

AMULET

Unraveling The Legend

OLYA AMAN

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Olya Aman

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Chapter 1. Max

When I opened my eyes it was not that dark, though the sunlight was hardly penetrating the transparent fabric of the window curtains. I reached out to the bedside table, fumbled with the clock and turned it to face me. The bright green digits of the electronic display helpfully informed me that the time was 5:30 am. Then they winked and told me the room's temperature. The number 65 surprised me a little, as I was half-awake, but then I recalled that it was displayed in Fahrenheit.

Even the hum of the air conditioner was soothing. Its monotonous buzz invited me to dive into my sweet dreams again, but despite the early hour, I couldn't sleep. I looked around the spacious room. Because there wasn't much furniture, it seemed huge. As if seeing it for the first time, I calmly noted the way everything in the room was arranged.

A huge window hid a sliding door that led up to the balcony. It was bright enough for the shadows of two chairs to be clearly visible. The sky was the same strange shade between gray and pink, which is typical for early dawn. The Moon, pale against the background of the sky, peered into the room with curious eyes and I joined it in looking over the room.

A wardrobe was opposite the window. The wall facing the bed on which I

was lying was decorated with three randomly hung large, abstract paintings. The paintings were illuminated as if from nowhere. This created a completely unexpected and fantastic effect. The pictures looked like windows into a parallel world that was cut through the wall.

The deliberate carelessness in the way the paintings were arranged and the light was set up could only be attributed to the efforts of a very good interior designer. The composition of each painting flowed into the next. It seemed that the colored blocks leapt outside their frames into the frame next to them, creating the illusion of living images and unceasing movement to the world beyond the wall. The composition was fascinating. For a few minutes I just watched the imagined shuffle of quietly hanging paintings until I began to feel a slight dizziness. I looked up from my contemplation and began to examine the room further.

The minimalism of the arrangement was more than offset by the extravagant chandelier hanging directly above me. It was a completely unexpected contrast. The chandelier was made of many curved thin twigs, at the ends of which were discernible miniature LED bulbs. That was how I imagined the head of the mythical Medusa Gorgona to look when I read about the exploits of Hercules as a child. The chandelier seemed both alien to this room and surprisingly harmonious with it.

But, the most remarkable thing about the whole environment was the attractive girl lying next to me on the wide bed. She looked like a cat, half curled

into a ball. Her fiery hair was spread out on the white sheet, the color contrasting with it. An unruly curl covered her face, leaving me to look at only the outline of her half-opened mouth with sensuous full lips. Her hand was pathetically placed under her head. The girl lay so quietly that I became transfixed watching her. An inexplicable anxiety overwhelmed me, and I inched closer to her. I noticed that the curls covering her face were slightly swaying because of her breathing. I gently rolled over to my side of the bed, sighed and shook my head, as if tossing aside the gloomy speculation that filled my heart with dreadful cold.

These emotions made my throat as dry as the Nevada desert. I became unbearably thirsty. I quietly lowered my feet to the floor and found my shorts crumpled on top of my comfy soft slippers. I put them on, mentally grinning over the tumultuous events of the previous night.

I forgot my thirst for a moment. It made me happy to see my girlfriend sleeping. I somehow resisted the temptation to nudge her awake in the most romantic manner. A soft blanket threatened to fall on the floor in the form of a mountain range. It was a leopard pattern that was a bit vulgar, but I loved all the same. I carefully straightened it and covered my sleeping beauty with it. I did this as unobtrusively as possible, making sure that she did not wake up. Then I went into the kitchen.

I didn't turn the light on. I turned on the cold water faucet, splashed a few handfuls of the refreshing water on my face and wiped the drops up with a paper towel. It seemed too early for a coffee, so I opened the refrigerator, took out a

couple of oranges and rinsed them in hot water. I carefully wiped the sunny rounds and cut them in halves. Soon after that the juicer bowl was full. I poured the fragrant liquid into the wide glass. The glass reminded me of an old-fashioned Russian style glass, but more square and with a wider bottom. As if the American way of life flattened the good old national flask. I added a few ice cubes to the glass from the special compartment on the refrigerator door. All of my movements were almost automatic. This technical equipment and routine transported me into a state of indescribable delight.

A mirror hanging on the wall near the window reflected a slender young green-eyed and brown-haired man with an old-fashioned glass in his hand. I looked at myself and objectively examined my appearance: broad shoulders, a moderately muscular body with a thin scar running diagonally across my chest. I had distinct cheekbones, a straight nose, beckoning green eyes, and a little wild hair. You could not determine the age of this Asian man. With equal probability, I could be assumed a 25-year-old or a well-preserved 40-year-old. I smoothed my hair with one hand and went straight from the kitchen out onto the spacious balcony.

I sat down on one of the chairs and finally began to relieve my thirst. The glass with its pleasantly cooling facets chilled my palm. The orange juice was energizing with its incredible aftertaste.

A sense of triumph overwhelmed me: "Damn it, everything turned out pretty good! Despite everything, or rather, in spite of everything in the world!"

My journey here, to this luxury apartment on the 16th floor of a prestigious American skyscraper started a long time ago. When I was a teenager, I spent hours watching Rocky movies, the peculiar story of a poor Cinderella, but from a male point of view. Already at a young age, I realized that I needed to leave my country in order to climb another rung on the ladder of my life. Most of my relatives and friends saw me as a romantic boy obsessed with the idea of moving to America. The most straight-forward said it was nonsense and I was a naive fool who watched too many Hollywood movies. Well, they were probably right. But I think the fickle truth was lingering somewhere in the middle.

Who could've imagined that this early morning the same boy from a distant Kyrgyz wilderness would be unhurriedly observing the awakening of a city halfway around the world!

Exhausting training, on the verge of torture. Before and after the exercises – the frantic learning of a foreign language, culture, and customs. The teacher thought I was a good example for my classmates. She took my idea to move seriously. I was very grateful when she offered to introduce me to a man who knew all the nuances of English language and pronunciation. My family couldn't afford a private tutor. However, my life turned upside down when I found out that I was selected for an exchange program, and I was lucky to go to the United States.

I got used to sleeping a few hours per day. It became a habit that turned out to be very useful after moving overseas. I had to work in a torturous mode.

But everything I went through was worth it when I experienced the delights of everyday life. I enjoyed the juice from ripe oranges. I remember that after I tried them for the first time, I was surprised at how their taste differed from the citruses of my childhood. Their taste was dulled after the long delivery to my country with a harsh climate.

Sometimes everything that had happened to me seemed to be some fantastic dream. Bizarre fate had its own way, and, as a result, I did not become the one whom I was planning to become - I had no right to complain. The self-confident guy in the mirror exceeded the typical ambitions of a teenager.

Yes, I chose a difficult path. Only the walls of my first apartment, which was located in the inner city of Chicago, know how many times I wanted to run back home like a whipped dog. Now the balcony on which I was comfortably sitting was several times more spacious than that room from the past.

And if I'm ever asked about the great and elusive American dream, I answer that you will understand its taste and color only when you live it.

Suddenly, I felt the rear part of my right hand grow sore and put the glass on a wide armrest. I looked at my hand and was surprised to see a strange slight scratch. It was like a cat's scratch, but much wider. It was strange that I had not felt it when I was washing my face. The skin around the long strip of the wound seemed to be a little swollen. I touched it and felt the soreness. The skin was inflamed. "It should be treated with an antiseptic" - I thought and looked at the

sleeping girl, who had thrown off the blanket again and was in the most appropriate Eve costume.

Somehow, she felt my gaze, brushed the curls from her face, and gracefully waved her hand. After this, my heart did a somersault and I entered the room.

- Hi, honey! – the girl greeted me with a hoarse whisper after sleep - why is it so cold?

- Because someone almost threw the blanket on the floor again - I covered the girl once more, lightly touching her shoulder.

- Oh, your hands are freezing! - she murmured sleepily and I saw a tiny shiver run across her skin

Smiling, I threw my slippers off and sat down on the bed.

Covered with a comfortable blanket, the girl smiled at me sleepily. Long eyelashes fluttered, and after a few seconds her eyelids predictably veiled her emerald eyes.

Without realizing it, I fell into a slumber too. The sun's rays stroked my face. The familiar route of my arm to the clock showed the figures 6:50 in front of my eyes. It caused me to wake up abruptly. I was stunned because it seemed that only a minute had passed. Yes, the pre-dawn was relentlessly swept away. The phrase "you know, early morning hours tick by frantically" emerged in my head. Probably, it was a line from some song that I heard at some point. I quickly ran

into the bathroom. Then in the kitchen I programmed the coffee machine to prepare espresso. I quickly put two slices of bread in the toaster, and left the appliances to work for me and went to get my clothes so as not to lose precious minutes.

Trying not to wake the sleeping girl I went into the bedroom. I slid the door of the closet open. I chose a shirt and trousers, hung them on a hook in the hallway, and hurried to the kitchen. I decided to get dressed immediately after a quick breakfast.

The coffee was ready. Browned slices of toast were sticking up invitingly from the device that prepared them. I made one more visit to the cool interior of the fridge and got a plate of smoked salmon and some slices of cheese. I put it in front of me on the table. I set aside one piece of the dried bread to accompany the salmon and cheese, and on the other piece of toast, smeared a generous layer of apricot jam. I like tasty, but simple food. This is my nature.

I jotted down a note, pinned it to the refrigerator door with a magnet depicting the city of my childhood and continued the simple morning ceremony. However, I moved a little faster than usual.

I rinsed the coffee cup and the plate, wiped a few crumbs with a napkin into the trash, and hurried to get dressed. I tucked a white shirt with stylish narrow gray-green stripes into classic style trousers. Their unusual color matched the stripes on the shirt. I threw a light jacket on top and took a leather briefcase from a

hanger. I ignored the umbrella, as yesterday's weather forecast informed me that rain was not expected. Finally, I was ready to go.

I opened the door carefully, trying not to make a lot of noise, and closed it behind me. I turned the key and called the elevator. Usually I ran down the 16 floors for morning exercise, but today decided to save time.

The elevator took me to the first floor almost silently. I walked out the building door and found myself on the street. The big city's human anthill was already breathing there.

Chapter 2. Max at work

The noise of the huge metropolis, which didn't reach my apartment at the top of the building, embraced and surrounded me, causing me stress.

I hurried to work. Fortunately, it was only a few blocks from home. The weather was perfect for a stroll. Traffic jams had already begun to form on the streets.

I was soon walking into the fashionable building. It had only taken me fifteen minutes to get there. A list of numerous offices hung in the hall. Hundreds of law firms, a lot of medical offices, beauty salons, and the offices of various companies found a comfortable shelter. There were offices with world-renowned names and unknown names that would be replaced by new names in a few months.

The round old-fashioned clock above the office list reported that another 10

minutes remained prior to the beginning of my workday. I walked up to the 4th floor and opened the door with a discreet sign. It read: "Doctor McGauer. Dentist". In the waiting room I met the secretary, she was already talking to a patient on the phone. She waved in greeting. With a gesture she revealed that the boss was already there and was waiting in his office.

I hurried to the doctor, again noting the role of chance in the fact that now I am the assistant to one of the best dentists in the city. John, a Baptist, who taught me the nuances of American pronunciation, was one of his first patients. Subsequently, they became good friends. I was shy about asking for help, trying to make it on my own. However, it turned out that success was not waiting for me in the sports arena. Fate caused me to run into John on the street, and my life went in a completely different direction.

I had, of course, to exert all my mental efforts and borrow money to get an education. Endless names in Latin, specific terminology. I was seeing gags, plungers, a variety of drills, scalpels and dental mirrors in my dreams.

I opened the door and saw a tanned middle-aged man sitting on a swivel chair carefully studying a patient's panoramic x-ray.

We greeted each other without shaking hands for the sake of hygiene. I went to change in the adjoining room, which served as a dressing room and a lounge. I hung my jacket on a hook, tucked my hair into a cap and began to put a white coat on. Then I remembered that I had not disinfected the wound that I noticed

that morning.

However, there was no scratch on my hand when I looked at it this time. I even rolled up my shirtsleeve, as if the wound could shift. There weren't any markings on my arm. I rubbed the skin and felt no pain.

The slightly irritated voice of my boss, sounded from the open door. It pulled me out of my reverie:

- Hey, Max, did you hear what I said?

- I'm sorry, Doc, I got distracted. Did you say something about Mr. Peterson's implant? - I asked, returning to the office.

- Almost. Please stop daydreaming and prepare everything for Mr. Tikhonov's surgery.

He uttered the patient's last name with the accent, which always distinguishes a person who has to pronounce the combination of letters alien to their native language. I went to wash my hands with a special disinfecting soap, but my thoughts were focused on the disappearance of the scratch. I made an effort to gather my thoughts. I could not afford to let the doc down during the surgery.

My ability to endure and concentrate really helped me to be a good dental assistant. Some surgeries lasted more than one hour, and I had to stand on my feet most of this time. I had to hold the saliva ejector and hand the instruments, swabs and other materials to the doctor. In addition, I had to look after the

patient to make sure he or she didn't lose consciousness during the surgery. Doctor McGauer had decided on principle not to use general anesthesia, but rather to use a powerful local anesthetic. The new customers wishing to "fall asleep and not feel anything" gave into his reasoning, and the doctor's skills proved the painlessness of this method. My origin was also suitable for this work as there were many compatriots from the former Soviet Union among the patients. I helped them relax with sounds of the common Russian language.

The workday started. I called the patient to the office and helped him to find a comfortable position in the chair. The doctor and I put the squeaky gloves on, and my boss asked the man:

- Are you ready, Mr. Tikhonov?

After his nod, the doctor gave me clear commands:

- Retractor, gingival protector, a cube of anesthesia, let's start.

Chapter 3. A mysterious incident

The dental implant surgery went smoothly. The Doctor went to drink his usual cup of tea followed by chocolate. He assured me that the real Swiss delicacy does not harm the teeth and is an excellent snack.

I stayed to clean the room and, taking the gloves off, surprisingly looked at my hand again – it was as if the scratch had never existed.

The workday went on as usual: an elderly African-American woman, a singer

gaining in popularity, a boxer whose teeth were not saved by a mouthguard, and a manager from a nearby office with severe pain. The patients took turns in the chair. I continued preparing the office, recalling the strange occurrence again and again.

In the evening, I returned home.

I opened the door with my key. I smelled the fragrant deep-fried meat and a homemade plum cake.

- Honey, wash your hands - a melodious voice greeted me from the kitchen - I prepared your favorite dishes.

- One minute, - I said and went to change my clothes.

My big-haired beauty Katya had set the table in the living room. We turned on the TV. There was another quiz show on. The questions weren't pretentious, and we virtually won almost a quarter of a million dollars. Having laughed enough, we changed the channel to a brand-new Hollywood hit. In that atmosphere of contentment and tranquility I started to fall asleep without even noticing it.

- Thank you for the dinner, darling, - I kissed Katya on her cheek - I'm sorry, but I'm a little tired today.

- Don't worry, Max, go rest. I'll clean up here!

When I reached the bed, I fell asleep even before my head touched the pillow.

The next morning I woke up at about six o'clock and went to the bathroom. When I was washing my face, I felt some discomfort and winced - that same strange scratch appeared on my right hand again.

What the hell was this? I could swear that yesterday evening my arm had no markings.

To say that I was surprised was an understatement. The scratch appeared the second morning in a row and it was sore. I opened the medicine chest, but, unfortunately, I couldn't find any disinfectant. There was a pain reliever and powder for cold symptoms. Strange, I just restocked it a little while ago. Where did that all go?

I applied a long band-aid and dressed quickly. I skipped breakfast so that I would have time to run to the hospital before work. I learned a long time ago that even a small scratch should be treated with care. I almost forgot my briefcase with all my documents including my health insurance card in a worried hurriedness.

The illuminated board on the elevator showed that it was on the ground floor. I didn't want to wait so I rushed down the stairs thinking about the mysterious origin of my wound.

In the lobby, I almost collided with Mistress Foksenberg, who was leading her pampered male Labrador Retriever home from a walk. According to rumors, this eccentric rich woman had a multibillion-dollar estate. It was quite difficult to

determine her age. However, judging by the fact that she used to call the murdered President Kennedy simply by name and mentioned that he used to help her cheat with her homework, she was well over seventy.

She had a privileged status in this building and so, was allowed to do many things. She became the first resident of our skyscraper. And her "dear Charlie", as she used to call her dog, lived a comfortable life and didn't disturb the neighbors. Mistress Foksenberg personally visited the apartments adjacent to hers, including the upper and lower floors and obtained the written consent of tenants so that she was allowed to keep her dear friend with her. That was the way I became acquainted with her and eventually found out that she was a permanent client of my boss. And I must admit, she was a nice lady. Afterwards no one could mention a single case, when "dear Charlie" caused any inconvenience to others. I absentmindedly greeted her:

- Good morning, Miss Foksenberg - although psychologically I thought that it was rather not good, but very strange, and I did not forget to greet the dog sitting at her feet:

- Hey, Charlie!

- Hello, Max, - the woman dazzlingly smiled at me - it is a little windy. You'd better button your jacket. Although the temperature is just wonderful, 60 degrees, and we like such weather more than the heat, when dear Charlie's paws get burned on this nasty asphalt.

- Sure, Miss Foksenberg – I hastened to say goodbye to the neighbor from the top, but she called me back.

- Max, would you please make an appointment for me tomorrow with the Doctor, ok?

- Sure, Miss Foksenberg! - With these words, I quickly jumped out the skyscraper's door and almost ran to the hospital.

I knew that work there was not interrupted even for a minute. A tired nurse met me in the waiting room of the hospital. A rather young pretty woman with a pair of dark curls that strayed from under her cap, walked towards me. It was clear that she had worked a difficult night shift, and it was easy to read her dream on her face: she wanted to quietly work the remaining one and a half hours and rush home to sleep. "Lana Gibson" - was the inscription on the badge pinned to her breast pocket, and I said to her:

- Hello, Ms. Gibson. I need to get to the doctor as quickly as possible.

- Hello! Did you bring your health insurance card?

- Yes! - I said hastily.

- Let me register you meanwhile. The doctor will be busy for another half hour.

- I brought everything, but is it possible to see the doctor any sooner? It's an emergency.

- The doctor is busy. But, since you, as you claim, have a very urgent case, I am

authorized to conduct the initial examination. Would you like me to?

- Of course. Thank you, Ms. Gibson.

- Go into the examination room and wait, please. – The nurse showed me the direction, waving her hand - I'll be right there.

I followed into the room, took off my jacket, and in a moment the nurse came in and invited me to sit on the chair near the couch.

- Here, - I said, taking the patch off - look at - I broke off abruptly and stared at my hand. No trace was there. The skin was not different in color even slightly from the rest of the arm.

- And what should I look at? – The nurse was no less surprised than me.

- Only half an hour ago a wide and long scratch was there and the skin was inflamed, - I tried to speak calmly.

- But, do you see that there is no skin damage now?

- Yes, actually no – I hesitated to answer. I did not know what and how to tell her.

- I see no reason to prescribe you medication - continued the nurse.

- Ms. Gibson, please, listen to me, would you call the doctor, please. I don't doubt your competence, but I want to hear someone else's opinion. Is such rapid recovery possible? Or, I don't know, were there any such cases?

- Judging by the appearance, you're not a drug addict, you probably drank a little too much yesterday? – The nurse was looking at me with a mixture of compassion and contempt - or had an absinthe cocktail? You know, I had a case in my experience...

- No, I hardly ever drink, and yesterday, I didn't drink at all except for tea at night. Please! Don't attribute these flaws to me! - I was starting to lose patience because of the nurse's remarks. I was annoyed by the fact that I didn't understand what happened to me.

- Sir, I'm trying to help you! - Ms. Gibson told me, and I realized that I was a bit harsh.

- I'll call a doctor, just calm down.

Coming out of the office, she muttered something about the fact that I should be sent for an MRI. I must admit that it was not a bad idea, if it had been a hallucination. Though, how could I have felt a real sense of pain from the scratch?

The doctor, came in about five minutes accompanied by the nurse, when I was about to leave the examination room.

- Hey, sir, where are you going? – the woman asked me – this is Doctor Doe, he will examine you. And here is your insurance card and the forms - she wanted to hand them to me, but then changed her mind and put them next to my briefcase

on the table.

Apparently, the nurse told him what happened, and he immediately proceeded to conduct a detailed examination of my medical history. The nurse was making some notes on the sheet attached to the clipboard.

- How long have you been noticing marks on your hand? - the doctor's voice sounded soft and sympathetic.

- This morning was the second time.

- Are you taking any medications? Or drinking alcohol? Or, perhaps, were you in contact with any unusual substances or plants?

- My answer to all the questions is "no", Doctor Doe. And as far as I remember, I've never had head injuries. I sleep well at night. The last time I was sick was a while ago and that was only the flu. There is no one with mental health problems in my family!

- Well, that's wonderful. No is no. Give me your hand, I'll examine it.

I obediently followed his instructions. The doctor brought the beam of a flashlight to the surface of my skin and examined it carefully:

- I don't see any indications that your hand was injured.

The doctor put on gloves and began to pound, probe and stretch almost every millimeter.

- Does this hurt? - he asked every few seconds. I told him that I was not experiencing any discomfort.

Doctor Doe suggested that it was simply stress, and though I tried to dissuade him, he prescribed a mild sedative for a night. Plus, not excluding the impact of toxic substances, he prescribed an oral absorbent. In addition, he suggested that I take a picture of the marks in case (he specifically stressed the words “in case”) they appear again. And finally, he suggested that I get more rest and see a therapist.

I picked up my things and the prescription, left the hospital and rushed to work, putting on my jacket on the way.

Chapter 4. Trying to find a reasonable answer

By happy coincidence, there were no serious operations that day. But Doctor McGauer brought me out of my reverie a couple of times.

In between the patients he once asked if I was ill.

- I'm a little unwell, but that's okay. I already saw the doctor - I said - by the way, Doctor, Miss Foksenberg wants an appointment for tomorrow - I switched the topic from what was tormenting me.

- Of course, we will always find time for her. Tell the secretary to contact her and offer some options. And you can rest an hour or so, I'll take the next patient myself. It is a simple check on the implant.

I warmly thanked my boss and went to the room where the computer was in the corner. I entered the words “sudden appearance of scratches” in the search bar. However, I didn’t find anything resembling my case. There were articles about religious stigmata, as well as signs of different sects, but their appearance was nothing like my scratch.

The searches “scratch marks from different animals”, “marks of claws”, “strange claw marks” did not clear up anything for me either.

None from among the hundreds of photos that appeared resembled what I saw on my right hand the second morning in a row. Just in case I printed out the ones that at least somewhat resembled what I had.

I read all the articles that appeared from my search request. I learned about the mystical beast Chupacabra’s attacks on sheep and goats in the “Lone Star State” - Texas. One of the websites had full confidence in the existence of this “goat vampire”, and even eyewitness testimonies were cited. But it was possible to see only a vague silhouette on the photos provided.

I also saw material about a maniac’s attack. He left four scratches in the form of a tag on the faces of his victims.

The print-outs with cases of coyote attacks on travelers, who left their cars to urinate in the Nevada desert, was added to the heavy stack of the materials that I printed.

The rest of the working day I carefully contemplated different ideas.

When I got home, I had dinner in a hurry, thanked Katyusha and went into my office. It was a small room, which used to be a luxurious dressing room.

I hung the papers on the walls. I continued to stare at the information I had collected, analyzed it and searched for new information on the internet.

Chapter 5. An amulet in hand

I dozed off. I do not know how long I slept, but when I woke up I felt terribly thirsty.

In the kitchen, I reached for the refrigerator door and became transfixed. That same scratch was on my hand again.

Forgetting my thirst, I ran to check the mark against the photographs on the wall. There was nothing similar. Trying to rid myself of my obsession, I went to the bathroom. I decided to erase the scratch, but while I was rubbing it, tolerating the pain, it began to bleed.

- Damn, what is it?! - I cried, but probably too loudly. A female voice sounded from behind the door:

- What happened, my dear?

I quickly washed my hands, washing the blood away, and opened the door.

- What happened? Did you cry out? - she repeated her question as if I could answer it.

- Everything is okay, I just pinched my finger. Go to bed, I need to do a little more work.

She reached out to kiss my cheek and left, her feet against the floor almost inaudible.

I remembered the words of Doctor Doe who advised me to take a picture of the mark and rushed to my office, where I had left my smartphone.

The bleeding stopped, but the scratch could still be seen quite clearly.

I sat down in front of a small bedside table, located behind the office door. In anticipation I threw some papers, stacks of paid bills and boxes with all sorts of small things from the drawers. Finally, I found what I was looking for. A small box decorated with some beautiful ornamentation was in my hands.

I opened it with a vague hope, though instinctively I knew that I was still half a step from solving the mystery of the scratch. There was a claw on the red velvet that lined the box. It was from an unknown animal - too big for a dog, or a wolf, and on the contrary - too small for a bear. A thin black leather strap was threaded through the hole in the top of the claw. It was intended to wear around the neck.

I put the claw close to the wound and saw that the scratch could be left by it. The amulet claw coincided exactly with my wound, as if I had just made the cut.

I was in a daze. My findings made me feel odd. Now I had no doubts that the appearance of this strange mark was connected with this amulet. I don't know

why, but it was one of the few things that I brought with me from my native town, first to Moscow, where I was studying at the university, and then to Chicago. In fact, I have never been able to explain my obsession with this extraordinary object.

Now I realized that the cause of the mystical appearance and disappearance of the scratches on my arm I should not have looked for in American urban legends and local crime news reports.

In my head, the whirlwind of questions kept spinning. I focused and deliberately turned an extra light on, went to the table with the computer, and put the box with the amulet on it.

I grabbed my cell phone and took pictures of my wound from multiple angles. For one of the photos, as I overcame the internal trembling, I placed this mysterious claw next to my wound to capture the already obvious similarities.

Then I grasped the amulet in my fist. I spoke to this strange belonging of mine aloud:

- What do you want to tell me? What are you? What do you want from me?

Of course, I didn't receive a response. I was sitting and thinking, and then looked at the clock on the phone screen. It was 7:30 PM, so, my parents were ... I could not immediately recall what the time difference was between the American city and my hometown, so I googled again. The difference was 12

hours, so it was early morning in Bishkek, only 7:30.

Trying not to make noise and wake Katya, who fell asleep watching TV in the living room, I went to the kitchen and brewed tea for myself. I had to wait at least half an hour. But now I hoped that soon I would learn the mystery of the amulet, and I would stop being tormented by my own obsession.

I returned to my office with the tea and decided not to waste time while I was waiting. Going back into the wilds of the Internet, I looked for information about amulets, closely resembling the one I had. There was a feeling of hope in my heart that told me everything was about to be resolved.

I didn't touch the scratch, but every now and then I looked at it.

I waited till it was at least 8:00 in the town of my childhood. As I remembered, my father woke up right about that time. I sat back on the chair comfortably, flipped through the contacts on my phone, took a deep breath and dialed the number.

Beep. Beep. Beep. I felt that I became transfixed while waiting. But after the fourth beep, a close and cheerful voice answered the phone:

- Hello son!

- Hello, dad, hello! I'm sorry that I'm calling so early!

- Oh, no, Max! I've been awake for an hour. I'm getting ready for work. How are you, son?

- I'm doing well, dad! How are you?

- We're doing well too. We can't complain. I'm still planning to master the internet thanks to your sister who started to teach me. Are you ok? Usually you don't call so early.

- Yes, everything is good, dad. Do you remember you gave me an amulet when I was a child? It was black and kind of frightening. What is it?

- What amulet are you talking about? – I could detect the surprise in my father's voice.

- The nail or the claw of some large animal.

- Oh, yes ... I remember. What happened?

- Where did you get it?

- When I was little, my father, your grandfather gave it to me. He was a famous hunter in our region. Why did this interest you so suddenly?

I didn't want to worry my father, especially since I did not understand what it meant. So I needed to invent an innocent lie. I knew that my words sounded unconvincing, but at that moment it was the best thing I could've made up.

- Well, I just decided to organize the old stuff tonight and stumbled upon it. I was going to call anyway, I haven't heard your voice for a long time and decided to ask while we are talking anyway. Which animal would have such a claw?

- It is a long story.

- Tell me, I want to know the story of this amulet.

I listened to the answer from the other side of the world. I pressed my ear to the phone, trying not to miss a single word.

- According to the legend, there is a forest with a small mountain in Naryn region that has a bad reputation. And though this area is rich with berries, mushrooms and wild game, no one from the nearby villages goes there. There were a couple of huts, and this village used to have a name in honor of the mountain- Burma-Too. But even from the time of my childhood, it has been abandoned. That makes at least five decades. When the heads of the households were gone, there were no heirs left. So the houses are empty now. Only if some tourists or visiting hunters get lost, do they drop in to warm up a little. And the locals avoid this place. Only the most desperate alcoholics carried more or less valuable utensils from the houses and cut the electrical wires.

- Why is it like this, if the place is so rich? - I asked, writing down the names on a piece of paper, though, it seemed, they became imprinted in my memory.

- As my mother, your grandmother, told me, a long time ago mysterious things began to happen there. My father died and didn't tell the whole story, he kept some of it from everybody. People from the village know the story as he recounted it. Once a shepherd boy from the neighboring village disappeared in the area where he was tending sheep. Prior to that, there were rumors that some

animals were attacking the livestock, pulling out all the guts and entrails without eating their victim. They ate the liver and left their prey to bleed. People used to say one could lose a half of a herd overnight.

Of course, people used to blame the wolves, who sometimes came to the villages to hunt. But this behavior was too unusual for them. It was as if these attacks brought pleasure to the killers and wolves do not usually act like that. No one thought that this could be done by one beast. There was a feeling that this massacre wasn't done because of starvation. No one could say what it was: fun or mischief, or a demonstration of who was the head in the country.

- So, was the boy found? - I asked.

- Listen further, son, if you're interested. Your grandfather and about four hunters on horseback went there to search for the boy. Neither he nor his sheep were found. Though they discovered a place where he rested and lit campfires to prepare dinner. They got off their horses to explore the place more carefully. They found the bag where he kept his simple food gutted by animals. And that was it. The boy vanished. It seemed he was swallowed by the earth. They walked around a little, looking for tracks, but didn't find what they were looking for. A creature from the forest jumped on the hunters. It was like an animal and at the same time it was similar to a human. It was one-legged, tall and large. It moved with powerful jumps. Each of them was at least two meters. And its terrifying scream cooled the blood in one's veins.

In a panic, the hunters fled in all directions, forgetting the basics of survival, which were supposed to be in their nature. Because of confusion they ran in different directions instead of staying together, and got completely lost in that forest.

It seemed impossible because each of them was an experienced hunter from an early age and knew how to survive in the forest. But it was not easy to get out of that damned place, as if they were lost in time and space.

My mother told me that for four weeks she cried and prayed to all the saints that she would see her husband again. She wept and begged for his survival. Your grandfather and one more hunter returned home in torn clothes only after a month, thin and kind of lost in themselves. The other two hunters who were with them disappeared. The hunter who survived lost the ability to speak and seemed to have lost his mind too.

Your grandfather told the whole village about some things he saw in the woods. Many people did not believe him, but everyone was afraid to go there. Some thought that they just got lost and starved to death after a month, though they were very experienced, and were usually able to survive without food much longer. Your grandfather brought the claw with him from the forest, but he did not tell anything to anybody. He drilled a hole in it and gave it to me.

- But have you ever tried to ask him about what happened in the woods?

- I tried, but he used to laugh it off, or, more often, simply remained silent. He

never wanted to tell the story to anyone. As the saying goes: “he took that secret to the grave”. When I became an adult, he had already died, - my dad became silent, and after a short pause he continued, - by the way, two years ago, there was some hype about this place Burma-Too again. Some old hunter thought he saw that creature. Locals say this, but many people think that he was just a dreamer. He threatened to catch this terrible thing in a short time, and prove to everyone that he was not crazy.

I listened to everything carefully, but decided to clarify, checking my notes:

- Naryn region, mountainous forest Burma-Too?

- That's right, son.

- Thank you, dad. I probably took much of your time. I'll call tomorrow. Say hello to everyone.

- Take care of yourself, son!

I put the phone that had become rather heated on the table and brought the computer out of sleep mode. I entered the place that my father mentioned in the search bar. The pieces of information from forums about all sorts of mystical phenomena were pretty much the same. Most of them were stories such as “I have not seen it myself, but my grandmother or grandfather told”, “there is a legend”, “people say that in the mountains” etc.

There was not a word about a story from two years ago, which my father told

me. I expanded the search entering the phrase “mystical place in the Naryn region”, but most of the links were limited to references on ghosts’ appearances in Issyk-Kul region. During the Central Asian uprising in 1916 there was a massive massacre, and researchers of the unexplained facts mentioned that this place became mystic since then. But I did not find anything new about Burma-Too.

I did not fill the prescriptions prescribed by the doctor. And after talking to my dad I did not even think they were necessary.

I printed out all the more or less important pieces of legends and stories and went to bed trying not to wake Katya.

Chapter 6. Planning the trip

The new morning was gloomy, but the mark on my hand did not worry me much. I had breakfast and went to work.

The start of the day was very busy, and I succeeded in forgetting the problem that was tormenting me for the third day. In addition, now I had photographs as evidence that I was not going crazy and I was not merely having hallucinations.

I was about to share the incident that occurred with Doctor McGauer during my break, but when I checked my phone the photographs didn’t show any sign of damage to my skin. I was flipping the captured images back and forth. None of them had even the slightest trace. Finally, there was the picture with the claw. It is in all its glory; you could even see layers. But there was no scratch on my arm.

- Max, was there something you wanted to show me? - the doctor called me.

- Yes, look, maybe you know what animal this belongs to? - I asked trying to hide the anticipation in my voice.

The boss picked up the phone and studied the picture carefully.

- Well, if it was a tooth, I could say more. And in this case I can say that it is clearly too small to be a grizzly's claw. And it is definitely too big for a dog of Rottweiler type, like the one that I have.

- Thanks, Doctor. I would like to ask you to give me vacation for a week or more. For family reasons. I will go see my relatives. They need help.

- You really haven't been looking well for the last few days. I think I can find someone to take your place for a while.

I thanked my boss sincerely and I spent the rest of the day planning my trip home.

I was probably not a very good employee that day. But my boss didn't say anything. I became transfixed by the idea of discovering the origin of these strange marks. I felt that this happened for a reason. I certainly had to find out why it appeared after so many years.

Surprisingly, I was lucky and managed to book a direct flight on the internet. The departure was the next day, Friday. At 2:00 Chicago time I called my father and let him know that I was coming so that he would plan to be home that

weekend.

- Of course, son. Thank you for letting us know. We're waiting. And well, did something happen?

- No, Dad. I just want to come to see you.

- Ok, ok! See you soon!

- See you soon, dad.

I still needed to somehow explain my urgent trip back home to Katya during dinner that night. I didn't think it would be much harder to get her permission than it had been to get the boss's permission. We were not married and had no obligations. We probably all get a sense of ownership when building relationships though. And that sense was driving the girl at that moment.

- I don't want you to leave.

- Katya, I need to go. And I'll be back soon. You'll see, the week will fly by.

- Why can't you stay with me?

- My sister needs help. She called and asked me to come, I have to go. I have to be there. And I'll bring you a souvenir!

- I don't need anything. Just come home sooner, ok?

I hugged Katya in a friendly manner, and went to pack my suitcase. I put the box with the claw on the very bottom.

Chapter 7. Finally, home

Afterwards everything was as if in a dream: duty-free, where I bought souvenirs for relatives, a long flight, which I spent meditating. Then I arrived at my home airport - “Manas”, which seemed to be a modest structure compared to O'Hare International Airport.

I had not been there for about 12 years, and the downtown had changed significantly, becoming more like a European city.

But, in my native suburb, gray nine-story buildings still surrounded the playground with renovated attractions. There were more parked cars and their brands had become a little more diverse.

My father opened the door. I hadn't even managed to press the buzzer yet.

We hugged and stood in silence for several minutes, until my sister, wiping her hands on a towel, ran out into the hallway.

- Dad, Max, come in!

We ended our embrace and I could see how my father furtively wiped the tears from his face, which was covered with a lattice of wrinkles.

I pulled out presents from my suitcase, gave them to my relatives, and was bombarded by endless questions about the United States and life there.

The atmosphere in the apartment was almost unchanged. The modest life of an average family. My sister, as I knew from her e-mails, had her second marriage

destroyed, and she returned to the nest with nothing.

We sat at a table in the hall. My favorite foods were on it: “herring under a coat”, fried meat with potatoes, dumplings. High-calorie, fatty - but everything was so delicious!

The questions continued. My sister kept asking about my personal life:

- Max, why don't you at least show us her photo? And what is her name?

Dad wanted to know where I go to relax there, if I go fishing, and if I was ever in Las Vegas.

- I relax on the beach. In winter I go to different operas and musicals.

My sister whistled in surprise.

– I have been to Las Vegas, but it is too far and it is noisy there.

When my sister got up to brew tea, my shrewd father asked the most basic question:

- Now, tell me, why did you decide to come so suddenly? And be honest!

- You know, Dad, my American friend, got the idea when he saw the amulet. He said he wants to write an article about Burma-Too and would cover the expenses. So I decided to seize the opportunity. He will pay for everything, and I can see you at the same time!

- You know how many journalists have come and how much they wrote about

this place! Does it make sense to travel 200 km there? There is almost no one left from among the old people, and the young only say: I've heard, people say, it was rumored, there was a legend, and so on, but no facts. Not a good idea, son!

- Well, now that we flew across the ocean, 200 km is nothing. Moreover, if we do not find any evidence, my friend will report on life in the Kyrgyz province. Tell me, what is the name of that old hunter? I'll go help my friend quickly, and when I come back we'll go to the river, as I did when I was a child, do you remember? Or we'll go to the movies or a park.

- What is this conversation about, gentlemen? – My sister joined us, bringing the teapot, cups and a cake.

- Well, our irrepressible Max decided to help his friend to report on Burma-Too.

- Oh, brother, you haven't been at home in a long time. It will be raining soon, and it will only be possible to drive there in by boat.

My dad seemed to have resigned himself to the fact that it was impossible to stop me:

- I'll call Turat. If his jeep is working, he will drive you and your American friend, just let your friend fill his gas tank and add some extra.

- Thank you, dad! Don't bother, we already have a car.

- Really? Well, ok then!

I spent the night almost without sleep and dozed a little only in the morning.

My father lent me his high boots, jacket, and a backpack. My sister put a thermos and a container with food in my backpack.

Of course, I invented the story about the American journalist and prolonged my lie saying that he sent me a text that he had rented a jeep with a guide that was waiting for us.

Soon I was on my way sitting in an ordinary old Niva, which the old driver Jyrgal, used to call “a jeep”.

However, it was moving quite briskly, and after four and a half hours, which included driving on rough terrain, we reached the closest residential village to Burma-Too.

Only supports with electric cables and a small shop on a kind of central square reminded us about the civilization there. I thanked Jyrgal baike, paid him generously and asked him not to wait and to return to the city by himself.

There were a few people in the store: two old ladies in colorful scarves and a pair of men in faded denim jackets, which they had been apparently wearing since the end of the last century.

- Hi, - I said to the cashier, - give me a bottle of mineral water and tell me where can I stay for a couple of days here?

She gave me the bottle, counted the change and nodded towards one of the men.

- Ask baike.

- Who? - I was surprised.

- Baike! His name is Bolot.

Chapter 8. Exploration begins

We agreed with this man without hesitating. He was so excited about the money that I promised, that he began to talk about lack of special delicacies as if asking forgiveness, but said he could cut a chicken up for me, and proudly reported that the stove was working well and that there was running water from the well. In short, he promised to provide many comforts.

Even after the US slums that I have seen, it was uncomfortable and scary there. And, though I spent my childhood in similar conditions, now the trash on the road, ramshackle houses and the view of the collapsed barn in the distance left a painful impression.

On the way, Bolot baike asked me to wait near one of the houses. I sat down on a bench, watching leisurely rural life. Red hens looked for something in the grass. The cat, which was passing by, did not even pay attention to them. Soon he came out with a small leap.

- I bought some meat. I do not want to mess with a chicken now.

Soon we entered through the gate, behind which a rather well-built house could be seen. Bolot baike patted the head of a large dog who jumped to him. He pointed at me and said: “guest”, and the dog waved her tail affably.

There was an apple tree growing in the yard, under which the host had made a table with benches. A stepladder leaned against it. Compared to the neighboring houses on the street, this house looked good. There were white trims, which were probably painted recently. Either for decoration or simply due to forgetfulness, a plastic lion from a cartoon about a turtle was sitting on the porch with balusters of different colors.

A pair of windows with motley curtains faced the street, and the other two faced the yard. A barn with animals was nearby. I was familiar with this house's layout: directly from the entryway you could go to the barn to milk a cow or to see why chickens or pigs were making noises.

It was evident that Bolot baike and the others who were living here were very hardworking people, who were trying to achieve, if not wealth, by local standards, then a sustainable well-being. He hosted me to earn an extra penny. And the humbleness of these people could serve as an example for many.

It was quite comfortable but a little cool inside the house. I took off my shoes and kept my woolen socks on. The owner of the house offered me slippers, and I did not offend him with a refusal.

We went to a small kitchen, separated from the rest of the house by a curtain with pictures of sunflowers. I could see a buffet with dishes, a table, a stove and the host's pride – a water faucet over the sink. Perhaps, it was rarely seen here. However, instead of a drain, everything ran into a bucket and then needed to be

emptied into the street. There was an old wooden breadbox on the table, contrasting with an electric kettle and a microwave.

The host invited me to sit at the table and quickly lit a burner on the stove.

Meanwhile I took out the food that my sister prepared from my small backpack, put it on the table, added a fresh juice, which I bought on the way and finally broke the silence.

- Bolot baike, people say one hunter saw an unknown creature in your region. It is called nothing other than “Jalgyz Ayak”. And he even promised to certainly catch it and show everyone who considers him crazy that he is sane.

- There is one, Ashym baike, who is really strange. He lives as a hermit far from the village, alone on the mountain. He does not communicate with any of the locals and only drops into the shop from time to time for something, without saying a word. Why did you come to our wilderness? Because of him?

Bolot baike finished lighting the burner, turned and looked at the table that I set. He took a pair of clean glasses and a half-empty bottle of vodka from the cupboard.

- Let's toast to our acquaintance and so you won't get cold! - he poured some for himself and wanted to fill my glass.

- No, I don't drink alcohol! Will you excuse me? I would rather drink fresh juice!

Bolot baike extended his glass. We clinked glasses and drank, and I answered his question.

- You know; I want to write about him. I am a journalist in training. This topic is of interest in the U.S. today, and they pay well for it.

Bolot baike nearly choked on a piece of potato:

- So you came from America? That's interesting! However, you speak our language well, and you even speak our dialect. That's right. We must not forget our language, our relatives.

- It is because I'm from here originally! - I laughed - and I used to spend time in the nearby village during the summers when I was a child. However, I never heard of any mysterious things. Probably, the adults didn't speak about it in front of us so that we wouldn't go to investigate.

- Probably. But, when I was a child, these places already had a bad reputation. Especially this mountain. Many people went missing there. Visiting journalists and adventurers began to fear going up there. And they had a right to - Bolot baike poured another glass, stood up as if he had just remembered something and went into another room. Judging by the sound, he opened the refrigerator. Then, he returned with a can of sauerkraut. He cut the meat that he brought earlier into pieces, salted it and put into a deep frying pan.

He sat down again and continued his story:

- Once, we were climbing on the Burma-Too mountain with friends. We were 15-year-old fools. It was daytime, of course. And, you know, at the top all of us felt a terrible fear. We couldn't understand it. The mountain was the mountain, the forest was the forest, and there was nothing to be afraid of. We looked at each other, and couldn't say anything. We even felt a sense of doom. It was as if our lives were over, and we didn't even want to escape. My friend's dog saved us. It started barking, bolted and tried to bite someone, but we didn't understand whom or what. I don't remember how we reached our houses. We ran as fast as we could without looking back. And none of us even thought about going there anymore. And, even now, let this place be cursed, I will not get closer than two kilometers from there.

Bolot baike drank the remaining liquid in the glass, sniffed bread and looked up at me:

- And you, boy, stay away from that place. That is my advice to you!

- The most important thing that I need from you is to help me rent a horse from someone. I'll ride over to Ashym baike. What else is known about him?

- I'll give you my horse for an extra fee, of course. It's calm and knows the way home very well. It won't let you down!

I nodded quickly in agreement, and Bolot baike continued:

- He used to be an average man. When the local collective farm collapsed, he

and his wife, Mayrash eje, who used to work with my mom at the collective farm, decided to become farmers. He rented the land nearby, started to keep sheep and goats.

He paused. He looked at the meat, mixed it, closed the lid and came back to the table.

- Everything seemed to be normal. Then a sheep from the herd ran to the forest, Mayrash eje ran after it, and apparently ended up far away from the village. Ashym baike at this time, unfortunately, was delivering the meat to the acceptance point. Since then, neither the sheep nor his wife returned. The cops came, but they were of no use. And he is still searching.

- Was that a long time ago?

- More than two years already.

- Then he is really crazy. There's no chance that she is still alive. Is he looking for someone who can be blamed for her disappearance?

- Yes, he says that he saw some beast and wants to catch it and take revenge.

- What a desperate man!

- Oh yeah, the whole village thinks that he really went mad.

- And how can I find him?

- Well, I'll tell you approximately. I've never been there myself. My mother

would tell you where to find his house, but she went to the city to help my sister with another newborn grandson.

The meat was cooked, and we spent the rest of dinner in almost complete silence. I slept without dreaming and woke up full of energy. The usual scratch wasn't on my hand and even I was surprised and kind of missed it.

Chapter 9. Visiting a hunter

The morning was gloomy, but I felt refreshed. Bolot baike tried to persuade me one more time during a simple breakfast of boiled eggs, yesterday's warmed meat and strong sweet tea. But, I wasn't going back since I was only a few kilometers from the solution. I got ready, the host poured fresh tea into my thermos and became a little confused. I got the hint and paid for the stay and the use of the horse. He handed me a military hazmat suit.

- It will be useful. And you know, you better put it on now. It won't make you uncomfortable.

And he was right. The cool air outside was damp, and it seemed it was going to rain heavily from the low clouds. It was not the best time for hiking, but I had no time or patience for waiting. Bolot baike brought me a horse that was already tacked up.

- His name is Altai. He is smart. Don't hit his sides unless it becomes necessary.

I put my foot into the stirrup and flew into the saddle. My muscle memory

kicked in and I touched the reins lightly, but the owner called me back. He handed me a double-barreled hunting rifle.

- Here, take it! Take it just in case! Everything may happen. You can meet a wild boar or a wolf here. Do you know how to use it?

- Of course! Don't worry, baike!

- Just keep in mind: I didn't give it to you.

I nodded.

- Are you sure you'll be fine? Shall I escort you part of the way?

But I refused.

- Thank you, I'll go by myself. I need to learn something from this old man. Where did you say I have to go?

Bolot baike pointed me in the right direction:

- Do you see the hill in the distance? Use it as a reference point. You will see two houses there. Nobody has been living in them for a long time. When you pass them, there will be a path between two birches. Follow it. Try to not stay there overnight. If you succeed in finding Ashym baike, tell him Bolot son of Chynar eje says "hello", people say he avoids strangers, so it may help. Good luck to you!

He slapped Altai on the rump.

My cell phone rang in my pocket. I looked at the screen. Apparently, there was suddenly reception, as messages began to arrive one after another. Two were from my sister and father, and one was from the other end of the globe. "Hi, dear! I couldn't reach you. How are you doing? I miss you so much!" I did not succeed in typing any responses, as there was no reception again and I did not want to return to the area where there was reception: my passion was the only thing driving me forward. My impatience was not cooled even by the rain that started drizzling.

Finally, I was in the forest. I had to bend every now and then so as not to be slapped on the face by wet branches. It was not as creepy as I expected. The forest was like any other. There were the same trees as there were in the woods where I used to go with my grandmother to get firewood. I went farther into the forest, already about 7 kilometers from the village. Suddenly, the rain got heavier.

I put on the hood of the suit that I got from Bolot baike and hid the gun underneath it so that it wouldn't get wet. The rain was getting heavier and heavier. Through the veil of pouring water, the thin thread of the path became barely noticeable. The road was eroded with dirt.

However, this did not stop me, though some vague uneasiness began to gradually creep into my thoughts. I began to look back and move my head from side to side because I felt that someone was watching me. I put one hand under a

raincoat and grabbed the gun. It calmed me a little.

Suddenly, Altai snorted. He inhaled the air through his wet velvet nostrils and stopped. I spurred him on a little, but he began to walk backwards on the slippery path. After my second push on his side and a jerk of the reins, he threw his head back. Such behavior and bent back ears clearly signaled to me that the horse was afraid of something. I tried to calm him down with my voice a little:

- Come on, buddy, come on, a little bit further! It was probably just a wild boar, but don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to you.

I stroked his wet neck and tried to send him forward again, but it didn't work. Altai even tried to rear up. We did not move even a meter forward. Suddenly, in front of me I saw what had frightened the horse so much.

Only the rustle of rain drops on the hood broke the silence, and time seemed to freeze. Then I heard a sharp whistle. Altai abruptly reared up, I could not hold onto the reins, and the next time he cast them aside I flew into the slush. I didn't see in which direction the horse ran. For a moment I ceased to see anything because of the dirt that covered my face. The tremendous pain from hitting the ground, though, softened by sticky mud, did not allow me to straighten up right away. I got up on my knees. I wiped the dirt from my face and saw blood on my arm. I pulled a handkerchief out of my jacket pocket, which was surprisingly dry under the cloak. The rain washed away the bloodstains on the fabric. Heck! That was not a good time for it. What did I manage to get hurt with? I looked around

searching for the horse and noticed an arrow stuck in the tree behind me. So, that's what had whistled near me.

I got up, grabbed the gun and began to look around. The last thing I remembered was Altai's silhouette on my right. Turning my head to the left, I received a blow that sent me into a blackout.

Chapter 10. Kidnapped

I woke up because of the measured rocking. My body was thrown over the horse's body like a bag. I breathed in the sweet, pungent smell of the horse's sweat. The ferrous taste of blood was in my mouth and my hands were tied with a rope. I touched my teeth with my tongue - they seemed to be in place, but the pain in my lower lip indicated that it was severely injured. Judging by the color, the horse on which I lay was Altai. Turning my head with difficulty, I saw that he was tied to the reins of another horse. A man in a hat was sitting on him. He was wearing the same hazmat suit, but it had almost lost its original color. The gun given to me by Bolot baike was on the man's shoulder. A bag filled with arrows was strapped to the saddle.

- Hey! - I called him, wondering about the alien sound of my voice, - Who are you?

The horses came to a halt. The man dismounted from his horse and approached me.

I turned my head to the side and looked up at the unshaven wrinkled face of the

old man who approached me:

- This is my territory, so tell me, what did you lose here?

- What makes you think these woods are yours? Plus, let me go - anger was boiling in me.

- Nobody knows this place better than I do. My marks are everywhere. And you, city slicker, do not belong here. Haven't you heard that it is dangerous to go to this mountain?

- I've heard, but I 'm looking for someone here.

- And you need a gun? Don't even think about it, he's mine! I must catch him alive! Nobody is going to get in my way!

The old man's faded eyes, which apparently had been green once, flashed with a fire. This was because the pupils narrowed to a tiny point and opened the iris almost completely. His strange bright eyes resembled ice holes on the background of his tanned face. One corner of his mouth drooped, like that of a man who had survived a stroke.

- You know, I came to find a certain man – without finishing my phrase, I realized that I had found the mad hunter, and therefore achieved my first objective and paid the price of a wounded lip.

I continued:

- Ashym baike, Bolot baike, son of Chynar eje told me to say hello to you.

The old man abruptly pulled out a curved hunting knife, swung, and I hardly had time to shout:

- Wait! Wait!

But, he smiled, cut the knot, and untied my hands.

For a moment I thought he was going to cut my throat, which was just at the level of his bottomless pockets.

I slid off Altai and stood on my feet, rubbing my hands that had become numb. Then I went to the old man and offered my hand for a shake.

- My name is Maksat. I came from America, but my ancestors lived in the nearby village. You have surely heard about my grandfather Abdyrazak, who managed to return home after a month of wandering on this mountain.

- So, you are the grandson of the survivor Abdyrazak? - The old man was obviously surprised; - your grandfather was a real hunter. It is pity he died young. How old was he? Was he 60? And you don't even know how to hold the gun. And I won't even mention the way you ride a horse!

- About that age. After his death, my family moved to Bishkek and we came to this place only to visit his grave.

The old man nodded.

He offered his hand to me in response:

- Ashym!

He had a strong handshake, and while I stared at him, I began to realize that he was probably no more than 10 years older than my father. It was my initial impression of his gray stubble and the dense grid of deep wrinkles that made me think that he was almost 80.

The hunter said:

- Go back home! You shouldn't be here. Go back before it gets dark!

- But I wanted to meet and talk to you.

- So, you met me and talked to me. I don't like strangers here. Go home!

- Something strange is happening to me, and it is related to this place and, in my opinion, to this creature.

- I don't understand what you're talking about. I don't have time to listen to your nonsense, - the old man pretended that he didn't understand what I was talking about.

I hurried to get the amulet from my pocket.

- Maybe this will interest you? - I showed it to him across the distance.

- What is it? - asked the old man.

- The claw of the creature that you're trying to catch! It leaves traces in the form of scars on my arm, but then they disappear in the morning, as if nothing was

there.

- That's nonsense! That can't be true! Where did you get the claw?

- It's my grandfather's! It seems he met this creature here!

Ashym baike stopped for a moment, turned and walked back. He took the amulet and examined it. He was interested in it, I could see.

- Well, ok, get in the saddle. Your face should be treated. It's bleeding. Let's climb the hill to get to my place and continue talking - the old man was not that rude anymore.

Chapter 11. A long-expected interview

After a 15 minute ride we were at his place. He took the horses by the bridle and led them to the barn. I looked around me with curiosity. There were beehives close by.

A trailer was converted into a home and the lower part, which was designed for wheels, was bricked up. There was a small iron door on the end. I could see a pipe on the roof.

Barbed wire was stretched on the fence surrounding all the buildings. Foil ice cream wrappers were haphazardly attached to it. There was a small sink, a kettle on a tripod, and stands for sawing wood.

Firewood was stacked almost up to the window to the side of the entrance. I decided to look into the trailer, but I was stopped by a voice behind me:

- Stay where you are and don't move! One more step and you'll lose your leg. And, in general, do not take a single step without letting me know. You should go where I tell you and follow the road that I show you!

Ashym baike took a shovel standing near the woodpile, and hit the ground. There was a sharp sound, the shovel's handle was broken by the powerful jaws of a trap.

- Why do you need such a big trap? - I was surprised.

- Better safe than sorry - he replied with the words from a wise proverb and beckoned me into his unique house.

From outside the length of the trailer seemed to be 6 by 2.5 meters, but inside, it seemed that this modest living space was even smaller. It was more like a warehouse with a narrow passage in the middle and ropes stretched a little above the head.

On the right side of the entrance, there were wooden boxes with some things stacked one on top of another. It got dark outside, and the light coming through the small windows, wasn't bright enough for me to see them in detail.

A hanger was on the left, and the hunter hung our rifles and a cloak on it. He put on the woolen slippers instead of boots. Lifting one of the boxes, he found similar footwear for me.

- Wait to take off your shoes. First, go and wash your face. You're dirty as a

piglet.

His rudeness was not abrasive, as it was natural in this environment. I indeed looked no better than a pig since I was covered in mud.

There was an old stove and a cask of water in the center of the trailer, which was turned into a house. A couch was a little to the side of it on the left. It was covered with only a blanket. It barely touched the wall. I was able to see the heater's brand name, when the old man lit the fire, throwing logs into the furnace from a large wicker basket in front of it. He started to heat the water, saying:

- Get yourself organized and then I will treat your wound.

It was strange to hear him talk about order because the floor was quite dusty and dirty.

A rocking chair facing the entrance was in front of the cot. It was the only way it could fit here. I couldn't imagine how many hours the hunter spent in its embrace, hatching a plan to catch the mysterious creature.

Despite the narrowness and dirt around, I noticed that everything was quite ergonomic. It was clear that the owner was well aware of what he's got in this place and where everything is. Like a magician he straightened out the folding table attached to the wall and put a kerosene lamp on it. The old man got a bucket of cold water, added the boiling water, put on the galoshes standing under the coat rack, and ordered:

- Come here. Do you have a flashlight?

I mentally thanked my father, who put it into my backpack and illuminating the darkness that had suddenly fallen, followed the host to the sink.

He treated the scratch on my cheek with vodka, hung the wet things to dry and set the table. He handed the worn wool sweater and trousers to me and offered to sit in the armchair. He lit a kerosene lamp and the room became a little lighter. He changed his clothes too and took a seat on the bed. A color photograph, carefully packed in a plastic file and attached to the wall was visible in the dim light over the table. A pretty woman with beautiful flowers in her hands was smiling in it.

- Mayrash! – the man nodded, as if introducing us, and was suddenly lost in thought.

A piece of pungent goat cheese, boiled potatoes in their skins, which the hunter probably cooked that the morning, smoked meat, strong tea with cheap lemon hard candies, all seemed to me unusually delicious. The honey served by the host in a small ceramic jar was extremely fragrant.

- It's a pity we don't have bread.

- Well, city slicker, honey should be eaten just like this. And it's even better with a cucumber. Try it someday, - Ashym baike gave me a spoon - eat, so you won't get sick.

After dessert, I took the amulet out of my breast pocket and held it closer to the light in my open palm.

- I wonder; why do these marks appear on my hand?

- Which marks? - the old man was surprised.

- Didn't I tell you? This claw leaves large scratches on my right hand. And in the morning, these scratches mysteriously disappear.

Ashym baike stared into my eyes for so long that I finally had to look away.

The old man gently took the amulet, and began to look at it from all sides, muttering under his breath:

- I have always been imagining it this way. It's big, it's strong.

- What are you talking about?

But, the host didn't seem to hear me. He was immersed in his examination of the claw:

- This is so far the only proof that the beast is really wandering in this forest. Thanks to your grandfather... He was a brave man...

It seemed that he was hypnotized and was talking to himself. Reluctantly, he handed the amulet back to me, but I did not hide into my pocket. Instead I hung it around my neck. Again, I started telling him in detail about the strange scratches on my arm and about the fact that for some reason the mark was not

appearing in this region. The old man was asking questions about how the marks felt and about when and how they appeared. It seemed he was finding out about all versions of their possible origin.

Our conversation was interrupted by the sounds that came from the barn. The horses snorted, and the bleating of a goat turned into a frightening scream. We could hear the sounds of hooves against the wooden walls and the crackling of the broken boards as well.

The old man jumped up, grabbed my rifle:

- This beast is here! - he shouted.

He quickly loaded the bullets and handed the rifle to me, warning:

- Be careful! Hold on to me!

He took his own rifle and a few seconds later we were outside. Impenetrable darkness surrounded us. The old man held his rifle in one hand and a kerosene lantern in the other. I asked in a whisper:

- Are you sure it's that same creature?

- Sshhh! Silence!

The noise in the barn didn't cease. We were coming closer and closer. The fear of the possibility that the monster was in the barn made my heart beat abnormally fast. The adrenaline in my blood boiled, and curiosity spurred me forward.

The hunter carefully handed me the flashlight, opened the barn door with a sharp kick and almost ran inside. Turning his head from one side to another he was alert and tense as a coiled spring. He was ready to shoot at any second. I shined light into the room as much as I could, trying to follow the old man's movements with the flashlight's beam. There was a dead goat lying in the corner. Its guts spilled out from the ripped belly. There was a pool of blood spreading beneath it. In the dim light it was not red but brown. My host walked quickly across the barn without dropping his rifle. Following behind him, I realized that the work I did as the dentist's assistant strengthened me, helping me to keep what I just ate in my stomach.

The old man understood that we were too late. And he even limped and stooped. Handing the rifle to me, he bent over the victim of the attack - the goat. I shined the flashlight on it, noting that the horizontal cut was made with one movement that had immediately cut the skin and reached the intestines.

- Ashym baike, what did this?

- It was him. But if you tell people they won't believe you.

- We'll see. My phone is charged up enough for a couple of photos, - putting the light up to it, I snapped a photo of the dead animal.

The old man calmed the horses down, took the rag hanging on the nail, wiped the foam from his horse's neck, then from Altai.

He pointed to the old-fashioned wooden toolbox and instructed:

- Take a couple of boards that are at the entrance and nail them to the broken wall. I'll rest here a little bit. - He sat down on a low chair, which was used in the villages when cattle were being milked.

After 10 minutes we rinsed our hands with water straight from the well, which was still warm and returned to the van.

- Tomorrow morning you'll go back home. I'll take you to the village. At the same time, I'll pick up a couple more traps.

- Do you seriously think that I flew five thousand kilometers to just turn around and leave? I need to know why this creature showed itself to me after so many years. Why did it bother me in this odd way? Why me? What does this creature want from me?

The old man smiled ironically:

- Do you think it will come to you to answer your questions? It will swat you like a fly, killing you with a single blow. Or it will rip your belly like it did it to this goat. Now you see that it is capable of it.

- Did you meet it? Did you actually see it? – My voice trembled with anticipation.

- Not up close. Only from the distance. It is the size of a bear if it stands on its hind legs. It's nimble. It disappeared as soon as it sensed me. I even had to quit

smoking so that the smell didn't give me away

- People say it is one-legged and moves with two-meter jumps?

- Maybe. I could not see. It was too far away. People call it "Jalgыз Ayak". – Ashym baike sounded tired and defeated.

The old man gave his bed up to me, putting the rifle near my head.

- Young man, sleep in your clothes. You never know ... - he broke-off mid-sentence, but it was clear what he wanted to warn me about.

He moved the rocking chair closer to the front door and took the gun. Then he covered himself with a dried sheepskin.

Chapter 12. A decision to stay and to find an answer

The remainder of the night that began so restlessly, was quiet. When I woke up early in the morning I didn't see the old man in the house. I put on my dry clothes, put the coat on, picked up my rifle just in case, and went outside. Not far from the trailer the old man was butchering the goat. He hung the carcass by its hind limbs with the help of a homemade unit.

I approached him and sat on the deck for chopping the firewood. Without turning to me, he said:

- Do you see how easily it kills its victims? Can you imagine how sharp his claws and teeth are?

- Ashym baike, I want to help you find this creature!

- You don't look like a fool, boy, but for some reason you don't want to understand that it is extremely dangerous. So you'd better go to your America and forget about this place. What is missing in your life? Adventure?

- I won't go anywhere and I definitely want to see what my grandfather saw. – I said this with determination in my voice.

The old man was silent for a few minutes.

- This goat was feisty - he began to talk again – it had been tied up when it was attacked by a wolf a year ago. But, by the time I ran to the barn, it had even succeeded in stabbing the wolf with its horns a couple times. And now, you see how it all ended for the goat, even though it had been freely walking around the barn.

- I've already decided and I won't change my mind.

- So, you are a fool! A stubborn boy! - Ashym baike spat to the side and proceeded to skin the monster's unfortunate victim.

I kept silent and I helped the old man to light a fire under the kettle.

My host brought the horses out of the stall, tied them near the fence, poured water into a broad trough, and threw the hay into the attached feeder.

- There's no reason to go anywhere today. It is too wet after the rain. We will only exhaust the horses.

I followed the old man's footsteps while checking over the land in front of the

barn. There were no traces, except for ours. Ashym baike didn't seem to be surprised by this fact. Using the wooden stairs, he brought from the trailer, he went to check the roof. To be honest, I didn't think of doing this.

- That's right, that's how he got in, look - the host got down, giving me a chance to get up and see - the third and fourth boards were torn away. And I nailed them with large nails, - he said.

The view at the top was really monstrous in the way that it seemed unreal. Huge boards were torn away and were lying as if they were still in place. However, the protruding large nails could be seen from below. It seemed that the creature was playing with us, as it had managed to silently put the boards back into place. Or we just did not understand that something was happening from above because of the noise the horses made.

I shivered, when I realized that the beast could have easily watched us when we were running around the barn, trying to find it. These thoughts scared me even more.

We spent the day, creating order after the destruction. We were exchanging short, meaningless quips from time to time. Ashym baike pickled some of the goat meat in an enamel saucepan, explaining that he would prepare it later in the smokehouse that he built himself.

When I sat on the roof, I tried to get a cellular signal, but I couldn't get reception. The charge was down to 15%, so I only briefly looked through the

photos taken during the night and then switched off my mobile phone.

Gradually it became dark and after having a quick supper, we went to bed. At night, I felt that someone was standing nearby. I heard breathing and slow, careful movements. I clutched my rifle and pointed it into the darkness. At the same time, I turned on the flashlight, which I had strapped to the rifle with tape that I had found in my host's reserves.

- Calm down! Calm down! - the old man's voice sounded apologetically, - easy-easy, I just wanted to look at the claw again! Put your rifle down and relax!

- Give my amulet back!

Ashym baike slowly put it on the table and returned to his chair. I tried to fall asleep after this little incident, and, surprisingly, I managed.

Chapter 13. Meeting with village men

In the morning, my host apologized during breakfast:

- I'm sorry for scaring you in the middle of the night. I just can't believe that we have something that belongs to this creature. Of course, on one hand it's great! But on the other...

- Not "we" have, but "I" have. This is my grandfather's amulet and I don't want to lose it!

- Today, we'll search for it in the place where I got as close to it as I could. I cannot promise that we will succeed in meeting it soon. It is necessary to stock

up on water and food.

We saddled the horses and rode to the forest. After about a half an hour leisurely riding along, we emerged from the forest, into an open area. There was a small stream. Ashym baike explained that in spring it turns into a river, and during summer, it gradually dries out, turning into a simple spring until autumn comes. Suddenly the old man stopped. He dismounted and commanded in a whisper:

- Get down, quickly!

I obeyed. Ashym baike slapped the horses on their rumps, and they rode away. He quickly climbed over a large rock, signaling for me to follow him.

In our improvised ambush he took the military sixteen-fold binoculars and began to peer into the woods.

- What is it? Is it him? - I did not understand what was happening.

The old man silently gave the binoculars to me and pointed to the place where I should look.

But, even when I focused, I couldn't see anything there

- Look closely ... Red aspen at "eleven o'clock", and a bush behind it.

I looked carefully at the landmark again and saw tall trees swaying almost a kilometer away.

- But ... how did you notice? - I was surprised by his sharp-sighted vision.

- The most important thing is for it not to notice us. Because we will hardly have time to escape. It can catch us in a few minutes. Do not make any sudden movements until I tell you. Pull the trigger and be ready. If something happens, run out into the open space, not into the woods. We'll try to creep closer.

With short dashes, trying to hide behind the big rocks, we moved slowly toward the place where the trees fluttered. Some knocks became clearly audible from behind the small hill, which we managed to reach. I could not understand what it was. The old man's face looked disappointed. It seemed that the sound was familiar to him. However, he ordered:

- Don't peek out! - And he raised his head a little above our shelter.

Soon he sat down on the ground next to me. He tore some grass, which had not withered yet, and began to chew it silently.

- So, what is it? - not waiting for an answer, I looked at the source of the knocking.

There were two men near a tree. One of them was in a sweater chopping against the trunk. The other one in a faded military jacket was leaning a long stick against the tree, so that the tree would fall in the right direction. His work was simple and he was smoking at the same time. Apparently, this wasn't the first time they were working there. Several birch trees had already been dumped and all the branches had been removed.

The old man spat the grass out and signaled for me to follow him. We approached the men. The one who was chopping the trunk saw us coming and stopped working.

Ashym baike greeted them:

- God help you!

- Thank you baike! - they said almost in unison.

They nodded to me, and I responded the same way. The old man said to them:

- Where are you from? I have never seen you in this place.

- We are from Saz-Dobo. It's not far from here, - said one of them, without taking the cigarette from his mouth, and he released the acrid smoke while telling it. The smell was almost unbearable in the crystal-clean air. The one who had been chopping the tree, sat down on a stump. He kept the axe in his hand. Apparently, he was younger than the one who was smoking, and therefore he was silently watching the conversation, studying me and Ashym baike. His gaze paused briefly on the rifles hanging over our shoulders.

- I know where Saz-Dobo is located, and almost all of your villagers, - the old man's eyes narrowed and he stiffened almost unnoticeably – no one has ever come for firewood here. What did you forget here?

- We recently settled there, so don't have orders. We came here for logs. Do you see, we're getting ready for the winter? Are you a ranger or something, old man?

- I'm not a ranger, but drop everything and get out of here! You shouldn't be here!

- We'll cut the logs into blocks, take them to the cart on a blanket, and will go away slowly.

The old man laughed raucously:

- Are you guys really from the village? You will strain yourselves if you carry this all. Unharness the horse, tie the tops of the trees. If you don't have a strong rope, use the bark from the birch, and pull it to where you need it. If you carry this all on a blanket, you will be lucky to get it done by tomorrow morning.

The older guy probably realized that the old man was right. He took a drag on his cigarette and threw the butt away.

- Thank you for advice, baike. You're on to something! - he turned to his partner
- bring the horse here.

The second man put his axe down, threw a light jacket on, which had been lying on the ground, and went down the small hill. After a while he disappeared behind the trees.

- Baike, how is hunting going here? - he started the conversation with a nod towards our rifles.

- You have a gun yourself. Why do you ask? - Ashym baike pointed at the gun, leaning against one of the trees, which was a bit hidden from view. I was

ashamed that I had not even noticed it until the old man said that.

- We would love somebody to show us the animal tracks, or, at least, where the pheasants live. Would you tell us?

- Hunters like you who don't know this forest shouldn't have anything to do in this place, - the old man paused and then added – or in the blink of an eye you'll become victims yourselves.

- Why, do grizzlies live here, or what?

- There are beasts, which are fiercer - my companion's voice was barely audible. It seemed that the man standing in front of him was not even breathing.

- Okay, let's go, - he said to me – the days are short. It will get dark soon.

He pulled a strange tube resembling a small pipe from his pocket and blew it abruptly. A strange whistle emerged. It sounded more like a loud puffing: “Chffuu-chfuu”.

I heard a clatter, and soon the old man's horse galloped to him. I could not clearly remember, when he managed to tie Altai to the reins of his horse. Ashym noticed my astonished look. However, he understood it in his own way and explained:

- Horses are intelligent creatures, almost like dogs. And they are perfectly amenable to training, if you wisely approach the job. But, they're too fearful.

He opened a large carabiner that connected the reins of the horses to it. He

handed me Altai's reins, and literally flew into the saddle of his horse. Together with the other man we were respectfully looking at the old man who managed to mount a rather tall horse barely touching the stirrup.

- Are you petrified, or what? - he urged me, and I climbed on Altai, but not as skillfully, of course.

My host turned to the man:

- Get out of here, get to the village before dark. It will be difficult to see the road after dark.

- Don't you worry, father. We'll use the same road.

Chapter 14. Dreadful death

Suddenly we heard an awful scream in the distance. It was both harsh and abrupt. The scream was becoming louder and turning into a whistle and rattle. It sounded so unbearably harsh as if someone's hand pressed a giant piece of foam to glass and moved it forward, and at the same time someone was trying to shout above that torturous noise.

This sound made me shiver and covered my skin with goosebumps. I saw that the man and horses were experiencing similar feelings.

Altai began to squat and kick the dirt impatiently beneath me, ready to dart away without seeing the road.

A few seconds later we heard a human voice, shouting clearly "Ahh", and then it

changed into a continuous scream. This was definitely the man who had been chopping the wood a little earlier. Such a pre-death shout is usually heard when someone is cutting a boar without skill, and the animal has time to realize the full horror of what will be done to it in a moment. However, now the victim was a man.

After that, it became silent, which did not bring us comfort, but on the contrary, made us realize the deathly truth of what happened. The man, who had stayed with us grabbed his rifle and turned to run in the direction where his partner had been shouting a second before.

Suddenly Ashym baike leaned toward him, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket, picked him up and tossed him onto the front of his horse.

The man was bigger than the old hunter and weighed a lot. I was blown away by the fact that an elderly hunter easily took the man by the collar and raised him as a cat its kitten. Where did he acquire such tremendous strength, or was it the effect of the heat of terror? However, there was no time to think. The old man ordered:

- Let's get out of here! Fast!

He struck Altai fiercely with a whip, and Altai ran off at a gallop, as if he had been waiting for this moment. I had to try to stay in the saddle, as I knew that my life depended on it.

The hooves of the old man's horse pounded behind us, but I could distinguish the desperate cries of the man.

- Stop! Let me go! Bakyt is there! I have to go! Let me go!

We were leading the horses almost side by side on the track that was rather narrow. The animals were terrified too and were running as fast as they could.

I was afraid to look back and see something terrible, so I just looked forward. Plus, I had to dodge the branches that were repeatedly slapping me in the face. The man, lying in front of Ashym baike was occasionally shouting the obscenities, venting his anger at the old man.

I didn't know if something forced me to do it, but I looked back. A little further from us, another horse, probably belonging to these men, was following us.

At the risk of being slapped with a branch again and again, I still periodically looked back. And, when I looked once again, I saw something dark and large knocked down the horse. It was like a side blow as if, a car was flying at a high speed. The horse apparently died immediately. It fell sideways and disappeared out of sight.

I couldn't get rid of the horrid image as if I was having a nightmare. In the speed of racing, I could not see clearly what it was. I shuddered when I realized what it could be. The size of the shadow that flashed before me was even bigger than a horse. The creature was as huge as a grizzly bear, and terrible in its lightning

speed. It wasn't the first time that strange day that I felt ghastly sweat covering my skin.

These visions of my first encounter with the monster caught my attention and I did not notice that the road ahead was divided into two parts: it went both straight ahead and to the left. For some reason I guided the horse to the left, and I heard the old man's shouting receding:

- Wait, we need to go straight! Straight! Max!

But it wasn't that easy to stop the galloping Altai. I continued the race. I was terrified of being alone now. There were trees and large shrubs that grew too close to the path in this part of the forest. It turned the little distance between us into impenetrable thickets. And it was impossible to even think of turning back through this barrier.

I looked back once more. No one was there, but I continued to keep the pace. I didn't know how much time passed, but Altai's gallop changed from uneven and sweeping to a quieter trot. I looked back again and did not see anything suspicious. I leaped down from the horse. My legs and back were aching desperately. After rubbing my fingers that had become numb from the strain, I stroked the horse:

- Well done, my boy, thank you! - in the silence of the forest my voice sounded unnatural, but it comforted me.

In response to the touch the horse stuck its face into the coat pocket.

Suddenly, somewhere very near I heard the rustling and crackling of branches. I climbed back into the saddle, guided the horse to the side and was ready to flee. But, I heard the familiar voice of Ashym baike behind me.

- Wait! It's me! - he stopped next to me – why did you go this way and why didn't you stop when I shouted? I had to make a detour to find you. And now we would have to turn back to the right road once again.

- I don't know, everything happened very quickly, and I just kept going.

Our horses were breathing heavily, and I didn't know about Ashym baike, but I was completely exhausted. What was I thinking about, as I had not been riding horses for 18 years?

Then I noticed who was missing.

- Where is that man?

- I left him where he asked to be left. He was going the other way. He was swearing all the way and even tried to hit me.

- Are we safe now?

- I think yes. But, it's getting dark. We cannot take this road back. And to back to the road junction, we'll have to go about 10 kilometers. It turns out we need to take a roundabout route. We'll need to spend the night in the forest.

- No way! Let's continue without stopping.
- Don't you see the horses are exhausted? We'll ride them to death!
- Did you say 10 kilometers? Nonsense! We'll get there in 2 hours, and maybe even faster.
- We will not be able to go this distance if we take the road. It will be rocky ground. That will take three hours. It will also be dark.
- But, I have a flashlight with me.
- Oh, man, I'm not eager to stay here overnight either, but your flashlight is good enough only to go to the outhouse and back. We won't see anything with it!
- But you're a local, you know all the trails. Let's try and get as close as possible to your home - the death of the horse and the man's scream were still vivid in my head.
- Don't you understand? I'm telling you that we won't be able to navigate in the dark in this forest not without reason. We'll go towards the junction. I noticed one place where we can spend the night relatively safely.

I had no choice but to surrender. I had to admit that the old man was right. The flashlight wasn't bright enough. I kept stumbling on the relatively flat road, and Ashym baike walked like a robot. Altai warmed my shoulder with his breath. We walked to the place that the hunter knew we could find lodging in almost in impenetrable darkness. Neither stars nor the Moon could be seen in the overcast

sky.

Chapter 15. Guarding the night

A small stone rock formed a kind of a semicircle. Two trees were growing on both sides. I tried to make a fire while the old man was unharnessing the horses. Wet branches made bad fires, but the old man took a plastic bottle with some ignition, which he took from the barn, out of his bag soaked the piece of material in it, which he torn off from his T-shirt, and soon the fire was blazing. He instructed me on how to prepare the torches:

- Look, you have to tear one off, roll out a flat stick, and moisten them. Lay them on this stone. It is smooth and dry. They may become helpful when we'll be on duty one after another at night.

Through the crackling sparks, we felt rather than heard that someone was watching us. But soon we heard clearly that something was approaching our encampment. The horses began to snort indignantly. We grabbed our rifles and stood back to back. The old man began to light the stick-torches and throw them in different directions 2-3 meters away.

- What is that for? - I asked in surprise at such an inconvenient time.

- We will see farther this way.

Indeed, we could see what was happening within a radius of five meters.

A voice sounded out of the darkness:

- Put your guns down! Don't move! Stand still! I have my gun pointed at both of you. Both of us turned our rifles in the direction from which the voice came. Soon, we saw in the firelight the man we met that day, whom the old man had thrown on his horse so unceremoniously. Having recognized him, we lowered our rifles. However, the man was not going to follow our example.

- Why did you leave him to die there? What was there? Wolves? We could have saved him! Bakyt was my brother. And you did not give me a chance to help him! - He said angrily.

The old man was calm and tossed a bit more wood to the fire. He sat down by the fire at his heels:

- Put your gun away! We couldn't have saved him!

The man came closer:

- I said don't move! Do you think I'm kidding?

The old man quietly took a handful of dirt and threw it into the man's eyes. After a few seconds the old hunter took the man's gun away, and he was lying on the ground with his hand cocked behind his back.

The old hunter said to the lying man:

- Lie down quietly and do not rock the boat. Think with your head and understand that you recently escaped death thanks to me. And instead of being grateful you jump out at me!

The prostrate man jolted a few more times, trying to turn over and throw Ashym baike off, but he did not succeed. The old hunter was only wringing his hand more fiercely. I was amazed a second time that day by his strength. It was not clear how it could exist in such a frail body.

- Enough! – The man roared in pain - let me go! Tell me, where are these wolves?

The old hunter frowned:

- They were neither wolves nor wild boars. Didn't you hear the scream? It was something completely different. You don't look like a young kid. If you are really from the neighboring village, you should know that people are afraid to come to this forest. Now, do you understand why?

The man didn't stop resisting, but he was twitching less. Ashym baike wasn't going to get off his back, continuing to restrain his hands.

- It's a fairy tale! People do not know what they are afraid of. Let me go!

- I wish it was a fairy tale. Unfortunately, it's real. The time will come and you all will know about this monster. I'm really sorry that it happened this way. And, I'm sincerely sorry about your brother. I wanted to save us all and managed to slip away. I couldn't risk our lives.

The man calmed down and asked almost quietly:

- Let me go, baike! I understand.

The old man decided that he was adequate, but asked me to take the man's gun away, and released him after that. The man got up and dusted himself off. He wiped the dirt that was thrown at him from his eyes with the edge of his sleeve, which he pulled out from under his jacket.

- Come to the fire - Ashym baike invited him – you are trembling. What is your name?

- Almaz. - he replied briefly.

- Ashym! - the old man's voice was a bit hoarse.

- Maksat! - I introduced myself.

The old man threw more branches into fire that were in no hurry to become part of the flame and untied his faded backpack. He took out a piece of meat, two bags with sweets and crackers, a jar and a flask of water.

- Well, guys, let's eat - he took a sip from the flask and passed it to me.

- Drink, it's water. We didn't have a chance to drink or eat since morning.

I drank a little and handed the flask to our new friend. Almaz took a sip and wiped the drops of water with his jacket sleeve. He was chewing the food mechanically, which was passed to him by the old man, and tears began to roll down his cheeks. This strange silent weeping frightened me more than the hysterical howls. I was watching this terrible picture and felt sincerely sorry for the man. But all words of condolences vanished from my mind. It was painful to

see a man who had lost his brother. It is unlikely that I will ever forget the victim's terrible, obvious death cry. And what was Almaz feeling? The old man did not even give him a chance to see what happened there and help his sibling. I believe it was painful for this guy to realize that he could have helped his brother and at the same time he could not. However, in my heart I knew that Ashym baike did everything right, and most importantly on time and quickly. Who knows what would have happened to us, if we had not hurried to escape that place.

This man's grief became like my own. I was grieving with him over a stranger whom I had seen for 10 minutes, which turned out to be the last minutes of his life. None of us was capable of changing anything about what happened. I wanted to cry with Almaz because of the irreparability of this moment. I have never been sentimental, but my eyes betrayed me and began to get wet. In order to entertain myself in some way, I tried to turn on my phone, but, as I expected, the battery died a long time ago.

All three of us were silently chewing, listening to the night sounds. The old man started to pass the flask of water in a circle once again. No one dared to interrupt Almaz's mournful thoughts with a conversation, but he referred to the old man himself:

- So, does the monster in these places really exist? Isn't it the superstitious nonsense of fools?

Ashym baike did not say anything. Everything was obvious. The strange sound of a mixture of screaming and whistling, which we all heard was not similar to anything we had heard before. He was silent and kept throwing branches into the fire. After a few minutes, he said in a low voice:

- It is necessary to try to rest at night. We can throw the branches that are on the rocks around the walls of this slide and sleep. Tomorrow, at dawn, we will leave in the direction of the house. You, Almaz, better go with us so you don't get lost in the forest.

The man did not answer. He didn't agree or refuse. The old hunter continued:

- We will have to take turns guarding the encampment. Two sleeping - one on duty! We'll change places every two hours, so that by the time it gets lighter all of us will have strength for the ten-kilometer march. I will be the first to be on duty, and you lie down to sleep.

"Lie down" - was an exaggeration! I dragged the deadwood, trying not to get too far from the dim light of the fire, threw it on the smoothest stone and sat on this improvised chair, lowering my head to my knees. Thinking of the strange day full of tragic events, I began to fall asleep.

I had a phantasmagoric dream, which was not surprising after all that happened. The epic Nightingale the Robber was sitting on a thin birch branch. Three knights in armor were heading to him. Visors hid their faces. And when they came closer to the fairy-tale hero's ambush, one of them opened his helmet, took

out a cigarette and lit it. When the smoke cleared, I saw that it was Almaz. Nightingale the Robber got ready to jump, but I was powerless, and could not warn the knights from my dream. Someone whispered my name. I woke up from my hazy dream:

- Max, get up and don't forget to throw twigs into the fire. It more or less protects us. I'll have a nap, - the old man sat in my place and fell asleep immediately.

But, in less than ten minutes Almaz almost silently approached me from behind:

- I cannot sleep after everything that has happened. I keep going over all of it in my head. I was tossing and turning, but could not fall asleep. You go sleep and I'll be on duty. There is no use for us both to be awake.

His argument was quite reasonable, and I was too tired to refuse this priceless proposal at that time.

- If you get tired, wake me up at any time. – I said, and after a pause added, - Condolences! I'm really sorry...

He nodded, and I went to rest.

Chapter 16. A prisoner runs away

I do not know how long I was napping, but Ashym baike's scream woke me up:

- Wait, you, little shit! Damn you! Stop!

I heard hooves clopping. It was still dark, and in the light of the fire, I guessed

rather than saw that Almaz was leaving on Altay. The old man ran after him. He ran a few meters and shouted:

- Rifle! – he commanded rudely and angrily. I jumped up and handed my rifle to him. However, my rifle turned out to be out of bullets. Plus, it was useless to shoot now anyway. The sound of Altay's hooves was becoming quieter and quieter, dissolving in the darkness.

The old man was furious and swore intricately and ornately. The more or less easy death that he wished on the man sounded like:

- Damn him!

When he released his anger, his speech began to be more human:

- I knew we shouldn't trust him! I knew...

He looked back at his rifle, then at mine, and after that at me. Due to understanding what exactly happened, I overcame my sleepy state.

- Damn! He took my horse and fled! And I must return it to the owner!

- Try to get yourself out of here alive, and after that think about the horse. We got into a real mess, son. And I, an old fool, felt, moreover I knew, he could not be trusted! They are all fools from that village!

Trying to encourage Ashym baike I said:

- Well, at least he left our rifles, though they aren't loaded.

The old man sighed:

- What use are they now? We have at least three more hours before dawn, and we have nothing to defend ourselves with. Look for long sticks, but don't go far, just in case! We'll make small spears at least.

When I brought what he wanted, he took the knife out of his pocket. He had used it to cut the rope that my hands had been tied with. It seems an eternity passed since that day. So much happened!

Ashym baike started to clean and sharpen the stick efficiently and carefully. At the same time, he began to question me:

- Why are you so frightened?

I tried to avoid his question:

- After everything that has happened, it would be strange if I looked different. I'm in a different world. So, everything is ok, if I can say that.

- What did you see? What scared you?

After all, Ashym baike had to know the truth, so I said frankly:

- When we were running away from the place yesterday, I turned back and saw something big and black, which knocked down Almaz's horse. This creature was endowed with unreal power. Everything happened so quickly, in a matter of seconds, - I felt scared again. I didn't need to be reminded. This picture was standing in front of my eyes.

- Did you say it knocked down the horse as if it was a feather? - the old man kept preparing the homemade spears, and there was worry in his voice.

- Yes, it fell down immediately even without screaming - I was suddenly struck by a terrible suspicion, which I shared immediately with the old man, - if that creature wanted to catch up with us, it could do it easily.

The old man paused for a moment. The thought that the unknown monster was playing a deadly “cat and mouse” game with us made me freeze for a moment, too. The old man went on making more self-complacency rather than self-defense instruments, but they were weapons all the same.

It finally was morning. The old man began throwing the soil on the fireplace:

- Now, it's time to leave. You sit on the horse, and I'll walk. If something happens don't look at me. Do you see the hill there? Ride towards it without looking back. Ok? When you pass it, you'll see my house in the distance.

Ashym baike pointed out the direction. We silently came to the junction in the road where we split up yesterday. I realized that I totally lost the landmark in this forest. We did not continue on the detour, but came back and we were following that same road where we escaped the monster yesterday.

- Is that place far away? - asked the old man.

I realized immediately that he tried to spot the place where the monster had demonstrated its speed and power. The old man started all this with a definite

purpose.

- I guess a couple of kilometers, maybe less.

- So, it's near. It would be good to go and see that place. But, with such a weapon it would almost certainly be suicide. We will turn here!

We continued our way on a narrow path. I had to jump from the horse, so that the branches would not scratch my face. We could really break our legs here at night. There were boulders and puddles filled with rainwater. These were very inconvenient places for hiking.

Chapter 17. Back to the camp

We got to Ashym baike's trailer without adventure. First, the old man fed the horse, poured some water for him, and ordered me to light a fire for cooking. By the time he entered the house, I had successfully completed this task. The water had even begun to boil.

The old man came in. Because of fatigue he seemed even older than he was when we first met.

- Today, we need to get some good rest and have some good food to eat. Oh, well done, you already boiled the water. We will make soup.

He praised me for the first time, but I did not have time to be surprised as he took out a couple of "Cooksey" packs from the box near the wall. The taste, which was familiar to me since my half-starved student years seemed to be

divine!

After dinner and tea with honey the old man told me his plan to capture the beast and began to ask questions.

-I have a half box of bullets. Charge up your rifle. Have you ever shot one?

- No, to be honest.

- Then why did you come here, I don't understand? Okay, look at where you should press. After you shoot, pull this lever to recharge. Ok? We're saving bullets, so don't waste any!

- I think I can handle it. I tried to shoot at a target once.

The old man smiled, but too sadly.

- You have to get the hang of it, because tomorrow we will really hunt for this creature. Gain strength. I feel like we will catch it soon.

The day passed in preparations. At night, I slept again with my clothes on the couch, and the old man slept in his chair with a ready rifle.

Early in the morning, we took all that was prepared the day before: a bow and a quiver of arrows, long ropes coiled in neat bays, and bags with traps. We draped everything over the horse so as not to carry it in our hands. I hung the rifle over my shoulder. The old man ordered:

- Let's sit down!

Chapter 18. Hunter's story

We went out on the porch and sat in silence. Ashym baike slapped his knee, got up, and said:

- Today may be a historical day. I have been hunting for him alone so far, but it looks like you can help me.

We went into the woods to the place where, the trees that Almaz and his brother had cut down lay, no longer necessary,

Ashym baike was skillfully setting traps. He reminded me once more how to set traps:

- Watch out, try to not chop off your foot or hand.

He made the rope loops and explained that they were to catch the monster's leg or legs when the monster walks into it. Previously, I had only seen this in adventure movies and had no idea that I would have to face it in person. The old man reminded me again:

- The rope will tighten, and it will be captured. The main thing is - do not rush to it. And do not try to shoot. Remember: it's mine. I have personal business with it. You just watch my back.

Nodding, I continued to think that soon, perhaps, I would find the answer to my questions about the mysterious scratch.

For about three hours we were occupied with preparations. We brought a baby

goat, who had become an orphan when the monster tore his mother to pieces. The old man thought that it would make excellent bait for the monster. Even though we felt sorry for the little goat, we had no choice. It would die anyway because it was too weak.

During this time, I finally decided to ask the question, which I had not dared to ask the old man in his trailer, where from time to time I caught his gaze directed at the photo that hung over a folding table.

- Ashym baike, I'm sorry if my question isn't tactful. Did you really love your wife that much?

- Love is the most important thing for you, youngsters. But, at my age - what love can there be? - said the old man.

- So, what do you think is more important?

- Respect and the ability to keep silent when necessary. To cover someone with a blanket during sleep, to give someone water for a hangover. Of course, Mayrash was not a bad woman. Did I love her? I respected her as a person rather than loved her. Plus, she handled the farm easily. With such an assistant, I could live as a godfather of a king or a matchmaker of a minister. When she worked on the farm, she used to bring milk, sour cream, and butter. Plus, she used to make "kumys" herself. I decided to become a farmer only because of her. I could totally rely on her as she was my godsend and she was so smart. The only thing was that she used to complain a lot. We never got married officially. She did not

ask, and I did not want a stamp in my passport. I already had one stamp so decided not to disgrace myself at my old age. So, we were just living in accordance with traditions. I can't say we were in perfect harmony, but we lived together for eight years. I never raised my hand to her. I was compassionate and helped her. And love is an empty word. A fairy tale for the youth so that they can believe in something.

It was the longest speech I heard from the old man during the time we spent together. I decided to ask him more, while he was so outspoken.

- I'm sorry, but it turns out she was your second wife?

- Yes, second. The first one whom I lost my head over moved to the city a long time ago. She couldn't get used to the conditions here. Plus, she took the two boys with her. Since then I never heard of them. I would like to go to the city to find them and to visit my sons, but I haven't had a chance so far...

- And everyone thinks you're hunting this creature because your wife is missing in this place. So why are you searching for this creature if you know how dangerous it is? You live as a hermit and almost everyone thinks you're crazy.

The old man was silent for a moment, and then continued:

- Maybe they're right. But, I can't give up the hunt that I started. My father was young and went to search for the lost shepherd boy with your grandfather. Your grandfather and another hunter returned, and my father did not. No traces

remained. Nobody was actually even searching. When they saw the condition the survivors were in when they returned, everybody abandoned this place. And I haven't calmed down since then. I am plagued by various thoughts, and the older I get, the harder it becomes to think about my father and what awaited him in this forest. In age, I outlived him a long time ago. And, perhaps, it is this hunting that gives me power to dwell in this world. Well, that's enough chatting! If I'm right, the creature must come here soon.

The old man turned his horse away, gave it a sign, and it sighed and snorted then bent its front and back legs and lay down.

- Let's go, - he brought me from my state of amazement again, - less and less time remains. We have been messing around here too long. Looks like I gossiped too much today. Take this spare whistle. I carved it yesterday.

- Why do I need this? - I asked in surprise.

- Just in case, in order to lure the horse. Otherwise it will not move from its place.

Then the old man chose the bush, from where the place with a trap and the orphaned goat in the center was seen at a glance. We lay nearby ready to wait in an ambush as long as necessary.

We were surrounded by silence, which was pressing on our ears because our nerves were strained to the limit. I wanted to ask something, but Ashym baike

put a finger to his lips, indicating that we had to keep silent and wait. Although I spread a coat on the ground, it was cold and hard to lie there. My body began to go numb because of stillness, but when I moved my arms and tried to change my position, the old man poked me with his hand. He did not say anything, but it was clear that I had to lie still. Thinking about what I had heard from the old man, I did not know how to react to all this. It turned out that the roots of this hatred were already hidden many years ago, and the story of my family was linked to the hunter and those terrible events.

Suddenly, a bird sitting on a branch fluttered. It was the first sign that something was approaching the clearing. At first, nothing happened. I even began to think that the birds just decided to fly to another place. But, after a few minutes, which seemed to be unbearably long, something red and black showed up behind the trees. My nerves became frayed. I even saw my fingers go white on my gun. My heartbeat seemed to be unbearably loud. It was impossible to lie in tense anticipation. My head cleared.

But, soon it became clear that this was not the mysterious monster, but a small wild boar. It was clearly adolescent. Even in my limited experience, I understood clearly. Its size was equal to a small Rottweiler. It had no protruding canines, as they had not grown yet. This small boar, which just started its development into a boar or a swine, had stripes on its sides so that it resembled a watermelon of a fantastic color. It raised its snout, sniffed the air and trotted toward the captive

goat.

The old man got angry because of the appearance of an unexpected guest and was annoyed that our plan was on the brink of collapse because of a hairy pig.

- Damn! Go away, you little shit!

Despite the danger that could come from the wild animal, he began to throw sticks and small stones that he found within reach. However, the stubborn boar did not want to leave. This behavior was very strange. I even thought that it could be mad. It was too unusual to see a wild beast cringe, shaking away stones and dirt thrown by the old man as if they were flies.

The small boar or swine – I was not able to determine the animal's sex from a distance – lowered its snout and began to dig something busily from the ground almost at the hooves of our bait.

- Damn! - the old man stood up and hurried to banish the boar before it destroyed the complicated system of traps and snares.

He got up, took a longer stick and ran there, trying to bypass the dangerous places. Having heard the steps, the hog lifted its snout, which was soiled by the ground, and snorted, causing the dirt to fly in different directions, but kept standing in place. It sprinted toward the forest only when Ashym baike swung his stick,

Slowly leaning on the makeshift cane, the old man was coming back to me. He

didn't try to hide and spoke aloud:

- That's it. The hunt has been disrupted for today. We can go home. All our preparation is down the drain. Why did that damn pig come to this very meadow? Hey, Maksat ... - he turned to me, but did not finish.

Chapter 19. Meeting with a beast

The terrible beast for which we have been setting traps all morning jumped out from the side somewhere.

I could see it in horrible detail. It was much taller than the old man, and was covered with long hair. This creature resembled a giant bear, which I saw once in a zoo in the United States. Its size and the hair's texture looked like a grizzly's. However, it only had one lower limb. It was difficult to say whether it was a foot or a paw. It was thin at the bottom and gradually expanded towards the top. I could see muscles even beneath the wool. The creature jumped with the help of a knee that was bent like a kangaroo's. Long claws stuck from its feet. The creature looked like some horrible hybrid of the Australian animal and a human because of its upright position. The way its fangs stuck out and it was covered by fur made it look like a wild boar. Its yellow eyes were rather large. They looked like a large cat's eyes, but at the same time, they were like a human's eyes. One of its eyes was defective. It could have been injured by something, or the creature could have accidentally hurt itself, or maybe it was born that way, who knows. It could not see me, but it seemed that it was piercing

me with its ruthless gaze. Is it possible that it could easily see through trees and bushes? I would not be surprised by this incredible possibility.

Long claws emerged from two paws covered with hair and looked like some monstrous parody of human hands. Palms with long fingers ended with hooked claws, similar to curved knives.

The movements of the creature were rapid, which I had already seen when the animal struck down the horse. Now I could see this all up close and was amazed. Even a cobra's attack would be a slow waltz compared to this.

After all, the old man and I did not even notice where it came from. There was no preceding whistle or scream, as it was in the case of Almaz and his brother. For a moment, it seemed that it had seen us preparing the trap with the goat. And this creature prepared a trap for us with a wild boar.

A real tragedy began to occur before my eyes. Thoughts flashed in my head, but I was attacked by numbness, and stood frozen as if I was nailed to the ground.

The creature knocked down the old man and he lay on the ground on his back. Instinctively trying to defend himself, he hastened to regroup and turn over. But, the creature was flipping him over with rapid movements, holding him with its foot, and was not letting him get up. Ashym baike was beating it with the stick which he had picked up to fend off the wild boar. With one rapid movement of the elbow, the monster knocked the stick out of the old man's hands.

For a moment, they both froze when the monster brought its snout closer to Ashym baike's face. I even saw how saliva dripped from its fangs. The old man jerked, trying to throw the creature off with his feet. The monster, as if it did not even notice it, pressed its claw on the old man's leg and the claw pierced his skin just like a hot knife through butter.

The old man's desperate cry of pain led me out of my numbness. I began to hear the sounds around me along with his heart-wrenching cry:

- Shoot! Ma-ax!

I have never thought of myself as a coward, but at that moment I was so scared that the rifle, which I was holding in my hands, was trembling visibly. The primal fear was not letting me take aim. I was pointing the barrel at the monster, but I could not seem to aim at its huge body.

The old man's voice turned into a desperate scream, filled with unbearable pain:

- Shoot, damn you! Shoot!

I could feel the sweat pouring down my back, though it was rather chilly. My hands were shaking as never before. The tremors were overpowering, but I pulled the trigger...

The bullet did not hit the monster. Chips flew from the tree trunk behind it. The sound of the shot startled it. It looked in my direction. I felt that gaze on me and froze. It would have no trouble killing the old man in a moment and killing me

after that. However, it was as if it was entertaining itself by playing with us and at the same time mocking us!

After a second of boring into me with its eyes, the creature straightened its single knee, picked up the old man with the claws of one hand and threw him onto its sloping shoulder. It was holding a rather heavy man without releasing its claws as if he weighed almost nothing, and it jumped away into the forest.

I tried to recharge my rifle, but because my hands were shaking, I scattered all the bullets on the ground. I found the whistle, which the old man had given me, in my pocket. I tried to beckon the horse. But there was a desert in my mouth because of the horror that I have seen, and there was a kind of spasm in my lungs. I could not inhale enough air to blow the whistle properly. A hoarse hiss emerged. Only the second time was I able to produce the sound I wanted.

Soon the horse came. I jumped on it. I had to fight for the old man, otherwise he would inevitably die. The monster's first blow was in the leg and could hurt the femoral artery, thus I had very little time to try to save Ashym baike. Moreover, the blow to the back could break the spine and be fatal for the old man.

For some reason, I completely forgot about the instinct to save myself having decided to catch up with this creature without a weapon. Moreover, I completely forgot about the traps we had set. I hit the horse in the ribs, pulled the reins and steered in the direction where the monster was dragging its victim.

It obediently galloped ahead, but stepped on a twig that was thrown by the

monster. Because of that the twig flew to the side and fell into the set trap, which clicked instantly, broke the twig in half, and closed with a clang. The horse got scared of the rough sound and reared. I could not hold on and fell to the ground.

When I tried to get up and find the frightened horse to continue my pursuit of the monster, my right leg was tightened with a rope trap. It dragged me for five meters along the ground and in a couple of seconds I was hanging upside down, helpless and angry at myself.

“How could I forget about this all! Such an idiot. I set these traps myself” - thoughts were spinning mechanically in my head. I was looking for a way to get out of this mess.

The amulet that brought me here peeked through my jacket collar, and was swinging before my eyes in time with my erratic movements, as if it was mocking me. But the loop around my boot was only tightening because of it. I was trying to take my boot off with my other foot and get myself out of the trap. But it was not easy to do this with my head down.

I continued to twitch, but it was only causing me to sway from side to side and complicating the task. How foolish it was to die in these deserted places hanging by one leg in the trap, which I had recently set myself. The blood was rushing to my head. Attempts to catch up and take the boot off were ending with one failure after another.

I heard rustling somewhere nearby. I wanted to scream and call for help, but

froze. Only my eyes moved from side to side, in attempt to see something. A furry monster jumped out from the forest and was slowly approaching with leisurely jumps. I had no choice but to hang upside down and count its jumps. The monster approached me in about five giant steps.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. I was scared to death, but was powerless. The beast, which was terrible by itself, in my inverted view was simultaneously causing a mixture of horror and disgust. It was right in front of my head, breathing straight at me. I could smell his sweet, suffocating breath. Yellowish, large and sharp teeth stuck out. It exhaled and inhaled with heavy breath. I saw how its nostrils covered with hair were inflating and letting puffs of steam out. It was like in cartoons, when a very angry bull is getting ready to tear the bullfighter apart.

Hanging upside down, I looked straight into his eyes. Finally, our eyes met. The creature's pupils were increasing and decreasing, as happens with people, when they are thinking about something. Because of my fear and foreboding of impending death, I did not react to the noise behind the monster. When I finally looked up from studying its muzzle, my heart stopped. Such an event could occur only in rare dreams.

Two more of the same kind of furry creatures were standing behind it.

I thought automatically:

"When we were running away from this place as fast as we could the day before

yesterday, perhaps, Almaz's horse was knocked down by a monster other than the one that attacked his brother. Probably my initial impressions of this creature's speed were wrong.

That could be another creature, for example its brother. The devil knows how many of them could be here. Three, ten, or, it was even scary to think of it, maybe hundreds... But the one who was standing next to me was the one with a defect of the right eye, which dragged the old man in an unknown direction. What do they all eat, keeping their superhuman strength? I thought I was going to become their next meal. Thoughts were passing like a whirlwind, but all of them disappeared when I saw the paw, which was stretching towards me and was similar to a hand. The beast was stretching towards me slowly and gently.

I shouted, and did not recognize my hoarse voice:

- No! No!

There is a moment in a dream when you are running away from someone or asking for help in some other situation, you scream as much as you can, but it seems that you are just whispering to yourself. Nobody hears you, except for yourself. It was just like this in my situation. This probably happens when a person is scared.

The monster hooked the cord of the amulet hanging around my neck with a huge curved forefinger claw and touched my nose slightly without even scratching it. Then the monster pulled abruptly and ripped the rugged rawhide strap, took it off

and clenched its clawed paw. It moved its nostrils again and turned in place 180 degrees easily. Then the beast gave a slight whistle. Its companions replied in a slightly different tone. All three beasts turned and disappeared in the forest with long jumps.

Chapter 20. Miraculous escape from death

I could not believe that this all was over and I was left alive. I did not know what to think about this. After all, one punch from this beast and my corpse would be hanging on the rope. It was enough for this monster to scratch my throat and I would bleed to death. It was even scary to think about the plans for my murder there. Thinking about it, I remembered the ease with which this or another creature pierced the leg of Ashym baike. Now I tried to escape not only for my own sake. I was such an idiot to go for a hunt without a knife. I could have cut the rope and freed myself.

Carefully trying not swing around, I began to try to release my trapped right leg with my left leg. It was useless. I tried once more and I felt my foot begin to be released. I was lucky that my boots were half a size larger than my feet. This saved me. Another attempt and I fell on the ground. Somehow, I managed to turn and hit not my head, but my side. Although the ground was wet after a rainy day, landing on it was tough enough. My breath was interrupted by the pain. I curled up trying not to scream. My head was buzzing because I had been hanging upside down. It seemed my heart moved to my head since it was

knocking so loudly. When I gained the ability to breathe more or less evenly, I felt my right leg was significantly cold.

After the mistake that almost cost me my life, I was thinking about the traps. I sat down carefully, tried to accurately recall the location of all the traps and pitfalls. I picked up several branches that were lying around, and neutralized the traps near me so that I could approach the tree, which was holding the trap in which I got caught. I untied the knot, scraping my nails and cursing myself for not bringing the hunting knife again. When I succeeded in untying the knot, I released my boot from the loop, pulled on a sock with my shaking hands, and then put on the boot. I got up and decided to try to find the old man. I don't know what was guiding me at that moment. Maybe my adrenaline was boiling because of the miraculous rescue. I went into the woods in the direction in which one of the monsters dragged Ashym baike.

There was a barely noticeable path between the bushes and trees, and I had to walk almost 100 meters before I saw the silhouette of a man lying face-down on the ground. Judging by the clothes there was no doubt that it was the old man and I rushed over to him. Mechanically I pointed out that there was no blood on his back, though his coat was badly torn. However, a pool of blood was spreading near his foot. It didn't promise anything good.

- Hey, Ashym baike! Ashym baike! - I tried to turn the old man to see if he was alive or dead.

When I succeeded in doing it, I noticed that his eyes were closed, his skin was pale, but his lips were still rosy. Hence, there was a chance that he was still alive.

I felt his neck for a pulse and said aloud:

- Oh, my God! He is alive!

I examined his leg. The blood continued to flow out of a deep wound without clotting. It was a bad sign as it was life leaving the body drop by drop. I threw off my jacket quickly and tore my shirt into strips. I recalled lessons on first aid, made a tourniquet to stop the bleeding and bandaged the leg gently. I put the jacket over my naked body. I shivered from the chill that embraced me.

I pulled out the whistle with my bloody hand and called the old man's horse. The horse ran up to me, but I had to throw the unconscious body on the horse's hindquarters and not frighten the animal at the same time. Trying to move as slowly as possible, I stroked the horse, tied the reins to a branch in case the horse got frightened. Somehow I succeeded in lifting the old man, who was frail in appearance, but thick-set and heavy, and put him on the horse. Then I untied the reins.

I had to choose a direction. It was dangerous to take the path in the dark. I was not familiar with the local places and wandering around would significantly reduce the likelihood that the old man would survive. I decided to lead the horse to the place of our failed ambushes through a narrow trail. We came to a meadow. Carefully avoiding the traps, I went to a safe place removed from our

ambush. It was necessary to pick up the weapon and untie the goat, but we had so little time. It was clear that at such a slow speed I would not bring the old man to the village alive. And who knew if there was a medical center?

I sat down in the saddle carefully and let the horse trot leisurely. I was holding the reins in one hand and guarded the body of the still unconscious old man with the other.

It was risky to ride quickly as the body could fall, and I felt like I didn't have enough power to throw Ashym baike on the horse again. However, I hurried the horse a little on flat pathways to save time. Finally, I saw the almost dried-out brook. People say the way back is usually shorter, but this road seemed to be endless.

Finally, I saw the hill with the old man's trailer. The horse tried to go home, but I turned it towards the road, leading down, towards help. In the distance, breathless from happiness, I saw the smoke of the chimneys of the village houses.

I spurred on the tired horse and hurried there:

- Come on, my dear, help your host out. Not a lot of time left.

Finally, we reached the village. I was so glad to see it! On the village street we didn't meet anyone. "Apparently, it is usually not too crowded" – was the first conscious thought in my head.

Soon I dismounted near the gate of Bolot baike's house and saw him in the yard. He was standing with his back to me, a bucket in his hand. Apparently, he was going to feed or give water to his animals.

- Hey, Bolot baike! - I called him, opening the gate.

The host turned around and saw me and the injured old man lying on the horse. I must be grateful for his reaction. A moment later, having thrown down the bucket, he was next to us.

- What happened? Max, are you all right?

My legs were shaking. I felt that I was reeling and I leaned against the horse so as not to fall on the ground. I could not believe I succeeded in getting out of that terrible place and returning to the village.

- Yes, I'm all right. But the old man needs help. He has lost a lot of blood. Do you have a paramedic here?

- I would love to say yes, but I don't. We have to take him to the hospital. But first, let's take him off the horse. Let's put him here as it's soft and smooth.

Together we lowered the old man and gently placed him on the hay.

- We've got a problem with a car. Let me run and find out if the neighbor is at home. His "Moskvich" should be running.

Cursing the lack of telephone service and the local facilities, Bolot baike ran past the gate without even closing it. The old man's horse came closer and began to

chew the hay in melancholy.

I took the old man's hand and began to talk as I was praying, repeating the same words:

- Don't die, please, hold on, Ashym baike...

I had a feeling that during these almost five days he became a member of my family.

A few minutes later I heard the sound of the motor. Bolot baike ran to take the coat. We put the old man on the coat as on a stretcher and took him to the car. The owner of "Moskvich" had already opened both rear doors and was standing opposite us. He leaned over the seat, took the ends of the coat from Bolot baike's hands, and soon the old man was already safely lying on the seat. I sat down near him, put his head on my knees so I could hold him as we went over potholes, which covered most of the road. Bolot baike closed the gate and sat in the passenger seat next to the driver.

Nobody spoke in the car. The driver did not even turn music on. I lost track of time, mentally repeating "don't die, please", and came to only when the car pulled up to the steps of the hospital. The owner of the car turned the engine off and ran to negotiate with the doctors.

Chapter 21. Saving the hunter

I took the old man under my arms through the coat's cloth and pulled him from

the seat as far as I could. Bolot baike gently supported him from the other side and caught him by the edges of the spread out coat. We almost ran into the hospital with the old man on the makeshift stretcher. A medic with an old-fashioned wheelchair met us there. He sat the old man in it and took him away to some office.

The driver approached us, but Bolot baike did not have time to introduce us to each other because an elderly nurse appeared in the hallway.

- Gentlemen, the old man has lost a lot of blood. We need blood urgently. It is type O positive.

I silently thanked the heavens that the old man had the most common type, like me, and took a step toward the nurse.

- That's my type. And the rhesus factor is the same. I am required to have an examination regularly. I am a medical worker.

- Are you relatives? However, it doesn't matter. Let's register.

- Come quickly, I'll sign everything afterward.

We rushed to the blood donation. After the procedure, I finally washed my hands of Ashym baike's blood that already dried out. Meanwhile, the nurse poured the boiled water into a cup with a flower on the side, put in a tea bag, a few spoons of sugar, stirred, and handed to me:

- Drink, son. You don't look much better than the old man. And sign here, - she

said, handing the form to me.

I signed the form and asked if she had a phone charger. She looked at the mobile phone I held out and shook her head, but pleased me:

- I have a "Frog". Take your battery out. It charges longer than usual, but it's better than nothing, right?

I agreed, and after a minute the LED was already flashing in the socket giving a signal that the charging process had started.

- Thank you very much. Can I sit in the hallway? There is more air there.

- Yes, sure. And make sure you drink your tea!

In the hallway, I sat down on the imitation leather couch. Bolot baike sat down near me and began to ask the inevitable questions:

- So what happened out there ... in the woods? You're all worn out, the old man is almost dying, my horse is lost...

Having sipped the tea, I was ready to give the most realistic version of what happened, because it was unlikely that he would believe the truth:

- The old man wanted to prepare a trap for this creature, and, you know, I was helping him. He climbed up the tree and the branch on which he was sitting to mount the block broke. He fell on the ground, and his leg fell into his own trap. That's how he was wounded. As for Altay, he was stolen from me the day before by one man. We met two woodcutters. They said they were from the

neighboring village called Saz-Dobo. Each word we spoke turned into a quarrel. One of them called himself Almaz. At night he quietly led Altay out of the barn.

Bolot baike listened to me carefully, and when I finished my adapted half-truth, he began to grumble:

- I told you this old man is a little bit mad. Didn't I warn you? Look where you ended up. Okay, stay here with him. I'll go by car to Saz-Dobo to get my horse. What did you say that guy's name was?

I nodded and replied.

- Will you stay here? - he asked half-affirmative and nodded in response again.

I drank from the cup and recalled with surprise, that a week ago I was having dinner in New York with a charming girl. I was slowly drinking oolong tea, the taste of which now seemed to be nothing compared with this sweet black tea, the brand of which was unknown to me.

The Doctor came a couple hours later, said that the old man regained consciousness and added:

- If you want, ask the nurse to give you a gown and you can see him.

I smiled at this joyful news. This was the first real smile during the last hard week. I hurried into the room and saw the old man.

I approached the bed where he was lying.

- I'm so glad you're alive.

The old man laughed:

- It's not that easy to kill me!

My lips curved themselves into a smile.

I sat down in a chair at the old man's bedside. The old man was breathing heavily, speaking in abrupt sentences, pausing for a few seconds between words.

I could tell that it was hard for him:

- The doctor said that if there had no bandage and tourniquet on my leg, a funeral ceremony could have been arranged for me. Thank you, Maksat.

I was confused:

- It's good I have a medical education. I could put the bandage on properly.

- How did you manage to drag me?

- On your horse. The whistle that you gave me was useful. The horse, of course, had a hard time. It was exhausted, but it was able to bring both of us here.

- And where is it? - there was genuine concern in his voice for his four-legged friend, through whose endurance we reached the hospital in time.

- It is in Bolot baike's yard, where I stayed. Don't worry. Only the rest of the stuff and the goat stayed there. It's a pity... I told Bolot baike that his horse was "stolen", and he went to the village.

Ashym baike closed his eye either from fatigue, or trying to hide the tears, which could already be seen in the corners of his eyes. A few minutes later he dealt with his emotions and looking straight at me he asked:

- How did you find the way to the village?

- I just really wanted to save you. I was afraid to go through the woods, - I saw the old man's gaze drift towards the nearby bed to a stooped man who was reading the newspaper and added. - I didn't know the place and was afraid to lose my way. I returned following the way we came.

We kept silent for some time. The old man waited till the roommates left and asked the question that apparently interested him most:

- How did you manage to escape from it?

- Ashym baike, I do not believe that I survived and that we got out of there. But it seems that they needed my amulet.

- Did you say "they"?

- Yes, I saw three of them. And I have no idea how many of them there are actually. But the forest seems to be full of these creatures.

The old man stared into my eyes. When he touched me, his hand trembled slightly either because of fear of this discovery he suddenly made or simply because of weariness. Or, this could have just been a consequence of blood loss.

- Did you get a good look at them? How many of them were there?

I told him about my mistake after which I was caught in our trap. I described the meeting face to face with one of them in detail.

- What did they want from us? Was it the claw, which you had as a memory from your grandfather?

He paused again, gained strength and continued:

- When it was dragging me into the forest, I had already said goodbye to life. And then he threw me from his shoulder as if I was some unnecessary thing. I flopped down on the ground. It was hard to move. It came close to me and looked directly into my eyes as if it was waiting for something from me: some question, some answer, I don't know ... I was speechless and could only stare at those deep yellow eyes. I was trying to understand why it didn't kill me. Why it dragged me and what it wanted to say or know? Why it dragged me away when it could kill me instantly? Then it heard a slight whistle and got distracted. It ran in your direction and left me to bleed. I tried to move in order to escape to a safe place, but my legs were numb and even though I was trying to stay conscious, my head spun and when I woke up I was already here.

- As I understand they communicate with each other with some sounds. One of them took something that belonged to them - the claw. But it saved our lives. I do not understand why. After all, our stories can lead to the fact their tribe will be hunted. People have already started to wonder what happened in the woods... And there are many people who hunt for answers.

The old man got excited and even slightly sat up in his bed:

- I hope you don't tell anyone? I don't think we should tell anyone about what happened.

- Of course not! First of all, no one will believe us without evidence or people will simply say that we want to earn extra money by telling such a tale, or something like that. And second of all, if they believe us, they will go into the forest and it's very dangerous. I don't believe they'll touch anyone as long as we stay off their territory. This forest is their home, and, like any hosts, they do not welcome strangers, especially enemies with weapons. These are just my thoughts, maybe I'm wrong... I told the doctors that you were caught in a trap when you fell from the tree when you were hanging the rope for the trap.

- Good, don't tell anyone yet.

The man came back to the room and the old hunter became silent.

- Get well soon! - I stood up and started to leave, but Bolot baike entered the room.

- Hello, Ashym bike!

- Salam, Bolot! I recognized you... You have not changed. Did you find your Altay?

- Yes, my neighbor is holding him near the porch. And I came to get Maksat and say hello. Damn, you scared us, baike. Say thanks to him, - he nodded in my

direction, - he shared his blood with you. Now you are like brothers!

The old man held out his hand, shrugged my arm silently, looked at Bolot and asked:

- Would you please look after my horse till I get discharged, okay?

- Yes, sure! I love horses... I'll look after it with pleasure.

The room door opened again and the nurse asked us to leave.

- You will exhaust him and I will have to bring him to his senses. Plus one of you doesn't have a gown. If the doctor sees you I will be responsible for you. Go home and come tomorrow!

The old man gently spoke to her:

- My daughter, do not be so harsh! It was me who kept them.

The woman who was only a couple of years younger than Bolot baike got confused about the way he referred to her, but repeated the request:

- It's time to go!

We quickly said goodbye and went out into the corridor. I took the gown into the nurse's room, took the phone? battery and thanked her once again.

While I was walking with Bolot baike to the door, he began to tell me:

- I found this Almaz. They kind of got crazy in Saz-Dobo! He tells everyone about the inhuman screams and about how his brother went away and never

returned. He says a terrible creature lives there. But he is going to return to that place to find his brother or his body. He says, while there is still hope, he will search. He kind of infected everyone with this idea. Ten men are already getting ready to go into the woods and find this monster. What can I say? They are fools!

I had nothing to say and tried to smile. But I knew that there was a visible fear and shock on my face after the incident. Even if the old man and I remained silent until the end of our days, there was Almaz. And it seems he has already managed to stir up many people. And this idea to go to the forest could lead to more victims.

Chapter 22. Back to the town

When we left the hospital, it was already dark. We approached the "Moskvich" and Bolot baike said:

- You get in the car. The neighbor will take you straight to the house. When you enter the barn, there will be a shelf on the right. There is a can of nails with a spare key for the house inside. Open the door and come in. There is food in the refrigerator. Don't be shy. I will ride Altay and will come soon.

I nodded and slid into the back seat. I inserted the battery and turned the phone on. It found a network and messages began to pop up from Katya who stayed in America, from my sister Alena and my father. They were worried that I hadn't written or called in so long. I hastily typed a text to Katya.

I dialed my father's number, he answered almost immediately as if he was waiting for the call.

- Max, are you all right?

- I am all right, dad. I didn't have a chance to call. There was no network coverage at all. I will be home tomorrow. Don't worry. Now the connection will be gone again. Bye!

- All right, son. Yes, I forgot to tell you that there is a bad connection there. See you tomorrow! We are waiting for you!

The driver did not bother me with questions, and I was silent too. My thoughts were not leaving me in peace. I entered the house, undressed, but I had no strength to even eat. So I was just sitting at the table till Bolot baike came in. He hurried up and set the table quickly.

He began to question me, but I answered some questions randomly. Some questions I simply ignored.

- Sorry, Bolot baike, I'll go to bed. My eyes are closing.

- Sure, the bed is ready. Lie down and rest.

But, despite my tiredness, I could not fall asleep. Every time I closed my eyes, the perverted face of the monster with bright yellow eyes appeared to me. It seemed that I still felt its breath on my face. I recalled all the materials about strange animals and about Chupacabra, which I printed out in America. No

description was even close to what I saw today.

There was no doubt that these one-legged creatures came into Ashym baike's barn on purpose. It turns out, they felt that the amulet with one of their claws was somewhere near. Were they just trying to entice me to come out and return what belonged to them? But why didn't they do it that same evening when it was so simple? After all, I was a witness to their supernatural power repeatedly during these amazing and terrible days. These and many other questions remained unanswered.

Speaking about the color and shape of their eyes and recalling all the programs on the "Discovery channel" I became convinced that they were predators and could have a fairly active nightlife. Hence, we were easy prey for them during our overnight stop in the woods. But why didn't they touch us then? Were they afraid of the fire? There was no doubt that they had good working brains. They are much smarter than people, otherwise they would become easy prey and a new discovery for man. Maybe they are endowed with a higher intelligence? Who are they? Where did they come from and what do they want?

Was there any other reason? I could not find a more or less clear answer to any of my questions. I decided that it was necessary to visit my grandfather's grave. I don't know why, but I was suddenly sure that he had played a significant role in my miraculous salvation.

I sunk into slumber from time to time, but the events of the day were flashing

like on a TV screen, and I was waking up again. The night passed this way. Apparently, just before dawn I managed to fall asleep because when I opened my eyes once again I found that Bolot baike was not at home.

Chapter 23. Farewell

I got dressed, took the backpack and went outside. The host had already brought Altay and the old man's horse out of the stall and tied them to a fence. There was hay lying in front of them, and he was slowly combing his horse with a stiff brush. The horse that brought us from the forest was already clean. There were no small pieces of bur-marigold and branches in the crest and tail, which stuck to them yesterday.

- Well, Bolot baike, I have to go.

- Already? Did you have time to write down anything? Did you prepare the material for your story?

- Yes, I found everything I wanted. I will have a good story.

Opening the wallet, I took out 300 dollars and handed them to Bolot baike:

- Thank you. I'm sorry for losing the coat and the rifle. Would you please help me to hire a car to the city? I totally forgot to ask my father to send the Niva which brought me here.

- No problem! The rifle was already old, and the neighbor will drive you with pleasure. Let me go to him so that you don't trample our mud again.

I went to the old man's horse, stroked a velvet coat, stood next to him in silence, and heard the roar of the "Moskvich" engine.

I said goodbye to Bolot bike and got into the car, shook hands with the driver and asked him:

- You know, baike, I'll pay you 50 dollars to Naryn city, but let's make a stop at the graveyard in the village of my childhood. I don't know when I will be here next time, and my ancestors are buried there.

- No problem! It is 20 kilometers on the highway there and 20 kilometers back. And we can drive through the regional center. We could take a shortcut through the fields, but we might get stuck in the mud. The rains have been too heavy. But, as people say "But this distance is nothing".

- Plus, I would like to stop in the hospital to get news about the old man.

The driver did not question me about what happened in the woods, but inquired about life in America. This easy conversation was very useful, as it distracted me from thinking about monsters in Burma-Too.

Less than half an hour later, we were at the cemetery. Realizing that I wanted to be alone, the driver handed me a pair of working gloves. They were not new, but clean enough:

- If you want to remove the grass or just brush off the dust, - he pointed his finger at the container standing near the corner of the wooden fence, - and then

throw it away. Take a garbage bag too.

- Thank you.

I went through the gate. Vaguely remembering that there was a small poplar in front of my grandfather's grave, I looked around. There were bushes covering almost identical iron monuments here and there. I only realized how long I hadn't been there, when my sight stumbled over a tall tree. Using this landmark, I found the last resting place of my grandparents. The monuments were surrounded by a common wall.

- Hello! It's me, Maksat.

I removed the leaves and took out the dried flowers from the plastic bottles that were cut and painted with white, put them in a garbage bag and read a prayer.

Before leaving, I whispered:

- Thank you, grandpa!

I closed the gate and carried the garbage to the container.

The trip to the regional center went quickly thanks to the talkative driver. There I asked him to stop by the shop. I came out with two bags and we drove to the hospital.

I dropped into the nurse's room and asked for a gown. The same nurse was on duty. Apparently there was a lack of personnel.

I handed her a package with tea and sweets and thanked her for her positive attitude.

- Oh, never mind, son! - the woman surprised genuinely. – Take the gown and try not to make him worry. His blood pressure was high last night.

I nodded and went into the room.

We shook hands greeting each other. I sat in silence for a while. Then I asked a neighbor who was doing a crossword to lend me a pen for a moment.

I took an envelope from the pocket and wrote my phone number on it. Then I returned the pen and handed the envelope to the old man.

- Get well soon, Ashym baike! This is my phone number. Maybe we will meet somewhere in the future when I come again.

The old man took the envelope and was surprised realizing that it was full. He opened it and looked inside. I put about 1,000 dollars there, leaving only the money for a ticket for myself.

- What is this for, Maksat?

- You must find and see your sons, - I smiled and was shocked to see tears in the old man's eyes.

We shook each other's hands again and I quickly went to the door so as not to cry myself.

I was already holding the doorknob when Ashym baike called me:

- Max...

I turned and saw that the kind eyes of the old man were full of tears.

- Thank you! - he told me quietly.

I nodded and left the room. I tried to pull myself together, took off the gown and handed it to the nurse who was talking to someone in the hallway.

- Goodbye, thank you!

- Good luck! Don't worry about the old man!

Chapter 24. Family

On the way to the city we were hit by rain and the eloquence of my companion and driver diminished significantly. I was watching the even movements of janitors, looking around the places we passed. Some fields had unharvested blackened sunflowers and some others had already been plowed. The silhouettes of the low hills were eroding in the shroud of the rain that was pouring over them. My thoughts returned to the monsters. Where do they live during the bad weather? Do they have some shelter? Why had they settled exactly on the Burma-Too? Maybe they live in other places? How many of them are there in general? And how did it happen that this strange one-legged species managed to survive in this fairly harsh terrain? How do they keep their balance? On the ground claws help them, but what about the rocks, which there are so many of in

that place, especially, after rain like this? Continuous questions were coming at me and remained unanswered. A little more and my brain would explode...

The driver of the "Moskvich" brought me straight to the city bus station, got his reward and wished me good luck. And I still had three hours to travel to the capital.

- Good luck to you too! – I said, took the backpack from the back seat and went out into the rain.

Finally, I safely reached my home in Bishkek. The first thing I did was jump into the bath to wash off the week's dirt, sweat and fatigue. I had probably never experienced such bliss before.

After some time, my father knocked on the door:

- Maks, are you all right? Dinner is getting cold.

- Yeah, I'm already done.

During dinner, my father and sister were talking about something, but I did not even react to their words and to the questions they were asking.

My sister touched my hand:

- Max, are you all right?

I tried to smile:

- Yes. I just got tired from the trip and found it difficult to film the story. It was

my first experience.

Having mechanically thanked my father and sister for food I left the table, sat in the armchair, went online on my phone, and booked a ticket to Chicago, paying with a card. I sent a message to Katya: "I'm coming at 12:15 tomorrow" and received the reply: "I am waiting".

After this I jumped into the bed, breathed in the smell of clean linens and "blacked out".

When I woke up in the morning, the first thing I did was look at my hand. There was no trace of any abrasions.

I had my breakfast and promised my father and sister that I would write and call them more often. I changed my clothes and ordered a taxi to the airport while collecting my stuff. I hugged my relatives and after a couple of hours the airplane was already carrying me away from my homeland.

Chapter 25. Flying back to old life

At O'Hare International Airport, I saw Katya among others welcoming travelers. There was a happy smile on her face. She ran up to me, threw her arms around my neck and embraced me with such force that I was surprised by the power of her hands that looked so fragile.

She sat behind the wheel, saying that I look too exhausted, but she kept looking at me from the side every now and then.

When we came to the apartment, I had a feeling that I have not been there for several years, although outwardly nothing changed. I had changed myself.

In the bathroom, I examined my hands closely again. The traces of the scratches disappeared. It seemed I had never had them.

While Katya was cooking, I went to unpack my suitcase.

There I found the whistle, which the old man had given me, and the thoughts about monsters came back to me with a renewed power. I went into my office to put the whistle on the table. Now I was almost 100% sure that the scratch appeared so that I was forced to return the amulet to these mysterious beings. But why did they need the claw to be there, on Burma-Too? And why did these traces begin to appear after so many years? I could not see any relationship though I was trying hard. I came up to the computer, turned it on to transfer the pictures of the goat slaughtered by the monster. For a second I even thought that it was a bad dream. But everything was real. A terrible picture appeared on the screen: the victim was lying with its guts spilled. The silhouette of the baby goat could be seen in a dark corner behind the goat. Next picture - a top view, and then – a side view, and a few more pictures from different angles.

The demonstration of remorselessness of the monsters forced me to think about the fact that they left us alive intentionally. But why did they need to do this?

- Max, come to the table! – Katya's gentle voice caused one more thought to come to me:

"So, they were not going to eat us. And the goat was slaughtered just for demonstration. Then why are there rumors that people disappear on that mountain? Where did Almaz's brother disappear? And what do these monsters eat to maintain their strength"?

- Max! Everything is ready!

- I'm coming! - I turned off the computer and came out of the office without finding any answers.

In the morning I did not find any marks on my hand again. I was almost not surprised by this fact. My boss said that I looked almost normal, and the usual routine began. But there was not a single day that I did not try to analyze everything that happened to me. I do not know why, but I did not want to share this information with anyone. I even kept it a secret from my family.

Chapter 26. Unexpected turn

Little by little, week by week, the sharpness of impressions started to fade. But a couple of weeks before Christmas, when Chicago was already glittering with holiday lights in the streets and shop windows, I received a phone call from an unfamiliar number.

- Hello! - I picked up the phone and I heard a familiar voice.

- Max, how are you doing? It's me. Did you recognize my voice?

- Of course, Ashym baike, how are you doing?

- I'm fine. Max, you must come to Burma-Too - There was excitement in his voice.

- What? What for? - I was surprised.

- I caught one of the creatures!