

# DASTAN

towards the sea

{ Laura  
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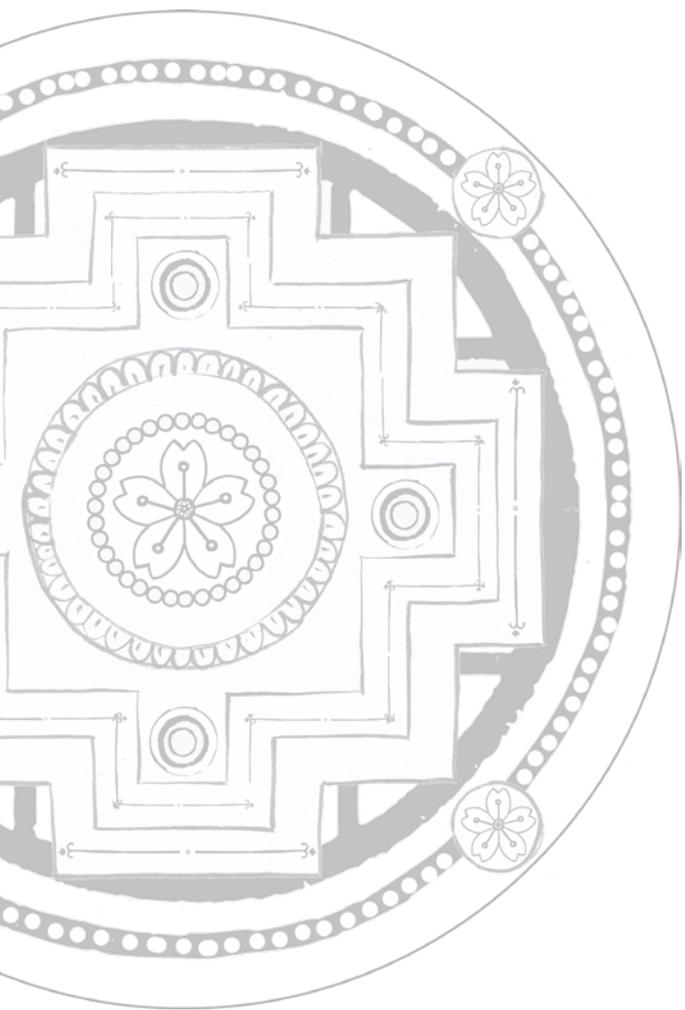
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CHAPTER I

ILYAS





The cold is a slab of steel between bone and skin, even now that spring is close and we no longer chatter our teeth in the dark. For a few days now, among the patches of hard snow, the sun has been lighting up the sand and the salt-grass undergrowth. In front of us, the Asian desert stretches towards the great lakes, towards West. Spots of sage and acacia trees break up the monotony of the landscape. And yet, at night we still snuggle up in our woollen blankets and curl up like frozen meatballs.

The wind hits the hut, whistling. The misty breath of the Long River creeps through the walls. Everyone is asleep, except for the Guardian, who is illuminated by the glow of the brazier. His dark circled eyes under the *shalpac*<sup>1</sup>.

Rustem and Samat are snoring. Their nostrils are clogged with mucus and their mouths are wide open. Not far away, next to Ilyas, Adel sleeps composed. Braids on her cheeks. I look at her as I did at the sky before. Anxiety fades, beautiful things are calm and quiet.

At the foot of the blanket, Siya dozes, curled up. When the wind shakes the wood, he raises his head, lowers his ears and opens his eyes. He looks like an

1. Kazakh winter headwear

owl, I think, because I've never seen an owl.  
Before we went to bed, we squatted on our backpacks in front of the hut entrance. Ilyas nodded to us and we nodded back.  
Adel hugged his knees with her arms and stared at the stars in the chill of the night.  
"Do you ever think of your parents?" she asked.  
After rubbing my arms with my hands, I answered: "Sometimes, when I'm afraid".  
In front of us, the desert was lost in a flat expanse. The tufts of grass and sparse bushes were darker than the darkness itself.  
Adel turned and swung the torch in her hand. The beam of light danced across her face. "Look up there."  
I lifted my eyes.  
"No one can tell the stars that they cannot shine."  
"But men can make us do what we don't want to. That's how the war was" I answered back.  
With a shrug, Adel said: "No one can tell you who you really are".  
"But they can kill us" I protested.  
Adel bit her lip and muttered, "It's not the same thing, Dastan. If you choose to shine, you will shine forever."  
Then she jumped up and ran inside.

I stayed out a while longer, peering at the darkness of the cosmos and the Milky Way. Finally Ilyas approached me, touched my shoulder and with a gesture invited me in.  
"The journey will be very long, won't it?"  
"Yes, it will be."  
"And is it dangerous?"  
"It could be, no one knows."  
"Ilyas, will we all make it to the sea?"  
He leaned down to my height, smiled warmly and whispered: "We'll do our best to make it happen".  
So I curled up on the makeshift bed, enjoying the warmth of the fire. I cuddled the cat and sighed.  
Now I can hardly fall asleep. It's not just for my mother or Adel. It's good to know that there are things as big as the sea and the firmament.



The first time I met Ilyas I had just slipped out of the flat. I smelled like a rotten banana and cramps were biting my stomach.  
Maybe she, my mother, was lying on the cold ground and the wind was ruffling her hair, breaking the quietness of Star City. Many years before, just a few kilometres from our neighbourhood, the best show in the world had taken place: space trav-

el. There was even a station at one time. What still remained was a launch pad, a rocket and a dead-end track across the desert. Before the war, I had often walked on it, dreaming of taking flight from the great cosmodrome. Sometimes, in the middle of the walk, I would close my eyes and plug my ears. Concentrating, I could hear the countdown: the impressive ticking of the seconds until the launch of a *Sojuz* rocket.

She could be there, a few steps away from the bushes, not far from the side of the building and the mural with the painted spaceship. When we were still able to leave for kindergarten, we often stopped to look at it. Dad worked a lot and never accompanied me.

My mother would lift her chin and point to the graffiti.

“Would you like to go to another planet, Dastan?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I’m afraid of flying.”

She would burst out laughing, ruffle my hair with her hand and say: “But men are meant to fly. Fear can turn from an enemy into an ally.”

“It’s been a long time since anyone has gone into space,” I answered back gloomy.

My mother shook her head and patted my cheek: “It’s only a matter of time, you’ll see. As I was say-

ing, man was made to fly, Dastan.”



That day, sitting on the cold step of the inner staircase, I remembered her eyes looking at the rocket. And I burst into tears. I missed the way she used to sing to me softly. I needed her voice. After my father’s death, she was all I had left.



A damp calm hung over the hallway. I was alone with the linear geometry of the floors and stairs. Frost came in gusts through the broken door. I shivered and trembled. In the emptiness, the sound of snow and my mother’s voice echoed, getting weaker and weaker.

I could have broken into the unguarded houses, grabbed a tin or a packet of salted meat. But I was terrified. In my memory, the soldiers’ footsteps tore through the silence.

There had been no electricity or running water for some time. I thought back to how little my mother was concerned about the matches that were running out. Smiling in the half-light, she rubbed the match on the rough strip of the packet. The smell of sulphur stung my nose. In the flickering halo of

the flame, her face was as pale as an icon. Although we had a torch, we used it sparingly. Supplies were running low and there had been no market for some time.

Every morning my mother ventured beyond the city limits. She would be gone for a whole day. She would wrap her head and cover her mouth with a coarse cloth. Then she would put on her shapan<sup>2</sup>, her kupè<sup>3</sup> made of coconut skin and a sheepskin cape. Already on the threshold she would tell me to use the hiding place if necessary. And I, unable to hold her back, would remain motionless in the morning darkness.

In the late evening, she would come through the front door, panting. Her sheepskin soaked and her skin cracked from the cold. She had bought some sour milk, a loaf of rice and a few slices of dried apple. The money had run out. A few pieces of jewellery remained to exchange for less and less food. Sitting on the bed, under the covers, every time I asked her how she had gone. I knew she had made it as far as the shacks along the Long River. It took her at least ten hours to get there and back. Every day she went further. Her feet slipped on the ice or

2. Kazakh clothing similar to a jacket

3. Kazakh winter clothing

dipped into the snow that swirled frantically above the desert.

Two nights before the soldiers arrived, on her way home, she had collapsed in exhaustion. She collapsed on the ground and fainted. In a panic, I repeatedly shook and called her. Finally, I managed to revive her, help her up and lay down on the bed. I had warmed the milk by placing it over the flames of two candles.

A few kilometres away, the old, disused gas pipeline was sinking into the sand and running towards the sea. Indifferent.

As I handed my mother a spoonful of milk, I had no idea that I would not see her again soon.



Two days later, Mum was already standing. Looking at her thin body, I wondered how long we would last. Dirt darkened her skin and yellowed her teeth. At night, the cold left us freezing under three layers of blankets. As darkness fell, we placed the portable heater in front of the bed. It would soon stop working.

To quench our thirst, we sipped fermented milk and nibbled on handfuls of fresh snow.

Soon we would leave. Marching along the river,

we would join an old farmer or a surviving farmer and share a windswept shack. I would look after the camels and a couple of skinny goats. I would ride a horse, muscular as my ancestors'. In the meantime, the last remaining old people had long since fled from the block of flats. The younger women, who had gone out to hunt for supplies, had never returned: swallowed up by winter or by the waters of the Long River.

Mum had waited until I was fully recovered from bronchitis. For the swirling snow in the sky to clear. At that time, I thought she would stay with me forever. That she couldn't slip on the frozen sand, break a bone or agonise in the desert. Away from the rotten or rusty walls of any old hovel.

No one would attack her. And not because she was invincible, or because of any special quality. No, it was the bond. Because of her bond with me, my mother came home every night. Even though my father had died in the conflict, I imagined that, through my mother, a part of him would stay with me forever. If something happened to her, I would have nothing left.

It was only when the soldiers broke in that I realised: the bond alone does not protect enough.

At first, from the floors below, we heard the squeaking and trampling of the combat boots.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a sheep's shawl, my mother strained her ear and pressed her lips together with her index finger. She was pale. Her eyes were fevered.

Suddenly she jumped up, staggered and leaned against the wardrobe. Then she gave me a nervous nod. Hesitantly, I approached her. Along the stairs, the noise of the soldiers became more and more insistent.

"Quickly, the hiding place!" she whispered in a hot breath.

I stared at her, stunned.

"You must go at once," she insisted, shaking me.

I didn't react. I lowered my gaze and clenched my fists: "I'm not going anywhere without you," I murmured. With two fingers she lifted my chin and forced me to look at her: "Don't talk nonsense," she remarked. "We've already talked about it. The hiding place is small. You have to go now and remember: you have to stay there for at least two hours. Can you calculate two hours, more or less, Dastan? Here. And you must cover your ears. For a long time, you understand? You must not listen."

I began to cry silently. We hugged. "Dastan, listen

to me,” she whispered, “you know what you have to do. You go into the wardrobe, lock yourself in and move the board to the back. Then you hide in the niche in the wall and rearrange the board. You have to stay still and quiet, Dastan. Do you remember that?”

We loosened our grip and I sniffed up.

My mother grabbed me by the shoulders. “You have to do what I told you!”

“Why?” I asked, sobbing.

She looked me straight in the eye. “Because I’m your mother,” she said.

“Please... if something happens to you, I’ll be alone. I can’t lose you after Dad too.” I begged.

“You can do it Dastan. Your father and I will always stay with you. Now go,” she ordered, tapping me on the back and trying to stifle the crying. I wanted to hold her again, but there was no time. The soldiers were downstairs. With my fists still clenched close to my hips, I looked at her one last time. The gesture of her hand hanging, her gaze and the half-closed lips. Everything about her said: *You are my son, and you must save yourself. It is the bond that asks you, Dastan. It is the bond.*

As I entered the wardrobe, I sensed the anguish of her silence.

Meanwhile, the soldiers had arrived. The soles of their boots squealed sharply on the landing. With frozen fingers I slid the door to the back of the wardrobe and, after taking refuge in the niche, I arranged it as best I could.

I was afraid that the wood would creak, betraying my presence. But even if I did make a noise, no one would notice. Just then, the soldiers broke down the door and entered the house.

The crash and thud preceded overlapping laughs, stern orders and a quick shuffle.

Without thinking, I grabbed the wax plugs I had in my pocket and stuck them in my ears. Immersed in a muffled silence, I crouched down and inhaled the damp stench of the wall.

As the minutes passed, I wanted to rip the caps off, slip out of the niche, move the board and open the cupboard. I wanted to run to her, but I was afraid. I never thought about death. I didn’t believe that what could neither be seen nor heard was more crushing than the cold or more insistent than hunger.

I was terrified by the knowledge that I might become an object in their hands. A broken doll.

A week before, my mother had told me an anecdote. On one of her sorties, she had chatted with

a rice farmer near the riverfront. Protected by the fragile shelter of her hut, the old woman told her a secret. There was a rumour that the war had been over for a long time and that the remaining soldiers, without flags or uniforms, had turned to crime. That they were killing and pillaging villages and semi-deserted towns. The curious fact was that at that time children started to disappear.

Taking on an impenetrable expression, the old woman conjured up atrocious scenarios ranging from archaic rituals to episodes of cannibalism.

My mother brought her hands to her face.

With the crackling brazier in the background, the woman continued her story. Not long before, a young woman had come to the door of the house. She had begged for a loaf of rice. She could hardly stand up. A terrible thing had happened to her. One morning she had to go out in search of food. She was holding her baby by the hand. She didn't trust her baby alone in the house.

They had not gone very far from the perimeter surrounding the block of flats where they lived. At one point, the little one had loosened his grip and run in the direction of a frayed bush, hiding from view. In a moment of distraction, the mother had looked up at the sky disconsolately and headed for the

building. She had looked behind and around, calling out to her son, but got no answer so she had pointed towards the dirt road.

She had walked across the square in front of the building and explored the boundaries between the neighbouring buildings. She had shouted the child's name in an increasingly hoarse voice, her heart racing in her chest. From that moment on, she had not stopped searching for him, reaching as far as the villages along the river. Day after day, with the shuffling gait of a ghost.



In the meantime, some time had passed. Between the wall and the wardrobe, there was hardly any air. Pressed against the rough cavity, I clutched my arms.

Mum and I didn't know why that niche was there. It was likely that the previous tenant had put a statue of a saint or of Mother Mary in there. She didn't really care. She had no particular interest in spiritual matters. She had hidden the recess and placed a cupboard in front of it. The war had sharpened her wits. With the help of an old carpenter, she had dismantled the plank that closed the cabinet at the

back and inserted a rail to make it slide. The material was scrap and the man's hands were shaking incessantly, but overall the work was decent. It was to be hoped that someone wasn't shining a torch between the wall and the cupboard, or inside. Careful examination would have revealed the deception. It was with relative sorrow that the following week we received the news of the carpenter's death. He took our secret to the grave. He was, after all, ill and old. Mum commented on this, murmuring: "Dying old is more acceptable if you've saved a young person's life".

Finally, I got up. Numbly, I clung to the peeled handrail and descended the last few steps. I crossed the hall, grabbed the door handle and pulled. The air assaulted me like a whip. Wrapped in my kupé, I stepped out onto the square. At the sight of the grey sky and the dull earth, I staggered. Enveloped in the dark desert light, I bit my lip and shook my head. I should have looked for here near the fescues. Or behind the wreck of a rusty car.

I tried to convince myself that she wasn't dead. That she hadn't been dragged down the stairs and thrown into the freezing cold dust.

I remember that one day in class, my friend Altai approached me with a serious expression. He had

found out what men did to women during the war. In a documentary, an old woman with a handkerchief tied around her neck told her story. According to Altai, she must have been at least 100 years old. He was struck by her blank stare and her emotional words. In the interview, the woman had said that violence turns the victim into a bag of empty skin. A sack that no longer even feels the need to breathe.



Picking up my nose, I took a few steps and coughed. Darkness was falling. The relentless wind was sweeping the sky on the horizon. Without a single reason in the world, I moved forward. I looked for my mother's body around the withered trees. I walked around the buildings in the growing darkness: four nine-storey buildings, one attached to the other.

Shivering from the cold, I walked the entire area where three more buildings stood. I knew there was no one left. In the silence of the night, the wind bounced against the facades and whistled.

I couldn't find her, yet I couldn't stop. At least until I heard the creaking of dry branches and a soft pattering. An indistinct figure was arriving from the road, straight ahead of the old space station. Be-

side it, a dark mass was cautiously darting along. It didn't take long for me to focus on them, surprised by their calm gait. A man, his mouth covered by a scarf and his *shalpac* pulled down over his eyes, was approaching with a Bactrian camel<sup>4</sup> at his side. It was carrying a huge backpack. At first, I thought it was an allucination. That an angel oof death had appeared. When we were facing each other, the anguish subsided. I was still alive, although I was swaying in the wind and could no longer feel my hands or feet. The man was watching me. The camel stood beside him motionless.

I stared at him. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five or thirty years old.

He gave me an intense look and asked, "How many of you are there?"

"Survivors?"

"Yes."

With a shrug of the shoulders, I replied: "Only me. They all ran away. Many died and my father went off to war a few years ago. The enemies captured and killed him. My mother and I lived here and stayed because I was sick. They took her away a few hours ago. I was saved by a hiding place".

The boy nodded, lifted his eyes and took a concen-

4. Common cammel in Central Asia

trated expression: "Children?"

"From what I know, I'm the only one."

"Then you must come with me," he said in a neutral tone. With my voice broken by the cold, I murmured, "With you, and to go where? Who are you?" I had the impression he was smiling: "My name is Ilyas. We like to say we are Guardians. Guardians of life."

"I don't understand, what do you want?"

"We are a group, we look for children. To save them. The few that are left, at least."

"Do you want to take me to the safety of some vil-  
lage?" I said, moving backwards.

"No, much safer. Tomorrow we can reach a group of huts near the river. The others are already there. I walked a lot today, but I only found you. I was about to give up and go back, but my instinct told me to continue."

"What if you hadn't found me?"

Ilyas glanced at the dark silhouettes of the build-  
ings.

"I would have entered one of these houses. I would have spent the night and left."

By now I couldn't see anything, so I took out my backpack, rummaged in it and grabbed my torch. Hoping it would still work, I hesitantly pointed it

at the pair and switched it on. Held by Ilyas with a rope, the camel had craned its neck forward. He seemed to be getting impatient.

“What should I do?” I asked suddenly exhausted. I felt I could trust him.

“Go into the house. We’ll leave tomorrow. I also have food,” he said, pointing to the camel and the bags he was carrying on his back.

The idea of going back in there twisted my stomach. But I couldn’t stand up, and if I hadn’t listened to him, I really would have met the angel of death.

“How do I know you’re not one of those who kidnap children? Mum said she heard it from an old woman down in the village. And then I have to find her. Maybe she’s still alive and they’ve taken her somewhere.”

Ilyas shook his head and stroked the side of the camel, who remained unperturbed.

“There is nothing more you can do. Except coming with me. Those who take the children have a power. They look them in the eye and they follow them, as if they had forgotten everything else. We Guardians are deserters. We left the war before it was over. We want to help the children. We can we start again only with them.”

Shaken by violent tremors, I wrapped myself in my

coat. I managed to stammer out: “I only want my mother to come back.”

“If you don’t come with me, you won’t be able to do anything.”

I clenched my jaw.

“If you don’t, you’ll die”, now he was shaking too.

“Alright then,” I surrendered. “For the moment let’s do as you say. But only for the moment.”

With a nod of his chin Ilyas nodded. I gestured for him to follow me and with slow steps all three of us walked back to the building.

“Where shall we put the camel?” I asked in front of the door.

Ilyas smiled: “It can stay in the hall. It won’t move.”

Astonished, I looked at the animal, fascinated by its difference.



We spent the night in mum’s big bed. Ilyas didn’t stink. His clothes smelt of the wild, of life teeming along the river. I wanted to ask him many things, but my head was heavy on my neck and I kept shaking. For dinner, we ate *kurt* softened in milk. It had been ages since I had tasted cheese.

In silence, we got ready for bed. The warmth of the stove had not erased the wetness of the sheets.

“Ilyas?”

“Tell me, Dastan.”

I had covered myself up to my chin. “Why are they taking the children away. Who are these people? Do they have mothers?”

Ilyas cleared his throat in the darkness: “I don’t know much. They kidnap children, hypnotise them. I think they want to kill them. Once, when I was trying to save one, they found us. They hypnotised me too and took the little girl.”

“But maybe they mean well, maybe they’re like you!” I exclaimed in a shrill voice, “Maybe you want the same thing and they don’t know it.”

“You said it yourself, Dastan. You heard what that peasant woman in the village was saying. A Guardian would never take a child away from its mother, but he would help her.”

Disappointed, I lowered my head. Despite the cold, I could smell my feet. The bed squeaked.

“They have no weapons, except that of their gaze. When they hypnotised me, it was as if I had become a mannequin.”

“But they don’t necessarily kill them,” I replied timidly.

“No, not necessarily. But they’re not the good guys, Dastan. They’re not the good guys,” Ilyas concluded

before the stillness of the night fell over everything.