

SASPYGA

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(trans. Ilona Yazhbon Chavasse)

The moss that grows over these stones can be grey, black, yellow or orange, depending on first bird to see this place, the colour of its eyes.

To catch a skittish horse, you must pretend to be just walking by.

There was a time when there was no one at the Lakes, apart from a derelict and soot-stained hut - the only human dwelling on those vast heights.

This is us, then: two tiny women on the edge of a boundless plateau. From above we are indistinguishable from one another. To those that can now see us from above, we appear no different from the sparse trees. Our mounts wait patiently. It's all the same to them.

“What do you mean, no?” I must have misheard.

Asya is silent. Like the flick of a switch, her “no,” has just severed the normal flow of our lives. In her silence, I can hear the roles we have inhabited until now come tumbling down with a quiet rustle. Overhead, those that can see us turn their heads slightly. A flicker of their curiosity finds an answering shiver in me, a nervy shiver I can’t - have no right to - do anything but ignore. It’s not allowed.

I clutch at the only sensible answer:

“You left something at the rest stop? You should have just said, instead of wandering off...”

Asya shakes her head and stiffens, blinking owlishly. Stupefied, I look down on her from the saddle. I need to say something now, question her, convince her. But my mind is a blank, without a single thought or word – empty like a fog you can drown in. I look at her as though the answer lies in her face: slightly boyish, unremarkable. Straight nose, a little sunburned, not too big or too small; the usual, somewhat scruffy hiker’s tan, the usual hiker’s pimple on her chin.

The usual sad blue tinge shadowing her mouth. Her dark eyes, beneath a pair of slim eyebrows, are trained on something behind me. Or on nothing at all. Her own stony, mask-like expression is like the window of an abandoned forest hut.

Then it hits me. She's just on standby until I leave her alone. Like waiting at a traffic light.

I clench my teeth. "Stop fucking around. Up into the mountains bare-assed, that's the plan? Enough of this bullshit, we have to get back, it's getting late..."

The words come flooding out, smooth and mean, like they're not even my own. I open my mouth again, not knowing what's going to spew forth, something blank and nasty.

But I have no time to say anything: abruptly Asya gathers herself in the saddle, bares her small, even teeth, and grinds her heels into Suila's sides. Obediently, he starts forward, snagging his lead rope on my saddle bag as he tries to wedge himself between Karash and the willow shrub. Asya's knee – it's hard and hot in a way that's surprisingly unpleasant – knocks painfully into my calf. Shit, she's going to tread on everyone's feet, I think, as I rein Karash back. Asya's face clenches like a fist, suddenly animated, mean and stubborn, like she's spoiling for a fight. What is with her? What am I supposed to do, brawl with her? Beg her to go back? Punch her in the face, pull her off her horse, tie her up... fucking hell, Kostya's probably already in fits, they'll be looking for us at base camp, this is ridiculous, messing up the trek for everybody... Asya gives an annoyed grunt. Suila tries again to surge forward and up the rising trail, and before I know what I'm doing, I grab him by the bridle.

We tussle, huffing and puffing silently, over the bridle for a few seconds – breath still laced with breakfast oatmeal, tobacco and milk chocolate, bony little claws, damp and grimy, sharp raggedy fingernails, The rough bridle strap stings red, frost-chapped skin. We drop it at the same time, as though burned. Asya rubs her palm across her knee, wincing. Thrusting out my jaw and trying hard to look calm, I lift the bridle over Suila's head. A good thing the lead rope is a long one. I twist back in my saddle, tying the lead rope to the cantle. My back is spasming with tension, I can feel Asya's laser-like, hate-filled gaze on me, I hear her scarce shallow breaths. Finally the knot sets as it should and I jerk the rope to secure the last loop. Towing time.

Tow her like a kid that's too big to fit in a parent's saddle, and too small to be expected to have any control over their horse at all.

“Ok then,” I grouse, without looking up from the knot. It’s all absurd, wrong, horrible. “Listen, I don’t know what you… why you… but…” Lost for words, I lift my eyes. Mouth pursed, Asya is slowly sliding down off her horse.

“What the actual…” It comes out as a yelp.

Clutching at the shrubs for balance, Asya pushes between the two horses, adjusts the straps of her backpack and, without a word, starts climbing up the trail.

I get past the willow and slacken pace, so as not to ride into her. The smooth plateau ascent is ranged before me. On the left, beyond the Karakol Lakes, the sky is swelling lilac, with flashes of lightning, but it’s still far: we should be ok. The Shekelmes Canyon rock formations – we call them Castles of the Spirits – ruddy and grey, and splashed with patches of orange lichen, loom jaggedly over the path ahead, bathed in yellowing daylight. How much time have we lost? When will Kostya realise that we haven’t rejoined the group? Obviously back at base, but probably much earlier, before the final descent. Or maybe he knows already that none of this turned out to be so simple,

I’m getting intrusive thoughts of a furious Kostya, cussing as he rides towards me through the meadows. And also Genchik, enraged. I look behind me, I seem to be waiting – but the meadows are empty. All the better.

I don’t want them to find me so at a loss. I’ve not the faintest idea what to do about this crazy chick, but I do think that anyone else getting involved in this detour would only make it worse.

In the meantime, Asya is quickly making her way to the Castle. The trail is forgiving here – a peaty groove through a cover of dwarf birch, still bare of leaves and barely past your ankle, it’s been tamped down by horses’ hooves. Up here, it’s still spring. Vivid blue gentian violets poke trumpet-like through the moss. The violets clump together, running the gamut from pale yellow to deep purple, dotted sparsely with pink, fawn lilies, their bell-like heads turned inside out as they fade away.

(The first time I saw this it shocked me, put me in a paralysing stupor. It was July then, all green but starting to turn brown, and I saw it from the north face of a high mountain pass, too steep to descend on horseback. I was already down on one stirrup, and ready to take a step, but then I just stood there, with one foot in the air. There was nowhere to put my feet: no grass, no earth, only delicate, tiny, fragile flowers, many kinds. They were unbearably,

inexplicably beautiful. They just... existed. I was in a lather by the time I got down to the valley floor. Back then I had come as a tourist; I was still at college, hence July, right after the end of term. Much has happened since then, so much; not least my getting used to things, getting rougher and tougher, learning to suppress surprise, to hide my butterflies of delight beneath a cynical grin, I had (eaten saspyga) learned many names and sloughed off everything surplus.

But I always returned in June, to see this sight again. And always tried my best not to step on the flowers, although I tried my best not to step on the flowers anywhere. Tried really hard not to.)

...at the Castles, Asya stops, and cranes her head up at the nearest of the cliff-like rocks, as though inquiring. Wow, she's finally using her brain. I'm irritated, but I immediately cast the thought aside. There are things we don't discuss – don't even think about – like what goes on in your head when you pass by the Castles of the Spirits.

Beyond the Castles, the path forks. Asya stalls; either she doesn't know which direction to pick or she's unable to flip a mental coin for it. Come on, take the trail towards the Lakes and we'll be down in the valley in three hours. It's all modern down there now, with hordes of tourists and staff, and locals. Sure to find someone I know. Down there, if you still feel like it, you're welcome to sit on your ass and hold tight to the boulders, down there I can leave you (and your horse, too) to be babysat by someone else, while I check in at HQ with Arkadievna and we figure out how to play it, it's going to be a hell of a round trip, twenty miles at least, and there goes my lower back...

But that would be too easy.

Asya sways indecisively for a moment longer, then trudges straight on, towards Akkain Pass. Goddamn it. I roll my eyes and spur the horse gently. Fine, we'll descend to Muekhta, you're not planning to sleep in the birch shrub tonight, are you... She keeps climbing, though, and there's something not right there, something odd, and the trail grows indistinct, and the only visible tracks now are those from Asya's boots. It's not that I can't see what's happening, I just can't believe it; what I'm used to is like a habit, too strong. The waysign – a little crag topped by a knotty pine – is suddenly to my right instead of left, and it's now clear, inescapably clear that we've emerged onto the old, high trail, abandoned for a hundred years or more.

I mustn't let myself remember the last time I took this trail and why.

(Ilya was saying it for years, wasn't he, that it was better to clear a trail down below, through the grass where the ground would be softer. Stop thrashing around in the shrub, he'd tell us, there's a horse going lame every trek, he'd had it with picking up lost horseshoes. That was his thing, by the time I joined Kaichi Trekking as staff, but everyone else said it can't be done, there's no path to take below, you'll just lame your horse. So everyone crossed over the honeysuckle shrub, and I went over it too, there was nothing for it...)

My mount was ready to drop from exhaustion, still young and not inured to the work. On top of that, Kaichi had little cash to spare then, so only his front hooves were shod. I wasn't expedition cook yet – Kaichi had no expedition cooks then, either – but a kind of trainee, really a maid-of-all-work. I was riding to catch up with the group and bring an extra supply of bread, which we hadn't been able to buy back at the village, due to some problem I didn't give a single thought, my mind entirely filled with these rocks and these cedars, the shape of the Castles behind me and the bird of prey in the sky ahead, and my over-tired horse.

White rock, dry earth pounded into dust. To my left, the rising scree slope of Mount Kylay; to my right, a cliff-edge over the chasm and some crooked dwarf cedars.

There's a murder of beaked black crows on the slope. The air splits into prickly molecules, the sky – it's so close – is tinged purple. And there's no one, not a soul, around for miles, or maybe not in all of my universe, my hermetically sealed world, whose contours, circumscribed by a fey magic, are dissipating in pale mountain fog.

But then a whisper of falling stones from the scree slope. Someone was moving around up there, up above. I scanned beyond the trail but saw nothing bar grey shadows over grey scree. It could have been a bear, and that was frightening enough. Or worse, a mountain yak, worse still, a yak cow wandering off from the herd as she neared calving time. I pulled in the reins – as soon as the horse gets the same idea, he'll go hell for leather, pell-mell, and we'll both break our necks, in a place like this... but the horse stood stock-still, trembling, and then I knew it wasn't a bear, wasn't a yak. Someone dashing across the scree, quickly and softly, pausing for a moment, then again, that revolting pitter-patter of little feet, that whispering that made your gorge rise and your head spin, and your vision blur, and you started to think you were back in your tent, inside your sleeping bag and you had to wake up, wake up before it was too late...

Those rustling little claws again, very near. The horse backed up and swayed, and then, dismounting, I started to pull it forward by the bridle, cursing at the top of my lungs, calling him a deadbeat, dope, idiot and big baby, until I called him a meatbag and I thought, fucking hell, because I suddenly understood the full meaning of the concept. I kept shouting. You dingbat, you sad-sack, you psycho... the little claws kept rustling, so close now, in my peripheral vision a pudgy grey shadow flitted from side to side, I have to wake up, wake up, wake up...

Later, when I'd caught up with the expedition group, I had to sit for a while on an icy-cold boulder overlooking the pass, smoking and taking swigs from the bottle until the shakes subsided, then a little while longer until the horse stopped shaking too, and finally grazed a bit on the short, dry and already yellowing grass growing through the stony ground. As I smoked, I wondered how I could ever come this way alone again, if I had to. What if the next group also started off without enough bread or, who knows, maybe fresh horses needed bringing?

But I didn't have to do it again that summer, and the summer after, Ilya, who didn't believe new trails were impossible, lost his temper on the very first trek of the year and pushed through a new, lower trail from Akkain Pass to the Castles. Yes, much and more had changed since that summer.)

That rustling... but no, everything's fine, Karash is steady as he picks his way through the rocks. The shadow of a bird floats smoothly beneath his hooves. I swallow down the dry lump in my throat and remember we need water. There should be a stream somewhere near by – before the trail swerves sharply up and starts looping through the native dwarf honeysuckle shrub. Asya is barely moving, so I don't need to hurry.

I kneel down at a runnel the width of my palm, that emerges chattering from among the rocks and then disappears again. Try to scrub the dust from my hands and use my palms to ladle the water. It's so cold it hurts my teeth, and knuckles and even my wrists, and fleetingly, crossly, I think this didn't used to be the way – back when I did have to go back and forth across the passes on my own, with saddlebags full of bread, or with a spare horse and somebody's left-behind tent... The water sheathes my tongue with lingering sweetness, it calms my desiccated throat, and so I keep scooping it up despite the pain. I force myself to stop drinking: we've an hour of walking still ahead, with nothing around but stones and knee-

high shrubs. No one to hide from, sure, but it's not pleasant to have to take your pants down in this wind.

I fill the water bottle. Karash nudges me softly in the back, breathing into my ear. I can hear Suila shifting foot to foot behind him. "No, not while you're in a lather," I mumble, my elbows automatically going wide to block him, but Karash isn't even trying to push in. The babbling brook, the snuffling horses. Some very normal, but completely essential sound is missing. I take a sip from the overfull bottle, feeling the water course down to my empty stomach. I'm starving.

Ah – that's what's missing. The crunch of juicy grass and clinking reins, and that full-belly sound of steady munching. I turn back. Karash and Suila are having a doze, ears drooping peacefully. Even now we've halted, neither is trying to sneak a clump of grass. Any horse would be jerking its rider's arms out of their sockets by now, diving stubbornly from side to side, to have a bite of something good.

I rack my brain for things I'd been told about these two geldings, and not the usual he-s-a-handful stuff, but something else, nothing to do with me at the time, but now it's like an itch, alarming. Although, even if I do remember – what good is that now? Let's take stock: we've got Karash, Suila, a wiggled-out tourist trekker, the upper trail along the Kylay – which we can't get off for at least another hour, and the sky behind us looking more and more like a ripe bruise, also not good.

Asya is trudging on. Over the rocks she jerks and sways unsteadily, off-balance, swinging her arms, slipping off and tripping up. Up ahead she looks minuscule, ungainly and ridiculous, lost among the cliffs and scree.

Did you expect to manage a horse trail on foot, I think with grim satisfaction. It seems so easy, from up in the saddle, but not the same on your own two feet... Shit, I don't actually want her to sprain an ankle, she's hobbling in a way I'm not happy about.

Asya makes a particularly desperate effort to keep her balance, twists horribly and topples forward, palms outflung. My guts also drop. A horrible, nauseating emptiness in the pit of my stomach. But then she starts moving, and I can breathe again.

"You ok?" I start shouting before we're anywhere near her. She's sitting on the ground, hands to her face. Crying? Screaming silently from pain? Numb with shock? When she hears me she lowers her hands and holds them out to me: look.

I jump down from the saddle and squat beside her. The pads are scraped so raw I feel momentarily revolted by the sight of blood seeping through the bits of rock and lichen ground into her palms. Yep, been there. It really hurts. But it's not a big deal.

“And the rest?” I’m rifling through my coat pockets until I find a pack of wet wipes. “Come on. Ankles ok? Knees?”

She shrugs. She sucks on the wounded flesh, then grudgingly accepts the wet wipes.

‘Fine, I’m fine,’ she mumbles, avoiding my eyes. “Thanks.” She wipes her palms and hands back the pack. Jaw clenched, she still won’t look at me, only her lower lip is trembling slightly.

There’s a dusty mark on her knee, where sharp stone met the dense synthetic fabric as she went down. All scraped underneath, I bet.

I leave her to tend to her own wounds and busy myself with untying Suila. No point in watching her try and kill herself from sheer stubbornness.

I bring the horse over. “Ok, get on,” I sigh. Asya looks up at me balefully.

“I’m not coming.”

“Get on, I said, before you break both your legs.” I’m trying hard not to scream at her.

Asya stands up gingerly. She’s limping a bit, but I can see there’s nothing seriously wrong. She’s scraped her hands and had a scare. Shaking so hard she can’t get her foot in the stirrup...

Eventually she manages to climb laboriously onto Suila and sits there, fiddling with the lead rope.

“Listen, could you just stop following me?”

Sounds like a plan. I’m just the cook, actually. None of this is any of my business.

“No, I can’t,” I tell her.

Her mouth twitches and she turns away.

Lone wolves attack horses from behind, leaving ragged wounds on their rumps. Then they follow along patiently, waiting for the carrion from their teeth to get into the prey's blood, weakening it.

Five-spice is a Chinese spice mix made with cinnamon, star anise, fennel, Sichuan pepper and clove. If you season liver with five-spice, you won't be able to resist it.

You will never find saspyga below the forest line.

(claws little claws rustling over the scree four little bird claws beneath a plump frame of fluffy feathers black blood spurting from the hole in its side don't follow don't look up don't look it in the face no wake up you're tangled in the sleeping bag wake up)

The high trail merges with the main and vanishes briefly in the dry grass and dusty stone crush of the pass before corkscrewing down like a party streamer. Huge massing volumes of cumulus clouds. Underneath, the tender ribbon of clear sky, and the snow-striped, jagged peaks of the mountain's spine. One side of the flat Akkay Valley abuts the mountain in a show of dwarf willow, silvery and soft, like fur. The other side drops steeply into a gorge. Below the mountain lies the dead lake, in its collar of stone outcroppings. A tongue of mountain snow, tinged neon blue, licks at the lakeshore. Some spooked groundhog-watchman keeps up a steady whistle. The unseasoned rider ahead, tilting in the saddle as she goes, moves slowly down the boggy trail as it meanders through the willow shrub.

“Right, I've had enough...” I mutter as I dismount with a groan.

Asya keeps moving forward but – no matter what she might think – it's the horses who choose the path, and no matter what hers chooses they will be visible from above for an hour or more. It's not like there's much to choose from anyway. Let her. She'll run out of energy eventually. She's going to get too tired, hungry, cold, right? Would serve her right to get soaked, too, but despite a wind that whistles icily over the plateau and smells of snow, the skies are clear. On the downward slopes here, it's almost warm. This is probably the stupidest place for a coffee break, but everything's stupid today. I drag Karash off the path. There's nowhere to tie him up, just grass and stones. I have to hook his reins over the pommel and just hope he won't try and wander off. And he doesn't – just waits where he's been put. Like a rocking-horse, very convenient, except that... Never mind, I'll take convenient.

The gnarled willow doesn't burn easily, but it's good enough to boil up a tiny, two-cup camping kettle. Good thing I haven't drunk all the fresh water. Good thing there's a bit of coffee from a previous trek left in my saddle bags. You can get a standard bag of ground coffee into a half-litre plastic bottle, if you try hard: that's enough twice over for a usual ten-day trek, but like any addict I'm always worried about running out. So that's all good. All good...

I pour the boiling water in the thermos, inhale pleasurable and replace the lid. While I wait for the coffee to brew, I go to rummage for a pack of cigarettes (the last one, if you please) from the saddle bags. When I touch the little plastic box, I push it aside as usual, then stop: if not now, when?

"Don't move," I instruct Karash sternly, then jog back to the trail. I need to do this where it can be spotted.

I have three permanent markers, black, white and russet-red. Here's a flat stone, recently split, its surface is still free of lichen. I should have thought about it first, or made a sketch, but there's nothing for it now. For years, I've hauled these markers around to serve a long-ago joke, and there was never any time, you couldn't make the whole group wait, I would have caught up, obviously, but who could be bothered to work it out with the guides or spend time explaining to the tourists. The weather always too bad, me always too tired... My mind a blank, I crouch down, with two markers held between my teeth and the third wavering madly in my hand. I swap it for another, swap again... a ruddy-red yak, crowned with wildly curving horns, takes off across the riven surface of the blue-grey piece of gneiss. A wolf stalks him down the trail, nose to the ground. I frame both with squiggly lines, dots and zigzags, my hand (my soul) moving of its own accord. I stand up for a better look.

Looks good. The drawing lies atop the stone as though it's always been here. Just a bit of wear and tear and you can play tricks on the tourists. Or not say anything at all, let them find it, and if they do, act surprised. Let them make up stories and make fools of themselves on their own. Even better.

Giggling to myself, I walk back to the horse, still dozing where I left him, and the thermos waiting by a dying fire. I take a drag on the cigarette, and a swig – finally – of coffee. There's something sharp and stony under my tailbone; I fidget, trying to get comfortable. At my sudden motion, the groundhog starts up whistling again.

Would be nice to do a couple more stones, but let's see how it goes... If I left this dope behind right now, and headed back to base, I could make a couple more rest stops. No one is timing me, no pressure to hurry. Let Kostya go after her. She's a grown woman, she can manage a few days on her own. Not even days, hours – I'd forgotten that someone was sure to be looking after us already. Of course they would be. They wouldn't have noticed the tracks leading to the upper trail, and if they did notice, they wouldn't believe something so stupid. So they'd be combing the valley past the Castles and up to Muekhta, at a push. If I turned back right now, I'd come across one of our lot in a matter of hours, and this would all be over.

Maybe that was exactly why I'd forgotten...

I inhale the bitter smell of coffee, smoke, distant rain, roots crushed under the horses' hooves. I watch Asya crawl across the valley floor like a persistent ant. She's gone a long way, Karash is going to have to step on it if we're to catch up with her. But, wait, the others will be catching up with us soon. I forgot again...

I just don't want to remember. Maybe I like things as they are. The groundhog sentry whistles one more time and stills, finally resigned to me as just another part of the landscape, safe. I'm guessing there was a rainstorm at Akkay, washing away old tracks; the trail looks abandoned, Suila's hoofprints bright and clear. They lead towards the gorge, a rest stop no one really uses anymore, as it's always too close or too far from the trail, never seeming to make sense. Weird that Suila even knows it. But just as well that he's heading up there, my butt has gone numb in the saddle, but my knees are starting to complain. I'm so hungry I can't let myself think about it. Somewhere in the saddlebags I've got a few pieces of chocolate, a little vegetable oil and – ha-ha, very funny – two dozen little sachets and packets of spices. We cross a little bog – Karash crushes wild scallion beneath his hooves – the scent is strong. No, better not to think about that for now...

The willow shrub gives way to knee-high birch, and blue splashes of gentian in patches of barely melted snow. There's the odd copse of low cedars dotted between springy hillocks, and sinkholes – black-bottomed karst funnels rimmed with emerald green sedge grass. The trail starts looking like a dotted line on a map. I spot deer tracks, some old ones, some very fresh. More animals going this way than people. To my right is a dark cedar grove, taller than the rest. I know that there's a rest stop there, but the hoofprints lead on, and Karash walks past without even attempting to draw me over to a place where he can finally rest.

Suila's tracks point away from the familiar path. Up ahead, the far slope of the gorge, streaked blue, tumbles down from the sky: black rows of cedars, foaming white streams cascading down into the chasm, a patchwork of green meadows, suspended at improbable angle. Where the devil is she off to, I wonder darkly. We don't go that way, it's all down, down, down from there, a bit of beauty and then the abyss. I picture the slope growing steeper; horse trying to cling to the falling rock, horse slipping, its back hooves suddenly in the air... I want to throw up. Inhaling deeply, I smell smoke.

Asya's fire is a poor one, and smokes horribly. She must be burning all kinds of rotting rubbish from near the path. Asya herself is crouched by her unsaddled mount, trying clumsily to tie on a thick, rigid rope.

I've caught up with her, what now? Ah, now I have to bring her back. But that's a job for tomorrow. I'll have to overnight here with her, and keep half an eye out, who knows where she might hare off to, and Suila needs looking after too. There's another little bunch of cedars a way off, I can set up camp there. It's going to be awful whatever I do... I'll just have to manage. She will too, we'll both have to manage, get over it. And hopefully she'll sober up by morning. I just need to get her back to base, and the she can go to hell for all I care.

Asya's knot is tangled: she curses through clenched teeth and tries again. I twitch the reins gently. The perfect time to slip away unseen. But then my eye is caught again by the fire pit with a sooty makeshift cooking tripod, ringed by blackened stones, a split log beside. What do you know, a second rest stop, even if it is disused.

It's a good spot, with two enormous cedars, their roots intertwined where they push out from the ground, offering shelter from the wind and rain. I can hear the trilling of a nearby stream, and here's a perfect little grazing field... and the view...

The view from the edge of the vertical slope is making me queasy again. I can't get the image of the rider, hanging mid-air over the chasm, out of my head. It's a good spot, but somehow worrying. Uneasy. And oddly, almost familiar. As though I've dreamt it. Or I've been here before, but forgotten, forgot all about it

(little paws fingers clenched and ruddy-red claws like dirty fingernails paws poking up to the blackening sky brisk voices give it here turn it hold it smells like blood so thick it clogs my nostrils clogs my eyes I don't want to be here no no wake up it's the sleeping bag all tangled can't breathe wake up)

...Two rusty tin cans, filled with water, jostle for space on the hot coals. A mug and crumpled teabag wait their turn over on the log. There's a flattened mayonnaise tube hanging limply from the log, too. I'm stupidly pleased to see it, realising that Asya was porting not just mayonnaise by jam and chocolate spread. I collected the chocolate spread the day before, the last of the jam was eaten three days ago. The mayonnaise, too, someone had a squeeze of it just this morning, pressing on the packet with a bit of wood. I was thinking at the time that it was empty and needed burning, but then I got distracted, the thing disappeared. Now we know where it went.

Asya doesn't seem to have any supplies of her own. What the fuck was she thinking? Right, who even gives a shit. Suddenly it hits me, how cold, and tired, and hungry I am. What I'd give for some meat... I can't help picturing a big hunk of it, reddish-black, set onto a large scarred chopping board, and me, I'm about to go at it with my sharp knife, but first I carefully remove a couple of blades of grass and a blood-soaked piece of shredded moss (pieces of meat dumped on the grass I grab them my hands crusty with congealed blood stuff the meat into plastic trash bags plastic bags into saddle bags they don't fit a hand black with dried blood beside me get rid of this fucking thing the hand pulls a plastic bottle out of the saddlebag throws it rattling into the tree roots the hand is gone someone behind me is now gone I can finally lick my grimy fingers so delicious why is it so delicious I'm licking my fingers almost biting no no no wake up)

I'm peering intently below the lush cedars, with their mighty roots, whose tops would come up to my waist. I don't know if I want to see the thing I'm looking for but I do - faintly, in the coagulating shadows – I see it: the weathered glass neck of a water bottle. Ordinary glass, ordinary mineral water bottle, ordinary blue bottlecap.

From the way that Karash is stirring, I know I must have made a sudden move. A branch crunches underfoot, provoking a belated neigh from Suila. Asya twitches and bolts upright. She turns to me.

“You again...” It comes on a sigh, with a kind of exhausted revulsion. I shrug and get off the horse. Lean forward for a moment, hands pressing into my knees, and stretch out my lower back, painful and sweet all at once. I haven't the energy to talk around her, or to endure another stream of her crazed protestations. My stomach contracts and gurgles at the thought of hot buckwheat kasha.

Now I'm on the ground, the rest stop seems even more familiar. My consciousness may have tossed it from my memories, but my feet remember. My hands remember (buckwheat rustling across plastic like bird claws over scree over the gorge)

(we ate it here raw with our hands it was right here)

Asya clenches her fists and looks baleful. Moves as if to block the fire and it brings me back to myself.

“Listen, this is getting ridiculous.” I sound as irritated as I am. “Let’s just be two normal people for a bit. Right now is...”

Asya twists and folds. She shakes her head violently, her chin trembles, her face crumples: tears spurt from her eyes and stream down her cheeks, instantly flushed as though she’d been slapped by an invisible hand.

“Just leave me the fuck alone!” she hollers, half-choking. “Let me be! Why won’t any of you just let me be? You’re all doing my head in... normal fucking people...”

(All those horses that have that nightmare scar on their rump, the miraculous escapees, the young ones who were found in time, walked down to base, stuffed full of antibiotics. You saw them at Kaichi Trekking once every few years. They were ok horses, really, if you didn’t make any sudden moves. Just not fully eaten.)

“Could you just go please,” Asya mumbles. “Leave, ok?”

Her crumpled, blotchy face perfectly reflects fright, revulsion, helplessness – a mirror. Everything, all of it, is not going how it should, not how I imagined it, and how I imagined it would never be, could never be...

I have to work to unseal my dry mouth.

“Fine.”

“Really?!”

“Yes, fine...”

I go over to the cedar and pluck the bottle out of its roots. Knock off a layer of black, rotting needles. The sound of rustling buckwheat is giving me the shakes. I prise off the bottle cap and have a sniff. Maybe a tiny bit on the turn, but normal, ordinary grain... more or less. Edible, at any rate.

I'm really starving now. Screwing the cap back on, I toss the bottle over towards the fire. Asya startles and flaps her hands comically, as though to fend it off. She peers at the dull glass in absolute confusion, hands tucked to her chest, as though she's scared to touch the bottle, even accidentally. I go back to Karash, still patiently waiting.

I've got my foot in the stirrup when Asya gives a loud, annoyed sniffle and asks, nasally: "What, you won't even stay for tea?"

My face is burning, like I'm looking into ignited petrol. For a second, sheer rage makes me deaf and blind: how dare she, given where we, how it's, in my own... punch her in the face... I turn to her and open my mouth, ready to unleash all my fury, all my exhaustion and hopelessness. But her tear-streaked face is so aghast and embarrassed that instead I jerk my foot back out before I fall over and laugh hysterically.

Part 2 Chapter 6

"Kaichi Trekking" staffers do not go on foot.

Above shrub tundra we often find meadows of grass-like flora, which eventually grow sparse, giving way to moss and lichen.

Suila is usually represented as a bird with equine eyes. He observes the lives of humans and relates any changes to it: this is why he is often called "double-tongued," and also "stutterer." Suila is the one leading the sacrificial beast. His reward is splashes of wine.

Karash stops dead again and this time I'm not even trying to spur him on.

His flanks are heaving so hard I'm rocking in the saddle. I pat him on the neck, to calm him – my palm goes wet, it's like I've dipped it in warm salty water. I turn back. The crupper lines extending towards his tail have whipped up two lines of frothy lather. Suila is leaning his face into Karash's croup: he's swaying too, and Asya, bent low in her saddle is worriedly running her hands over his chest. She holds up her palm, covered in yellow foam,

I try to out-shout the wind. "Let's halt a minute, let them catch their breath." Asya nods skittishly

I don't like the look of her face: pale, damp with sweat, her lips dry and very chapped. I probably look the same, and I don't like that idea either. Halfway up the ascent I made her swallow down a hunk of chewy dried meat and a piece of chocolate and had a snack myself. That's probably the only reason we still haven't been blown off our horses.

Asya seems very small. Behind her is a vast expanse – the gorge itself and beyond the gorge the high Akkain plateau. I can see the lake, the high pass that leads to the Castles, and the two peaks overhanging Uul, rounded like humps. It's all so familiar, so well-trodden. And so unreachable from here... Just in case, I study the far side of the gorge: maybe there's a trail starting downriver? But no, the entire side of the gorge is a mad crush of stone, frozen forever in its downward hurtle. There's only one fording, to boot: given how abruptly the meadows give way, the river must be squeezed between scree on the far side and cliffs on this one. Silly to even think of it. From here, all my cherished places look bent out of shape, evanescent and strange. Sad. Veiled in transparent but impermeable fog. To return to them you must turn your back on home and walk away. I look at Akkai one last time, then focus again on Asya and the horses.

I'm thinking we are too high up, here. We've been climbing for a long time; at one point I even wondered whether we were curving around the mountain rather than gaining the plateau, but that's not right. It's just a very long ascent. It's just that we are too high, impossibly high. The wind smells of snow. Icy-cold, it makes your eyes water and the inside of your nose sting, but no matter how hard you try, all you get inside your lungs is emptiness.

A small, mean white sun hangs directly overhead in a mulled-purple sky that's too dark for midday. The sun doesn't warm, it burns. I'm freezing and burning up, all at the same time. We must be at about six and a half thousand feet. Maybe seven, but there's only a couple of peaks that high. At this altitude you could get out of breath walking fast. I don't understand where we've climbed to. It's too high. I'm not sure now I'd chosen the right route. There is no trail, this kind of plateau, grown over with short, dense turf, swallows all trails. Everything looks faded and leached. Bare patches of crushed stone the colour of rust. And splashes of lousewart, purple and ultramarine, and pale yellow. Tufted vetch, and dragonhead, and meadow pea. Flowers get crushed under hoofs, but the dents left in the grass spring back up before your eyes. The plateau, rising gently, stretches towards the horizon. Side to side, you can't see past low, stony peaks, swathed in deep snow.

I'm really tempted to turn my phone on and look at the satellite map. Get a sense of where we are, and also I'm curious about our altitude. But I dread the thought that as soon as the screen lights up, the phone will ring and Fair Maiden will ask, in a sad voice, why we left him behind all alone. Why we killed him. Why we were acting so weird, burying him...

Spluttering and blinking from the profusion of tiny black midges that flit across my view, a new thought enters my mind: what if I'm wrong? What if we don't *have* to be here, but just the opposite – we shouldn't, not for any reason, be here? What in blazes made me think we were meant to go through this way, rather than run for our lives, on foot, abandoning the horses if we had to, before we were... we were what, seen?

I knew, didn't I, that these were mountains were not meant for humans. I knew it but forgot, in the thrill of the hunt...

Karash slows his breathing, lowers his heads and starts to graze, carefully, almost shyly. Suila sniffs noisily at the lousewart, nostrils flared. Looks like the lawnmowers have stopped stalling, that's one less problem to worry about. Would be great if Asya stopped looking like she's about to vomit from a great height. I'm barely holding it together myself, so I turn my head before I see something I shouldn't.

I scan the plateau, figuring our direction – we should be heading forward and a little to the left, skirting an elongated little peak...

Then I see it coming, around a bald little crag and reach back to unstrap my multi-haz dister coat.

“Put yours on,” I shout back at Asya. Wind whips the words from my mouth and strews them around the slope. “Get it on you, whatever you've got, and we need to move.”

“Let them rest a bit more,” Asya begs, and I shake my head no. I'm screaming now.
“There's no time!”

The smell of snow in the wind is mind-numbing.

We manage to get across half the length of the plateau, maybe: then the storm cloud is upon us in an instant, with no preamble. One moment it's heading for us, swelling like a hideous explosion the colour of a bruise, and the next we're inside it. It's like being beaten up. Fleece gloves turn instantly into icy wet rags. The hailstones are so big there's no fabric that could soften the blows. I cringe and twist in the saddle, trying to hide my face. Pull my

hands back inside my sleeves, then catch myself – I’m still clutching at the reins - just in time. Karash ducks his head, does a wild leaping turn and thrusts up his rear end. I bounce hard, with a guttural grunt. The hazmat is getting in the way, making it hard to balance, good that I hadn’t put it on fully... Hailstones pummel my back and shoulders, distracting me and making me jerk around. Ok, pull back that dopey gelding’s head. Lean back hard, pull on the rein, don’t let him surge forward or buck again. Good, now gently, gently so you don’t spook him. Gentler still...

Karash still trembles from the force of the landing hailstones, but he’s not trying to run from them anymore.

Once I’ve got the horse somewhat under control, I remember Asya, also just in time: Suila is making tracks, shivering and shaking his head. His rangy trot is shaking Asya right out of the saddle, she’s already leaning dangerously sideways. I flick the lead rope, but there’s no need: Karash is very ready to break into a gallop and run from whatever this hard, painful, icy stuff is... I have to catch up with Suila. Block the way. Asya is clinging fiercely to her pommel. Somehow she manages to right herself. Her face is like a plate of oatmeal, with two floating prunes for eyes. It’s impossible to speak, so I show her: keep the reins short. Suila, resigned to the fact that there’s no getting away, tucks his ears close, to keep them safe from hail, and goes still.

Wind presses icy palms into my back, like a giant leaning on a door. I’m about to give in, creaking. This pressure will break me open, and the cold will get inside and never leave me. The rubber multi-haz doesn’t soften the force of the hail at all, little snowdrifts are gathering in every fold. My ears are ringing with the noise, my hood amplifying sound, turning the rumble of falling ice into a thundering waterfall, a crashing rockslide, a million booming, dissonant drums. But that’s ok. Now that that the horses are facing out of the wind, it’s not scary anymore, only very unpleasant.

Now we can wait out the storm cell. We’ll be ok. Asya won’t be able to hear me in all this, so I just give an extra-wide, exaggerated smile. She musters an answering smile in return, then goes still, looking ahead stonily. Only her nose twitches.

Five minutes. The hail is becoming less terrible, more like thumping, then patting, then tapping. The wind isn’t trying to knock me off the saddle anymore; it’s reduced to a cold, steady pressure, perfectly bearable. It even seems to be brightening: looks like the storm cloud has moved on. If we’re lucky, we’ll get over the pass before the next one lands.

I wave over to Asya: let's get moving. I turn around. And realise that it hasn't cleared. We're still in it. The cloud's ice-filled front end passed over us and through us and on towards the gorge, but it's burst its bellyful of snow. I can't see the little bald peak anymore, or the edge of the plateau that leads on to the uncharted valley. The world is reduced to prickly white slush and the tips of Karash's ears. I'm having to kick him in the sides and smack his snow-covered rum with the lead rope – I'm having to keep an eye on the reins too, or else the horse is liable to turn around covertly and start wandering back to familiar meadows, where it's nice and warm. My interventions are making me sweat inside my jacket – at least I've warmed up, small mercies. But I'm running out of steam. It's still a struggle to breathe; the wind smacks into my lungs so hard it's knocking out the oxygen. I'm getting exhausted, while there's still no end in sight for the snowstorm, and no sign of the trail down. And might not be for some time. I can't feel my hands or my face anymore. Stupid, I think. It's so stupid. Two days ago – an eternity - I was trying to scare Asya into sense, but this was a possibility I forgot to mention: an unfamiliar pass with not a hint of a trail. In a snowstorm.

It comes to me again: maybe we weren't supposed to be here. Maybe we should stop pushing before it's too late. The moment I stop urging Karash forward, he's turned sideways, flank to the wind. Now that my hood can shield me from the wind, my face goes hot. Asya catches my eye, makes a quizzical face.

"I'm thinking about heading back..." I shout. "Use our own tracks!"

While we can still see them.

Asya makes big eyes at me and shakes her head like a Chinese dummy – her lips are moving: no-no-no. I give a pointed shrug and look behind her, at the furrow the horses have plowed through the snow. A couple of feet beyond Suila, already the tracks look smudged and soft. This is bad.

Asya stops shaking her head.

"We can't go back!" She's grimacing, as though trying to convey with her face a concept too complex for shouting into the wind. What she's conveying is stubbornness, terror, despair. "It's a trial!" she screams. "Before we can pass through!"

I'm screaming at the top of my lungs too: "Fuck that!" I'm done with Asya's communication problems for now. "We'll figure it out later!"

“No! If I don’t pass through, they’ll have me!”

Who knows what she’s on about. My hand goes up; not quite to my face, but the gesture is obvious: you’re cuckoo. Asya’s face goes extinguished, expressionless.

I’m having to read her lips. “I can’t go back,” she says. I’m torn. I try to remember the map and the photos. To triangulate how far we’ve come already. I can’t be sure, but – it feels like far too much. Can’t be sure, but it feels like what’s ahead is closer to what’s behind... I wipe my face, and instead of drying it all I’m doing is distributing the icy droplets more evenly. My nose is running like a tap, cold always makes my nose run like a snotty toddler’s...

If I knew exactly the distance we’ve travelled... but I lost my sense of time a while back. You can’t orient by the sun in this white soup. But I guess it’s true, we’re too far along this path, and it doesn’t really matter whether this is some test or we’re just massively unlucky with the weather.

“Ok, let’s move out.” She can’t hear me, but she understands: for a moment her haggard face seems illuminated by joy. Gratitude. The fool. Honestly – a trial?

... now my left cheek is freezing. Either the wind is changing tack or it’s Karash swinging to the side so he doesn’t get wind full in the face. I should look back at the tracks to see if they’re straight or curving.

The numbing cold has already crept inside my clothes, and I have to force myself to turn around. I move my hood aside – I can’t be seeing right – and try looking over the other shoulder. Finally what I’m seeing becomes unmistakable, reaches my brain. My heart drops down to my stomach, swoops up to make a lump in my throat and oscillates madly like a trapped, terrified bird: Asya’s not there.

She’s run off again, that fool. The thought flashes up for a second, wildly, then recedes. I know she didn’t, not on purpose. Out here, right now – there’s nothing she can do on purpose. She just didn’t notice Suila turning back. Maybe she tuned out because of the cold. Or she assumed the horse was meekly following and trusted him, even when she lost sight of me.

This happens, and I'm used to doubling back to retrieve stragglers, but that was always on familiar trails, and never on my own. I bite down on my cheek, I can't afford to start crying now. Turn Karash around and set off at a trot, back over our tracks. When I shout, the wind hammers my words back into my mouth, together with a handful of crushed snow. My teeth ache with the cold. My stomach lurches with fright. My eyes are watery – that's the wind, it's just wind; wiping wet slush across my face brings up the sudden, untimely memory of Fair Maiden, the way he wiped his tears away like they were water from a tap. "I'll die if I don't find her," that's what he said, wasn't it?

Our tracks are vanishing under the snow. We should be at the fork now, or the spot where Suila would have jerked the reins from her cold-numbed hands, turned and started back – back to anywhere with no wind in his face. I shout her name again. Maybe I'm just shouting because I'm scared. Tracks, rocks, hollows – all of it subsumed in snow - I can't tell anymore what's what. My swollen heart beats thickly, unmaking me from the inside. "Asya," I whisper hoarsely. I'm mumbling: please, please, don't let her vanish, I need to find her. I'm willing to promise anything. I don't actually know what I could promise to those who may – or may not - be watching us, but I do promise. I'll do whatever you want, just let me find her.

Up ahead, the snow is darker where it sinks to the level of a stream bed. I can't see tracks at all, not even here where they should be most apparent. I scan side to side, maybe there's something upstream, or down – and see a yellow glimmer in the white, shiny like satin. The flash of light is so appealing that I ride up to it almost despite myself. It's a clump of mountain poppies, wavering above snow-covered rock. The wind bends them almost to the ground, but they persist. These unbearably fragile, tender blooms are dying in the cold but, for the moment, unbroken. For a second, I feel a stab of vivid, shameless hope. Well, you picked a time, I think crossly – and avert my eyes. The wind pulls at one of the snow canvases and a greenish-grey shadow congeals briefly, just beyond. It seems to hover inside an empty white void. You can't make out grey Suila in the white snow, but the multi-haz is smooth and slick, and snow slides off...

Thank you, I whisper crazily, kicking Karash into a gallop after the receding green, thank you, thank you...

Asya watches me with mild stupefaction, like someone rudely awakened. Or someone who's given up and wants to be left alone.

"No fucking way," I mumble.

“You ok?”

Asya blinks perplexedly, looks around. I get off the horse, tangling in the wide multi-haz and cursing under my breath. Get to Suila. Bring the rope. The wet snow underfoot is freezing into layers of ice, I’m slipping with every step I take. Rope goes through the girth strap, then around his neck. Another knot around my own cantle. Loop the rest of the rope, tuck in, affix... Deja-vu. Again the pass, again I’m towing Suila and Asya slumps silently in the saddle, stiff and awkward like a rag doll. This time I don’t take the reins from her, I don’t want her to lose control completely. I twist back into the white slush. There’s an instant jerk, which is Suila being stubborn, but Asya’s with it again, she urges him on, shouting crossly. Sheer mulishness makes me go fifty feet before I can admit what’s obvious: we’ve lost our bearings. The snowstorm shows no sign of abating. There’s no seeing more than five feet ahead, five feet of snow-covered planes devoid of marks or indentations. I can’t feel my face, can’t feel my hands. I just want to go to sleep. Snow rustles down my hood. Why hurry, why struggle, it whispers, forget your troubles, there’s nothing to get upset about now... So, so stupid, I think. On a trek, this would be where you ask the tourists to think about whether it’s actually scary, or still just really unpleasant? You need to say something to Asya, she must be getting the creeps, now is the time to reassure her, wake up, wake up...

Well, you don’t need to tell her anything, she already thinks you know what you’re doing. Don’t worry about her. She’ll be asleep before she knows what’s happening, she won’t have time to be scared. This is why you had to find her, so it would be easy...

(forget your troubles wake up)

“It’s the saspyga,” I say out loud.

The wind lobs a hard, sharp handful of snow into my eyes and I’m briefly submerged, wincing, in a ruddy haze. I can taste blood. Tremors run up and down like I’m a cell phone, vibrating silently.

The phone! I could laugh. It takes forever to load: I try to shield it from the snow eddies that melt over the screen, with my hand, that’s the last thing we need.

Finally it comes on, the tinny sound startling Karash, who jolts. Belatedly, I remember to pull in the slack reins, so I can do something if the horse tries to bolt. I click on the satellite map. Again that maddening, exhausting wait: loading, searching. The cloud cover shouldn’t

be a problem, especially not when there's no rain. But what if it doesn't work? What if it can't chart our position?

Then it comes to me that I'm worrying about the wrong thing: the battery symbol is hollering red. I shift in the saddle and Karash, picking up my stress, picks up speed too. Finally a dot appears. We move forward and the dot on-screen moves with us. Obviously there are no markings here, or mapped trails, it's all a white void, but the void is patterned with elevation lines. I need to find a spot where the elevation planes don't jostle inside the swirly labyrinth but stay apart - where the plateau flows steadily into the valley, instead of plummeting over cliffs and scree.

I find the place, no more than half a mile to the south-east. We only need to tack a little more to the left. I put a pin in it, just in case. I even have time to think that it's going to be ok, and we'll be down from this infernal plateau soon.

Then the phone rings.

Behind me, Asya unleashes a howl of protest .

She's right, I know she's right – but I can't seem to hit decline, I'm hypnotised. I take the call and Fair Maiden is there, sobbing into the receiver. He shrieks at me, in a voice clotted with terror and outrage: where is she, what are you doing to her, how could you, you have to save her, I can't live without her, if anything happens... where is she now?"

Where are *you* now, I think dully. And immediately it comes to me: it doesn't matter.

"Get over it," I grit, and end the call.

It rings again, but I keep clicking ignore, the spell is broken. Ignore. Ignore. He's going to drain the last bit of battery like this. I'm straining to fix the mark at the start of the descent in my mind, imprint that half-blank section of the satellite map onto my brain...

Suila, encrusted with wet snow, shoves in beside me. Asya is screaming and I can't make anything out in the roaring wind, but I see her gesticulating furiously, rolling her eyes and waving her hands. I'm trying to parse it, but the phone rings again, distracting me.

"You're getting us killed, you fuckwit!" I rage into the phone. Fair Maiden's whimpering reaches across an impossible void – then a revolting electronic gulp - the screen gently powers off.

I stare, stupefied, at the black, dead, snow-spattered screen. When I raise my eyes, an especially malicious gust tears the hood from my face.

My beanie is instantly shot through with cold: as I grab the edge to pull it tighter, I can finally process Asya's desperate shrieking.

“...block him, you idiot!” She falls silent, because she already knows.

I look around slowly, digesting, taking stock. Not a break in cloud cover. This kind of storm can last for hours – cloud catching on a mountain peak and pounding the plateau like a mallet, while it pours icy rain into the valley. This is wait-it-out weather; on a trek we usually build in an extra day, so we don't have to try and outrun it by going up into the heights. But we're already up.

I purse my chapped lips – it hurts – and draw the map in my mind. Karash is facing the right way. If I can hold him back... But I can't, not in this blind whiteness, without a single waysign to orient from.

Asya twists oddly, tucking her elbows into her side, she's nearly writhing in the saddle. Her face contorts. She's itching, horribly, her skin on fire beneath the multi-haz duster, parka, fleece, teeshirt, whatever else she got on – and she can't get to it, can't touch it, can't rake the skin that's demanding to be scratched.

She gives a convulsive shudder; she's trying to say something. I push my hood back and wave my hand: tell me.

“I have a compass,” she says, just loudly enough to hear. A wave of pure delight huge, warm and golden, washes over me.

“Give it here!” I shout. “What were you waiting for...”

“I didn't want to get in your way!”

I'm so incredulous, I want to laugh. You're something else, you are...

The plastic compass, button-sized, looks like it's been torn off some souvenir or a child's toy. I hold it in my closed fist as the grass gives way to dwarf birches, each little leaf a miniature snowdrift. It's hard for the exhausted horses to push through scrub, but what I took

for a descending slope, it really is taking us down. I still can't see ahead much, but birch like this usually grow on the gentler slopes. Karash suddenly perks up, adjusts direction fractionally, makes a diagonal push and – miracle of miracles – it's the trail, we've found the trail.

I give the compass a tender squeeze and stow it away in my pocket. I promised I'd do anything, and I know it will come due. Not because they need anything from me: it's just the rules. Like the laws of gravity, or the way that water boils at a different temperature the higher you climb. They're sure to collect, but right now I can't help thinking, I'll manage.

The snowstorm has resolved - into gloomy, ordinary rain.