah alone turned his head now and then to greet the most distinguished batyrs and commanders of his troops with a majestic nod...

- Great is the most holy emir, a pillar of the faith!
- May your strength be augmented, oh great bagadur!
- Glory to you, oh mighty Abdullah Khan!

These greetings were chanted by specially detailed men from among the troops, and their cries were echoed by the warriors in thousands of voices. The green banner of the Prophet was sailing in his wake, and the white red-legged falcon was sitting between his horse's ears quite still, as if bound by its legs.



— The falcon does not fly away, — Hakim Muhammad Sultan, standing on the wall, said with anxiety. — This bodes us ill!

— Let's see what this arrow will bode for this accursed emir! — This was what Kiyak said, taking his famous bow off his back.

— Don't you venture to shoot!

The hakim did not know how he could shout this command, standing on the wall with so many defenders of the fortress around, and he corrected himself:

— If we spill the blood of the keeper of the faith himself, they will kill us all to the man!

— I obey you, hakim, — Kiyak Batyr said calmly. — But let this bird sing him a song about his ill fortune!

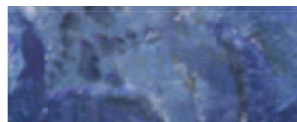
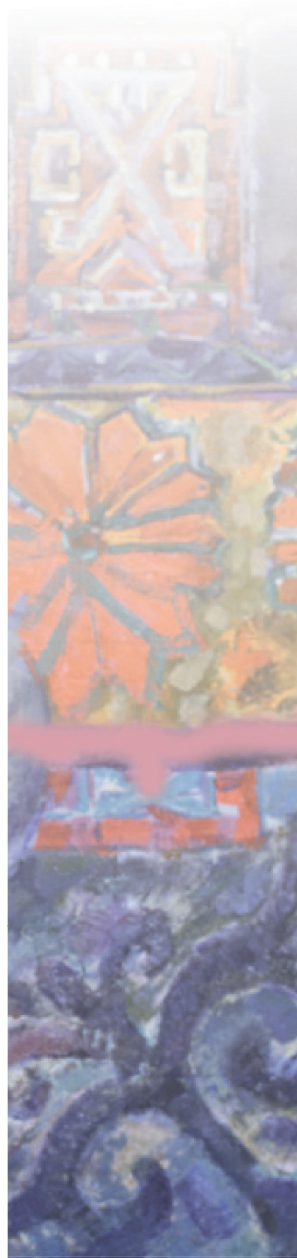
With these words, the batyr drew his bow with lightning speed and shot his terrible arrow. Its head was as broad as a lamb's blade-bone and as sharp as a razor. The white falcon remained sitting on the horse's forelock, but now it was headless. The bird's bright-red blood squirted out over the emir's face, and he burst into uproarious laughter that resounded from one end of the steppe to the other:

— An excellent marksman! But that doesn't count. The falcon has been killed, but it hasn't flown away. Fetch me another one!

A servant galloped away and returned in a few minutes, bringing another falcon, and the emir moved on. The smile never left his lips and his eyes reflected the bright Turkestan sun.

The bird of luck did not leave Emir Abdullah's horse. Having made a full circle round the fortress, he returned to his tent.

The next morning, the same thing recurred again. Once again the emir, riding the same snow-white horse, began making a circle round the fortress. The white red-





legged falcon was sitting still between the horse's ears. True, having heard that Kazakh batyr bowmen had joined the town's defenders, Abdullah was now keeping at a safe distance from the fortress' battlements.

What happened next, however, was entirely different this time. No sooner had the emir turned his horse to ride along the wall, than the falcon soared heavenward. After it hovered in mid-air for a while, the "bird of luck" suddenly darted across the sky towards Sauran. Having danced in the sky above one of the towers, the white falcon returned and began circling around the emir, as if intending to alight back on its place. This also might be of good omen. But then, the fidgety bird once again flew towards the fortress. Halfway there, it descended and alighted on a shrub of thorn.

— Catch it! — the emir ordered.

Instantly, one of his bodyguards dashed after the falcon. Having gotten near it, he took the bird in his hands. The troops breathed a sigh of relief.

— Heh, I feel sorry for the poor bird, not for this robber henchman! — someone's merry voice could be heard saying.

An arrow whistled through the air and transfixed both the white falcon and the bodyguard. Everyone aah-ed. It was Kiyak Batyr, who was standing on the tower next to the town's hakim, who had shot the arrow. Emir Abdullah turned his horse and rode towards his tent.

— The white falcon has fallen closer to the town than to the emir! — Abdysattar Sultan said, eyeing the batyr with suspicion. — Won't you tell us, merry batyr, why on earth the falcon flew from the emir's horse's withers all of a sudden?

Kiyak Batyr puckered his lips and gave a soft whistle. In this way, Kazakh boys living in the steppe lured birds into traps. The hakim smiled in his bushy moustache:

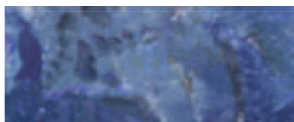
— People needn't be told about your special skill. They believe in their good luck, which is just as well!

A long period of siege began. Now and then, the bravest of the besiegers swam across the moat in the dark of the night and threw ropes to the battlements. Then, they noiselessly climbed up the wall, and later on, their decapitated bodies fell into the water and, horribly swollen, floated on it as a lesson to the others. The batyrs were keeping sentry day and night, and no one could get past their guard.

Abdullah sent Kulbaba Kokiltash, his finest silver-tongue, to the besieged town with a letter, which said, — “Do not waste your energies trying to resist me. I will vanquish you no matter what, for God is with me. Do not force me to fill the moat with your blood. Surrender, and I will forgive all your sins in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful!” All day long, Kulbaba Kokiltash's eloquence poured out in a flood before the rulers of Sauran, but they only laughed in response: “No one would proffer peace, having brought with him a force of fifty thousand horsemen to his neighbour's house!”

And then, the town of Sairam, given up by its hakim to the enemy without a struggle, rebelled and refused to provide food supplies for the khan's army. During that time, a lot of common people who had fled other towns in the Syr-Darya area, trying to save themselves from the massacre perpetrated by the emir when capturing these towns, crowded together in Sairam. The warriors who had survived or escaped from salve caravans were full of wrath and eager for revenge. Mu-hammad Sultan, the hakim of Sairam, while going in mortal fear of the emir, had no choice in the matter, for they now, in effect, had complete authority over the town.

When Abdullah Khan appeared before his troops, he seemed not to be looking at anyone. He rode in front of his





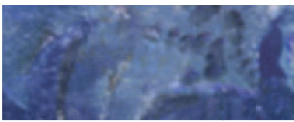
lifeguards, never turning his head, and no one was allowed to approach him closer than two hundred steps. In reality, however, the emir saw everything and was fully aware of what was happening. His troops were tired of standing at the walls of the Sauran fortress. Fewer and fewer horsemen remained in his units, which kept diminishing day after day. Taking their weapons with them, the warriors ran away in groups and singly to the Kazakh steppe to join the ranks of free batyrs. Such vagabond outfits always found shelter and got support from common people at Kazakh nomads' encampments. And the elders often let them be, knowing that these batyrs could defend their auls from the emir's troops when the need arose. Every day, a great number of such motley outfits, in which Kazakh, Uzbek and Kyrgyz paupers had established fraternal relations among themselves, raided the frontier area, plundering the khan's supply trains and releasing prisoners.

One morning, having donned a simple cloak, the emir took a walk through the horsemen's camp. It was still rather dark, but the guard was about to be changed. Those who were to go on sentry were cooking food for themselves, and occasional campfires were burning in the predawn half-light. The emir ordered his lifeguards to fall behind and remained unnoticed when he stopped in the shade of a tent. Two warriors, a young and a middle-aged one, went on talking softly.

— Damn this war! — the young warrior said. — Whenever will it end?

— We will take Sauran and they will send us to recapture Sairam or to seize Yasi!

— Now, what do we need this Sauran for? Let's say, I will be allotted a square of cloth and a handful of dirhams as my share of the total spoils. I will bring it home to Shakhrisabz and a tax collector will take it from me right away—to be spent on the very same war!



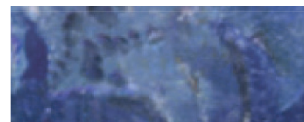
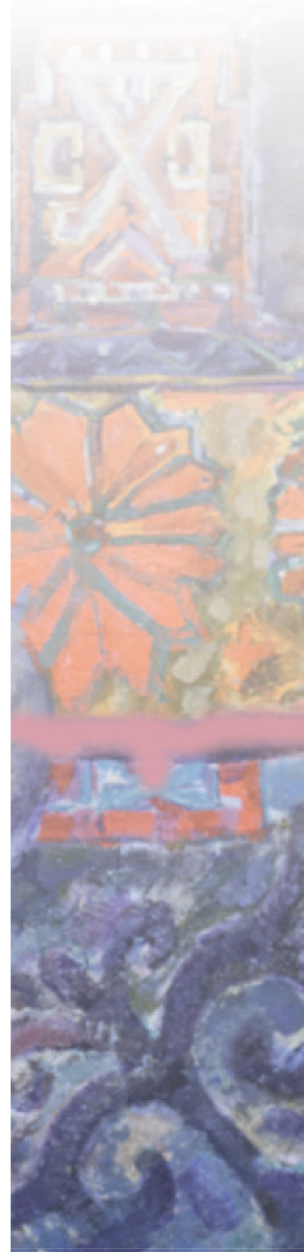
- Then don't give it away!
- If I don't, they will nail me by the ears to the town gate or even make me shorter by the head...
- If Allah wills!



The situation of the emir's troops improved somewhat when a large caravan arrived to Sauran directly from Bukhara. Besides provision supplies, it brought four "black dromedaries"—war engines devised by a disciple of the famous Ruhadi-Mirakh Tubbashiust. They could hurl not only red-hot stones the size of a sheep, but also firepots filled with a special liquid that made even iron burn. Installed on each of the four sides of the town, these war engines kept working on and on, but the mighty walls held up. Then, the target was shifted to the town itself, and fires began to break out in it.

It was then that a carrier pigeon from Yasi flew in to Sauran. The message attached to its legs said that Nogailin troops headed by Baba Sultan and Buzakhur Sultan had marched forth to succor the Turkestan towns. The defenders' spirits revived and they continued their resistance. In the meantime, the incendiary liquid brought from Bukhara was running short, and there were no necessary components for making it on the spot. Now, the terrible "black dromedaries" hurled their deadly missiles only from time to time...

Things were not exactly as reported by some good man from Yasi. Indeed, Baba Sultan and Buzakhur Sultan, being chased by Emir Abdullah's units, went to Saraichik. At first, they were welcomed there as allies and relatives of the White Horde. They received a particularly warm welcome from Aktorgyn, Khan Khaknazar's widow. The situation that had developed by that time, however, made it impossible to count on the Nogailin Kazakhs for any serious help in the struggle against Abdullah. The Astrakhan Khanate had quite recently fallen almost





without mounting any resistance. Now, a voivode of the formidable Russian tsar, Ivan the Terrible, with a large unit of streltsy, royal musketeers, at his command administered Astrakhan. The Astrakhan beys had sworn allegiance to Moscow. Those who were against this had fled to the Crimea, ruled by the Girai dynasty, and some of them had joined their relatives, the Nogailin Kazakhs. It was they who now came out against giving help to the Turkestan sultans in their struggle against the emir of Bukhara. The beys and elders of the Mangyt clan, the most influential one, sided with them.

— We need horsemen to recapture Astrakhan from the infidels! — the Astrakhan refugees said. — The main interests of the Land of Nogailin lie here, on the road to the mighty Crimean khan. Let us recognize him as our lord and join our forces. What does all this fighting against Abdullah have to do with us? We do not want to stay in the White Horde!

Yet most of the Nogailin Kazakhs did not want to break their connections with their brothers, and the Nogailin beys could not be openly disloyal to the Syr-Darya Kazakhs for fear of arousing popular indignation. That was why they were playing for time, staging one festivity after another.

On Thursday, the seventeenth day of the month of Raj'ab (7 August 1582), Bagadur Tauekel, bringing a captured Latif Sultan before him, dismounted from his horse in front of the emir's tent and cast two heads, those of Baba Sultan and his atalyk Dzhal Muhammad, on the ground at his feet. Abdullah Khan stooped and looked closely at them to make sure that this was not a fraud, then stepped over them and came up to the bagadur, standing on a bended knee.

— He who kills your worst enemy becomes closer to you than your nearest relative! — he said, repeating an

old proverb. — In addition to my consanguine brothers, sultans Ubaidulla and Dustim, I now have a third one, Tauekel. I bestow the office of kush-begi upon you and give you Afrikent, my inherited domain!

His vizier, Khasen Khoja, nodded in approval. His charge, the most holy emir of Bukhara, did the right thing. Such a bagadur should be bound down by the ties of kinship and gratitude. Nearly everyone in the emir's retinue was a stranger to him, so he would now be serving the throne hand and foot. And Afrikent was a locality in the Khanate of Bukhara farthest from the Kazakh steppe...

— Thank you, Most Holy Emir! — Bagadur Tauekel said, rising from his knee.

The enemies' heads were placed into casks filled with honey to preserve their natural appearance, and a great feast to celebrate the death of the emir's most dangerous enemies began. During that night, the fortress's defenders heard a lot of wild cries. Some drunken lashkar rode up to the wall and shouted that this was the last night in the lives of the oath-breakers from this damned place, Sauran. A sheaf of oiled reeds was thrown on him from the wall, and both he and his horse turned into an enormous living bonfire thrashing about wildly.

The next morning was quiet. For the first time in many days, the "black dromedaries" ceased their infernal rumble, and small skylarks, which abounded in these parts, made use of the breathing spell to start a merry frolic above the bushes of dropwort growing between the fortress and the besiegers.

The sound of trumpets heralded the break of day, and immediately, Emir Abdullah, ruling over the immense Khanate of Bukhara in the name of his father, came out of his silk tent. In an instant, a patchy crowd of viziers, warlords, sultans, beys and begs, bowing their heads, gathered around him.





— Oh Most Holy Emir, our sovereign lord the Khan! What will your orders be for today?

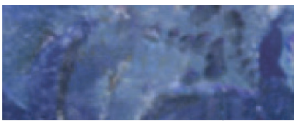
Abdullah's grey eyes grew warm and a faint smile stirred his lips. "Whose turn will it be today?" — Khasen Khoja thought with sorrow. And the emir turned his head towards Kulbaba Kokiltash:

— Take a walk together with Baba Sultan's son to the wall behind which our Sauran friends have taken shelter. Tell them everything. And if this does not seem enough to them, they will have to be presented with the head of Baba Sultan himself. True, I will be sorry to part with the head of an old friend who has been serving us for so long. Life has become so dull in this world no longer graced by his presence.

Soon, a horse laden with a cask full of sweet smelling Dzhizak honey started for the town's main gate. Next to it, Kulbaba Kokiltash, accompanied by two lashkars, was strutting stiffly. Tied to the horse's tail was a fettered Latif Sultan. Abdysattar, Baba Sultan's son, and Zhakbulat Tore, another hakim of Sauran, appeared on the topmost platform of the town's main tower. Together with them were several batyrs, including Kiyak and Tuyak. Seeing his brother emaciated and bound in fetters, Abdysattar shielded his eyes with his hands for a minute.

— Oh our brothers, for all men are brothers before Allah! — Kulbaba Kokiltash began to speak in singsong. — The highest mountains have a flaw in that they have no passages. Big rivers are imperfect for they have no crossings. You honourable and noble people of Sauran have one flaw, which is pride. Pride and pride alone prevents you from taking a reasonable view of the world and submitting to defeat. However much this grieves me, it is my unfortunate duty to bring you tidings of bale. Baba Sultan, whom you are expecting, has already arrived.

— Where is he then?



— You should have asked where his dead body is... It lies buried beneath the ground, and is marked by a tombstone as befits the grave of a sultan. And his head is in this cask of honey to preserve the pinkness of his cheeks!

Having heard the news about his father's death, Abdysattar once again shielded his eyes with his hands.

— Is this true, Latif Sultan? — he asked his brother.

— It is...

— You have heard this, you faithful, and do not say later on that you haven't! On whom else can you pin your hopes? Think better of your situation, brothers, and beg gracious and most holy Emir Abdullah for mercy! Bring him the keys to your town with all due submission, and he will forgive you your trespasses!

— And what if we don't do as you advise us to do, silver-tongue? — the men on the tower asked him.

— First, this sultan, Latif, who is your brother, Abdysattar, will be stabbed to death before your very eyes, and then Takhir Sultan, who is now sleeping in the zindan together with man-eating rats!

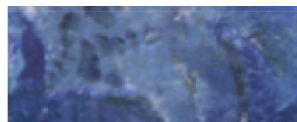
— And what next? — Abdysattar asked calmly.

— Next, we will be feasting at your walls until the last one of you dies of hunger!

At that moment, the prisoner's chains clanked. Latif Sultan pushed the lashkars away and stepped forward heavily.

— Don't listen to their sugar-coated words, my brother Abdysattar and you people of the town of Sauran! — he shouted at the top of his voice. — You will not save us anyway and will only dig your own graves. Everyone knows that this accursed Abdullah Khan has sworn that he will not rest till he blends your blood in the main town khauz and takes a drink from it!

— Step back, you confounded leopard!





The two lashkars pulled the chains, but they could not budge Latif Sultan. Finally, they felled him and dragged him back, thrashing their horses.

— Do not believe them! — the prisoner shouted. — Hold on, and Yasi, Sairam, Otrar, Arkhuk will come to your rescue! The entire steppe will come to your aid!

The next morning, just as before, the karnais bellowed, and Emir Abdullah came out of his tent. He gave a wave of the hand, and at that very instant, the heavy thud of a “black dromedary” was heard. Instead of a missile, however, it hurled a small leather bag into the besieged town. It contained four heads—those of Baba Sultan, Takhir Sultan, Latif Sultan, and the atalyk Dzhalmuhammad...

To prevent the horrible contents of the bag from bursting into fragments on impact, the cut-off heads were wrapped in pieces of thick felt. On top of it was pinned a note in Emir Abdullah Khan’s own handwriting, warning the people of Sauran that the same fate awaited all of them to the man.

The town’s defenders buried the heads of the executed men as if they were burying their bodies—according to every rule prescribed by their religion.

Having gathered in the town’s main market square, they swore a solemn oath to defend their town to the death. They had no other alternative.

That same day, Hakim Abdysattar, who had all at once lost his father and his brother, summoned both twin brothers, the batyrs.

— The truth, however bitter it may be, is not concealed from lions. Suppression of the truth can only serve to comfort cowardly jackals, — he said to them. — We will be able to defend Sauran for not more than two months. Famine is raising its head in the town. But the besiegers’ situation is not all that good either. Soon, cold

steady rains will start pouring. Most of the emir's troops are from the southern vilayets. They are already feeling chilly in our parts. Besides, it will be not so easy for them to travel off roads through the mud to supply themselves with provisions. I think that, if we do hold on, the emir will lift the siege!

— And what if he doesn't? — Kiyak Batyr asked.

— Then we will all die! — the sultan said laconically.

A heavy silence hung over them. Kiyak Batyr was thinking hard about something, looking down at the floor. Then he raised his head:

— I have an idea!

— Speak up, batyr!

— A yurt will collapse if you cut its stays...

— You mean you want to...

— I very nearly did this the other day.

— How so?

— My arrows usually fly twice as far as other bowmen's arrows. But the hakim forbade me to shoot. Now, I feel sorry I didn't do it... No, the emir is too hard to reach. They are guarding him better than the entrance to paradise. However, I have some business to settle with one of the mainstays of that army...

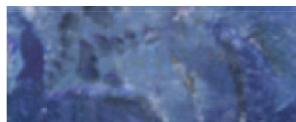
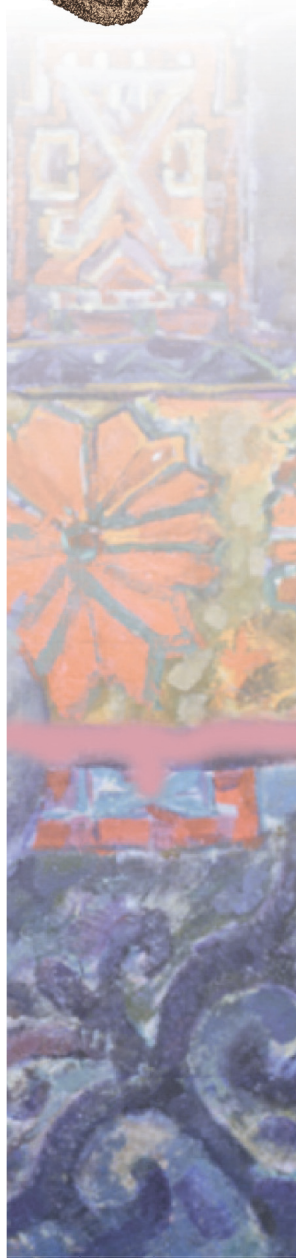
— Whom are you talking about, batyr?

— I'm talking about Bagadur Tauekel... During a battle with the men of Kashgar, I was the one to close Khan Khaknazar's eyes. Before he died, he told me a few things about this poor wretch.

— Well, this is your affair, batyr. Despite his youth, Bagadur Tauekel is Abdullah's right hand. Besides, he has numerous followers among Kazakhs. It is them that I fear most of all, because they are used to cold and hardships. They can stay the whole winter at our walls.

— We will go, Sultan!

— God help you, valiant Kazakh batyrs!



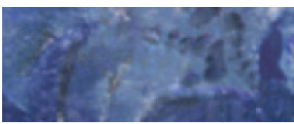


That night, five men descended on a rope from the wall into the moat and soundlessly swam to the other bank. They were clad in common clothes, and soon, they vanished amidst the noisy and lively medley of inhabitants of the military camp stretching around the town of Sauran. However, as soon as the sun was up, a small white carrier pigeon soared to the sky right from the window of the room of Ainar Sultan Bike, the hakim's wife, and flew over the town wall. The hakim's wife was Ubaidulla Sultan's own sister and a stepsister of Emir Abdullah himself. By lunchtime, Ubaidulla already knew that five men had gone to the besiegers' camp in order to kill him as well as Abdumumin, the emir's son, and also the vizier, Khasen Khoja, and the Kazakh bagadur Tauekel. The letter contained a description of the men who were to carry out the assassination. Soon, three of them were caught and immediately hanged. A fourth one, Tuyak Batyr, wrenched himself free from the grasp of the lashkars who had caught him, crossed the moat under a shower of arrows, and was raised on a rope back to the wall. A fifth one, Kiyak Batyr, had better luck. He found out that Bagadur Tauekel, together with his thousand and some additional troops, had marched off to Yasi in order to reduce the rebellious town to submission. Kiyak Batyr followed his tracks...

One day at dawn, some noise woke up the warlord sleeping in his tent. Two of his bodyguards frog-marched a man bound with thick ropes into the tent and pushed him onto the rug. The man, however, kept his footing. He looked Bagadur Tauekel in the face with utter contempt.

— Oho! — the bagadur said, instinctively taking hold of his yataghan. — Who are you? My men say you've been cogitating some mischief against me!

The bagadur began toying with his yataghan, easily cutting bunches of cane lying about in the tent.



— I am Kiyak Batyr!

— I don't remember having ever heard this name among those of batyrs. But then I seem to have heard something about a rootless robber by the name of Kiyak, who is disobedient to the will of pillar of the faith Emir Abdullah. I recollect having been told that this crook raids the khan's supply trains and his flocks...

Kiyak Batyr sneered right in the bagadur's face and again looked at his yataghan with the same expression of contempt. The bagadur involuntarily threw the yataghan aside.

— Kazakhs have a different name for people who defend their belongings against robbers, — Kiyak Batyr said. — Was it not from our burnt-down encampments that the emir's henchmen were driving those flocks and supply trains?

“Well, Abdysattar surely knew whom to send after my head, — the bagadur thought. — But why is he looking at me with so much hatred? What have I personally done to this warrior?”

— What was your father's name you said?

— Zhaubasar.

— Well, sometimes even a scabby puppy calls itself a wolf dog. I'm guilty if I ever heard anything about Batyr Zhaubasar either. From what stem does he descend?

— He descended from the Argyn batyrs.

— How old are you then?

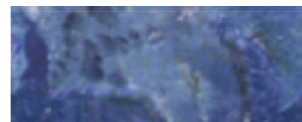
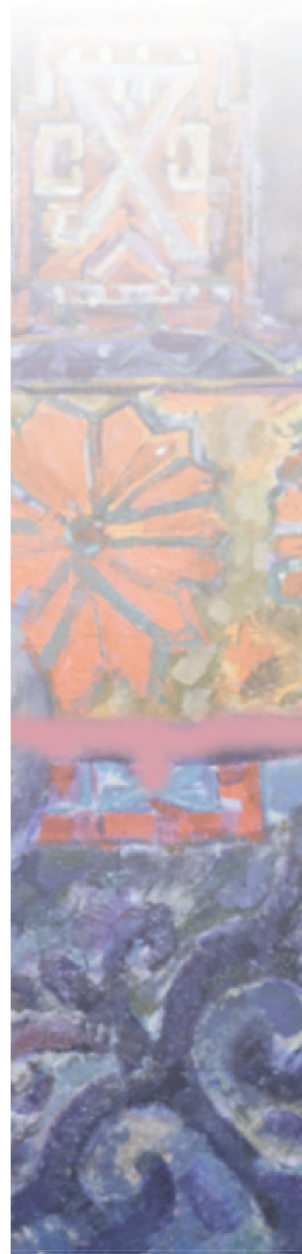
— My late father told me that I had been born in the same year as Taukel, the turncoat Shagai's stepson!

The bagadur, white-faced with anger, grasped at his yataghan. Then, he quickly walked up to the bound Kiyak Batyr and cut the ropes.

— Be seated, Kiyak, Zhaubasar's son!

Kiyak Batyr slumped on the felt rug.

— Speak up!





— Send the guards away!

The bagadur waved them away, and the guards went out. Only an old lashkar, holding his sabre at the ready, remained standing at the door. When his comrades called him, he said that he was afraid for the bagadur and wanted to be ready to run to his aid if need be.

— Now tell me why you hate me so!

— And for what should I love you, bagadur?

— Whom of your relatives have I hurt?

— Wasn't it my relatives who were living in the auls whose ashes you have scattered to the four winds, bagadur? Isn't it my brothers who are now being sold into slavery at every bazaar all over the world? Wasn't it my sisters whom your lashkars dishonoured before selling them to other men's harems?

— I am a Kazakh myself and I do not fight against honest, dutiful Kazakhs! I have only run down and destroyed our common enemy, Baba Sultan. Wasn't he the one who killed the children of the very same Khaknazar to whom you still remain loyal?

— Hold your tongue, bagadur! You were born of a Kazakh mother in the Kazakh steppe. What are you doing to your homeland? Less than a month has passed since I visited my family's encampment. Ashes and blood were the only thing that I saw there. And so my brother Tuyak and I have sworn that we will repay this horrible crime in full measure! Wasn't it Emir Abdullah, your master, who performed this wicked deed? Aren't you his faithful slave? Now be man enough to harvest the fruit of your evil acts!

Kiyak Batyr flew at the bagadur, and the two of them began rolling on the felt floor like two fighting leopards.

— Wasn't it you and your friends who burnt down our auls? — Kiyak Batyr whispered, burning with anger. — Now you are going to carry out a massacre in the town of Yasi and be granted yet another fur coat by the emir

in reward for this. But if I do not get you, murderer, my brother will!

Kiyak Batyr had not touched food for two days. Besides, he had been bound for quite a long time and had lost much of his energies in a fight with the guards. The bagadur pinned him to the felt rug, held him thus for some time, and then relaxed his hold.

— You mean you and the others regard me as just a traitor who is shedding the blood of his own kith and kin? — he asked again, as if nothing had happened.

— Yes... But no one is surprised at this. When a great calamity befalls our native land, it is slave women's sons such as Tuyak and I who defend it. But what is to be expected of highborn traitors who are fosterlings at that?

— Speak up, batyr! — Bagadur Tauekel roared. — Speak your mind or I'll take both your life and my own. I've already heard something about my birth. But my father, Shagai...

— He is a murderer, that's what your father is... A bloody murderer! — Kiyak Batyr said in a low voice. He suddenly felt terribly sorry for this man. All the same, he will tell him the secret of his poor mother's death...

— Tell me... Tell me everything! — Bagadur Tauekel said hoarsely, gripping his arm.

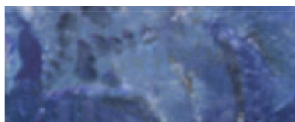
— Your mother's name was Kunsan, "Sunlike", as befits a high-blooded woman. My own and Tuyak's mother was called Koisana, "Sheep-like", as befits a slave. But when a calamity of the kind we are now suffering befalls your country, death respects no one...

— Who killed my mother? — the bagadur asked in a suppressed voice.

— Your father, named Shagai Khan, did.

— Go on, tell me everything!

Bagadur Tauekel let go his grip on the batyr's arm. And Kiyak Batyr told Bagadur Tauekel the secret of Kunsana's death.





— So you really do not know that Shagai, who has adopted you, stabbed your mother to death on the day of his return from Sozak!

— I...I only remember her scream... — The bagadur's voice was stifled by emotion. — She shouted out something!

— On his death-bed, Khan Khaknazar bade me to tell you about this, bagadur. I don't know why he wanted me to do this. But when I saw that you were at one with the enemies, I decided simply to kill you!

— Why has no one told me about this before?

— Because Shagai Sultan killed everyone who knew the truth, together with your mother!

— What has become of your mother, Koisana? — The bagadur asked him suddenly.

— The slave woman Koisana was given in marriage to a poor and lowborn batyr by the name of Zhaubasar. — Kiyak Batyr looked Bagadur Taukel straight in the eyes. — There is no reason for me to feel ashamed for either my father or my mother!

Bagadur Taukel stooped his head:

— What happened to your parents?

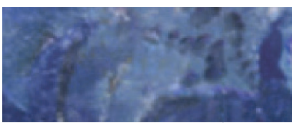
— Batyr Zhaubasar was killed in a battle against Dzhungars who had attacked our winter quarters.

— And what about Koisana?

— I found her dead body amidst the ashes of our encampment... It was your henchmen's doing, bagadur!

The lashkar, who had been standing at the carved door keeping his ear close to it all this time, suddenly leapt aside. Bagadur Taukel and the prisoner came out of the tent. Having taken one of his horses by the bridle, the bagadur gave his guards a sign that he did not want them to follow him and walked into the steppe together with the batyr.

When they were far enough from the camp, they



stopped, and the bagadur handed over the bridle rein to Kiyak Batyr without another word. The batyr jumped upon the horse, but did not set forward, looking at the bagadur.

— Someday I will find you in the steppe myself, batyr!
— Tauekel Bagadur said, and then turned around and walked back to his tent.

Kiyak Batyr stood up in the stirrups and gave a low whistle, and a cloud of dust rose and dashed into the wide expanse of the steppe...

— My bagadur, this dog of a lashkar, this old man killer, listened to the conversation you had in the yurta — a young Kara-Kalpak warrior, one of Bagadur Tauekel's bodyguards, said to his lord in a low voice.

Bagadur Tauekel looked at the old lashkar with a scarred face. He had a roguish, fawning look. But the bagadur only waved him off and did not take any further steps...

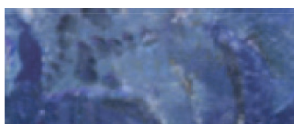
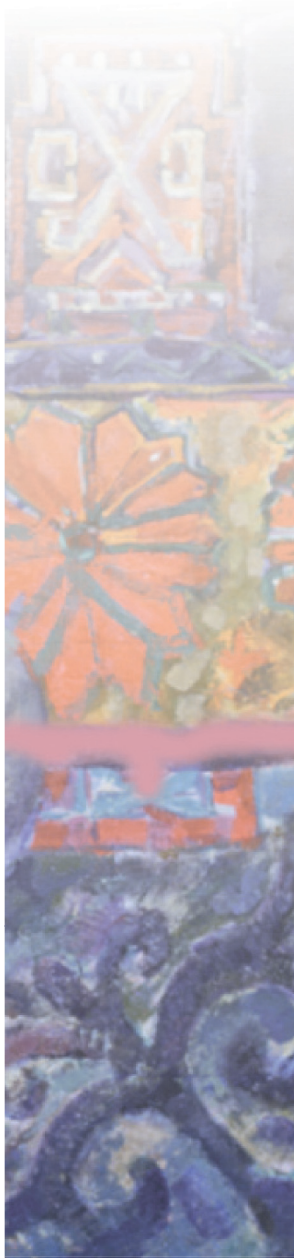
Three days later, a scar-faced man soundlessly entered Shagai Sultan's tent near Sauran. He told something to the sultan at great length and the sultan kept nodding in approval. At the end of the story, the sultan threw a small leather bag full of gold to the man. And when the lashkar turned to leave, the sultan plunged a curved Bukhara knife into his back.

— A slave who knows too much no longer remains loyal, — he whispered, and then ordered in a loud voice,
— Take away this trash that has tried to malign my son Bagadur Tauekel!

At midday, Shagai Sultan bowed his knee before the emir:

— My son Bagadur Tauekel wants to defect to your enemies, my lord Khan... Now you see how loyal I am to you!

— Yes, I know that you will stick to me through thick





and thin. Who else has any need for you? No one except myself will accept you... — Abdullah grinned. — Make arrangements for your son Tauekel to join my body of escorts. I want him to stay closer to us!

Khasen Khoja, who entered the tent at the moment, saw the laughing eyes of his lord the emir, and his blood ran cold with fear. Whose death does his smile portend this time?

Neither the emir nor Shagai Sultan were aware that Bagadur Tauekel, with a small detachment of loyal men, had just separated from the main force and was now galloping north, right into the Desht-and-Kipchak Steppe...

Emir Abdullah Khan's lashkars stood near Sauran for another two months. He himself had departed from this place earlier, ostensibly on account of his father Iskander Khan's illness. Sometime later, his troops followed him. Sauran withstood the siege...

A strange hissing sound was heard somewhere in the blue sky. It grew louder, coming closer rapidly, and astounded and frightened people involuntarily hunched their shoulders, bending lower and lower to the ground.

— It is a “black dromedary!” — someone shouted.

But it was not a stone-hurling war engine dubbed “black dromedary” of the type that had been used in an attempt to break down these very walls two centuries earlier. A rolling iron cannonball struck at the very top of a fortress tower, shattering one of the merlons, and lumps of dry clay showered the crowd below. Another cannonball flew over the wall and hit the middle of the square, killing a horse that was tied to a stake there.

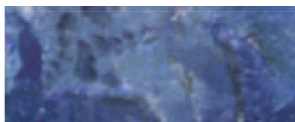
— It's the Dzhungars! All hands to quarters!

It was Yelchibek Batyr, who had just appeared on the wall, that bellowed the order. But men were already running each to his station on the wall. On a corner tower,

the mighty figure of Nauan the blacksmith, the grandson and great-grandson of men who had for centuries been defending Sauran from intruders, was prominent.

— Oh our zhyrau, please take cover! — he shouted, seeing that Bukhar-Zhyrau was climbing to the wall together with everyone else.

But the sage bard was already on top of the wall. Using his hand as a visor, he was gazing intently at the retreating hills beyond which the formidable Dzhungar cavalry was getting ready for an attack. Twenty cannons, supplied to the Dzhungars by the Chinese rulers, were pounding away at the fortress, trying to intimidate its defenders. Commanding the Dzhungar cannoners was one Renat, a petty officer of Swedish descent, who had been captured in combat between Dzhungars and a Russian detachment. And five thousand horsemen, riding stocky Mongol horses, were racing in a forager towards the fortress walls under the cover of the cannonade. The fortress defenders, however, were already fully prepared to repulse them, and when they approached the wall, they were greeted with volleys of musket fire and a shower of arrows. Hot oil was poured on them, and heavy boulders were rolled down on their heads from the wall. And yet about a hundred and fifty Dzhungars burst their way onto the wall from the first line. They began climbing up the tower on two sides, aiming to seize it. Had they been able to gain a footing on it, the fate of Sauran would have been sealed. There, however, they were met by a detachment of townspeople led by Nauan the blacksmith. And, as if they had run slap into a wall of iron, the enemies, hacked with battle-axes and old aldaspan swords, began falling into the moat. Fighting tooth and nail, the defenders of the tower gripped hold of the Dzhungars and fell down together with them, crashing into stone ledges. Those of the townspeople who still remained alive on the walls





attacked the enemies from the rear, and eventually the danger was eliminated...

Nauan Batyr, an unconquerable warrior, was still standing at the top of the tower, but when Bukhar Zhyrau finally got near him, he saw that the blacksmith's face was white as death. Everything around him was drenched in blood, and a fragment of a heavy Dzhungar pike was protruding from Nauan's breast. It was incomprehensible how he could still be keeping his feet. The blacksmith's eyes were directed at the zhyrau.

— Oh my Nauan!

Bukhar Zhyrau received Nauan Batyr in his hands and carefully laid him on the stones. He wanted to draw the enemy pike from his breast, but the blacksmith shook his head. The dying man's lips were moving in an attempt to whisper something. Bukhar Zhyrau bent over his face.

— My zhyrau... You did not finish your story about my ancestors... About Kiyak...

The batyr's hands began to turn cold and Bukhar Zhyrau folded his arms on his breast.

Meanwhile, the Dzhungar cavalry surged back from the walls of the heroic town. It was one of the units that tried to take Sauran in stride. The first attack was the most violent. The Dzhungars made a few more attempts to assault the fortress, but each attempt was met with a bold repulse. Seeing that they would not be able to capture Sauran, they lifted the siege...

As is usually the case in wartime, the winter was incredibly severe that year. As early as October, all the steppe rivers and lakes were covered with ice. Most of them, being shallow, froze hard to the very bottom. A terrible blizzard raged throughout the winter, never abating even for a day. During the rare intervals when silence settled over the steppe, the sky turned red because of hard frost. A horseman's spit turned into a lump of

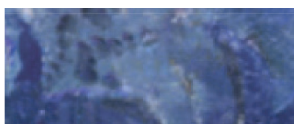
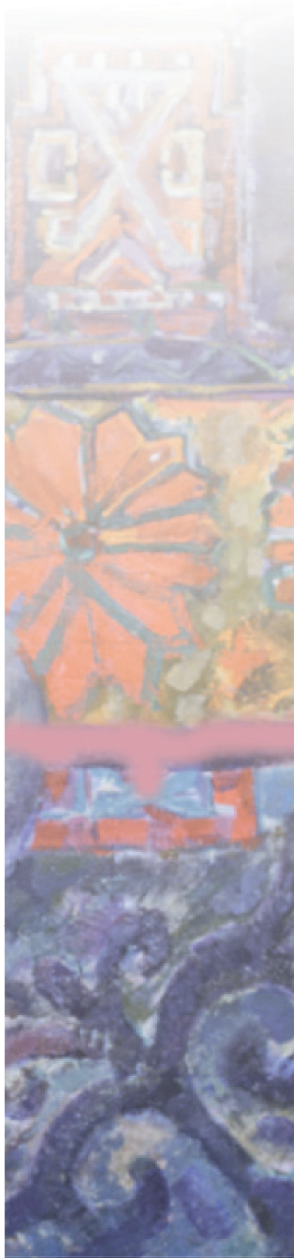


solid ice before it reached the ground. Even wolves froze to death in the steppe during that winter. The toll of men's and sheep's lives that the winter took was even heavier. It was unbelievably hard for Kazakh nomads. It was, however, no easier for the Dzhungar invaders, either. As if by way of judgement on them, all the livestock that they had taken from Kazakh and Kyrgyz auls fell. Dzhungar horses, which were not used to local hardships, were stricken by murrain.

The spring turned out to be even more terrible. The murrain spread all over the steppe, and death took its tithe of people and cattle from the Caspian Sea to the Altai Mountains. The inhabitants of the surviving auls moved towards the north where they could truck for some foodstuffs with the residents of frontier Russian towns and scrape through somehow. These years went down in popular tradition as "the Time of Great Disaster".

It was only two years later that Kazakh encampments recovered from the devastating disaster. Individual outfits of batyrs began to win their first victories over the noions led by Syban Raptan. Tailak Batyr from the Junior Zhuz, together with his nephew Sanyrak Batyr from the Senior Zhuz, won his very first victory over the enemy. The battle was fought in the interfluve of the Bulanta and Bulenta rivers flowing into the Sarysu River, and this spot is still known as Kalmakkyrgan, "Place of Dzhungars' Death".

It was then that rumours ran across the steppe about an eighteen-year-old chieftain who incessantly harassed Dzhungars, making surprise attacks on their units and destroying them all to the man. Insensible to pity, he plunged into battle with headlong fury, and his battle cry was "Ablai!" His name became a terror to Dzhungars, and when Abulkhair Khan encountered him, he identified him as the very same herdboys whom he had met one day when he and Bukhar Zhyrau had lost their way in





the dense forests on the bank of the Seyhun Darya. This young man turned out to be of noble kin, and everything seemed to indicate that Abulkhair now had yet another rival on the road towards gaining power over the entire steppe...

Soon, the famous battle at Lake Alakul on the Anrakai Mountains south-west of Lake Balkhash was fought, in which a united army of all the three Kazakh zhuzes led by Abulkhair Khan defeated major forces of the Dzhungar kontaichi (prince) himself, so that Dzhungar horsemen had to flee down the Hi River to their encampments. This might have become the beginning of the end of the Dzhungar invasion into the land of the Kazakhs. And, as usual, internecine strife prevented this from happening. It always flared up among the Kazakh tribes, as soon as the general situation improved...

Khan Bulat died. There was every indication that Abulkhair Khan should have become the head of all Kazakhs. His victories over Dzhungars, his battle experience, and his prestige among warriors were unquestionable. However, in keeping with the Genghizides' behest, a descendant of a junior branch of the ruling family had no right to become a great khan. Therefore, it was Abilmambet, Khan Bulat's eldest son, who was lifted on a white felt rug. The offended Abulkhair led his troops away to the banks of the Irgiz River, to the land of the Junior Zhuz. Khan Sameke, who had also expected to ascend the great khan's throne, also went away, together with most of his force. The Kazakh land was once again left defenseless...

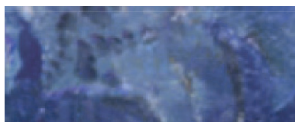
Only a few batyrs with their outfits put obstacles in the way of the murderous kontaichi Syban Raptan's well-fed army ready for fresh conquests. The valiant Kabanbai, with two hundred horsemen, was one of such batyrs. He wintered in Kazalinsk, at Abulkhair Khan's former

headquarters, and in summer, he attacked Dzhungar patrols, sometimes getting as far as Turkestan itself. Riding always side by side with him was Gaukhar, the “Pearl Girl”, whom the entire steppe knew. Songs were already being composed about how she rescued a unit of Kazakh troops from certain death, having warned them about approaching Dzhungars. She became a faithful mate to the batyr.

It was empty and cold in the steppe. Gusts of wind raised clouds of sand from the tops of barchans a little way off and threw them into his face. At the very edge of the claypan area, where the sands began, a whole hill of skulls was revealed. The bones were quite old: from all appearances, they had been underground for a few centuries. Who was it that had perpetrated the massacre? Was it Genghiz Khan’s horsemen or Abulkhair’s warriors? Or did it happen even earlier than that and it was the sabres of a Shurshut punitive outfit that had wiped out an encampment?

Right beyond the hill, heaps of perfectly white bones lay. Shreds of clothes were throbbing in the wind, and everything was powdered with ashes that the wind had not yet puffed away. Here, it was quite evident that these people had been killed by the kontaichi’s soldiers. This had happened a year or two earlier. In this ancient earth, just as in people’s souls, the past and the present intermingled with each other, and sometimes, you could not discern where the one ended and the other began. The only thing—killing—remained invariable... Bukhar Zhyrau looked about him and then looked at the sky. As usual, he was travelling across the steppe alone. Your thoughts are clearer when you travel alone. And the steppe, revealing the bones buried in it here and there, told its story without any embellishment.

It began to grow dark. The zhyrau unsaddled his horse,



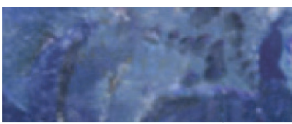


put up a screen near a saksaul bush to protect himself from the wind, and lay down on a saddlecloth, covering himself with an old vest. The wind was piping above the poet's head, and he could not sleep. The sage bard was looking at the dark, foggy sky, pondering over the destiny of his native land.

The ancient art of writing has been forgotten by his people, but popular memory is alive and indestructible. It holds everything together, which is why the art of the zhyrau is held in such a high esteem. He is both a singer and a narrator and a keeper of the past, without which a people cannot exist. In various parts of the boundless Kazakh steppe, people are already singing verses from his lay of the siege by Dzhungars of the ancient stone citadel, Sauran. A number of new lines have already been added to it, and many people do not even know that he is the author of the lay. Yes, it was thanks to the great fortitude of such men as Nauan Batyr that Sauran held out. And the powder and muskets brought by Russian merchants were also of much help. Had each Kazakh town had such muskets in its arsenal, the Shurshut cannons could have been given an adequate rebuff...

The question is whether there is a man capable of forging an all-Kazakh alliance for repulsing the enemy. This will call for breaking the backs of innumerable tribal beys and sultans, each of them wishing himself to mount the khan's throne. Is there a man in the steppe who would be adequate for this task? The zhyrau started at the thought. He saw in his mind's eye a young man clad in herdsman's rags and tatters, but with a cold, cruel glitter in his eyes. The fame of his feats was already running across the steppe, and the accursed name of Ablai, the young man's blood-thirsty grandfather, was always uttered in connection with these feats...

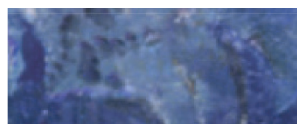
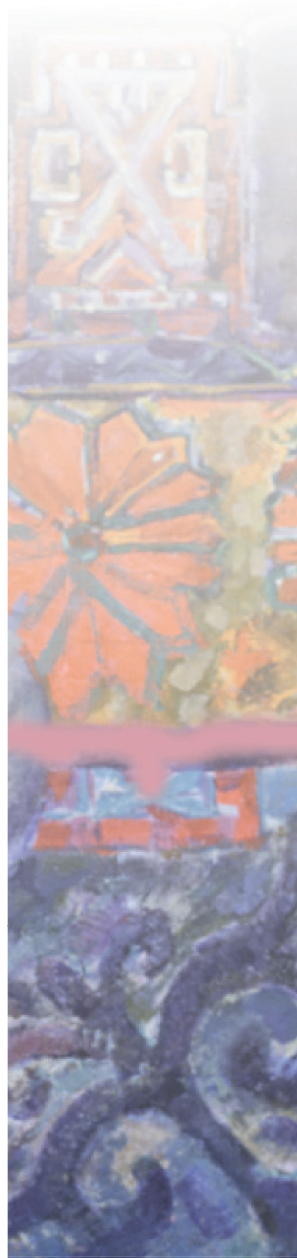
Yes, this was a fitting beginning for a Genghizide



prince. This young man killed in cold blood his old faithful slave who had saved his life, and then, to rule out all doubts concerning his intention, he took the name of his sanguinary grandfather, which mothers in Kazakh encampments use as a bugaboo to frighten their children into submission. But then, perhaps, it is precisely such a man that should come to power in these cruel times of ours?

Bukhar Zhyrau sighed heavily. Oh, how much blood is yet to be spilled in his native land! The young Genghizide had insistently asked him then to tell him about times past, and he had told him about the period when the White Horde began to fall into pieces because of internecine feuds. The blacksmith Nauan Batyr, who had fallen on the walls of Sauran, also had asked the zhyrau to tell him about the same things. But their views of the past were absolutely different. He had told the blacksmith about his ancestors, Kiyak and Tuyak, glorious batyrs of “base descent”. The sultan had disapproved of Kiyak, and Nauan had gone to his doom with Kiyak’s name on his tongue! So there are two versions of history—one for sultans and the other, for common people. Which of the two is more correct? What can the world’s cruelest and craftiest sultans do without such devoted batyrs as Nauan?

He had no chance to finish telling the blacksmith the story of his glorious ancestors, Kiyak and Tuyak. But he will tell people about them. Let people decide whose ancestry is truly glorious—that of the great sultans or of Nauan the blacksmith...





PART TWO

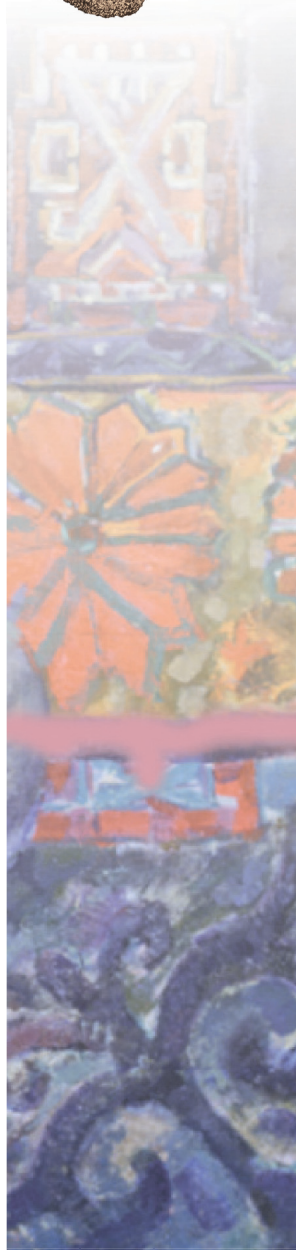
I

While the situation in the western part of the Kazakh land was relatively quiet, on its northern frontiers, events that had an ever-growing impact on the state of affairs in the Kazakh Khanate were taking place. There, in the inhospitable boundless expanse of Siberia, no single stable government had ever existed from time immemorial. It was there that offended and defeated tribes not only from the Kazakh steppe, but also, long before that, from the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates, from Bashkiria, and from the ancient lands in the Volga Area, moved after intertribal warfare. An ever-greater number of slaves, prisoners of every origin and, in the last century, serfs that had escaped from Russian boyars and princes fled there. Apparently, people had had a rough time under the rule of the terrible Russian tsar, because peasants hived off in whole villages to unknown areas beyond the Ural Mountains. Most of the people who fled Russia, however, were those who ran away singly, being persecuted by the stringent Russian laws and the lawless oprichnina, a reign of terror introduced by Tsar Ivan the Terrible. They were of different ethnic origin, but they soon found a

common language, united into military-type formations, and took on the name of Cossacks. By using this ancient name meaning “Independent” or “Vagabond”, which they adopted from the Kazakhs, they emphasized their love of freedom and their desire to live according to the laws of military-nomadic democracy. The very structure and the names of ranks in Cossack outfits and, later on, Cossack army units, copied those of ancient Kazakh tribal military formations.

Dozens of such outfits, large and small, wandered through Siberia and, following the example of nomadic tribes, conducted raids, got into fights with one another, mixed with the local population, and gradually settled on the captured lands. The tsarist government soon realized what benefit it could derive from this. Being unable to bring riotous Cossack outfits under control, it began to use them in conquering new territories and guarding the frontiers. It was precisely the heterogeneous, multiethnic character of the Cossacks that facilitated the conquest of Siberia.

By the time that Bagadur Tauekel was lifted on the khan’s white felt rug, the name “Strogans” was already well-known along the entire northern border of the steppe. That was how the Stroganov family of merchants, whom the Russian tsars had farmed out trade in the wide expanse of Siberia, were called in the steppe. The Stroganovs hired independent Cossack outfits and, not infrequently, Kazakh units for guarding their trade caravans and warehouses. Soon, the first trading stations began to spring up along the entire frontier line. And, although the prices that were given at these trading stations for goods brought by nomads were extremely low, the steppe had finally obtained access to new, broad markets. Bukhara was no longer the only one to control all trade routes and the prices for wool, skins, and minerals. The nomads, in

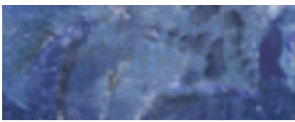




turn, could now buy the necessary commodities at the frontier bazaars.

In the eastern part of the steppe, however, the clouds were piling up. The Dzhungar kontaichis, warlords, reminded one of a bulldog that had jumped down its victim's throat and was now holding it in a vicelike grip. And each summer, this bulldog was slowly and intently getting ever closer to the main artery on the neck of the Kazakh land. Not only the Kazakhs, but also all other peoples became aware of a mortal danger. Following the Dzhungar kontaichis was an old and formidable enemy. The inhabitants of Kyrgyz encampments went into the mountains inaccessible to Dzhungars; Uzbek, and Tajik merchants phased down their operations, and Kara-Kalpaks had to squash up to make room for the retreating inhabitants of Kazakh auls. The Central Asian khanates made themselves as inconspicuous as possible, sensing the danger of inroads into their oases. And the Dzhungar kontaichis were now eyeing the Siberian towns...

Russian diplomats were keeping a close watch over what was happening in the great steppe on its southeastern borderline. They were acting with extreme circumspection. It might seem that at that time, which was so difficult for the land of the Kazakhs, when the Dzhungars attacked it from the east, the Kalmyk khans were waiting for an opportunity to attack it from the West, the Bashkir myrzas tormented it with raids from the north, and unceasing confrontation with the Central Asian khanates continued in the south, it was a propitious moment for some other power to join the carve-up and take the tastiest piece of the pie... Apparently, this is how pre-Petrine Russian politicians would have acted. However, beginning from the days of Peter the Great, Russia was destined to play a more significant part in the affairs of the Orient. And the roads of this big-time







politics had already crossed with the political roads being followed by other great powers; this had happened on the seven seas. Here, in the heart of Asia, they were marked with clear and sharp dash lines. For the time being, Russia was awaiting developments, strengthening its trade and diplomatic relations with all the countries in the region in the meantime.

Bogembay Batyr turned his horse around sharply. His shaggy chestnut horse, long as the distance between the threshold of a yurta and its red wall, halted in his tracks, leaning to one side heavily, made a semicircle, and dashed in the opposite direction, throwing clumps of earth, each one equal in area to a campfire, from under his hoofs. Only the wind was piping in the bare steppe and the battle charger was clattering along on the ground, which seemed to groan with every thud of his hooves...

Now Shuno-Dabo, a Dzhungar bagadur, also noticed the Kazakh batyr and turned around his giant shaggy white horse with a similarly mighty pull. They swept by each other at full gallop, having nearly touched each other's stirrups. Their heavy clubs with forged knobs rose and fell amidst a cloud of dust. A thump was heard in the steppe as if two granite rocks clashed in the sky, and the two broken clubs were thrown far away.

And the batyrs were already turning round their horses once again. There was no one to witness their combat, which only made it even fiercer. Once again, they rushed at each other head-on, now holding heavy gleaming aldaspan swords in their hands in place of the clubs. Thunderous sounds of heavy blows were heard as soon as they came near each other. This time, the batyrs did not pass by each other: they began circling around each other, striking sparks with their swords. When the edges of their ancient swords blunted, the batyrs rode apart once again and drew their bows, aiming to pierce each other's flesh

with their arrows. Yet they did not succeed in doing this either. They equaled each other in strength and valiance.

The time that their combat lasted would have been enough to milk a mare twice. The batyrs got tired, they were dripping with sweat, and they could hardly raise their arms covered with iron armour. And their horses were so exhausted that they could hardly bear their heavy burden. So the batyrs dismounted from their horses and came at each other with daggers. Soon, the daggers dropped out of their hands, for each of them was holding the other's arm in a vicelike grip, and they began to strangle each other with bare hands...

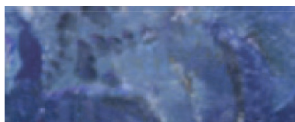
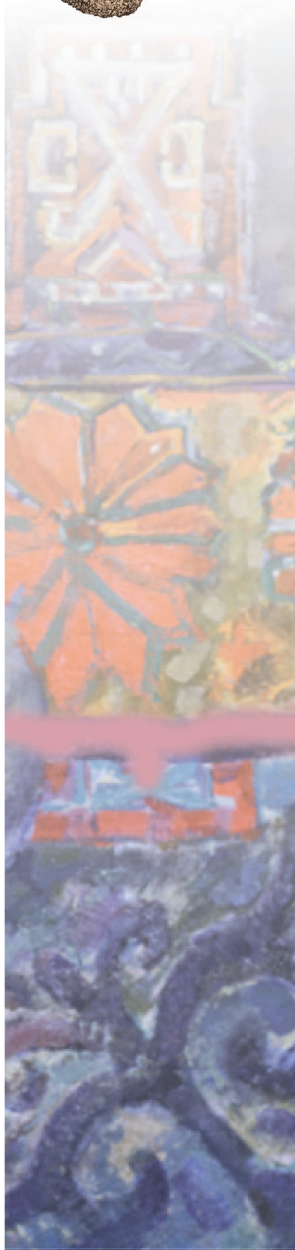
Utterly exhausted, they lay side by side on a bald hill. After a while, one of them stood up and, without another word, stumbled towards his horse. The other followed suit. The batyrs did not look at each other until they were back in their saddles and turned their horses away from each other. Only after they were a few paces apart did they look back at each other as if by preconcert.

— Bogembay Batyr, our conscience has remained clear, — Shuno-Dabo said. — It was a fair fight, like in old songs. And now, each one of us will go his own way. Be sure to keep out of my way alone in the steppe!

— And you don't be surprised if I fall upon you unawares! — Bogembay Batyr answered.

Upon which they separated and each one went his own way.

The two men—Kazakh batyr Bogembay from the Kanzhigali offshoot of the Argyn clan and Dzhungar bagadur Shuno-Dabo—had known each other for a long time. Their encampments were two days' ride from each other. And it was already for several years, since the time that Shurshuts were said to have begun driving Dzhungars to bay somewhere in the east, Shuno-Dabo had begun to appear in the Kazakh pastures each summer. As befitted



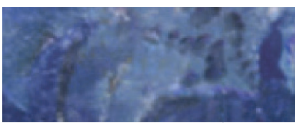


a true bagadur, he more often than not rode alone. And it was also alone that he reeved away droves of horses from Kazakhs, taking captives on occasions. It was for intercepting such lone bagadurs that Kazakh batyrs went to the frontier part of the steppe for long periods of time. Bogembay Batyr and Shuno-Dabo met with each other in the open steppe three times, each time to no avail. Now, they decided to renounce the ancient rules according to which a call to engage in a fight was given to an opponent in advance. They decided to hunt each other in the manner of wild beasts.

It was only five years later that they were destined to meet once again... A large Kazakh force was hiding in countless gullies in the flood plain of the rivers Arys and Badam. On Mount Orda-Basy, not far from the main body of troops, several horsemen were standing immovably. The one at the head, sitting on a white charger, was Abulkhair Khan, who had once again brought his troops here for fighting against Dzhungars. He was keenly aware that, if the Dzhungars finally crush the Kazakh encampments near the Seyhun-Darya River and the Aral Sea, the lands of the Junior Zhuz will be gripped in a vice. If such were the case, then on one side, Kalmyk khans from the Volga Area, and on the other, cavalry led by the kontaichi himself would bear heavily on them.

Immediately behind Abulkhair Khan was Bogembay Batyr on his trusty chestnut steed. Down at the foothill, twenty of the khan's messengers, holding the leading reins of standby horses, were waiting for a signal. It was here that day that the famous battle in which Kazakhs once again succeeded in defeating the Dzhungar kontaichi took place. Although it was an indecisive battle, the Dzhungars' pressure on the Kazakh lands eased for some time as a result.

The Battle of the Badam was bloody and fierce. Many



thousands of warriors on either side fell in that battle. Either side was eager to out-manuever the other, and thrust into combat more and more troops placed in ambush. The battle turned into a mass slaughter...

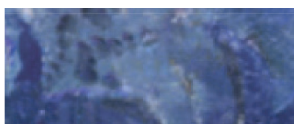
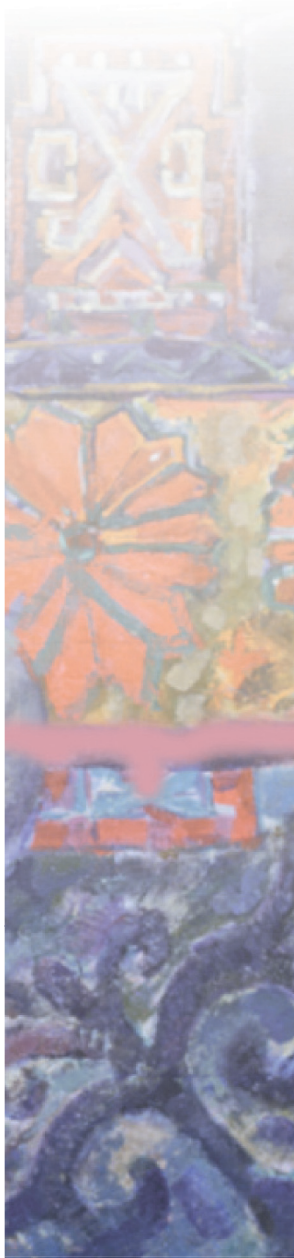
It was then that Bogembay Batyr and noion Shuno-Dabo met for the last time on the left bank of the Badam. A ballad about their combat describes how the Kazakh batyr pierced the Dzhungar bagadur's iron armour and shirt of mail with his hexagonal pike and mortally wounded him in the chest. Yet the bagadur's white horse snatched him from the battle and swam together with him across the cold rapid river. When the dying bagadur was approaching the opposite bank, he looked back. His old enemy, Kazakh batyr Bogembay, was standing there, leaning on his bow. Despite the agreement between them, the batyr did not shoot, not wishing to break the ancient rules of conducting a combat. Then, noion Shuno-Dabo looked at his own bank and screamed, foreboding impending death. Standing on the bank was his nephew Galden-Tseren, holding a club with forged iron knob in his hand. And when the clever horse reached the bank and bagadur Shuno-Dabo slumped down to the ground, Galden-Tseren, the future kontaichi, split his skull. The impetuous torrent carried down the body of the famed Dzhungar bagadur, feet foremost, far into the Kazakh steppe...

Galden-Tseren looked after the floating body of th^e one who should have by right become the chief Dzhungar kontaichi upon the death of superannuated Syban Raptan.

— You will no longer be standing in my way! — he said, and turned his horse away from the river.

He was barely a bowshot's distance from the river when he came across another noion.

— Look, Galden-Tseren, here comes Shuno-Dabo's





horse without his master! — the other noion shouted. — Where is the brave noion Shuno-Dabo? Can it be true that his star has set?

— I don't think so, — Galden-Tseren answered stiffly. — Perhaps, this fine Dzhungar steed has turned out to be trustier than his master!

This subsequently gave rise to a legend that the rightful claimant to the kontaichi's horsetail was hiding in the Kazakh steppe. It has for centuries been handed down from generation to generation in Kalmyk and Altai encampments...

And Bogembay Batyr's honest heart remained constantly worried. Although it was his enemy whom he saw fall victim to a base act of treachery, yet he was a witness to Shuno-Dabo's death at the hand of Galden-Tseren, and it now seemed to him that he himself had been involved in that heinous murder. He told no one about this until he chanced to meet Bukhar Zhyrau one day.

— Tell me, truth-loving zhyrau, why do wolves behave more honestly towards each other than men do? — he asked the zhyrau, and told him about the death of the Dzhungar batyr on the bank of the Badam River.

— Men become worse than wolves when they take up a wolf job, — Bukhar Zhyrau answered. — Aren't the Dzhungar noions now busy doing a wolf's job in our steppe? And among themselves, they are more ruthless towards one another than wolves are. But sometimes, it is very much the other way, when doing a good deed makes a brutal man human again. Have you heard the lay of Sultan Tauekel?

— Yes, your story about how Sultan Tauekel, Shagai's son, left the blameworthy army led by Emir Abdullah of Bukhara and returned to his native steppe when he heard the truth about himself from Kiyak Batyr is being told and retold everywhere in the steppe...

— I had no chance to tell the last part of the story to the famed batyr Nauan, Kiyak's great-grandson. That was on the walls of Sauran, and a Dzhungar pike pierced his chest.

— Then tell its last part to me, zhyrau!

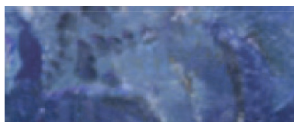
It was well on at night in the steppe, and not a single star was burning in the cold black sky. The two of them, a great zhyrau and a famed batyr, were sitting by a small campfire.

— All right, — Bukhar Zhyrau said. — Listen to my story, and you will see that a man's every action depends on whether he decides to do a good or an evil deed...

The Kazakh steppe was waiting for a deliverer. Even wolves collect into a single herd with deer and flee for safety together, trying to save themselves from a terrible steppe fire or flood. It was like such a fire or flood that enemies rushed into the steppe from different sides. Bagadur Tauekel, who had rallied the numerous kith and kin of Sultan Shagai, who had been dead for some time by that moment, to his colours, was the only one who represented a force to be reckoned with. He was a descendant of Janybek and Kasym Khan, both of whom had remained in popular memory as unifier khans.

As old legends had it, the mountains in the east were puffing smoke, foreboding unheard-of calamities. More and more tribes and clans were moving as far as possible from the Dzhungar Gate. Along the entire southern border of the steppe, however, an old and ruthless enemy, who had to be fought against today, was playing the master. And the new khan, Tauekel, entered a war against that enemy.

While Tauekel was gathering together fragments of the White Horde scattered all over the steppe, Emir Abdullah of Bukhara was also up-and-doing. Immediately after the death of Iskander Khan and his own official ascension

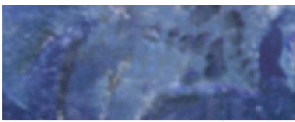




to the Bukhara throne, he crushed a popular movement in the Tashkent vilayet with unequalled cruelty, carried out a murderous campaign against the towns of Eastern Turkestan and Kashgaria, and captured Khorasan and Khorezm in the south and the west. It only remained for him to conquer the towns of Western Turkestan in the lower reaches of the Seyhun Darya. They ferreted him day and night like a bone lodged in his throat. The inhabitants of these towns had from time immemorial had connections with the steppe nomads and constantly got help from them, so they were hard nuts to crack. Besides, as usually happens, an acerbic feud broke out between the ageing khan and his young and insistent heir Abdumumin. Leaning on his fief, Balkh, for help, Abdumumin decided to overthrow his father or rule in his name by the entire khanate, the way Abdullah himself had done when his father, Iskander Khan, was still alive. The old khan was compelled to keep a better part of his troops on the border with Balkh.

It was precisely this circumstance that made it possible for Tauekel Khan to secure a foothold in the steppe and gain influence on politics in Turkestan. His positions became particularly strong when Yesim, Shagai's youngest son, who had grown into a youth by that time, joined him without any reservations. Even those Kazakh clans and tribes that had not recognized Tauekel as their khan had to reckon with him.

Meanwhile, the situation in the steppe was growing ever more complicated. The Oyrat koutaichis, being pressed and tarred on by the Chinese emperor, more and more often conducted raids on neighboring Kazakh encampments. With characteristic cunning, Chinese officials were stirring up interethnic enmity among the nomadic peoples, systematically and consistently taking away their best lands from them. Exhausted by internecine

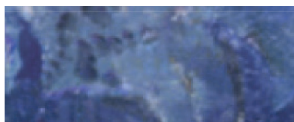
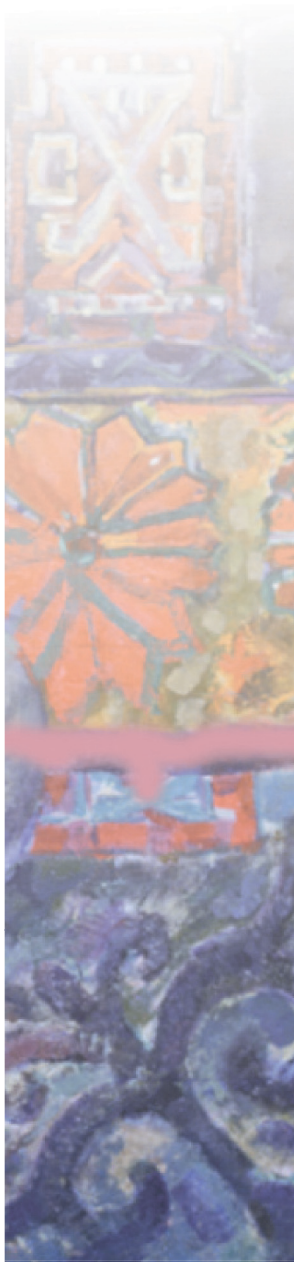


feuds, these peoples could not offer any protracted resistance to the regular Chinese army. The dragon was slowly but surely creeping towards the boundaries of the Kazakh steppe. There could be no hope, even in the future, for getting support from the khan of Bukhara. And how could the Khanate of Bukhara, rent by never-ending disturbances, provide such support? Willy-nilly, Tauekel, the new Kazakh khan, following the advice of the most sagacious elders, was watching the development of affairs on the northern and western borders of the steppe.

For the time being, Khan Tauekel did not see any threatening actions on the part of the mighty neighbour. Now, the elders of different clans and tribes were already saying with one voice that friendship with it would be essential in the forthcoming clashes with the Dzhungar kontaichis implementing the will of the Chinese emperor. Besides, it was necessary to have the rear well covered in the fight against Abdullah that was expected to follow soon...

In the meantime, the relations with the northern neighbour were improving by themselves. As a result of a border skirmish, several well-born men, including Orazmuhammad, Khan Tauekel's own nephew, had been arrested in the town of Tyumen and escorted to Moscow. The fact is that Orazmuhammad's father, Onai Batyr, who was well-known in the steppe, entered the Russian tsar's service in his day and subsequently did much for Boris Godunov. Somehow or other, Khan Tauekel sent a special embassy to the tsar with a request for his nephew's release. The tsar did not release Orazmuhammad, but he did not execute him either, and soon, he created for him the possessory khan of the town of Kasimov. Thus, Khan Tauekel now had men of his own kin in the retinue of the tsar himself.

The old contention with Abdullah Khan for the towns





of Turkestan could now be resumed. This had to be done while the old tiger Abdullah and his promising son Abdumumin were at loggerheads. Bukhara's politics was changeful as the desert wind. Who could know where this wind would blow tomorrow? At the moment, rumours had already begun circulating in the steppe that warriors were being gathered in Khiva and Samarkand for some new war. The feud between the father and the son could hardly have gone that far. What if, having reconciled their differences, they would make an all-out attack on the infant Kazakh Khanate? It is best to keep a key to the gate of your own home about yourself. And it was the Turkestan fortress towns that were such a key now, just as they had always been before.

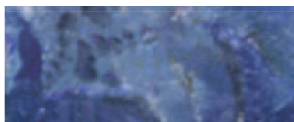
That was exactly how the ancient town of Yasi was now called—Turkestan. Khan Tauekel had made it his main capital. The khan's palace stood on a dense shadowy park not far from the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassavi. And although this palace was not anything like the splendid palaces of Bukhara and Samarkand, its thick walls built of burnt brick afforded shelter from scorching Turkestan heat, and quotations from the Koran that adorned its walls and cornice prevented the townspeople from wallowing in sin and ignorance. In a word, it was a regular khan's residence.

One could clearly see that the town was preparing for a war. Tents were erected in every square, armed men on horses were rushing hither and thither along the streets, and day and night, there was constant din in the armorers' quarters. Around the town, in its numerous suburbs—dekhs and rabats—more and more fresh units coming from the steppe were being put up. The warriors could be distinguished by their dress and weapons. Men coming from nearby towns and settlements in the Syr-Darya area were armed with curved Khiva sabres and

yataghans; warriors from the Semirechye and Talas areas had pikes strapped onto their saddles; and in the units coming from the northern borders and from the land of Nogailin, muskets of the type used by the Russian streltsy, royal musketeers, could be seen here and there...

Khan Tauekel gathered more than one hundred thousand troops around Turkestan. At a sitting of the khan's great council convened in keeping with an ancient tradition, the troops were divided into three parts. The right wing was headed by Batyr Kudzhek, Tauekel's younger brother, and the left wing, by another one of his brothers, Yesim Sultan. Khan Tauekel himself was in command of the centre and of the entire army. As usual, each warlord had experienced advisers among his retinue, so a warlord's young age was not an impediment. The main thing was that he had to be kin to the khan.

It was decided to make a major thrust at Tashkent and Samarkand, so as to deprive Abdullah of reserves and room for manoeuvre. These cities were to be captured before the main body of his troops could come to their rescue, and only after that, to enter into negotiations. In the present situation, the emir of Bukhara could hardly afford a major war. Besides, these cities had long outgrown their citadels, which had turned into islets amidst the sea. Their walls had long been crumbling away and their moats were lacking water. And the most important thing was that the inhabitants of these cities had long been murmuring against outrageous taxes imposed in Bukhara, and quietly envied the semi-independent towns of Northern Turkestan. Year after year, people fled from Tashkent and other cities to the steppe and settled on its boundaries. Khan Tauekel, who had himself been in Bukhara's service in his day, was fully aware of this, and he decided to take full advantage of popular discontent with the Bukhara yoke. To prevent disturbances among the





people of Turkestan, he ruled against imposing on them the war tax that was being collected all over the steppe.

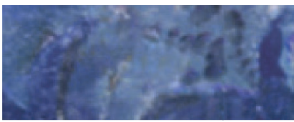
Khan Tauekel spent the last night before taking the field in the chamber of his favourite wife, Aktorgyn—yes, the very same Aktorgyn, Khaknazar’s widow, who had now been given by the people of the land of Nogailin to the new khan. He was confident of a swift victory and had never before felt so full of might. However, when sitting down to table to have his morning repast, the khan received some ill news. Having honoured none of his subordinates with an invitation to par-take of the meal, he sent for his favourite singer and soothsayer, Zhiyenbet Zhyrau.

Having offered an appropriate prayer, the khan nodded to his vizier:

— Now bid the zhyrau come in!

Although he had just passed the thirty mark, Zhiyenbet Zhyrau wore a large beard threaded with white, setting off his waxen complexion. The hat on his head was not flaming-red as it used to be in his younger days; it was made of the fur of a plain Karatau fox. And his caftan was shabby, worn threadbare at the elbows. Only his dombra, adorned with eagle-owl feathers, was shining, looking as good as new. It was evident that the celebrated zhyrau had specially furbished it up before leaving his native Kazykurt for the khan’s faraway capital, Turkestan...

Zhiyenbet never became the khan’s court poet. Only occasionally did he visit Khan Tauekel. Yet the khan valued him above others, for he could not forget the days when he dodged about the steppe and the young zhyrau did him a great service in that he was the first among singers of note to praise the future khan before the land of Nogailin. As the saying goes, “the one who was the first to unveil the bride’s face on her wedding day will remain near and dear to her for life.” The bard’s life was



a stormy one. On the next day after Tauekel was raised on the khan's white felt rug, Zhiyenbet Zhyrau vanished into thin air, leaving no trace behind him anywhere in the boundless steppe, which alone was his permanent home. Messengers that rushed into the steppe in every direction on the orders of the khan himself never found him. However, two years had not elapsed when some men brought the great singer to the khan on a rope and demanded that he be put to trial. It transpired that the zhyrau had been so bold as to fall in love with seventeen-year-old beauty Yesenbike, the daughter of the richest bey from the powerful clan of Bey-Uly. Although Zhiyenbet Zhyrau had an incomparable voice and was famed all over the steppe, the poor man possessed nothing but an only horse and a faithful dombra. In order not to pay the bride price, the zhyrau abducted the beauty with her consent and escaped with her to the mountains. Pursuers sent by the bride's relatives caught the fugitives, but, being aware of the khan's special attitude to the culprit, the bride's father did not dare dispose of him personally. For the violation of the inviolable laws of the ancestors, the zhyrau was brought to the khan himself for trial.

— What mischief have you done, zhyrau? — the khan demanded sternly.

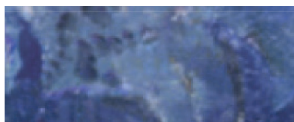
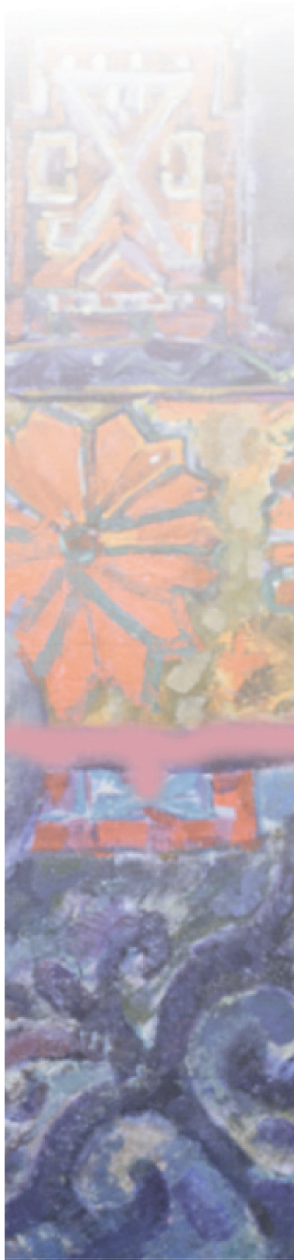
— How can a singer answer your questions when he has his hands tied? — the zhyrau replied.

The khan ordered to untie his hands, and then Zhiyenbet Zhyrau snatched a dombra that was hanging on the wall and sang a song which is still remembered in Kazakh auls:

On gloomy autumn days, both rams and shaggy
camels

Are besotted, full of summer sap.

In springtime, mighty bulls and broad-chested
stallions





Feel drunk, warm with the heady air of spring.
A bard is drunk with love the year round—
In scorching summer heat and dreadful winter cold...
Forever drunk with love, I'm standing in your presence.
So here's my head: now kill my Love, my khan!

Khan Tauekel smiled.

— I understand that both of them were drunk with love, — he said to the bride's father. — What kind of fame will you earn if you thrash the life out of your daughter and son-in-law? Can a broken cup be glued together again? And that it is broken is true beyond the shadow of doubt. Wouldn't it be better to forgive them?

And yet, being afraid of the khan's anger, the zhyrau and his young bride never returned to their native aul and chose to live alone, apart from other people, at the foot of Mount Kazykurt. He won fame amongst the people for never attending rich weddings. On the other hand, not a single wedding of a lowborn batyr or a poor warrior was held without him being present. He was not a frequent guest even at the khan's palace, where his life had once been saved. It was this man, loved by common folk that Khan Tauekel had now invited to visit him. Besides, according to ancient unwritten laws, it was appropriate to ask sage bards for advice before fighting a battle.

This was not a difficult thing to do, for the popular bard had arrived in Turkestan the day before together with an outfit of horsemen that Batyr Zholymbet, a relative of his, had brought from the Junior Zhuz. Zhiyenbet Zhyrau entered and only slightly bowed his head before the khan. That was his right, and Khan Tauekel benevolently nodded to the singer:

— Sit you down on a pillow, my zhyrau!

— I have come to your call, khan! — Zhiyenbet said, having settled himself down in front of his lord. — You

seem to have some cares sitting heavy on your mind...

— Tell me first how your journey was, my zhyrau. Was it a pleasant one?

— What is a journey to a singer?

— And yet do tell me how it was. It would do me no hurt to know what people are saying and thinking today when they are on the road.

— Yes, you are right, my khan. For even the best of khans likes to hear only good things. Who will tell you the truth but me?

— Speak up, zhyrau!

— Men travelling every road in the steppe are saying that you have started a wicked deed, Khan Tauekel. They are coming here in answer to your call in order to defend their towns and land from murderous Abdullah. Whereas what is actually happening here is that a campaign is being mounted against other people's towns. People are saying that not a single nation has ever been made happy by taking possession of what belongs to others. You are bringing death and fire to Tashkent and Samarkand, where our nearest relations are living. All this will return to the steppe thousand fold, and it will burn far and wide...

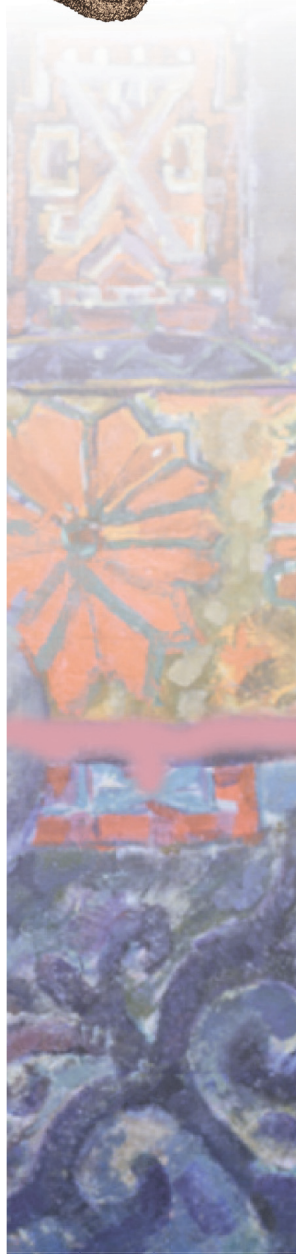
The khan turned white, but his countenance remained impassive.

— Speak up, zhyrau!

— People are saying that grass is running to waste in the steppe, while it should be hayed for the winter. The war will draw people away from their daily toil. Murrain and a shortage of feed will come to our steppe once again. It is the khan and the sultans who need this war. They are being drawn by the splendid palaces and harems of Bukhara. What good will this war be to the people?

— Speak up, zhyrau!

— No, I will not give you, my khan, the names of those who are saying this!





— You don't need to, zhyrau! — The khan raised his right hand. — They will be brought here presently, and you yourself will decide whether they are right in having doubts.

Khan Tauekel waved his hand, and a heavy clank of chains was heard. A dozen and a half guards forced two batyrs into the hall. Their wrists and ankles were in shackles. Zhiyenbet Zhyrau half got up with excitement. He recognized the two batyrs. They were the famous twin brothers, Kiyak and Tuyak. Only recently had the khan appointed the two brothers mynbasy, or commanders of a thousand men. They had been serving Khan Tauekel hand and foot while he was gluing the pieces of the White Horde together. Kiyak Batyr owed it to the khan that he was still alive. And now the twin brothers had offended him.

— Here they are, the men spreading havoc among the warriors on the eve of a battle! — The khan pointed at them. — Verily, you cannot make a handful of sands into a stone, nor can you make a bunch of slaves into a khanate! As if only slaves' blood will be shed in tomorrow's battles! There will be more than a fair share of highborn warriors who will fall in battle as well! And how can you form a state without fighting a war?

The wise zhyrau instantly grasped the essentials of the situation. The batyrs, who were popular heroes, were towering above the tall khan's guards. Each of them could easily sit an ordinary man on either shoulder. And, although they were in chains, both of them were bearing their heads high. Besides, the insignia of their rank had not been ripped off their garments. Khan Tauekel was no fool to start a real quarrel with men who commanded love and respect from the people and the troops...

The khan waved the guards away and they went out.

— If I didn't know you, I would decide that the ring of Emir Abdullah's gold is to be heard in your harangues! —

Khan Tauekel said, addressing himself to the two batyrs.

— We thank you heartily, our khan, for not having ordered to cut off our stupid heads right away! — Kiyak Batyr said with a touch of mockery in his voice.

— This won't be long in coming! — The khan promised.
— But why has the peace of Emir Abdullah become so dear to the Kazakh batyrs? Tell me, Kiyak!

— We are Kazakhs, my khan!

— So what?

— We are ordinary Kazakhs and we have no use for other people's land!

— And what about Abdullah?

— Let him and his lashkars only try and make an intrusion into our land, and you know what will await him here. We have already more than once warded off his attacks on our towns. And we do not want other people's towns. It is not only us, but also people from all the four quarters of the steppe who are saying this!

— You have forgotten, Kiyak Batyr, the words of ancient songs about the Kipchaks' campaigns. They conquered half the world and great Rome itself trembled with fear at the sight of them!

— These are khan's songs, my lord!

— And what about glory!

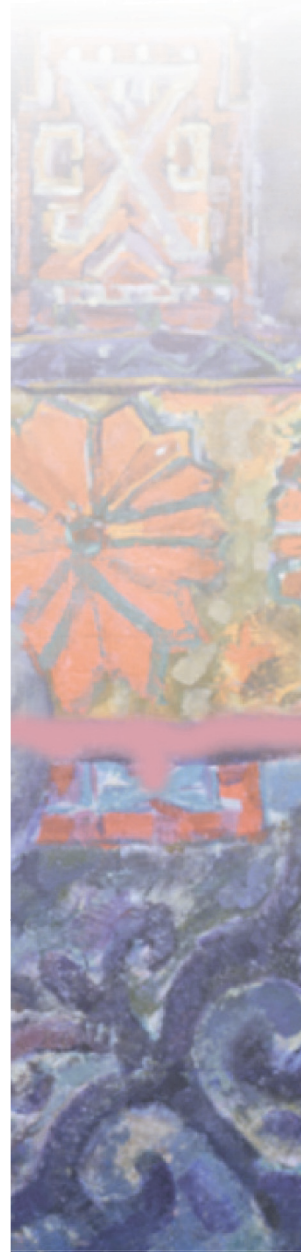
— This is khan's glory!

— What is it then which is your own?

— My homeland, my khan! And also the two score and ten sheep and four camels that are grazing near my black yurta. If they die for lack of feed, then all the world's glory, beginning from Iskander the Bicorn, won't save my family from starvation!

— And what will you say, Tuyak Batyr?

— We have the same possessions... I will only add that we do not make any special distinction between an Uzbek and a Kazakh. The same kind of people are living





in our and their towns, and you will hardly find a family in Turkestan that wouldn't have relatives in Tashkent. If I, poor batyr Tuyak, were to divide something with a similarly poor blacksmith from Bukhara, that would be like making two bites of a cherry!

Zhiyenbet Zhyrau alone was aware how angry the khan was. Tauekel's face was white, and a cold black fire was burning in his eyes. Suddenly, he curled his lip sarcastically:

— All right, you wise batyrs who are deciding instead of the khan whether there should be war or peace... You say that you have relatives in Tashkent. Why then are they fleeing in hundreds from the emir of Bukhara to us day after day?

The two brothers bandied looks.

— The emir's henchmen are stripping two skins off their backs whereas here...

— Finish your phrase, batyr! — The khan ordered sternly.

— Here, people are only stripped of a skin and a half!

— Kiyak finished firmly, looking the khan straight in the eyes.

— I will remember your impudence, batyr, — the khan said in a dull voice. — But let us postpone our reckoning until a more propitious moment. Now tell me, don't you think you are betraying your brothers in Tashkent, abandoning them to the mercy of the lashkars of the emir of Bukhara?

The brothers clearly did not expect that their talk with the khan would take such a turn.

— Well, now, we might help them out... — Kiyak Batyr said tentatively.

— Now you see! — The khan raised his hand in a triumphant gesture. — And when we take Tashkent, accursed Abdullah will have no place from where he

could attack our towns. Go in peace then, batyrs, and get ready to wage war for the sake of justice!

He summoned the guards and ordered them to unchain the two brothers. As soon as they were free, they gave him a bow and left the hall without saying a word.

— This is the kind of time that has come, my zhyrau!
—Khan Tauekel turned to Zhiyenbet Zhyrau. — Now, the khan has to persuade his people instead of giving orders!

— You have done right, my khan! — the bard said.

— Yes, they will advance on Tashkent, — Khan Tauekel said with a sardonic smile. —And then... And then, let them only try to cross my path when I march on against Samarkand, Bukhara, Balkh, and Khiva! Yes, I will avenge myself on Abdullah for the insults that I had to swallow at his court. I will exterminate his accursed clan and drag him on a rope through the whole of Bukhara. The great banner of the White Horde will flutter in the wind on the ruins of Bukhara and Samarkand. We will ride along the roads of our great ancestors to glory, and our horses' hooves will trample many a kingdom to death!

Khan Tauekel drew himself up to his full height and did not even notice this. His eyes were half-closed, and he was uttering words rapidly and wildly, as if he was in delirious fever. Suddenly, he saw the zhyrau's worried look and cut his speech short.

The khan of the White Horde slowly sank down on the pillows once again.

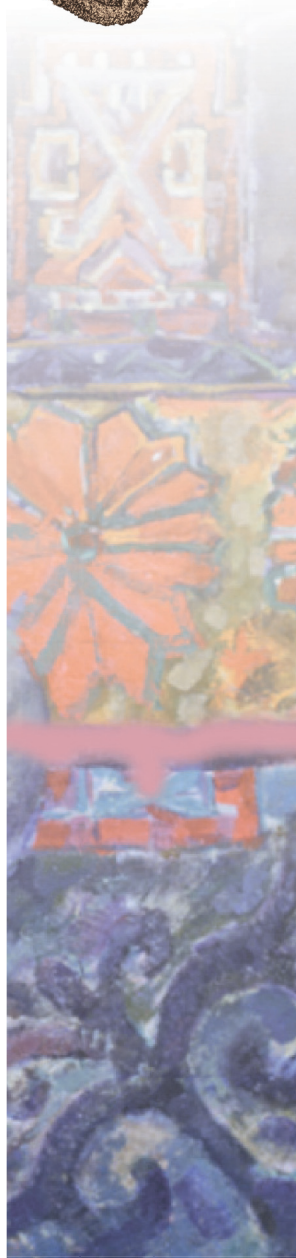
— You are surprised at my cherished thoughts, my zhyrau, aren't you?

Zhiyenbet shook his head:

— No, my khan... I just did not think that you would contract the disease so soon...

— What disease?

— The khan's disease... I see a lot of grief ahead, my khan...



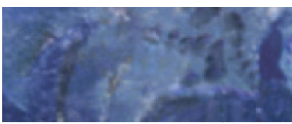


In the deep of the night, the hundred-thousand-strong Kazakh cavalry marched out. The horses, well-trained and accustomed to the steppe, were moving in trail, easily and quietly. Well-polished shields were gleaming, and clubs with forged knobs were showing white in the eerie moonlight, and the plumes adorning copper helmets were playing in the wind.

In two night's marches, the aim was reached, and on a bright spring morning, the White Horde's troops beleaguered the houses and orchards of Greater Tashkent in a formidable gleaming semicircle. The main body of Abdullah's army was already waiting for them on the western edge of the city. The emir himself was prancing on a snow-white horse in front of his invincible thousand.

Having realigned his troops, Khan Taukel pushed forward to the attack. The emir's lashkars did not move. At that very instant, a dull thud was heard from the corner towers of the Tashkent citadel. Enormous white-hot boulders struck into the very middle of the Kazakh army and made long bloody breaches in it. Frightened steppe horses darted away in a stampede, throwing the advancing cavalry into confusion. Not only the grass, but also the earth itself burst into flame where the missiles hurled by "black dromedaries" had fallen. The Kazakh horsemen had scarcely collected themselves when a second volley followed. There is no saying how the situation would have developed if the townspeople, among whom there were quite a few followers of Baba Sultan, had not risen in rebellion and captured all the four stone-hurling war engines. At the same time, a small rear gate was quietly opened, and two thousand warriors headed by Kiyak and Tuyak burst into the city through it. Both of them were well-known and loved in Tashkent, and nearly half of their units consisted of Tashkent fugitives...

Facing the risk of being encircled and being pressed



on the flanks by Yesim Sultan and Kudzhek Sultan, Emir Abdullah beat a retreat. He expected to take shelter in the citadel, but right at that moment, Kazakh warriors appeared on its walls. One of them drew an immense bow, but Emir Abdullah only curled his lip sarcastically. The citadel wall was a good three bowshots from the emir. A sharp whistling sound was heard, and a file-hard arrowhead pierced Khan Abdullah's armour right in front of his heart. His horse made a dart, and this alone saved him from sure death.

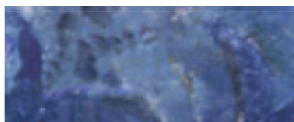
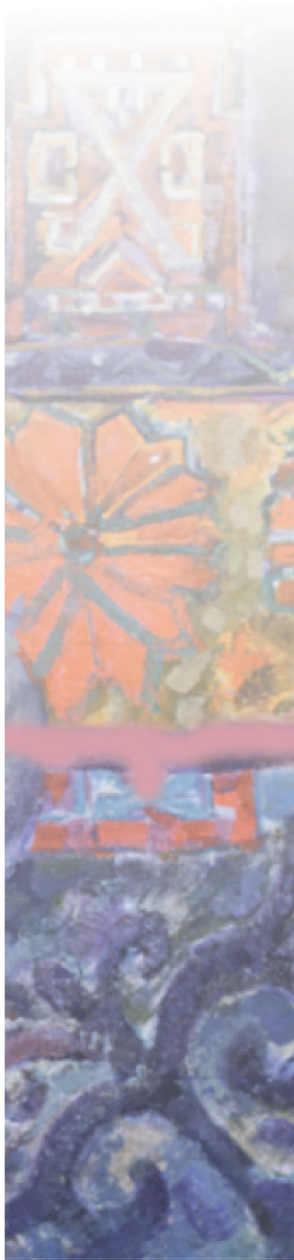
— That's him... this accursed archer! — the emir croaked, streaming with blood and sagging down into the arms of his bodyguards.

Yes, it was Kiyak Batyr, who had been keeping a file-hard arrowhead for the emir of Bukhara since the days of the siege of Sauran.

Having heard about a severe wound received by the emir himself, the keeper of the faith, the Bukhara lashkars fled in disorder. Khan Tauekel immediately sent a fresh cavalry unit in pursuit of them. Changing horses now and then, they unceasingly attacked the retreating lashkars, keeping them on the trot. Thus, in hot pursuit of the lashkars, Khan Tauekel's vanguard units burst into the ancient city of Samarkand.

In the palace where Tamerlane, Timur the Lame, had held court in his day, Tauekel, the steppe khan, was now sitting on a carved throne. The banner of the White Horde adorned with horsetails was flaunting on the tower. The khan's viziers and warlords, his brothers Yesim Sultan and Kudzhek Sultan, and numerous courtiers entered the hall. Yet he looked up and down the hall to find the two batyr brothers.

— These are the men who have made our victory possible! — Khan Tauekel said. — They swooped down on the enemy like steppe eagles and chased the Bukhara game





like wolves, and now they are ready like leopards to make a final spring on the breast of the dying Bukhara red deer!

At the khan's sign, the finest daggers that could be found among the spoils were brought in and put on the two batyrs. Their handles were adorned with precious stones and ornaments of beaten gold. Bukhara caftans embroidered in gold were flung over their shoulders, and two wondrously beautiful and fast pure-bred Bactrian horses were led to the porch.

— The banner of the White Horde awaits fresh deeds of arms from you! — Khan Tauekel said to them. — What is your wish, glorious batyrs?

As usual, Kiyak Batyr, the more loquacious of the two, stepped forward and bent his knee:

— The warriors making up our thousands are herdsmen, ploughmen, and blacksmiths. Permit us, my lord khan, to return to our daily toil!

The lowborn batyr's voice sounded low and firm, but it seemed to rumble like a thunder-blast under the ancient high vaults of the palace hall. And then, in the dead silence that followed, everyone clearly heard the great khan Tauekel grating his teeth...

It was rather like a wounded tiger than a Bukhara red deer that Emir Abdullah, the ruler of Bukhara, was looking. He had ordered general mobilization in Bukhara, Khiva, Balkh, Khorasan, and all other lands subject to his rule. Within a month of the order, the formidable Bukhara army put up its tents on the Zeravshan River, midway between Bukhara and Samarkand. It was here that Abdumumin, the khan's rebellious son, came to see Abdullah, who was recovering from his severe wound. He entered the great white tent and fell on his knees:

— Forgive me, Father, for the pain that I have inflicted on you by my disobedient disposition and behaviour. From now on, I will be the most dutiful son there can be.

Here are a loaf of bread and the Koran: I swear on them allegiance and filial obedience to you!

Apparently, Emir Abdullah had indeed grown old, for scanty and purely human tears welled up in his eyes.

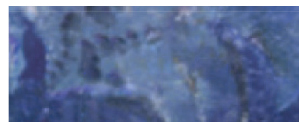
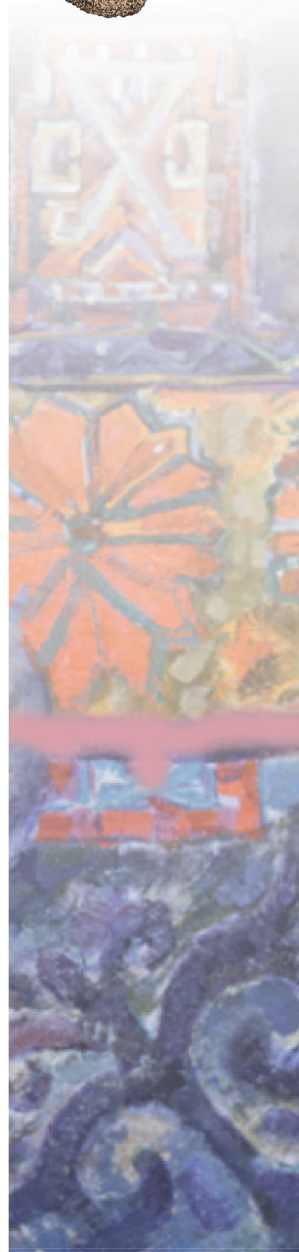
— At the set of my life, God has given me the joy of seeing and forgiving my only son! — he exclaimed. — Even if death comes to me this very day, I will accept it willingly, for my most cherished dream has come true. My son and heir has returned to me!

The old emir had a long talk with his son, telling him about the affairs and the ways of administering such a state as the holy land of Bukhara. There were quite a lot of these secrets. And then, he pointed at a cup and asked his son to give him a drink of refreshing grape juice.

The son dutifully fulfilled his wish. Evidently, God had heard the old emir's words about his readiness to embrace death even if it came that very day. For, having drunk a cupful of juice given him by his only son, Khan Abdullah gasped and sank back against the pillows. Abdumumin looked intently into his father's eyes, raising the eyelids. Then, he splashed what remained of the drink out into a corner, washed out the cup and half-filled it with juice again. Having done this, he went out of the tent and passed the guards an order not to wake up the resting emir.

Only when the afternoon was well along did the head of the guards dare enter the tent. He peered into the face of the khan reclining on the pillows and gave a start. The lips of the most holy emir were parted in a horrible smile well-known to the whole world. The same cruel, death-promising smile froze in the ruler's dead eyes...

Abdumumin was the first to rush into his deceased father's tent. As soon as he entered it, he pressed his hands to his cheeks in an expression of inconsolable filial grief. Deluged in tears, he personally closed his father's laughing eyes. Learned Bukhara doctors, whom he



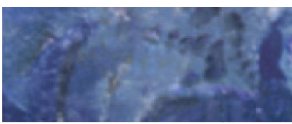


summoned, established that the “king of kings and eagles, the most holy emir, the guardian of the faith, deceased of heart failure.” Meanwhile, rumours about a cup of grape juice offered by the son to his ailing father were already circulating all over Bukhara...

Eight pairs of horses black as night were put to the catafalque carrying the emir’s ashes. Mullahs in a thousand mosques all over the holy land of Bukhara prayed for his absolution from sins. The sarcophagus was placed under the stone foundation of the famous mausoleum of Khoja Nakhshbandi. This happened in the year 1006 of the Hegira, or the year of our Lord 1598. Now, a new keeper of the faith, the most holy emir Abdumumin, ascended the throne.

No, it was not because Khan Tauekel was afraid of God’s wrath that he did not take advantage of the situation to make an assault on Bukhara. This was only an excuse offered to the historians of the period. The simple truth, however, was that on the following day after the famous feast in the main Samarkand palace, it was reported to the khan that both the units commanded by the two batyr brothers had set off for their homes. Many other units, led by steppe chieftains, followed them. Their hungry families and sun-scorched grass in the steppe was all that was waiting for them back home. However much Khan Tauekel raged and fumed, he could do nothing about this. He did not dare punish the insubordinate men. There were too many of them. And so Khan Tauekel beat a retreat from Samarkand.

The Kazakh cavalry did not stay long in Tashkent either, for it almost entirely consisted of civilians assembled for military service, and now, families at countless steppe encampments were waiting for their breadwinners. Tashkent itself, a city that opened its gates to Khan Tauekel some time ago, was in a ferment. The



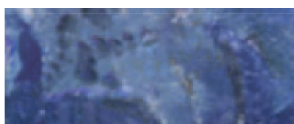
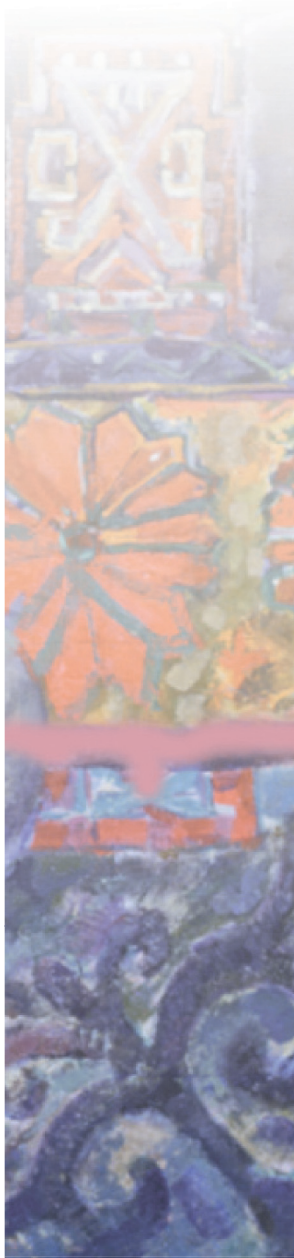
taxes imposed by Khan Tauekel were also quite heavy, and the war could not be continued without collecting them. The malcontents were headed by a certain Khazret Sultan, one of the relatives of the late Khan Abdullah. Abdumumin promised the citizens of Tashkent through his emissaries an alleviation of taxes. Somehow or other, Khan Tauekel retreated back to Turkestan. From there, he was keeping a close watch over the developments in the Tashkent vilayet, interfering in its affairs if necessary.

Six months had not elapsed when Abdumumin was killed with an axe in his bed when he was sleeping. Thus ended the rule of the Sheibanid dynasty on the Bukhara throne. Now, one Dinmuhammad from the family of Astrakhan khans, who had escaped to these parts, became most holy emir.

Indeed, cruel fate inevitably befalls patricides: dynasties usually end with them. The death of Khan Berdibeg, who killed his father, marked the end of the Batu dynasty in the Golden Horde. The greatness of the Timurides ended with Abd al-Latif, who killed his father, Ulug-Beg. The same thing was now repeated in Bukhara.

Khan Tauekel was not unprepared for this. Apparently, Zhiyenbet Zhyrau had been right when he spoke about a special “khan’s disease”. This time, he saw that he stood little chance of success with mobilized troops. A people remains resolute and tenacious so long as it is defending its own land. But as soon as an army is led to another people’s land, the batyrs’ will to win diminishes. Whereas an enemy fighting on its own land grows stronger tenfold. This was written even in the ancient books found in the Samarkand repositories. Their homeland is a source of strength for the troops.

That summer, Khan Tauekel was reminiscent of a cat lying in wait for a mouse. A few allies—a number of Kyrgyz nobles and Khan Abdrashit of South Kashgaria—





had joined his permanent army. Once again, a hundred-thousand-strong force rushed at Tashkent and Samarkand. This time, however, the city gates were not opened to them. People hid provisions and feed for horses. Everything had to be taken by force, and this does not make an army stronger.

Besides, the summer was exceptionally dry and hot. The rivers ran dry and the snow avalanched from the tops of the mountains. Kazakh horses from the northern steppes, not used to this kind of weather, died in thousands. Epidemics broke out among people. Every night, warriors deserted from the army. When Khan Tauekel, besieged in Samarkand by the Bukhara army, was wounded by a stray arrow, he remembered the Kazakh batyrs who had refused to join him for this ill-fated campaign.

Having once again left Samarkand, Khan Tauekel, sustaining heavy losses, retired to Tashkent. Having established himself in the citadel, he began a treatment for his wound. By the time, most of his allies had already left him, and the approaching Bukhara troops were sealing off the city. Fewer and fewer roads leading north, into the steppe, remained open. Finally, the last one, leading to Turkestan, was also cut off. Only his most loyal retainers and his favourite wife, Aktorgyn, remained with the dying khan...

On one of the hardest days of the siege, wild uproar was heard all of sudden.

— What's going on there? — Khan Tauekel asked in a weak voice.

— An assault! — was the answer.

Indeed, a many-thousand-strong force of Bukhara lashkars was converging on the citadel. Siege ladders easily reached the top of the rather low citadel walls. Breaches had already been made in the walls here and there. Kazakh warriors, accustomed to fighting on horseback, now had

to fight on foot. Battle cries were heard closer and closer to the khan's palace. And then, all noise subsided abruptly.

— What's happening there? — the khan kept asking.

The tall double door was flung open, and a giant warrior, all covered with dust and blood, burst into the hall:

— Here you are, Khan Tauekel... I've come after you!

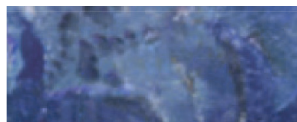
Having said this, the warrior crumpled to the floor and ceased to move. The khan half got up from his bed and drew aside the chain mail protecting the warrior's face. It was Kiyak Batyr.

— We've come to fetch you... Go from this alien soil, khan! — the batyr whispered, and his face turned deathly pale.

— Yes, stubborn batyr, you were right! — Khan Tauekel croaked, and this effort made blood spurt from his throat. Thus he remained, lying on top of the dead batyr...

Both of them—Khan Tauekel and Batyr Kiyak, who had been born and who died on the same day—were buried in Tashkent. Thanks to the reinforcements that had arrived under the command of the twin brothers, the Kazakh army had an opportunity to leave the besieged Tashkent. However, the worst thing happened: there was no unity of command in the army. Batyr Zholymbet, who had brought a reinforcement unit from Turkestan, was also wounded. He reposed all power over his unit in Batyr Tuyak's hands. The numerous highborn sultans and batyrs, feeling resentful, refused to obey a slave woman's son.

Now, the day that was the most important to the besieged came. Having donned armour and a helmet adorned with feathers of an eagle owl suitable to a commander, Batyr Tuyak resolutely mounted his horse. Then, suddenly, he saw at his side a small figure clad in gleaming armour and a khan's helmet. The horse was also befitting a khan: it was the white speckled charger, Khan Tauekel's favourite horse.





— Let's go, batyr! — the rider said in a melodious voice and half opened his or, rather, her face, for it was Aktorgyn, Khan Tauekel's favourite wife, who commanded great respect from the entire Kazakh army. By her presence next to the lowborn batyr, she showed that she recognized his power over the army on behalf of her deceased spouse. Side by side, they rode into battle.

It was here, on the north-eastern side of the city, that the destinies of the besieged were to be decided. The young Yesim Sultan, who had become the khan of the White Horde, was holding back the lashkars on its southern side, and Kudzhek Sultan, on its western side. But it was precisely on the north-east, where the road to Turkestan opened up, that Dinmuhammad and his general, Bakhimuhammad Sultan, had concentrated their foremost troops. The Bukhara warriors were arrayed in well-aligned units of a thousand men, each thousand riding horses of the same colour, just as they had been at one time during the siege of Turkestan towns. Units of horsemen were darting by along the front in foragers, inspiring dread by their strength and might. They seemed to be able to crush any opponent in passing—the more so, the steppe troops which were far inferior in number and which had been left without command. The Kazakh warriors were warily watching them from behind the adobe walls enclosing numerous Tashkent courtyards. Even though reinforcements had arrived, their spirits had clearly fallen, for the death of a khan was always an ill omen in the steppe.

Now the lashkars unhurriedly closed their ranks, getting ready for an all-out attack. In a few moments, they would go into an assault, irresistible like an avalanche. And then all of a sudden, a rider on a universally known white charger and wearing a khan's helmet adorned with a plume appeared from a breach in a courtyard wall and



rushed into the battlefield. The Kazakh warriors were also momentarily taken aback. What was this? Was it a shadow of the khan of the White Horde, whom they had buried earlier today together with Batyr Kiyak in the great Tashkent mausoleum? And now a shadow of the fallen batyr was also riding next to the khan...

— Aruakh! Aruakh! Oh the spirit of the deceased!

Aktorgyn's furious ringing cry was heard all over the field. In the same flash of time, the Kazakh warriors darted forward in her wake. They careered in a horrifying torrent, shouting their clans' battle cries:

— Akzhol! Akzhol! Oh Lord!

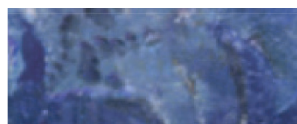
— Uisun! Dulat! Boribay!

— Kara Khoja! Kabanbai!

— Beket! Shakabay!

They shouted out the names of famous batyrs and warriors who had fallen one, two, or three hundred years ago, calling their spirits for help. Only in the fury of an attack, facing certain death, were warriors permitted to call out these names considered holy by the steppe people. And the picked thousands of lashkars wavered and began to turn their horses around. Those who tried to offer resistance were crumpled up and trodden into the ground. But the lashkars' neighbours from the flanks were already hurrying to their aid. The battle blazed up again with renewed force, and now, Batyr Tuyak, with six loyal warriors, had to defend the brave Aktorgyn from numerous enemies that were converging on her...

The battle turned into a total scuffle. The fighting was going on in a completely disorderly manner. Thousands of men, cursing the hour they were born, yielded up their lives on that unhappy day. Eventually, the lashkar forces, which were several times as great as the Kazakh forces, began to press the Kazakh warriors, but Yesim Khan himself, who had routed the enemy at his sector of fighting, came to their aid.





The bitter fighting raged till late at night and ended only when the combatants could no longer see one another.

The next morning, the units of Bukhara lashkars set out for Samarkand in march formation, leaving outposts along the way. Seeing this, Yesim Khan did the same. Having placed his own outposts here and there all the way to Tashkent, he led his army to his capital, Turkestan. Thus, he maintained a close watch over Tashkent...

For a long time afterwards, Tashkent remained a half-independent city. Since the Tashkent vilayet adjoined the lands of the Kazakh clans of Katagan and Shanyshkaly belonging to the Great Zhuz, Yesim Khan appointed one Tursunmuhammad, a descendant of these two clans, who had distinguished himself during the last military campaign, ruler of the city. Having raised a loaf of bread and the Koran above his head, the new hakim swore eternal allegiance to the White Horde. The amount of gold and also of rice, dried apricots and raisins that was annually to be supplied from Tashkent to Turkestan was set. Soon, the twenty-two-year-old Yesim was formally declared khan and raised on a white felt rug by representatives of most Kazakh tribes and clans in acknowledgement of his elevation to this high rank...

Following this, Yesim Khan took the remains of his elder brother, Khan Tauekel, and all the batyrs who had fallen together with him, Batyr Kiyak among them, from Tashkent and buried them in Turkestan. Their names were engraved on stones near the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassavi...

Bukhar Zhyrau had long finished his narration about the days of old. Both of them, the sage bard and the glorious batyr Bogembay, were lying awake, watching in silence the glow of dying embers in the campfire. Many people in the steppe did not sleep at night in those terrible days.





— Have you comprehended the essence of what I have told you? — The zhyrau asked finally.

Bogembay silently gave a nod of the head.

— You can see how different Bagadur Tauekel was in different periods of his life, — Bukhar Zhyrau raised his finger emphatically. — Every man would like to leave a good memory behind. And people's memory is the chief judge. It will give Tauekel his due for leaving the oppressor emir and going to his native steppe, but it will condemn him for conducting a sanguinary raid into another people's land. His example goes to show how the wrong cause brings about unrighteous actions. And Batyr Kiyak will remain in people's memory as a man bright and pearly throughout, for he had no khan's avarice for other people's lands. Nor did his great-grandson, the blacksmith Nauan, have any desire to entrench upon someone else's fortune. He died on the wall of his hometown, defending it from invaders. This holds true for every people, my batyr. And if every people could be given the right to decide its own destiny, there would be no more wars in the world!

They did not sleep a wink till dawn, pondering over the same things.

After the surrender of Turkestan, the headquarters of Abilmambet, khan of the Middle Zhuz, kept moving from place to place. Now it was stationed on the shore of Lake Telikol, where the borders of the grazing land used by all the three zhuzes came together. It was here that Bogembay Batyr, accompanied by five hundred young warriors, arrived. Travelling with him was the sage bard Bukhar Zhyrau, who had joined him on the way here; he could not stay put in these hard times.

No sooner had they arrived than a messenger coming from the west brought disturbing news to the headquarters. Lola-Dorzhi, Syban Raptan's brother, the cruelest and the most willful among Dzhungar noions,



having violated a secret truce and taken advantage of the fact that Abulkhair Khan of the Junior Zhuz was busy fighting with the Volga Kalmyks, had attacked the auls of the Tama and Tabyn clans in the vicinity of the Syr-Darya River, burnt down most of them and reeved numerous prisoners and a great number of cattle. Scouts were sent without delay to reconnoiter the position of the enemy. Soon they returned, bringing the news that, having subjected a large area in the lower reaches of the Seyhun Darya River to horrible devastation, the Dzhungar forces separated into two parts. The one unit, numbering three thousand horsemen, was now driving great herds of livestock to its encampments in the lower reaches of the Hi River, and the other unit, two thousand strong, was escorting Kazakh prisoners to Khiva to be sold for slaves.

Warriors coming from auls situated around Lake Telikol, alarmed by the news, immediately began to prepare their horses for a raid and whet their old aldaspan swords. Batyr Bogembay galloped at once towards the khan's yurt.

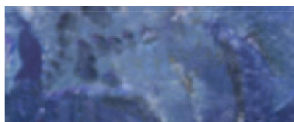
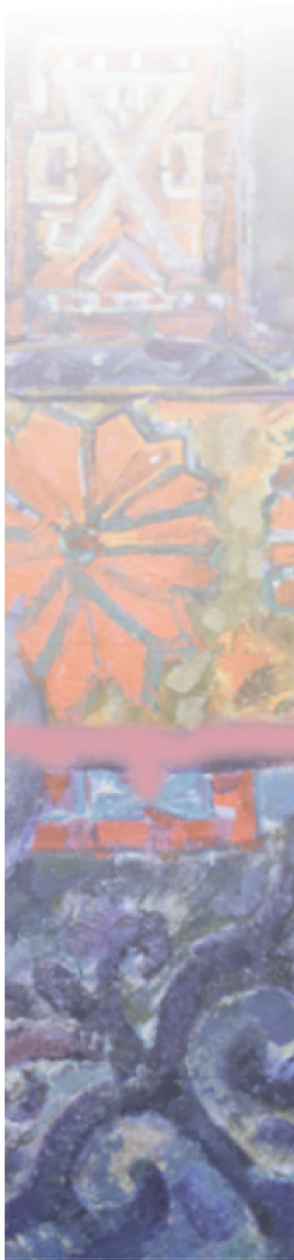
— God will punish us, Khan Abilmambet, if we permit our brothers to be carried off into slavery! — he said, looking unfalteringly in the grey unblinking eyes of the khan of the Middle Zhuz.

— I've been told that Abulkhair Khan's own sister is among the people captured by the Dzhungars. — Abilmambet calmly scratched the bridge of his nose. — And it is the auls of the Junior Zhuz that have been devastated. Their protection is Abulkhair's responsibility...

— But Abulkhair is now fighting with Kalmyks somewhere near Yedil! — the batyr demurred.

— He always keeps saying that no other horses in the steppe are as fast as his. Now let him try and catch up with the Dzhungars!

The voice of the khan of the Middle Zhuz clearly





sounded satisfied with the fact that his more capable rival had gotten into trouble.

— Then I will lead the warriors in pursuit of them myself! — Bogembay exclaimed.

— By my authority as khan, I prohibit you from doing this! — Abilmambet raised his right hand. — I will not quarrel with the kontaichi now that we have not enough troops.

At that moment, the quiet voice of Bukhar Zhyrau, who had followed Bogembay in and who was now standing on the yurt's threshold, was heard:

— You don't need to quarrel with him, o khan of the Middle Zhuz. Who knows whether Bogembay's warriors have already arrived at your headquarters? Maybe they have heard the ill news on the way here and have themselves already turned their horses to go and fight with Lola-Dorzhi's robbers!

The enraged khan swung round to confront the zhyrau. Had it been possible, he would have long disposed of the eternally disobedient batyr and this self-confident singer as well. But they always seem to have some mysterious force behind them. If he tries to take any steps against them now, all the auls in the vicinity will immediately start fermenting and rebelling. There is no saying how all this will end for him.

— All right, — the khan gave up. — If you wrest down the Dzhungars, it will be your good luck, but don't expect support from me!

Five days later, Batyr Bogembay's five-hundred-strong outfit came on the tracks of a Dzhungar caravan. Scouts reported that the Dzhungars were very close and that they were moving in march formation.

— I was the first one who wanted to go in pursuit of the robbers, — Bukhar Zhyrau said. — But remember, batyr, that they exceed us in strength four to one. Besides, your

warriors are young men, and the Dzhungar horsemen are battle-seasoned fighters!

Before Bogembay could answer, everyone fell silent as if by command. A faint sound of someone's sad voice reached them in a gust of the steppe wind. It was a song that sounded like moaning.

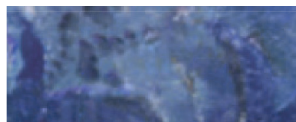
Soon, other voices began to join this solitary voice. Now one could hear that many people, both men and women, were singing. Their song was full of inexpressible sadness and grief. They were singing a song known as Yelim-Ay:

A caravan of grief is descending the Karatau Mountains,

And a little orphan camel colt is tailing along...

The Kazakh warriors' eyes grew dark at once. The wailful tune began to gnaw at their hearts like a hungry wolf. They involuntarily clasped the handles of their swords and sabres. Bogembay's order was passed on in whisper from one end of his unit to the other, and the warriors scattered and hid behind the crests of the hills. Down below them an ancient slave road was winding its way. Right at this spot, the hills parted and the bitter-salt Ust-Urt Desert could be seen ahead. Somewhere in that direction, the city of Khiva with its old "tear market", where male slaves were bought for working in mines and female slaves, for harems throughout the East, was situated.

Now, a Dzhungar mounted vanguard unit came into view, followed by a slave caravan that looked like a long black ribbon. Mothers parted with their children were weeping, and children who had lost their parents were crying. Horsemen using long lashes were flogging along those who fell behind. Riding on a great shaggy horse at the head of the unit was a ferocious-looking big-shouldered Dzhungar, as huge as a mountain. A bowl-



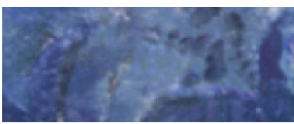


like iron helmet covered his round close-cropped head, his long moustaches reached to his ears, and the whites of his black eyes were streaked with red, which could be seen even from a distance. A heavy sabre hanging on his side nearly trailed along the ground. It was none other than Lola-Dorzhi, one of the most bloodthirsty Dzhungar warlords. His warriors, as grim-visaged and ferocious-looking as himself and armed to the teeth, were following him in two files...

Batyr Bogembay was waiting for half the caravan to appear from the gorge between the hills. He was going to make an attack on the vanguard unit and dispose of the main body of the Dzhungars before the rest of them could realize what was happening. More and more prisoners under convoy of armed guards were coming out of the gorge. Now, Lola-Dorzhi came abreast of the hill behind which the Kazakh warriors were hiding. The words of the song could now be heard quite clearly:

O how hard it is to be deprived of your homeland...
Bitter tears are blurring my eyes!

Before Batyr Bogembay could give a command, a young woman with her hair tumbled separated from the crowd of prisoners who were plodding along. Just as the other women, she had part of her hair torn out and there was caked blood on her head, because Dzhungar horsemen had a custom to grab women by the hair and drag them along the ground after their horses. She was holding a baby in her arms. She laid the baby on the ground and began swaddling it. One of the Dzhungar guards noticed this and rode up to the woman behind her back. Seeing the shadow of a shaggy horse, the woman turned round in horror. But it was already too late. The Dzhungars had no use for little babies, for they could not



sell them in Khiva, and a nursing mother was a cut-price commodity. Without another word, the guard lowered his long Dzhungar pike, struck the baby with it right through and, having picked it up, tossed the tiny quivering body over the crest of a hill. The baby only let out a soft squeak before it flew up into the sky, its swaddling clothes flapping in the wind. The guard burst into the most uproarious laughter and the noions and warriors, livened up by his joke, echoed in a chorus of loud guffaws. Had they seen where the baby's bloodstained dead body fell, they would have thought better of it. For the tiny lump of human flesh, which was still quivering slightly, hit the ground right in the midst of the Kazakh warriors...

— Murderer! Bloody butcher!

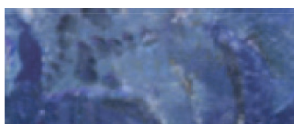
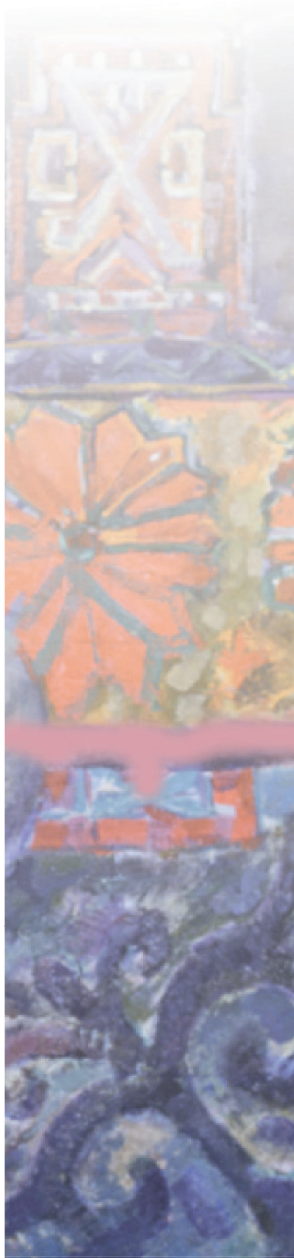
Screaming like a wounded tigress, the mother made a mad dash for the guard, and he cut her in two with his sabre. However, in the same flash of time, the entire crowd of unarmed prisoners rushed at their tormentors. The Dzhungars had to beat them back with whips and sabres. A cloud of dust rose above the clash. And the Dzhungars never noticed how Batyr Bogembay's warriors, not making a sound and looking particularly terrifying in their silence, charged at the enemy.

Riding like grim death from the top of the hill, Batyr Bogembay descended upon the bloody noion. The batyr's terrible club with forged iron knob fell on his head, and Lola-Dorzhi was dead before he could realize what had hit him.

— Akzhol!

— Bogembay! Akzhol!

The gorge now resounded with a furious Kazakh battle cry. The Dzhungars, squeezed in between the hills, were crowding in the narrow gorge, being unable to face off the attackers. Only some two hundred horsemen managed to break through and escape into the steppe. The story they





told later was that a hundred-thousand-strong Kazakh force had attacked them. Since that time, the gorge, just like many other places in the Kazakh steppe, began to be called Kalmakkyrgan, “Place of Dzhungars’ Death.”

The Dzhungars fled in groups of five to ten horsemen. And then the hawk-eyed batyr noticed that a body was dragging on a rope behind one of the escaping Dzhungars. Batyr Bogembay put his horse into gallop. Making great strides, the horse soon caught up with the villain. The heavy club came hurtling down, and the Dzhungar, together with his horse, fell flat on the ground. The batyr cut the rope and saw a young girl in a tattered rich dress.

— I know who you are; you are Abulkhair Khan’s sister! — he said and dismounted from his horse.

— And you are Batyr Bogembay! — she said.

His guess was right, for she was really Sakipzhamal, the khan’s beautiful sister. She had been captured by Dzhungars when she was visiting with her relatives living in auls near the Syr Darya River. Somehow or other, it so happened that when Batyr Bogembay brought her to Abulkhair Khan, who had hastened to meet them halfway, she told her brother that her deliverer was the only one whom she wanted to become her husband. It was an old custom in the steppe that a warrior who had saved a woman from death or dishonour was given preference over other suitors for her hand, his origin notwithstanding. And so, although Batyr Bogembay was of “base descent,” the proud khan had to agree to the betrothal. Besides, he expected the famous batyr Bogembay and his warriors to help him in the impending struggle for power and influence in the steppe...

Indeed, while fighting against the Dzhungars, the khans and sultans of all the three zhuzes continued their rivalry for power over the steppe, and this weakened their resistance to the invaders. Batyr Bogembay, offended by

Khan Abilmambet, had lived in the Junior Zhuz for five years. He had more than once took part in fights with Dzhungar outfits and won fame all over the steppe. One day, he received a letter from Sultan Ablai. The sultan invited him to return and join his colours. There was every indication that the illustrious sultan was preparing for a real all-out war against the Dzhungars. The batyr decided to accept the invitation. That same day, Batyr Bogembay received a message from his new brother-in-law, Abulkhair Khan. Apparently, having somehow got wind of Ablai's letter, the khan of the Junior Zhuz demanded that he present himself without delay at his headquarters, which was within three marches of the spot where the batyr and his unit were at the time.

— What am I to do, sage zhyrau? — Batyr Bogembay asked Bukhar Zhyrau, who was staying with him.

— Go to Ablai, — he answered. — There you will be closer to the Dzhungars. But do not go there at once. First, let us go and see what the khan of the Junior Zhuz wants from us. Perhaps, he has also resolved upon fighting a full-scale war against the Dzhungars.





II

The Dzungar invasion had swept over the Kazakh lands like a steppe fire. Great areas of land and the towns of Turkestan, Tashkent, Sairam, and Sozak had been captured. And now, also like a steppe fire, it continued to smolder, ready to burst into flame once again at the first gust of the spring wind. Devoid of unity of command and having no support to rely on, Kazakh forces and individual detachments more than once inflicted crushing defeats on the kontaichi's army. In 1729, Abulkhair Khan and Taiman Batyr put the invaders to rout on the bank of the Bulanta, a tributary of the Sarysu River, and sent them flying. The same thing happened on the banks of the Karatal and Hi rivers, where Kazakh units under command of the batyrs Kabanbai and Bayan routed one of the wings of the Dzungar army. Hundreds of encounters occurred in the steppe with varying success. This, however, did not decide matters. Kontaichi Galden-Tseren clung like grim death to the lands he had captured. Dzungar encampments sprang up here and there on Kazakh and Kyrgyz land, while somewhere beyond high mountains, Chinese mandarins rubbed their hands, for everything was proceeding according to a plan mapped

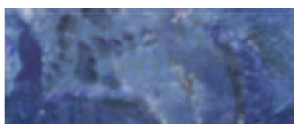
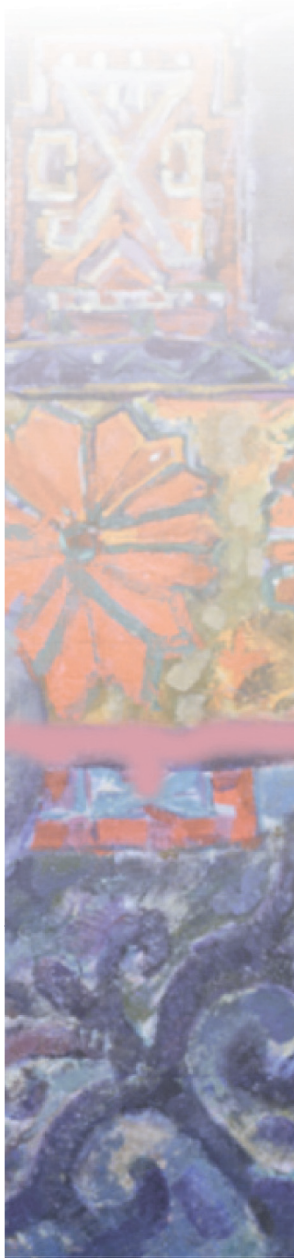


out by the Chinese emperor some time ago. While two stupid tigers were fighting with each other, they could be gradually pressed back from the watering place...

Russia kept a close watch over the development of affairs. When Abulkhair Khan sent an envoy to St. Petersburg in 1725 with a proposal that the Kazakhs and Kara-Kalpaks swear allegiance to Russia, it was received there as a long-expected request.

Unlike other colonial powers, Russia normally carried out its diplomacy in the East through the efforts of people close to the inhabitants of the regions being colonized, in terms of culture and religion. This time, Maksut Yunus, a Tatar mullah, was sent over to Abulkhair Khan to conduct negotiations with him. Subsequently, a new mission from Abulkhair Khan, headed by Koibagar Kobeg-uli, went to St. Petersburg to ask the Russian government to expedite the annexation of Kazakh lands to Russia and request permission for Kazakh nomads to move freely in the region between the Volga and Yaik rivers and carry on trade on Russian territory.

Tsarist diplomats, knowing that the support of the one side would mean severance of relations with the other, were playing for time, spinning out the negotiations about the terms of the annexation and the privileges to be enjoyed by either side. Abulkhair Khan, in turn, was keenly aware that the Dzhungars were not the ones whose “moustaches could be shaven off with an axe” and was hastening his envoys. It was only on February 19, 1731, after Dzhungar hordes had invaded the territory of the Junior Zhuz, that the tsarina Anna Ioannovna, in response to Abulkhair Khan’s message of the eighth day of the month of Nauryz, that is, March, 1730, requesting her to “extend her protection to the Kazakhs”, and on her ministers’ recommendation, promulgated an ukaz admitting the Junior Zhuz to the Russian Empire. The





ukaz was delivered to Abulkhair Khan's headquarters at Irgiz on October 5, 1731, by Russian envoy A. M. Tevkelev, a Tatar converted to Christianity. The signing of this ukaz marked the beginning of a new period in relations between the Kazakh khans and the tsarist government and between the Russian and Kazakh peoples.

Soon after the ukaz was issued, almost that same year, Khan Sameke of the Middle Zhuz also sent a request to Anna Ioannovna to "take the Kazakhs of the Middle Zhuz under Russia's shelter" and two years later, in 1733, Kodar Bey, Tyulya Bey, Satai Batyr, and Bulyak Batyr, sultans and beys from the Senior Zhuz, in their turn, sent their own envoy, Kangildy Batyr, to St. Petersburg to submit to Anna Ioannovna their request for accepting them and the clans subor-dinate to them as Russian subjects.

Alongside the Dzhungar invasion, it was Abulkhair Khan's desire to become, with Russia's support, the khan of all the three zhuzes that largely determined his decision. The Dzhungars, however, continued the war after the tsarina Anna Ioannovna issued her ukaz, and numerous Kazakh sultans from the other zhuzes began to accuse Abulkhair Khan of treason. One of Abulkhair Khan's main opponents was Barak, a sultan from the Middle Zhuz.

Now, three years after the ukaz on annexation to Russia had been issued, Envoy Tevkelev was once again expected at Irgiz, where Abulkhair Khan's headquarters was situated at the time. To meet with him and to achieve unity, Abulkhair Khan had invited to his headquarters well in advance the highest-ranking and most eminent men, including quite a number of his own opponents. Sultan Barak and the batyrs Taiman and Bogembay, who had particularly distin-guished themselves in the war against the Dzhungars, were among those invited. The two batyrs, who were at loggerheads with each other, had

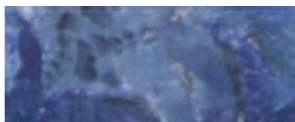
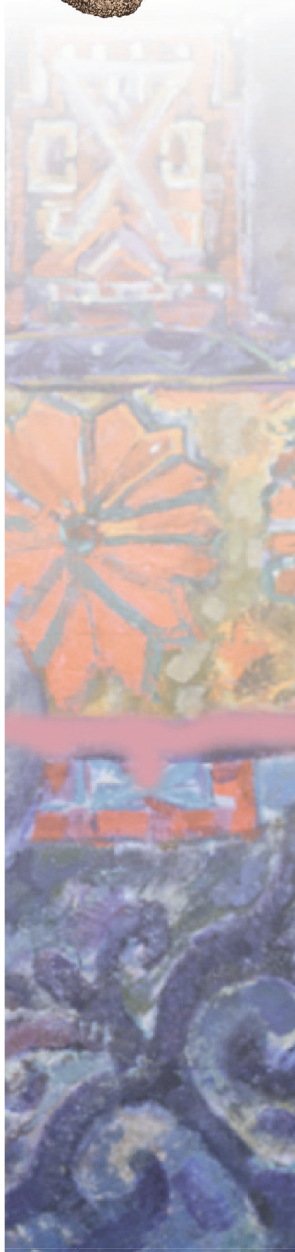
each arrived with a small detachment appropriate to the occasion. Sultan Barak had brought along a large cavalry unit as his train. Besides, for some unknown reason, he had brought along to the khan's headquarters Bagadur Seren-Dorzhi, an envoy of his bitter enemy, Dzhungar kontaichi Galden-Tseren, with whom he had been fighting all his life. The arriving guests were amazed to see the giant close-lipped Dzhungar. Of all men, he was the last one whom they expected to see here...

Despite summer heat, the canopies of all the three snow-white yurtas that stood together, forming Abulkhair Khan's summer residence, were lowered. Even their bottom part, which is normally kept raised to ensure airing, was closed up and covered with a piece of thick felt. In the middle yurta, embroidered in silver on the inside, the two batyrs, Sultan Barak, the Dzhungar noion, and Abulkhair Khan himself were now sitting. Besides them, the khan's youngest son, Yeraly, a hand-some blond young man with fine fuzz above his upper lip, and two bodyguards with unsheathed sabres remained in the main yurt...

One will fare much better having a famous batyr for a friend than for an enemy. This is what Batyr Bogembay was thinking about, sitting in Abulkhair Khan's tent. Taiman Batyr from the Junior Zhuz, his rival of long standing, was sitting right opposite him, planting his elbow on a pillow.

Both of them were already past forty, and their enmity had continued since the days when the two of them, still young warriors at the time, first saw each other. This enmity, which threaded their lives, was like the edge of a dagger...

It was rivalry, which always placed arrogant and proud nomads in a situation of mutual hostility, and not the desire for taking revenge, that stood between them. Where a man leading a sedentary life would only smile and avoid trying his strength against a stronger or more





capable person, a nomad will try to excel him, and more often than not, take his failure to do so as an affront to his pride. It is precisely such rivalry, in whatever form it might manifest itself, that sows the seeds of bitter enmity between two worthy men.

This was exactly what happened in relations between these two warriors. Long ago, their clans moved side by side along the boundary between the lands of the Middle and Junior Zhuzes. At the time, there was no hostility between the two zhuzes; this hostility developed and was increased by many subsequent events later on. The inhabitants of their auls together took shelter in the dense forests on the banks of the great Seyhun Darya River from harsh Kazakhstan winters with their incessant snowstorms. Their meetings after long hot summers were always marked by a great feast and contests in everything appropriate to batyrs: horse races, equestrian games, archery, and songs...

The fateful meeting between the two batyrs happened on the day when Khisan Bey from the Bozhban clan, a man unequalled in wealth, had the rite of circumcision performed on his only son. Khisan Bey was a merchant famous all over Central Asia, who mostly conducted trade with Kazakh nomads. That was why he held the celebration of the occasion at the main Kazakh auls that had moved to the Seyhun Darya River. It was during the celebration that the legendary batyr Bogembay quarreled with the tiger-like batyr Taiman. Had it not been for the festive occasion, they would have wrestled for life or death there and then. And so the two of them, nursing a grievance against each other, had been nourishing it with rumours supplied by “well-wishers”. Such rumours circulating in the steppe are worse than a poisoned arrow shot from an ambush... Eventually, however, the Dzhungar invasion began, and the two batyrs stood shoulder to shoulder,



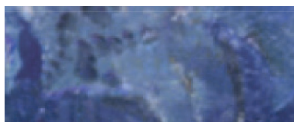
always fighting together against their common enemy, as if no quarrel had ever broken out between them.

And now, sitting face to face with each other in Abulkhair Khan's white tent, they were looking into each other's eyes... Sitting on a pillow on the khan's right side, a bit higher than they were sitting, was Shagai's offspring, Barak Batyr, the famous sultan of the Middle Zhuz. He was popularly dubbed "Barak the Grey Wolf" for his daring and ferocity. Sitting on the khan's left side was the famous noion Seren-Dorzhi, an envoy of the present Dzhungar kontaichi, Galden-Tseren. Ten years had already passed since the first year of the "Great Disaster", and kontaichi's envoys, bringing the Kazakhs his proposal to surrender, came to the Kazakh steppe now and then...

— So that's that, Abulkhair Khan, — Sultan Barak grinned familiarly, showing that he did not regard Abulkhair Khan as his superior, and curled his moustache with a habitual gesture. — That's that... Now I see why you have made us undertake such a long journey. Since that tsarina woman has once again sent your Teupkel (he deliberately mispronounced the Russian envoy's name, making it sound in Kazakh like a rude phrase meaning "Go give a kick!") to see you... Since she has once again sent him here, this means that the request you made three years ago was not enough for her. Am I right?

— Apparently, you are right, — Abulkhair Khan said quietly, evidently ignoring Sultan Barak's tone of voice. — Indeed, my promise alone turned out to be not enough for the tsarina. However, considering that outsiders are present during our conversation...

— Why have you fallen silent, Abulkhair Khan, you, who have always had the guts to do and say what you wanted? — Sultan Barak exclaimed. — Don't scruple to speak your mind, for the subject of our talk always pretty soon becomes known to the whole world. And Seren-





Dorzhi, while being the kontaichi's trusted envoy, is my best friend. Speak up, man!

Abulkhair Khan said with a sneer:

— Since you now have such friends, it will be safe to assume that the kontaichi himself is in your good graces. Maybe you have become akin to him as well, sultan?

— Do not laugh, Abulkhair Khan. If I say that Seren-Dorzhi is not just a relation but also a man who is quite close to me, this is really so!

Abulkhair Khan thought a minute and then nodded his assent... He knew quite well that relations among the Dzhungar kontaichis were not a bed of roses. The stronger the power of the initial ruler, the bitterer the strife among his successors. The kontaichis had inherited the skill in cutting one another's throats from their ancestors. The rumours that Kontaichi Galden-Tseren had put his uncle Shuno-Dabo, the rightful sovereign, out of the way, were growing ever stronger. That these rumours were not ungrounded was well known to Batyr Bogembay, who was sitting right here. He had only wounded Bagadur Shuno-Dabo during their fight near the Badam River one day, and it was Galden-Tseren who had finished him off with his own hand.

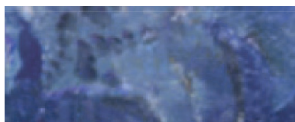
Rumours were in the air. But one could not rely on rumours alone. At the kontaichi's headquarters in Turkestan, there were men who sent secret messengers to him each time Galden-Tseren made an important decision. The Dzhungar noions had now divided into two groups. Galden-Tseren, a more sagacious and experienced leader, had directed his entire army against the land of the Kazakhs. Whereas a group of young noions had long wanted to allure Dzhungar forces into going down the Irtysh River to Russian Siberia. At each kurultai—general meeting—they ever louder shouted that the invincible khan Dayan, the great successor of the “Shaker of the

Universe”, was of the Choras clan. And the ancestors of that founder of the khanate originally came from Siberia. Now, the ancestors’ graves were insistently calling the glorious bagadurs of Dzhungariya.

Abulkhair Khan knew as well as Kontaichi Galden-Tseren who was muttering in the young “loudmouths” ears the whirling words they were saying. Far in the east, Russian military units had already approached the lands of the Manchus, where the conquerors and rulers of the Heavenly Empire came from originally. Russian ships were already sailing the ocean from which the sun rises. That was why, every year, the kontaichi’s wise advisers more and more insistently turned the Dzhungar tiger’s face towards Siberia, so that he should gnash the vein on the long arm of the tsarina woman reaching as far as the ocean. “The Heavenly Empire is the middle of the world, — they keep saying. — And don’t its outskirts by right belong to the middle of the world?” Sooner or later, they expected themselves to put up their fortresses in the sparsely populated expanse of Siberia. Well then, meanwhile, let the Dzhungar forces depopulate these lands, and later on, they may well be driven farther and farther to the other ocean.

Kontaichi Galden-Tseren, however, for all his self-confidence, was aware that the Russian chunk was more than he could chew. He felt a heap better and more confident in the divided and exhausted land of the Kazakhs. He thought of forming a great khanate here. He was going to exterminate half of the local men and force the other half to join his army and then send them to conquer the world the way his red-bearded ancestor had done in his day.

The young noions, however, did not quieten down. Having become the kontaichi’s enemies, they began looking for allies among the Kazakh sultans. Quite recently,





Sultan Barak had given his daughter in marriage to this same Seren-Dorzhi, one of the most influential Dzhungar noions, the direct great-grandson of Dayan Khan himself. Abulkhair Khan knew that the sending by the kontaichi of this troublesome noion as an envoy to the Kazakhs was in fact a kind of exile. Seren-Dorzhi, however, took advantage of his long stay with the sultans of the Middle Zhuz in order to poison their minds against annexation to Russia. Sultan Barak, who hated Abulkhair Khan and his adherents, inclined to the idea of conducting, jointly with Dzhungars, a raid into Siberia. Such a policy would have been suicidal for the Kazakhs.

— I have nothing against our guest and relative, my dear friend Sultan Barak, — Abulkhair Khan said, also curling his moustache. — We Kazakhs have a saying, “You may reveal a secret to a friend, but then he may also have friends”. So isn’t it better to tell everything to both of you at once, without intermediaries?

Sultan Barak curled his lip, which signified a smile. “Since when has this snake Abulkhair begun to regard me as his friend?” — he thought apprehensively and nodded his assent.

— All right, I am satisfied with your decision... Now tell us, your friends and relatives, what is this Teupkel, who has abandoned his faith, is coming to see you for? Whom is he going to give a kick this time, Ablai or me? Whose meat are you planning to throw to him now? And won’t the fortress of Orsk that the Russians have begun to build next to our lands become a ditch in which all of us will be buried? It is hardly a coincidence that the word “or” means “ditch” in Kazakh!

Abulkhair had something up his sleeve which he could use as a retort to Barak’s reproach, “Whose meat are you planning to throw to him this time?” Quite recently, Oralbay and Orzageldy, envoys of the Senior

Zhuz, had brought him a request that he should intercede with the tsarina Anna Ioannovna for annexing the Senior Zhuz to Russia. Abulhair Khan might have told Sultan Barak about this wish of the people. However, he decided against this. Abulhair was aware that this would only foster Barak's feelings of hatred for himself and the clans of the Senior Zhuz.

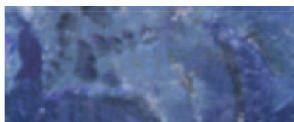
The fortress of Orsk was quite near to where he was staying, and so Abulhair, just as any other khan in his place would, was hoping to enlist Russia's support so as not only to repulse the Dzhungars, but also to establish his rule over all the three zhuzes. Just then, the building of the fortress was beginning under the supervision of General Kirillov and Tevkelev. Abulhair was fully in touch with the situation and was pressing the Russian authorities to launch the construction work as soon as possible. The neighbouring Kazakh encampments also could hardly wait for the fortress to be built, hoping that it would protect them from incessant Dzhungar raids. However, knowing the sentiments of some of the sultans, Abulhair Khan concealed his desire to speed up the construction of Orsk.

— Will you be welcoming your Teupkel with a zurna and a karnai like you did last time? — Sultan Barak asked caustically.

— Yes, we will, as is appropriate in greeting envoys from any great power! — Abulhair answered coolly. — We have never been impolite in treating even less important guests!

— But your guest has abandoned his ancestors' faith! — Sultan Barak said coldly.

— Sometimes your own guests are not reckoned among the faithful at all! — Abulhair Khan noted, hinting at Seren-Dorzhi's shamanist persuasion. — Will you now invite us to the celebration of your grandson's circumcision, Sultan Barak?





Sultan Barak bit his lip in fury and burst into angry words:

— You better tell me, Abulkhair Khan, what have your rich presents to the tsarina woman brought you? How many presents have you received in return? Presents from this woman ruler of yours are being brought to everyone else: to Astrakhan Kalmyks, to Bukhariots, to Bashkirs who plunder our encampments, and to the very same kontaichi! But still they keep tormenting the land of the Kazakhs, and your tsarina woman would not say even a word in protest against this! And you need Orsk in order to establish your rule over us great sultans!

— Yes, this is true! — Abulkhair Khan answered. Sultan Barak gave a start of surprise.

Only a year before, the very same Tevkelev, who had done a lot for the sake of annexing the Kazakh lands to Russia, wrote to the royal Foreign Collegium: “Just as the Kyrgyz-Kaisak Horde, the Kalmyks and the Bashkirs are on the same level of development. They are savage and ignorant... If any one of these peoples revolts against the Russian Empire, the other two can be used against it. In that case, we will bear no responsibility and our conscience will remain clear...” Russian tsarism certainly made use of the entire arsenal of colonial politics, including the world-old principle of “divide and conquer”. For all that, their annexation to Russia was the only possible road into the future for the Kazakhs. All other roads, including an alliance with the Dzhungar noions, spelled a national disaster...

— What does it matter who will be ruling us, the Russians or the Dzhungars? — Sultan Barak shouted again.

— The kontaichi has left no man alive on the lands he has taken from us. He is ruling over dead men!

— And the Russians?

— So far, Russian merchants have only been coming to us with trade caravans.

— And when will they be followed by soldiers?

— We'll see... — Abulkhair Khan once again cast a sidelong glance at the noion. — Just remember the saying, "It is better to serve a lion than a jackal".

— But why doesn't this lion put out a claw in our defense?

— Because of you and your friends, Sultan Barak!

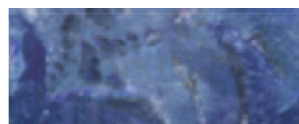
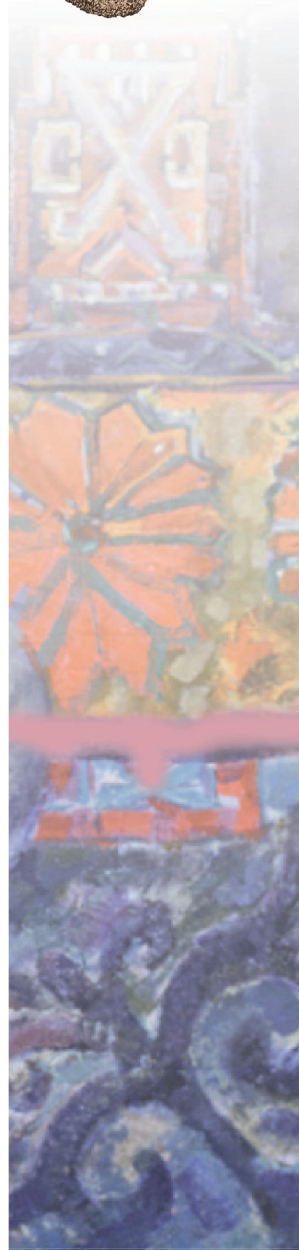
— What do you mean?

— Who was it that ransacked the Russian caravan going to Bukhara the year before last? And another caravan that was going to Tashkent last summer? Answer me, sultan! Or maybe the steppe robbers who did this wanted not so much to steal the samovars that the Russians were bringing as to make mischief between me and the tsarina? Speak up, sultan!

He was speaking about two large caravans escorted by military units under the command of Colonel Harber and Major Miller. The one was ransacked near Astrakhan and the other, halfway between Orenburg and Tashkent. Similar attacks on Russian caravans were made every summer on the banks of the Irtysh and Ishim rivers...

— Do you think, Abulkhair Khan, that once we begin to let the tsarina's caravans pass, peace and joy will reign supreme on our land? — Sultan Barak for the first time sounded serious, and a note of sadness was heard in his voice. — They say that no one else but the fox itself is to blame for having beautiful fur. Our land is rich. The Shurshuts are dreaming of coming here after the Dzhungars and settling all over it. Why should we give the tsarina woman an appetite for it as well?

— Half of our steppe is already strewn with white human bones. If we wait a little longer, the entire steppe will turn white with them!





— But then you mean... — Sultan Barak's lips suddenly turned pale and the pupils of his eyes dilated, foreboding a fit of frenzy well-known all over the steppe. — You mean to say that you are thinking about the people and not yourself? Not about bending us sultans to your will and sitting on top of us?

Sultan Barak roared and crouched like a tiger ready to pounce, and his relative Seren-Dorzhi reached for his straight Dzhungar knife, hidden inside his soft boot.

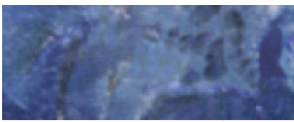
— And what are you thinking about, sultan?

Abulkhair Khan bent over Sultan Barak, facing him squarely, and at his sign, the two bodyguards at the door instantly drew their bows.

— Hey you, Abulkhair Khan! Hey you, Sultan Barak! What have you summoned me, a lowborn man, to your high council for?

Batyr Bogembay spoke in a deep, thunderous voice, sounding like the voice of a lion. Everyone lowered his hands and regained his seat. Batyr Bogembay, however, having said this, fell silent.

— Speak your mind, glorious batyr Bogembay! — Abulkhair Khan was the first to recollect himself. He knew that this man of ignoble parentage enjoyed great prestige in the steppe. One day before the great Dzhungar invasion and soon after his quarrel with Taiman, when Bogembay was still an ordinary horse wrangler, Dzhungar robbers raided his winter encampment, killed his entire family, and reeved his livestock. After that, Bogembay took the path of a vagrant batyr and the fame of his feats eclipsed the fame of all the warriors that had lived before his time. Even deeds that he did not perform were ascribed to him all the same. What was perhaps the most significant for the common people was the fact that Bogembay descended from a clan of free warriors, and that he himself won his livelihood right from his childhood years. Being



nationally acclaimed and thanks to his own courage, valor and military skill, Batyr Bogembay became one of the popular leaders in the years of the Dzhungar invasion. Not a single khan or sultan ventured upon major warfare against the invaders without enlisting his support...

— Yes, yes, speak up, batyr! — Sultan Barak echoed the khan's words, looking away from him. His princely blood boiled in his veins, for he, a direct descendant of Genghiz Khan himself, had to listen to an opinion offered by some ragamuffin horse wrangler.

Batyr Bogembay nodded his head:

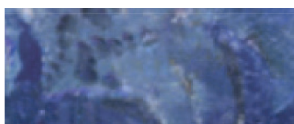
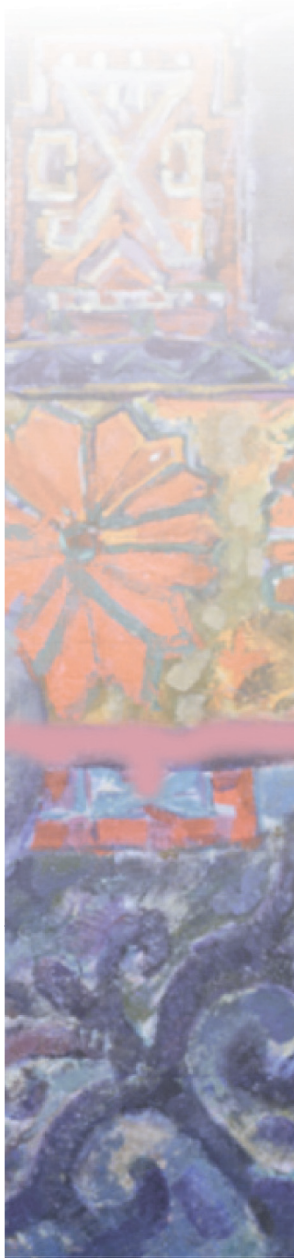
— Well, then... I am not a khan to be able to decide the country's destiny. But the ability to think is not a privilege peculiar to khans alone. I'll tell you what: life is more peaceful near the Russian fortresses than far away from them... Where do the people of whole auls run when the Dzhungar knife is about to strike at them? They run directly to the Russian fortress line. I know that life is no less hard for the common people there than it is anywhere else. It is khans whose life is easy everywhere...

— He looked full into the face of Abulkhair.

— And yet people in the river of life, just like fish in the Seyhun Darya, run away from danger to where the water is deep and quiet. They seek refuge from your kinsfolk, Sultan Barak, in Russian fortresses... People want to stay alive so as to graze their cattle and raise their children...

The batyr's words were falling like heavy stones into the white void of the yurta.

The two-leafed door opened with a jingle, and Abulkhair Khan's junior wife, the famous beauty by the name of Nurbike, entered the yurta. She was a small woman of a slender frame; her round face was covered with a light tan, and she had a languishing look in her big hazel eyes. Her tall saukele-headress was wagging





in time to her steps, and the men present in the yurta got the impression that its dim and silent anger-filled interior was flooded with golden sunlight.

— Dinner is waiting for you in the guest yurta, esteemed guests! — she said with a drawl in conformity with the latest steppe fashion, bending low before the men. — May it please you to partake of what God has sent us!

She ran a rapid watchful eye over the men in the yurta. Bogembay and Taiman, feeling embarrassed as any men would when being looked at by a beautiful woman, exchanged a cold stare. Now, the khan's wife fixed her eye on tall and handsome Sultan Barak, but he seemed to be paying no attention to his in-law.

— Perhaps my brother-in-law, the sultan, hasn't quite caught my invitation to dinner! — she said in a fretful voice.

— We will taste of everything which will be offered us, — Sultan Barak answered coldly. — Permit us first to enjoy the elevated mind of your spouse!

The beautiful woman slit her eyes in fury.

— Well, well, those who are lacking in intelligence should borrow it from others! — she sang in a voice sweetly bland.

— A good meal gives rise to high thoughts, — Abulkhair Khan said, saving the situation. — Our conversation will be continued, but now let us go and glut our appetite!

Sultan Barak gave a scornful shrug of the shoulders, as if surprised at the khan's submission to his junior wife. He cast a rapacious side-glance at her like a leopard ready to spring. His glance, however, was devoid of any appreciation of her beauty: there was in it only some dispassionate scheming.

Although Nurbike was Abulkhair Khan's junior wife,

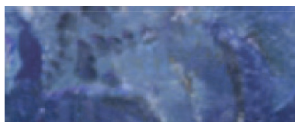
she was well over thirty, but she looked less than twenty. Speaking about the deadly feud between the two great batyrs, it was she, Bey Khisan's daughter, a fourteen-year-old girl at the time, who was the actual cause of that feud. It was before her eyes that Taiman and Bogembay, who were unknown wranglers then, competed with each other in dexterity, strength, and the art of singing. The young beauty was so cunning and nimble that each of them believed that she preferred the other one to himself. However, her heart was sick for yet another one, young Sultan Barak. And, having become Abulkhair Khan's junior wife, Nurbike, a domineering and self-willed woman, still hoped that she would be able more often to see her secret favourite, who was her husband's next of kin. However, the relations between Abulkhair Khan and Sultan Barak developed in a way that prevented their frequent meetings. And now, so many years later, God hurled together all the participants in that fateful festivity: both the rejected batyrs and the sultan for whom she had been secretly yearning all her life. No wonder she was now in a fever of excitement...

In the meantime, the batyrs were thinking about the same thing. They were recalling a warm moonlit night and the girl's defiant words, in which mockery was clearly present. But they were too naive then to be able to see it.

— I like both of you, — she said then. — But I will give a place in my heart only to the one who wins the competition!

For three days, they competed in horse races, shot at a bag of gold while riding at full gallop, wrestled, snatched a silver coin from the ground with their teeth from the back of a galloping horse, and finally, the elders adjudged that both of them were equal to each other in every skill.

The beautiful girl trilled with laughter when they brought her the news about this decision:





— It is your own fault that neither of you has been able to step aside so that the other one could win me!

Soon, the two batyrs learned that the proud beauty Nurbike had become Abulkhair Khan's junior wife. Then the years of the Great Disaster followed, both of them became famous batyrs, and their deeds rang through the steppe. Yet each of them still had a secret raw wound, even though the war, a national disaster, had drawn them closer together, for they were men fighting side by side in a mortal combat. And people thought that it was rivalry for military honours which was the actual cause of the enmity that they still harbored against each other...

Abulkhair Khan looked the most pleased among them. He recalled the life that he had lived with his beautiful wife Nurbike. She had every merit of a real woman and only one demerit: Nurbike had never borne a child, and this tormented the ageing khan. When, however, he came to her yurta, he forgot everything. She inflamed him and put him into sweet ecstasy with her passion. With whichever of his wives he might be spending the night, he was always thinking about his junior wife, and so he not infrequently broke the schedule made up for his other wives in favour of young Nurbike.

His other wives more than once whispered to him about Nurbike's flirtations with young warriors. The khan believed them and vowed vengeance against her. But when he entered her yurta and she reached out her white arms towards him from the pillows, the khan forgot all about it. Gradually, he came to believe that his young wife's love for him was as pure as morning dew in the steppe. His other wives also ceased to pester him with complaints against her. He became even more convinced of his junior wife's sincerity when he visited Turkestan together with her. During their stay there, he showed her the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassavi. Deeply



impressed with the holiness, grandeur and peace of the place, the steppe beauty was inspecting the numerous structures adjoining the mausoleum with appropriate decorum. And then, when they approached some closed door ornamented with intricate carving, a reverberating howl of bloodcurdling laughter was suddenly heard behind it. Nurbike turned pale with fright.

— What is... who is hiding there? — she asked in a whisper.

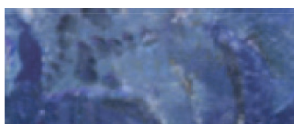
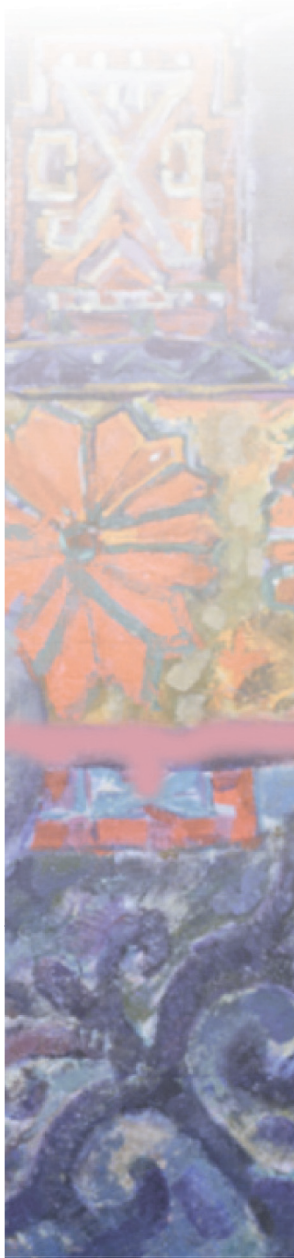
— These are the voices of those very birds of prey from Hell, — the khan said. — When a married woman sets foot inside this door, they announce with their cawing how many sins against her husband she has committed. Enter if you like!

Abulkhair Khan knew quite well that it was black kites that nested in the dilapidated palace behind that door. It was their ghoulish cawing that sounded like demonic laughter. His junior wife, however, who had grown in the north, had never heard their cry.

Nurbike clenched her hands and darted a glance at her husband. “If the Lord in heaven has been busy taking count of my sins, He will find other ways to tell my husband about this! — she thought. — I will enter, and be that as it may!” And the beauty, a sad, reproachful smile on her face, turned to the khan:

— Doesn't my lord the khan know how modest and obedient his faithful wife is? Please, open this holy door. God sees and hears everything best of all!

Since then, Abulkhair Khan had been on top of the world. And now, at dinner, he paid no heed to his wife's behaviour. Meanwhile, the beauty Nurbike was raving with fury. Never before had men remained indifferent at the sight of her. And now one of them had already twice taken no notice of her: the first time, many years ago, and the second time, today. Her face, and especially her eyes,





were alight with purity, kind-heartedness and serene joy. Making light and easy movements, she stirred up kumiss, and poured it out for the guests...

The men were eating the fragrant meat of a milk-fed yearling colt that melted in the mouth and talking about falconry and horses. When, having said all the words appropriate to the occasion, they rose and, stepping sedately forward, walked back to the middle yurt, the young woman's sharp eyes noticed a horsewhip lying where Sultan Barak had been sitting. Her eyes kindled with joy and she adopted an unstudied pose, her round knee showing from under her rich silk garments.

When the men came to the main yurt, Sultan Barak suddenly remembered that he had left his horsewhip in the guest yurt. He went to fetch it and, apparently, was delayed somewhere along the way. When he returned, Abulkhair looked wonderingly at his fierce face and noticed a faint wry smile stirring his lips. The khan's spirits instantly sagged for some reason. If, however, someone had now tried to speak ill of his junior wife, he would again not have believed it.

Abulkhair was now speaking in a measured, subdued tone of voice:

— Since we decided, after mature deliberation, in favour of annexation to the Russian Empire, I've been confronted by numerous enemies. I think these men were my enemies anyhow, and our decision only served as a pretext for bringing accusations against me. Had there been no such decision, they would have found something else... It goes without saying that the annexation to a stronger nation implies subjugation to it. And subjugation is always subjugation, and there is little pleasure in it. But we are not in a position to pick and choose...

And then Seren-Dorzhi, who had until then kept silent, suddenly began speaking. He had an unexpectedly

thin piping voice, like the voice of a woman. He spoke in a confused splutter, foaming at the mouth.

— Why are you saying that you have no choice, Kazakh khan? — He began to twist round in his seat furiously, as if aiming to rub the silk pillow to powder. — We will take all strong men into our service. You, batyr, and you, batyr.

Abulkhair Khan snatched Batyr Bogembay's glance. He was looking at the noion with hatred and disgust.

— And what about the Kazakh land, illustrious noion? — the khan asked the Dzhungar, deliberately drawing him out. — What will become of our grasslands? Our pastures have been reduced to less than half their size as it is!

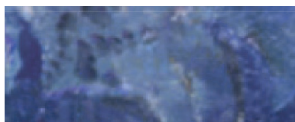
— Like I told you, we will take strong batyrs into our service, — the noion explained. — And why should we let weak ones go on living? Whoever has any use for them? Let them die!

— Well, now, — Khan Abulkhair made a pause. — Say, noion, have you ever seen big Russian guns shooting?

— Oh, we shall have a thousand cannon from the bogdykhan, — cried the noion.

Barak-Sultan sullenly scrutinized his kinsman. The Naiman clan, to which the sultan belonged, was Dzhungars' closest neighbour and the first to repulse their raids. Frequent encounters with the enemy meant close contacts, as was often the case with nomads. Warlike Naimans often took Dzhungar maids in wedlock and sometimes joined their internecine strife. The Dzhungar had special preference for the caste of Genghizide Tyures, to whom they willingly gave their daughters in marriage, and whose women they took. Yet, when it came down to war, Naimans were the first to rise in arms for the Kazakh land. Many were their batyrs who valiantly fought Dzhungar invasions, among them Kabanbai, extolled in folk tradition.

— Don't you mention Shurshuts, — Barak-Sultan









glumly brought out. — Even the Orys are better than those Shurshuts of yours, with their cannon.

— I asked the Russian Tsarina to allow me to build a city near the Zhaik and the Or. A Russian fort on the Or will be of great help to me as khan of the Junior Zhuz when I start bringing all Kazakhs together, — Abulkhair resumed his speech after the noion's interruption.

— Don't forget Abilmambet, supreme khan of all three zhuzes. Such matters are up to him, — retorted Barak-Sultan.

Though Khan Abulkhair made no reply, the sultan at once realized that he was wrong—Abilmambet had no actual power to speak of.

— Yes, I want to unite Kazakhs to make others reckon with them, — Abulkhair was speaking in the same flat tone. — Weren't you listening to Bogembay as he spoke of fish? The people want the same!

Seren-Dorzhi gave an angry grunt, but then spoke in a milder voice: — We Dzhungar have a saying: "A hedgehog is a mole's friend till he is admitted inside the molehill, where he shows his needles."

— You mean the Shurshut hedgehog and the Dzhungar mole, noion? — wondered Taiman-Batyr.

— Listen, Noion Seren-Dorzhi. We do not know what trouble to expect from Russian cities, but we know what the Dzhungar noose feels like—and perfidious Shurshuts are even worse. You know it better than we do, — said Khan Abulkhair, shaking his head.

— I shall pass your decision to the Great Kontaichi in so many words, and all our tumens will come to you in Irgiz, — threatened Seren-Dorzhi.

— Long it was that I saw the beastly, blood-stained face of Galden-Tseren on the battlefield.

— You will see it quite soon, Khan, and that will be the last instant of your life.

The Dzhungar noion rose to his feet and strode off with a slight bow. Barak rose, too.

— Wait a moment, Barak-Sultan! — Abulkhair gestured at his vacated cushion, and Barak took his seat again. — Tevkelev, the Tsarina's man, is coming here, as I have said. He may have something up his sleeve. Most probably, he will demand our subjection to the Empire, oath and all, and participation in Russian affairs. What shall we say to Tevkelev?

— What do you mean to say to him?

— I have known it for the last five years.

— I took the opposite decision that day.

— So we shall be clipping our horses' tails?

To clip horsetails meant to sever a friendship. Not that they had ever been on friendly terms, but now, bigger things were implied than personal likes and dislikes. Naimans were wandering too close to Dzhungariya to wave the matter aside.

— As you like, Khan Abulkhair.

A pregnant silence fell in the yurta after Barak left. The bodyguards never budged in the doorway, their sabres as hewn of stone in their motionless hands. The singsong of the wind came across the felt walls.

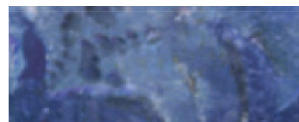
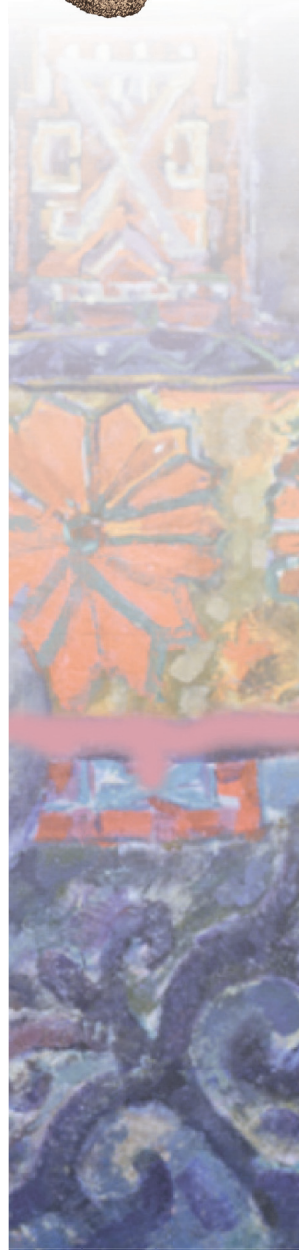
— Let me speak, my khan and lord, — said Taiman-Batyr.

— Speak up, my batyr.

— The more Kazakhs survive these bad years, the more hope we shall have for the future, so you are right to seek Orys support. Barak-Sultan is out to gallop between the two fires with not a spark falling on his skin. He will not.

— What troubles you, batyr?

— Are Dzhungar noions our friends—they who steeped our land in blood? Are they gone from it? How is it that we have come together with Seren-Dorzhi, the





worst of them, who slaughtered our women and children? Even this would be tolerable, but how could you mention to him our most cherished intentions, my khan? The noion may be thrice the foe of his kontaichi, but they will come to terms in no time, as soon as they see a chance to spill our blood. He will, even tomorrow pass what was said here to Galden-Tseren, the ravenous wolf.

— I would not be outspoken about our intentions if I were not sure that Noion Seren-Dorzhi will never again face his kontaichi.

— What will come of him?

— Death awaits him at Red Rock.

— I see!

The batyrs exchanged glances and fell into silence.

— Who will deliver the blow? — asked Taiman-Batyr.

— You will, my batyr.

— Barak-Sultan will be with him!

— Touch him not. Remember—no one of the noyon's men is to escape. Everyone saw them leave my hearth safe and sound. Let the fangar say that Barak-Sultan could not protect his guest. There are no ignoble means when a deserter is to be driven back to the warriors' file.

Quite soon—after not enough time for a woman to milk a mare, two dozen horsemen stealthily went through the riverside reeds and shot off into the steppe. Taiman-Batyr, face hidden in a bashlyk cowl, was riding in front.

Khan Abulkhair stayed in solitude. He sat in meditation for some time, then rose, and took off the wall his grandfather's dombra, adorned with an owl feather. A fell, fierce tune came from his yurt. Wrath, bitterness, and thirst for vengeance intermingled in it. The people on the opposite bank were turning to look at the khan's headquarters.

When Irgiz was lost from sight, Barak-Sultan stopped his steed.





— Why are you leaving the road, sultan? — asked Noion Seren-Dorzhi, also letting his men pass.

— Did the Almighty appoint you my guardian? — snapped Barak. He had been rather reserved in Khan Abulkhair's presence. Now, he was letting his emotion loose. Many bagadur heads were severed by his dauntless sabre, and though he was destined to become the Dzhungar noyon's kin, he would not let him get too bold.

As he crossed the river, the sultan rode into the reeds, dismounted, gave the bridle to his sword-bearer, and walked off on his own. The khan's headquarters with three white yurtas joined into one showed through a slit in the lush greenery. Barak-Sultan sat in ambush, waiting for the dusk to fall. A lonely birch was rustling its leaves above his head.

When the first fires lit at the yurtas and warriors' tents, an agile shadow showed between the bushes, and disappeared the next instant. The sultan gave a barely audible cough, and the dark form slid to the tree, showing white in the dark. Without uttering a word, Barak clasped in his arms the lithe body of Abulkhair's younger wife. The couple sank down into the springy reeds.

Another dark form showed among the willows. Khan Abulkhair spread the branches—and froze on the spot, gazing into the moonlit night. His heart turned into stone as he heard quite near the happy moan of a woman in ecstasy of love. He could not discern anything in the dark. One more moan, then another, and a lilting laugh, as the bubbling of a brook. Standing motionless, the khan thought he had never heard a woman laugh like that. He turned on his heels, and strode back.

Nurbike was whispering to her lover at that instant: "That husband of mine sent batyr Taiman to kill your Dzhungar at Red Rock."

Twigs groaned under the man's heavy feet. "Couldn't you say it at once, you dressed-up fool?" — he shouted at the top of his coarse voice. The woman snatched at his leg as she begged him to stay in a frightened little voice. The sultan shook her off and dashed to the river, breaking bushes as he ran.

She crouched, whining as a lost puppy, then rose, and was long arranging her dress. When she was approaching the aul, she gave a start and a cry—her husband was facing her. With an animal instinct, she saw it was no longer her husband, but the khan of the Junior Zhuz, a man of wisdom and resolution.

In the morning, an opulent caravan started to take the fair Nurbike to the home of Hisan-bai, her father, on the bank of the Seikhundarya. As was rumoured in the auls, Khan Abulkhair had enough of her stupidity and affected manner, and was glad to be rid of his capricious and meddling tokal, younger wife.

That same night, dust-coated riders approached the khan's yurtas, led by batyr Taiman. He dismounted and entered.

— Speak, my batyr, — said the khan after they exchanged due greetings.

Taiman-Batyr silently dropped his head.

— Something went wrong at Red Rock, I heard, — said the khan as he bent close to the squatting batyr.

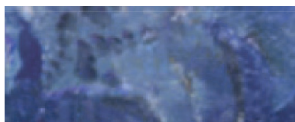
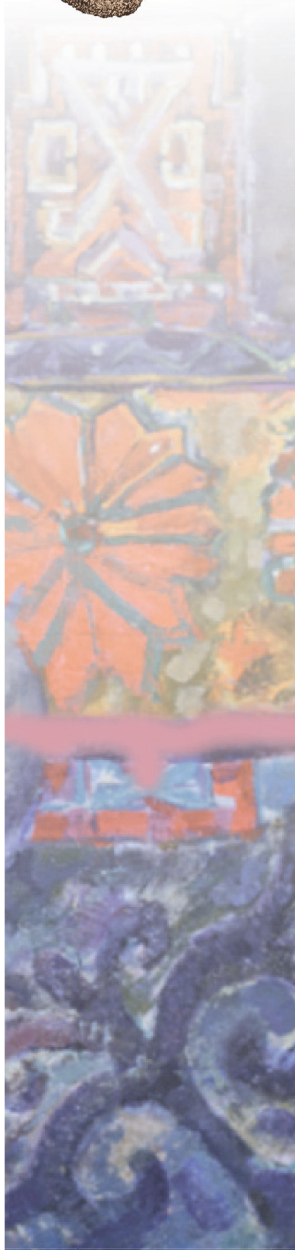
— Was it mere rumour? Speak up!

— Luck left us, my khan.

— What was it?

— My men cut the throats of all the noyon's Dzhungars in their sleep, just as you ordered, and I challenged the noion as the code of honour demanded.

The khan gestured in exasperation. Well as he knew that chivalry could not strengthen his power, he reckoned with batyrs noble customs. Now, he was thinking that he





needed totally unscrupulous men for tasks as that—and let batyrs make war.

— What came of your duel, my batyr?

— I had him pressed to the rock and knocked his sabre out of his grip when I heard, “Aruakh!”, the Kazakh warcry.

— That was Barak-Sultan!

— Yes, my khan. Could I cross swords with the man who had stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the three bloodiest battles with the Dzhungar?

— You were right, my batyr. “Snow drives off snow, and a khan alone can punish another khan,” goes our old saying. A man of low birth ought not to bare his weapons against a sultan-tyure without another tyure’s order. That would set people a bad example.

Taiman-Batyr grinned with a silent nod.

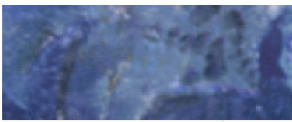
— Don’t you agree, my batyr? — said the khan, surprised.

— Not the time to discuss it, my khan.

— Why, Seren-Dorzhi will join his kontaichi in a week!

Khan Abulkhair went off into the steppe, as was his wont when he had something to ponder over. No one was accompanying him but a huge wolfhound with clipped ears, and mounted bodyguards were keeping at a fair distance. Now that no one saw his countenance, the khan felt free to think.

He had many things to think over. In the matter of a night, he caught his favourite wife on adultery, and the most fierce and dangerous of Dzhungar noions escaped his trap. He had heard many secrets, and now would pass them to his kontaichi. The khan would now have the taste of the bloodthirsty Galden-Tseren’s wrath. Then, Barak-Sultan, who had never before thought much of Abulkhair, would turn into his sworn enemy. Abulkhair, either, could

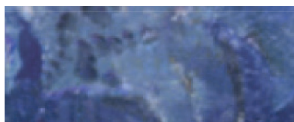


not forgive the predatory sultan for what he saw in the dead of night.

Khan Abulkhair was not the benevolent, weak-willed person his foes thought him to be. His character and gifts were best bespoken by the many victories he had gained over the most terrible enemy Kazakhs ever knew. The blood of Genghiz-Khan, his ancestor, spoke through his conduct, and he was none inferior for cruelty to any of his Tyure kin.

By ill luck, the khan belonged to a junior line of the Genghizides, from which no supreme khans of the three zhuzes could come. Everything in the steppes is in constant movement—birds and beasts, and even homes. One thing is immovable—the ancestral law. As the ancient shanrak had it, supreme rule of the Kazakhs belonged to sultans of the Middle Zhuz, the offspring of Kerei and Janybek. Whatever feats of glory Abulkhair would perform, he remained only the khan of the Junior Zhuz. Even that title belonged to him illegally thanks to the supreme khan's enfeebled grip on the zhuzes. Abulkhair was fully aware that his power of khan was the lot of a younger son, whose little house was leaning to the gorgeous mansion of his parents.

Even the command of all troops of the Junior and Middle zhuzes in the years of trouble did not help Khan Abulkhair. He was the first of the Kazakh khans to see that the Dzhungar invasion was not an incidental raid, but a prelude to an agelong subjugation by Manchurian-Chinese emperors. Not in word, but in deed he linked his policies to Russia, and did it firmly and forever. Following him on the road of national salvation was Khan Sameke of the Middle Zhuz, to prove Abulkhair's far-sighted wisdom. True, he was pursuing his secret ends as he was slanting toward Russia—yet who else could take the helm at a time like that?





Suddenly, Abulkhair, the cruel and resolute Tyure of the Genghizides, the khan who would not shrink from perjury and murder if they brought closer his goal, realized that even here, in the vast empty steppe, he was never daring to refer to himself as Great Khan. How great was the power of ancient custom? Was it true that Genghiz-Khan had god-given right of bringing spells? But then, the batyrs of low birth were brave enough to trespass many steppeland laws. Whenever war looms on the horizon, the old customs give way to put commoners at the head of troops, and many sultans bow to them. Was he to follow those brave men?

Khan Abulkhair stopped and looked back to see whether anyone was eavesdropping. Was not his idea monstrous? If the khans took that road, what would you expect of the riffraff? Chaos would reign then, and the world perish.

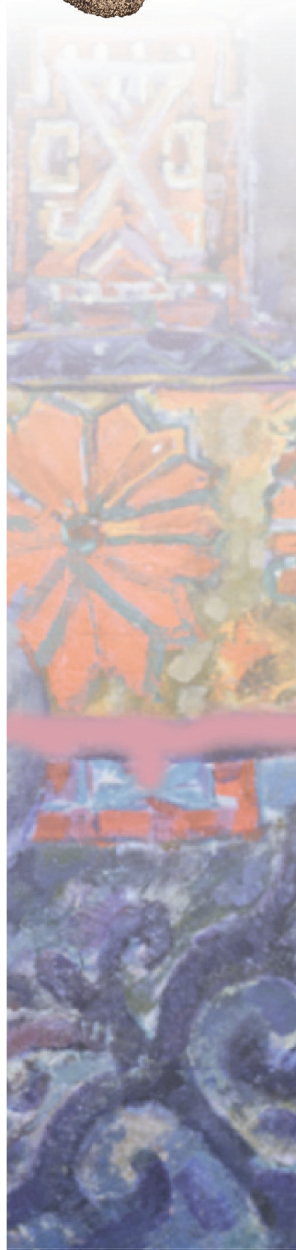
Still... Who but he deserved the throne of the three zhuzes? Was it the undistinguished Sameke-Khan of the Middle Zhuz, or Zholbarys, his brother, who had great difficulties ruling the ruined Senior Zhuz? No one had considered the ailing and lazy Bulat true Great Khan, just as his son Abilmambet now. Yet youthful Ablai was hopeful. At the age of thirteen, he brought down flying birds with an arrow, and beheaded running antelopes with his sabre at a gallop. Yet Sultan Ablai was too young to be seated on the white felt rug on which the Great Khan is lifted above the steppe. As to Abulkhair, if he were seated on the rug, few clans would be found in the Middle and Senior zhuzes to delegate men who would hold the edges of that rug of honour.

Biys and sultans were famous for inconstancy. They came for his protection and to the safety of Russian forts as soon as they felt the pressure of Dzhungar noions, only to repudiate his supremacy and curse him for his

treaty with the Tsarina as soon as a lull came. They were afraid he would subjugate him with Russian support, rob them of privileges and freedoms, and limit their power in their own auls. That was true. As the “best people” of many clans were harassing Abulkhair, a Kazakh majority were supporting him in the hope of protection from Dzhungar invasions and from the unbridled sway of biys and sultans, whose arbitrary rule became even worse with the Dzhungar raids. The common people were growing ever poorer, and bais enslaved freeborn warriors. Why else would Bogembay and Taiman be on his side? The poorer nomads always gained with one hand wielding the steppes—and Abulkhair was no fool to ignore popular support. A ruler’s wisdom was in an artful use of the peoples aspirations toward his own ends.

Did not Khan Abilmambet or Barak and the other sultans see that? Who of the steppe people would follow them if they struck a compact with the kontaichi or his noions after the horrible invasion? Did not they see the dragon’s maw behind the kontaichi’s back? Their advances to the Dzhungar noions, including the visit of Barak-Sultan and his relation, were to warn Abulkhair about going too far in his contacts with Russia. They were afraid of him gaining strength—which meant that he was on the right road!

Then, was it not clear to all that countries whose population and property were always on the move could no longer survive? How could they mine ores, melt iron, weld cannon, and defend themselves from enemies brandishing guns? They ought to learn all those crafts. They were to learn to build cities, melt iron, and sow grain. And had they better teachers than Russians? Dzhungars were in a similar situation. Their savage noions did not see that—or pretended not to see. They had the same cudgels, sabres and bows-and-arrows in their army. All



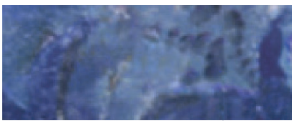


tumens of the kontaichi were weaker than the Tsarina's small contingent along the Siberian border—and she had a thousand times more subjects than those troops. The Dzhungars would sooner or later face the choice between Russia and China—and they were sure to prefer Russia, because no one in this world was worse than the Shurshut emperors.

Meanwhile, all those dashing sultans, who knew only how to steal herds from each other, were calling him traitor for his permission to build the town of Orsk, for his negotiations, and for joining Russia. No, he was no traitor who was wisely steering his boat into a safe haven amid the raging storm. They were the real traitors, the loud-mouthed fools who were steering the Kazakh boat into the Dzhungar shallow waters, across which the black Shurshut reefs were showing.

They were not to think that Khan Abulkhair was scheming by his treaty with Russia. He knew what proposals Tevkelev was bringing. He also knew several obtuse and arrogant Russian dignitaries in the frontier areas, who were accusing him of double-dealing in their reports to the Tsarina. They were wrong; he was not double-dealing. He merely had vision, and saw everything that lay ahead—good and bad, profitable and ruinous. He would consent to the Tsarina's request to send his sons to her court. Such were the ways of this world. His children would not be guests nor courtiers, but hostages. Yet he was sure that he had made the right choice, and he would not deviate from his way—and may his sons be the first Kazakhs to learn in Russia everything required by modernity.

His sons Nuraly, Eraly, Batyr, Aishuak, and Kozhahmet were their father's favourites. He also had Chinghiz by a Dzhungar wife. Abulkhair had more than once sent the boys to Russian forts shortly before important decisions



and joint action. His children were the safest there with the sultans' bloody strife, and the boys' presence made Russian rulers trust him.

They had every reason to mistrust their newfound subjects. It took Tevkelev close on twelve months to get back home from the steppes in 1731, as the biys and sultans of the Junior and Middle zhuzes branded him spy and were out for the envoy's life. At that time, Bashkir chieftains subordinate to Russia raided Kazakh lands, and prejudice against Tevkelev grew even worse. Bogembay Batyr and Eset Batyr, his kinsman, rescued the envoy, and escorted his embassy up to the frontier. And there were attacks on Russian caravans, too. Russian dignitaries had every reason to suspect Khan Abulkhair of masterminding all those outrages as a majority of the Tsarina's councilors were sure that he was an autocratic ruler.

The khan came out of his reverie with a start, as a woman's desperate sobs reached his ear. Horsemen were dashing across the steppe, an elderly woman riding ahead bare-headed, astride a mangy nag.

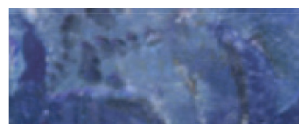
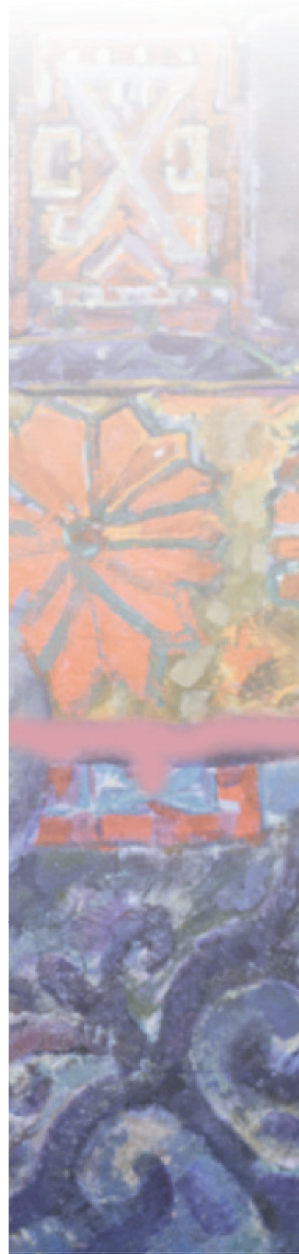
— Oi! Oibai-ai!

— Alas! Woe! Woe on us!

They were harbingers of death. He saw it now! Two warriors of Taiman-Batyr's force died in the nighttime clash with the kontaichi. Their comrades could not bring the bodies to the aul, lest the attempt on Noion Seren-Dorzhi became known, so the dead were put near the edge of the aul. Now they were found.

— My own boy! My only son!

The black wolfhound snarled and dashed forth. The sobbing crowd galloped past as the woman and two or three of her kith turned to the khan. As she reached him, the old woman awkwardly dismounted and crawled close to Abulkhair, scratching her face and tearing out tufts of hair from her bare head. The khan had difficulty holding





his dog by the collar, as the beast was out to tear at the hapless woman's throat. The bereaved mother rose from her knees and raised her hand in curse:

— I know everything. It was you, Khan Abulkhair, who sent my son to his death. Curse on you! May you have no peace here and in the afterlife! May you sob and wail in your grave for ever and ever!

— Hush, you poor thing. Are you the only woman whose son is dead? — he said softly.

— Curse on your grandfather and his father! Oibai-ai! — she cried even louder than before.

The dog tore out of the khan's hands but did not reach the woman—a black club rose and fell in the hand of a shepherd on a bay nag, and the beast collapsed, skull crushed.

A lasso swished in the air, and the shepherd fell off his horse. One of the khan's tulengut bodyguards came near.

— Hey, you bastard, — he cried out. — You might have hit the ruler!

Abulkhair made a sign with his hand. The bodyguards instantly unbound the herdsman, who helped the mother, who had lost her son, to climb to the saddle, and both of them went on horseback off without looking back.

After gazing at the dead wolf-hound for a minute, Khan Abulkhair rose and began to walk heavily to his tents. His bodyguards drove away, keeping aloof.

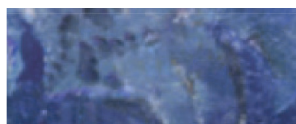
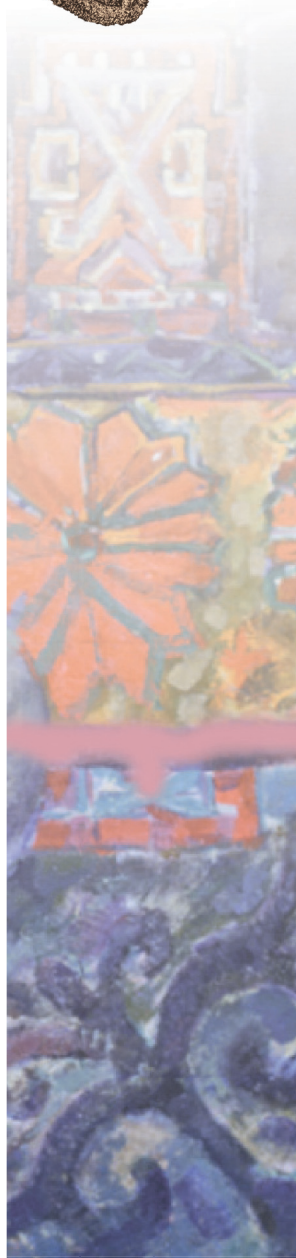
Walking, he thought and thought, and he could not remember where he had seen the herdsman, the killer of his favourite wolf-hound. At last, he recalled both the herdsman and the woman. Yes, it was she, that girl! In the years of his tempestuous youth, he made a trivial pleasure raid on the karakalpak auls in the lower Dzheikhun Darya River. There, he captured a girl with her brother. The girl made repeated attempts at escaping to reunite with her fiance in the native aul. However, she was caught

each time. Then, by order of the khan, she was given to a tulengut in marriage. Her brother became a tulengut, too. Later, the woman was left a widow and once, in severe winter-time, came to visit the khan with the request for aid. One of the khan's clerks had to deal with her request. He wondered whether she had then been aided.

Her son, a tall, strong horseman, was called Khusain. He would have made a good warrior with time. But he was incautious enough to place his head to a Dzhungar sabre thrust in the dark. There would have been less grief had the horseman died in an open battle. But on being found somewhere beyond the aul's limits, in the steppe, he was treated as a vagabond and would be buried accordingly.

What's to be done now? Indeed, the woman cursed him, calling him all kinds of bad names. True, no one heard that. But such indulgence tends to detract from his prestige. How should then the woman and her brother be punished?

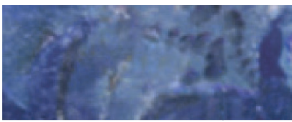
Only late in the evening, Khan Abulkhair shook off his thoughts. The camp-fires near the yurtas were burning out, with a warm kizyak smoke drifting in the air. He rose from the stone and suddenly saw he was sitting just opposite a large black circle. This had once been the place of the mirthful yurta of his tokal Nurbike.





III

It is difficult to date the Kazakh land's accession to the Russian Empire back to some single document. This was a long, involved and contradictory process that lasted for decades. Nor must it be linked to the name of some particular politician or even several ones. Just as any law-governed historical phenomenon, there were the most diverse economic, political and military reasons for it, and it had its numerous supporters and opponents, who defined their positions depending on the dynasty, inter- and inner-kin disputes, on the political conditions and geographic location of this or that groups of kins and tribes, and their traditional orientation. Thanks to the migrant way of life and the generally unstable situation in the steppe, which was caused and intensified by the Dzhungar invasion, the position of leaders of the kins kept on changing. Yesterday's opponent of the accession turned into a zealous supporter overnight, and vice versa. Be this as it may, the wheel of history kept rolling, tirelessly throwing off the historical arena everything that was lagging behind life, receding into the past, inert and petrified. As always in such cases, the wheel left splashes of blood flying to all sides. The sharp, merciless and

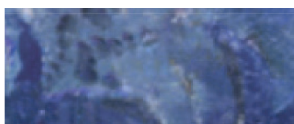
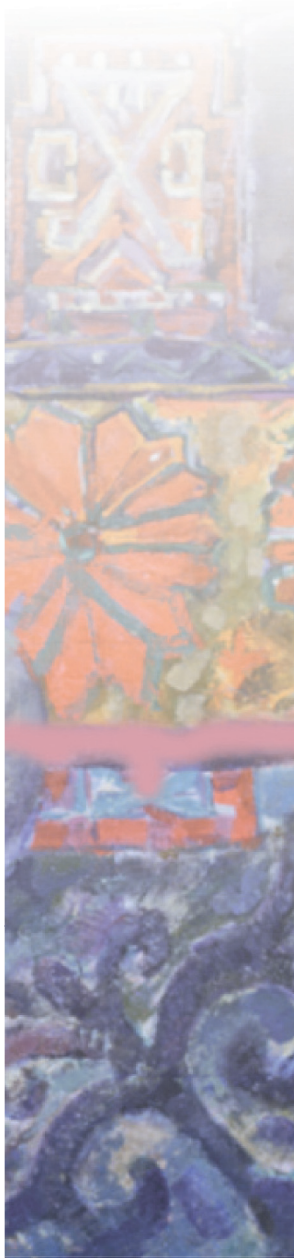


irrepressible wind of recent history burst into the Kazakh steppe.

In accordance with the documents, Khan Abulkhair was issued Tsarina Anna Ioannovna's deed reaffirming that "you, Kyrgyz-Kaisak Khan Abulkhair, and the troops which you command, shall henceforth be kindly placed under our subordination..." In conformity with the deed, Abulkhair shall have to loyally serve the Tsarina, to re-subordinate his army to the general Russian Command in war-time, not to make raids on the settlements of the Yaik and other Cossacks and the small nations, Bashkirs, Kalmyks and others, who acceded to Russia, to refrain from plundering Russian convoys, and to immediately return Russians taken prisoner to their homeland.

And when in 1740, Khan Abulkhair reaffirmed his accession and Khan of the Middle Zhuz, Abilmambet, with his nephew Ablai-Sultan, pledged their loyalty to the Russian Tsarina, all of them, as well as three-hundred-ninety-nine "influential persons," including Warriors Bogembay and Eset, each had their own ideas of the meaning, significance and forms of their accession to the Russian Empire. What really mattered was the fact that the Kazakh land had by that time already directly and unequivocally relied on Russia, combining its political, economic and military interests with the interests of the Russian Empire. This was necessary historically, and this process developed ever more rapidly, smashing all barriers in its way.

Whichever complications might have risen subsequently (this was inevitable in such a process), the Dzhungar invasion was stopped, anyhow, and the Kontaichi's absolute influence then spread only to the southern nomad Kazakh territories. The pressure put on the Kazakhs by the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates also discontinued, and later, already in the 19th century,



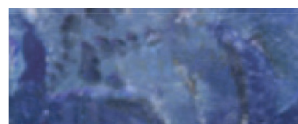


the Kazakh lands, thanks to the accession to Russia, rid themselves of Iranian Khan Nadir's encroachments that posed a threat of great misfortunes, too.

Meanwhile, the wheel of history continued rolling. Apart from Orsk, a number of Russian fortifications along the Zhaik and Ilek rivers were under construction. More and more tsarist troops were sent to the border areas. Migrants from Russia's hinterland gubernias came together with the troops and settled on land. Clashes, inevitable in such instances, began; moreover, such clashes were surreptitiously encouraged both by tsarist officials and feudal-and-bai higher echelons. Both sides were always at one in instigating inter-ethnic strife. They understood even in those distant times, particularly over the Pugachev developments that soon followed, the kind of a threat that emanated from the unity of the poor and needy strata of both nations.

Such is, indeed, the law-governed nature of history. The accession to Russia saved the Kazakh land from destruction, involved its people in the contemporary world historical flow of events, and facilitated the acceleration of the social and political development, a settled way of life, land tilling, and the emergence of new forms of trade and industry. But from the outset, this process—in terms of its social implications—also divided into two parts, developing in two directions. On the one hand, the more oppressed and trampled underfoot sections of both nations started drawing closer to each other more actively: first, the settlers' poor to slaves and farm labourers, herdsmen, and then—the “working people” at the tsarist metal-making factories and mines—and, as industry and railways were fast developing, the local proletariat eventually emerged, which was the most revolutionary section of the Kazakh people, marching already fully in a single formation with the Russian

proletariat. This drawing closer together proceeded for two-odd centuries, developing both in breadth and in depth and assuming the most diverse forms. This process ranged from the numerous meetings of progressive exiled Russian intellectuals with progressives and educationalists in the Kazakh steppe, the joint service of army officers from the Kazakh clan nobility with the revolutionary-minded Russian Guards, officer-Decembrists, and Decembrist followers to tsarist penal servitude, exiles and prisons, where the continuously rebellious Kazakh poor and needy found themselves by the thousands, and where their class-consciousness was molded under the guidance of Russia's professional revolutionaries. The Kazakh and Russian people came hand in hand to win their great objective, with the genuine unification of nations finally materializing in a single socialist state. On the other hand, however strongly some khans and sultans might hate tsarism that deprived them of their relative independence and many feudal liberties, they inevitably drew closer to it, becoming its most loyal and cruelest servants. They saw in this drawing closer together their own salvation from the revolutionary tide rising ever higher with every year that passed, and tsarism's colonial policy was no exception in this respect, anyway. Officials and even generals—clever, well-educated, thinking persons—were to be found, who, with the breadth of character typical of the Russians and their conscientiousness, established schools and hospitals in territories within their jurisdiction and demanded that judges, doctors, post-office workers and other rank-and-file officials, who had to deal with non-Russians every day, an obligatory command of the language, morals, and customs of the local population. There were many instances of such persons going to St. Petersburg to uphold the rights of non-Russians there, to protect them against arbitrary rule and violence. The Kazakh people pass the





names of such persons from generation to generation and revere their memory. And what can be more sensitive and just than the people's memory!

But such persons were only an exception that confirms the rule. The first Cossack detachments, which came to the "wild bank of the Irtysh River," were not made up of great humanists of their day at all. Overseers at the tsarist mines were not noted for justice and meek morals, either. And, indeed, new settlers in the border areas were not a homogeneous mass of people. Together with the poor land workers, who moved to the Kazakh steppe away from the unthinkable arbitrariness and serf oppression, adventurers of all shades and caliber, rushed to the new places, as it always happens in such instances. Ex-convicts were also resettled there. There was no law upon all those people even in their native parts. But there were extensive opportunities offered for them here. When, under one of the tsarist decrees, for example, it was proposed to appropriate departments already in the 19th century that new settlers shall be permitted to buy "orphaned girls" from among non-Russians for marriage at the price of fifteen roubles per capita, this soon developed into a genuine trade for such people. Of course, all the girls bought that way figured in documents as orphans. Incidentally, one should not be surprised at this here. The Russian serf girl, who was also taken away from her parents and sold to another land-owner, was not priced much higher!

There were widespread embezzlement of public funds, bribery and lawlessness in the native Russian gubernias, whereas those phenomena manifested themselves in the colonial outskirts to an immeasurably larger extent. There were unjust trials even in St. Petersburg, but trials of that kind were doubly unjust somewhere in Karatal or Kokchetau.

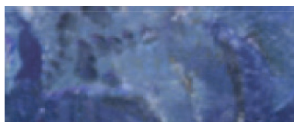
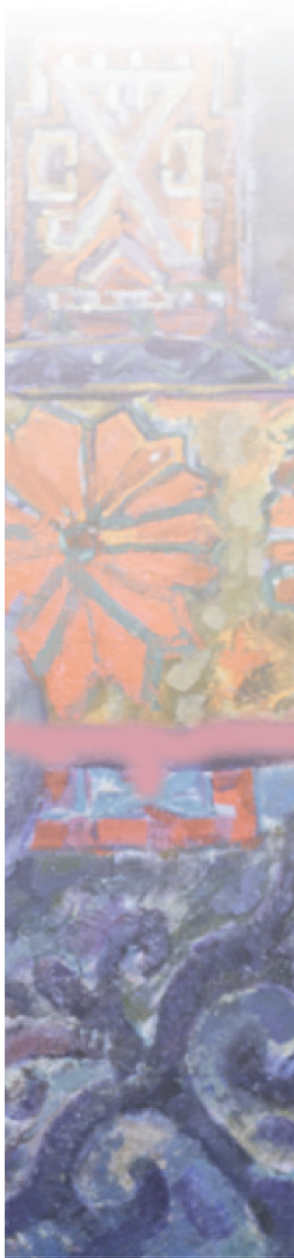


The farther on, the more acute the contradictions between the two aspects of one and the same historical process of Kazakhstan's accession to Russia. And the sooner they led to the revolution. Therein lies the main progressive objective historical reality. Therein lies the wisdom of history.

Sameke-Khan died in 1737, and Abilmambet, who was made khan of the Middle Zhuz, was too far away from the Russian fortress walls, but too close to Dzhungariya. He decided on improving relations with the Dzhungar Kontaichi. For this purpose, Abilmambet recognized his supremacy over himself, sent to him as an amanat—hostage—one of his sons, and asked as a reward to give him back the ancient capital of his ancestors—Turkestan. With this aim in view, he intended to send his ambassadors to Galden-Tseren, who stayed in Tashkent at that time. However, Abilmambet conducted the negotiations secretly. He was not sure that the people would back him, for the wise Bukhar-Zhyrau had already told him directly:

An old friend will never turn your enemy,
For his blood mixed with yours when pledging
friendship,
Nor will an old enemy ever be your true friend,
For his blood was spilt by your hand!

Orenburg Governor General Nepluyev also hastened then to strengthen his relations with leaders of the Middle Zhuz Khan Abilmambet, Barak-Sultan, and the young Sultan Ablai. This worried Khan Abulkhair, who dreamt of getting Russia's support for his sway over both zhuzes. In addition to this, the Orenburg chiefs refused to grant his request for using grazing grounds between the Volga and Zhaik rivers. As a result, the bellicose leaders of the Junior Zhuz started disobeying Khan Abulkhair, while





the argyn and kipchak tribes of toraigyr, kaz, kedel, utei, taz, kyrkmyltyk, aiderke, aktashy, takshy and bakai, who inhabited the flood-lands of the Turgai River and belonged to the Middle Zhuz but had until then been subordinated to Abulkhair, began to openly talk of a desire to get out of his control. They thought that will help them ease the tsarist settlements' steadily growing pressure on their lands. Under Anna Ioannovna's decree, the size of tax on the Kazakh nomad camps was insignificant. The two zhuzes combined contributed to the tsarist treasury a mere one to three thousand fox pelts a year. In the initial years, even this tax was paid but occasionally. Now, however, that the new fortifications were under construction, the tsarist government started levying those taxes in kind: food and animal supplies. The main burden of that tax was shouldered by the auls of the Junior Zhuz located nearby. Added to this were officials' abuses. All this gave rise to a murmur of discontent. "If even now they take our animals away from us, what will happen when the fortresses are built?" — the people said.

Khan Abulkhair appeared to have become twenty years older in one year's time. An energetic and active man in the past, he could now sit for hours in solitude, gazing at one point. His cheek-bones became angular, cheeks sunken, and there was not a drop of blood in his yellowed face. The sparks that had once been gleaming in his lively eyes vanished. This made his eyes turn whitish. When he was sitting like that, one could not believe that the lean old man was that same Khan Abulkhair who had rushed at the head of an avalanche of horsemen towards the Dzhungars, breaking through their close-set tumens.

Be this as it may, Khan Abulkhair was not a person that set himself a great objective, and on seeing the collapse of his plans, would not fall on to the rocks, like a wounded eagle, to kill itself. No, he went on thinking of how at least

to crawl to the peak or, if failing to make it, at least to have revenge on his enemies. In such a frame of mind, all means are good.

A solitary mound in the steppe that Khan Abulkhair took a fancy to was that same one near which the kithless tulengut had killed his favourite wolf-hound with a sharp kuruk. As ever, he sat there on a hard carpet that his servants had spread out beforehand, while Sultan Nuraly, his first-born son, was seated nearby, next to his right foot. Today, they conversed with each other for a long time, and both were cheerless. From time to time, Nuraly looked askance at his father, but averted his eyes then and there when faced with Abulkhair's ice-cold gaze. As the saying goes, "The khan has a son until the son wishes to be a khan himself." So far, Sultan Nuraly ruled over a whole territory his father had allotted to him, but who knows what was in the heart and mind of that restless and, bustling, unlike his father, man?!

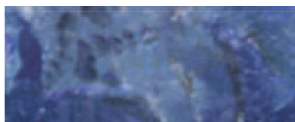
— So, you propose that I should express my firmness and independence, talking with Nepluyev? — Abulkhair asked, watching his son out of the corner of his eye.

— No, it's too late to do this, — Nuraly even waved his hand as a sign of negation. — It's too late, anyhow. What's needed now is to try and find a common language with him, if possible.

— But will he want to do so now?

— Had he had no desire, Nepluyev wouldn't have invited you to come and see him in Orenburg, father.

— It's not only me he is pining for, — Khan Abulkhair gave a short cheerless laugh. — Similar invitations were sent, as it seems to me, on equal terms, to the Middle Zhuz, too. But was it by chance that Anna Ioannovna referred to me in her deed as "Abulkhair, Khan of all the Kyrgyz-Kaisak Horde?!" The Tsarina listed as lands falling within my jurisdiction the lands of the Middle Zhuz, too.





Why, then, does the Tsarina's Governor deny recognition of this title of mine, if he really intends to find common ground with me?

— But you just think, Father, how many years have elapsed! Your power and influence have dwindled. Abilmambet and Sultan Ablai no longer lend you an attentive ear. We must find another way to make them fall out with the governor.

— I see you have found it.

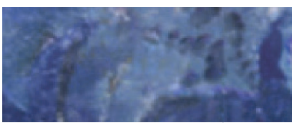
— Yet my khan will not follow my advice.

— Do you ever follow mine?

— When a baby is past teething, soft food does him bad.

— That's how you talk now!

The father and son fell silent. They had much to think over. Nepluyev, the governor of Orenburg, had asked Khan Abulkhair for a conference in Orsk, a new town at equal distances from the headquarters of the khans of the Junior and the Middle zhuzes. Steppeland people always paid great attention to such things, and Kazakhs saw at once that the Tsarina's vice-gent was treating both khans with equal respect, while he had clearly been giving preference to Abulkhair ever before. Besides, young Sultan Ablai of the Middle Zhuz had been invited to the conference, unlike Sultan Nuraly, independent ruler of clans along the Zhaik. That wrong done to his son pleased old Abulkhair, who had long seen Nuraly's hopes for his throne. He also knew that Nuraly had secret contacts with Russian civil officers, who had not yet recognized him for an independent khan. Nuraly would go to all lengths to win that recognition and his father's crown, for that matter. As he met Russian envoys at the negotiation table, Abulkhair made it a point to insist on his sovereignty, even if limited. Unlike him, the selfish Nuraly would willingly sell all nomads of the Zhaik country into serfdom.



— That's how you are talking now! — The khan repeated.

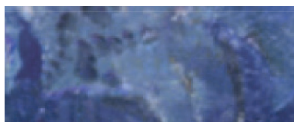
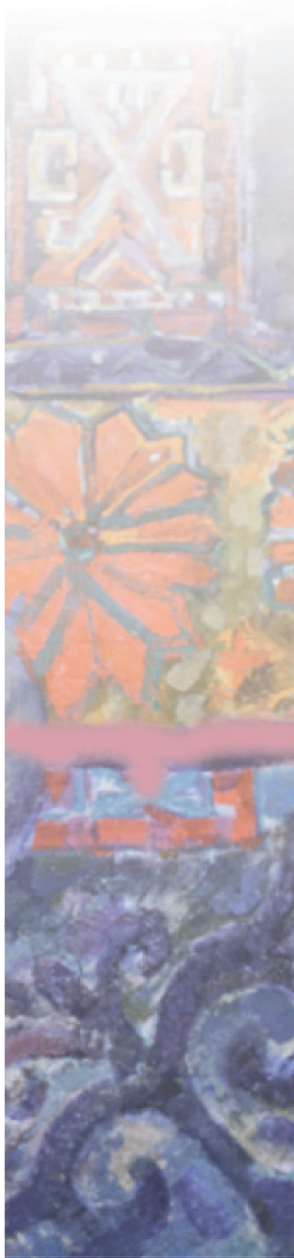
Unreasoning senile fury gripped him. The khan's hand grasped a staff inlaid with gems and silver to strike across his son's hateful face and cunning eyes, which were avoiding his glance. He did not see the young man put his palm on a Khiva dagger dangling from his belt. A heavy thud of horsehooves interrupted the scene. Both turned their head to see Zhanat, Abulkhair's youngest daughter, and Chinghiz, his son by a Dzhungar wife, approaching the hill.

Of slight and graceful built and dark complexion, Zhanat took after her father. Her grey eyes, like her father's, spoke of his will-power and obstinacy, which dominated her beauty. She was wearing not a frilled dress, as befit a young lady of station, but the soldierly attire. That fashion was for the wives and daughters accompanying warriors to cavalry guerrilla forces to wage a life-and-death war on Dzhungars. A khan's daughter had no reason to dress like that in these peaceful parts. Still, she was wearing a close-fitting cloth coat with short sleeves and ample trousers with embroidered cuffs. A silver-sheathed dagger was on her belt, and her long plaits with their modest pendants were tied to the belt on her sides. The girl was approaching twenty, and so, was an old maid, according to steppeland ways. A bitter fold of her obstinate mouth said that these dry lips would never open to meet a lover's lips.

Sultan Chinghiz, with his round face and slanting eyes of a Dzhungar, was of remarkably strong build and resembled a paluan wrestler. A simple belt of camel-skin ran across his coat of fine wool, with a black velvet collar, a dagger on his side.

After the son and daughter made their customary greetings, the khan asked sternly:

— Do you have any message, or have you merely seen





us talking? — Judging by his inscrutable face, no one could think that he could have killed the flesh of his flesh an instant before. Zhanat stepped forward:

— You told Aunt Karakyz this morning to gather Chinghiz's luggage, so we have come to ask where and when he is going, and for how long.

— Let's go back now, — snapped the khan as he rose from his carpet, and the four galloped back to Irgiz, escorted by silent tulegens.

Khan Abulkhair spent the previous night in the yurt of Akilim-ai of the zhagalbaily kin, his second wife, and next in beauty to the adulterous Nurbike. Carried away by passion, he pledged to bring Kozhahmet, her hostage son, back from Orenburg. "Oh my khan, is it not high time to have our favourite child back with us?" — she was hotly whispering in the dark. — "Cannot Chinghiz, your tokal's son, go to replace him? He is a big boy, and nothing bad will happen to him." The khan made the promise.

Her request was not the only reason. He knew that the influential zhagalbailys, who used to settle along the Or, were losing vast pasturelands with the fort construction, and were greatly dissatisfied. "The khan has to think about everything. Water rises in a lake with a frog pissing," — he angrily thought. Now that the zhagalbailys saw their young kinsman of the khan's blood, they would be not so angry and would not openly blame the boy's father for their plight.

As he reached the yurta of his new tokal, a Dzhungar, the khan dismounted and crossed the threshold together with Chinghiz:

— The boy is departing for long. He may be leaving the aul for two or three years. Get him everything he will need.

Karakyz turned pale, and silently bowed her head. Kazakhs could not cope with her long Dzhungar name,

and when she was brought to the aul, local women nicknamed her Black Girl after her swarthy complexion.

— You are a big boy, — added the khan seeing his son turn pale, too. — It is high time for you to see strange lands and learn manners.

At this, everyone understood that Chinghiz would now be the Tsarina's hostage.

Three riders appeared from around the hill as if they had been waiting for the khan to leave the yurt.

— This is Kudabai, — said the khan and turned to Zhanat, — Go home now, girl.

Zhanat went off reluctantly. She gave the bridle of her horse to a tulengut to hold, and approached her own yurt, looking back every now and then.

Kudabai, a handsome broad-shouldered young man, her father's scribe and interpreter, had long won the heart of the brave and resolute girl. But a tyure lady had no hope to marry a commoner, so they had a secret affair, though whatever secrets there were in the steppes were open secrets. Zhanat was to meet a highborn betrothed on the Jeikhundarya banks two years before, but she conveniently caught typhoid fever. Loath to part from Kudabai, she again feigned illness the year before, and even went to Khiva to see local physicians. Now, Kudabai had been away for a week on the khan's order, and she felt desperately miserable.

Zhanat had an inestimable merit she shared with no one—Khan Abulkhair, stern and secretive, confided most of his secrets to her. There is no wiser judge of a child than his parent, and Abulkhair intuitively knew that his daughter was his replica from head to toe, and all his secrets were safer in her memory than at the bottom of the deepest well. That was why, right upon getting Nepluyev's invitation and learning that similar papers had been sent to Abilmambet and Ablai of the Middle





Zhuz, he dispatched Zhanat to Orenburg with an escort of fifteen warriors. She alone could cope with the mission of tremendous importance.

Zhanat had a report to governor Nepluyev in a leather bag on her neck. “Khan Abilmambet is scheming with the Dzhungar kontaichi. If Galden-Tseren cedes the city of Turkestan back to him, the khan will surrender to him and make his sons hostage. I am making bold to advise you to do the same, and hold Abilmambet tight before one of his sons comes to Orenburg.” Hard as she tried to hold her tongue, Zhanat could not but tell the secret to her darling.

Kudabai knew on which side his bread was buttered. Perfidy was hiding in his heart, masked by his prepossessing appearance. His conscience of a private secretary stepped aside at the temptation of a bowl of good koumiss, let alone a glass of vodka, to which he took one of the first steppeland men to become steady booze companion of the Orsk drunkards. Truly, Khan Abulkhair’s famous intuition was giving way. Kudabai was the man he ordered to penetrate the home of his rival kin in the Middle Zhuz and see what was brewing there. No wonder, Khan Abilmambet knew all that his beloved amazon’s father had confided to him the very day Kudabai arrived.

Kudabai sprang off his horse, as befit a good warrior, and fell on one knee before Khan Abulkhair.

— Good to see you again, oh light of my eyes! — the khan greeted his factotum, his eyes glued to a brand-new silver dagger of an expensive look on his belt.

Kudabai promptly took the dagger off and handed it to his sovereign:

— Look, my khan, what a gift I received in the Middle Zhuz as your messenger.

— I see...



Abulkhair had not the slightest suspicion that the dagger had any connection with the secret he had divulged to his daughter. He thought that his situation was not so bad at all if Abilmambet and young Ablai were so generous to his clerk.

— Say now what you have seen and heard, — he said as soon as they entered the khan's central yurt alone.

— Much have I seen and heard, my khan and lord. What matters most is that the Middle Zhuz is not anxious to fall out with the Tsarina. So their plotting with the kontaichi is a mere blind.

— Is Sultan Ablai going with Abilmambet?

— Yes, my khan.

— What about Bukhar-Zhyrau?

— I did not see him.

— How is that? He is generally known as the people's eye. If he is not with them, the people don't approve their khans' conduct. Is that so?

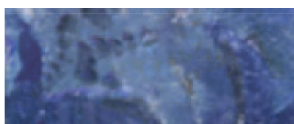
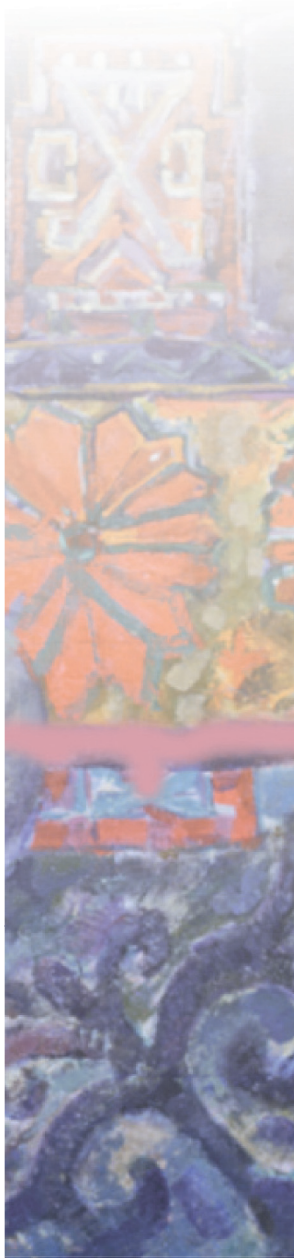
— I am not sure. I think the governor has not asked strangers to his feast.

— Possible.

The khan gave a satisfied nod, and shut his eyes.

On August 20, 1742, governor Nepluyev of Orenburg ordered large army tents pitched in the Tas-Otkel valley near the Orsk fort for a conference with the Kazakh khans. Only then did Khan Abulkhair, who had arrived three days in advance, learn that, apart from Abilmambet, Ablai and Barak of the Middle Zhuz, Dzhungar ambassadors Koshku and Burun had been invited together with their escorts, Karakalpak batyrs Momor and Kuchak. Khan Abulkhair's two sons, Eraly and Nuraly, had by that time reached Russia on the governor's personal invitation. It was too late to change the arrangement.

The governor was attaching great importance to the conference, judging by all the details. Two dragoon





squadrons and a grenadier battalion had been stationed on the site. As they fell in of a morning, or were doing exercises, the officers' sabre hilts and the privates' bayonets sparkled in the bright steppeland sun. Six big cannons gave a salvo from time to time, and their shots raised fountains of sand on distant hills.

The rulers of the Middle Zhuz were late. They did not arrive the next day, either. The governor had become nervous by August 22, when he heard from one of his numerous spies that Khan Abilmambet and sultans Ablai and Barak had met halfway with Kudabai, Khan Abulkhair's scribe and interpreter, upon which they unexpectedly turned their horses back into the steppe. Men close to the Middle Zhuz's top thought that was because Khan Abilmambet had got wind of Dzhungar envoys being with the governor, and was loath to negotiate in their presence. After all, the kontaichi's tumens were always ready to fall on nomadic camps.

— That's right, — decided the governor. — But how could they learn about the Dzhungar ambassadors? And what has the clerk to do with it? Call him, quick!

Kudabai was summoned to the fearsome governor immediately. An experienced man, he saw the general was serious by the way he heavily strode from end to end of his tent, twitching his ginger moustache.

— Good morning, Your... Your... — he cheerfully shouted in Russian, a trembling palm pressed to his fur hat.

The general gave a wave of his hand, his bulging eyes fixed in anger:

— Why did you go from Abulkhair to Abilmambet? Quick!

The cunning Kudabai pictured Abilmambet arriving, though belatedly, to tell the formidable general that he knew about the advice to keep him in Orsk and demarked

his sons hostage. None other than Kudabai had blurted it out to the Middle Zhuz rulers after he coaxed Zhanat into telling it. It was the best thing to tell everything to the biggest chief.

— Your Excellency, my lord and governor, — he cried, interspersing Russian words with Kazakh. — I was really sent to catch up with Abilmambet and the sultans on the way, and I had no chance to report to you.

Nepluyev still was striding to and fro. “I think the interpreter boy is telling the truth. Abilmambet did not come lest he be kept here to give hostages. The boy says he warned the Middle Zhuz chieftains on the order of Khan Abulkhair of the Junior Zhuz. Why did the devilish Abulkhair make this wise advice to me and warn his opponent of it at once? I suspect he is afraid of the hothead sultans, and is beating a retreat. Right, the old plotter wants to cause me to quarrel with the Middle Zhuz. That’s understandable. He wants me to have whatever contacts with the steppe through his mediation. Now, I shall have to pretend that I am unaware of his clever little tricks.”

The general cast a glance at Kudabai:

— Listen, my dear. Your zeal will find its reward, but you first have to do more favours to Her Majesty the Tsarina.

— Yessir.

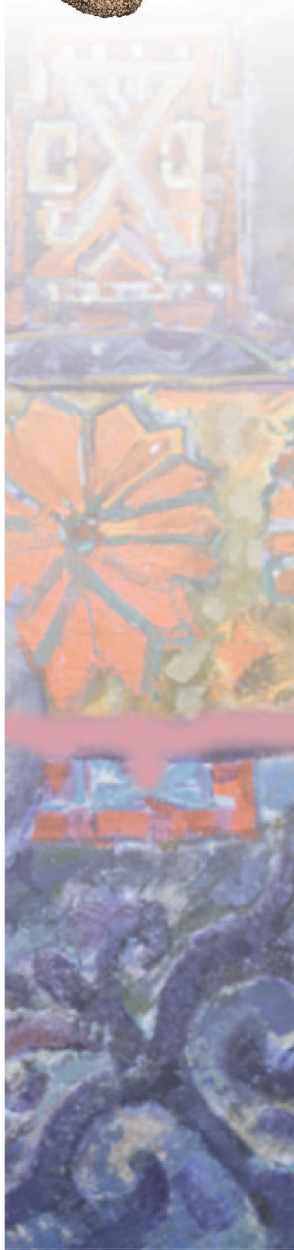
— All right. Have you told me everything you heard?

— I can swear it on bread and the Koran, Your Excellency.

— Yes. I, too, know the importance of an oath on the Koran, — Nepluyev grinned. — Do you know anything about the sister of Abulkhair, your lord? The one on the Kalmyk line, who has been proposed as wife to the Dzhungar kontaichi?

Kudabai’s jaw dropped in astonishment:

— I don’t know, my lord and governor.





— That's all right, boy.

The clerk was clearly telling the truth. Nevertheless, the governor knew for sure from Nuraly that Abulkhair, who was bearing him a grudge, had tried to contact Galden-Tseren via the khan of Khiva, and proposed in marriage his sister Karashash.

— That's what you are to watch, my dear Kudabai.

— Yessir.

— Go now.

Half an hour later, Kudabai the interpreter was summoned to Khan Abulkhair's yurt to tell everything he knew about the wooing of Karashash.

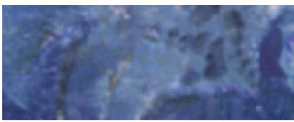
— Nepluyev knows it all. I wonder who is informing him, — he panted.

— I shall know it someday, — Abulkhair said ominously, turning pale with the news. Though aware of Kudabai's contacts with the gubernatorial chancellery, the khan did not know about Zhanat, his daughter's, liaison with the clerk. The interpreter was often passing news from his headquarters to Orenburg. Whatever guesses the khan had he chose to keep to himself. It was much more convenient to know the man who was shadowing him. The arrangement was all the better with Kudabai informing him about all proceedings in the chancellery.

The khan saw now that Nuraly was betraying him, and that mattered most. How far had he carried his contacts with the governor? What if the fate of Khan Abulkhair had been sealed, and the Tsarina was soon to recognize Khan Nuraly alone? What would Abulkhair be doing if he were Nuraly?

The khan dropped his head.

Kudabai scrutinized him with an understanding air as he was pondering his own position with the utmost satisfaction. "He who believes, pours gifts on you, and he who doubts is afraid to hurt you"—the saying was







about him. Who else had such a gainful situation as his? All were rewarding him for information. Nepluyev was kind to him and promising high awards, Abilmambet had given him an expensive dagger, and Khan Abulkhair—a grey ambler the kind of which Kudabai saw only in his most daring dreams.

— Take him for good. I see you are my faithful servant, — the khan said that day. True, a sinister flame lit in his tiger's eyes that instant—but then, he was an old tiger, and his paws had grown feeble with the years. The other two would protect Kudabai if necessary.

Now, Kudabai was thinking of a red officer saddle he had seen in the governor's courtyard. How nice it would look on his ambler! But to earn a saddle like that, he had to learn much else from his lord and pass on to the chancellery. He was to lend an attentive ear to the feverish nighttime whisper of Zhanat, his passionate beloved.

The chieftains of the Middle Zhuz were absent, but General Nepluyev, governor of Orenburg, did not show that he cared. He ordered the festivities to start, and long tables brought for the occasion were arranged the next day on the shadowy tree-grown riverside, gorgeously laid with viands to Kazakh and Dzhungar taste: a fine choice of meat dishes, the best koumiss and boursaks alongside exquisite samples of Russian and West European cuisine, fruit of the industry of the governor's serf chef. No pork was to be found on the tables, which were, however, generously adorned with wine, vodka and sweet liqueurs—the governor knew with what relish highborn Kyrgyz-Kaisaks were indulging in drink, braving the Prophet's behest. So, facing the bais were bottles whose shape repeated their squat, obese form. All the Russian and Kazakh guests were dressed up.

Nepluyev ordered the feast to be preceded with war games. Grenadiers in full dress were attacking each other

in two files as dashing hussars reformed and slashed vines with their sabres at full tilt, and showed wonders of trick-riding.

— Well done! Go on, man! Godspeed! Oibayai! — the guests were shouting—some merely encouraging the riders, as was the steppeland wont, others gazing terrified at the approaching cavalry, thinking that the governor had gathered them for slaughter.

Artillery shooting replaced cavalry exercises, and admiring and horrified cries came again:

— Hurrah!

— Hurray!

— Oibayai!

— Astagfir'Allah!

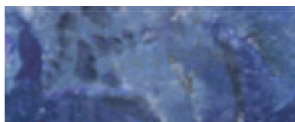
The cannon had made twenty four salvos when frightened steppeland horses had all torn their tether to dash off into the plain. Huge wolfhounds were whining, crouching behind the yurtas. Women and children cried and shuddered with every shot. In reply to servile questions, General Nepluyev proudly said that three salvos of six cannon would suffice to raze an average aul to the ground.

The governor then made a speech, which lasted ten minutes. Turning now to Khan Abulkhair, who was sitting on his right, now to the Dzhungar ambassadors to his left or to Karakalpak batyrs, Nepluyev spoke of the Empress' desire to live in peace and accord with all neighbouring countries and nations who had given themselves under her protecting hand.

— Not to drink to Her Majesty's health is disrespectful!
— he guffawed as he downed his glass.

Stupefied by cannon roar, the bais drank big glasses of vodka or liqueur in one gulp—even those who had never before had a drop of anything stronger than koumiss.

Some men at the other tables, however, put their glasses





aside in glum silence. Seeing that, Akhun Nasibullah-mullah, the Mufti of Orenburg Muslims, who had come with the governor, slowly rose.

— Not to drink to the health of our mother the Tsarina means to wish her ill health. An ill wish to the one placed above us by the Almighty is a bad sin, — he said in a sing-song voice.

With a jocular sniff of his little, red, shiny nose, the reverend Akhun downed a huge glass of vodka so bravely that a hussar officer opposite him opened his eyes wide. No one dared to ignore the toast after the clerical feat of courage, only a few extremely pious Muslims splashed out their vodka behind their back. A majority were sneezing, groaning, and waving hands:

— Bitter as poison, it is!

— The booze burns holes in one's throat.

— Right drink, it is, if the mullah guzzles it!

— Say, Kirah-bai, you dirty dog, why d'ya hate me?

— Now the Tsarina woman and the gov'nor with womanish fringes on his shoulders have something to praise me for.

— Your health, Kirah-bai!

And the whole gathering turned to the food. They did not need the mullah's inspiring example any longer. Sleeves rolled up to the elbows, each snatched several slices at once, stuffing the food into their mouth with smeared fingers, mumbling, "delicious!" Huge rams fried whole turned into piles of bare bones in no time. Strong teeth were noisily crushing gristles: "Now, Kirah-bai, pass me this little round bone!"

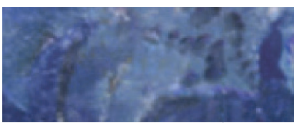
Potatoes were thrown aside without tasting:

— Do they call that food?!

— Bad herb — bitter!

— Too much salt! How can one eat Orys food?

— Wrong! Have this roast fowl—not bad!



— What a herb! It brings tears to your eyes. Put a bunch into my friend Kirah-bai's big mouth!

Only several batyrs and three or four Russian officers had tasted the roast out of politeness and were now seated, with inscrutable faces, their eyes glued to the table in their front. Those kindred souls spotted each other in the munching crowd, and exchanged silent glances, wondering what awaited them—a clash in battle or long, stern, manly friendship.

General Nepluyev rose again, raising his glass above his head:

— Officers and gentlemen! Nobles of the Kyrgyz-Kaisak Horde! Let us now drink the health and prosperity of a faithful subject of Her Majesty Empress Elizabeth and of my dear friend, great Khan Abulkhair of the Smaller Horde!

Deafening hurray's and a hubbub responded. Some were drinking, others eating. Praises and curses mixed in a dissonant choir:

- Rise in glory, Khan!
- May you die an ignoble death!
- Happiness and more glorious victories to our lord!
- May his yurta burn to cinders!
- Hush, aksakal, he may hear.

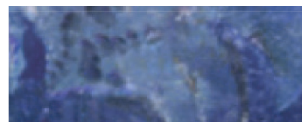
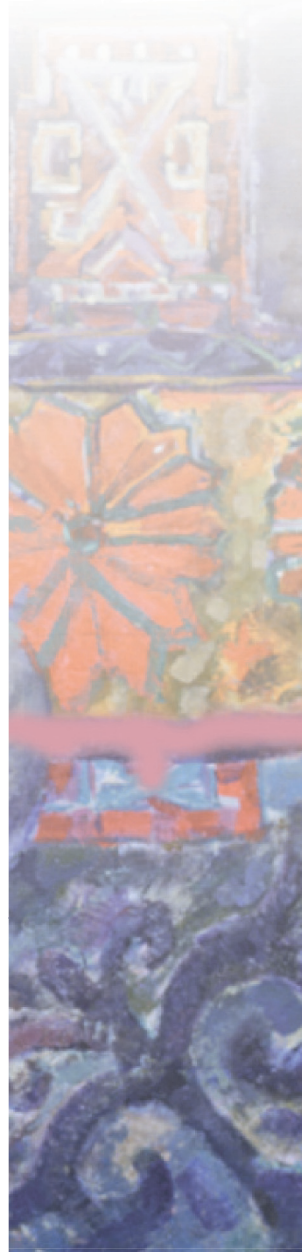
— Let him! He made us sit at table with infidels, made me poor sinner taste forbidden drink! Now we are all as bad as infidels. Alas! Oibayai! You will be shedding bitter tears in your grave, Abulkhair!

— He sold us to infidels dirt-cheap as so many mangy sheep.

— Quiet, you fool, or you'll lose your silly tongue with your head!

— Better sit at table with infidels than lie in your grave in glory!

General Nepluyev waved his hand:





— Long live Khan Abulkhair!

Merchants and army and Cossack officers broke into song of praise. Drunken bais and local tradesmen joined in out of tune. The Mufti's penetrating tenor rose above the discordant singing. Someone took a dombra, and a lilting tune rang above the plain in honour of the White Tsarina, the governor and Khan Abulkhair.

The khan had visited many feasts, and knew from experience how much liquor he could hold to keep a sober mind, so when he and a tipsy Nepluyev left the table for a stroll, Abulkhair was stalking with firm foot, and his sight was sharp.

— We shall talk business tomorrow, my friend. I don't think you want important disputes in the presence of our Dzhungar friends.

— Right, especially if a deaf ear is turned to my humble requests.

— Who knows?.. That was why I wanted this little preliminary talk.

— I have three requests to make. If you concede to two, the last will go without saying.

— What's the first?

— My foes assume that I and my horde see little help from you. Aware of my dedication to you, dear friend, Khan Abilmambet and the sultans of the Middle Zhuz are accusing me of betrayal, while they are after an alliance with the Dzhungar kontaichi. Still, you rather sympathize with them than me.

Nepluyev shook a finger at him, laughing:

— The sultans are all your enemies.

— Whoever is plotting against the Russian Empire is my bitter enemy.

— All right, my friend, but Khan Abilmambet, and sultans Ablai and Barak swore fealty to General Urusov on the Koran two years ago. Vassili Urusov told it to me,

and described the ceremony in detail. In token of their subjection to Russia, they were given sabres in silver-plated sheaths, like the ones Bogembay, Yeset and you have. A hundred and twenty eight elders of the Middle Zhuz have oaths similar to the ones given by the elders of your zhuz. Now I have replaced Urusov, but they swore not to me or him, but the Empress.

— We are nomads, and not all are taking seriously oaths given on a book.

— But you take it seriously, my friend.

— I am different.

— Abilmambet is true to his oath, too.

— He will yet break it!

— What makes you think so?

— Why has not Khan Abilmambet come here?

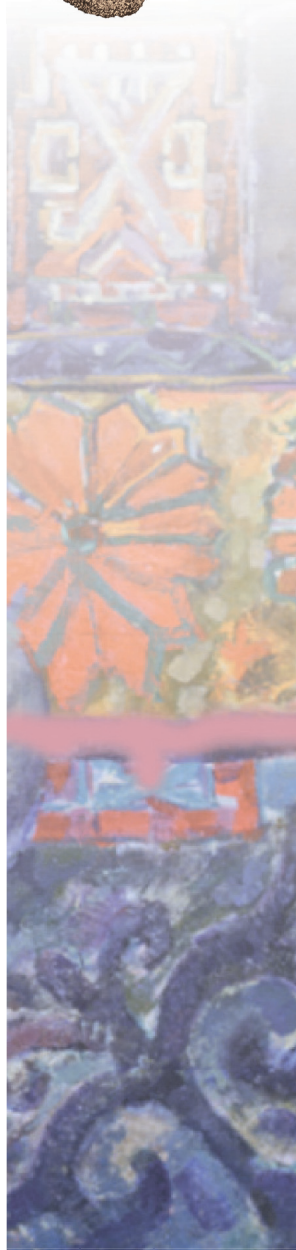
— I keep wondering, too.

They stopped at the edge of a precipice, and Khan Abulkhair began speaking about the plot weaved by the Middle Zhuz. Abilmambet and his sultans were in direct contact with the kontaichi. That was why they were loath to attend the feast—all the more so since the kontaichi had his spies among the guests.

— Very interesting, — smiled the governor. — But back to your request, my friend.

— Give three thousand soldiers into my subordination! I shall make do with a thousand armymen. Let the rest be Kalmyk or Bashkir auxiliaries.

Nepluyev's eyes shone with pleasure. As soon as he relieved Urusov two years before, he embarked on a divide-and-conquer policy to lure now one Kyrgyz-Kaisak khan, now another, and they were quarrelling for his benevolence. History provided him with a wealth of instances on which clever civil officers achieved amazing results through no visible effort, by cunning tactics alone. Yet none of those khans had asked him for troops to make war on another.





— What is your other request, dear khan?

— It concerns my son Kozhahmet, who has been your guest for seven years now. His mother wishes to see him while Chinghiz, my other son, may be staying with you.

Quite sober now, Nepluyev looked at Abulkhair askance:

— Which wife's is that other son of yours?

— Karakyz-khanum's—the Kalmyk's.

The reply spoke volumes to the general. As he knew from agent reports confirmed by Sultan Nuraly, Khan Abulkhair's eldest son, Kozhahmet, was his favourite child, while Chinghiz was in disfavour with his father. So the request meant that old Khan Abulkhair did not want for some reason to leave a valuable hostage in Russian hands. Nepluyev pretended not to hear the khan's important words. He stood upright and significantly knit his brows:

— Great are your deserts to Her Imperial Majesty, my friend Abulkhair, and I should fulfil both requests if not for a trying situation in which Russia is. As you know, Russia is waging war, and cannot spare even three thousand soldiers, while valiant Khan Abulkhair's struggle with other khans and sultans subordinate to the Empire is a domestic Russian affair, however important it might be.

Abulkhair lost self-control for an instant to drop his head:

— I see. What will you say to my other request?

— You will have to write a letter to Her Majesty Elizabeth in St. Petersburg. The Empress values you so highly, my friend, that she alone can settle the matter.

— Ah, that's how it is!

— Now, for your third request.

— Third... — Abulkhair's voice grew thick with emotion. — My third request will come as follows: Kontaichi Galden-Tseren, whom you know, is seeking in marriage the hand of Karashash, my sister on our Kalmyk



line. I cannot afford permanent hostilities with him as I have no reliable support.

A shadow of a smile again lit Nepluyev's face:

— This is a practicable request, my friend. The late lamented Peter the Great, Her Majesty's father, made a peace treaty with Dzhungar tribes in his time. Still, I don't think you ought to be too hasty about that match. We shall have enough time for a wedding feast after we have talks with them all. The fine young lady your sister is will have many enviable wooers.

That instant, Khan Abulkhair clearly saw that Nepluyev knew everything he was after, and he owed it more to Nuraly—his son—than anyone else. As if reading his mind, the general turned the conversation to Nuraly:

— Sultan Nuraly has a profound and comprehensive knowledge of the Kyrgyz-Kaisak Horde, unlike your other sons, my friend.

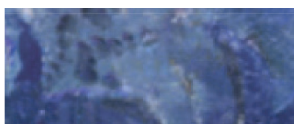
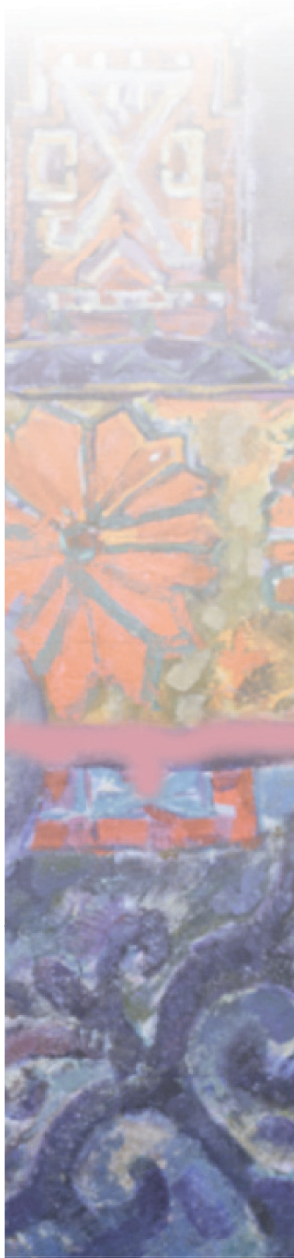
— Yes, all my hopes lie with Nuraly. He is to inherit when I die. That is my most important request.

— “Aha, I think he knows that Nuraly's informing on all his little schemes! Well, what do I care?” — thought Nepluyev, and said — I think the Empress will approve your justified wish.

— “What a quick approval! Nuraly boy and the infidels would like me to die this very instant,” — thought Abulkhair.

— But we hope that we shall long enjoy the inestimable help in all our good deeds of Khan Abulkhair, our wise and dedicated friend, — Nepluyev quickly brought in.

— “They can't afford to rid of me at once,” — Abulkhair thought with relief. — My son Nuraly is well informed on everything that is taking place in Khiva, and Karakalpak chieftains reckon with him. If only you could give him soldiers, he would win the Karakalpak cavalry to his side, and oust the Shah's men from Khiva, — he remarked.





— Too early, dear friend. We are waging another war and cannot afford to fall out with the Shah. That was why I refused you the three thousand soldiers you needed.

— I do not need a single soldier of the regular troops—they will be a mere nuisance! — Here, Abulkhair looked the general straight in the face for the first time since the conversation started. — The pious people of Khiva would rise if they saw infidels in their city, while our warriors are their kith and kin, and they will joyously greet Nuraly, for they hate Nadir-Shah.

— “Why is he involving Nadir-Shah? He wants to entice us into a big war to fish in troubled waters,” — thought Nepluyev. — We cannot start any armed action on our frontier without Royal orders, — he said sternly.

Abulkhair replied with a nod. He knew where he was. Everything was to be paid for in this world. Protection from the Dzhungar cost him independence. He could no longer make thunderbolt appearances with his riders here and there in the steppe-land. Everything was to be coordinated with St. Petersburg. The old warrior hated it—but Nuraly, his son and most likely successor, appeared to like the arrangement. What would his grandsons stoop to?!

— We are, both of us, men dependent on big politics. We understand each other, and this is good! — added Nepluyev to soften the impression of his previous words.

The evening made Abulkhair even more uneasy. Like a man awaiting his dismissal any day, he had been watching the governor talking to others since the instant he came. Before supper, Nepluyev was talking to Janybek-Batyr.

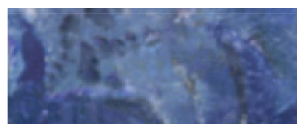
One of the Shakchak tribe, an Argyn branch, Janybek was greatly respected in the Middle Zhuz. Husband of one of Abulkhair’s daughters, he had been helping the khan of the Junior Zhuz to spread his influence to several clans of the Middle. He had long been Abulkhair’s right-hand man, together with Bogembay-Batyr and Taiman-

Batyr. Urusov and later, Nepluyev were reckoning with his opinions as if he belonged to the highest noblemen. They requested the Empress to bestow on him the title of tarkhan, brought by outstanding feats of martial glory—he was the first non-Russian to receive that high award. Abulkhair, too, did something to bring him the honour.

Janybek was playing a decisive part in a recent war with Kalmyk khans of the Volga country, kinsmen and allies of Dzhungar noions. Khan Donduk-Omba, supreme Kalmyk ruler, lived up to an old saying: “When the enemy has you by the throat, his dog has you by the edge of your garment.” The Kalmyk khan attacked Kazakh nomads from the west whenever Dzhungars were invading from the east. Khan Abulkhair determined to punish him in 1738. Not Donduk-Omba, but simple Kalmyk shepherds suffered, as usual. Abulkhair and Janybek routed the Kalmyk army in a surprise attack and went on to ransack Kalmyk auls, Dzhungar-fashion. Two thousand families were taken hostage, and ten thousand sold in the slave markets of Khiva and Bukhara.

Bagadur Galden-Norbi, son of Donduk-Omba, mustered twenty thousand to take vengeance, but his strife with his father thwarted the raid, and governor Urusov eventually coaxed Kalmyks and the Kazakhs of the Junior Zhuz into making it up. Not that he truly desired peace between the two khanates, and lasting peace was impossible, for that matter, with clashes repeating every day, flocks stolen, and captives taken.

One of the far-sighted men who at once saw the benefits of joining Russia, Janybek-Batyr, fully supported Khan Abulkhair’s policies. That day, he was to be announced tarkhan of the Russian Empire in the presence of many men of noble birth. Yet now, Abulkhair’s heart sank as he saw his son-in-law and comrade-in-arms confidentially talking to the governor. After all, Janybek rather belonged





to the Middle Zhuz than the Junior—and why was Nepluyev not asking him to join the conversation?

Again, as if divining his thought, the governor approached the khan.

— I regard Janybek-Batyr not merely as your son-in-law, but your right-hand man, — he said in an apologizing manner. — The khan and sultans of the Middle Zhuz have not come, for some reason, so I am discussing things with our valiant tarkhan. Look how many batyrs and elders of the Middle Zhuz are present! It takes a venerated man to lead them.

— You are right.

The general dropped his voice:

— Then, the Dzhungar ambassadors ought to see that we do not need Abilmambet and his sultans to settle the affairs of the Middle Zhuz.

— Right, too! — Khan Abulkhair livened up for the first time that day. — That's why I am here. We are not to trust Ablai with the destiny of the Middle Zhuz. I have a good reason to say so—Ablai is getting to the fore there despite his young age!

The tables stayed as they were, and ever new dishes and drinks were appearing on them from morning to night. A brass band and a drum were playing behind the trees. The bais and clerks were drinking vodka together, diluted with koumiss, and slept on the grass as servants were stepping over them. The rams brought to be slaughtered gave a frightened bleat every now and then.

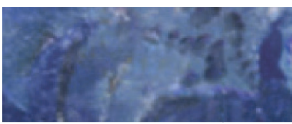
Nepluyev examined the tables, and raised a full glass. The most sober of the gathering hissed:

— Hush! Quiet! Gentlemen, I am drinking this last toast to the health of my guests.

His voice drowned in discordant shouts:

— Hurrah! Bravo, bravo!

— Zhasasyn! Hurrah!



— Thanks, Your Excellence!

— Good luck! Ten thousand years of prosperous life to you!

The next day, the select few were invited to the governor's tent for negotiations which went on for two weeks. To obtain recognition of Kazakh lands joining the Russian Empire from the Dzhungar kontaichi was the main goal.

It took several days to take stock of entangled relations between Russia, Dzhungariya and the Kazakh khanates. General Nepluyev was doing what he could to be recognized sole judge and mediator of all disputes between Dzhungariya and the Kazakh zhuzes.

— We have come here for Kazakhs to pay us taxes and give hostages. They were raiding us while we were busy on the Chinese frontier, — announced the kontaichi's envoys.

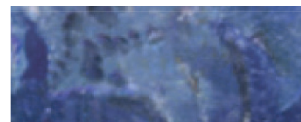
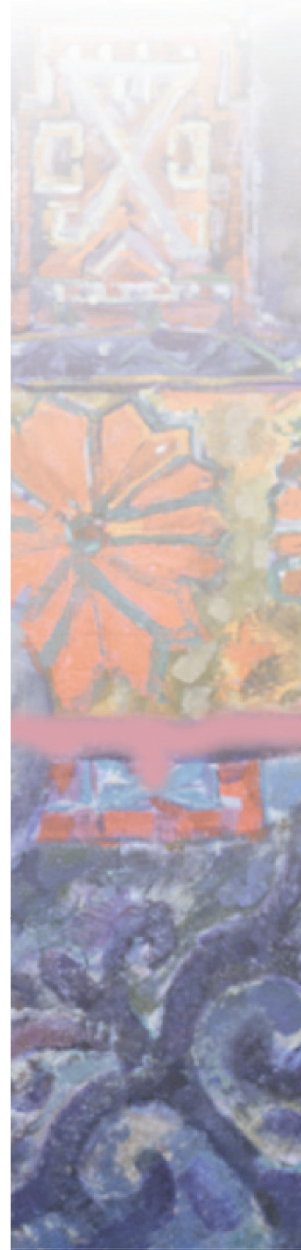
— The laws of the Russian Empire forbid our subjects to pay taxes and give hostages to any other country, — Nepluyev firmly replied.

— Despite our enemy's subterfuges, we shall not tolerate disobedience to Her Majesty the Tsarina, to whom we pledged fealty on the Koran, — Khan Abulkhair and Janybek-Tarkhan said on behalf of the Junior and Middle zhuzes. — Our previous raids merely continued a warfare which none other than the kontaichi had started. If no war is on, we are taking an oath not to break peace anymore, and the governor's presence makes this oath more reliable than all hostages of the world!

— Kazakh khans more than once swore peace and friendship, and were never good on their word, — retorted the Dzhungars.

— Now, I am speaking on their behalf, — snapped Nepluyev.

— If so, please send delegates to the great and radiant





Galden-Tseren, the earthly image of the sun, — said the ambassadors Koshku and Burun.

They did not go at once to silently attend a sumptuous ceremony, in which a hundred and seventy eight aksakals, biys and batyrs of the three zhuzes were announcing with bread pressed to their lips and a Koran above their head that they and all their kin were voluntarily accepting allegiance to Russia. As they were saying this, the Dzhungars threw eloquent glances at huge Russian cannon lined along the edge of the steppe.

General Nepluyev, in full dress, with aiguillettes and all his orders and medals, made a speech to thank Her Majesty's new subjects for trust in the Empress, and pledged on her behalf to recognize the equal rights of all tribes and protect them from enemies. He made an emphasis on the elders and warriors of the Middle Zhuz, whose lands were under the kontaichi's sway and sons held hostage by Dzhungars. The governor was thus challenging the kontaichi.

When the ambassadors were gone, Nepluyev appealed to Khan Abulkhair and Kalmyk khans, his neighbours, to settle all disputes peacefully, with the assistance of Russian legal agencies. Not to prejudice Abulkhair against Russia, hurt as he was, the governor allowed his auls and herds— better late than never—to wander along the rivers Ilek and Berdy. Kazakhs now could settle there side-by-side with Russian colonists. It was a great boon for the poorest, who soon revived the long-abandoned Kazakh land-tilling.

More than that, Khan Abulkhair was allowed free entrance of any Russian fortress day and night, and he and his bodyguards were entitled to free food supplies at the level of a general. Instead of joy, the khan felt a pang at that—steppe-land rulers were granting the same benefit to their tulenguts.

Another frontier was drawn along the Zhaik between

Kalmyk and Kazakh lands, and neither could cross the river now. It was too late to settle the fate of captive Kalmyks, long after they were sold in the bazaars of Khiva and Bukhara, but the governor promised to trace them and intercede for the hapless.

So, Janybek-Batyr alone was perfectly pleased. An artillery salute followed the reading of a Royal ukaz, which bestowed on him the rank of the First Tarkhan of the Russian Empire, equal to General-Fieldmarshal, to be passed on to his offspring. The gathering broke into congratulations:

- Eternal happiness to you, Janybek!
- How you glorified the shakchak kin!
- Your pacer won the race. Do not forget your humble kith!
- Now you make a feast for all the three zhuzes!

At this, Janybek the greybeard, the most courageous of all batyrs of his time, dose associate of the khan of the Junior Zhuz, who faced death on many occasions—wept like a baby. Even General Nepluyev was-taken aback at his outbreak of emotion. “Oh Lord, they are simple and trustful as little children—excellent new subjects of Her Majesty! — he said to himself.

The governor cast a look back—and saw fierce countenances. Only now did he realize how many enemies Janybek had made with his success.

This did not spoil his radiant mood. “They are envious as all children. Sheer measure to rule such people. Whenever I want to punish one of them, I shall reward him in public,” — he grinned.

The governor summoned Kudabai the interpreter shortly before the guests left.

— Do you know, dear man, that Abulkhair has long been petitioning for the restoration of Zhamkent, an ancient town in the lower reaches of the Syrdarya? Which you Kazakhs know as Seikhundarya?





— I heard it more than once, Your Excellency.

— Why do you think is he doing that?

— He might like to be closer to the Dzhungar, Your Excellency, — said the pinning interpreter, as he was contemplating the governor with an innocent eye.

Their talks were getting more frequent with every passing day, and Kudabai grew accustomed to the general's blood-curdling gaze and stentorian voice.

— We'd do wise to get closer to them, too, — the governor brought out, pensively rolling from heel to toe. — It will be not restoration proper. We shall have to build from scratch, and start by dispatching a land-survey team to the site. I shall send Junior Lieutenant Ilya Muravyev to your khan's headquarters. He will be your immediate superior. Understood?

— Yessir.

— Good luck! Keep the khan under close supervision before the lieutenant arrives. Report his every movement to me.

At this, Kudabai made bold to reveal his cherished dream:

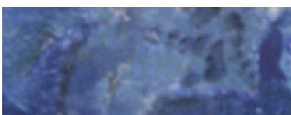
— Do we need that officer boy at all, Your Excellency? I know what land-survey is about, and local people will not be so suspicious of me.

Nepluyev scrutinized his promising interpreter:

— Work on, and you will have your reward. Money and promotions will not wait if you remain as dedicated to the crown as you are. As to the lieutenant, he will not interfere in your job. Go now.

Half an hour later, Kudabai received from Khan Abulkhair a sable hat and a cold-embroidered coat as he learned that an eye was to be kept on a Russian lieutenant who was soon to appear.

— “Though we are holding hostage Abulkhair's son, so the khan will not dare to openly come out against Russia,



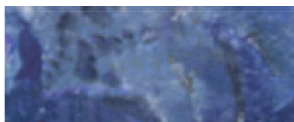
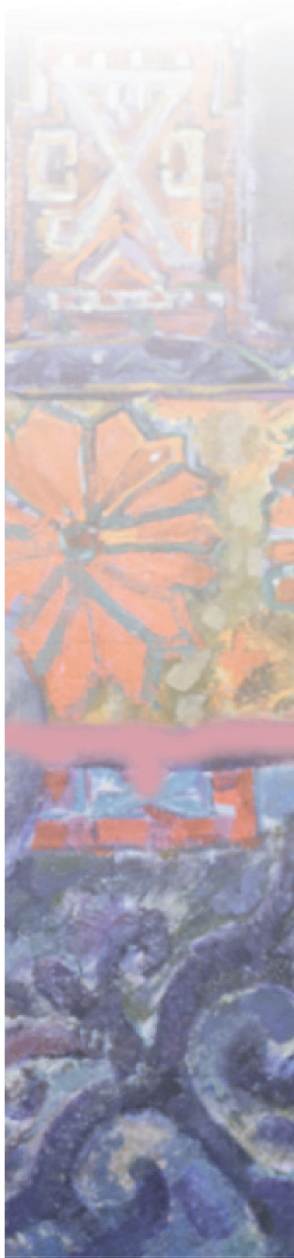
we are not to trust that arrogant and perfidious man,” — Nepluyev wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in St. Petersburg the same night.

So none of Abulkhair’s serious requests were met. Though he was granted free access to all forts and cantonments of the Russian Empire, and promised government supplies, his heart was aching with the wrong done him, and he felt as if he were groping down an underground tunnel as he rode across his native land.

At that time, Khan Abilmambet surrendered Abilfaiz, his son and heir, as hostage to the Dzhungar kontaichi. The khan was jealous of Abulkhair, as he saw Russian preference for the khan of the Junior Zhuz and suspected that Russians intended to make him supreme ruler of all Kazakhs. He soon learned that Janybek-Batyr was promoted to tarkhan and represented Abilmambet’s own Zhuz at governor Nepluyev’s conference. This, and Galden-Tseren’s promise to cede Turkestan and thirty two neighbouring towns back to Kazakhs, encouraged him to seek the kontaichi’s protection. Young Khan Ablai was in Dzhungar captivity at the time, and that mattered, too. All said and done, the khan of the Middle Zhuz was helping his worst enemy to finally subjugate Kazakh lands.

When he saw that Abilmambet was serious, Galden-Tseren ordered a military highway built across saline plains in 1745, and stationed crack forces of twenty thousand along the frontier of Kazakh lands subordinate to Russia. Dzhungar vanguards were ever more often raiding and ransacking Kazakh nomads’ borderline camps to enslave captives.

Kazakh refugees once again fled across the steppes. An agreement, however, banned their crossing the Zhaik to its west bank. Those who ignored the frontier on an old nomadic custom were tried according to a Senate decree of March 5, 1744, which ordered the culprits banished





to Rogovik or the Nerchinsk mines and mills in Siberia. In a message of May 11, 1747, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered fire set to the grassy steppe from the right bank of the Zhaik to the Caspian coast. A Senate decree of September 20, 1743, made the Yaik Cossack army responsible for frontier guard to make Cossack elders lords of the land. The Siberian Cossack army overtook the frontier along the Tobol, Irtysh and Ishim rivers to the detriment of the neighbouring Kazakh tribes and clans. The Russian Empire was embarking on a colonial policy ruinous to the poorest nomads. Oppression was getting worse on Russian colonists and the poorer Cossacks, too. The Pugachev mutiny was nearing to bring Russians and aboriginals together for the first time in a bitter fight against Tsarism.

True, General Nepluyev saw that peace negotiations and extended trade were the best tools of further colonization. “Opportunities must be used to subjugate Kazakhs not so much by violence and threats as through the boons of trade,” — he wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, the same Nepluyev asked Lieutenant-General Stockmann, Uil Highway commander, for two thousand Cossacks and five thousand soldiers of the Orsk garrison to crush Kazakh armed resistance in case it rose. If necessary, another ten thousand auxiliaries were to be dispatched from among Kalmyks, Bashkirs, Tatar Christian converts, Cheremises, and others.

Kazakhs had nowhere to retreat, with the bloodthirsty kontaichi and his cavalry locking them to the other side. The khans and sultans promptly took sides, while the commoners were tossing as trapped beasts, bleeding with every desperate jerk. Hundreds of armed bands appeared, led by batyrs of low birth and even shepherds, to ambush Russian army units and transports, caravans, the richer nomadic camps and bais’ herds. Though official papers

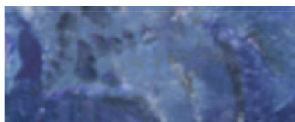
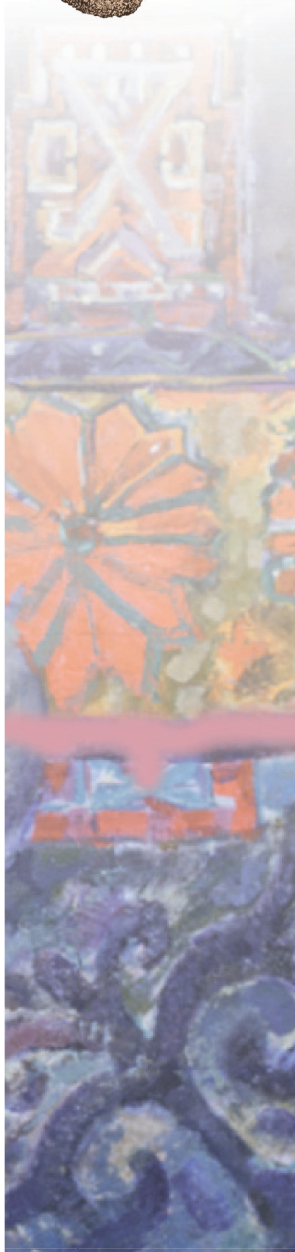
described them as robbers, they manifested popular resistance, which everywhere and in all times started with similar spontaneous outbreaks. Peasant bands were joining Stepan Razin's movement in Russia a century before.

Units led by Bayan, Malaisary, Yelchibek and other batyrs were persistently attacking Dzhungar noions, who had seized their lands. The conflagration of popular warfare was spreading.

Khan Abulkhair stood aloof to his affairs. His public influence was dwindling apace after he failed to get the Orenburg governor's consent to his requests of regular troops, independent action against Nadir-Shah in the south, pastures across' the Zhaik, and even his hostage son's return. That was not so much his own trouble as General Nepluyev's bungle for Khan Abulkhair, a venerated warlord, personified the policies of incorporating into Russia.

The elderly khan of the Junior Zhuz was dashing to and fro across the steppe-land. He did not know what to do, and stooped to instigating certain Kazakh clans to migrate to Central Asian khanates in the hope that, alarmed with those acts of disobedience of Russia's new subjects, the governor would summon him back and give him troops to force the fugitives back. Nomads stayed deaf to his sedition, as they felt safer in Russian-governed lands. Seeing that his hope was futile, the khan came out against Russian rulers, first on the quiet, and later, overtly.

Two Kazakh units crossed the frozen Zhaik at the height of winter 1746-1747 on Abulkhair's instigation to attack Kalmyk nomad camps and a Russian fishermen's village in the Kzyl-zhar valley. They drove away large herds and over six hundred captives, some Russians among them. Another big unit soon reached the Volga to ransack many villages on the way. The dashing warriors



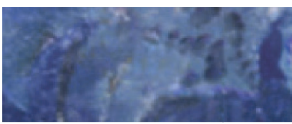


were ambushed on their way back. Many of them fell or were captured. The prisoners were later court-martialed. As he wandered about the steppes on his tortuous road, Khan Abulkhair was thinking of attacks on Russian forts which he himself had allowed to be built in his time. Other insulted clan chieftains and guerrilla batyrs were mustering round him.

Still, Abulkhair never forgot that he could never take the upper hand over mighty Russia, and whatever he was doing was done merely to raise his chances, as he would be bargaining with the governor. That, and the love of his hostage son Kozhahmet, made him order all Russian captives traced and released. "As soon as he realized the vanity of his action against Russia, Abulkhair became even humbler than before," — General Nepluyev wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Russian dignitaries again misunderstood the old khan.

Things were quite different in the Middle Zhuz, whose chieftains saw that they could not believe the Dzhungar kontaichi, who was out to subject Kazakh lands. Russia alone could resist the Dzhungar conquerors. Now that it was clear that Abulkhair had no Russian support in his dynastic aspirations, Abilmambet and all sultans of the zhuz were slanting to Russia. Governor Nepluyev, in his turn, tactfully reminded to the chieftains about their oath of allegiance to the Tsarina, and transparently hinted to Sultan Barak, the most obstinate of the lot, about his grudges against old Abulkhair. Nepluyev knew about his quarrel with Barak after Abulkhair's men ransacked a rich caravan which Barak-Sultan's son had sent to him from Khiva. The governor well knew the vengeful Barak, and could now afford to idly wait for an easily predictable denouement.

Abilmambet soon achieved the release of all his hostages by the kontaichi, immediately to sever all



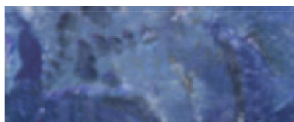
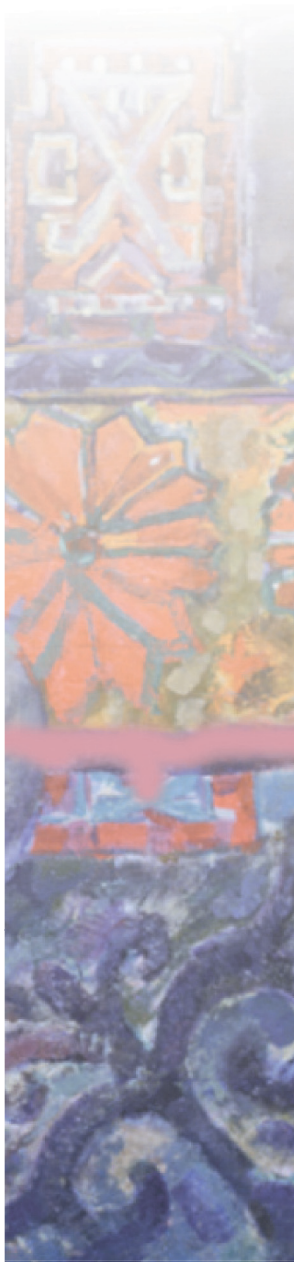
contacts with him. Galden-Tseren retaliated with recalling his ambassadors from the Middle Zhuz, which amounted to a declaration of war. After Khan Abilmambet and his sultans finally determined to accept Russia's sovereignty, Taiman, Altai, and other low-born batyrs of the Junior Zhuz gave up Abulkhair to join them. The batyrs little cared about khans' and sultans' strife. They knew that the Dzhungar kontaichi and his Shurshuts were their only true enemies, whom they could repulse only with Russian support. Though it was clear that the Tsar's yoke would be hard, it was still better than cruel death from the Dzhungar sabre. Certain Kazakhs had made friends with Russian colonists. Deserters from the Russian army were roaming the steppe, and shepherds and rank-and-file warriors easily found common language with them.

Trade was of tremendous importance, too. Kazakhs could gain permission to visit all Russian fairs and sell their wool and felt rugs in exchange for grain, textiles, crockery, knives and tools—all of better quality and at much more reasonable prices than in the bazaars of Khiva and Bukhara. Russian garrisons made the journeys to the fairs safer than ever before. Merchants and even industrialists appeared among the Kazakhs, and many poor men found permanent jobs in quarries and salt mines or on road and bridge construction.

When he saw what turn things were taking, Khan Abulkhair, who was sure he was the first in the steppelands to swear fealty to the Tsarina, determined to present his claims to St. Petersburg bypassing the governor. He started with writing to Tevkelev, whom he knew well, to complain of Nepluyev and ask for counsel. Kudabai the interpreter wrote the message as usual, and brought it to Orenburg, where he visited the governor the first thing.

— What's up, dear man? — asked General Nepluyev.

— A letter from Abulkhair, my khan, to General Tevkelev in St. Petersburg...





— Hmm.

— To be dispatched with the very first messenger, Your Excellency.

— I think you know the contents?

The Orenburg governor was an honest soldier, and would hardly read anyone's letters in Russia—he had imbibed the code of nobleman's honour with mother's milk. But rules of decency did not concern the correspondence of barbarian Kaisak khan.

As to Kudabai, that one was devoid of any scruples at all, so he recited the message by heart as it was imprinted in his excellent memory.

— Don't you forget to dispatch it with the first messenger going to Petersburg, as the venerable Abulkhair told you, — said Nepluyev, smiling at the old khan's naivety.

He stopped his spy with a nod as Kudabai was about to rush out on his mission.

— Any more orders, Your Excellency? — asked the interpreter.

— I think you realize as well as I do, dear man, that we cannot any longer rely on the valiant Khan Abulkhair.

Kudabai's face darkened—he was still pinning hopes on the khan:

— What if he repents and serves the Tsarina faithfully as before?

— No matter now that young and able dignitaries have emerged among Kyrgyz-Kaisaks.

“Khan Nuraly, son of Abulkhair!”— shot through Kudabai's mind. Really, he had chosen the right tactic from the start. If Khan Abulkhair the old wolf was to meet his fate, what would become of the little defenseless rabbit Kudabai was?

— How will our khan be deposed? Will the Empress do it with an ukaz? — Kudabai made bold to ask.

— I don't think she will, — the governor brought out dryly, glaring at the interpreter. — St. Petersburg could not care less about Abulkhair, who sowed discord among the sultans and will answer for it. We shall not intervene in their strife.

— Who will deal the blow? And what does the governor want of me? — Kudabai was feverishly thinking.

— Barak hates Abulkhair more bitterly than any other of the sultans hostile to him. Khan Abilmambet detests him too, but he will not... — he brought out, his flesh creeping.

— Will Barak-Sultan?

— That one? He will! He has long been saying that Abulkhair sold himself to the White Tsarina...

And he pressed a panicky palm to his lips, but Nepluyev made an encouraging gesture:

— Speak up, man! So Barak is the best for the task. If he hates us so, we shall not be sorry for him.

— What shall I do, Your Excellency?

— Nothing. Just think what you can do, my man.

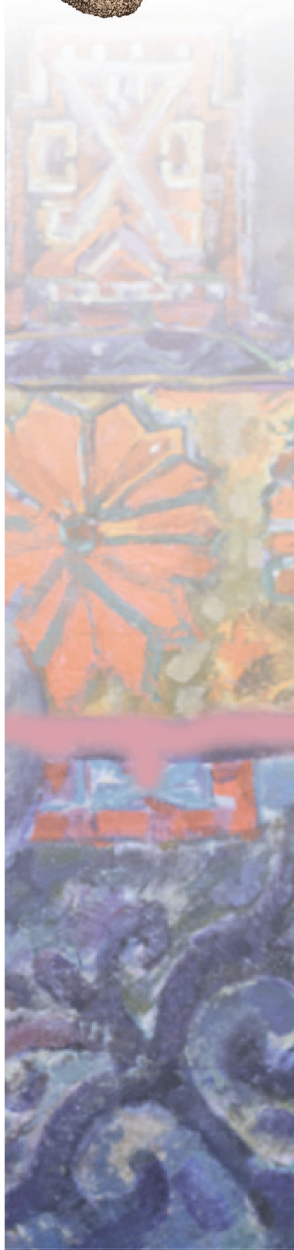
— But, if Abulkhair goes, it will be a godsend to the kontaichi. And some kins in the Junior and Middle zhuzes will take vengeance on Barak-Sultan and myself, — Kudabai stammered out.

— You, of all people? What have you to do with it? You're safe unless you bell a lot of lies about your deserts. Rest assured, and encourage Barak if you have the chance. The Junior Zhuz will have another khan, and we shall keep aloof to a strife among kinsmen with which we have nothing to do.

— Right, Your Excellency. That's their affair alone.

Seeing that the interpreter was at the end of his tether, Nepluyev added with feigned indifference:

— Your salary for the last six months is with the treasurer, dear man. Now you have a salary, and a high rank and reputation will come later.





— Thanks, Your Excellency!

— That's all right. Go now. I shall be waiting for news.

Ten days later, Kudabai was in Khiva to visit batyr Zholbars, son of Barak-Sultan. A long conversation finished with the batyr giving the interpreter his own embroidered fur-lined coat and a bay Akhaltekin pacer. From there, Kudabai dashed to Abulkhair's headquarters. He did not relate his conversation with the governor—merely hinted that the khan ought not to ride in the steppes on his own, and received some more valuable gifts.

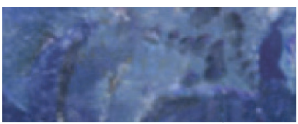
An inexorable end was approaching. General Tevkelev came from St. Petersburg to Orsk in summer 1748 to see Abulkhair eye-to-eye.

— There's no such friend as an old friend, sir, — he remarked to General Nepluyev when they met in Orenburg.

— Here at the back of beyond, I have to mix not with whom I like, but with anyone who comes my way, Your Excellency, — the governor complained in reply.

Seeing that strife and envy among Russian dignitaries was no better than among Kazakh khans and sultans, Abulkhair hurried with his entire household and now scanty retinue to see Tevkelev in Orsk, and laid bare all his grudges to the man who had in his time talked him into joining the Empire. One of the most intelligent people of his time, General Tevkelev did all he could to make the old khan forget his regret of that step. He knew that wrongs done to one of the foremost figures on the cause would badly dampen Russia's reputation in the entire East.

Khan Abulkhair sincerely promised Tevkelev to continue faithful service to Russia. Kozhahmet, his favourite child, rejoined his father to be replaced by his brother Aichuvak as hostage in Orenburg. The venerable old man came back to his Irgiz headquarters looking



younger with all the encouragement he had received.

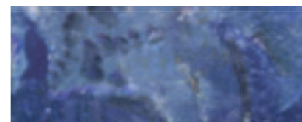
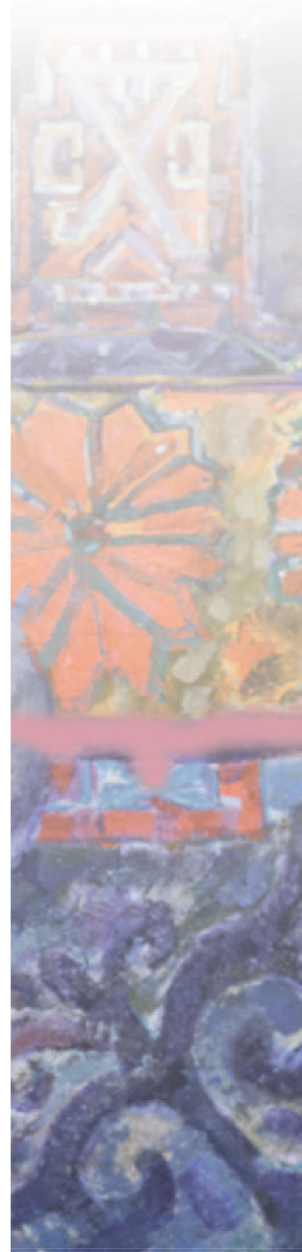
General Nepluyev chose to keep silent in conversations with Tevkelev—a strife among sultans was none of his business.

— A pack of wolves, that's what they are, Your Excellency. No use trying to change their nature, — he only sighed.

General Tevkelev was departing for St. Petersburg full of forebodings for Khan Abulkhair and Russian policies on the vast Asiatic plains—with good reason, too.

General Nepluyev was not lying when he said that he could not bridle steppe-land tribes in their strife—he had not enough troops along the frontier, and was not too eager to make peace, for that matter.

Khan Abulkhair's men were repeatedly ransacking the camps of nomadic clans which had, often despite their will, bowed to the Dzhungar kontaichi. On some occasions, he was settling the old accounts of his own tribe—for instance, with many years' merciless persecution of the Senior zhuz's Jalair clan, which had found refuge from the Great Disaster with Karakalpaks. Abulkhair's warriors often crossed the Seikhundarya to ransack Jalair and Karakalpak auls. To escape impending extermination, the clan elders determined to flee to the Argyns of the Middle Zhuz as a large Argyn caravan, which included two Karakalpak auls, was crossing Abulkhair's domain to Turgai. The caravan met its doom, massacred by the riders of Kuchuk, Barak-Sultan's brother, who had severed ties with the Middle Zhuz to usurp the title of khan of many clans and tribes. Kuchuk-Sultan justified his surprise attack by alleging that the Jalair were plotting to go over to Dzhungars. Only about fifty Karakalpaks escaped with their life to flee to Orenburg. They encountered Khan Abulkhair on their way as he was going back from his negotiations. Though a mere hundred and fifty men were





accompanying him, the khan pursued Kuchuk. Barak-Sultan unexpectedly came to his brother's rescue.

— We are unable to face Barak-Sultan. Let us come back to Irgiz and fetch reinforcement, — his courtiers advised to Abulkhair.

— You are no warriors! A pack of old women, that's what you are! — the old khan bellowed in fury—and ordered the brothers pursued.

Barak-Sultan's men were slowly retreating, and appeared on the closest hilltops every now and then to send the old khan into a frenzy. Everyone saw that Abulkhair was being lured into the heart of the plains.

The two armies met at last for a fatal battle on the deserted bank of the tiny stream Olkeyek. The two sultans' men easily overcame Abulkhair's twelve dozen, and sent them into flight. As was often the case in those turbulent years, Jalairs and Karakalpaks of the ransacked caravan came over to the sultans as they had long thirsted for vengeance on Abulkhair. The old khan had slain several enemy warriors single-handed when he saw Barak-Sultan galloping to meet him. Seeing his doom, the khan dropped his hand with the sabre, and shut his eyes. The sultan knocked him off the saddle, leaped on the prostrate enemy's chest, and stabbed him in the heart with a dagger. The immobile blue sky above the khan's head madly whirled, turning crimson.

— So that's the end of it, — his pale lips were whispering. A melancholy thought shot through his failing mind: "Wise are you, my people! No one but Kazakhs named this life zhalgan¹, a quickly passing illusion. Verily, this life was futile and full of vanity, and passed as a dream. Only an instant did it last."

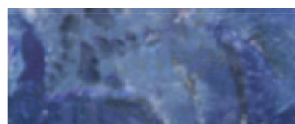
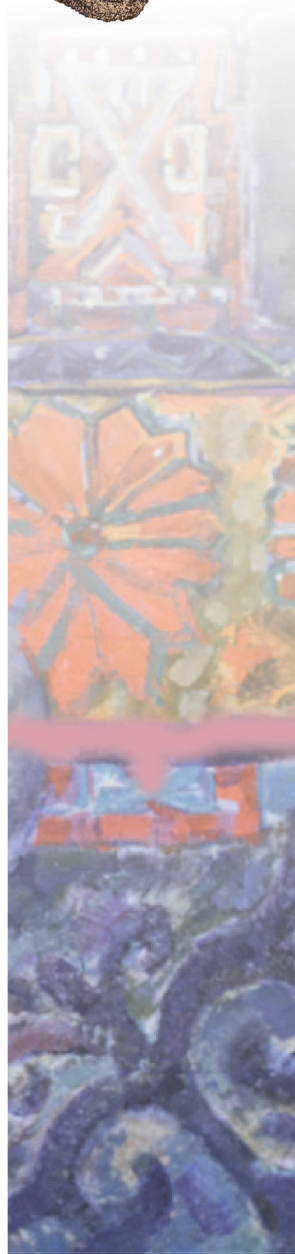
Barak-Sultan was shouting:

— Oh you traitor and my eternal enemy! I have fulfilled my oath. I slew you and drank of your blood. If

I am found guilty, my neck is strong enough to meet the noose of justice.

Saying that, he lashed his horse and galloped off, swift as the lightning.

Less than a year later, Empress Elizabeth issued an ukaz to appoint Sultan Nuraly khan of the Junior Zhuz.



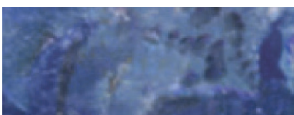


PART THREE

I

The dense, sweet-scented grass down in the meadows reaches up to the waistline. If you look from afar, you may think that white seagulls are scattered about the slopes of Mount Syrymbet, while actually, it is the snow-white yurtas of a sultan settlement. There are a lot of other tents up there, too—black, sooty and full of holes. But you cannot possibly spot them from the meadows, as they are hidden from the eye in a mountain hollow. They make, intact, a separate settlement, inhabited by tulenguts and servants of Ablai Sultan.

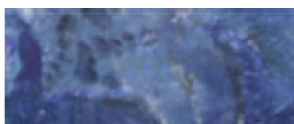
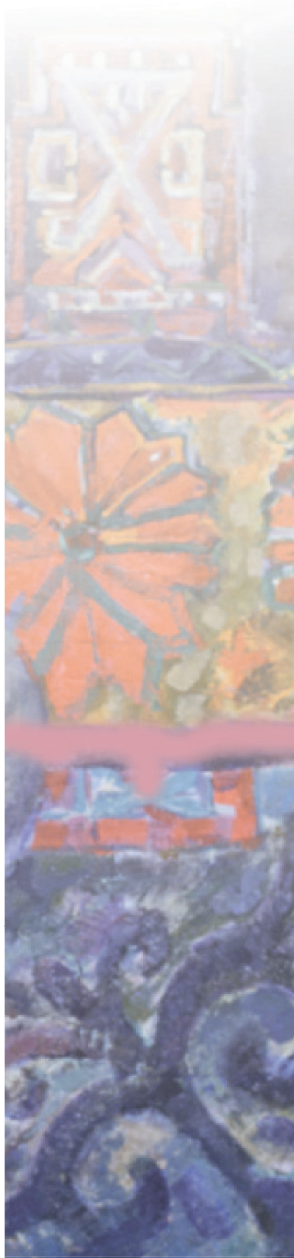
Both by the sultan yurtas and the black ones underneath, there are people scurrying about. Out of the way, there is a round site for skinning sheep, with huge boilers at the ready. The sun just rose, and as soon as it reaches the zenith, a feast will begin. Kasym Sultan, Ablai's seven-year-old heir by his wife, who is sister to the great Dzhungar Kontaichi Galden-Tseren, has been circumcised today. Here, in the steppe, such an event is traditionally accompanied by sumptuous celebrations, especially when it is Tyure Genghizides who undergo circumcision.



Around ten years ago, Ablai Sultan, still a young man back then, was, for a second time, captured by the Dzhungars. He spent the following three years serving on the kontaichi's staff in Tashkent, as the Dzhungars traditionally treated the Tyure, a people of the same kin as themselves, with respect. In 1743, Ablai Sultan was finally set free—thanks to the petitioning of his uncle, Abilmambet Khan, and also of general Nepluyev, a Russian governor. Abilmambet's son, Abilfaiz Sultan, and a son of Barak Sultan's, Shagai, replaced him on the staff.

But Ablai Sultan did not return from Dzhungar captivity all alone. On taking a closer look at him, the discerning Galden-Tseren had come to appreciate his bravery, intelligence and resoluteness, essential for a sovereign, and married him, in compliance with the rules of oriental diplomacy, to his militant sister, Khocha. For valor in action and achievement in the administration of state affairs, from the age of thirteen, she was referred to by her kinsfolk as Khocha Bagadur and, after she joined the Kazakhs, as Khocha Batyr. First, she gave birth to a girl, who soon died of measles, and then, in 1746, she had a son, Kasym, whose circumcision was going to be celebrated that day.

By that moment, Ablai had attained wide renown all over the Kazakh steppe and beyond. The kontaichi had been right in foreseeing a glorious future for him. His valor, brains, and wisdom, which most people accumulate by an older age, had enabled Ablai, despite his not having the official title of khan, to gain unlimited authority in the Middle Zhuz, and he now had clout everywhere the Kazakh language was spoken. There was only one miscalculation that the wise Galden-Tseren had made vis-a-vis his future brother-in-law—marrying his sister, Ablai did not become a stooge to the kontaichi, as the latter had expected, but continued to pursue an independent course





of his own. Whatever perturbations occurred in the steppe, his policy remained oriented toward liberation from the Dzhungar yoke.

Formally, however, Ablai Sultan was still the leader of only a few Argyn clans of the Middle Zhuz, including the numerous Atygai and Karaul, who populated the slopes of the Kokchetau Mountains and had become related to Ablai by marrying their daughters off to him. Actually, through this stupendous feast, forty-year-old Ablai was secretly hoping to win over new supporters. From the very start, he had set himself the goal of becoming an all-Kazakh khan and was steadily moving toward that goal, unscrupulous in choosing the means. At times, he acted as a composed and, on the surface, flexible politician, but if anyone got in his way, he never hesitated to do away with that person.

The previous night, the renowned Bukhar Zhyrau came over to his place. Ablai had first met him when, still a young man called Abulmansur, he had escaped from prison and was hiding from the Dzhungars in a shepherd's sooty yurt, together with an elderly slave named Oraz.

It was then that he revealed to Bukhar Zhyrau his plans to assume his grandfather's name, Ablai.

— You look gloomy, my Zhyrau, — Ablai said. — Tell us something we could derive a lesson from.

— That's precisely what I've come round for, — Bukhar Zhyrau made a meaningful pause. — It's time I told you about an ancestor of yours, Yesim Khan. I know you revere that name, Sultan, and I would not want you to repeat his mistakes...

— We are listening, Zhyrau...

And albeit weary after a long journey, Zhyrau began his narration...

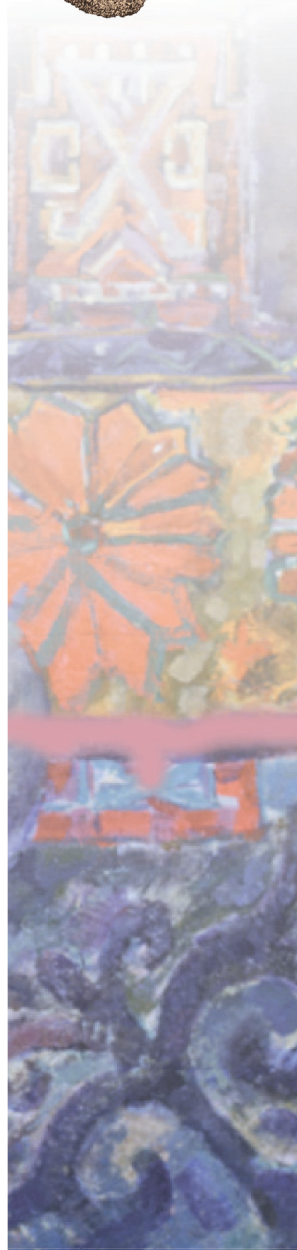
The young Yesim Khan came to face a great deal of challenges after Tauekel died. First of all, he had to do

something about the conflict between the Kashgar and former Mogolistan leaders and sultans, presently fighting between themselves for the heritage left behind by Abdrashit Khan. They claimed many of the Kyrgyz lands as well. The Kyrgyz manaps, in their turn, were split into supporters of the White Horde, akin to them, and allies of the Kashgars. The inexperienced Yesim Khan, unable to stay away from that petty strife, eventually bogged down in it. It was only the increasingly frequent attacks of Dzhungar kontaichi, set on by Chinese bogdykhans, that made the rebellious manaps team up with Yesim Khan. The hot breath of the Chinese dragon could already be felt in Zhetysu as well... As it had more than once been the case before, Dzhungar rulers expected Kazakh and Kyrgyz armies yet again to rise and fight side by side against their common eastern enemies.

In the meantime, on getting involved in the Kashgar feud, Yesim Khan decided to follow advice of those concerned, allying himself with Abdrakhman Khan, a son to Abdrashit, who was the ruler of Shalysh and Turfan. Formally, this was put down to the fact that Abdrakhman's mother came from the Kazakh tribe Uysun, which made his siding with the White Horde only natural. Yesim Khan was going to provide him with five thousand cavalry men as reinforcement in his fight against Abdrashit's other heirs, with Tuyak Batyr placed in command of that force.

On the day that followed the ceremonies to commemorate the deceased Tauekel Khan, the young Yesim Khan summoned Tuyak Batyr to his palace. Restless and hot-tempered, with lively hazel eyes, Yesim Khan was almost of the same height as the giant Tuyak. In a brisk gesture, he flung a cushion to the batyr—a sign of high favor with a khan—and immediately began outlining the assignment that he was going to give him.

— We must secure the support of the Uysun and all





the Kazakh clans of Zhetysu and Turkestan! — he said as he was concluding his farewell speech. — Swear you'll implement my will!

— The will of a khan is doubly sacred if it does not clash with his people's, — Tuyak Batyr replied calmly. — But we are all humans, and so let your humble servant share with you one secret desire of his.

— Go ahead, Batyr.

— Faith in his happiness is what makes it possible for a man to stay afloat while crossing the wide and turbulent rivers of life. If that faith is strong, the flame of bravery will always burn in his heart, and his horse will never stumble. And my happiness is all in your hands, my Khan...

— Say what's on your mind, Batyr.

— Since you have deigned to listen to a slave's son like me, I'll make a clean breast. Are you satisfied with my service in your army? Do my deeds measure up to those of your other fighters, however high their origin might be?

— I swear by God that you and your late brother outdid everyone else in the latest war, — Yesim Khan exclaimed impatiently. — But come on, say it out quick.

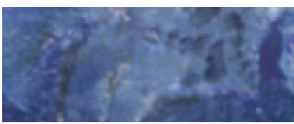
— My Khan, I heard you utter sacred words just now. Here's my hand and my heart. Let me marry your sister-in-law, Aktorgyn.

The young khan winced and blushed as if he had been slapped in the face. The request came as a staggerer to him:

— Hey, what are you talking about?

— You have sworn by God that I am no worse than others, have you not, my Khan?

The khan's face turned as dark as night. He shook his head like a wild stallion that has all of a sudden gotten a lasso thrown upon it. Of course, there's no such law in the steppe that obliges a widow to follow her late husband



into the grave, he thought to himself. And so Taukel Khan's widow is not going to wear mourning forever. But she is destined for a khan. It isn't permissible for her to marry a slave's son. That would be on everyone's lips, and would bring eternal shame on the family!

— Aktorgyn, your sister-in-law, is begging you for the same, my Khan, — Tuyak Batyr said.

— It means... it means that the two of you got involved when my highborn brother was still alive, didn't you? — Yesim Khan's tone was cool now, and he had a faraway look in his eyes. — Then you will face punishment three times as severe!

— Your accusation is false, my Khan!

— Shut up, slave!

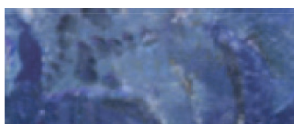
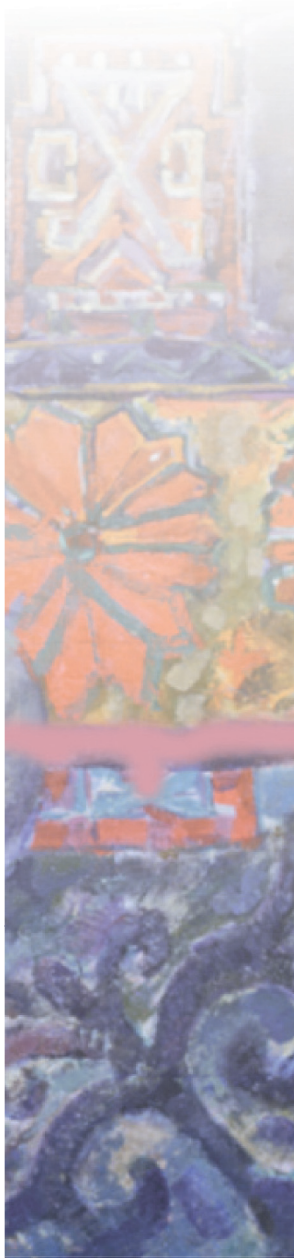
Yesim Khan was not all that cruel at heart, no. It's just that the lowborn warrior's desire to become related, albeit indirectly, with himself, a hereditary Tyure, seemed unheard-of impudence to him. But there was also one other circumstance fuelling his anger: The young khan would not at all mind sharing his bed with that woman himself. His sister-in-law was so perfectly beautiful, and he sought to marry her in spite of the age gap. Aktorgyn was ten years his senior, yet overshadowed to him all other beauties around her.

The silver bell began ringing violently in the khan's hand. The guard rushed in.

— Take him down to the dungeon!

The news that the eminent batyr and military commander had been put into a prison on the "black" square behind the khan's palace toured the whole of Turkestan in no time. By the evening, it reached all adjacent villages, and in three days' time, it was already being discussed throughout the Kazakh steppe.

Aktorgyn was braiding her wonderful hair into pigtails when her boy servant rushed in to report that Tuyak





Batyr had been put into irons and taken to the “black” square. The color went off her cheeks, her heart sank, but she pulled herself together in a minute.

— Run and fetch Zholymbet Batyr!

Zholymbet Batyr was an uncle to her, and he commanded the Junior Zhuz’s best force. Aktorgyn decided not to make an apology to the khan. Nothing good will come out of it, she reasoned. By an unwritten old law, she was supposed to belong to the khan till she died. And the court of the elders was on his side. Of course, a wiser and more experienced khan would never let himself sever from his batyrs, sever from her and, consequently, from the entire Junior Zhuz just like that, on a whim. What could she, a woman already in her early thirties, inspire in that young khan, other than ephemeral passion? And then, that reserved look in Tuyak Batyr’s eyes, full of manly vigor, had won her heart. And as he helped her dismount from a horse, his hand stretched out to prop her up, she hated having to take her knee off his palm.

— We can expect no mercy from the khan, — she said to Zholymbet Batyr as he entered the room. — I’d better start for home right away. I’ve got to escape while your men are still in town. You are a friend of Tuyak Batyr’s, aren’t you? And besides, you’re my uncle. Please get him out of jail while they are chasing me. Let our fate be decided by the biys of the Land of Nogailin!

And how could Zholymbet Batyr do otherwise? When Khaknazar died, Aktorgyn was married off to Tauekel Khan as a token of loyalty of the entire Junior Zhuz to the White Horde. And now, the whole of the Junior Zhuz was insulted in her person. The Zhuz’s warriors could by no means let such an insult pass unnoticed! And as for Tuyak, by helping him escape from prison, Zholymbet Batyr was sure to gain support of all of the Horde’s

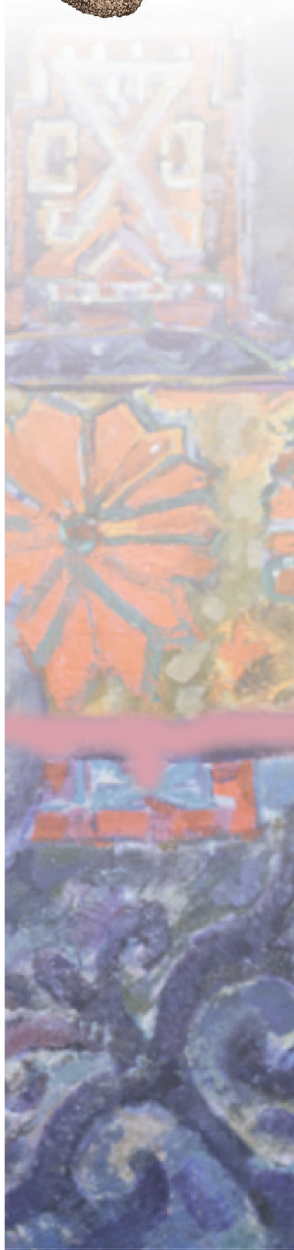
humble batyrs, of all the commoners. Which was a great force, given the present-day turmoil in the steppe. It was ordinary warriors who had frustrated Tauekel Khan's Bukhara campaign, after all.

The one who had provoked the scandal, Tuyak Batyr, was meanwhile sitting in a somber stone pit, with a narrow hole up in the ceiling. He bugged now and then, causing his heavy chains to jingle... It had all begun the moment Aktorgyn had put on her late husband's coat of armor, mounted a horse, and dashed into action. It was then that he had for the first time helped her install herself on the saddle by placing his palm under her knee. Feeling the warmth of that round knee, he looked up to see her gazing at him as if from the skies, her eyes brighter than the stars... Then, he would be warding off lances directed at her chest and fighting off oncoming enemies with a single stroke of his saber. When the battle was over, he helped her off the horse...

Upon his arrival in Turkestan, the batyr did not see her even once in all the forty days of the funeral feast. On the forty-first day, however, her boy servant came along and asked to follow him. Tuyak Batyr obeyed without a single word. And he was not at all surprised to end up in Aktorgyn's room.

— Will you be able to break a horse in for me within one day? — Aktorgyn asked him, and he nodded, still finding it hard to believe his luck. As an ancient legend had it, before giving her heart to an ordinary warrior, a tsarina would first test him in that fashion. This was regarded as an open sign of a woman's affection for a man, and revealing one's feelings in a situation like that would certainly take a lot of courage. Aktorgyn had plenty of it, though...

The horse was seven years old, tall and handsome, but absolutely wild. It had been offered to her as a gift





by Bashkir relatives. At the crack of dawn, Tuyak Batyr jumped up onto the horse, pressing it tightly with his strong knees, and it took him far out into the steppe, neighing wildly. In the evening, the batyr rode back on the calm, obedient horse. When Aktorgyn came up to put her foot in the stirrup, it didn't move a bit.

— Thank you, my batyr, — she said.

Late at night, the boy servant picked the batyr up and led him through dark passages to the khan's minor palace. There he was welcomed by Aktorgyn's wet-nurse, whom she had brought along from the Land of Nogailin. The nurse escorted him up to a small door, remaining outside as he came in. In the dim chamber, the batyr saw white arms reached toward him.

— Come, my batyr!

He came up, holding his breath, and she touched him with her slender fingers.

— What do you want for having broken my horse in, batyr?

He kept silent, unable to utter a word.

— Well, let me give you a kiss in reward then...

She rose on her toes, but was only able to reach up to his chest. As if in a magic dream, he heard her silvery laugh:

— Why aren't you offering me your hand, my brave batyr?

He offered her his big hand, as he would whenever she had to mount a horse. She put her hot bare knee into his palm to reach his lips. Instantly, everything lost its balance and began to whirl: the room, the palace, the steppe, his whole life... And she would not let him go till day broke...

Aktorgyn got pregnant, but the loose-fitting silk apparel accepted at the Court and the inaccessibility of noble women to indecent glances helped her keep this concealed for several months, up to the day of the major





funeral feast to commemorate Tauekel Khan. Now that everything had come to light, it was only by eloping that she could save herself from dishonor...

— Either death or Tuyak Batyr! — she said to her uncle, Zholymbet Batyr, as they were parting.

Late at night, a small cavalry detachment of the Junior Zhuz was approaching the western gates of Turkestan.

— Who are you, and by whose order? — cried out the chief guard.

— Mine, — replied Zholymbet Batyr as he came out of the dark, and the chief guard stepped back to the gates in deference. The detachment continued its way into the night, with Aktorgyn, wrapped up in a chapan, riding on a white horse in the center of it.

In the morning, an outraged Yesim Khan already had his men in pursuit. He was well aware, though, that that endeavor of his was doomed to failure. He also issued an order to keep a watchful eye on the confined Tuyak Batyr. He was told that the previous night, an attempt had been made to release him. The attempt proved abortive only because prior to it, the prisoner had been transferred to another dungeon, right by the palace's wall...

Lending a helping hand to Abdrakhman Khan in eastern Turkestan, Yesim Khan sent there, instead of Tuyak Batyr, Zholymbet Batyr.

Six months had passed before Zholymbet Batyr made a triumphant return home. However, he had had to fight not against Abdrakhman Khan's Kashgar brothers, but against a more serious foe. Encouraged by Chinese advisers, Dzhungar forces had just carried out a sanguine raid on Zhetysu's Kazakhs and Kyrgyzes. Burdened with trophies, they were crossing the border to get back home, when suddenly, Zholymbet Batyr's five-thousand-strong army came down upon them, dispersing the fighters, liberating the prisoners, and seizing the spoils. Zholymbet's men

had not been paid for their service in six months by then, and so he ordered that the khan's military share be divided among them. This was promptly reported to Yesim Khan, with the amount of spoils in the reports exaggerated tenfold. The khan got mad at the batyr. The dramatic event took place on the day of the Zholymbet-led army's homecoming. Precisely on that day, the stone pit where Tuyak Batyr had been confined became empty. The guard testified that it was men of Zholymbet Batyr's who had arranged the prisoner's escape the previous night.

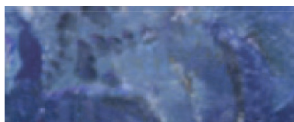
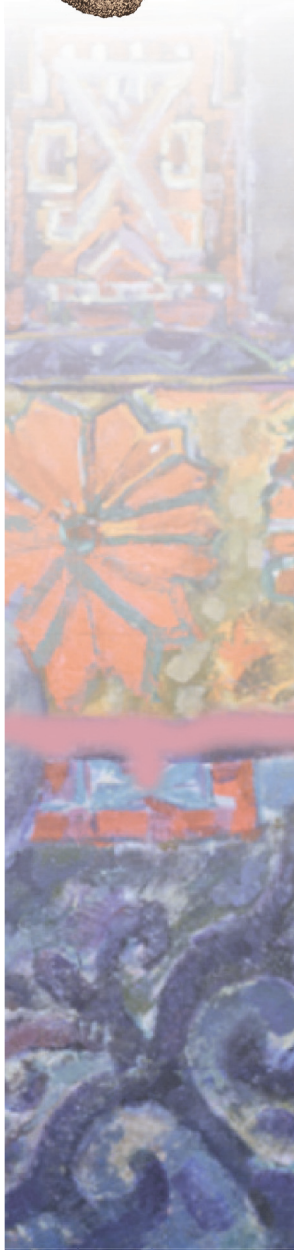
That same day, upon his return from the exhausting campaign, Zholymbet Batyr was shackled and thrown into the pit where Tuyak Batyr had been previously held. The news was circulated throughout the steppe that the glorious batyr would now get his head chopped off.

This time, Zhiyenbet Zhyrau made up his mind to personally come to the khan's palace. By tradition, an acclaimed minstrel had the right to come see a khan any time. This was especially true of Zhiyenbet, a bard of the late Tauekel Khan. There was no time to waste, as on Turkestan's main square, right opposite the khan's palace, everything had already been prepared for Zholymbet Batyr's execution. Aware that this may trigger a popular outburst, Yesim Khan ordered his body guards to cordon the square off.

— Come on in, my dear Zhyrau, — the young khan said sarcastically as he was ushering his guest in. He had right away guessed the motive behind Zhiyenbet's visit. — You must have been hurrying. Is everyone feeling well in your homeland?

The dignified minstrel did not say a word, but took up his dombra and began to sing:

Where power generates nothing but cruelty,
Wisdom has to hide in fear, my Khan.





It's a bad omen that you make a batyr
Fall victim to your emotion...
Do not forget you are a khan.

And the tiger-like Zholymbet is not alone in this world.

He has the Bai-Uly clan with its twelve branches behind him,

And each of them will miss the batyr you're out to kill,
But if you're crying for your share of trophies,
We'll reimburse you for it threefold.
In all the rest, it's only upon God that we can rely.

However young and hot-tempered he was, Yesim Khan realized what a threat there was behind the bard's words.

— I enjoy your singing, my Zhyrau, but you should have said hello, first, — he said.

Zhiyenbet kneeled down like a warrior:

— Health and prosperity to you and our vast khanate, sovereign!

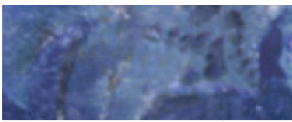
The khan's eyes flashed.

— All right, my Zhyrau... I'll cede Zholymbet Batyr's life to you!

— I'm singing praises to your wisdom, sovereign, — the zhyrau said with a sigh of relief. — You just proved to the entire steppe it was not for nothing that you had been lifted on a white inaugural mat. When you were born, you were given the name Yesim, which means "wisdom". Your parents chose the right name for you. Not to be afraid of being wise is a major manifestation of a khan's prowess.

That was just the way he was, Big Yesim, as the people had dubbed him—clever enough, temperamental, yet never bearing grudges. That was the way he was portrayed in minstrel songs.

— Why did you tell me about this, Zhyrau? — Ablai



asked when Bukhar was through with his story about Yesim Khan.

— Maybe you'll see it tomorrow, — Bukhar replied enigmatically.

— But tomorrow there will be festivities in my son's honor.

— One vested with power should stay wise even on festive occasions, shouldn't he?

Then the morning came...

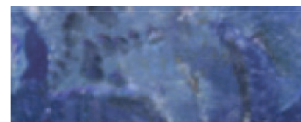
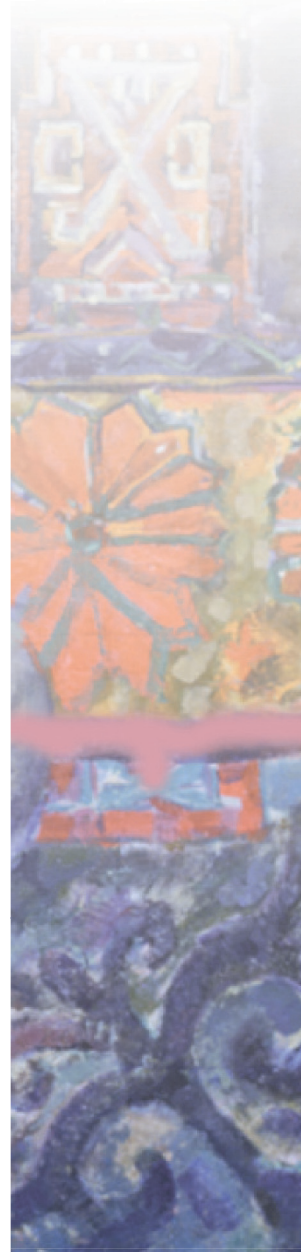
Ablai had thought out carefully each event of the forthcoming celebrations, each gesture he was going to make and each word to utter. In a loose velvet caftan thrown over his shoulders and with a sable cap on his head, he went out of his yurta and looked at the clean sun without squinting his eyes. There could not be a weather more favorable for a feast. After running his eye around the picturesque scenery, Ablai was just about to make a step toward a young man with a copper bowl in his hands and an embroidered towel on his shoulder but suddenly stopped still, like a kite at the sight of prey.

Two men on foamy horses dashed out of a ravine behind the mountain and began to move slantways, like merlins, barely touching the top of the grass. They then made an abrupt turn toward the white yurtas, crying out the conventional "Alarm! Enemy advancing!"

As they came nearer, the men split up. One horseman, with a simple white bandana on his head, rode off toward the tulenguts, while the other, wearing a white camel jacket and a hood, reined in his horse right at Ablai's feet. On getting off the horse, he rolled his hood back and knelt down. He was still very young, and had a handsome thick moustache over a beautifully outlined mouth.

— Five thousand Argyn cavalry men are only one passage away from here! — he shouted.

— Do you know what this fuss is all about? — Ablai asked without batting an eyelash.





— Yes, my Sultan... They are angry as hell. And I heard them say, “Let’s ride to behead Ablai for the death of Botakhan!”

— Who’s leading them?

— Bekbolat-Biy, the eldest son of Kazdausty-Kazybek.

— And the Great Biy himself, where is he?

— They mentioned his being unwell since this past spring. But as I was sitting in the reeds, I failed to make out what kind of disease he’s got. I only heard them say that he now weighs as little as a tulpar’s hoof. But Bekbolat is mad with rage, and he’s rushing them!

— If they speed up, when are they likely to arrive here?

— By noon. And they’ve taken along that one... — The man cast down his eyes, not daring to proceed.

— Who’s that one? Go on, name him!

— Olzhabai Batyr, together with his foster son, Koteshe Zhyrau...

Ablai Sultan involuntarily turned his head. The matter must be really serious since that truth-seeker Olzhabai has joined them, Ablai thought to himself. Olzhabai, of the Karzhas clan, recently turned forty, but was still in two minds about which career to choose: that of a batyr or of a zhyrau. In fact, he had been one of the Middle Zhuz’s bravest batyrs in the past twenty years, and there had been no serious battle against the Dzhungars in which he would not take part. Apart from that, he knew by heart all steppe legends from the times of the famous Korkut to this day. If the news reached him about a visiting minstrel that he could learn something new from, Olzhabai was willing to cover miles and miles on his skewbald ambler to meet him. His speech abounded in allusions to old tales and legends, and each word—Kazakh, Arabic, Persian, or Russian—he would enunciate repeatedly to eventually find the original manner of its pronunciation that was common to all of the cultures. His personal example,

more than anyone else's, proved the belief widely spread in the steppe that the Argyns had a natural inclination for arts and sciences.

But as luck would have it, each time Olzhabai Batyr took up his dombra with the intention to compose something of his own, a herald would come round on a foamy horse to tell him that Dzhungars had yet again attacked a neighboring nomad camp and that relatives of his were crying for help. Olzhabai would never refuse to give a hand in such cases. Also, every summer, together with other warriors, he would join Ablai's regular army in its lengthy campaigns against the Dzhungars. Once, the young Ablai had been taken prisoner whereas Olzhabai had fought off three attacking Dzhungars and sped off to the steppe.

Yet, despite his age, Olzhabai Batyr would tell every person he met that he was going to give up his sword sometime soon and begin touring the steppe like an ordinary minstrel. But before he actually did, he expressed his love for the arts through patronizing of all bards who came his way. He always had some talented teenager living with him, who, with his help, was to grow into a prominent minstrel. At the moment, all his attention was focused on Kotesch, an orphan whom he was fostering and who already overshadowed many renowned bards by his sonorous singing and good memory.

Perhaps for his eccentricity, or maybe for his love of truth and justice, this tall, slender batyr with a pensive face was treated with respect in every Kazakh settlement. He had always been a reliable ally to Ablai in battles against the Dzhungars, and his word had always inspired people. And now Olzhabai Batyr was with those seeking Ablai's blood!

It was the awareness thereof that must have suggested him an unusual solution.





Ablai nodded, came up to the servant, and put his hands under a clean, sparkling stream of heated water. After washing, he dried with a towel his hands, his neck and his face, threw the used towel onto the duckboards and impulsively turned to the servant, who was waiting for further instructions:

— Sound the alarm! Let everyone who calls himself a man be here within the time it takes to milk a mare!

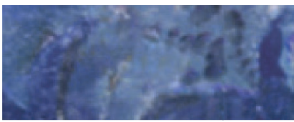
That same instant, two robust, half-naked men took hold of wooden rattles on long handles and began to bang them alternately against an inflated bull stomach, hanging on a pole, and two small drums. With hostilities currently underway, all warriors had their horses attached to their yurtas or grazing, hobbled, nearby. Taking up a gun and mounting a horse was therefore a matter of a few minutes. Instantly, there was dashing, whistling, rising clouds of dust, and women's anxious voices.

The alarm was not an accidental one. As was often the case with nomads, the strife had broken out during festivities. People of the Karakesek clan were having a lavish funeral feast in the memory of one of their leaders. By age-old tradition, a lot of very important people from all of the three zhuzes had arrived to attend. Among these was Ablai with his dashing tulenguts.

Things were following their proper course: first, a horse baiga, then a Kazakhsha-Kures combat, an archery contest with a small gold-filled bag as the target... At the peak of the feast, Ablai found himself surrounded by a crowd of witty jesters, unfailingly present at every celebration in the steppe.

— And what would the sultan do should his cap be struck off? — one of the jesters cried out joyfully.

— It would hardly reach the ground when the fellow who dared do that would be made to follow suit! — another one replied.



— I think I'll have a shot!

With that, the former snapped a whip, striking, as if unintentionally, Ablai's cap off. The sultan did not bat an eyelash.

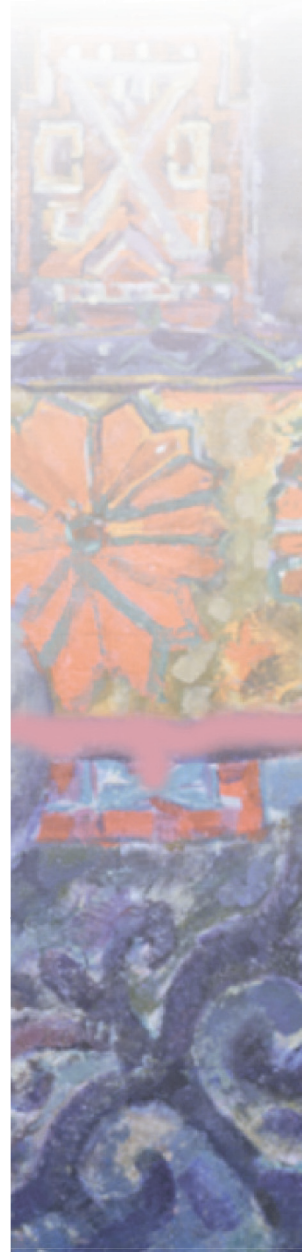
— Those are right who maintain that a great feast is always ensued by great intoxication! — he said, without moving to lift his cap from the ground.

The following year, a general of the Russian tsar, Kinderman, arranged the first trade fair in a newly-built town near the boundary of Kzyl-Zhar, which was shortly afterwards given the name of Petropavlovsk, and a large group of locals from the Karakesek clan arrived for that fair. There, Ablai Sultan, who owned those lands, ordered to detain two kinsmen of the jesters who had once offended him, Zhanai and Botakhan by name. People would recall that the two had been laughing at the humiliated sultan more loudly than others.

— But this was nothing more than an ordinary practical joke, — associates and friends would say in an effort to bring Ablai to reason. — Show your largesse and sense of humor, our Sultan!

— Woe unto a sultan who understands jokes, — Ablai replied very seriously and ordered to throw one of the detainees, Botakhan, into a grave dug out specifically for the purpose.

Botakhan spent several days lying in the grave, from which there was no escaping, and when Ablai finally came to say that now he could go, an offended and humiliated Botakhan replied, "A person who finds himself in a grave once will never leave it." With that, he ripped his belly open. And now, all men of the Besmeyram tribe had mounted their horses to take revenge for their folkman. Ablai's scout did not have enough time to see everything. On the way, the Besmeyram men were joined by several more groups of commoners from other tribes who bore





a grudge against Ablai for previous affronts, and so the approaching army's strength was no less than five-thousand men, with all of them craving for revenge.

Thirty horsemen lined up on a square in front of the sultan's yurt. This was Ablai's army. All of the men were battle-hardened fighters, as not a single year would pass for them without a war. But could his small army possibly defeat the five-thousand-strong force advancing on their settlement? So Ablai said:

— We are leaving...

The elderly people, women and children set up a clamor.

— And what is going to happen to us when you're gone? How will we be able to evade Bekbolat and his men's rage? Woe unto us!

— And you treat the guests to besbarmak and kumis, — Ablai said, pointing to steaming caldrons nearby. — There's so much food you've cooked. We are all one kin, after all. It's not seemly to leave one's relatives without fare, is it?

Indeed, this was a stratagem befitting a sultan. Ablai was not going to make a shameful retreat, no. Everything was left at its regular place. The snow-white yurtas were as stately as before. The bed linen and kitchenware had been neatly arranged as if in anticipation of guests' arrival. Fatty meat was boiling in huge caldrons. And the livestock were all beside the yurtas, rather than out in the pasture.

Ablai did know a thing or two about human psychology. The sight of the serene settlement allayed the anger of the infuriated army. The worn-out and hungry horsemen were pleasantly surprised by such hospitality toward them, and they quickly made friends with the locals. Who would lift a hand against those meeting you with a broad smile and tantalizing food?!

When his foes appeased their hunger, Ablai Sultan

showed up. Escorted by an associate of his from the Balta-Kerei tribe, Tursunbai Batyr, he got off the horse on the approaches to his settlement. One of the “guests”, the renowned shooter Kapan-Mergen, who was a cousin to the late Botakhan, installed his bipod musket and began aiming it. But at that moment, Bekbolat said in a thundering voice:

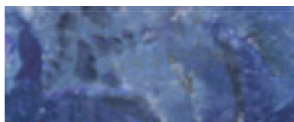
— The case involving a murder of a free Kazakh citizen is up to the public to decide! — And Kapan-Mergen reluctantly got up from his knee.

Ablai Sultan was slowly making his way through the crowd, greeting all those he knew. Given that in the steppe, people know one another personally for miles around, there was no stranger he could come across here...

Suddenly, a boy came out of the crowd, a dombra decorated with eagle owl feathers in his hands, and began to sing loudly:

Oh, Botakhan, an innocent victim, ask the murderer
What for he has brought down his unjust rage on you.
You have argued with your people, my Sultan.
Now we are here to steep our grief in your blood!
The house you’ve built, Ablai, is burning down...
But before you pay for everything, say:
What have the Meyram tribe done wrong
To make you kit one of them and take another into
custody?
Bring to trial Zhanai, whom you’ve kept alive,
Or your children will become orphans and your wives
widows!

This was Kotesh-akyn from the Syundik tribe, and his song went down in history. He had just turned seventeen, and it was a great honor for him to speak out, condemning Ablai Sultan on his people’s behalf.



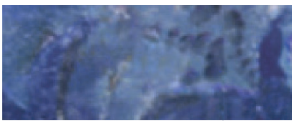


Here, on the public square, surrounded by a crowd of many thousands, biys representing the sides began their condemning speeches. Ablai, without wrangling, admitted to his guilt and, like a commoner, paid for Botakhan's death as much as he would for the death of three adult men—nine head, multiplied by three, of various livestock (cows, horses and sheep), three white camels, and a saddle horse with a silver-embroidered caftan for the dead man's heir. To Bekbolat Batyr and shooter Kapan Mergen, who had argued about whether Ablai should be killed at once or not killed at all, the sultan offered each a saddle horse from his herd and a sable coat from his shoulder. After that, the leaders of all clans and tribes present sat down to one table, and festivities began to mark the circumcision of Ablai's seven-year-old son. By law, one may by no means turn down an invitation to such a celebration.

Reportedly, Ablai would later more than once state that the people should be caged in—just like a lion. Let it snarl, rush about, and jump onto the cage's bars; it lacks brains to push its paw through to open the cage from the outside, anyway. The metal bars were a metaphor for the ruler's smartness and resourcefulness.

Ablai Sultan also maintained that if you hurt your people's feelings, you shouldn't stand in their way, as it's always safer to stay away from an injured lion. They should be calmed down, fed and...put back into a cage. As indeed, his own mutinous people pose to the ruler a much greater threat than any outside enemy.

After traditional entertainments, during which all forgot what had brought together such a large number of people, commoners went back to their homes, on the way sharing impressions made on them by that day's lavish sultan feast. Should you overhear them talking, you might as well think they had all been asked over, and by extraordinarily hospitable hosts.



The leaders and batyrs of Argyn tribes meanwhile stayed behind for a big conference. Those were Ablai Sultan's real guests—from all nearby settlements in Kokchetau, Kara-Otkel, Atbasar and Kzyl-zhar. People kept arriving at Ablai's day and night. When they saw among the newcomers quite a few ordinary batyrs and even horsemen from migratory units, the nobles came to realize that it was not all about a circumcision celebration.

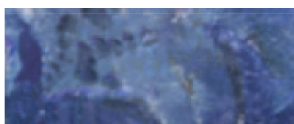
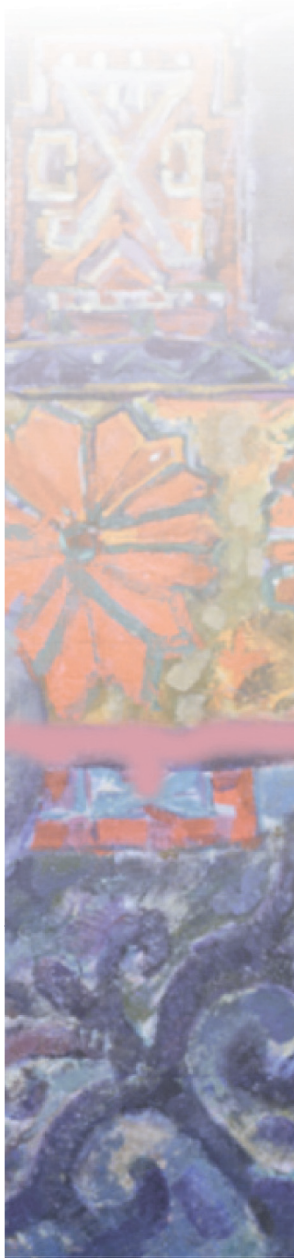
On the second day of festivities, Ablai Sultan invited everyone to his famous twelve-winged yurt.

— Galden-Tseren, my noble father-in-law, had brought together twenty-five thousand horsemen on the other bank of the Irtysh River, — he said calmly, in a low voice, as if he were announcing yet another banquet.

All those present had their hearts sink. There were people of different ages and ranks here, but they all felt like a snake were crawling along their naked bodies. Memories were still alive of the Great Trouble era. But while back then, only Dzhungar attacks would take place, with most of the kontaichi's tumens setting off southward, to Turkestan, presently, Kontaichi Galden-Tseren's headquarters were right opposite the Middle Zhuz's major settlements.

Jiang-Lun Bogdykhan, who had been ruling the Middle Empire for quite a long while by then, was persistently pursuing the policy of his predecessors. The heterogeneous Dzhungar tribes had one territory after another taken away from them, with any resistance on their part crushed by the regular Chinese army, which was poorly developed for its time, yet surpassed the kontaichi's nomadic troops both in military hardware and strategy.

As soon as the kontaichi undertook yet another campaign against the Kazakhs, militant Dzhungar noions would immediately get necessary aid from China in ammunition and foodstuffs, above all, rice. Rife was





also the practice of buying off with gold of some of the most influential noions, who were to decide which way Dzhungar tumens should go.

Bayan Batyr, of the Yak-Kerei clan, whose settlements were located on the border with Dzhungariya, had come to see Ablai a short time before. He only confirmed what Ablai had already learned from his scouts based in the kontaichi's lands. Galden-Tseren was waiting for an appropriate moment to launch an attack on the Kazakhs, and he was hopeful that on seeing the uselessness of any resistance, Ablai would take his side. At the time, Ablai had more clout in the Middle Zhuz than Abilmambet Khan himself. Jiang-Lun was especially interested in Ablai standing by the Dzhungars. If the Kazakh Middle Zhuz was neutralized, then Russian cities would become exposed, he reasoned. This was essential for Chinese politicians. Indeed, the Russian eagle and the Chinese dragon were bound to meet each other face to face someday...

No one had any idea about Ablai Sultan's thoughts. Presently, taking advantage of the feast to celebrate his son's circumcision, he invited to the conference all his friends and allies, while his foes had arrived without any invitation. Everything happened as it should: all the most influential representatives of Kazakh territories close to the Dzhungars had gotten together to discuss the current situation.

— And where's Bukhar Zhyrau?

— The great prophet has been here for quite a while now.

Ablai Sultan, who knew the customs and realized that at such moments only a prominent zhyrau could convince and unite the populace, got up from his cushions. When in the yurt's doorway, the stately figure of the bard appeared, he went to meet him and, holding him by the arm, helped him take his seat on the cushions beside himself.

The celebrated Bukhar Zhyrau was sixty years old, and he came from the old clan Karzhas in Bayanaul. The entire Kazakh steppe knew about his sharp, darting wit and excitable temperament. He never was afraid of anyone, interfered in all affairs, and could express disapproval of a khan's actions to his face. Noblemen were wary of him, while commoners liked him and repeated his pointed, spicy remarks. Unlike other bards, he would treat anyone as his equal, regardless of that person's origin, and this only added to his renown.

Bukhar Zhyrau ran his eye cursorily around his audience to notice that those present were people who had not gotten together in more than fifty years. His eyes lit up:

— Let me greet you, my dear!

— Are you all right, the mountain eagle of the Argyns? Was your journey comfortable? — asked those who had not yet spoken to the bard on that day.

— Not really, because I had been flying, together with birds, around settlements presently being constructed on our land, and I listened to what people say.

— So what do they say?

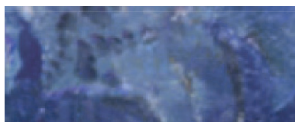
— Those Russians who are building houses and roads call their settlements the Bitter Line. Hard is the life of a commoner. They sow grain so as not to starve to death, and they live as poorly as our tulenguts do.

— Why should you care? — Ablai exclaimed impatiently.

— It's only natural, Sultan! How can I not care about what is happening in our land?! We have plenty of it, and if our land begins to yield bread, all people on earth could be fed on it. I spoke with the most needy of our people, who don't even have any livestock.

— So what? — Ablai pricked up his ears.

— More and more of them come to new towns and





villages to earn themselves a living. It's nice that now they can at least provide for their children.

— And what do people in steppe settlements say to that effect?

— They say that after you launched a war against the Dzhungars, they came to have had more trust in you. Some believe that you were right in allowing to build towns and roads in our land, while others disagree. But poor people have got bread now. I've already seen Kazakhs plowing soil.

— That's all very well, Zhyrau, but don't you think our men may get spoiled by Russian peasants? There's too much willfulness to this people.

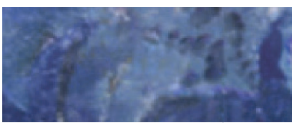
— And do your own subjects always do everything your way? That's not the point. I'm thinking day and night about whether you do the right thing by letting foreigners build fortresses in our land.

— A horse and a fur coat have been awaiting an owner for a long time now... — Ablai said. — They will be a good reward to the one who will be able to puzzle my dream out. I saw it the night before the feast, and I have been unable to set my mind at rest since then.

— Tell me your dream, my Sultan. If I, a commoner, is allowed to puzzle out a Tyure's dream, I'll try my hardest!

— In that dream of mine, Zhyrau, I saw myself lying on the deathbed. There were three groups of people trying to snatch the flag of the three Kazakh Zhuzes over my head. There was a lion and a dragon by the sides of my sarcophagus, and numerous heirs at my feet. Those born by my son Valyi were saying a prayer for me. And those born by my son Kasym stood holding daggers in their hands. And I was between the lion and the dragon, trying to find a way to rise from the dead...

Bukhar Zhyrau kept silent for a while, then he tossed his head.



— Well, my Sultan... Remember that puzzling a dream out is like hunting for a fox—you either make a leap that is a bit too long or one that is not long enough.

— Go ahead, Zhyrau!

— A person who in his prime dreams about his own death will live to a ripe old age. The flag over your head implies that you will become the khan of the three Zhuzes. But on the day of your death, the Zhuzes will take three separate paths...

— And the lion and the dragon are no problem recognizing, are they? — Ablai asked in a serious voice.

— You'll spend your whole life in between those two, my Sultan...

— And what about my sons?

— One family branch is going to glorify you with learnedness, whereas the other—with sanguine battles!

Legend has it that the prophetic zhyrau predicted Ablai's future and the fate of his descendants. This was not hard to do as the sultan was a man of extremes—a Tyure Genghizide, simultaneously smart and stubborn, eager to learn and believing in shamanism, noble in spirit and insidious, well-meaning and wantonly cruel. This was a true son of his terrible age, when the fate of the Kazakh land was full of uncertainty. The lofty and the ignoble went hand in hand in those days...

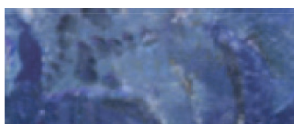
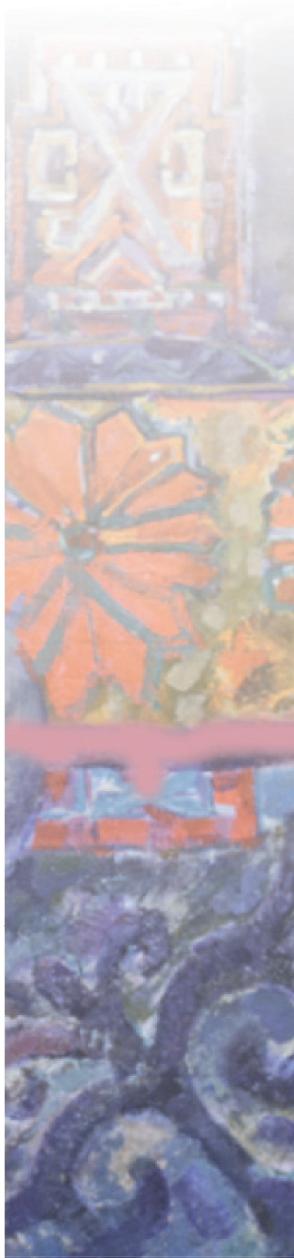
— You will go down in history, Ablai! — exclaimed the perspicacious zhyrau, noticing the ambitious sultan's cold eyes twinkle.

They all knew Ablai's famous reply to Galden-Tseren, his future father-in-law.

— What is the worst lot in this world? — the kontaichi asked his highborn captive.

— To distribute scanty food and to own scanty land, — answered the young sultan.

A man gains in brain from forty to sixty, and loses it





since sixty, say Kazakhs. Ablai was forty one years old, and desired to rule no less than half the world as befit Genghiz-Khan's offspring. Yet it was his lot to part with nomad chieftains' ancient ambitions and turn the Kazakh steppe to a new life—a U-turn which took an appalling toll of lives, and cast a bloody mist over Khan Ablai, through which later generations see the mighty ruler.

Ablai's lucid mind, realistic as every true nomad ruler's, saw all the twists and turns of his time, with its musts and vague promises. Bukhar-Zhyrau, unlike him, was loath to admit that the world was changing apace. Answering to God alone for his songs, he could well afford his aloofness to political challenges. He sang of the plains and free riders in them. He would like the whole world to be free and uninhabited, with only sunlight, the fragrant air, and emerald grass in it—a dream excusable to the poet he was.

Now, he took his pinewood dombra, which was with him through thick and thin. His high, penetrating voice sang of stone walls which criss-crossed the free steppe-land to make nomad hearts weep, as he fiercely strummed the strings and drummed on the sounding board. He called of Ablai and the other chieftains to change their mind before it was too late. His audience of warlords and batyrs were nodding their heads to his fastening beat and fiery recitation. Ablai alone stayed cool. Gnawing at his mind was the news brought by Bayan-Batyr the day before. The years he had spent in Galden-Tseren's tent made him see through Shurshut intrigues. Now, he saw the danger looming over the Kazakh steppe better than anyone else. The Shurshut dragon would scorch it with his fiery breath if not for the Russian fortresses on his way, whether Kazakhs liked it or not—and later—who knew?

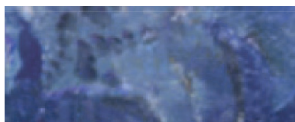
The zhyrau sang his final stanza in a scream, and flung his dombra into the doorway. His young guide and

bodyguard knew the trick, and snatched the instrument before it struck the ground. A string gave a long plaintive sound.

— With thee our hopes lie, Sultan Ablai, yet thou seekest refuge behind the infidel back. Dark are the intentions which make them build their forts, my lord! — the bard brought out, his fell glare never leaving Ablai's face.

Ablai kept silent, his lips firmly pressed, his eyes searching the countenances of the gathering. True, the steppe-land folk were apprehensive as the Russian government had embarked to colonize the area. The Governor-General of Siberia wrote to Peter the Great back in 1713 that Russia direly needed a fort on the Irtysh. Semipalatinsk was fortified in 1718, and the Ust-Kamenogorsk fortress rose two years later. The Akmolinsk, Bayan-Aul and Karkarali forts followed within the 1720s and 30s. A military highway linked Akmolinsk with Kokchetau in a mighty construction effort started in 1737 to last ten years. Ten thousand Crown serfs were brought with their families from Central Russia to toil, and colonists settled along the new highway. Arable lands and pastures were confiscated in plenty to give room to forts and colonies. Russians never encroached on the property of sultans, biys and highborn aksakals, while the poorest were the first to be robbed of their land, miserable as it was. Now, they had a double yoke to bear, of their clan elders and the royal administration. The have-nots were the first to settle side-by-side with Russian peasants. Less than half a century later, these new land tillers and Russian farmers together joined the Pugachev mutiny. Punitive forces came on them from two sides—from the Tsarina's forts and Sultan Ablai's headquarters.

Meanwhile, the nobles of the Junior and Middle zhuzes blamed the Russian forts for the famine and every other trouble. Commoners swallowed it, and the bard





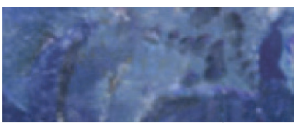
reflected their mood in his songs. The steppe-land folk was ignorant of the Dzhungar kontaichi mustering his crack forces to give the Kazakh land to fire and sword.

Now, too, the people forgot Bayan-Batyr's news to listen spellbound to the swathful song of the zhyrau, who had never heard of the Dzhungar danger looming again. All were waiting for Ablai to respond—he, who was their protector by birthright and who joined Abilmambet in 1740 to swear fealty to the Tsarina—a woman!—on the Koran and bread; the Ablai who, immediately after his rescue from Dzhungar captivity, sent Zholbars, his maternal half-brother, to Governor Nepluyev with a written pledge of loyalty to the Crown and eagerness to trade with Russia. More than that, in 1745, he wrote to Sukharev, Governor-General of Tobolsk, to ask Russian citizenship for the uisun kin of the Senior Zhuz. There was no trade fair in the new Russian towns, which he would not visit. He came to the funeral of Khan Abulkhair, the infidels' most trusty vassal, in his best attire, and called Barak-Sultan a scoundrel in a letter to General Nepluyev. He was supporting the khans Nuraly and Yeraly, the accursed Abulkhair's sons, who were dedicatedly serving the infidels.

Sultan Ablai had taken upon his shoulders sovereignty over all those men. Could he now open his mind to them—he, whose every word was known in Orenburg, Tobolsk and the kontaichi's headquarters as soon as it was uttered, and in the Shurshut emperors palace a bit later? Yet he had to reply, and he slowly turned his head to the bard:

— So you are accusing me of swearing fealty to the infidels, oh zhyrau—yet I was pledging to the kontaichi, too—and now I am getting ready to give a good rebuff to his tumens.

— Why, then, are you not planning a rebuff to the other side?



Ablai pensively nodded:

— The Orys land is not like Dzhungariya.

— Yet the Shurshut land is grand and mighty, too.

— That is why we allow the Orys to have their forts in our plains. We shall never fight back the Shurshut dragon without Russian support. I know from none other than the kontaichi what lot the Shurshuts are preparing us. The Dzhungars will not be spared, either!

— Yet the Shurshut emperor has no forts in our lands,
— the zhyrau glumly retorted.

— If he had, there would be not a single Kazakh survivor in the Kazakh land, — Ablai snapped back.

Despondent silence fell. Kazakhs had known the stories of appalling Chinese cruelty for many centuries. The Chinese soldiers left bare desert after them wherever they passed. Entire nations disappeared swallowed by the dragon.

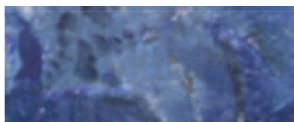
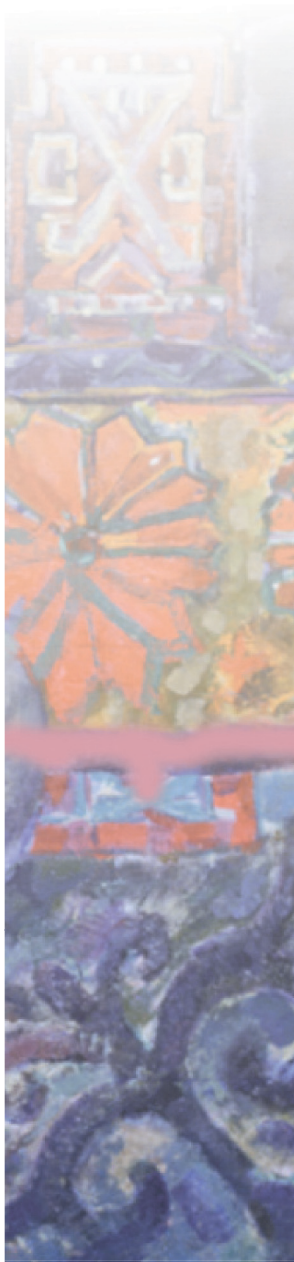
— What shall we do, then? — asked the old bard, as he gazed at Ablai from under his knitted brows.

He thought he was seeing through the sultan. Ablai was out for vengeance on Galden-Tseren, who had done great evil to the Kazakh land and was still scheming against it. Later, Ablai would raise his sword against the Russian forts. He could not openly talk about his plans now—the Russian wolf was sharp-eared.

The sultan snatched out a leather scroll nap:

— Look, here are the tumens of the kontaichi, my resourceful father-in-law. He will sooner or later bring them to the Irtysh. If the warriors of all the three zhuzes meet them there, the Dzhungars will never get out of the trap. They will never expect us to attack the first, because they were the first to fall on us ever since Khan Dayan's time.

— I don't think all the batyrs of the Junior Zhuz will come here to make war on Dzhungars on the Irtysh banks,
— brought out Syrymbet-Batyr of the Basentiin tribe.





— Yet the batyrs of my Middle Zhuz are fighting Kalmyks on the Zhaik, — retorted a squat batyr of the tarakty kin.

— Who of your kith and kin was ever fighting there?

— Why, batyr Janybek, who is now the tarkhan!

— He was only fighting for his father-in-law, — roared Syrymbet-Batyr—a giant with a bare hairy chest, now crimson with wrath. — That Janybek of yours belongs to our glorious zhuz only by title. His lands are on the Irgiz, close to the Junior Zhuz. That was why he took up arms!

Ablai sat pensive, dropping his pepper-and-salt head. It was always like that with Kazakhs. Any serious conversation turned into a squabble of “my-zhuz-your-zhuz-your-Irtysh-my-Zhaik”. Discord was reigning within every zhuz, too. Even now, they had come together by sheer incident. Village dogs were wiser than humans—they stopped their fights when they saw a wolf, and here was an enemy worse than any pack of wolves, Galden-Tseren with the Shurshut dragon following.

The noise died down, suddenly, as the yertoul scouts came back from the opposite Irtysh bank, to which they had been sent the week before. They said there were no kontaichi’s soldiers yet in the riverside Dzhungar camps. The rumour said quite the contrary.

The kontaichi would not be caught unawares—he never was. Now, too, he knew better than to gather his tumens in one spot, from which they could attack in one direction only. The Dzhungar host remained in the heartland. With their fierce mangy horses of unsurpassed hardiness, the Dzhungars could take start any instant to come close to Turkestan, the Aral or wherever they liked within a mere three or four days, or ransack the Middle Zhuz auls here across the Irtysh. If only he had a united army of the three zhuzes, he could divide it in three directions and wait for the Dzhungar. But the time of the

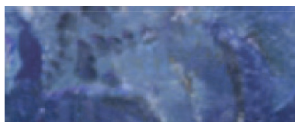
legendary Kasym-Khan was past. That one could muster a force of two hundred thousand within a week. Now, the enchanted Kazakh sword was blunt and rusty after they had been chopping firewood with it in their folly.

Ablai's council determined to muster the Kazakh militia near Lake Telikol, at about the same distance from all the three zhuzes. Though Ablai's men knew that the Junior Zhuz army would not come after Khan Abulkhair was slain by Barak-Sultan, there were many warlike batyrs in the zhuz, who could be expected to join the force with their detachments. Tarkhan Janybek and other sardars of the Middle Zhuz, now subordinate to the Junior, would be welcome to join, too. As to the Senior Zhuz, it was impatient to rid of the kontaichi's yoke.

Ablai immediately notified Khan Abilmambet about the council resolution. Despite ill health, the khan had retained sovereignty of the Middle Zhuz. He was now far away in the steppe-land on the Sarysu riverside. Ablai went with his auls to the banks of Lake Burabai on the Kokchetau plateau. His huge caravan was a day's march long, lined to the sides with vast herds of Ablai's renowned steeds—grey, black and piebald, each herd of one colour. Sultan Ablai's wealth was known all through the steppes and far outside them.

No one would believe that danger was looming by the look of peaceful herds of sheep, lambs and cattle, and small boys and girls happily bellowing as they darted from caravan to caravan on horseback. Warriors in shining armour alone reminded of the impending war, as they lined the caravans in close formation. The most experienced yertouls were sent three or four days' marches forward and back, and to both sides of the caravans.

At last, they reached a cozy green dale known as Ablai's Field. Black and white yurtas were promptly pitched, sentries posted, and Ablai galloped with his crack force to



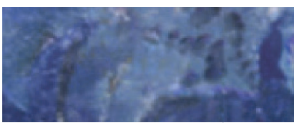


Lake Telikol. The winding road stretched for two thousand miles. Ablai had good reason to hate that roundabout way, along which lived the many tribes and clans of the Middle Zhuz. The mustering and re-establishment of a united Kazakh khanate—Mai's cherished goal—mainly depended on that zhuz. The argyn, kipchak, kiman, tarakty, uak, kerei and many other auls made up an overwhelming majority of the Kazakh population after the ten years of Dzhungar invasions. The sultan and his men passed Kokchetau, Sandyktau, Atbasar, darted along the Ishim and Tersakkan banks, on across the holy Ulytau mountains, the banks of the Kara-Kenghir, the Zhezdy and the winding Sarysu, and at last made a beeline to Telikol.

“Ablai is coming to make war on the kontaichi!” The rumour ran in front of his force, and the army was snowballing with every mile. Though independent of the kontaichi, the place was laid bare by the predatory Dzhungar noions year in, year out. Now was the time of vengeance. When Ablai approached Lake Telikol, a boundless human sea was accompanying him. Ablai was now in command of thirty thousand riders, plus numerous auxiliaries, the largest Kazakh host ever mustered after the Dzhungar invasion.

A great many batyrs gathered in the Telikol headquarters. Of special importance was the arrival of Janybek-Tarkhan, which meant that true warriors forgot all grudges when facing the foe. Janybek brought with him the best-known warriors of humble birth, who had reached the “prophetic age” of three score—Bogembay of Kanzhigali and Kabanbai of the Karakerei tribe, with Gaukhar his wife, who had accompanied him on all campaigns ever since she swore him love and fidelity in besieged Turkestan. Side by side with them were the famous Argyn batyrs Taijigit, Basbulat, Janatai, Olzhabai, Malaisary, and Orazymbet. The elderly Taiman-Batyr soon joined them.

Still, Ablai's heart was heavy, for Bayan-Batyr had not



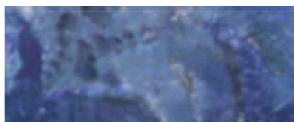
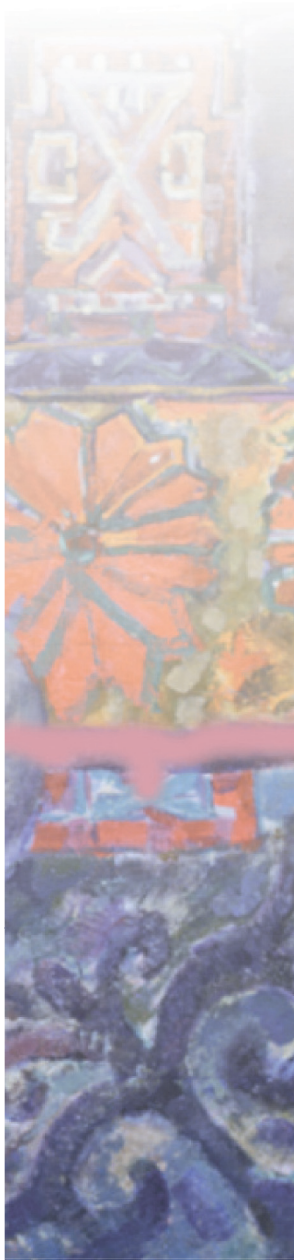
yet come from his borderline post. Together with Zhapek-Batyr, who had shared Dzhungar captivity with Ablai, Bayan was chief counsellor and the right hand man of the sultan who had determined to reunite Kazakh lands.

Ablai had every reason to worry. Of the lineage of Sayan, a valiant lowborn warrior and close associate of Khan Janybek the Land-Gatherer, who settled in the uak auls in his advanced age, Bayan-Batyr in every respect resembled his legendary ancestor. He was the first to saddle his warhorse as soon as the foe appeared in the steppe—and now was the time to be always on the alert. Yet the renowned warrior would not appear.

Fortyish, Bayan-Batyr had just entered the mature warrior's prime. A blue-eyed, fair-haired colossus of frank disposition and prepossessing countenance, with a bushy moustache, he had a fabulous strength, and his cudgel drove an ordinary man deep into the ground at one fell swoop. Yet he had a kind and generous heart—a rarity at the cruel time he was fated to live in. Noyan, his younger brother, the only one of the numerous kin to survive the Dzhungar massacre, was the most cherished treasure of that big heart.

At his age of fifteen, Noyan had never yet crossed swords with Dzhungars, but was often training with the cudgel. Proud and passionate, his nighttime dreams were of battles. His fiery soul frightened his elder brother. "Your time will come yet, boy. Now, train in martial arts and the noble art of self-possession. Remember, man takes up arms only in the hour of trouble. The Lord made the human race for a peaceful mission," — Bayan repeated to the youth.

The previous summer, Bayan-Batyr led a force of five hundred to avenge a raid by ransacking Dzhungar auls across the Hi river. Dzhungars were fighting like the devils to protect their families and property. Over half of





the Kazakh warriors fell in battle, and the survivors took refuge in the riverside reeds. Astonished, they saw out of their hiding that the Dzhungars were leaving the site in panic all along the bank for a hasty retreat to the arid desert eastward. As they were to learn later, one of their warriors, wounded and taken prisoner, had said to the Dzhungars that the five hundred were a mere scout force, and the army was approaching.

Ecstatic at the sight of the foe's thunderbolt flight, Bayan's men fell upon the last of the retreating auls to massacre the bagadurs and warriors, caught unawares. The survivors spurred on their horses and camels into the inundating stream. Only few reached the other bank. The Kazakh booty was small in that poor aul—only scanty cattle and a few women.

Bayan-Batyr was glumly examining the abject trophies. He thought of the cruelty and injustice of war. Those hapless people whose miserable belongings now lay scattered on the ground—were they to blame for the invasion? Yet they were the greatest to suffer, while the bloodthirsty kontaichi and noions were now aslumber on their silken pillows far from the swords of vengeance.

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide in astonished admiration, and his heart missed a beat.

— Is this a houri? She cannot be a maiden of the human race, — he whispered to Zhapek-Batyr his friend.

True, the maiden stood out against the other captive Dzhungar women as a sable among rabbits.

— Who is she? — Bayan asked.

— Daughter of Horen-Bagadur, the one who slew our Janatai-Batyr yesterday and whom your cudgel sent today a-chasing his victim in the afterlife, — answered the warriors.

Leading Tulpar-kok, his steed in tow, Bayan strode up to the girl.

— What is your name, fair gazelle? — he asked, mildly.

— Why, you know it! — exclaimed the maid, surprised at the handsome stranger knowing her name, Kuralai, which meant “gazelle”.

— I guessed it! So it is my destiny, — he pensively replied.

Kuralai had great eyes, deep as two mountain lakes. Old nomadic women give babies names by such tokens. The maid’s face was of chiseled features and a matte ivory complexion, slightly pallid. Her jet-black braids streamed down along the willowy body, reaching to her ankles, and winding as she moved round a wasp waist.

The batyr was gazing into her eyes, which sparkled in reply. Was she requiting his sudden love? Or was it hatred? Bayan’s famous composure was one. He stretched his right hand with the riding-crop in it, shouting:

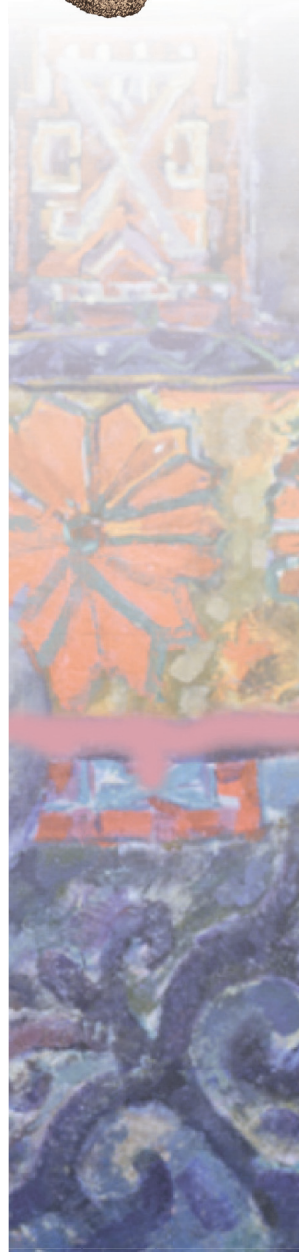
— I am taking this maid as my booty!

All fell silent—Bayan-Batyr had never before taken part in the distribution of slave girls, and always darted away in dismay before it started.

— Let it be, — shrugged Zhapek, and said to his men, — Keep this gazelle as the apple of your eye lest a kite hurt her. She is Bayan’s woman.

— So be it, — replied the agitated soldiers in their anticipation of women’s caresses.

Every word reached Kuralai’s ears. She saw the day before that warrior, with his honest eyes, piercing her father’s chest with his spear, and heard his triumphant warcry. Now, in the same joyous voice, he cried, “I am taking this maid as my booty!” She was shivering all over, as a trapped fledgling. Would she commit a mortal sin by giving herself to the man who had slain her father? Pressing her hands to her belly as was the Dzhungar custom, the girl whispered: “I swear never to be your booty, you blue-eyed butcher! I swear on my mother’s milk





to take vengeance on you!” Her oath was later fulfilled for all to see.

Bayan-Batyr was as a man consumed by fire all through the way back. He kept looking round his shoulder to the caravan with which Kuralai-sulu was. He never gave a thought to the three hundred warriors fallen in the raid. His friends were riding at his side, downcast.

Kuralai, on the contrary, was complacent, and even wittily replying to the raillery of her guards. As she learned from them, Bayan-Batyr had no near and dear except a young brother whom he loved to distraction. A horrible plan was haunting her in the daytime, and at night—dreams of her father in death throes.

The wail of the bereaved reached the caravan far away from the auls on their road. Bearers of evil tidings had galloped forward well beforehand to announce the death of sons and husbands. The luckier villagers were congratulating Bayan on his victory and trophies. Ever more warriors were leaving the force for home. At long last, he and twenty other horsemen reached their own aul, which had pitched camp on the Ubagan riverbank.

— Oh my kokeh, how happy I am to see you safe and alive!

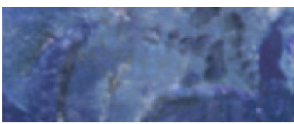
— Are you well, my only brother? — were the customary words which Bayan and the adolescent Noyan exchanged upon reunion. Kuralai was attentively watching from under her veil.

As he was mounting his horse, Noyan suddenly caught the stare of those great, slanting eyes. His head swam, and he nearly fell off his horse.

— What’s wrong, boy? — Bayan asked, alarmed.

— Who’s there, riding a camel? — Noyan brought out, pointing a finger at her.

The steeled batyr blushed, he knew not why, and cold not say that it was his betrothed third wife.



— A slavegirl of no importance, — he snapped.

Kuralai, too, had her eyes glued to that strapping lad, looking older than his age, so like her father's killer and yet so endearing. Her heart was thumping. Their eyes met, and both blushed. Still unaware of it, they knew in their subconscious that they were destined to belong to each other.

Noyan gave a jerk of his head, and said:

— Can you give me a gift, kokeh?

The innocent words pierced Bayan's heart as a dagger. He knew what the request would be—and he could not bring himself to a straightforward answer.

— Oh my little brother, apple of my eye, you are not big enough for such gifts as this. Wait till you come of age, and I shall bring you a houri of paradise, — he said.

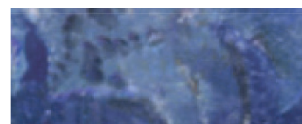
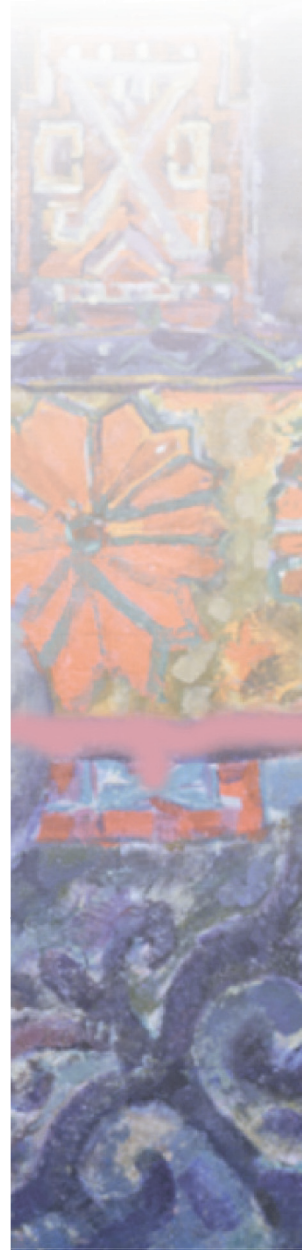
— I have no use for houris. I want this slave girl alone, — Noyan firmly replied, his gaze never leaving Kuralai.

— Oh kokeh-zhan! May I address you so as befit an orphan? Please give me to your brother in marriage, I implore, — her tender voice unexpectedly cut in.

Her broken Kazakh and thick Dzhungar pronunciation gave the beauty's words an irresistible charm. Noyan drew near, stretched his hand out to lift her veil. Bayan clenched his teeth at that.

— We shall see later, — he mumbled and spurred in his horse. Tulpar-kok neighed and galloped off, the other horses following him—Noyan's too.

The boy could not live in separation from Kuralai. He spent his days and nights beside the captive women's yurta. Sometimes, on warm autumn nights, she came out to talk to him, yet she never allowed him to touch her body. Torment was admixed to her love as her father's cruel death never left her mind. She saw her mother writhing on the beach, stretching out hands in supplication: "Oh daughter mine, suffer not the male hand to touch you





before I give you my blessing with a kiss on the brow.” On the darkest and bleakest nights, Kuralai was repeating her terrible oath under her breath.

Bayan-Batyr led a life of torment, as a man dying on the stake. He saw how infatuated with the captive maiden his beloved brother was, yet he could not trample his own love underfoot. To give up that love was as reforging a sword of Damascus steel and tempering it anew in fire. Death and rebirth as a new man alone could end his torment, such was the law of his nature.

Yet boundless was his kindness and self-sacrifice, and he announced the betrothal of Noyan and Kuralai.

Nomadic Kazakh boys and girls have pure and simple contacts. There is an altybakan seesaw at the edge of every aul, where couples meet on warm summer and autumn nights. As all unmarried captives, Kuralai enjoyed the freedom of aul girls. It was there at the seesaw that Noyan, beside himself with happiness, told his beloved about his brother’s decision and the bliss awaiting them—yet tears welled in her eyes.

She was silently recollecting her oath—she would make Bayan-Batyr not weep, but wail with grief as bereaved Dzhungar mothers had been wailing that hellish night. Blind to her wrath, Noyan embraced her and led her to the darkness of the shrubbery, out of which rang the lilting laughter of couples in love.

There on the carpet of lush grass, Noyan, crazed with love, gave her an oath—a terrible oath.

— What do you want of me? — he asked.

— Mother must give me a kiss on my brow in blessing before I wed you, or a curse will be on our wedlock. She will give us her consent if she is alive. If she is no more—if bereavement killed her, then we shall cover her gravestone with red flowers, — Kuralai firmly said.

Enchanted with her strong and exquisite feeling, Noyan consented to her request. It never occurred to him

that to leave his native land and elope with a captive to the enemy camp was an unforgivable crime. The eaglet was contemplating the world from high above in his flight, unaware of its traps and quagmires.

— Wait for me on this spot as the North Star appears in the sky, — he whispered.

Noyan was good on his word. As soon as the North Star appeared on the horizon, he rode up to the waiting Kuralai on his best bay racer, leading another in tow. As like as two peas, the steeds were brothers of Tulpar-kok, of whom ballads were sung in the steppe-land.

— Godspeed, — he whispered as he spurred on his horse. The hoofbeat died in the lush grass as they rode off.

The aul learned that Noyan, brother of Bayan-Batyr, had stolen the two best horses only in the early afternoon, when the herds were taking all horses to the watering-place. Two silver bridles, made for them on Bayan's order, were also missing. A falconer turned up who had seen the couple galloping away to the Dzhungar lands across the Hi. Everything was clear now, and the elders made bold to tell the whole story to the batyr.

— Oh Bayan-Batyr, you who raised the martial glory of our kin to heaven! Your brother Noyan, the silly hobbledehoy, has now ruined that glory. It is up to you alone, valiant warrior, to decide what is to be done about it, — said the greybeards.

Knowing too well that one mere glance of Kuralai's magical eyes could throw an angel into the hell of temptation, Bayan did not need to ask questions. He had lost his only brother, whom he cherished more than his own life. Impotent jealousy was tormenting him. Shame and wrath were tearing his soul apart as hungry fiends. Aware of his friends' compassionate glances and his foes' gloating, the mighty warrior took his birchwood bow, put two arrows into the quiver and, without putting on his





armour, he buckled his broad belt, strode out of his yurt, and mounted Tulpar-kok in silence. The whole aul's eyes were following him till he was lost from sight beyond the horizon.

No one said to him, "Stop, batyr!" The magnificent steed galloped on and on a day, a night, then another day and another night. At sundown of the second day of his chase, Bayan discerned two black spots far ahead. He knew it was his prey, and did not spur on his horse. However swift the two bays might be, they were too young to be trained for a long gallop, and had fattened in the luscious meadows of Ubagan.

The fugitives, too, recognized the rider, who was inexorably catching up with them, and understood his fiendish wrath.

— Faster, faster! — Kuralai was whispering as they whipped their tired steeds with their riding-crops.

The sun had not yet set when they reached Zholdy-Ozek, a God-forsaken patch of saline soil edged in wiry weeds. Zhyrau Asan the Ill-Starred was referring to it as Kandy-Ozek, Blood Vale. The atygai clan, who was owning the spot, never used it as pastureland out of superstition.

Noyan cast a wistful glance at Blood Vale close in his front, and saw that he was doomed. He reined in his horse and turned to face his brother. Kuralai did die same.

— Don't stop! Run for dear life while I meet my doom as befits a batyr, — he cried to his beloved, calmly dismounted and, unarmed, came up to his brother.

— Forgive me, kokeh! — He held out both hands, and a smile appeared on his puffy lips of a youth.

The arrow shot from a Bukhara bow sang its drawn-out tune. Its tempered tip broke Noyan's ribs and pierced his passionate heart.

— What have you done, kokeh?!..

Kuralai screamed like a wounded bird and rushed to





the falling youth. The warrior stood up in his stirrups, looked at her with blood-shot eyes, and shot another arrow. The girl fell near her loved one with a pierced heart.

Then, after making a full circle around the dead, Bayan-Batyr crumbled down, too. He fell on his only brother's body, sobbing, convulsing, and howling like a she-wolf which lost her cubs. "Woe is me! Woe is me!" he roared, striking his head with his fists. Suddenly, he froze in astonishment. Kuralai was staring at him with bright live eyes. Her parted dark-red lips curved in a menacing smile, and her dead face expressed the satisfaction of revenge. For the first time in his whole life, the warrior closed his eyes in terror. Maybe that just seemed to him in his grief. Because the warrior opened his eyes when he heard a barely audible moan, and she smiled at him sadly and without anger...

— O kokeh, bury me together with Noyan and don't throw earth between us!..

Saying this, she closed her beautiful, almond-shaped eyes as if she was going to outstrip the setting sun.

All night did warrior Bayan sit motionless by the two bodies. With the first rays of the sun, he took his knife and began digging the bitter-salty earth of Bloody Ravine. The lovers' grave was spacious and deep. He lay them together and did not drop a single fistful of earth between them...

After the lovers' death, Bayan-Batyr stayed three days in the Bloody Ravine. Dark in the face, shaggy and glum, he returned to the aul and immediately ordered to saddle the battle horses. This was the cause of his delay.

At Telikol's, all were glad to see him, but marveled at his darkened face. Some said he was ill, but no one could find out what really had happened to him. Bayan-Batyr told his horsemen not to say anything about it, and they kept their promise out of deep respect for their leader.

He told about his sin to Ablai alone.

— I don't know why I did that... — said he and bowed

his head. — Maybe it was the revenge of an offended man. Anyway, here is my head. Cut it off!

— We certainly would if you didn't do that. Keep your feelings to yourself. But you must know that those siding with our enemies have always been punished by death. Besides, they were sentenced and executed by their close relatives. If they refused to do that, they themselves were punished by death. It is an ancient rule, and we cannot renounce it now!..

Ablai's muted voice was full of anger. He was staring into the distance, above the warrior's head, and for some reason, the youth regained his composure.

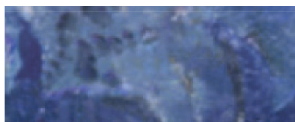
— Yes, my Sultan, it is true... — said he. — But the wound in my heart still smarts. It can only be healed with blood, someone else's or... my own!

— Well, tomorrow you will have a chance to do that! — Ablai said calmly.

That same day, after consulting with Khan Abilmambet, who had just arrived there, and not waiting for the coming of the Junior Zhuz's forces under Khan Nuraly, Ablai's cavalry set out for Turkestan and the camps captured by the Dzhungars along the banks of the Syr Darya. This happened at the beginning of the second month Zheltoksan, and Ablai's forces numbered over forty thousand riders. It was the Kazakh army's first big offensive campaign since the "time of great trouble."

According to the traditional military tactics of the nomads, the Kazakh forces were divided into three groups, all of them moving in different directions. The first group was headed by a very experienced Kanzhigali commander by the name of Bogembay. The famed zhyrau Umbetai had composed the following song about him:

O, my sweet mountains and valleys: Bayanaul, Kyzyltau, and Abraly, Kozy-Manrak, Koi-Manrak, and Genghiztau,





How many Dzhungar brigands roamed you!..
And you, Bogembay, like a worthy teacher,
put them in their place,
Beyond the Black Irtysh, where they belong.
You drove them out beyond the river and
the Altai Mountains.

At Ak-Shaul, you set up a camp for the brave and the
faithful.

The horsemen heard your call and flew there like birds.
With them you defeated the Dzhungar myrmidons
wherever you met them...

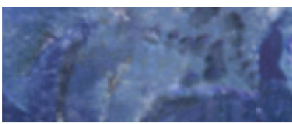
O, great warriors Kabanbai and Bogembay!..

The Argyns and the Naimans glorify you for your
having returned the age-old lands and pastures to them!..

Now, at the head of a ten-thousand-strong cavalry,
Bogembay-Batyr was rapidly moving to Sozak, from
which Kontaichi Galden-Tseren was going to set off for
Ulytau, the ancient political centre of the Kazakh steppe.
As was the old custom, the army was accompanied by a
special “historian”, zhyrau Umbetai.

The second group was headed by the famous
Janybek-Tarkhan. His forces moved towards the lower
Seikhundarya. Apart from the horsemen of the Middle
Zhuz, there were many warriors and horsemen from
the Junior Zhuz’s Shekty, Tabyn, Tama, and Adai kins in
the detachments under the first Kazakh tarkhan. They
were desperate to win back their territories around the
Seikhundarya. This group’s “historian”-songster was the
well-known Tatikara-Zhyrau from the Kalmak tribe.

The third and chief army was under the command of
Ablai himself. It moved through Shiyeli and Zhana-Kurgan
heading for Turkestan. Its subdivisions’ commanders
were the famed warriors of that time: Bayan, Malaisary,
Zhapek, and Kabanbai-Batyr, who caught up with the



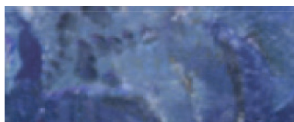
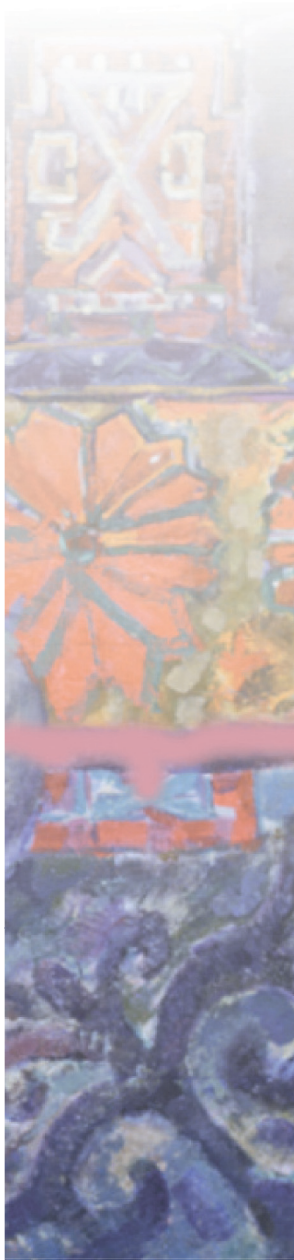
troops after they had already marched out. Now, the old warrior was accompanied not by his wife, the famed fighter Gaukhar, but by his young and beautiful daughter Nazym, the spitting image of her mother.

Bukhar-Zhyrau, who was now over sixty and did not have a battle horse, could not take part in this great campaign and stayed in the aul of his friend, Warrior Bayan. Instead of him, Ablai took the seventeen-year-old Kotesch-Akyn as the campaign's "historian", the very Kotesch-Akyn who had recently accused him of deliberately assassinating Botakhan.

The Kazakh troops rushed down three depressions like an avalanche and inundated the steppe. Although they outnumbered the Dzhungar tumens, their discipline, arms, and training were by far inferior to those of their opponents. It was just a volunteer corps in which plain herdsmen and horse-herds rode side by side with experienced warriors. This was why Ablai did his best to avoid the general encounter of the main forces. His aim was to force the Dzhungar noions into dispersing their troops, and then destroy them one by one. The Kazakh army was divided into three parts just so it could scatter the enemy forces...

However, being a nomad, the cunning Kontaichi had fought the Kazakh nomads all his life and easily guessed Ablai's device. He immediately realized that the purpose of Bogembay-Batyr's troops, which were heading for Sozak, and that of the army of Janybek-Batyr moving to the lower Seikhundarya, was to divert his forces. For the Dzhungars, the' main danger was Ablai's army, which was heading for Turkestan. The Dzhungar yertouls knew that too. They loomed on the horizon each time the Kazakh troops appeared in the steppe.

Tseren-Dorzhi, by now the ruler of Dzhungariya, sent only auxiliary detachments to Sozak and Kazalinsk, and himself took command of fifteen thousand choice warriors





and hurried to meet Ablai's forces. He got there before the slow-moving Kazakhs and occupied the territory of Zhana-urgan. In the center, a dismounted group armed with fifteen cannons and Chinese muskets was stationed. The light cannons were positioned on the humps of giant camels and could be easily moved to the needed direction. Although the animals were used to the sound of gunfire, their ears were plugged up with wads. When shooting began, the camels were laid on their stomachs and fastened with rope to three pegs, like anchored boats. On the flanks, as usual, Tseren-Dorzhi deployed the formidable Dzhungar cavalry.

A few days before, learning that Tseren-Dorzhi had become kontaichi instead of Galden-Tseren, and that his forces had blocked up the way to Turkestan, Ablai flew into a rage. This noion from the Dzhungar kin of Chorasses was his most implacable enemy. Once, he demanded that the young imprisoned Ablai be executed, and only recently insisted that the Dzhungar tumens strike the main blow on the Kazakhs from the Irtysh, that is right on the domains of Ablai and the entire Middle Zhuz. The same Tseren-Dorzhi had given refuge to Sultan Barak after the assassination of Abulkhair. According to his position, Barak had had to be tried by the council of Kazakh biys. Later, Tseren-Dorzhi had ordered that Barak-Sultan be poisoned, notwithstanding the fact that the former's wife was Barak's sister. True, in the event of Barak-Sultan's death, Ablai would become the sole ruler of the Middle Zhuz, but still, his hatred of this treacherous man was not at all less. Now, this militant noion was the main Dzhungar kontaichi and stood in the way to his uniting the country and glory!

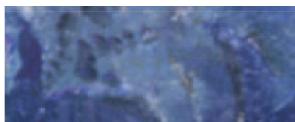
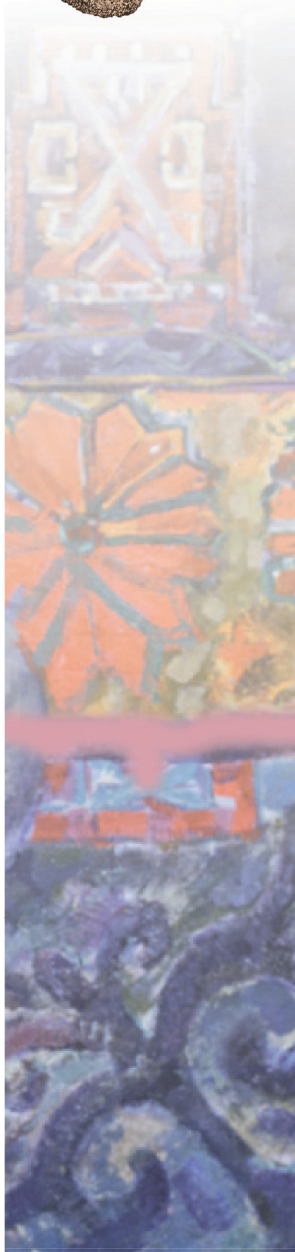
According to tradition, Ablai divided his forces into three columns. He entrusted warrior Kabanbai, who had experience in storming cities and whose detachment

numbered about five hundred picked Kazakh bowmen, with capturing the fortress of Zhana-Kurgan. Sarymbet-Batyr was at the head of the right wing, and Bayan-Batyr the left one. In front of each wing, there were three thousand cavalymen. Behind them stood the auxiliary detachments under the command of Oryzymbet-Batyr and Malaisary-Batyr. They were armed with spears, cudgels, and Russian fusils. Ablai and his seventeen-year-old son Zhanai took up a position in the centre, behind Kabanbai's warriors. Ablai had his personal thousand-strong detachment of choice Tulengut warriors.

The battle began at dawn, on a Wednesday. Ablai's men had a good view of the whole plain before Zhana-Kurgan. Scouts had already been sent out from both sides in order to prevent any unexpected surprises from the enemy. Now, everything depended on the courage and gallantry of the fighters. Both commanders signaled the beginning of the battle at the same time, and immediately, guns and fusils fired, arrows whistled, and the drums began beating. Tens of thousands of horsemen unsheathed their sharp swords and aldaspan-sabres, and raced towards each other. Clouds of reddish desert dust rose slowly to the sky from under the sharp hooves of the horses and shut out the sun...

It was a scorching, horrible hell, smelling of human blood. The wild neighing of the horses intermingled with the screams of wounded and trampled men, the furious roar of warriors and bagadurs, the whooping of horsemen, the crunching of bones, and the grinding sound of iron. If a troop was giving in and began retreating in some place, the commanders of the opposing sides immediately sent three or four hundred fresh horsemen there. The day was drawing to a close, but the carnage was going on, not stopping even for a minute.

Ablai made up his mind. All day, he sat in the saddle





of his horse, staring into the red haze and listening to the sound of the battle. Every minute, messengers galloped up to him and reported about the developments on the thirty-verst-wide battle field. And now, at the end of the day, Ablai suddenly straightened his shoulders, stood up in the stirrups, and waved a signal.

— Attan! Forward!..

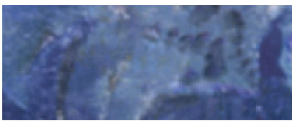
The one-thousand-strong detachment of Tulenguts rushed forward like a stone avalanche. In front, the young warriors of the sultan's personal guard, Sagimbai and Kanai, raced astride Akhaltekin chargers. They sliced the frontline of the Dzhungars apart as if with a sabre and came galloping up to the hill on which the tent with the kontaichi's tailed flag was set up. But the Dzhungars' guns and fusils fired again and made a wide breach in the line of the attackers. The horses reared and pranced, and their riders began falling on the sand. In the meantime, the rear horsemen continued to crowd those in front, thereby making even a greater mess of it. All the while, the Dzhungar gunners were busy charging their guns with red-hot cannon balls. Within a minute or two, a new whirlwind of fire would go through the Kazakh cavalry. Behind the kontaichi's tent, Tseren-Dorzhi's bodyguards were pushing their sleeves up to the elbows and exciting their horses for pursuing the fleeing...

— Don't we have a real warrior among us who is not afraid of the cannons' thunder! — Ablai exclaimed, standing up in his stirrups.

His son Zhanai grabbed the sultan's familial bunchuk (wand) and rushed forward:

— Ablai!.. Ablai!..

But his horse carried him somewhere aside from the hill, where the kontaichi and his counsellors were. A hundred dashing young horsemen started chasing him, but had to slow down in the brushwood. However, no



sooner did the seventeen-year-old Zhanai-Sultan get out of there than a small slim girl astride a huge black unsaddled horse rode on to the battle-field from a different direction and stopped in front of the kontaichi's tent. She had no arms, just a whip.

— Kabanbai! Kabanbai!

Everybody immediately knew the beautiful Nazym, the daughter of warrior Kabanbai and the famed fighter Gaukhar.

— Ablai! Kabanbai!..

These calls were coming from the young horsemen of Zhanai-Sultan, who had finally got out of the thorny brushwood. The youth and the girl were now together, horse to horse, before the terrible cannons on the hill. Their desperation so impressed the Kazakh troops as to make even the wounded get up from the ground and take up the arms.

— Ablai! Kabanbai!..

— Hurrakh!..

Overcome by the same awe-inspiring outburst of passion, the warriors and horsemen of all kins, tribes and zhuzes dashed forward.

— Ablai!

— Atygai!

— Akzhol!

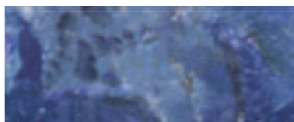
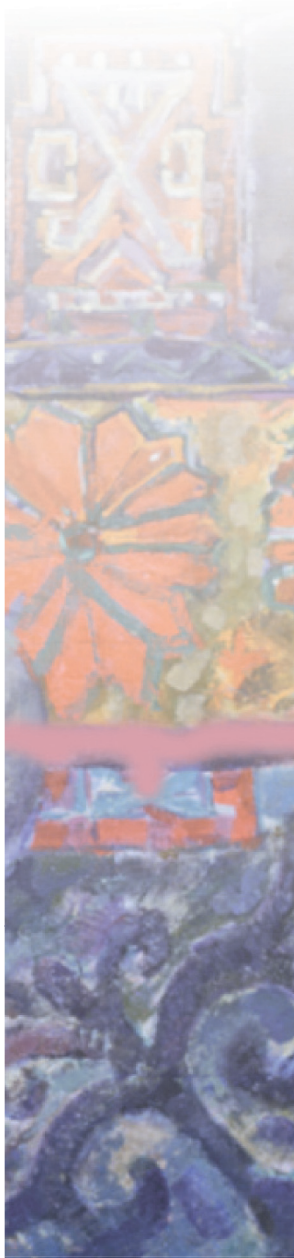
— Karakipchak Koblandy! Hurrakh!..

— Kabanbai!.. Ablai!..

— Ablai! Ablai! Ablai!

Sultan Ablai, too, rushed to attack the enemy with a detachment of cuirassed warriors. Seeing this, the kontaichi's servants began hastily folding up his field tent. The Dzhungars' tailed flag with the black Shurshut dragon on yellow silk shook and swam towards the setting sun.

More than half the Dzhungar army was destroyed in this bloody battle. The war lasted two months. For the





first time after the “great trouble,” the Dzhungar tumens suffered defeat after defeat. Ablai took the fortress and territory of Zhana-Kurgan, which was the key to Turkestan, and was slowly advancing towards the ancient Kazakh capital, sweeping away the Dzhungars’ covering forces. The mounted patrols of warrior Bayan had already appeared on the banks of the Talas River, thus betokening the nearing liberation of the kins and tribes of the Senior Zhuz, and also the Kyrgyz camps from the Dzhungar yoke. In the meantime, Bogembay-Batyr had taken Sozak and Sairam. Janybek-Tarkhan was driving the Dzhungar aggressors out of the Kazakh and Karakalpak territories around the Aral River, which forced Kontaichi Tseren-Dorzhi to ask for peace...

Ablai consented to conclude a peace agreement. His fatigued army had lost half its men and needed a rest. Besides, it was nothing but a volunteer corps, and every horseman had a lot to attend to in his faraway Sary-Arka. Having repulsed the Dzhungars and prevented the danger of another aggression, the people were thinking about how to feed themselves and their families in the coming winter.

Tseren-Dorzhi’s seven plenipotentiary envoys spent a whole month at Ablai’s headquarters. After long negotiations, they agreed to cede, in the name of the kontaichi, the already liberated Kazakh cities of Sozak, Sairam, Mankent, and Chimkent, to the Khan of the Middle Zhuz, Abilmambet. At the same time, they consented to discuss during the winter the question of returning to the Kazakhs the Turkestan vilayet with the Fortress of Turkestan and its suburbs. The large territories along the banks of the Seikhundayra and Talas rivers were also to be returned. As for the Kazakh domains of the kontaichi, the duties and tributes from the local population there were to be considerably lessened. Just

one year ago, the kontaichi would have laughed viciously if the Kazakh chiefs had suggested him to accept these terms...

— This year's war is over! — Ablai said meaningfully, disbanding the volunteer corps.

He himself, with an escort of his most trusted men and warriors, set off for Sozak, where Khan Abilmambet's headquarters still was. As was the custom, they held a grand feast there in honour of the successful end of the war. But during its height, terrible news came down on the happy Ablai like a bolt from the blue. Pushing aside the guards, the young Kotesh-Zhyrau burst into the palace of Sozak's governor, where the feast was held. He sat aside from the others, tuned his dombra and began playing a plangent heart-rending melody.

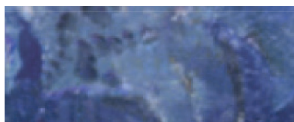
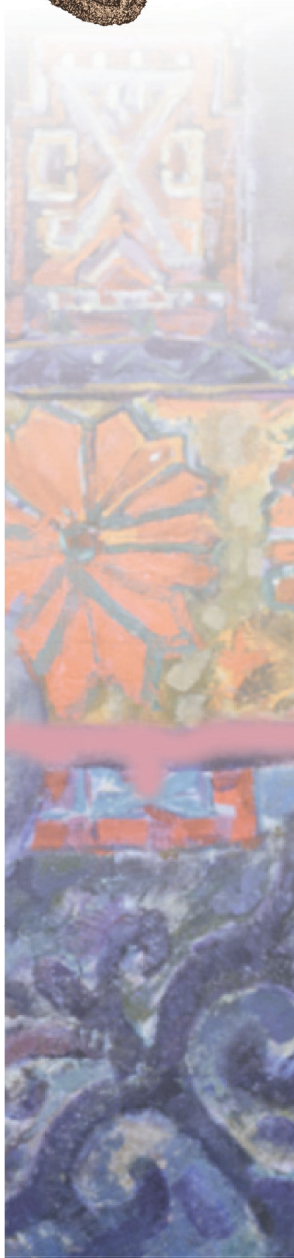
— Why is your song so sad, my zhyrau? — Ablai asked turning pale in the face. — Is my son Zhanai in good health?

The young Kotesh bent to his dombra as though listening to its voice, and began to sing:

Who would enjoy the setting of a bright sun?
What human being would enjoy the killing of
a white swan?.. That swan is your son Zhanai, who
was struck down
with a Dzhungar arrow!..

In the ensuing silence, everyone heard how the zhyrau, a friend of his co-equal Zhanai, was crying. Behind him, Olzhabai-Batyr, the great lover of truth and educator of Sultan Zhanai, was stealthily wiping tears from his face...

The feast failed. Sultan Ablai, who dearly loved his treacherously killed son Zhanai, fell ill, stricken by sudden grief. As if accusing Olzhabai-Batyr of not preventing his son's death, the sultan did not suggest that he stay.





Kazybek-Biy himself, nicknamed Gander's Voice, arrived from the far-off Sary-Arka. Toleh-Biy came from the Senior Zhuz, many kins of which were grateful to Ablai for his liberating them from the Dzhungars, and Bala-Biy arrived from the Junior Zhuz. The coming of such important persons from all the zhuzes to express their condolences to an ordinary sultan on the occasion of his son's death meant that they had privately recognized him as their leader in this war.

Faithful to his nature and disregarding the loss of his beloved son, Ablai took advantage of the situation in order to pave his way to the throne. This was what Tatikary-Zhyrau told him unequivocally in his song, notifying the sultan of the notables' decision:

The nobles of the three zhuzes
Had a long conference.
Finally they all agreed
To make you their khan!
Yet too long and deep is your sadness.
Can it be that you've traded all our killed sons
For your son alone, my Khan?
Then may they cut off the horse-tail
That links us to our sons!..
May everybody get on dappled horses
And reduce the selfish khan's riches to ashes!..

— You are right, wise zhyrau! — Ablai said.

The next morning, the young Kotesh-Zhyrau silently entered his yurta, squatted, and touched the strings of his dombra. But instead of singing, he began to cry.

— What is the matter with you, my bold zhyrau? — Ablai asked him worriedly.

— Olzhabai-Batyr is...dead...

Kotesh-Zhyrau told the sultan how it all happened... They were riding together in the night steppe, and suddenly

heard someone singing. Good as the song was, it was not a Kazakh, but a Dzhungar one. Still, Olzhabai-Batyr turned his horse and headed for the light of a distant fire.

— It's Dzhungars! — Kotesch-Zhyrau whispered.

— Don't worry, the war's over now... — the warrior said. — They are singing a really good song!..

The next moment, an arrow swished in the dark and pierced Olzhabai-Batyr's throat. The horses reared and carried them away from the singing Dzhungars. Gripping the sticking out arrow, Olzhabai said in a hoarse voice:

— That's alright, my zhyrau. They say we are going to be born anew in the seventh generation... Maybe my love of good song will remain with me then, too!..

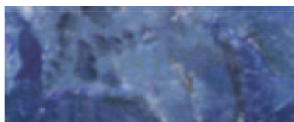
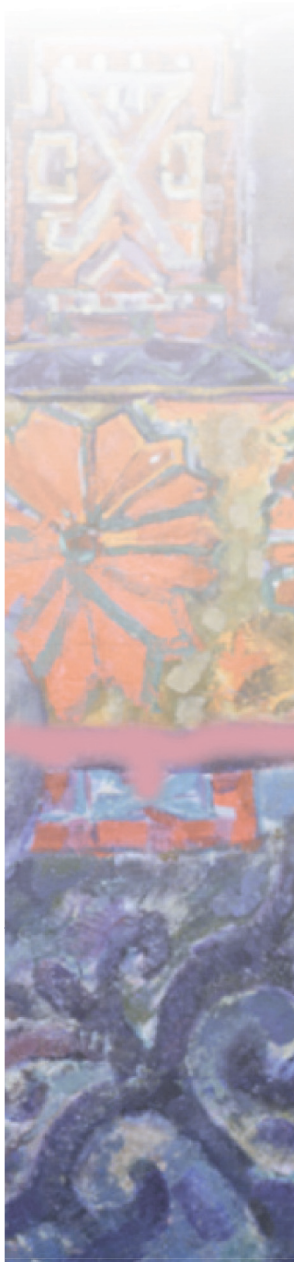
Saying that, he wrestled out the black arrow, his blood spurting forth and streaming down on his horse, the earth, the bushes around, and bespattering Kotesch-Zhyrau from head to foot..

It was only now that Sultan Ablai looked at Kotesch and saw that the young lover of truth was all bespattered with bright blood.

— Yes, he did love songs! — Ablai said.

Then, the sultan rose from his bed and ordered his armour and weapons brought to him...

Six generations after that, a boy was born in the Karzhas kin. According to the Kazakhs' sacred tradition, he was given the name of his warrior-ancestor who had loved songs better than anything else in the world. The boy was destined to become a poet...





II

In 1745, Kontaichi Galden-Tseren died. But two years before his death, his second son, Tseren-Dorzhi, had become the ruler of Dzhungariya. During his governance, the bloody power struggle, which had always been typical for this country, grew especially severe. At the end of 1753, Lama-Dorzhi assassinated his brother Tseren-Dorzhi and became Great Kontaichi. His nephew Amursana was immediately at his throat. Ablai promptly used the situation to his own advantage. Now, he supported Amursana, whose mother was a Kazakh woman, now sided with Lama-Dorzhi. As a result of all this internecine strife and incessant campaigns against the Kazakhs, Dzhungariya was bleeding to death. Finally, using the support of the underage Manchurian-Chinese Emperor's officials, Amursana became the Great Kontaichi of Dzhungariya.

But the days of Dzhungariya were numbered. The dynasty in the Under-the-Sky Middle Empire had changed, but the policy remained the same.

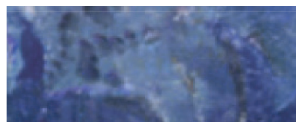
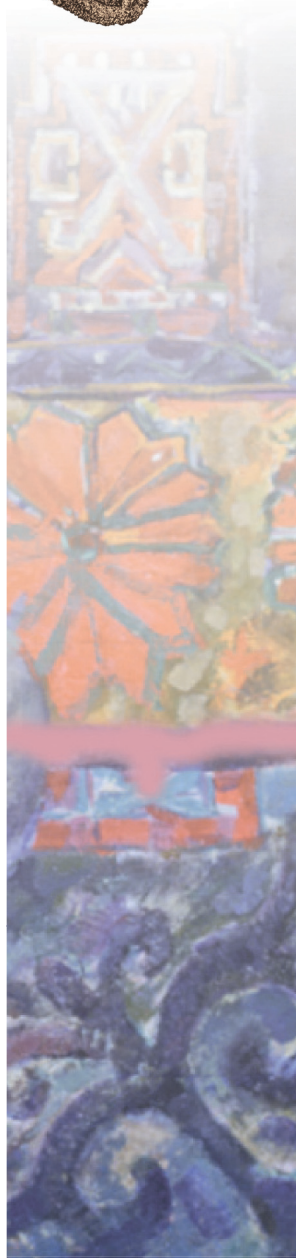
The Manchurian feudals, who had just conquered China, established their Tsing dynasty and united with the

most reactionary Chinese rulers, breathed new life into the old annexationist policy of the Chinese Empire. For over a century, the Chinese, and subsequently the Manchurian-Chinese rulers, had been oppressing the Dzhungar tribes and setting them on the Kazakhs. And then, when in their opinion, the Kazakhs and the Dzhungars had bled each other white enough, they decided to act more resolutely. It was time to remove “the wounded tigers” from the arena. It needed to be done quickly, while Russia, busy with its internal disorder, could not get more involved in the Central-Asian affairs.

Using another clash between the Dzhungar tribes and the Chinese troops, who were constantly pressing them, as a pretext, huge Manchurian armies, headed by the generals Fu De and Chzhao Khoi, invaded Dzhungariya. It was not a conventional war. In two months, the invaders, who outnumbered the separate Dzhungar detachments many times, actually annihilated the whole nation. By a special decree, the Dzhungars were proclaimed outlaws, and all of them were to be executed, including old people and newly born babies. Over a million people were killed as a result of that merciless campaign. The rest of the Dzhungars fled to their former enemies, to the Kazakh Steppe.

The kontaichi Amursana fled to Ablai for protection. There, he took refuge at the relatives of his Kazakh mother, whom, only the day before, he intended to rob and ruin. Ablai gave him cattle and a yurta, and appointed him the head of a small ulus made up of all the Dzhungars-torgauts who had survived the Chinese massacre. Soon after that, he died of smallpox, which came to the Kazakh Steppe together with the Chinese troops.

Dzhungariya ceased to exist. For many months, black crows flew in circles over the former pastures on the other side of the mountains, and the wind brought the smell





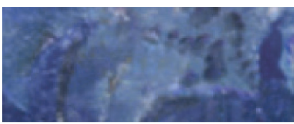
of dead flesh. Realizing there was a threat from the East, the chiefs and biys of the Kazakh kins and tribes stopped their internecine quarrels. If previously, China and the Kazakh khanates had been separated by the Dzhungar pasture lands, now, the hot breath of the bloodthirsty dragon reached the Kazakh lands.

The panic-stricken soldiers of the famous Manchurian general Fu De fled in disarray through the Altyn-Emel pass for the third time. In the gorge, the experienced and well-armed foot Chinese soldiers were helpless against the strong horsemen of Ablai with their long spears. And while the Chinese were trying to overcome the live wall blocking the pass, the Kazakh mountaineers, who used to hunt there with eagles and falcons, dropped granite rocks on the heads of the Shurshuts.

That time, the invaders were not the Dzhungar noions, but regular troops of the emperor. China had always considered itself the center of the world, and therefore, its troops recognized no borders. The Son of Heaven—the emperor—had just sent his servants to the outlying regions of his empire to punish some disobedient wild nomads.

When the Shurshuts fled for the third time, Ablai was not as happy as before. It had already happened twice, and each time, new monotonous gray columns of Chinese troops appeared, as if nothing had happened. It looked like an ant-hill in Sary-Arka: one could tramp on them as long as one liked, but more ants just kept appearing on the surface. And where could one get so much water and fire for the Shurshut ant-hill? Warrior Derbilai, the leader of the scouts, had just reported that another Chinese army headed by Chzhao Khoi was approaching.

A Shurshut cavalryman on his dock-tail horse did not compare to a Kazakh warrior, but even ten or twenty of such no-good soldiers were too much for one horseman,



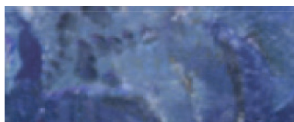
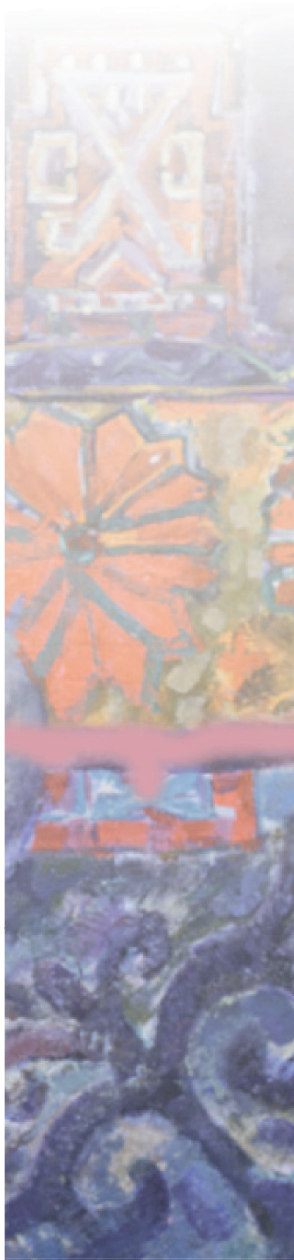
who just could not kill them all with his club at once. Besides, the strong point of bogdykhan's army was not cavalry, but foot soldiers, stubborn, persistent and blind to the losses.

Everything had to be done to prevent the merging of the two Chinese armies, but to do that, one had to fly over the mountains. Otherwise, the Shurshut dragon would bring such misfortunes to the land of the Kazakhs that the former "great disaster" would look like paradise. The example of Dzhungariya was before their eyes. But what can be done, if that was one's destiny? The white camel's pose had looked strange before that campaign!

Ablai was haunted by thought from the very beginning of the battle in the gorge. The camel had first appeared after the Dzhungariya campaign in which his beloved son was killed, his first-born Zhanai. That morning, still grieving, Ablai had gone out of his yurta and seen an unusual white camel near the aul. It was huge and had a snow-white mane that trailed to the ground. The camel, not afraid, just squinted its eyes when Ablai approached it. Its nostrils had not been pierced by the cameleers, and its hump showed no trace of a khom, a special device for fixing pack-loads. It looked like a wild dromedary-aruna. When Ablai raised his hand, the camel started and ran away.

The next morning, the white camel Ak-bura was there again, as if waiting for inconsolable Ablai to wake up. And Ablai, as any nomad, could not but see a connection between that and the death of his son. All winter long, the camel appeared near the Sultan's aul, and not a single sultan's lamb was killed by wolves that winter. It was an exceptionally lucky year, and that luck was also attributed to Ak-bura.

And in spring, the white camel demonstrated all his power. Sultan Ablai decided to go on a campaign against the Dzhungars again, but the opinions of biys and chiefs





of kins in the council, which he convened, were divided. Some believed they should go against the Dzhungars-Torgauts near the Irtysh, others—against the Oirots near the Hi. And then, the white camel stepped in, at least so the legend says. When Ablai came out of his yurta early in the morning, he noticed that the white camel was lying with its head not to the West, as usual, but to the East. “What can that mean?” — the Sultan thought, and remembered that the camel had brought him luck. So Ablai went with his troops in the direction prompted by the camel, and his campaign was a rare success.

Since that time, wherever Sultan Ablai went, they brought the white camel with him. Now, it is difficult to say whether the sultan really believed in the mysterious powers of Ak-bura. But the white camel occupied a prominent place in the legends of that time. They say that Ablai once dared to doubt the powers of the camel sent to him by Providence. “It cannot be that my destiny depends on that animal!” — he once exclaimed and led his troops opposite to the direction that the camel had pointed. Needless to say, his troops got into an ambush and had a narrow escape thanks to the same Ak-bura.

And that time, too, the morning before the battle against the Chinese troops approaching along the Hi River, Ablai looked at the white camel first. Its position was somewhat unclear, it was lying with its head pointing away from the pass, where Ablai had decided to stop the Shurshut invaders. That obviously meant bad luck, but nothing could be done. If the Shurshuts managed to cross the pass, it might take centuries to drive them out!

And now, when the Chinese retreated for the third time, Sultan Ablai did not feel good. Even without the camel, he knew how the Shurshuts outnumbered his troops. Nevertheless, he decided to outmaneuver the Chinese general Chjao Khoi and attack the army of Fu De before the former could join the latter.

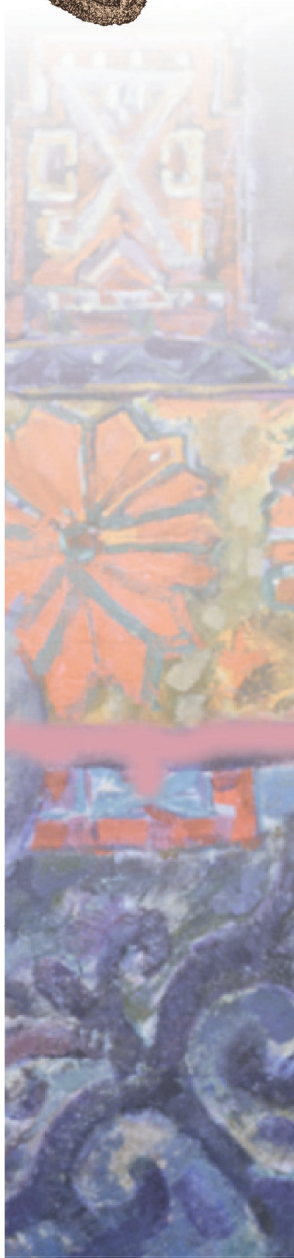
— Hei, the Bayan-Batyr detachment must hide in the thicket! — he ordered. — And Sarymbet-Batyr will hide behind those hills, so that the Shurshuts will not see him. Attack when I give the order!

The Kazakh warriors stopped chasing the enemy at once and dispersed in the thickets and groves near the river. In several minutes, they had all disappeared from sight, as if they had dissolved in the wet river fog. Only the scouts hiding in the gorges heard the Chinese bugles gathering the troops for another attack.

No, it was not the first clash of the Kazakhs with the emperor's army. From time immemorial, numerous Chinese bogdykhans had been trying to conquer the land and the peoples inhabiting it. The Shurshuts had left behind ruins and scorched earth all along the western edge of the Steppe, especially in the lands of the Senior Zhuz. Over the centuries, the Chinese invaders had been trying not only to subjugate the kins and tribes, but to turn them into Chinese. And when they failed, whole nations were treated like the Dzhungars.

After the Dzhungar tragedy, Bukhar-Zhyrau, who in his songs had opposed the “giaours-oryses” (Russians) building fortifications in the Kazakh Steppe, changed his tune and sang:

The “Inzhil” Holy Scripture
Consisting of four books
Sent by the Gods to the people
Says about the Shurshuts,
Who are revolting somewhere over the mountains
and shaking them,
That if they come to this world, the Shurshuts
Will even dig corpses out of the graves
And eat them!





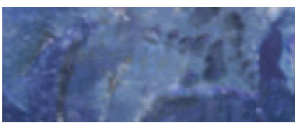
It should be pointed out that the wise zhyrau was perfectly aware of the feral nature of the Chinese emperors. He said that they were worse than hungry jackals, and called for the Kazakhs to sharpen their spears.

By that time, a new threat hung over the Kazakh kins from the South. As soon as the Dzhungar State ceased to exist, the newly formed Kokand Khanate, which had inherited the policy of Bukhara, occupied Tashkent, and then the Kazakh towns of Turkestan and Arys. The Kokand detachments were advancing down the Seikhundarya, taking one town after another.

Ablai and the troops under his command could have stopped the Kokandians, if there hadn't been the grave threat from the East. The dragon-cannibal, who was digesting Dzhungariya, had one of its sharp-clawed paws on some Kazakh pastures of the Senior Zhuz, previously occupied by the Kontaichis, and was pointing another paw at the lands of the Middle Zhuz, beyond the Black Irtysh.

It was then that Ablai forgot about settling accounts with the Kokand rulers and gathered a big army of volunteers. Headed by the famous warriors of that time, many of whom were from among the people, the army moved from the Blue Sea, Balkhash, to the East. The huge Manchurian-Chinese armies of Fu De and Chjao Khoi, having dealt with Dzhungariya, brought up reinforcements and started preparing to seize more territories. Although Ablai did not harbor the hope of defeating the Chinese Empire, he thought he could manage to keep the Chinese at bay that and the next years. To do that, the Kazakhs would have to unite, and Sultan Ablai was sure then he would become their khan.

And the separate Kazakh tribes could do nothing but unite. The example of Dzhungariya showed that the Chinese did not intend to offer anything to one Kazakh



tribe or zhuz or another, and play the game of setting them against each other. The dragon would swallow everything and would not even spit out the bones. It was not for nothing that the old Chinese proverb said: “The end of the world will be when Black China moves.” The war promised to be long and cruel. Anything could happen. The same Bukhar-Zhyrau sang:

If the Shurshuts come, don't stay here,
Move to Seikhundarya,
There you will always have drinking water.

And who could know what the white camel symbolized, when it laid down with its head not in any particular direction, as if it wanted to avoid any responsibility.

— My zhyrau, did you see, how hard it was to tell what direction Ak-bura's head was pointing? — Ablai asked Bukhar-Zhyrau, standing next to him.

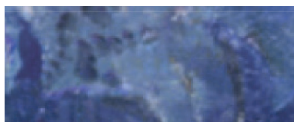
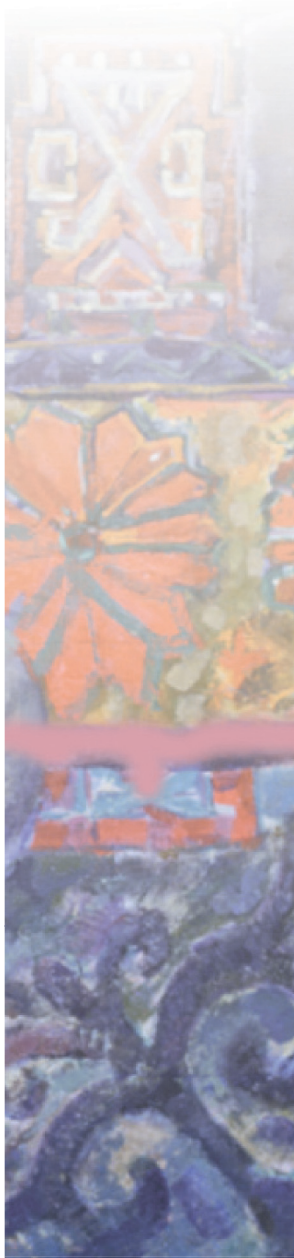
The old bard watched the gray-green Shurshut dragon, crawling out of the gorge for the fourth time. The Kazakh defense line was bending slowly under its pressure. There were twenty Chinese soldiers against each Kazakh horseman in this battle. The poor peasants, weak from century-old malnutrition and forced into the battle by the Manchurian rulers and their great-khan associates, were stupefied and downtrodden. They knew only one thing: retreat means certain death for them. And they stubbornly and obediently went forward to their death under the Kazakh clubs.

— If a shepherd does not believe in the safety of his flock, the wolves will not be hungry. — Bukhar-Zhyrau replied. — Drive away your doubts, sultan, or we'll all regret it!

— How can I?

— It's a grave disease, which can be cured by only one thing...

— Tell, me, zhyrau, why did you stop?





- Only by death!
- So, what am I to do, zhyrau?
- Look for death.

Ablai looked at the zhyrau and then around. Too many people had listened to their conversation. Sultan Ablai got straight in his saddle and took a good look at the battle, where the outnumbered Kazakhs had begun to flee.

— So, I have to seek my death, don't I? Well, you have suggested a good remedy, zhyrau!

And Ablai pulled the reins so that his obedient horse reared and then galloped off.

Bukhar-Zhyrau got off his horse, kneeled down and started praying loudly. Any mufti would have been driven crazy by the zhyrau's praying, since half of its words were spells addressed to the spirits of earth and heaven of the local pagans—the bakses.

— Ablai! Ablai!

With that cry, the fleeing horsemen turned around and entered into battle again. Ablai was in their front line. He was the bravest, no doubt. When the Chinese attack lost its momentum, he returned to the hill where Bukhar-Zhyrau was praying. Blood, both his own and the enemy's, was splattered all over Ablai.

— I have no more doubts, my wise zhyrau, — he cried approaching him. — A ruler does not need them!

But when the Kazakh defense line bent again somewhat later and Sultan Ablai was about to join in the battle, Bukhar-Zhyrau grabbed the reins of his horse like a leopard:

— Don't try your luck with mother Death twice, my sultan. A cup can be broken only once!

— But I have no more doubts, my zhyrau! — Ablai exclaimed.

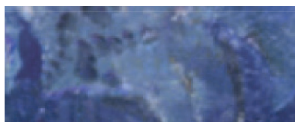
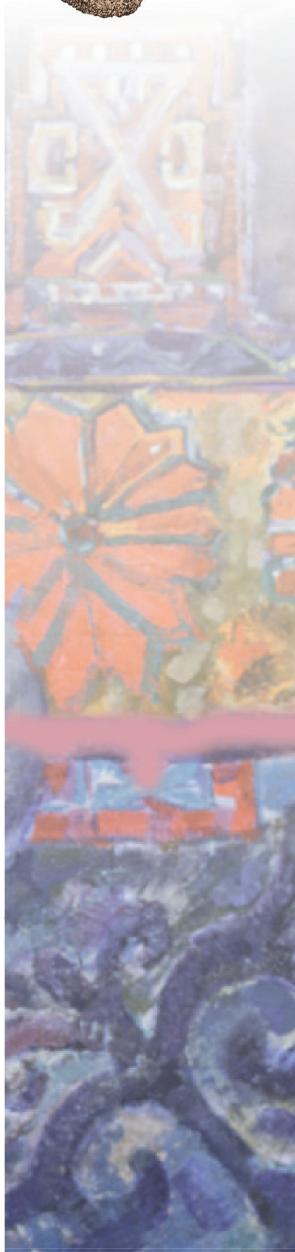
— Do you think, sultan, that each time God will do what I pray for? — the old man said indignantly and all those present laughed.

The Kazakhs, just like all nomad nations, had great respect for bard-prophets. The feudal kin chiefs used the talents of those bards to protect their privileges from the sultans and the khan himself. But the most popular bards were those, who spoke on behalf of the whole nation in their songs, not just one tribe. Even the most despotic rulers had to reckon with them. Bukhar-Zhyrau was one of them. He was sincerely devoted to Ablai, but nevertheless, often told him things that others in his entourage would not have dared to. In those cases, Ablai listened to him with a stone face, not showing his great irritation. A minute before, the old man had expressed his doubts concerning Ablai's firmness and the latter had to prove to the people there that he, the future khan of all the Kazakhs, never had any doubts. Impram, the mob, as the rulers, all Ablai's ancestors and he himself and all his offspring contemptuously called the people, would only follow a man without doubts.

The battle was still going on, and new detachments of Chinese foot soldiers kept pouring out of the black jaws of the gorge. Paving their way with corpses, they advanced step by step into the Kazakh Steppe like an endless cloud of locusts. An arrow from afar wounded Bukhar-Zhyrau in his hand and Ablai ordered him taken to the rear. Takikara-Zhyrau replaced him as the main bard of the army.

Ablai looked at the sun, which was setting. It was obvious that he would not have to use the cavalry hidden in the ambush that day. Let the Shurshuts gather more foot soldiers in the gorge during the night, so that there would be more work for the Kazakh clubs and swords made and hardened in the steppe smithies.

All of a sudden, the sultan raised both of his hands to his head. His fox-fur hat, pierced by a long arrow, softly fell on the ground. A tulengut picked it up and gave it to the sultan. A piece of light-coloured leather was tied to the





arrow's feathers. Ablai unrolled the letter... "Beware, sultan! Tonight one of your retinue is going to take your life!"

The arrow came from the bushes to the left. "What an excellent shot," — Ablai thought. Obviously, that was a well-wishing person. Otherwise, he could have aimed an inch lower and got away with it.

— What does it say? — Bekbolat-Bei asked.

Ablai looked at his face, which had suddenly gone pale and shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

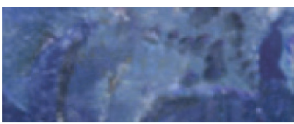
— Nothing in particular, about the hardships of war.

Bekbolat-Bei nodded his head, although he obviously did not believe a single word of Ablai's.

The kin chiefs were more and more scared by the growing power of Ablai. He had been shot at several times. The biys and his numerous relatives-tyure feared that a strong man would head all three zhuzes. They had always preferred rulers who were weak and obeyed them. And they had no doubt that Ablai would immediately curtail their rights. It was in the struggle against them that Ablai widely used the bards-prophets, who expressed the opinion of the common people. In his struggle against the all-powerful biys, he could rely only on the impram.

It was not by chance that Bekbolat-Biy, one of Ablai's ill-wishers, had asked him about the content of the letter on the arrow. That biy and his father, the all-powerful Kazybek-the Goose Voice, who was over ninety, did not conceal their disapproval of raising sultan Ablai above them. But when the news came about the Shurshut invasion, both the father and son realized that only Ablai was able to head the volunteer army of the Kazakh kins. No matter what they felt, the herds of Bekbolat-Biy were grazing along the border with former Dzhungariya, and the Shurshut soldiers were notorious in the steppe for their appetite.

— If six people fight each other, they will without fail



become victims of the seventh one! — Bekbolat-Biy had said to Ablai, when he and his detachment joined the volunteer army. But why had he become so pale at the sight of the arrow with a letter? Ablai looked again at the sun, which was approaching the horizon. In the depth of the gorge, the Chinese drummed the end of the battle.

— Well, this time we'll obey their signal, too! — Ablai said merrily, spurred his horse, and rode to the yurtas in the steppe.

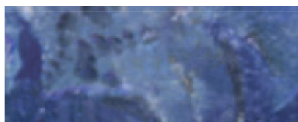
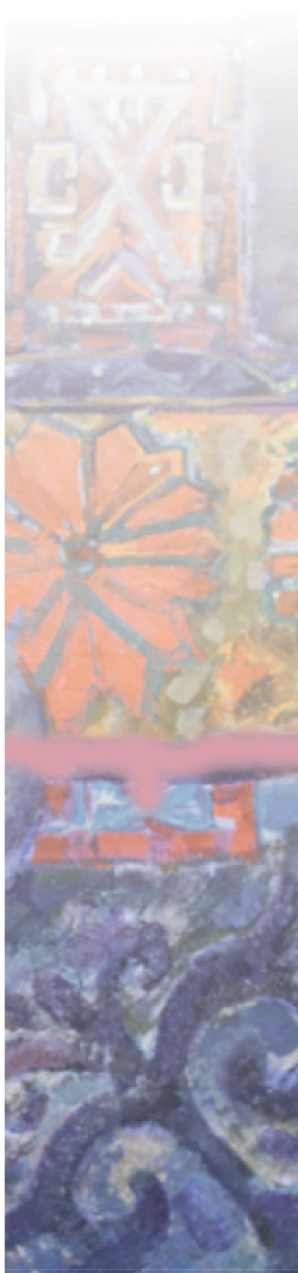
The next moment, the Kazakh daulpazes thundered, and the warriors lowered their weapons, turned their backs to each other, and went in the opposite directions. High carts with the teams who were to pick up the corpses appeared in the field after the moon had come out. They had enough work to do for the whole night.

Ablai's headquarters were by the mountainous rivulet Kurkreuk, a tributary of the Ili. Ablai's white yurtas were in the center, towering above the numerous yurtas of biys and warriors around them. There were poles with a kin or tribe symbol of a commander near each yurta.

As usual, after holding brief military council, Ablai went to bed. He fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow, but slept lightly. In accordance with the military tradition, he did not take off his clothes, but only released his belt and put his bow and arrows and sword near the bed. But when the camp became quiet, he opened his eyes and jumped up. It was not for nothing that an anonymous archer had warned him that his life was in danger.

However, Ablai did not reinforce the guards. After pondering for several minutes, he grinned and again lay down on the felt mat, which protected him not so much against the humidity, but against venomous spiders. "If I am to die tonight, the angel of death will find me even in a golden trunk!" — he thought and fell asleep again. Ablai believed in fate till his last day.

He dreamed about a camel, a dromedary, as big as a mountain. He wanted to lasso it, but all of a sudden, the





camel turned into the Shurshut dragon and opened its bloody jaws.

— Abekeh! Oh, Sultan Ablai!

Nevertheless, Ablai managed to lasso the dragon before he opened his eyes. His hand gripped his sword.

— Sultan, it's me, Nurzhan!

Ablai let go of his sword. It was Koshmat, the brother of his middle wife from the kin of the Karauls.

— What happened?

— Who is on guard with you by the yurta?

— Only Malik and I!

Ablai could not sleep any more. He lay thinking about the warning. It said plainly that an attempt on his life would be made exactly that night by someone close to him. Only the warriors most close to him from the trustworthy kins of the Atygai and Karaul were on guard... and Malik!

No, it couldn't be Malik, although he is from a Bashkir kin. Karasakal himself sent him. But was that so? Was it indeed Karasakal, who sent that best shot and valiant horseman to him? I should have asked the old Kabanbai-Batyr about that!

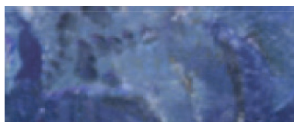
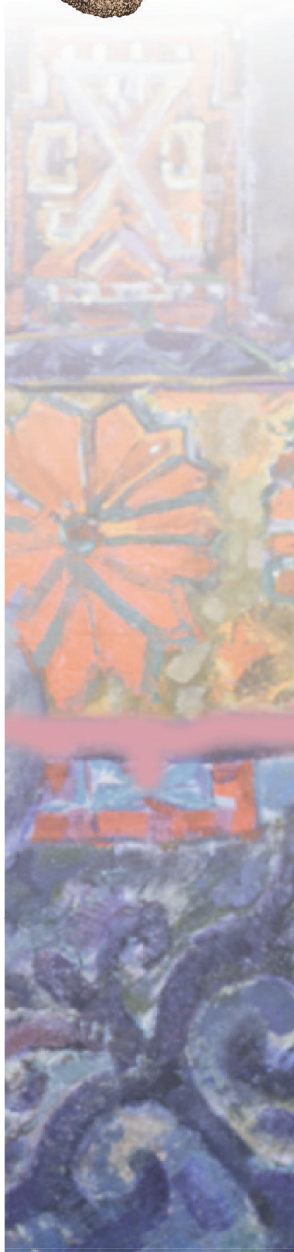
Karasakal was one of the Bashkir kin leaders who rose in rebellion against the czarina. Ousted by the regular troupes, he went to the Kazakh Steppe where his Kazakh relatives accepted him. Many of the Bashkirian common people, who accompanied him, subsequently came back to their motherland and participated most actively in the Pugachev movement in the detachments of Salavat Yulaev. But so far, Karasakal or Kara-Khan, as his retinue called him, took the name Shuno-Dorzhi, the junior brother of Syban Raptan, a Kontaichi, in order to avoid persecution from the czar's generals and elevate his authority in those parts. He also alleged that he had to flee from Dzhungariya, where he was being persecuted by his nephew, the usurper Galden-Tseren.

The Kazakhs would never hand him over to either the czarist government, which knew him as Karasakal, or to the Kontaichi Dzhungar, who knew him as an imposter. All enemies of the Dzhungars fled to the Kazakh Steppe and joined the detachment of the self-proclaimed “great martyr” Shuno-Dorzhi, thus weakening the Kontaichis, the main enemy of the Kazakhs. The imposter was under the special patronage of the famous warrior Kabanbai. The horsemen of Karasakal were known for their bravery, and they participated in battles on the side of the Kazakh people many times against the Kontaichi, and subsequently against the regular Chinese troops. When Dzhungariya was conquered, the number of troops of Karasakal became even greater due to the Dzhungar horsemen who managed to escape.

And not so long ago, that very Karasakal, who enjoyed the special confidence of Ablai, sent him Malik, one of the horsemen who was most close to him. An able warrior and good shot, Malik immediately gained the confidence of the sultan. Recently, he had been on guard near the yurta of Ablai with the other most trusted people.

A dark blue ragged cloud hid the moon. Malik unsheathed his cold knife. His hand was already tense and in good position to strike Nurzhan, a relative of the sultan, in the pit of his stomach, when he heard a low constrained cry coming from the white yurta that they were guarding. Nurzhan entered the yurta and started waking up Ablai, who had seen a nightmare—a bloody dragon. Still holding the knife in his hand, Malik listened attentively to the conversation in the yurta...

No, it was not Karasakal who had sent Malik to Ablai, but absolutely different people. For quite a long time, the rulers of the Kokand Khanate had been watching the success of Ablai. Rid of the Dzhungar threat and separated from the lethal breath of the Shurshut dragon by the





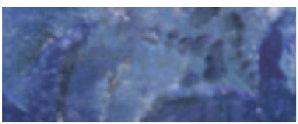
troops of the same Ablai, they decided to take advantage of the situation and seize as much land as possible along the middle course of the Seikhundarya River, and, with a little luck, even its lower course. Sultan Ablai and his army were the only significant political and military force in the Kazakh land of that time. They hoped that his death would cause the emerging united khanate to disintegrate again into a thousand small, easy to swallow pieces. It was they who had sent the hired assassin Malik, cunning and perfidious as a snake, to Ablai. Innumerable blessings were promised to him, if the mission was accomplished.

Time does not wait. In the morning, he got a direct order from Kokand to hurry up. A saddled horse-argamak, with his hooves and muzzle wrapped in hessian, was waiting for him half a mile from the sultan's camp.

Maybe, there was something behind the fact that Nurzhan was so cautious, although apparently on friendly terms with Malik, and that the sultan had awakened. And the sultan himself looked worried that day, or so it seemed.

Only one deaf-and-dumb horse-holder had come with Malik to Sultan Ablai's headquarters, allegedly from Karasakal. He was an escaped Bashkir tulengut, who had left two of his sons in the Kokand Khanate. The deaf-and-dumb horse-holder did not know what instructions his boss, Malik, had, but that morning, he had seen a messenger from Kokand handing a paper with signs to Malik. Could the deaf-and-dumb man have had a chance to read the paper when Malik was busy with the messenger? No, the tulengut was not only deaf-and-dumb, but also absolutely illiterate.

Suddenly, Malik started. The sultan himself came out of the yurt. His figure seemed even taller and mightier in the moonlight. The experienced killer could tell at once that the sultan had no arms about him, except, perhaps a



knife, which there would be no chance to use, in his boot.

— I'll take a walk in the fresh air! — the sultan said as he passed by without turning his head.

— I'll accompany you, my Sultan... — Malik said and made a sign to Nurzhan. — And you stay on guard here, Nureke!

Malik did not notice the grin on Sultan Ablai's face and left his sword and bow near the yurta, for according to an ancient law, an armed man could not accompany a khan in the nighttime. Ablai was already considered a khan.

So they walked in the eerie moonlight—Ablai slightly ahead and Malik at some distance. But when Malik, gripping a cold knife in his hand, closed the distance and was ready to strike, all of a sudden, Ablai turned to him.

— What's that over there, boy?

The sultan's hand pointed into the darkness.

— That's ... a white camel... — The bodyguard's voice trembled. — Ak-bura!

— How come it is here?

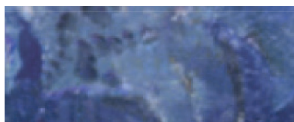
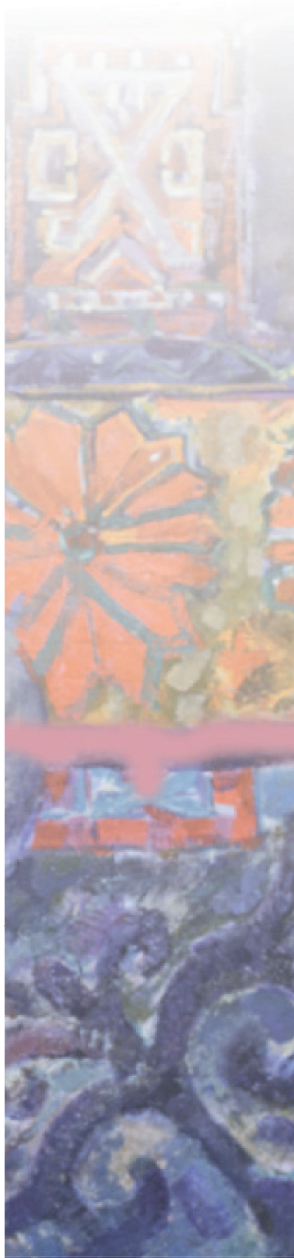
— I don't know, my Sultan. In the evening it was lying back behind the yurtas!

— Let's see my fate!

Sultan Ablai went up to the white camel. The camel started to slowly rise, and in the darkness, Ablai saw its long white hair also rising. It was so frightening that even Ablai himself took a step back. Suddenly, the giant hooves shot into the sky and came down somewhere behind Ablai's back. At the moment, a terrifying cry of pain and despair cut through the silence of the night. The guards shouted and hustled about, and torches appeared all over the huge camp.

— Oi-bai-ai, are you all right, Sultan?

Nurzhan, who was the first to get there, watched, his eyes open wide, how the wild white camel was tearing





apart someone's lifeless body with its teeth and trampling it. Nurzhan's first impulse was to help the poor soul, but Ablai stopped him:

— Do not do that, Nurzhan, it is too late anyway, the man is dead!

Something flashed in the light of the torches. Nurzhan bent down and picked up a straight Khivin dagger, which had been in the hand of the dead Malik. The camel, still roaring and snorting, got up and went into the darkness. A look of terror was on Malik's dead face.

— He... he wanted to stab you, my Sultan! — Nurzhan said, and looked at the people who had gathered around. — Ak-bura saved your life, it was sent by God!

Ablai turned around without saying a word and went back to his yurt. This is what the legend says about this. It does not say that the sultan smirked in the darkness of the night. Nobody saw that. So, the sultan went away, deep in thought about the message brought to him by an arrow. In tiny Arabic letters, it had informed him who was to assassinate him that night.

Then the deaf-and-dumb slave came to the dead body and carried it away. He belonged to the same tribe and buried him in accordance with the ancient laws of their people. And nobody in Ablai's camp ever learned that the pathetic deaf-and-dumb slave was a literate person and wielded a curved Bashkir bow.

In the morning, the deaf-and-dumb slave of dead Malik was brought to the white yurt and left alone with Ablai. The sultan looked attentively at the unexpressive face of the slave, then took a piece of chalk and wrote on the table:

— Was it you, man, who shot an arrow through my hat yesterday?

The deaf-and-dumb slave calmly took the chalk from the sultan's hand and wrote:

- Yes.
- Thank you for being such a good shot.
- Thank your lucky star, Sultan!
- Where did you and your master come from?
- From Kokand.
- Who sent you?
- Biys Erden and Narbota.
- Why?
- They are afraid of you in Kokand, Sultan!



Ablai nodded his head, took his best, gold-embroidered caftan and marten hat from an upper pole of the yurta, and put them on the slave. And early in the morning, five horsemen set off at a gallop to the West. They had orders to buy the children of the deaf-and-dumb slave with the help of trustworthy merchants.

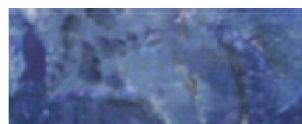
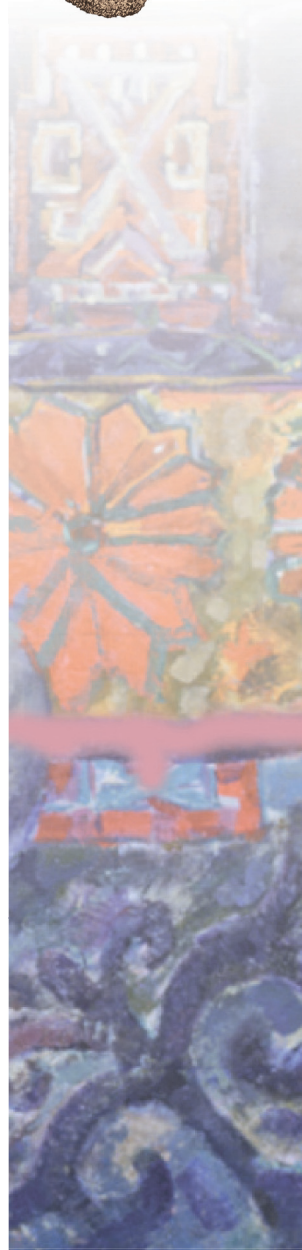
And the legend spread among the common people that fate itself, which took the shape of the camel, favoured Sultan Ablai, and that was a sure sign that only he must become the khan of the three zhuzes. The legend about the miraculous Ak-bura has been preserved till our time.

The sun was not visible above the mountains yet, when a low incessant rumble was heard coming from a gorge, as if a powerful river was bursting out of its banks. At the same time, the scouts reported that the vanguard troops of another Chinese general, Chzhao Khoi, were approaching.

— They are mainly cavalry, my Sultan... — Tursunbai-Batyr, the head of the scouts, reported. — And their horses are not small, as previously, but of our, steppe breed, most probably stolen from Kashgaria and the camps of the Senior Zhuz.

— And the Shurshuts have more foot! — Ablai said thoughtfully. — Will they attack us today? What do you think?

— No, my Sultan. The ones who came tonight are too tired. The ones who came yesterday are even more tired—





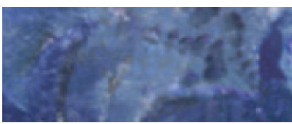
they had to collect seven thousand dead bodies in their carts last night. And now they are making big bonfires to cook double rations of rice, not millet. That means, they are going to celebrate their arrival. Only their guards are armed at the moment.

— Summon all the commanders! — Ablai ordered curtly.

Couriers were sent at once in all the directions—to the yurtas of the chief warriors. Sultan Ablai was sitting on pillows, alone in his main yurta. That morning, he had to decide what to do next. And when he decided, the white camel would lay with his head in the proper direction...

And a decision had to be made without delay. The slaughter had been going on in the gorge for several days. Although the Shurshuts had lost ten times more men, they did not care. Their food suppliers, perhaps, would even be glad: less people—less food—less problems. But the country of the Kazakhs, which had not restored even a half of its population since the “time of the great disaster,” had to count every horseman. That was only the second Chinese army from that side, and no ambush would help. Even if he managed to defeat the armies of Fu De and Chzhao Khoi, a third army would come immediately, and then a fourth and a fifth. No, it was impossible to fight against a thousand-headed dragon. The remaining Kazakh tribes and kins must be patient; they should hide in the mountains, in every cleft and crack of them. And having shown the dragon that the Kazakhs are not ones to be trifled with, the Kazakhs would lead all the troops back to the steppe. If the Shurshuts decided to pursue them in the steppe, they would regret it. Unlike in the mountains, in the steppe, their horsemen could do their best. But, judging by everything, the enemy would not dare to do that, and they would part, as before.

And they have to preserve their army by all means. It was not by chance that the Kokand rulers had sent



Malik to assassinate him. Their plan was simple: when the Shurshuts slaughtered the Kazakh army, the assassin would kill him, the future Khan. Who would be able to oppose the Kokand laskars then? The land of Kazakhs would be divided up like the carcass of a bull. Of course, the Kokand rulers would save the biggest part for themselves. It was not for nothing that their detachments appeared near the Aral region. They did not think about the Shurshut dragon; they were relying on God's mercy. But now, only the Kazakh troops stood between the dragon and the Kokand Khanate. And the Khivin servants of Nadir-Shah also forgot about the insatiable dragon. Not a single day went by without them making trouble along the Kazakh frontiers. No, they would be of no help in the war against the Shurshuts. Even if a miracle happened and they joined his army, they would not be able to stop the fire-breathing dragon, who, sooner or later, would crawl as far into the steppes and valleys as his eyes could see. And now...

— Tonight we will dismantle our yurtas! — Ablai said in a low voice, when all the commanders had entered one by one and made themselves comfortable on the velvet pillows in a semi-circle around him.

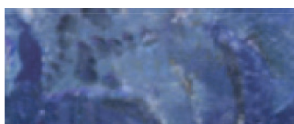
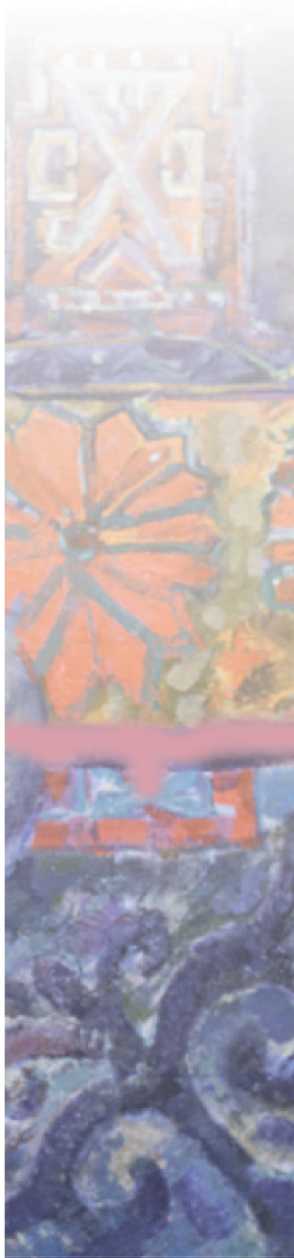
There was silence. All were shocked by the unexpected decision.

— What? Take to our heels?! — Old Karanbai-Batyr cried.

— No, retreat! — Ablai said firmly.

— Our horsemen have been fighting the Shurshuts many days and will not want to retreat!

— Then in twenty days, only you and I will remain alive... — Ablai replied in a low voice. — Today, we have buried seven hundred corpses. Yesterday, two hundred and twenty four of our horsemen had their arms and legs cut or heads wounded in battle. So figure, how long we can last?!





Janybek-Batyr dropped his lash in front of him as a sign that he wanted to say something:

— Ablai makes sense, but where shall we go?

— To Tugai, — Kanai the Joker laughed the matter off.

— From there, it isn't far to Orenburg!"

Even now, when they had to fight the Shurshuts, many of them lacked foresight. What Kanai the Joker had said, was on the minds of most of Ablai's enemies. For many years, he had been accused of rapprochement with Russia. Whatever happened, the fate of the Dzhungars was known. Unfortunately, the new czarina could not solve the problems in her own empire. Otherwise, he would have talked to the Shurshuts in a different tone...

— We won't retreat further than the Blue Sea!" Ablai said firmly. — We shall leave one detachment here as a shield and go.

Those present looked at each other, and then turned their gazes down. Never before had such important decisions been made without a majority vote in the council. Usually, each biy and warrior had to drop his lash in front of him as a sign of consent. But Ablai would not be asking them this time. Only the khan elected by all the three zhuzes had a right to do that.

— I will cover your retreat, Sultan and warriors!

That was Bayan-Batyr who broke the silence.

Ablai got up from his pillow:

— Well, now we only have to see what kind of omen Ak-bura has for us!

And all present followed Sultan Ablai to the edge of the steppe, where the white camel was lying. When it saw the crowd approaching, the camel got up. Ablai stopped ten steps short of it. Ak-bura turned slowly and lay down with its tail toward Sultan Ablai, and its head in the direction of the Blue Sea...

The fighting in the gorge continued all day long. Ablai and his commanders watched it calmly from a hill. And

in the evening, as on previous days, big campfires were burning all over the steppe. But if someone had happened to pass them by at midnight, he would have seen that not a single yurta was left, and only lonely young tulenguts were adding dry weeds to the campfires to keep them going...

Most of the Kazakh cavalry was already some fifteen miles away and moving in the direction of the Balkhash. The horsemen on the march exchanged glances of surprise.

— We seem to be fleeing!

— Yeah, judging by the speed... And they say our people from the Senior Zhuz rose up in a rebellion behind the backs of the Shurshuts.

— A rebellion without sultans?

— We managed to defeat the Dzhungars many times without any sultans!

— Does Ablai know that the Uyghurs and Kazakhs have revolted in Sintzian?

— How do you know that?

— So they say...

— And what are we going to tell our people? Better that we die in battle!

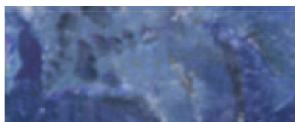
— You'll have a chance to, fighting-cock!

— Well, one does not need a lot of brains or to be a sultan to order fleeing!

Tatikara-Zhyrau, who was riding nearby, looked into the gloomy face of the horseman, who had said the last phrase.

— Don't be upset, — the bard said. — A clever wolf will flee if there are ten dogs against him, and will only turn on them with his fangs when they are stretched out in a line!

Just before sunrise, during a night halt, both singers—Tatikara and Kotesch—came up to Ablai.





— Sultan, let us entertain the horsemen with songs!
— Tatikara-Zhyrau said as the senior singer.

— Sing, bards!

The horsemen had just finished hobbling their horses, when two dombras, the best ones in their time, started playing, competing with each other, first in the vanguard of the troops and then in the rear. And strong, shrill voices started singing over the steppe. The horsemen left their camp-fires and hurried toward the singers.

There was a red and mischievous glint in the eyes of Tatikara-Zhyrau:

Oh, beware, horsemen!

Remember that fat Shurshut and how his belly was trembling,

When our Zhabai pursued him!

And although Zhabai was as fast as Azrail, the angel of death himself,

The Shurshut managed to disappear in the horizon in a twinkling of the eye!

No one has ever seen such speed.

The stout Shurshut ran like the best argamak in the horse-herd,

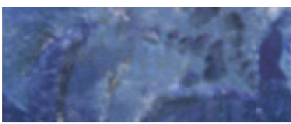
His heels flashing and whistling.

So, if the Shurshuts overtake you, do not try to flee,

Because no one can run as fast as the Shurshuts!

A thousand-voiced laughter roared over the steppe.

The horsemen slept with their heads on their saddles like their grandfathers and great-grandfathers did in this very steppe two thousand, three thousand, and four thousand years ago. And the same insatiable thousand-headed Shurshut dragon used to come here from its far river valleys with the intention of swallowing them, sucking their blood, and spitting their bones out, so that



even the memory of the ancient people of the steppe would be blotted out. But each time, it had to crawl back across the rocky desert with its teeth broken. That was what the Kazakh bards sang about that day. And the horsemen dreamt about the future victory over the blood-thirsty dragon, they cried and grasped their swords in their sleep.

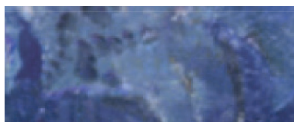
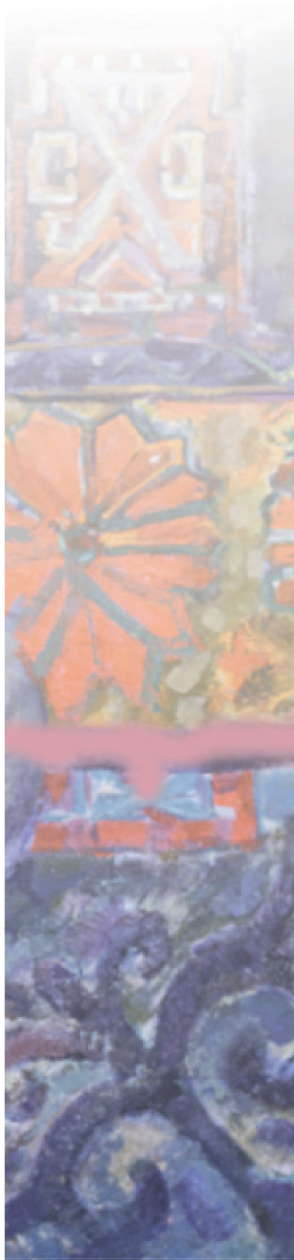
Early in the morning, heavy clouds covered the sky and a cold rain began. Soaked to the skin, the men continued to ride in silence across the darkened and slippery steppe. When they approached what used to be a rivulet, they saw that its water was seething and bubbling, and the opposite bank was somewhere near the horizon.

The horsemen glumly watched how the river was throwing rocks as big as camels and trees with their roots, brought here from somewhere in the mountains, on its sandy bank. The roots moving in the water resembled the membranous paws of a dragon. While they were watching this turbulent stream, a thousand horsemen of warrior Bayan arrived. As planned, they attacked the front line of the Shurshuts and caused them to panic. However, the Chinese cavalry had been pursuing them, and the Chinese commanders thus learned about the retreat of the Kazakh troops. Of course, the Chinese had already crossed the fatal gorge and were coming here. And here, driven to the river, all the Kazakh troops might perish, every single one of them.

The roar of the river was getting louder and louder, and the level of the water—higher and higher. Horses and camels were backing away, scared by it all. And then, Tatikara-Zhyrau rode forward, touched the strings of his dombra, and his high piercing voice broke through the noise and roar:

Cane has soft fringe and a long root...

The river is in front of us, and the dragon is behind us!





Can't our warriors do something besides waving their swords?

Where are you, Janybek-Shakchak-Uly and your heavy spear?

Where is Bakei—the proud son of the Sagir and Dulat kins?

Where are they—Derbisal and Mandai from the Kipchaks?

I do not see Sary and Bayan from the Uaks!

They are afraid of water!

The tallest tree in a forest is the pine...

Where is the pine of our army—Bogembai?

And the formidable warrior Zhabai from the kin of Eminaly-Kerei?

The only thing he knows is how to handle his spear!..

Again, loud laughter shook the wet and cold steppe. And the warriors, even those who could not swim, moved forward. There was a heavy splash and the drops of water reached the tops of the nearby trees—that was Bayan-Batyr, who was the first to dash into the river, mounted and with his armour on. Since the day when he killed his own brother, he had wanted to die.

The current carried only a few horsemen with their horses away. The troops quickly put themselves in order and dried themselves near campfires. So, by the time the Shurshut scouts (from the recently subjugated Kashkars) appeared on the opposite bank, the Kazakh troops were already on their way. Only a thousand horsemen were left on the bank of the river, which from that time was called the Kurkreuk (“the Roaring River”). Sultan Ablai ordered them to stay there and not provoke the Shurshuts.

The horsemen from the Bayan-Batyr detachment waited for the Chinese army for a whole week. But the Chinese did not appear. The scouts sent to the opposite

bank reported that only a covering force was left in the gorge, and most of the army of the invaders had gone back, deep into “the New Land”—Sintzian. Soon, it was learned from reliable sources, that when the army of Chzhao Khoi invaded the Kazakh steppe, the Uyghurs and the Kazakhs had risen in rebellion in their territories recently conquered by the Chinese. The Chinese generals, who, as usual, were quarreling with each other, rushed there with their armies. That saved the Kazakh Steppe from the invasion, which would have been much worse than the Dzhungar’s. But nobody saved the rebels. For reasons unknown to them, the Kazakh army retreated to the Balkhash.

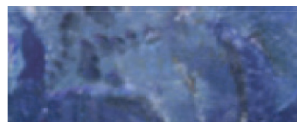
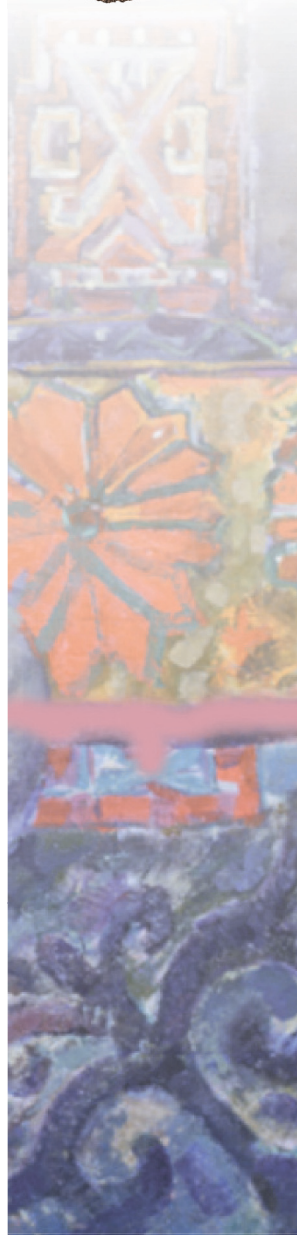
The same day, the thousand strong detachment of Bayan-Batyr went back across the river, (it had become shallow again by that time) and by night, reached the Altyn-Emel gorge. The scouts reported that the Chinese covering force had at least ten thousand foot soldiers and two thousand horsemen. Bayan-Batyr’s horsemen had some rest and slept in brushwood, and when the night fell, they moved to the gorge.

In the gorge, there were campfires and sentinels every twenty steps, and the Kazakh horsemen decided to go round it. In the darkness, they and their horses swam across the Ili-River and, by paths known only to them, got to the other side of the mountains, just above the Chinese guards. It was still dark when a thousand of Bayan-Batyr’s horsemen lined up to form a wedge, ready to attack the Chinese from where the invaders least expected them—from the side of China.

— But will Ablai be happy about your decision, warrior? — somebody whispered behind Bayan’s back.

— Arruakh! — Bayan cried curtly and fiercely, having gone to the head of the wedge on his Tulpar-Kok.

— Ua...Arruakh! Oh, the ghosts of our ancestors, who died here!





- Akzhol!
- Oinybai!
- Karakhodzha!
- Ablai!

And the Kazakh horsemen galloped forward, like an avalanche, sweeping away everything in their path. Like a steppe fire, they burnt everything they approached with their incendiary arrows. In the dust and smoke, naked and burnt Shurshuts tried to escape, but aldaspan (long grandfathers' swords) and simple clubs reached them everywhere. Cries of the dying and curses were heard all over. The soldiers brought here by their rulers from a faraway land to conquer the steppe died here by the hundreds. And before their death, they had dreamed of big calm rivers, graceful pagodas, and green palm-trees near the ocean. They had dreamed of their motherland...

Over three thousand invaders were killed that night. While the Chinese commanders collected themselves, the attackers disappeared. It looked as if night genies had attacked the Chinese camp. Only the dead and wounded Kazakh warriors mixed up on the ground with their victims left no doubt as to who the attackers had been.

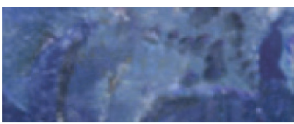
The detachment of Bayan-Batyr started getting ready to return. But when they counted their own losses, it turned out that over three hundred horsemen were missing.

— We should not leave our comrades in the hands of the Shurshuts, — Bayan-Batyr said.

— You all know what they do with prisoners!

The horsemen, exhausted by the night battle, said nothing. “Do not bring your gifts twice for one feast,” the saying goes. Do not try your luck twice, and the steppe people believed there was such a thing as luck.

— Let us leave those still alive to the mercy of God; the dead are already in his province!



— one of the horsemen said. — We are tired and will lose too many men. The Shurshuts are expecting us.

— We do not have a choice, do we? — another horseman supported him.

— May the dead forgive us!

And then, all of a sudden, a horseman came forward and raised his right hand.

— I am with warrior Bayan!

Another horseman joined him, the same who had had his doubts about a new attack against the Chinese:

— Are you the only man whom your mother gave birth to?

— Me, too!

— I am with you, warrior!

In a minute, all joined warrior Bayan. He waved his hand.

— We'll go by a different glen, in that direction!

— Hey, Bayan, but will our sultan approve of what you are going to do? — the same voice said quietly behind his back.

— I do not know... — the warrior took out his fearsome aldaspan and pointed to the smoke in the distance. — Forward!

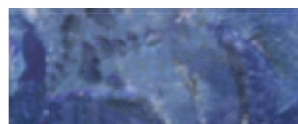
— Hurrah!

— Akzhol!

— Ananzhol!.. Boribai!

And again, it was as if their ancestors had joined them in this attack against the enemy. But this time, the emperor's soldiers met them with a rifle salvo. The Chinese had formed a line with their spears in front of them, but the line was smashed by the horsemen, and again, the invading Shurshoots fled in all directions like frightened roaches. That is what a poet said about that battle:

The blood of the Kazakh warriors boiled,
And although sure death was in front of them,





Because there were a hundred Shurshuts against each of them,
They dashed forward!
Blood instead of perspiration stood out on their bodies,
Blood streamed from their swords,
The enemies surrounded them...
Like millions of venomous spiders.

Yes, they were outnumbered. The Chinese camp spread for many miles, and reinforcements were coming from all parts of it, while the Kazakh army was melting away. Only a hundred horsemen were left. Bayan-Batyr looked around and saw that the end was near. He also saw that the hills around had become dark, covered with the invaders' corpses. "It is not for nothing that we are dying here," — he thought. — "The Shurshuts will remember this black field for centuries. Perhaps, they will see it in a nightmare when they would want to come and conquer our land again!"

A giant wide-faced Manchzhur with a long iron spear dashed at him. Bayan-Batyr grabbed that spear with one hand and made a knot of it in a flash, and then cut the surprised enemy in half with his grandfather's sword. The same moment, he felt cold iron penetrating his big warrior's heart.

— Arruakh! Forward!

That terrible cry of Bayan-Batyr echoed many times in the mountains and rolled over them to his native steppe.

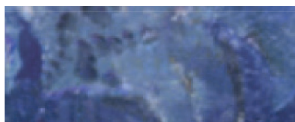
They were sitting opposite each other—Abilmambet, khan of the land of the Kazakhs, and Ablai, one of the sultans of the Middle Zhuz. Yes, that's the way it was, notwithstanding all Ablai's glory and numerous victories over the Dzhungars and the Shurshuts. In the eyes of the old biys, who revered the immutable laws of the ancestors,

and in the eyes of all the Kazakh kins and the crowd, he was still just a sultan. And although the name of Ablai was known in the steppe and beyond it much better than that of this sickly man, the big khan's pillow was still under Abilmambet. And Ablai, strong, full of life and thirst for power, had to look at his uncle from below.

If he had been alone, Ablai would have smiled. He knew perfectly well why this sickly khan had forgot about his own sorrows and sufferings, and all of a sudden decided to make this fifteen hundred-mile journey to his residence on the shore of the Blue Sea. Khan Abilmambet had come to celebrate the great victory over the Shurshuts, won by one of his numerous sultans, Ablai!

No, it had not turned out as his enemies had hoped. Sultan Ablai was considered number one in the land of the Kazakh and it had been up to him to decide, whether it would be peace or war. Everything could have been lost in the Shurshut slaughter. Supposing he had come to the rescue of the rebels of the Senior Zhuz and managed to defeat both Chinese armies. Where would his warriors be? In the black yurt, wrapped in white fabric, like the body of Bayan-Batyr, brought from the battlefield. Ablai would have been left without the troops he so needed to become the Khan of the Big Horde—the three zhuzes. However, one more thing was necessary for that—the timely death of his own uncle, the sickly Khan Abilmambet, who had been quite good to him.

Ablai knew well the kin leaders surrounding Khan Abilmambet: the biys, elders, and hereditary worries. Each of them had his own interests, passions, big and small, and attachments. And each of them, if they themselves did not dream of becoming the Khan of the three zhuzes, then had a person in mind who would be good for them in this role. Such were the Tyure-Genghizides, his relatives, and he knew them better than anybody else.





They watched every step of his, waiting, like wolves, for him to stumble. He was accused of every kind of crime when he accepted Russian citizenship. Some bard even incited the mob—impram—against him. And wasn't that him, that old man rubbing his hands, who had told the tale about the cunning neighbor. — Give me a piece of land the size of an ox-hide as a token of friendship, — the sly man said. And when the simple-hearted neighbor agreed, he cut the hide in thin strips and took land till the horizon. The Russian generals did the same. First, they asked for land for the construction of fortresses, then, they made vegetable gardens around the fortresses; then, they planted wheat and brought their peasant-tulenguts here.

That's what all of them used to say. But now, when the Shurshuts had grabbed the Steppe by the throat, they no longer believed that Ablai had sold himself to the Giaours and convinced the khan to do the same. For the dragon was worse than the Dzhungar pangolin, and it would be easier to deal with it with Russian fortresses behind one's back.

No, his main support was not the Tyure-Genghizides, but the grass-and-root worries, and the common people, who proved themselves with their swords and spears in that troubled time. And behind them was that faceless mob dubbed impram. Since time immemorial, clever rulers had used it to gain power. One could promise them anything, but still have everything done his way. One did not have to answer to them about anything—they trusted you blindly. He, Sultan Ablai, was neither the first, nor the last ruler of this kind. All the Steppe rulers were like that, including his red-bearded ancestor, who in his time, had shaken the universe...

Here they sat, to the right and left of their master and future khan Ablai: old, but still powerful Bogembai, next to him—Zhabai-Batyr from the kin of Emenaly-Kerei, the

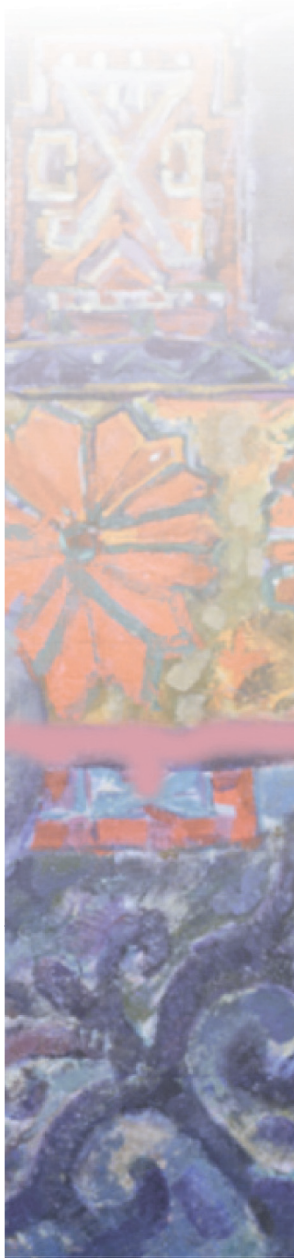


warriors Derbisal and Mandai from the Kipchaks, Bokei and Sary-Batyr from the Uaks, and others whose names were repeated in the Steppe by people of all kins and zhuzes. Their faces were gloomy, because they dreamed of defeating the invading Shurshuts, but had had to retreat. And the more so, the body of their warrior Bayan had been brought from Altyn-Emel. But no one had any objections, nobody demanded any explanations.

Well, perhaps it was possible to defeat the Shurshuts and liberate the Kazakh kins and tribes suppressed by the dragon. That was why the all-Kazakh uprising had begun. And the Kazakh nomads rebelling against the Shurshuts were expecting help. But that was not in his interests, as the future Great Khan. And from now, what was in his interests had to be the law for all in the Steppe.

Nobody of those now present in the yurta was aware of the fact that, the same day that his hat was pierced by an arrow, two strolling dervishes in dirty darned robes had visited him in his white yurta near Altyn-Emel. Via his guards, they had given him a small silver circle with a single character on it. Ablai had ordered to let them in immediately. One of the dervishes with watering eyes had silently taken off his robe and turban. Shivers had gone down Ablai's back, when he recognized that old man with expressionless eyes. When Ablai had been a prisoner of honor of a Dzhungar Kontaichi, that Chinese had visited the latter two or three times. The puffed up, haughty Kontaichi, who had considered himself the master of half the world, had become pale and talked in a low voice in the presence of that man. Subsequently, the Sultan learned that it was that old man, in front of him in dirty clothes then, who had destroyed the Great Dzhungariya.

The conversation in the sultan's white yurta had not been long. And when the dervishes had mounted their donkeys and were gone, Ablai had ordered everybody to





leave the Altyn-Emel gorge and go to the Blue Sea. And the white camel, which had saved the sultan's life that day, had obediently lain down, pointing with its head to the Balkhash.

Yes, that was his choice. If he was to become the Khan of the three zhuzes, it was not in his interests to defeat the Shurshuts near the Altyn-Emel gorge. The moment the threat from them lessened, all those silver-tongued biys, fat-assed politicians, kin rulers, and judges would take advantage of it. Who could out-talk them in peace time! But while the Shurshut sword was above their heads, only he, Sultan Ablai, had real power. When he became the Great Khan, then it would be appropriate to come back to Altyn-Emel.

Meanwhile, he would maneuver between the Russian lion and the Shurshut dragon, preserving the lives of his troops and keeping the Kokand jackals—Erden and Narbota-biy, on a chain. There is nothing better than having both sides interested in you. He had already accepted Russian citizenship. Well, now he could accept a certain dependence on the bogdykhan. His guest did not ask for more.

No, he wasn't shortsighted and could see the intentions of that old Shurshut with diseased eyes. That terrible old man had the fate of Dzhungariya in his mind for all the three Kazakh zhuzes. At the moment, the Shurshut empire was chewing Dzhungariya. But when Dzhungariya was swallowed and people from China got settled in that burnt land, then it would be the turn of the land of the Kazakhs. Then, the Russian fortresses, that he and other noble people had permitted to be built in the Steppe, would prove useful. Besides, by that time he would become the khan!

Meanwhile, he would steadfastly work towards his aim, which would be achieved when the representatives

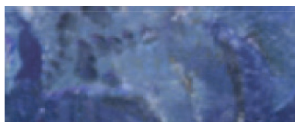
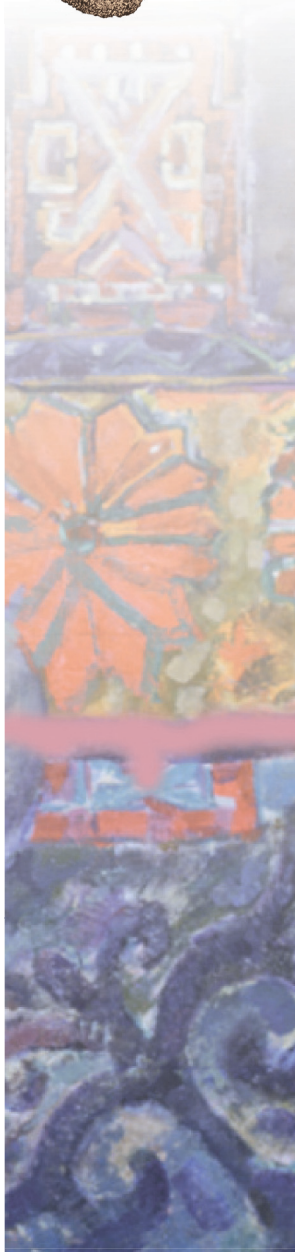
of all the three zhuzes raised him over the steppe as their Khan. Anyone who stood in his way would regret it. All those present here, both noble and common people, had to obey him implicitly. Otherwise, they would share the fate of Bayan-Batyr. Yes, just by one glance of Bayan-Batyr's, Ablai understood that he knew the reason for the retreat from Altyn-Emel. That explained why the warrior had wanted to be in the cover force. And Ablai knew that the warrior would violate his orders not to engage in battle with the Shurshuts. Well, all were aware of the fact that Bayan-Batyr acted on his own. Everything happened as expected. The Shurshuts now knew the strength of the Kazakh warriors and would think twice before they dared to attack Ablai next time. And for Bayan-Batyr, the right hand of the desperate and fearless Sultan Ablai, it was high time to die. He could not be the right hand of the Great Khan Ablai.

Yes, in the future, too, he would cut off the hands and heads of those who wanted to think and act on their own. What could be said to a simple sultan, could not be said to the khan even in one's dreams. But his warriors did not have much respect for the noble biys and tores, and would always be with him and obey him!

The Great Khan Council began not exactly as demanded by the law. When all the ceremonial words had been pronounced, and Khan Abilmambet slowly raised his hand to give the floor to the biy most esteemed because of his age and wealth, Kazybek—the Goose Voice, the taciturn Bogembai-Batyr put his huge palms together and stretched them out in front of him:

— Oh, my Khan, and all the big men from the three zhuzes. Let us pray for our comrade, Bayan-Batyr!

One of the common warriors, with his eyes half-closed, began to pronounce words from the Koran in a singing voice, half-forgotten since childhood. Very few





of those present had prayed in the past twenty-five years. And even the Khan himself had to put his palms together and listen to the prayer. So, elders, sultans, and biys sat with immovable mournful faces. Sultan Ablai was the last to join them in praying. When he had finished reading the Koran, the warrior touched his face with his palms:

— Amen!

— Amen! — all began to repeat, vying with each other.

After praying, the old, gray-haired legendary warrior Bogembai, the left hand of Sultan Ablai, dropped his lash in front of him and turned to Ablai:

— Oh, my Sultan, why didn't we help our brothers from the Senior Zhuz, bleeding under the oppression of the Shurshuts?

There was a prolonged silence in the twelve-winged yurt of the khan. Finally, Sultan Ablai's lips parted to speak:

— I was not aware of the uprising of the Kashgaria and Semirechiye kins against the Shurshuts!

Ablai slowly looked around at his warriors. Did any of them know that he had been the first to learn about the uprising of the Kazakh kins and Uyghurs in Sintzian and Semirechiye?

The faces of the warriors were sullen.

The Great Khan Council decided not to go to war with China. Sultan Ablai said nothing. Khan Abilmambet himself informed the representatives of the three zhuzes about the arrival of official Chinese ambassadors for negotiations. However, all present knew that what Abilmambet said was also on the mind of Ablai. It was exactly upon the insistence of the latter that they had decided, notwithstanding the treaty with the Shurshuts, to increase the regular troops and again organize a volunteer corps the next spring.

— That will be for the Shurshuts' own good, — Ablai said. — It will also be good for the Kokand rulers to



know that our cavalry is combat-ready any day. Erden and Narbota-Biy have gathered too many laskars near Tashkent. As the proverb says: “If meat is getting rotten, you can add some salt, but what can you do, if the salt is getting rotten?”

“The best people of the three zhuzes” only reluctantly accepted Ablai’s proposal. They understood too well, what such a big army in the hands of Sultan Ablai could mean. Each new hundred horsemen in his army made him closer to the title of khan.

Most of the volunteers had already returned to their camps. Ablai himself, with his detachment and volunteers from some kins of the Middle Zhuz, was about to leave for Kokchetau. But hardly had he mounted his horse, when somebody cried out nearby. A messenger, a shabarman, dropped from his horse and got on one knee before Khan Abilmambet, who was seeing Ablai off:

— Oh, my Khan! Ten thousand yurtas of the Sadyr kin are going to leave their territories and move to their kindred people in Andizhan!

— Why? — Ablai asked sharply, and the messenger turned to him.

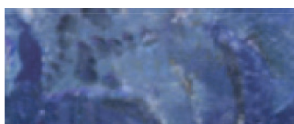
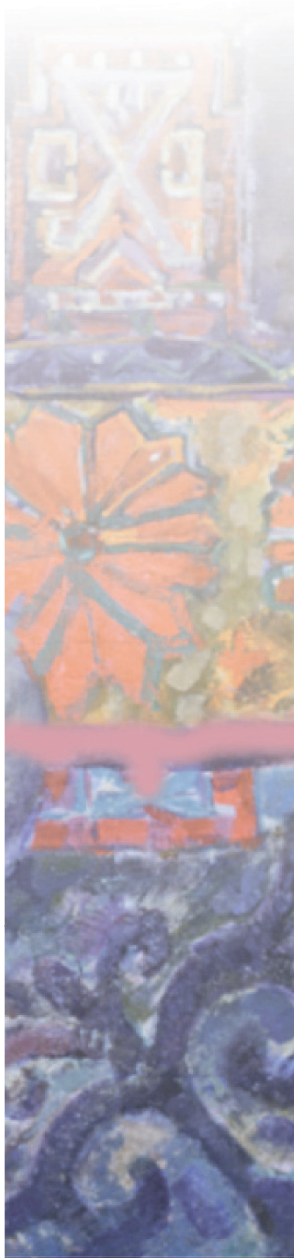
The auls of the Sadyr kin lived right on the boundaries of the conquered Dzhungariya.

— That I do not know!

— Then what do you know, scout?

— I only know that a man from Emir Narbota in Kokand came to them and said: “Come to us. If the Shurshuts spare you, then Ablai will kill you all!”

— Why should I kill our subjects? — Ablai asked, knowing that the next day, his words would be known to all in the Steppe. — Can it be that Tasbolat-Batyr, the head of the Sadyr kin, believes that nonsense?! Or, does he think that in Andizhan, he will be safe from the Shurshuts? They will pursue him even in Fergana!





— The man from Kokand was talking about the old animosity between the Argyns and the kin of Sadyrs.

— Well, — Ablai squeezed his kamcha with a pale hand. — Then we'll have to...

— Do not say anything rash, Ablai! — Bukhar-Zhyrau, who was standing nearby, said calmly.

— But, if we let the kin of Sadyrs go, all the Semirechiye Naimans will panic and follow them!

— Give me just ten horsemen to accompany me, my Sultan, and they will not go!

Ablai thought for a minute and nodded his head:

— Agreed, my bard. But we'll have to stay here till you return.

And Bukhar-Zhyrau rode away. It wasn't an easy job. Once during the "great disaster", the Sadyr kin of the Naimans sought refuge near the Argynaty Mountains. But the Argyn biys did not give them pastures. That provoked inter-kin clashes. Such offences are remembered for centuries in the Steppe, and that one was relatively not so long ago. Zhomart-Batyr, the head of the kin, and his nine sons were killed in battles with the Dzhungars. Subsequently, Tasbolat, his miraculously rescued tenth son, headed that big kin. Scared by the massacre of the Sintzian Kazakhs by the Chinese troops, he had decided to roam with his subjects within the territory of the Kokand Khanate, where some fifteen thousand Sadyr families already lived. That would open a long section of the border. Besides, other Naiman kins would be tempted to follow Tasbolat's suite. And the Shurshuts would be only glad to take over the vacated land.

When Bukhar-Zhyrau and his horsemen arrived at the main village of the Sadyrs, they had almost finished packing their yurtas on camels.

— Where is Tasbolat-Batyr? — Bukhar-Zhyrau asked the first man he met there.

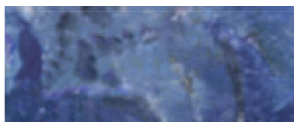
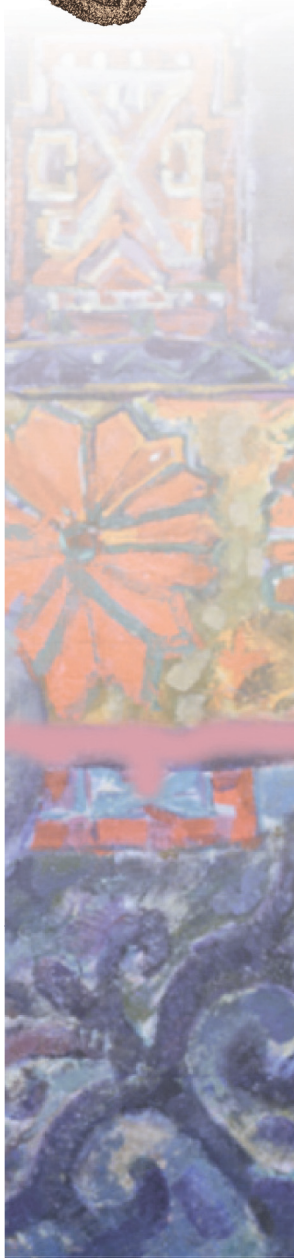
— That big yurta, the one, which is still up! — the man answered.

Trembling with anger, the bard rode up to the yurta. Still mounted, he touched the strings of his dombra and began to sing over the whole Steppe:

Where are you heading to, the kin of Sadyrs?
Is it to the Sarys River?
You cannot get away from me,
The argamak of revenge is faster, than the wind!
As a blizzard
I'll block your way.
Why did you strike
Our Akmurza with your club?

No, the bard did not come with orders of the khan for his subjects. He came with the demand for repayment for the warrior Akmurza, who had died in the inter-kin strife. One dry summer, Tasbolat's father was roaming with a herd of horses in the pastureland of the Argyns by the Argynaty Mountains. The Argyns insisted that he and his herd of horses go to the Ulytau Mountains. During the skirmish, Zhomart killed Akmurza, an Argyn warrior, and moved to the Burundai River. Since that time, the Sadyrs had been at war with the Argyns. If Sultan Ablai had punished the kin only for their desire to move to their relatives, the whole steppe would have risen up against him. But this was a just trial for manslaughter, which the Sadyrs were allegedly trying to escape from. And in this case, the ancient steppe law was on Ablai's side. Tasbolat-Batyr could do nothing but suspend the migration. He himself came out of his yurta and helped the bard get off his horse.

For half a day, they discussed the terms of the forthcoming trial, while the Sadyrs unloaded their camels.





Some even started to assemble their yurtas again. Nobody was eager to leave the long-occupied place.

— How come all the yurtas in your aul are dismantled?
— Bukhar asked, as if by the way.

— The Shurshuts are coming... — Tasbolat-Batyr answered. — The Kazakhs are already fleeing from Sintzian!

— But there is Ablai with his troops!

— Where was he when the Shurshuts burnt our auls on that side of the mountains?

— The time has not come to fight the Shurshuts, — the bard said. — But it's not the time to flee from them, either!

— So, what we are to do?

— The same thing Bayan-Batyr did!

Tasbolat thought for a minute and said:

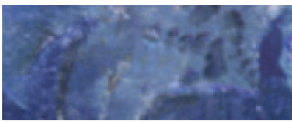
— All right, we are staying!

There was some relief in his voice. The decision to migrate had not been an easy one. The Sadyrs would not have had a very free and easy life in the Kokand Khanate.

— But if the Shurshuts come, will Ablai help us? — Tasbolat-Batyr asked, seeing Bukhar-Zhyrau off.

— Bayan-Batyr would have come... — the bard said thoughtfully. — That means Bogembai will come, and Zhabai-Batyr will come, and so will Sary-Batyr. So far, you'll stay here as scouts of the land of the Kazakhs.

Tasbolat followed the old bard with his eyes, pondering his words. Why hadn't he given a direct answer to the question about Ablai? Up till now, Bukhar had been considered the mouthpiece of Ablai in the steppe.



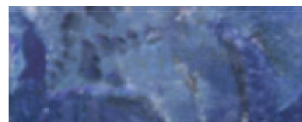
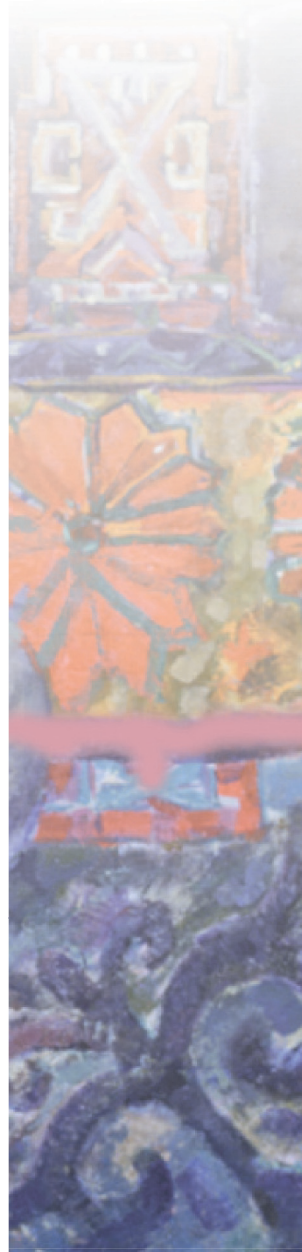


III

Khan Ablai was in a wonderful mood. Yes, he had become the Great Khan of the Kazakhs. In accordance with the traditions, the noble people of the three zhuzes gathered on the shore of the Telikol Lake and raised him on a white felt mat. True, representatives of many kins of the Junior and Senior Zhuzes were absent, but now it was of no importance. He would make anybody who didn't obey him knuckle down!

And now Khan Ablai was reaping the fruits of his labour. All bowed when he and his cavalry rode in the steppe. And now, his horsemen brought into line the Bozhban tribe of the Konrad kin, who had joined the Kokandians against him. And he got the sweetest loot. The Kokandian elders gave him their most beautiful girl in order to abate his anger and rescue their noble people. Now, in bed with her, he was watching her efforts to please him. She was only fifteen, but her experienced aunts had instructed her with what to do. And she was doing her utmost now, although it was painful and frightening for her. That's how a real ruler must make a whole nation behave! Let it be painful and frightening for all of them, then they would acknowledge his power over them.

He must not concede them anything. Making himself comfortable, the pleasantly tired khan listened to the cries





and moans, muffled by the thick wall of the white yurta. While he was having fun with the Konrad beauty, his hangmen-tulenguts had tied the chiefs of the Bozhban tribe to horses' tails and driven the horses in opposite directions, tearing the guilty men apart. And that's what he would do in the future, too!

Ablai heard the low sobs of the shaking girl, who was trying not to cry. It did not matter, he would give her a present, and she would forget her grief and her brothers, who had been dragged by the horses in the dust. But what was that noise?

— Attan... Attan!

At that cry, all the onlookers, curious to see the execution, scattered. Children also scattered and hid in their yurtas under the thick cotton blankets, as if it were possible to hide from the unexpected enemies.

The khan put on his clothes and sword leisurely, and came out of his yurta. Some horsemen were approaching from the south. Judging by the warning cry of the first horseman, who had been sent forward, the news was not good at all.

A red-bearded horseman, a Shabarman, accompanied by some fifteen horsemen, approached the khan's yurta, got off his horse, and got down on his knee:

— Oh, all-mighty Khan, bad news!

— Tell, me, shabarman!

— When Alim, the khan of Kokand, learned that you had dismissed the volunteers, he saddled his horse in violation of the agreement with us. And so did all the Andizhan, Namangan, and Margelan emirs. And in the Tashkent vilayet, the kins of Shanshakls and Kangls forgot about your good deeds and also rose in rebellion!

— What do they say?

— They say they will make their way towards the towns of Turkestan!

— How numerous are they?

— All together—sixty thousand spears!

Ablai fell to thinking. He had expected outbursts of animosity towards himself, but not so soon. Immediately after he had been pronounced the khan, he hurled back

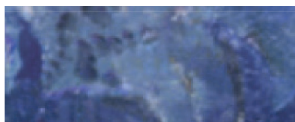
the troops of the Kokand emirs and restored his power over the territories and towns lost during “the years of great disaster”. Tashkent was obliged to pay taxes to Khan Ablai. The Kazakh kins of the Senior Zhuz—the Dulats, Dzhalaurs, Bestanbals, and Suans, and the Konrads of the Middle Zhuz, again became his subjects. However, not all of them were pleased with Ablai’s iron fist, and riots started. He had just suppressed one such riot.

And now Alim, the young khan of Kokand, dared to wage a new war. He had been reassured by the news that only one thousand horsemen were left at Ablai’s headquarters, and that the auxiliary detachments made up of horsemen from the Senior Zhuz would hardly stay loyal to Khan Ablai.

The point was that the best detachments of the three zhuzes had participated in the campaign against the emirs of Kokand. But when he had gained victory, Ablai ordered the warriors from the Middle and Junior Zhuzes to go home, and the ones from the Senior Zhuz to stay with him. His reasoning was as follows: “From time immemorial, the land of Semirechye and middle course of the Seikhundarya had belonged to the kins of the Senior Zhuz and Konrad kin. Those kins had always bravely protected their land from external enemies. The Dulats, Dzhalaurs, Kangls, Shanshaks, Albans, Bestabals, and others were especially courageous. The land in the steppe had always belonged to the kin capable of protecting it. After the land of Semirechye and the Seikhundarya banks were given back to the kins, they would become its owners and protectors. That would help them find themselves...” For the above reasons, Ablai withdrew the horsemen of the Middle and Senior Zhuzes.

And out of the blue, such news! The enemies, like water, had infiltrated through a crack. That means the Emir of Kokand had found a crack! So, where was it?

If there could be only doubts about the Konrads and the Dulats, Khan Ablai was well aware of the moods of the Shanshaks and the Kangls. The khan of Kokand had put the whole burden of the Tashkent tax on those renegades. The kush-begi of Tashkent was skinning them alive and





saying that it was the appetite of Ablai. And that he did not care—the Shanshaks and the Kangls deserved that, as anyone did, who dared to get out from under his rule!

— Where is the Kokandians' assembly place?

— On this bank of the Chirchik, at the bend.

— Well, while they get to Turkestan, we will have time to muster our forces. — Ablai looked at the sky, then at Kazykurt Mountain, and yawned. His first impulse was to send messengers to the Sary-Arka auls and ask them for help, but then he thought better of it. “The kins of the Senior Zhuz and the Konrads must fight themselves. Then, they will realize their role in the Kazakh Horde sooner.”

The Khan raised his hand:

— All right, send a messenger to the Sirgalints, to Yelchibek-Batyr, and also send messengers to the Dulats, Dzhalaurs, Bestanbals, Suans, and Albans. Their detachments are to be at Kazykurt in twenty four hours!

The Khan's messenger made a sign with his hand, and two hundred horsemen, shabarmans, mounted their horses. They were always ready to go, and every one of them knew where to. In a minute, they were going in various directions. Only a cloud of dust swirled over the steppe.

Khan Ablai sneered:

— Cut a snake in three parts and it will still be stronger than a lizard. I can defeat the Kokand sucker with a third of my army!

He went back into the darkness of his yurt, but did not get undressed. Sixty years are not eighteen; he had to preserve himself for his destiny. He took off his hat and belt, and relaxed on a pile of blankets. The young Konrad girl was crying silently in the darkness, and he felt pleased.

He fell to thinking. Let the envious say what they wanted. Many call him cruel and bloodthirsty, but no one could say that the land of the Kazakhs had lost anything during his rule. He was still maneuvering craftily between the lion and the dragon, and baring his teeth to Kokand at that. If many people were so scared of him that they were ready to run anywhere, that's the way it should be. The land of the Kazakhs and the integrity of the Khanate were above everything else.



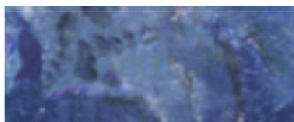
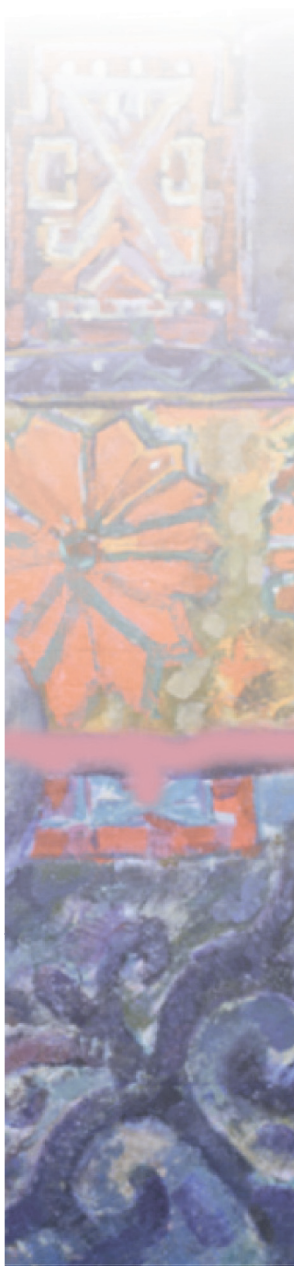
Immediately after the battle at Altyn-Emel, he sent his brother Zholbars to the Chinese bogdykhan. He knew that there was an internecine war going on in China and, hence, that was the best time to sign a treaty. The Emperor Khun Li conferred the title of a prince on him, and also gave him a sable fur coat, silk carpets of unusual colors, and many other things. Even the personal calendar of the emperor was sent to him from Peking, so that the Kazakhs would know about Chinese culture and count time Shurshut style.

Two years later, in 1758 by Russian chronology, the Chinese army, having suppressed the Kashgars and the Kazakhs in Sintzian, again invaded the Kazakh Steppe. This time, they came down the Tarbagatai Mountains and devastated the whole steppe up to the Blue Sea. As in the “years of the great disaster”, people from all the boundary auls fled. The Shurshuts were so numerous that not a single blade of grass was left in the steppe. It seemed that not only their horses, but also the Shurshuts themselves, ate the grass and the bark of the trees.

Ablai decided to take them on and there was a big battle at Aiaguz. Again, wishing to preserve his best troops, he retreated, leaving the warrior Malaisary with a covering force. The great warrior Malaisary fell in battle, as Bayan-Batyr did. A sandy mountain called Malaisary stands there now.

The Shurshuts could not force the khan to break his ties with Russia. He retreated further and further into the steppe, luring the dragon into the region where the Russian fortresses were standing, like lion’s claws on soft pillows. However, the dragon sniffed the air and crawled back, over the mountains.

No, the dragon had nothing to do on that side, and the same year, a huge one-hundred-eighty-thousand-strong army was gathered on the Sintzian frontiers. This time, the Shurshuts aimed at the whole of Central Asia. It’s a blessing that the Russian lion had neither pretext, nor opportunity to intervene. All the old offences were forgotten at once. Khiva, Kokand, Bukhara, and Afghanistan, backed by the entire Moslem world, started preparations for a rebuff. Like a hot wind, the news about gazavat, the holy war against





the Shurshuts, spread around. According to the laws of the faith, neither Ablai, nor Nuraly, the khan of the Junior Zhuz, could stay out of it.

Khan Nuraly made a reference to their direct dependence on Russia, which was not at war with China. The Junior Zhuz was too far from the Shurshuts. Ablai, too, found reasons for not joining the gazavat. Firstly, he also depended on Russia and had no right to begin a big war without its consent. Secondly, only recently, a present—thirty white argamaks—had been sent to the Chinese emperor on behalf of Ablai, and the emperor had recognized Ablai as the “head of all the Kazakhs”, so to fight against the bogdykhan now would mean to break his word. But in fact, Ablai, like his ancestors did not have too much respect for any treaty, especially one written on paper. He was more concerned about the coalition of the Central Asian khanates, headed by the Afghani warrior Akhmet-Khan. In the territory between Tashkent and Samarkand, Akhmet-Khan had gathered a seventy-thousand-horsemen-strong army, and who knew where he would go, if he did not have to fight the Shurshuts. Bled white by numerous disasters and wars, the Kazakhs could not resist such an army. It would not be too bad if the Shurshuts taught a lesson to the Kokand and other emirs, who now claimed the towns of Turkestan. Of course, the Shurshuts, as southern neighbors, would not be welcome, but in this case, the double citizenship would come in handy. If the Shurshuts become impudent, the Russian lion would intervene. The Russian fortresses were not only in the Kazakh Steppe, they stretched further along the Chinese border, to the Great Ocean.

Meanwhile, Khan Ablai sent another big mission, headed by his son Tugum, to Petersburg, to Czarina Catherine the Second, with the request to approve him as the khan of the three zhuzes. Although he had been raised by the elders on a white felt mat and bathed according to the rules in the milk of white mares, the Russian czarina, with the wisdom of a tyure, did not want to recognize him as such. That was not only because many kin leaders of Junior and Middle Zhuzes were against Ablai’s autocracy, but mainly because it was easier for the czar government to

deal with the khans of each zhuz separately. If the obstinate and despotic Ablai got full power in the steppe, he would become disobedient and insist on his own terms. Already now, although not officially approved, he was recognized as the main khan of the Kazakhs not only by all the steppe bards, but also by many czarist officials on the frontier.

That night Ablai slept soundly and got up early. The same Konrad girl was sitting cross-legged on the edge of his bed near the wall. Her eyes had become even bigger. Long and thick hair covered her whole body. The white chemise she was wearing was barely visible. Due to her dark hair and eyes, her face looked even whiter than her chemise.

— Do you want anything from me? — the khan asked.

— I have only one request...

— Tell me!

— Do not kill my brothers!

— Let those who are alive now stay alive...

— They made a mistake, they did not obey you, but they will never do that again!

— Quite so! — Ablai grinned.

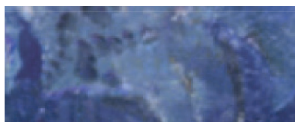
He stared at the brightening sky through the round hole in the ceiling. Yesterday, he had cruelly punished some of the obstinate Konrads, who had tried to evade his power. Now, there would be another trial. How would the other Konrads behave, and also the Uisuns, the Dzhalaurs, the Dulats, the Albans, the Suans, and other tribes of the Senior Zhuz? Had they felt his iron fist? Would they recognize him as the main khan? Most of them were now in his army, which was to fight the eternal enemy—the emirs of Kokand, who kept trying to win them to their side. Would the feeling of the Kazakh community prevail in them? Or would they, like water, pour from one jug into another?

— Birds never strike those who join their flock... — the Konrad girl said quietly, as if reading his thoughts.

— It depends on the kind of birds! — Ablai replied tonelessly. — Some birds are eagles, and some are ravens!

— Some are swans...

Ablai looked at her and without a word, got up and went out of the yurt. He stopped at the threshold and looked at





the now bright sky. “I haven’t seen swans in the steppe for quite a long time!” — he thought, and with a gesture of his hand, called his bodyguard.

— Any news from the messengers?

— Yes, they are beginning to come back!

Ablai looked in the direction of Karatau Mountain. At its foot, he saw small groups of horsemen moving towards the khan’s headquarters from various directions. A hundred horsemen entered the aul at full speed. When the dust settled, Ablai joyfully nodded his head. That was the warrior Mandai of the Kipchaks and Zhabai-Batyr of the Kereis. It turned out they had not gone home and stayed with their local relatives. They heard “attan” and rushed to Ablai.

— Did you send for Bukhar-Zhyrau? — Ablai asked.

The bodyguard was at a loss for a moment, and Ablai frowned. His relations with the bard, who had once been devoted to him with his body and soul, were getting worse and worse. Yesterday, as a protest against the execution of the Konrads, the bard had left the headquarters without saying goodbye.

Again dust swirled in the East. Another messenger came up to the khan’s yurt. He got off the horse and kneeled on one knee:

— My khan, only four or five hundred of the Dzhair kin are ready to join you...

— What about the rest?

— They are disassembling their yurtas to flee from the Kokandians!

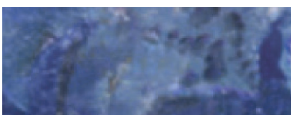
— We got the same news from other kins of the Senior Zhuz, my Khan! — the messenger said.

— Where do they plan to go?

— In the direction of Alakul.

— That means they will come under the Shurshuts’ swords! — Ablai said in a fit of temper.

However, by noon, it became evident that not everything was so bad. Offended by Ablai as they were, many kins believed that the Kokandians and the Shurshuts were much worse. Soon, it was reported that the elders of the Alban and Suan kins had promised to bring all their



volunteer troops under the white banner of Ablai. Then, a messenger from the Dulats brought the news that five thousand warriors of the kin headed by warriors Bokei and Sadyr were on their way to the headquarters. Khan Ablai had no doubts about the loyalty of Yelchibek-Batyr.

— How many of the guilty Bomzhans are left? — the khan asked in a better mood.

— We have dropped five instigators of disobedience to you between horses, my Khan. Twelve more are in the stocks, awaiting for your verdict.

— Let them go!

In a few minutes, the Bomzhan horsemen were released, and, rubbing their hands, which were raw from shackles, hurried to their yurtas.

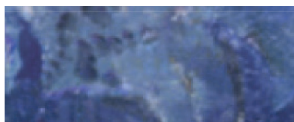
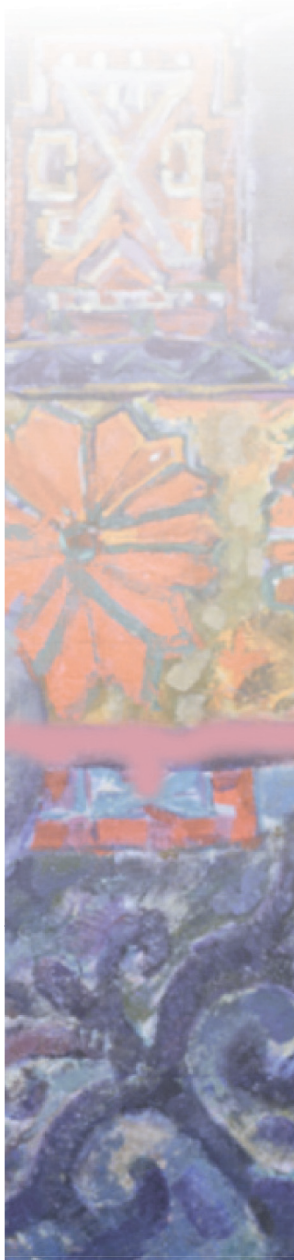
— Oh, generous Khan! You are justice itself! — the Bomzhan elders sang in chorus at some distance.

— They praise me, because I have tied five of them up to horses' tails, — Ablai thought. — If I had released all of them without shedding blood, they would have cursed me!

Suddenly, he heard a low voice: “Janybek!.. Kanybek!..” That was the Konrad beauty. She had come out of the yurta on the other side and was calling her remaining brothers. The two released horsemen approached her timidly, asked about something, and then hurried away.

“Perhaps, I shouldn't have released those two...” — Ablai thought, and the next moment forgot all about it. He remembered a week later, when he saw that cruelty only drives the hatred deep inside and engenders enemies which would not have been born by themselves.

Meanwhile, there was a lot to be done. Taking advantage of the fact that Ablai had refused to join the gazavat, the Kokand emirs decided to do away with him once and for all. This time, the law was on their side. Not a single Moslem was permitted to help Ablai under the threat of eternal damnation and death. But the Steppe had its own ancient laws, which turned out to be stronger than the orders of the priests. And most kins of the Senior Zhuz were gathering from all sides under his banner, notwithstanding the heart-rending calls from all the minarets of Kokand, Bukhara, and Samarkand.





— Hey, Turumtai-Shabarman! — Ablai cried.

His most prompt messenger, a fellow with light eyes and bright-red eyebrows, rushed up to him:

— Yes, my Khan!

— Go again to the auls of Dzhalair kin and tell them to hurry up if they do not want to be next after the Kokand emirs!

— And what if they don't reply?

— Here, take my lash. Drop it in front of them and ride back!

The messenger rode off.

The steppe became more and more animated. From there, near the Kazykurt Mountains, it was visible for a hundred miles around. Several times, Ablai turned his head to the North, obviously expecting someone. Everybody knew that Ablai was waiting for Bukhar-Zhyrau.

Although the aging bard was the son of the once famous warrior Kalkaman, he had never possessed anything. Many times, he had been given fur coats, but he always gave them to his neighbours and stubbornly continued to wear his old robe. In winter, it was a worn fur coat like the ones of the poorest horse-herders. He had never had a home of his own and moved from one place to another, and was welcomed everywhere. He had supported Ablai for many years and never hesitated to tell him the truth in front of all the people. However, in recent years, the famous bard had been talking more and more about the cruelty and unfairness of many khans' decisions. He had become a rare guest at the headquarters, and that upset Ablai more than anything else. He realized that the voice of the bard was the voice of the impram, the faceless masses, who understood everything, and whose opinion was expressed in the bard's songs.

Some time ago, the bard had criticized the Khan for the union with Russia. Later, having understood that the union protected the Kazakhs from the Shurshuts, the old bard became even more attached to Ablai, who, in his opinion, would unify the nation. However, Ablai was shedding more and more blood to achieve his aims, and the bard kept aloof from him. Yesterday, Ablai had resorted to extreme

measures: he had five disobedient horsemen torn apart by horses. Bukhar-Zhyrau must have heard about it. The day before, in order to gain his favor, Ablai ordered a herd of his best white horses be sent to him. Ablai knew that the bard had a soft spot in his heart for good horses. And now, that whimsical and refractory old man, who could change the mood of all the three zhuzes by singing just one song, was approaching the headquarters with a small group of horsemen.



When they were a mile away, Ablai could see that Bukhar-Zhyrau was riding his old bay horse. He was ignoring the khan's gift. Usually, the bard started to sing something joyful at long distance, but this time, he approached in silence, got off the horse, came up to the khan, and bowed:

— How do you do, Khan Ablai!

— How are you, my bard? How was your trip?

— It was a trip veiled with tears, my Khan!

— You do not approve that I have punished the disobedient ones?

— Soon, the whole steppe will seem to be disobedient to you, Khan Ablai!

— What would you do in my place, wise old man?

— At least I would have asked the people why they wanted to leave their homeland. Remember, Ablai, you cannot glue a khanate with blood alone. That kind of glue will not last long!

— I see, you want to teach me how to rule the people!

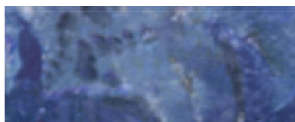
— That is not what I came here for, but I can help you.

— How?

— I can help you to keep the people in their homeland. The clouds that have gathered over it are too heavy now.

— Well, I will accept your help this time, too, my bard!

By evening, a military council had gathered in the twelve-wing Khan's yurt. The situation had become clear by that time. Numerous scouts sent in the direction of the enemy had returned. The Kokand emirs were conducting negotiations with the Chinese military leaders, but so far they had sent the main force of the united Central-Asian





army in the direction of the Steppe. That met the interests of the Chinese, and they encouraged the young Kokand Khan in that.

The Kokand army outnumbered the one which Ablai could now have by several times, but it was heterogeneous and inferior in combat power to the Kazakh cavalry. Besides, there were many Kazakhs in the Kokand detachments who were reluctant to fight against their brothers. It was decided that the main force of the Kazakh volunteers from the Senior Zhuz, headed by warriors Bokei, Sagir, and Dzhambai, would engage in battle with the Kokandians at the rivers Arys and Badam, and decoy them further into the steppe. Meanwhile, Khan Ablai and his army, reinforced with the detachment of Yelchibek-Batyr, would come from the rear and enter Tashkent. There, the most serious resistance could be expected from the militant Shankals and Kangles, Kazakh kins who had once joined the Tashkent vilayet. In order to avoid that, the esteemed Bukhar-Zhyrau and a group of elders were sent there to negotiate.

When Ablai returned to his yurta, he stood rooted at the threshold to it. The day before, he had not really had a chance to take a good look at the Konrad girl. Now in the daylight, he saw her dazzling beauty. He couldn't take his eyes off her face.

— Sursha-Kyz, — Ablai said in a low voice. — Dark young lady... Were you engaged to someone?

She fluttered her long eyelashes:

— No... But couldn't the Khan...

— The Khan can do anything he wants! — Ablai stretched his hand out in front of him.

— You will be my twelfth wife!

Sursha-Kyz looked at him penetratingly, like a beautiful animal, and immediately realized her power over him. Her almond-shaped eyes flashed.

— I will be your slave, my Khan!

There was triumph in her voice. The scared and trembling girl was lost somewhere in the night. That was the future tokal, the youngest and most beloved wife. A quarrel with her would be dangerous for anyone. Now, she would take revenge on all the rest of the world for that terrible



night of pain and profanation. Experienced Ablai, who had never trusted anybody, looked at her with adoration, like a blind man at the sun.

She came out after him and did what only a wife could do—helped him to get on his famous horse, Zhalyin-Kuirak. All the people around were astonished, but no one said a word. And only one dull-witted nuker of the bodyguards, who followed the departing khan with his eyes, said without much politeness:

— Hey, you, get your things and leave, the khan has no more use for you!

Sursha-Kyz did not even look in his direction; she only made a sign to the head of the guards:

— Lash him a hundred times and keep him in the stocks till the khan arrives and has his tongue pulled out!

Zhamantai-Batyr, the head of the guards, ordered the nuker put in stocks at once. Sursha-Kyz called for the head of the bodyguards.

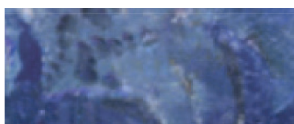
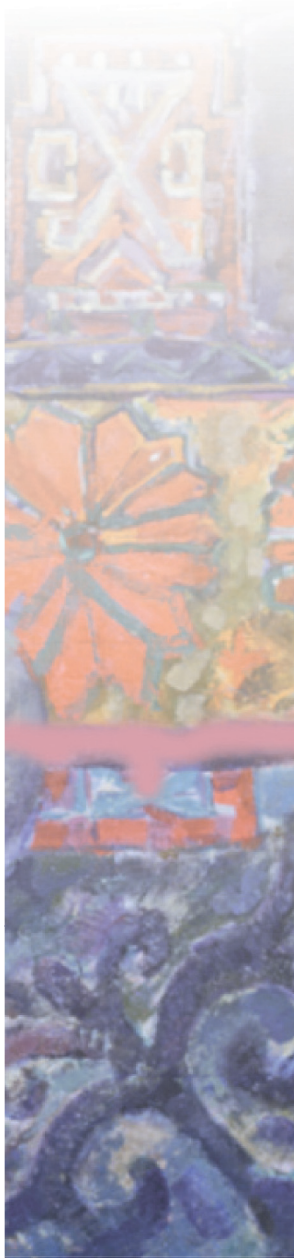
— Get the white pacer ready for me. Decorate it with silver. I will meet Ablai on it!

Three days later, to the East of the town of Turkestan, a battle broke out between the volunteer core of the Senior Zhuz and the main Kokand force. The hot-tempered and ardent Alim-khan fell for the bait of the experienced Kazakh warriors easily. Following the ancient tactics of the nomads, they lured the Kokand army deeper and deeper into the steppe.

Alim-khan knew that his troops outnumbered the Kazakh volunteer core, and he tried to overtake the elusive steppe cavalry. The more experienced Emir Erden tried to dissuade him from further offensive, but the khan of Kokand rushed to Turkestan.

Meanwhile, four thousand of the best warriors headed by Ablai himself advanced on Tashkent. The small garrison and scared townsfolk could not put up much resistance to the formidable Kazakh cavalry.

The main part of the Kokand army was stuck under the walls of Turkestan. Most men in the army had been drafted in accordance with the law of gazavat and had never taken up arms before. The Kokandians could not take the town





by assault, although they outnumbered the defenders. Each time the Kokandians concentrated their troops in some place for an assault, the Kazakh cavalry appeared out of the blue in their rear, and armour-clad warriors with spears came out of the town. Squeezed between them, the Kokand soldiers were confused. That continued for three days. On the fourth day, terrible news spread among the besiegers: “Ablai is in Tashkent!”

The news caused panic. New rumours spread that the prophetic Bukhar-Zhyrau had managed to convince the Kangle kin of Kazakhs, who lived near Tashkent, to support Ablai, and that a huge Kazakh army was moving from Sary-Arka. Detachments of small rulers who had joined Alimkhan began to scatter. Then the experienced viziers of Kokand sent their representatives to Ablai and, referring to the laws of the faith during gazavat, proposed considering the war between the Moslems as a misunderstanding. Ablai agreed after he got a number of concessions.

What could be more joyful than soldiers returning to their homeland with a victory gained easily and without excessive losses! The strong-legged Kazakh horses speeded home. Boisterous voices and laughter were heard everywhere. Even old and usually gloomy and taciturn men were animated. Only one face looked clouded. A big warrior ahead of the Konrad detachment was darker than night and looked with bloodshot eyes at Khan Ablai, riding under the white banner. That was Kanybek, one of the few left alive after Ablai had the relatives of Sursha-Kyz, “the dark young lady”, executed.

He and his brother Janybek had distinguished themselves in action by taking one of the Kokand military leaders prisoner. Wounded at the beginning of the siege, Janybek was sent back to his aul on the very first day. Kanybek kept on fighting to the end. But during the battle, his eyes were constantly searching for Ablai — he did not know that the khan was in Tashkent. The words of the little Kunduz, which was the real name of Sursha-Kyz, who had been left by Ablai in his yurt, sounded in his ears louder than the noise of the battle.

— I helped you out, Kanybek! — she said, when the shackles were taken off him and his brother.

— Then let's run together! — he said, ignorant to how that girl, who had promised never to leave him, had managed to do it.

— No, Kanybek, I will be a khan's wife! — she said in a strange voice, and turned aside.

Moreover, when the army was near Turkestan, he heard his own name as he was passing by a camp-fire, around which Konrad people of another branch were sitting. "Well, of course, if the fortune of a warrior depends on the sweetness of the intimate part of the body of the beauty Kunduz..." And the explosion of laughter seared his heart.

"Death to Kunduz, who paid such a price for my life! Death to me, who is still alive due to a disgrace! Death to you, Khan Ablai" — Kanybek-Batyr said to himself. Several times he came out of the mounted formation to select a position and shoot the khan with an arrow, but each time somebody blocked the way.

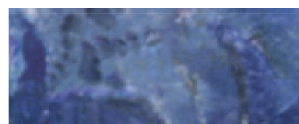
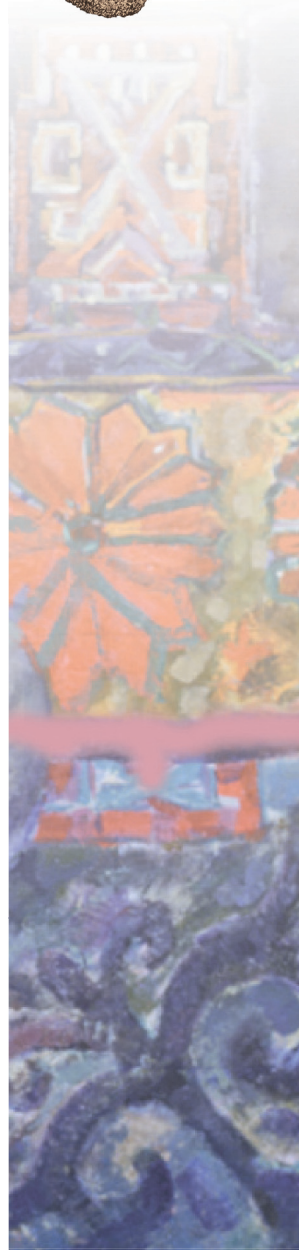
A huge number of yurtas and tents appeared in the distance—it was the khan's headquarters. A big detachment of horsemen came out from the aul to meet the victors. Out in front of it was a wonderful beauty dressed in silk and silver on a white horse. She approached the khan, jumped off her horse, and bowed to him, as his wife should. Then, she stretched out her hands and already touched his golden stirrup, but suddenly stood rigid for a moment, as if unconscious, and then fell down on the sand of the desert like a cut off white bud.

Ablai bent over her in surprise. A long armor-piercing arrow stuck out of the girl's heart.

— Who did that? — the khan asked in a low voice, looking around.

— That's your fate, damned Ablai!

A heavy Khivin bow was bent in the strong hands of Kanybek. But that very moment, the Konrad warrior himself moaned and fell on his back. His hand released the second arrow meant for the khan and it flew up into the blue sky. On the other flank of the khan's army, Kapan, a





well-known shot, was calmly putting his simple birch bow behind his back.

Everything happened so quickly that at first, no one understood anything.

— Who's that? — Ablai asked, when he approached the dead Kanybek.

— Her relative that you pardoned! — the head of the khan's guards replied.

Then the khan approached Kapan:

— Why did you shoot him?

— Because he aimed at you, Ablai!

Only after that, Ablai got off his horse and went up to Sursha-Kyz. She still looked like a white bud, but there was a small red spot on the silk, exactly over her heart.

Ablai gazed at her for a long time, then raised his head:

— God let me know happiness only when I was at the age of the prophet, but took it away from me at once. — Ablai said in a low voice. — Perhaps, in order to show me the emptiness and insignificance of this world!

Suddenly, everybody saw that the famous khan was old and gray-haired. But the next moment, his eyes shone as a young man's.

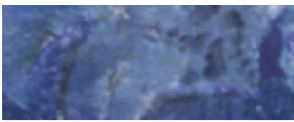
— Hey, you! — he cried out so loudly that he could be heard all over the steppe. — Bury them together, he deserves that!

So they were buried together, the Konrad beauty Kunduz and her assassin, the young warrior Kanybek. The small mound over their grave is still there in the steppe, not far from Turkestan.

The victory was celebrated by a big feast, which all main kins of the Senior Zhuz participated in. As if nothing had happened, Khan Ablai offered a cup of koumiss to Janybek-Batyr from the tribe of Bozhban, the brother of the warrior Kanybek and relative of the five men torn apart by horses exactly in the same place some two weeks ago.

At that point, Ablai turned to Bukhar-Zhyrau, who, though over ninety, was still very sensitive:

— You see, my bard, how people are. You can expect their love only if you shed their blood and make them cry.



— Soon you will see nightmares, Khan Ablai! — the bard replied.

That was their long-standing argument.

The old khan and his bard were riding to the North, to their native steppe near the Kokchetau Mountains. They had not been together like this for quite a long time. Each year, Ablai had become crueler, and Bukhar-Zhyrau had refused to come to share feasts with him. Earlier, the khan had taken the bard's opinion into consideration, but for many years now he disregarded it. Ablai was irritated by the bard's faith in good words and had become more and more cruel to people.

— Yes, that's the way people are... — Ablai said, as if continuing the conversation. — Rob them of a ruble, then give them a kopek, and they'll think you're the kindest ruler!

Bukhar-Zhyrau looked at the khan:

— You're simply getting old, Ablai!

— You are much older than me, bard!

— I am not talking about years, Khan. People are kind and trustful; you should not laugh at that!

— It's you who is getting older and dribbling!

— I have become wiser, my Ablai.

— So have I, my bard!

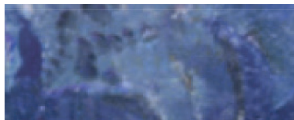
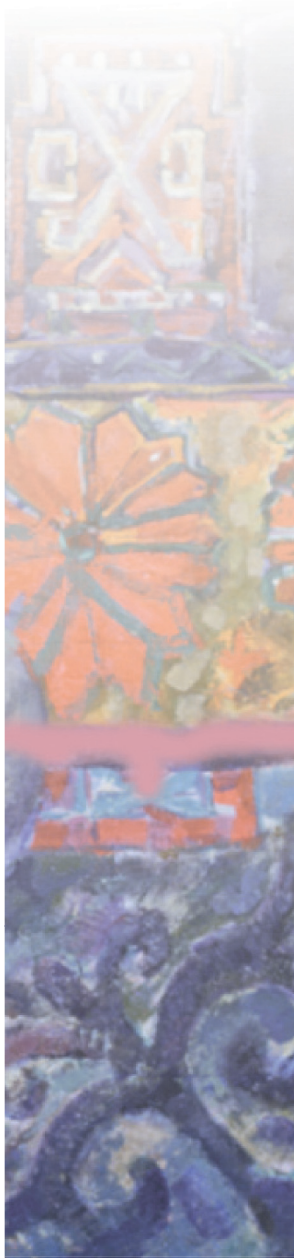
Bukhar-Zhyrau turned around. Only several hundred horsemen were accompanying them. The rest had gone home with their elders and leaders. The khan's personal bodyguards were keeping a respectable distance.

— Nobody can hear us, Ablai. Why did you do that to the Bozhhans? I know they did not want to go to the Kokandians, it took some effort to persuade them. Finally, they decided to send only several people to Alim-Khan to negotiate. Your people did not even try to dissuade them, but waited for them in ambush. Then you accused all the Bozhhans of treason.

— How do you know, my bard?

— I have known you for half a century, my Khan!

— If you actually do. You yourself said, — “they just thought”. Today they think, tomorrow they will do. I gave them a lesson.





— It wasn't a lesson, but grief. Grief makes people older and bows them.

For a long time, they kept silent. Suddenly, Ablai turned to the bard. His eyes looked young and his voice was high and clear:

— Tell me, bard, do people consider me the khan of all three zhuzes, although the czarina has not recognized that?

— Yes, they do consider you aga-khan, Ablai! — the zhyrau answered, not realizing what Khan Ablai was driving at.

— Why did I want to become the khan?

— You tell me!

— If you think that I did so only for my own glory and power over people, then you do not know me yet. No, not for that, and I did not shed so much blood for that. — Ablai waved his hand tiredly. — Well, I will tell you some other time!

Bukhar-Zhyrau touched his horse silently. Ablai began to speak again:

— I see, you are scared in your old age, my faithful bard. Do you regret that you have had to help me all your life? Don't be so sad. You'd better answer me. Is it not good for the Kazakhs that after all those great disasters, when hardly half of them survived, and after all those wars and foreign invasions, they still have a khan whom all Kazakh kins and tribes fear and respect? Could the Kazakhs survive without a man like me? Tell me, my bard!

Bukhar-Zhyrau was already very calm. He did not even turn his head to the khan and addressed his words to the space in front of him:

— If it were not so, I wouldn't be near you now, Ablai! I did glorify you, my Khan. But I am not talking about that now, and you are well aware...

— Tell me, bard!

— When you were waging the wars against the Dzhungars, the Shurshuts, and the Kokand emirs, you did not have to cause quarrels and kill people every hour. Remember, Ablai, people even forgave you the death of Botakhan. You were only a sultan, and five thousand horsemen came to kill you for your unlawful actions. They

did not touch you then, but not because you left cauldrons with food and koumiss for them. They saw that you were the first who would fight the Kontaichis. Your truth was obvious then. They needed a leader who could unite them and rebuff the enemy.

— And what happened then? — Ablai asked impassively.

— Then... Bayan-Batyr was killed.

— What are you getting at, bard?

— He wanted to die not because he had killed his beloved brother. — Bukhar-Zhyrau continued to talk, looking somewhere into the steppe. — Bayan had trusted you, but when it was obvious that you were withdrawing from Altyn-Emel and leaving the rebellious brothers from the Senior Zhuz in Sintzian to the mercy of fate, he could not stand to live any longer. Usually, the rulers think that nobody knows anything.

— I could not afford a war with China!

— No, but you could have at least rescued the rebellious kins!

— But didn't you, bard, cheer up the withdrawing troops? — Ablai asked, squinting his eyes cunningly.

— Yes, I have made a lot of mistakes in my life.

— Tell me, bard!

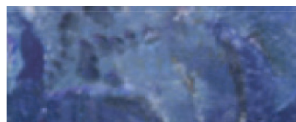
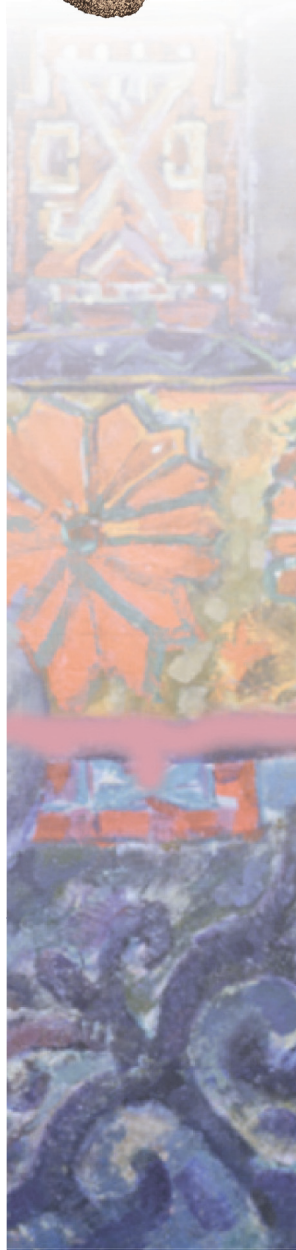
— You left Altyn-Emel only because you wanted to become a khan. It was at that point that your path diverged from that of other people and the future, khan!

— The future... — Ablai said, shaking his head. — What is it? And what are the "people"? Genghiz-Khan, my ancestor, did not know such words, but conquered the world!

— And where is that conquered world of his now, Ablai? Only our despair is left of it. That is the answer to your question about the "future". And the "people"... people never forget anything. Only you, Ablai, think that you have deceived them.

— Why did I deceive them?

— Then in Altyn-Emel. It happened more and more often, because you were not just involved in building up your khanate. The detachments collected by you were no





longer for protection, they attacked the Karakalpaks, the Bashkirs, the Kyrgyz, and more often than not, your own disobedient kins.

— But wasn't that for the greatness of the land of the Kazakhs?

— No, khan, that was only imaginary greatness... Remember the Zhail slaughter!

Both fell silent, thinking about the mountains of dead bodies—Kazakh and Kyrgyz horsemen piled up in a jumble, there in the gorge, so that the water in the mountain river ran red for three days. Supposedly because of the frequent raids and barytma of the Kyrgyz manaps, Ablai and his cavalry undertook a surprise attack, via the pass Shatu, on the auls of the Kyrgyz kin, the Soldats on the bank of the Turo River. Caught unawares, the Kyrgyz fled to Chui Valley and there, on the banks of the Kzylsu and Shamsy, the famous battle took place. They say only forty people out of forty thousand families were left of the Soldats kin. It was a massacre. Ablai resettled the survivors of the neighboring Kyrgyz kins in Sary-Arka as slaves. There, some auls are still called Bai-Kyrgyz and Zhan-Kyrgyz.

— The Kyrgyz barymtaches did not bother us for a long time after that. — Ablai noted.

— Wasn't I thinking about safe borders when I went over the ice via the Shatu pass?

— May that day be damned! — the old bard cried out, shaking his fist.

— Why?

— Because seeds of hatred were sowed in that gorge!

— But hadn't the manaps made raids on our territories?

— Yes, they did send their horsemen to raid us, and then you and your army attacked them. The Kazakh khan and the Kyrgyz manaps sought glory, cattle, and slaves. But fire and swords were used against innocent people, who were killed by other innocent common people, horsemen. You wanted the poison of hatred between the two nations to penetrate into their flesh and blood. I hope God will spare other nations the memories of such slaughters. Khans and sultans benefited from the fact that the poison passed from

one generation to another. The Kyrgyz are our brothers, but your slaughter has separated us.

— Do you think it will never be forgotten?

— I think it will be forgotten soon, if...

— Tell me, bard!

— If there are no khans and manaps anymore! — the bard said firmly.

Ablai grinned.

— Well, a prophetic bard may tell tall stories!

— Oh, you know, Ablai, it is the truth, and it goes not only for the Kyrgyz!

— What else, in your opinion, am I guilty of?

— Do you think the Konrad kin of the Bomzhans will ever forget how the horsemen loyal to you from my glorious kin of Atygai-Karaul tied up their warriors to horses' tails, and they were torn apart?

— But I am still alive!

— You will not live forever, Ablai. Your body will still be warm when your khanate, glued with blood, disintegrates. That's what I had in mind when I spoke of the future. Sooner or later, the blood that was shed will ooze out. The seeds of evil are easy to sow, but difficult to eradicate. And you, Khan Ablai and Khan Nuraly from the Junior Zhuz, the Kokand emirs, the Kyrgyz manaps, czars, and bogdykhans are still sowing them!

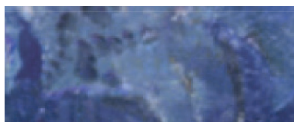
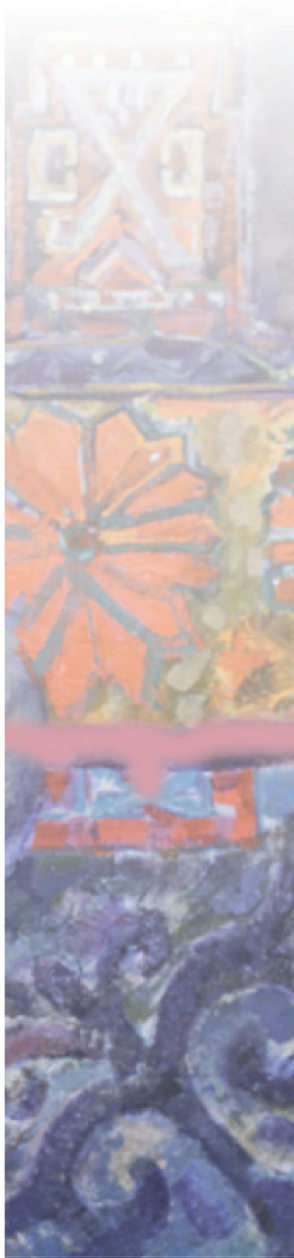
— That's the way it has always been!

— But, will it be?

— So, all your songs in which you praised me were lies?

— When I sang them, I believed in you. And I believed in you longer than anyone else. My offspring will not forgive me for that, because a bard must see better than the others!

Again they rode in silence for quite a long time. When the red glow of sunset appeared in the North-West part of the sky, Ablai held back his horse and pointed to a glade near a steppe lake, where they would stay for a night. Then he went up to the bard, who was watching the installation of a tent.





— I am still thinking about that, — he said, as usual, in short abrupt phrases, — Good, evil... They are not a khan's concerns. But you are right that my khanate will disintegrate. I know that better than you do. But it will happen not because the glue with which I united the kins and tribes was made of blood.

— Then, why?

— You know, bard, I have visited Omsk and other Russian towns, — the Khan's voice was different now, muffled and pensive. — And each time, I used to walk and watch everything without my bodyguards. Their towns are different from Samarkand and Bukhara, much smaller so far, but their streets are straight, and the houses are situated at equal distances from each other...

— So what if the streets are tangled in Bukhara and Kashgar? — the bard was surprised.

— Do you know what the strong point of the army of my ancestor, Genghiz-Khan, was? It was divided into tumens—ten thousand horsemen. And in each tumen, each horseman knew his place. And the army moved in that order, and each answered with his head for his neighbor. Nevertheless, it moved and moved all right, while Genghiz-Khan was alive, but when he died, all the tumens became tangled and interfered with each other.

— So?

— And now those people, who sowed wheat and were afraid of our tumens, are building their lives. But they have a settled way of life, and that is where their power and strength lies, or as you call it, the “future”. They even settle in a special order, like tumens lining up. The Russians call it “quarters”. I counted—there were twelve houses in each quarter. And they cannot go or ride away. They plant trees and sow wheat. They even go deep under the ground. I saw that in Ust-Kamen and in Zhaik. They dig out iron ore and make cannons and ploughs. While we rush about the steppe, happy that it is so big. But from all sides, we are being squeezed out by a different life. And we will disappear,

if ... if we do not learn how to build such quarters, plant trees, and extract iron ore.

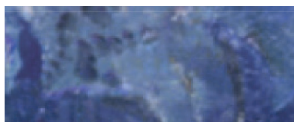
— Once upon a time, the Kazakhs had all that in their land, — the bard observed. — But then, the tumens of your ancestor came, and we became all mixed together, as dust on a road, and followed them.

— Perhaps I, his offspring, will have to restore what was ruined.

— So that's why you've been interested in Russian towns so long! — the old bard glanced at his khan with surprise and alarm.

On the day that he arrived at Kokchetau, the proud Ablai learned that the Russian Governor-General of Omsk had ordered construction of two more fortresses, without his permission, in his personal territory—near the Lake of Zerenda and in Sandyktau. At the same time, there were rumors about trouble in the Russian Empire: an alleged Russian Czar, Peter the Third, was waging a war from the banks of Zhaik to St. Petersburg. The khan decided to take advantage of the situation. He started mustering up the recently dismissed volunteer core in order to attack and destroy the six thousand Russian garrisons in Kokchetau and the nearby fortresses, and conquer new towns for himself. The Governor-General, in his turn, began to move his troops closer to the borders of the Steppe. In all Russian fortresses, the cannons were combat ready and were aimed in two directions: the steppe, and the opposite direction, from where Pugachev's detachments might appear any time. It became known that the rebels had captured almost all the fortresses along the Zhaik River except Orenburg, and that whole villages of the Bashkir tulenguts had joined the imposter.

Yes, for the khan, that was a most convenient moment to get back all his lands and gain a lot more. The small Russian garrisons could hardly offer much resistance to Ablai's cavalry, which was so experienced due to the endless wars. Besides, the soldiers in the garrisons openly spoke ill





of the czarina, and more and more of them were deserting and joining Pugachev. Ablai was getting ready to call the big khan's council and start hostilities. His first aim was to be recognized as the chief khan of the three zhuzes.

But all of a sudden, everything changed. It began with the news about a tulengut, who was bringing a letter from some Kazakh warriors from the Zhaik. The letter called the Kazakh horsemen to attack the Russian fortresses and then unite and go to the new czar in Zhaik, who promised liberty to all: Russians, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, notwithstanding who they were—serfs or khan's tulenguts. The khan's guards did not find the letter, but brought the rebellious tulengut to the khan.

— Who are you? — Ablai asked, looking attentively at the disfigured face of the tulengut.

Not even slightly bending his head, the tulengut looked gloomily at Khan Ablai. His nostrils had been pulled out and the Russian letter “B”, meaning “criminal”, was branded on his forehead. Those who violated order or tried to flee from the czar's mines were marked thus.

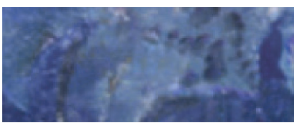
— Don't you recognize me, Khan?

His voice sounded familiar to Ablai.

— Where is the letter which you have brought from the self-proclaimed batyrs?

— The title of batyr is gained in battles, but not as bargain to father's herds! — the tulengut answered, revealing his strong white teeth when he grinned.

Now, the khan recognized him. It was Kerei, a grandson of the blacksmith Nauan, and the offspring of the warriors Kiyak and Tuyak, former slaves about whom Bukhar-Zhyrau had told him a lot. His grandfather had died on the walls of Sauran. For non-payment of his debt, he was made a tulengut and given to a sultan. His owner had tried to rape his little daughter, and the tulengut Kerei stabbed him. Ablai decided their case by giving the assassin to the czarist authorities. The czarist court sentenced him to penal servitude in the mines.



— I recognize you, horse-herder Kerei! — Khan Ablai said. — What sort of a new Russian czar is it, if assassins serve him?

The horse-herder Kerei grinned:

— Killing a sultan absolves a person of half his sins before God!

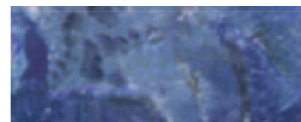
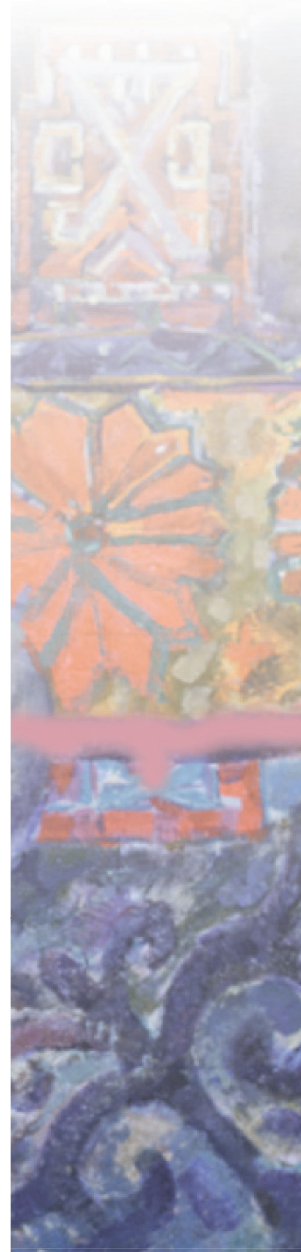
— And how does a person clear himself of all sins?

— For that, one has to kill a khan! — Kerei said calmly.

Despite all the torture, he did not confess to whom he had given the letter from Pugachev's batyrs to. The next day, he was tied to horses' tails and torn apart. But the same day, a hundred and fifty horsemen from the khan's tulengut village deserted and joined the imposter. When the khan himself caught up with them at a small steppe river, he was met with gunfire. It turned out that the escaped Kazakh tulenguts were fleeing to Pugachev, together with a company of Russian soldiers who had killed their officers in a small fort near Kokchetau.

Ablai had to retreat. When he returned to his headquarters, he learned that about half of the people from the border villages of Karaul kin had ignored his orders and not shown up. The biys told him that the poorest horsemen, the so-called "black bone", and almost all the tulenguts from those villages, had joined the Russian rebels. Those biys and the elders, who accompanied them, did not want to go back to their villages. Every day, one or two, or even hundreds of horsemen deserted from Kokchetau, where the volunteer core was usually gathered. All the noble people in the steppe were panic-stricken. Many biys and their families sought refuge in the Russian fortresses.

Khan Ablai did not come out of his twelve-wing yurt for a whole week. Then, he sent out his messengers, each with a hundred horsemen: one—to the Siberian Governor-General, another—to Orenburg, besieged by Pugachev, and the third one—to his sworn enemy, Khan Nuraly. Three weeks later, Khan Ablai and Khan Nuraly and czar's





officers from Omsk and Orenburg met in a small fortress in Tobol.

Immediately after that, special squads of Khan Nuraly's and Khan Ablai's blocked all the paths in the steppe, thus were catching the horsemen and Russian soldiers fleeing to Pugachev. They executed their compatriots on the spot and handed the soldiers over to the czar's chastisers. The two khans, jointly with the Cossacks and uhlans loyal to the Government, made a brutal raid against the rebellious Bashkirs.

That was when the almost a hundred year-old Bukhar-Zhyrau sang his famous song to Khan Ablai:

Oh, Ablai, do not choke with anger,
When you hear a word of truth,
You have reached the summit of your glory,
But there is no room in one caravan
For obese bais and the starving common people!

Horsemen listened to that song by their campfires. Torn away from their work, the volunteers grumbled louder and louder that there was no real enemy, and that they were being used as chastisers. More and more often, they deserted the khan's headquarters and rode home. More and more of them went to the Zhaik River to join the unknown batyrs under the banners of Pugachev. Gallows, tall and visible for many miles around, stood along the entire border. Each day, the blood of the caught horsemen was shed. But this did not help. Campfires burnt all over the steppe, and in their dim light, horsemen could be seen rushing in the direction of the flame of the Pugachev rebellion.

The old Bukhar-Zhyrau had known the khan for over half a century. He remembered him as a young sultan, distinguished in the battles with the Dzhungars, as an adult man who survived his second captivity, and then as a proud and arrogant old man, who could calmly cross a river half-filled with blood. And now, one hundred years-old, the bard, for the first time, saw a confused Ablai.

Yes, the eyes of the old khan moved quickly from one object to another, and his hand squeezed the kamcha impatiently.

— Be quick!

The loyal bodyguards and tulenguts disassembled the numerous white yurtas. From all the khan's territories, endless herds were collected and driven to the South. Messengers hurried in all directions day and night, whipping those who lagged behind. Khan Ablai was going to move, together with all his household and relatives to Turkestan, the ancient capital of the country. But at that moment, which capital was older was of no importance.

— Oh, you have come, my bard! — Ablai exclaimed, when he noticed the bard. — Did you have no trouble getting here?

— There are so many people in the steppe roads... — Bukhar-Zhyrau answered evasively.

— Yes, too many! — the Khan said quickly. — People have gotten out of hand!

— Don't you think that in old age, everything looks worse?

— It's not a matter of age! — Ablai even waved his hand, which he had never done before.

— It's all because of the Russians, it started with them!

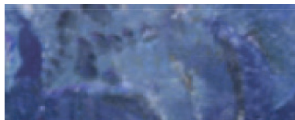
And he looked with hatred to the North-West, in the direction of the nearest Russian fortress.

— But here they are, near your yurta! — the bard said, pointing at some Russian officers, who were watching the departure preparations in the aul. — But they aren't driving you out of here, or are they?

— They came to convince me to stay. They have promised me everything: gold, decorations, even... — Ablai approached the very ear of the bard. — They have even promised to make me the khan of the three zhuzes!

— So why don't you stay, Ablai?

This time, Ablai did not merely turn around, he even got on his toes to be certain there was no one behind the nearest small hill. Only after that, he whispered:





— If our auls stay here, we will not remain among the living, my bard!

Now Bukhar-Zhyrau understood everything.

— But didn't you want to build towns, like the Russians do, my Khan?

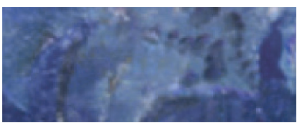
— Cursed towns! — Ablai said angrily. — I thought there was a governor, generals, and officers there. A cunning dame-czarina is in their main town. I could have found a common language with them sooner or later. But there are only rebels in those "quarters". Each town, each mine, each village means new rebels on our land. That's why I want to get our auls away from them. They are like an infection, and because of them our shepherds, tulenguts, and slaves fall sick. Their eyes become bloodshot, when they look at our herds. It was not like that before, when there was no Russian towns here. To me, Bukhara nooks are better!

— Now you are telling the truth, Khan Ablai! — the bard said.

— But why are you alone, my bard? — the khan asked. — Where are the people accompanying you? We're departing any minute now!

— I am staying, Ablai!

The sun rose higher and higher over the steppe. The campfires had burnt down and were smoking. The century-old prophetic bard Bukhar-Zhyrau was standing on a hill and looking to the South. There, in the hot haze of settling dust, the white banner of Ablai was fading into the background of the bright sky.



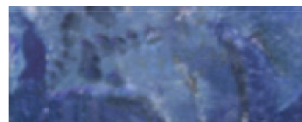
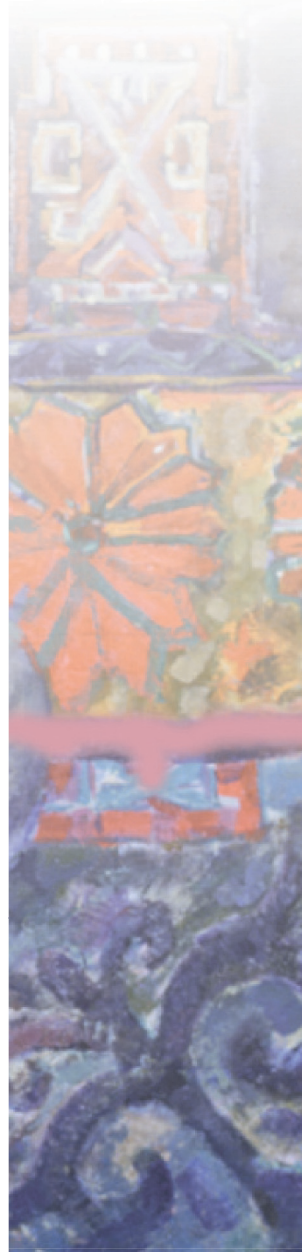


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Nevertheless, the fearsome Khan Ablai and the prophetic bard Bukhar-Zhyrau met again before their death. It was in the year of the dragon, or in 1781, by our calendar. It was the worst year in the steppe—there had not been a single drop of rain since spring. A strong and dry wind blew day and night, killing everything around. Due to the merciless heat, the ground was cracked, and the fine white sand suspended in the air, screening the sun...

Ablai was dying. He had lived seventy-one years, and now it seemed to him that nature itself was punishing him for his sins, because there had not been a single day in his life without bloodshed. The old khan gasped the hot Turkestan air with his dry mouth, but the surrounding people never heard him moan. His body was bent, his heart was rending, sharp pain pierced his lungs, but he held his head high. Every day, his face became grayer and grayer, like the ashes of a burnt out campfire.

It began the day Umbetai-Zhyrau brought him the sad news about Bogembay-Batyr. That day, he was sitting in his camp yurta, assembled near his palace, gloomily stroking his long trailing moustache. He had a lot to think about. Eight years had passed since the representatives of the three





zhuzes had proclaimed him the Khan of the Big Horde. Not long ago, he had sent a mission to St. Petersburg, headed by his son Tugum, with the request to approve him in this post on behalf of the Russian State. Of course, he did not trust the czarina, and it was not for nothing. Catherine II, true to her policy, approved him only as the khan of the Middle Zhuz. And now, when he was thinking of what to do next, a group of elders came from Bayan-Aul. They were dressed in high boots, fox fur coats, and silver belts. Already on the threshold, the old Umbetai-Zhyrau began to sing in a hoarse voice a long and sad song, notifying of death—zhoktau:

Hey, Ablai, Ablai!..
Khan Ablai, what is happening in this transient world?
Do not close your ears,
You cannot avoid the inevitable.
Haven't you heard a lot of joyful and sad news
During your long life?

Ablai was sitting with a stone face, like a khan should, and only one blue vein on his face pulsed a little bit faster. “Who else of my fellow-fighters has left this world?” — he thought. But the old and experienced bard could not answer the silent question of the khan at once. He began from afar: he enumerated in detail which warriors and when had fought next to him, and who and when had distinguished himself. The song asked him to remember that they had not lived their lives in vain, so let the grief not be too great. Suddenly, the voice of the singer dropped like a swan shot high in the sky, and the words stuck in his throat:

Hey, Ablai, Ablai,
Listen to my words:
That of your comrades-in-arms who was older than you,
That who was wiser than us,

That whom you respected in younger years,
That who equaled your age,
Because after sixty all are equal in age,
But who, nevertheless, was over eighty,
Our great warrior has died,
Bogembay has died!

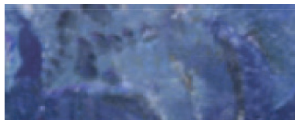


Khan Ablai's heart began to ache. In front of him, he saw the mighty folk warrior Bogembay, who had never been afraid to say what he thought. What had he said then? About the necessity to be wise. And that it was impossible to achieve prosperity for the khanate by war alone. And that he should rely on the Russian fortresses in order to oppose the bloody winds blowing from the Dzhungar gate. The warrior, who, better than anybody else, knew all the strong and weak points of the khan, also reproached him for not sparing human blood. And now, when the warrior Bogembay was no longer alive, Ablai realized that the warrior was the dearest person to him. The pain in his chest became unbearable, and he heard the rest of the song by Umbetai-Zhyrau as if in a dream:

Be happy all those of you,
Who were close to our Bogembay-Batyr!
God, give us strength in our grief!
Let the soul of that just man be in Eden,
And shine there for ages!

Although Bogembay-Batyr died in Bayan-Aul, Khan Ablai arranged a luxurious funeral repast in Turkestan. From that day on, the khan's face began to grow gray. The awful paroxysms of pain repeated only in spring and in autumn, but he could not recover after them for a long time.

This time, Ablai stayed in bed for three months. Because of the unbearable suffering, he lost consciousness for a long period of time, but being a man who had spent most of his





life in the saddle, he held his head high. When he regained consciousness, he saw Bukhar-Zhyrau near his bed. Ablai only nodded his head, as if he knew he would see the old comrade before his death.

— Oh, Bukhar-Eke, I begged God to take my life only on a battlefield. — Ablai said in an almost inaudible voice, he spoke fast, hurrying to say everything before he died. — It did not come out my way. So many years, but all the bullets and arrows missed me, and I have to die of some wretched illness. Why did not God fulfill that little wish of mine, if during my lifetime he fulfilled many other wishes of mine?

Bukhar-Zhyrau looked at the dying khan with deep sorrow. In Ablai's unnaturally big and penetrating eyes, he saw the last sparks of life. The prophetic bard knew that that dying man was not one of those who needed consolation even when he faced death.

— Yes, Ablai... — he said, beginning from afar. — Fifty years, you were on a horse. You shed rivers of blood to get the khan's throne! And ahead of you is only a stone grave.

Suddenly, he saw a smile on the dying man's face, or did he? Ablai slightly moved his hand.

— I knew you would say that... — Now, that terrible man spoke more calmly, even with a certain conciliation. — Yes, I have shed quite a lot of blood and tears. Was it more, or less, than other rulers did? Who cares? Yes, I wanted to become a khan very much from an early age. But who doesn't? Now tell me, bard, is a man God's creation?

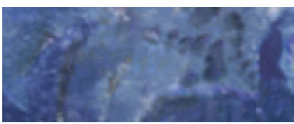
Bukhar-Zhyrau looked at him in surprise:

— Everything is in God's hands.

— So, why did you believe that even a man like me desired only one thing—power over people? It's so little!

— What else did you want, my Khan?

— I dreamed of glory. The star of glory shone for me in the night of life. I have always thought that the Kazakhs were a small nation and therefore must be like wolves. Look,



anyone who wants to, hunts wolves, sets traps for them, and kills them. But they survive! A new time is coming. Now, as I am dying, I see that I did not understand everything in my life. I knew only one way to achieve my aim—a bloody one. Now I see there are other ways, too. Let those who succeed me, find them.

— No, you couldn't have been any different, my Khan,
— Bukhar-Zhyrau said in a low voice. — An eagle reared on blood wouldn't want anything else. A khan cannot do without violence. You were a black eagle with iron talons, Ablai. But, of course, a swan wouldn't have had a chance against a dragon.

— I wanted power for my offspring. — Ablai thought that he was shouting, but only a hoarse whisper came out of his weak old man's chest. — Will I be forgiven for my mortal sins and the blood that I have shed?

— It is not up to me to judge you.

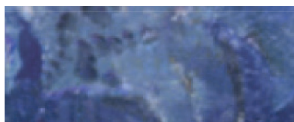
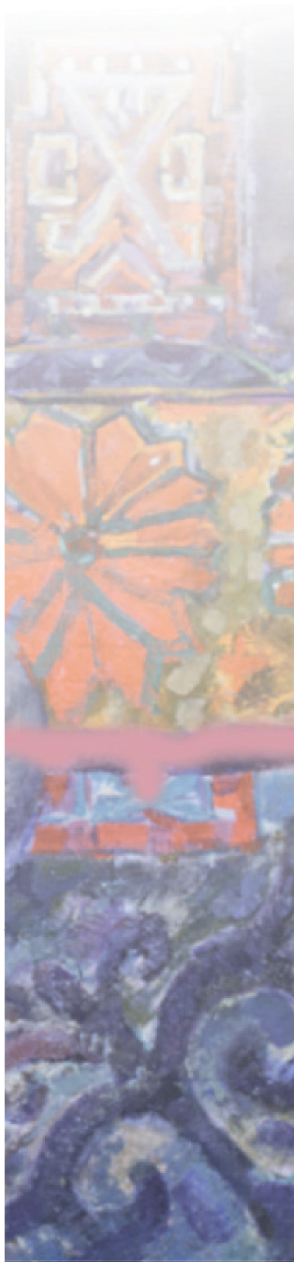
— Why did you come then?

— Each ruler of the Steppe left his last testament.

— Yes, yes... — Ablai gathered his last strength and raised his right hand. — Listen, prophetic bard. On the threshold of death, I would like to give two pieces of advice to my grandsons and great grandsons. It will be easier to rule the people if they are melded into a single bar. Whatever they do, they must mercilessly punish any disobedient person. I bequeath them unity. It was for the unity of the White Horde that I have fought all my life.

— And the second one?

— For half a century, I was at war with the Chinese dragon, keeping it away from my throat. I did that for a rapprochement with the Russian czars. They are our support, and let the sultans always remember that!.. You know, I had a Russian adviser, Timofei Egorov, in Kokchetau. He helped me to bring Russian peasants to Shortandy and Zerendy, to teach the tulenguts how to sow wheat. I let the Russians construct fortresses in the steppe. The fortresses, the roads,





and wheat helped us to survive in hard times. But, together with the wheat, the seeds of discord were brought to our steppe. All the more reasons the sultans must become closer to the czars. It is true, the czarina offended me several times, and she did not confirm me as the khan of the three zhuzes. But, as they say, “if you are offended by fleas, don’t throw your fur coat into the fire”. When the peasants and the tulenguts rebelled, I understood that there was no one closer to us than the czarina.

— I did not expect anything else from you, Ablai! — Bukhar-Zhyrau said sternly. — Even when facing death, an eagle will not sing as a swan. And what is your last wish, Khan Ablai?

— It is not realistic, my bard. — Ablai’s lips had already begun to turn a lighter color.

— I wish to live...But so much talking about that. It would make me happy, if people would not scare their children with my name.

Never before was he afraid of that. It was quiet in the khan’s yurt. The bard thought that Ablai was sleeping, but suddenly, the dying man opened his eyes and said in clear and calm voice:

— Here, in Turkestan, I took part in my first battle, so bury me here, next to my ancestors!

— Your wish will be fulfilled, my Khan...

Ablai nodded his head to let the bard know that he had heard his words, but suddenly, Ablai’s face became distorted in pain, and he again spoke in hurry, swallowing words, as if in delirium:

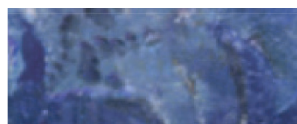
— Oh, they all have gathered here, young and old, whom I beheaded in battles and not in battles...And the slave Oraz...Remember, the one, who brought me from Khiva...Guilty and innocent, they all stretch their hands to me! Who is that? Munkir-Ankir, the Angel of Death with his club...Will he hit me with it as a great sinner before God and the people? Oh, Bukhar-Eke, you know me even

better than God and his angels. Tell him the whole truth to console my soul!

Bukhar-Zhyrau had no time to reply.

The prophetic bard did not stay a single day more in Turkestan. The next morning after the funeral, he mounted his horse and rode off alone, as in his younger years, because his native steppe was his home. The hundred-year old man was sitting in his saddle straight, as usual.

The outline of the Mausoleum of Khodzhi Akhmet Yassavi, which Khan Ablai was buried next to, disappeared in the distance. Bukhar-Zhyrau never looked back. He headed to the North, where those who escaped to the steppe were gathering in free detachments.



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