



THE WHISPER OF SUBMERGED SANCTUARIES

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Submerged Sanctuaries**

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Hidden in the depths of the flooded caves of Issyk-Kul lies a secret that could change the course of history. Archaeologist Alexei and ethnographer Dinara set out on an expedition, but their search turns into a deadly race. Secret societies, ancient enigmas, and whispers from the past lead them along the trail of Nestorian monks who concealed an artifact of incredible power. Who will be the first to decipher the ancient code—the researchers or those willing to kill for power?

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Prologue: The Concealment of Treasures (1218)

The night was clear and cold. The stars of the Chuy Valley shone with particular brilliance, like thousands of celestial witnesses observing the events unfolding below. On any other evening, Brother Thomas would have savored this spectacle, but tonight, the beauty of the heavens was the last thing on his mind.

The Nestorian monastery in Suyab, once a thriving bastion of Christianity on the Great Silk Road, had descended into feverish commotion. The alarm bell had rung after sunset when a messenger arrived from the east. Mongols. Genghis Khan's innumerable army, led by Commander Jebe Noyon, was just five days' march from the city. With them rode Chagatai himself, the great khan's second son.

Thomas ran a hand through his short, graying hair. At forty-five, he was perhaps the most unusual member of the community. A European, born in distant Normandy, who had journeyed from crusader to Nestorian monk. He had spent the last fifteen years here, in the heart of Asia, studying local languages and customs, transcribing ancient texts, and healing the sick. Suyab had become the home he had never truly had before.

And now this home was about to be reduced to ashes.

"Brother Thomas!" called young novice David, descending the stone steps to the underground repository. "Father Nathaniel asks if everything is ready?"

Thomas turned. David, an eighteen-year-old with lively brown eyes and olive skin, was his pupil and assistant. Half Syrian, half local Sogdian, he possessed a rare gift for languages and a sharp mind. Thomas nodded toward the heavy chests, already packed and sealed.

"Tell him the sacred texts and relics are ready for transport. We need another two hours to gather the medical treatises and instruments."

"And what about the treasury?" David lowered his voice to a whisper.

Thomas frowned. The question of the monastery's treasury had sparked fierce debates among the brothers. Through centuries of trade on the Silk Road, the community had amassed considerable wealth: gold and silver artifacts, precious stones, rare fabrics, and spices. But there was also something else—valuables entrusted to the Nestorians by keepers of other traditions, including wandering brothers from distant Jerusalem, those known as Templars.

"Father Nathaniel still has his doubts," Thomas answered quietly. "He says the true treasures of the church are in our hearts and minds, not in gold and silver."

"But the Mongols will leave no stone standing!" David protested passionately. "We cannot allow these valuables to perish or fall into pagan hands."

Thomas gently placed a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I agree with you. That's why I'm preparing the treasury as well," he nodded toward the far corner of the cellar, where a small, unremarkable wooden box stood in the shadows. "Especially what's in there."

David followed his gaze.

"The crystal," he whispered.

Thomas gave a short nod. Among all the monastery's treasures was one item whose value exceeded everything else. Not because of gold or precious stones, but because of its origins and supposed properties. A crystal found in the Judean hills during the time of King Solomon and crafted by ancient masters. It was said to cure incurable diseases and reveal a person's true nature, amplifying both the light and dark sides of the soul. A relic that had made a long journey through Persia, India, and finally into the hands of the Nestorians, who recognized its dual nature.

"Get ready, David," said Thomas, turning away from the box. "We leave before dawn. We have a long journey through the mountains to Issyk-Kul."

The cold mountain wind cut through to the bone, forcing them to wrap themselves in heavy cloaks. A caravan of two hundred camels moved slowly along the northern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul. Three days of travel lay behind them, and fatigue was beginning to take its toll. The Nestorians who had fled Suyab traveled with a group of merchants and ordinary townspeople who had decided to escape the Mongols. Their destination was the Chinese city of Kashgar, where they hoped to find refuge.

Thomas rode in the middle of the caravan, glancing back from time to time. An uneasy feeling had haunted him since the previous night when he had dreamed of Mongol horsemen pursuing their group. That morning, one of the scouts reported seeing a distant cloud of dust.

Father Nathaniel, a gray-bearded elder with an ascetic face, drew level with him on his mule.

"Brother Thomas, you look troubled."

"We must change our route, Father," Thomas said without preamble. "I'm almost certain the Mongols have learned of our departure and are pursuing us."

"But there is no other path to Kashgar," the abbot frowned. "Mountains to the north, the lake to the south."

"That's precisely why we need to split up." Thomas lowered his voice. "And the treasures must be divided too, so that not all will fall to our pursuers if they catch up with us."

Nathaniel was silent for a long time, gazing at the gleaming surface of Lake Issyk-Kul in the sunlight.

"You're right, Brother Thomas. I've hesitated too long..." he finally said. "But now I see the wisdom in your words. What should we do?"

Thomas pointed toward the approaching hills:

"Twenty camels with part of the treasure and fifty people will go through those hills to the Armenian monastery. I know its abbot, Father Grigor. He will give us sanctuary and help hide the valuables. The rest will continue toward Kashgar."

"And the crystal?" Nathaniel asked quietly.

"It will come with me," Thomas replied. "And your successor, David, as well. If... if I don't live to complete the journey, he must preserve the secret."

The abbot nodded.

"So be it."

By sunset, the caravan had split. Thomas, David, and forty-eight others—monks and several families of local Christians—turned toward the mountains, leading the laden camels. The others continued along the lake.

Thomas's foreboding proved correct the following day. When they were already within sight of the Armenian monastery, a scout galloped in with news that a Mongol detachment was approaching from the east. And a second unit, as if anticipating their maneuver, was moving from the west, cutting off the path to the monastery.

"They're pinning us between the mountains and the lake," Thomas said grimly when the small band of fugitives gathered for council. "We have a few hours before they catch up with us."

"What shall we do?" asked one of the women, clutching a small child to her chest.

A heavy silence fell. Everyone understood what fate awaited them if they fell into Mongol hands. Rumors of the cruelty of Genghis Khan's warriors had reached even these remote places.

"Not all the treasures should fall to them," Thomas finally said. "We can hide them."

He beckoned to David and several other strong young men.

"Father Grigor told me of a place not far from here. A cave in the mountains where a stream flows. If we can temporarily divert the water, we can hide the valuables inside, then let the water flow back along its course. The Mongols will never find them there."

Work began immediately. The men found the indicated cave and started building a temporary dam, diverting the stream. Women and children helped unload the camels, while the monks carefully packaged the valuables in oiled leather and canvas to protect them from water.

Thomas left his helpers to finish the work and returned to the other fugitives. Taking a scroll of parchment from his tunic, he quickly drew a detailed map of the cave and its location.

"David," he called his pupil when he had finished. "Take this map and medallion," he removed a silver medallion with ancient symbols engraved on it from his neck. "There's a secret compartment in the medallion. Inside is a parchment with instructions on how to open the box containing the crystal, should it be found."

David's eyes widened.

"Master, I cannot..."

"You can and you must," Thomas interrupted firmly. "You must survive, David. Someone must preserve the knowledge. Not all of us will live to see tomorrow."

David bowed his head, accepting the medallion and map.

"I will preserve them at the cost of my own life."

"No," Thomas smiled. "You will preserve them by preserving your life. Promise me you'll try to survive."

"I promise," the young man whispered.

When night fell on the mountains, the arduous work was complete. Deep within the drained cave, in a niche hidden from prying eyes, they placed most of the treasures. Thomas personally installed the final slab covering the cache—a stone on which he had carved a cross with his own hands.

"Now let the water flow back," he ordered when everyone had left the cave.

They dismantled the dam, and the stream, as if rejoicing in its freedom, roared back along its former course, flooding the cave and concealing the entrance to the treasury.

Thomas stepped away from the churning waters and looked up at the starry sky.

"Now prepare yourselves," he told the others. "At dawn, we make our last stand."

But deep down, he knew that none of them would live to see the next sunset. His only hope was that David, whom he had secretly sent along mountain paths toward Kashgar during the night, would manage to evade pursuit. And that someday, many years later, someone would find this medallion and map and understand their true value.

A blast of icy wind swept across the foothills. The water in the newly flooded cave bubbled, as if something were trying to break free from beneath the stone slabs, but then settled, concealing its secret for the time being.

The era of the Nestorian treasures was just beginning.

Chapter 1: The Discovery (Present Day)

Rain drummed against the roof of the old wooden house, creating a cozy background noise that muffled all sounds from the street. Alexei Sorin stood at the mansard window, gazing out at the wet St. Petersburg rooftops. His athletic yet not overly muscular build was discernible beneath his loose sweater, and his facial features—with well-defined cheekbones and attentive brown eyes—revealed the same academic focus that had characterized his grandfather. In his hand, he clutched a cup of cold coffee, which he had yet to taste. For the past three days, he had been sorting through the archive of his grandfather, Professor Igor Nikolaevich Sorin, a renowned historian and Orientalist who had passed away a month ago at the age of ninety-seven.

Sorin senior had been a legend in academic circles. A specialist in ancient Central Asian civilizations, author of dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles, a man who had dedicated his life to uncovering the secrets of the Silk Road. For Alexei, however, he had simply been Grandfather—somewhat eccentric, eternally immersed in his manuscripts, but at the same time incredibly kind and always ready to share another captivating story about times long past.

His unexpected death in his sleep had made Alexei his sole heir. Alexei's parents had died in a car accident when he was twelve, and it was his grandfather who had taken him in, raised him, and set him on his path in life. Now, at thirty-two, Alexei was a successful archaeologist specializing in computer reconstruction of ancient artifacts. "A technician in a humanities field"—that's how he jokingly described himself.

With a sigh, Alexei turned away from the window and surveyed the mansard. Everywhere stood stacks of books, folders with papers, boxes filled with photographs and slides. His grandfather had been one of those scholars who didn't trust digital archives and preferred to store his materials in the old-fashioned way—on paper.

"I've almost finished with this box, Grandfather," Alexei muttered, addressing the large portrait of the professor hanging above the desk. "But there are at least ten more to go. You could have been more organized with your notes."

It seemed to him that the wrinkles around his grandfather's eyes in the portrait formed into a mischievous smile. Alexei smiled back and returned to the desk, where an open cardboard box filled with folders lay.

The next folder was simply labeled: "Expedition 1953-1955. Personal." It was strange that his grandfather had marked it as personal. Usually, he meticulously cataloged all his expedition materials by theme. Alexei untied the faded ribbons and opened the folder.

Inside were just a few documents: yellowed diary pages with faded ink, several black-and-white photographs, and a small sealed envelope made of thick paper. Alexei carefully removed the diary and began to read.

"May 12, 1954. Lake Issyk-Kul. Something unusual happened today. While exploring caves on the northern shore, Kambarov found a strange medallion. Judging by its style, it's Nestorian, presumably from the 12th-13th centuries. Symbols are engraved on the reverse side, which I cannot yet identify. The expedition leader, Comrade Voronov, insists on immediately transferring the find to central administration, but something makes me hesitate. Perhaps it's young Kambarov's intuition. He claims the medallion 'wants to stay' with me. The boy is only 12 years old, but his perceptiveness sometimes astounds me..."

Alexei turned the page.

"May 16, 1954. Voronov received orders from Moscow to wrap up work in the caves and relocate to the Cholpon-Ata area. The official reason is to concentrate efforts on more promising sites. But rumors are circulating that a KGB commission is coming to our camp. It might be about the deserter whom local shepherds discovered not far from our camp. Or perhaps it's something else. In

any case, I've made my decision. The medallion will stay with me until I solve its mystery. Kambarov has promised to help and to introduce me to his grandfather, who, according to him, knows ancient legends about the treasures of Issyk-Kul..."

The entries ended abruptly. The following pages had been torn out. Alexei frowned. It was unlike his grandfather to destroy his notes. He should have valued every line, especially regarding his expeditions.

Alexei set the diary aside and picked up the photographs. The first showed the expedition camp—tents on the lakeshore, people in field uniforms. In the second, a group of men in formal suits stood near some mountain slope. And finally, in the third—a young version of his grandfather next to a Kyrgyz teenage boy, both smiling, with the entrance to a cave in the background.

Intrigued, Alexei picked up the sealed envelope. It was heavier than it first appeared. Something shifted inside. There were no inscriptions on the envelope, only a small red wax seal with an imprint resembling a stylized cross.

Alexei carefully opened the envelope, trying not to damage the seal. Inside was a folded sheet of paper and something wrapped in a piece of dark fabric. Unfolding the paper, he discovered a short note written in his grandfather's firm handwriting:

"Alexei, if you are reading this, it means I am no longer with you. Forgive my secretiveness, but some secrets are too dangerous to entrust to paper. This medallion is the key to one such secret. I have kept it for more than sixty years but never dared to use it. Now it is your inheritance and your choice. There is a hidden mechanism in the medallion. If you decide to activate it, be prepared for the consequences. Some doors are better left closed. With love, your grandfather."

With trembling hands, Alexei unwrapped the fabric. On his palm lay a silver medallion the size of a large coin. Despite its age, the metal had not tarnished and shone as if new. On the front was an equilateral cross with widening ends, framed by an intricate ornament. On the reverse side were strange symbols, resembling both Syriac script and some astronomical signs.

Alexei's heart beat faster. He held the medallion closer to the light of the desk lamp, examining every detail. A thin line ran around the edge—an almost imperceptible seam. It seemed the medallion could indeed be opened. But how? His grandfather had mentioned a hidden mechanism.

Alexei carefully began pressing on various elements of the ornament. Nothing happened. Then he tried turning the edges of the medallion in opposite directions—to no avail. Perhaps press the center of the cross? Nothing again.

He had almost given up when he noticed that one of the symbols on the reverse side looked slightly more convex than the others. Alexei carefully pressed it with his thumb. A barely audible click sounded, and the medallion split into two halves.

Inside was a tiny piece of parchment, folded several times. Alexei carefully unfolded it with his not-too-delicate fingers, afraid of tearing the fragile material. The parchment displayed the same strange symbols as on the reverse side of the medallion, as well as a short inscription in Latin:

"Light in water, water in light. Solomon's key will open the way."

Alexei read this phrase several times. It seemed both simple and enigmatic. What was this "Solomon's key"? And what path was it supposed to open?

Below the inscription was a schematic drawing resembling a fragment of a map with a lake and marked points on its northern shore. One point was circled and marked with a cross. Alexei immediately recognized the outline—it was Lake Issyk-Kul.

He leaned back in his chair, clutching the medallion halves in his hand. The rain outside intensified, drumming on the roof with redoubled force. Fragments of thoughts raced through his mind. His grandfather had clearly found something important during that expedition in 1954. Something he had concealed all his life and decided to pass on only after his death.

Alexei reached for his phone. He needed to talk to someone about this find, someone who understood ancient artifacts and, more importantly, the geography of Issyk-Kul. A face flashed in

his memory—olive skin, warm brown eyes with a characteristic almond shape, an unruly strand of chestnut hair constantly escaping from under a hair tie. He involuntarily recalled that expressive look she always gave when she disagreed with something.

Dinara Kambarova, his classmate and former lover. A talented ethnographer specializing in Central Asian cultures. Now she worked at the Historical Museum in Bishkek. And she was the granddaughter of that very boy Kambarov who was in the photograph with his grandfather.

This couldn't be a coincidence.

Alexei glanced at the clock—almost midnight. Too late for a call. But he couldn't wait until morning. He found Dinara's number in his contacts and pressed the call button. After several rings, a sleepy voice answered:

"Hello?"

"Dinara, it's me, Alexei. Sorry for the late call."

A pause.

"Alexei?" Her voice held surprise and wariness. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"Yes... no... I don't know," he answered honestly. "I found something in my grandfather's archives. Something related to the expedition to Issyk-Kul in 1954. And it seems your grandfather was involved as well."

Another pause, this time longer. When Dinara spoke again, her voice sounded much more composed:

"What exactly did you find?"

Alexei hesitated. Was it wise to tell her about the medallion over the phone? Something told him it wasn't the best idea.

"I'd rather show you in person. I can fly to Bishkek in a couple of days."

"Are you serious?" Her voice mixed disbelief and interest. "After three years of silence, you suddenly decide to fly to Kyrgyzstan because of some old expedition?"

"Dinara, this is important. I can feel it. My grandfather concealed something all these years, something connected to your family."

She was silent for so long that Alexei thought the connection had been lost. Finally, she said:

"All right. Come. I'll meet you at the airport. But, Alexei..."

"Yes?"

"Be careful. Don't tell anyone about your discovery. And... try not to attract attention."

It sounded strange, even alarming. But before he could ask what she meant, Dinara continued:

"And about what was between us..." her voice softened. "That's in the past. Right now, only this... discovery matters. Get to Bishkek, and we'll talk."

With those words, she hung up, leaving Alexei bewildered. He looked at the medallion lying on the desk. In the dim light of the desk lamp, the silver seemed almost alive, pulsating. As if the ancient artifact had awakened after a long sleep and was now waiting to see what would happen next.

Alexei carefully folded the medallion halves together. They joined with a barely audible click. He put the chain around his neck and hid the medallion under his shirt. The cold metal quickly warmed from his body heat.

"What did you find, Grandfather?" he whispered, looking at the portrait. "And why did you hide it for so long?"

The rain outside had turned into a downpour. Drops pounded against the glass with such force that it seemed as if someone was persistently asking to come in. Alexei approached the window and drew the curtains. A strange feeling of unease wouldn't leave him. It was as if he had taken the first step on a path leading into the unknown, and now he couldn't turn back.

He took his phone and booked a flight to Bishkek for the day after tomorrow. Then he began gathering necessary documents and things for the trip. His gaze fell on a stack of recently received

bills—for utilities, taxes, apartment mortgage. Life in St. Petersburg had never been cheap, and the salary of a research fellow at the Archaeological Institute was not the highest.

A cynical thought flashed: perhaps the medallion really did lead to some treasure? Money wouldn't hurt right now.

But immediately he felt ashamed of this thought. His grandfather had dedicated his life to science, not treasure hunting. And if he had preserved this medallion and passed it to his grandson, there must have been some deeper meaning.

Alexei resolutely closed his suitcase. Whatever awaited him in Kyrgyzstan, he had to get to the truth. He owed it to his grandfather. And, perhaps, to himself.

Outside the window, the moon momentarily appeared among the night clouds, casting a silvery light on the desk where the medallion had recently lain. In this light, outlines resembling the contours of a lake on an ancient map briefly emerged. And then the moon disappeared again, and the room plunged into semi-darkness.

The journey was beginning.

Chapter 2: Reunion

Bishkek greeted Alexei with heat and bright sunshine. After the damp St. Petersburg summer, it was actually pleasant. He emerged from the Manas Airport terminal, squinting in the bright light and wiping sweat from his forehead. People bustled around him, taxi drivers shouted their offers, and somewhere nearby two men argued in raised voices.

Alexei looked around for Dinara. They hadn't seen each other for three years—since their relationship had ended in a painful breakup. Back then, he had chosen a career in St. Petersburg, while she had opted to return to her homeland.

He spotted Dinara immediately, though she stood in the shade of a large tree. The same long dark hair with copper highlights in the sun, gathered in a casual ponytail, the same expressive almond-shaped eyes the color of dark amber, framed by thick eyelashes. The elegant line of her neck and stubborn chin gave her face both softness and determination. Only now she looked more composed, more... professional. She wore light-colored trousers, a loose sand-colored blouse, and a light scarf with turquoise patterns covering her shoulders.

Their eyes met, and for a moment, it seemed to Alexei that the past three years had vanished like smoke. But when he came closer, he saw restraint in her eyes.

"Hello, Alexei," she said in Russian. Her accent, barely noticeable during their student years, had now become slightly more pronounced. "How was your flight?"

"Hi, Dinara." He smiled, not knowing how to behave. Hug her? Shake her hand? In the end, he simply nodded. "The flight was fine, thank you. Just delayed a couple of hours in Almaty."

She nodded and gestured for him to follow her.

"My car is in the parking lot. I've booked a room for you in a hotel downtown. Inexpensive, but clean. I think you'll like it."

They walked side by side, maintaining their distance. The air between them seemed filled with unspoken words. Alexei searched for a way to start a conversation, but everything felt inappropriate or banal.

"You've changed a lot," Dinara said unexpectedly as they approached her car—a small blue Toyota. "You look... sterner."

Alexei smirked.

"And you're still the same," he replied.

It was a lie. She had changed. Become more confident, more reserved. During their student years, Dinara had been open and impulsive, always ready to argue and defend her point of view. Now there was a kind of inner strength and calmness about her that hadn't been there before.

They got into the car, and Dinara confidently steered out of the parking lot. They drove in silence for several minutes. Finally, Alexei couldn't stand it and asked:

"How is your grandfather? Is he still alive?"

"Yes, he's alive," Dinara nodded. "He's 84 now, but still a sturdy old man. Lives in a village near Issyk-Kul. Grows apples and keeps a bee farm."

"I'd like to meet him."

Dinara gave him a quick glance.

"That might be arranged. But first, tell me what you found."

Alexei hesitated. On one hand, he had come specifically for this—to share his discovery and get help. On the other—something made him cautious. Perhaps it was Dinara's strange warning on the phone, or simply the years spent in academia, where one always needed to protect one's research from competitors.

"I'll show you when we're in a secure place," he finally said.

Dinara braked sharply at a traffic light and turned to him.

"You don't trust me?" There was more surprise than offense in her voice.

"It's not that," Alexei rubbed his temple. "It's just... my grandfather warned me to be careful. And you said something similar on the phone."

The light turned green, and Dinara focused on the road again.

"All right," she said after a pause. "First, we'll go to the museum. I have an office where we can talk privately."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Alexei looked out the window at Bishkek. It was a modern city with new buildings, billboards, and wide avenues. But what distinguished it from other similar cities Alexei had visited was the abundance of greenery and the mountains on the horizon.

Finally, they arrived at the Historical Museum building—an imposing structure of Soviet architecture with a wide marble staircase. Dinara parked in the staff parking area and led Alexei through a side entrance.

"This wing houses the restoration workshops and staff offices," she explained, swiping her card through an electronic lock. "I have a small office on the second floor."

They climbed the stairs and walked down a corridor lined with shelves stacked with cardboard boxes and wooden crates. Dinara stopped at one of the doors and took out her keys.

Her office turned out to be a small but cozy room with a window. Bookshelves filled with academic literature, a desk with a computer, and maps of Central Asia and photographs of archaeological excavations on the walls. In the corner stood a small sofa and a coffee table—evidently a place for relaxation and conversations with colleagues.

"Make yourself comfortable," said Dinara, pointing to the sofa. "Would you like some tea? I have an electric kettle."

"Thank you, I wouldn't mind."

Dinara switched on the kettle and sat opposite Alexei, folding her hands in her lap.

"Now we can talk calmly. What did you find in your grandfather's archive?"

Alexei took a deep breath and removed the medallion on a chain from the inner pocket of his jacket. The silver disc gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the window.

"This." He placed the medallion on the table between them. "According to my grandfather's diary, this artifact was found during the expedition to Issyk-Kul in 1954. Your grandfather, then just a boy, helped with the expedition and seems to have been somehow connected to this find."

Dinara examined the medallion with evident interest, but without touching it.

"My grandfather did indeed often talk about the 1954 expedition. He lived with his parents in a village near the excavation site and helped the scientists as a guide." She raised her eyes to Alexei. "But he never mentioned any medallion."

Alexei nodded.

"In my grandfather's diary, there's an entry where he decided to hide the find from his superiors. And that your grandfather said the medallion 'wanted to stay' with him."

Dinara smiled slightly.

"That sounds like my grandfather. He always had a special sense for ancient things. He said they 'spoke' to him."

The kettle clicked off. Dinara stood to prepare the tea. Her movements were fluid and precise, like someone accustomed to working with fragile artifacts.

"Did you open it?" she asked without turning around.

"Yes," Alexei replied. "Inside was a parchment with an inscription in Latin and something like a fragment of a map. 'Lux in aqua, aqua in luce. Clavis Salomonis aperiet viam.' Light in water, water in light. Solomon's key will open the way."

Dinara froze for a moment, then slowly turned to him. Her face had become serious.

"Solomon's key," she repeated. "That's interesting. In our region, there are legends about sacred artifacts hidden in the waters of Issyk-Kul. Some of them are connected to the Nestorians who fled

from the Mongols in the 13th century." She placed a cup of tea in front of Alexei. "But I've never heard of a 'Solomon's Key' in this context."

Alexei sipped the hot tea—strong and sweet, as is customary in Central Asia.

"I studied this matter before my trip. The 'Key of Solomon' in Western tradition is a grimoire, a book of spells attributed to King Solomon. But judging by the context, this refers to some physical object."

"Perhaps it's a metaphor," Dinara suggested. "Or..." she fell silent, as if contemplating something.

"Or?" Alexei prompted.

"Or it's indeed some artifact, so valuable that our grandfathers chose to conceal its existence from the authorities."

She finally took the medallion and began to study it carefully, turning it in her hands.

"Undoubtedly Nestorian work. The cross is of a characteristic shape, and the ornament is also typical of their art. But the symbols on the reverse side..." she frowned. "They resemble Syriac script, but with elements I cannot identify. Possibly some secret code or font known only to initiates."

She placed the medallion back on the table.

"I need to show this to my uncle Ermek. He's the custodian of the nature reserve on the northern shore of Issyk-Kul, right where the excavations took place in 1954. And he's a great specialist in local folklore and history."

"That would be great," Alexei nodded. "When can we meet him?"

Dinara glanced at her watch.

"I can call him right now. If everything works out, we could head to the lake tomorrow morning. It's about a four-hour drive from Bishkek."

She took out her phone and stepped into the corridor to talk. Alexei remained alone in the office. He looked around, examining the books on the shelves and the photographs on the walls. In one of them, Dinara stood next to a tall middle-aged man with the characteristic appearance of local residents—presumably the uncle Ermek.

Alexei's gaze fell on a stack of documents on Dinara's desk. On top lay some printout in Kyrgyz with a logo resembling a coat of arms or emblem. He couldn't read the text but noticed that several lines had been highlighted with a marker.

Next to the computer lay a small voice recorder. The red indicator on it was blinking, showing that it was recording. Alexei frowned. Why was Dinara recording their conversation? And why hadn't she told him about it?

He quietly approached the desk and turned off the recorder, then returned to the sofa just as the door opened and Dinara re-entered the office.

"Good news," she said with a smile. "Uncle Ermek will be happy to see us. He's currently in Cholpon-Ata, a town on the northern shore of the lake. We can leave early tomorrow morning and be there by lunchtime."

Alexei nodded, trying not to show his concern about the recorder.

"Great. What about your grandfather? Will we be able to meet him?"

Dinara frowned slightly.

"Grandfather isn't feeling very well right now. Age is taking its toll. But I asked Uncle Ermek, and he thinks a visit might be possible if Grandfather feels better."

She sat down opposite Alexei again, taking her cup of tea.

"Now it's your turn," she said. "Tell me more about how you found the medallion and what else was in your grandfather's archive."

Alexei gave a detailed account of the folder's contents, the diary, photographs, and the note his grandfather had left specifically for him. He omitted only his suspicions about the voice recorder—first, he needed to understand what was happening.

"It's strange that your grandfather kept this secret for so many years," Dinara remarked when he finished. "Apparently, he believed the medallion might be dangerous or lead to something dangerous."

"Yes, and that concerns me," Alexei admitted. "My grandfather wasn't prone to exaggeration or mysticism. If he felt it necessary to warn me, he must have had serious reasons."

Dinara thoughtfully twirled her cup in her hands.

"There are many legends about cursed treasures and mysterious artifacts at Issyk-Kul. The lake holds many secrets." She placed her cup on the table. "But as scientists, we should approach such stories skeptically, right?"

Alexei nodded, though deep down he felt there was something more to this story than just local legends.

"Of course. But I'd like to know what was so special about this medallion that my grandfather concealed it his entire life."

Dinara looked at him intently.

"Did you really come here solely out of scientific interest? Or is there something else?"

The question caught Alexei off guard. He hesitated, choosing his words.

"I... don't know. It's probably a combination of factors. Scientific interest, certainly. Respect for my grandfather's memory. The chance to see you again..." he faltered, unsure whether it was appropriate to mention their past relationship. "And, honestly, some financial difficulties. An archaeologist's salary in Russia leaves much to be desired."

Dinara nodded, as if his answer confirmed her suspicions.

"I understand. Many come to Issyk-Kul hoping to find treasures. Legends of sunken cities and immense riches attract fortune seekers from all over the world."

Alexei thought he detected a slight disappointment in her voice, and he felt the need to defend himself.

"I'm not a treasure hunter, Dinara. I want to understand what my grandfather found and why it was so important to him."

She sighed and softened.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to accuse you. It's just... I've seen how treasure hunting changes people, and not always for the better."

They sat in silence for a while. The sun had begun to set, and shadows gradually deepened in the office. Finally, Dinara stood up.

"It's getting late. I'll drive you to the hotel. And tomorrow early morning, we'll head to the lake. It's quite a journey, so I advise you to rest well."

Alexei also rose, discreetly returning the medallion to his inner pocket.

"Thank you again, Dinara. Really."

She smiled faintly.

"You're welcome. After all, our grandfathers were connected by this secret. Perhaps we're destined to solve it together."

They left the museum, and Alexei suddenly felt a strange sensation, as if someone was watching them. He looked around but noticed nothing suspicious among the passersby and parked cars.

When they got into Dinara's car, he asked:

"By the way, who else knows about my arrival and the medallion?"

Dinara fastened her seatbelt and started the car.

"Only Uncle Ernek. I told him you came with some find related to the 1954 expedition, but without details." She drove out of the parking lot. "Why do you ask?"

Alexei shrugged, looking in the side mirror.

"Just a strange feeling. As if we're being watched."

Dinara tensed but remained silent. After a few minutes, she turned onto a busy avenue and said:

"You know, let's go have dinner first. I know a good place not far from here. We can also talk about tomorrow's trip."

Alexei agreed, though he noticed that Dinara checked the rearview mirror several times, as if she too sensed someone's presence.

The restaurant turned out to be a small, cozy establishment serving national cuisine. They sat at a table in the corner with a good view of the entrance. After ordering pilaf and tea, Dinara leaned toward Alexei and said quietly:

"Your instincts might not be wrong. Lately, there's been a lot of... interested parties circling around historical artifacts, especially those connected to Issyk-Kul."

"What do you mean?" Alexei asked, equally quietly.

"After the collapse of the USSR, many archives and repositories were left without proper security. Valuable artifacts disappeared, documents were lost or stolen. Now these items are surfacing on the black market or in private collections." She paused as the waiter brought tea. "And in recent years, one person has been particularly actively interested in everything related to Issyk-Kul antiquities."

"Who?"

"Timur Karabaev. A local oligarch who made his fortune in the mining industry. He finances archaeological expeditions, buys artifacts, creates private museums... At first glance, everything is legal and even noble. But rumors suggest many of his methods are far from ethical."

Alexei frowned.

"And you think he might know about the medallion?"

"I don't know. But he maintains close ties with the museum management and sponsors many of our projects." She fell silent when the food arrived and continued only after the waiter had left. "Perhaps it's just a coincidence. But be careful, Alexei. Don't show the medallion to anyone except my uncle."

They began eating, but Alexei had lost his appetite. Dinara's words made him wary. What if his grandfather was right and the medallion could indeed lead to something dangerous? What if someone was really following them now?

He discreetly surveyed the restaurant. Regular patrons, families, couples, groups of friends. Nothing suspicious. And yet the feeling of anxiety wouldn't leave him.

"If you're afraid, we can cancel the trip," said Dinara, noticing his concern. "The medallion has remained secret for decades. It can wait a bit longer."

Alexei shook his head.

"No. I want to know the truth. My grandfather entrusted me with this secret not so I could hide it back in the archive."

Dinara looked at him with respect.

"Then we'll go tomorrow. But we'll be careful."

After dinner, they drove to the hotel. It was a modest but clean establishment in the city center. Dinara helped Alexei check in and accompanied him to his room. At the door, she hesitated, as if wanting to say something but changed her mind.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven in the morning," she said. "Be ready."

"Thank you again," Alexei replied. "For everything."

She nodded and turned to leave but suddenly stopped and looked at him over her shoulder.

"You know, I'm glad you came. Despite everything."

With these words, she left, leaving Alexei at his room door with the feeling that tomorrow would change everything.

Inside, the room proved simple but comfortable. Alexei locked the door and, for good measure, propped a chair against it. Then he took out the medallion and placed it on the bedside table. The silver disc gleamed in the lamplight, as if winking at him.

"What are you hiding?" Alexei thought, looking at the ancient artifact. "And is the solution worth the dangers it might bring?"

But he already knew the answer. He hadn't come here to turn back. Tomorrow they would head to Issyk-Kul, and perhaps the secret preserved for centuries would finally be revealed.

Alexei lay down on the bed, fully clothed, and closed his eyes. Sleep was long in coming, and when it finally arrived, he dreamed of labyrinths of underground caves filled with water, and an ancient monk who persistently told him something in an unfamiliar language, pointing to a silver medallion hanging around his neck.

Chapter 3: The Pursuit

Dinara pulled up to the hotel at exactly seven in the morning. Alexei was already waiting at the entrance with a small backpack. He had slept poorly, plagued by strange dreams, and looked somewhat disheveled. However, the anticipation of the journey to the lake gave him energy.

"Good morning," said Dinara, opening the car door. Today she was dressed in practical clothing—jeans, a plaid shirt, and a light jacket. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. "Ready for the journey?"

"More than ready," Alexei replied, tossing his backpack onto the back seat.

Dinara handed him a paper cup of coffee and a paper bag.

"Here. Coffee and meat samsa. A traveler's breakfast."

"Thanks," Alexei smiled, accepting the offering. "You've thought of everything."

"It's quite a journey," Dinara shrugged, merging into the morning traffic. "Four hours at best, if there's no congestion leaving the city."

They drove in silence for a while. Alexei chewed on the samsa—a flaky pastry with meat filling—and watched as Bishkek gradually gave way to suburbs and then rural countryside. In the distance, the mountain ranges of the Tian Shan were visible, shrouded in morning mist.

"Tell me," Alexei finally broke the silence, "what do you know about this Karabaev?"

Dinara gave him a quick glance.

"Not as much as I'd like. In the '90s, he started with a small business, then somehow gained control of several gold mines. Now he's one of the wealthiest men in the country, has connections in the government, finances cultural projects." She hesitated. "But rumors suggest he made his first millions smuggling antiquities to Europe and China."

"And he's interested in the archaeology of Issyk-Kul?"

"Not just interested. Obsessed with it." Dinara changed lanes, overtaking a slowly crawling truck. "For the past five years, he's been financing expeditions, bringing in foreign specialists, building a collection of artifacts. They say there's an entire museum in his mansion near Cholpon-Ata."

"Sounds like an enthusiastic collector," Alexei remarked.

"Perhaps," Dinara didn't look convinced. "But my uncle Ermek isn't impressed with his methods. He says Karabaev is only interested in certain types of artifacts, especially those connected with Nestorians and ancient treasures. He doesn't care about anything else."

Alexei pondered this. It could be a simple coincidence, but the fact that a local oligarch was specifically interested in Nestorian artifacts seemed suspicious.

"Do you think he might have somehow learned about the medallion?"

Dinara shrugged.

"I don't know. But he definitely has connections at our museum. The director regularly dines with him and receives generous donations for 'the development of historical research.'" She made air quotes with her free hand.

They drove onto the highway leading to Issyk-Kul. The road gradually ascended into the mountains. On both sides stretched green meadows, with occasional yurts and flocks of sheep grazing. The scenery became increasingly picturesque.

"How beautiful," Alexei couldn't help saying. "Like something from a fairy tale."

"Yes," Dinara smiled. "I missed these places when I was studying in St. Petersburg. No matter how many beautiful palaces and parks I saw, nothing compares to our mountains and Issyk-Kul."

A light nostalgic smile appeared on her face. For a moment, Alexei saw in her the girl he had fallen in love with during their student years—open, dreamy, full of enthusiasm. But the moment quickly passed, and she became composed and slightly detached again.

They passed a road police checkpoint, where Dinara showed some documents, and the officer, after glancing at them, saluted and waved them through. Alexei raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Museum ID," Dinara explained. "It provides certain privileges on the roads, especially if you're heading to the nature reserve."

After an hour, the road began to wind between mountain slopes, climbing toward a pass. Traffic became less busy. Occasionally, cars or small trucks passed in the opposite direction, but mostly the road was deserted.

Alexei noticed a black SUV in the rearview mirror, following them at some distance. At first, he didn't pay much attention, but then he noticed: when Dinara reduced speed, the SUV repeated their maneuver. A feeling of unease stirred in his chest.

"Dinara," he said quietly, "have you noticed that black jeep has been following us for some time now?"

Dinara cast a quick glance in the mirror and tensed slightly.

"I noticed it when we left Bishkek," she admitted. "But I didn't want to worry you. It might just be a coincidence."

"Or it might not be," Alexei murmured. "Let's check."

"How?"

"At the next turn, brake suddenly, as if you've seen something on the road. If they also brake without reason, then they're definitely following us."

Dinara nodded. A few minutes later, when the road made another turn around a rocky outcrop, she suddenly hit the brakes. The car jerked and stopped. Alexei turned around and through the rear window saw that the black SUV had also braked sharply, maintaining a significant distance from them.

"Well, there we have it," he said. "It's not a coincidence."

Without a word, Dinara started moving again, but now drove noticeably faster.

"Who do you think it could be?" Alexei asked.

"I don't know for sure," she answered, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "But I have my suspicions."

"Karabaev's people?"

She nodded.

"Possibly. He has eyes and ears everywhere."

Alexei felt the medallion hanging around his neck under his shirt seem to grow heavier.

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll try to lose them. I know these roads better than they do," Dinara said confidently. "Hold on."

She sharply turned onto a side road that Alexei hadn't even noticed—a narrow dirt track veering away from the main highway. The car shook on the uneven surface, but Dinara, without reducing speed, confidently steered between shrubs and scattered trees.

"This is an old road," she explained. "Local residents sometimes use it. Tourists don't know about it."

Alexei held onto the handle above the door, trying not to bounce too much on the bumps. After a few minutes, Dinara turned again, this time onto an even narrower path that seemed about to disappear among the dense vegetation.

"Are they still following us?" she asked, not taking her eyes off the road.

Alexei looked back but didn't see any pursuers.

"Doesn't look like it. It seems we've lost them."

"Don't relax," Dinara shook her head. "It won't be for long. If they're really watching us on Karabaev's orders, they have resources. Possibly even a helicopter."

She continued zigzagging along mountain roads, clearly trying to confuse their trail. Finally, they emerged at a small village consisting of several dozen houses arranged along a single street.

"Where are we?" asked Alexei.

"This is where my cousin Bakyt lives," Dinara replied, slowing down. "We can stop at his place, wait a while, and change our route."

She turned into the yard of one of the houses. It was a modest single-story structure with a large garden where apple and apricot trees grew. An old UAZ with peeling paint stood by the gate.

A sturdy middle-aged man emerged from the house, clearly surprised by their arrival. He said something to Dinara in Kyrgyz, and she quickly replied. The man nodded and gestured for them to enter the house.

"Bakyt says we can stay here for a while," Dinara translated. "He suspects his house is being watched, but not from the road—from the direction of the mountains."

"Watched? Why?" Alexei frowned.

Dinara and Bakyt exchanged a few phrases.

"He says strangers have been appearing in the village in recent weeks. Asking about old caves, archaeological finds, local legends. Offering money for information." She paused. "And they were especially interested in our family. My grandfather, uncle Ermek, and... me."

Alexei felt a chill run down his spine.

"You think it's connected to the medallion? But how could they have found out?"

"I don't know," Dinara shook her head. "But I have a bad feeling."

They entered the house. Inside it was cool and smelled of herbs. Bakyt led them to the living room, where a table was already set with national dishes—flatbreads, cheese, and jam.

"Bakyt says we should eat something, and then he'll drive us to Ermek in his car," said Dinara. "It'll be safer that way."

"Thank you," Alexei nodded to Bakyt, though he wasn't sure if the man understood Russian.

To his surprise, the man replied in quite decent Russian:

"You're welcome. Dinara's family is my family." He gave Alexei an appraising look. "Are you an archaeologist, like Dinara?"

"Yes," Alexei nodded. "My grandfather worked here on an expedition in 1954."

Bakyt raised his eyebrows in surprise and again spoke to Dinara in Kyrgyz. Their conversation became increasingly animated. Finally, Dinara turned to Alexei:

"Bakyt says his father told stories about a Russian scientist who found something important in the mountains and because of this quarreled with his superiors." She translated a bit more. "He says this scientist secretly met with our grandfather many years later, in the 1980s."

"With your grandfather?" Alexei was surprised. "But why?"

Dinara asked Bakyt the question. He shrugged and answered.

"He doesn't know exactly. He says they would talk privately for hours. Sometimes grandfather would return from these meetings very agitated." Dinara gazed thoughtfully out the window. "Strange that grandfather never told me about this."

At that moment, Bakyt's phone rang. He answered, listening with a serious expression, then quickly said something to Dinara.

"We need to leave," she translated, jumping up. "Two black jeeps have entered the village. They're checking houses."

Alexei felt his heart beat faster.

"Damn, they found us. How?"

"It doesn't matter," Dinara cut him off. "Bakyt will lead us out through the back gate. There's a path that goes through the forest to the road on the other side of the hill. His car is waiting there."

They quickly gathered food for the journey, Bakyt took a hunting rifle and hung it over his shoulder. Dinara put on Alexei's backpack, adding bottles of water to it. Bakyt checked the windows

and, making sure the way was clear, led them out through the back door. They crossed the apple orchard and approached a small gate in the far part of the fence. Beyond it, a forest began, stretching up the slope.

"Let's go," said Bakyt. "Quietly and quickly."

They walked along a barely visible path among the trees. The ascent became increasingly steep. Alexei, though in decent shape, began to breathe heavily. Urban life wasn't conducive to developing mountain endurance. Dinara and Bakyt, it seemed, experienced no difficulties, confidently moving forward.

Suddenly, distant barking reached them. Bakyt stopped and listened.

"They've let the dogs loose," he said grimly. "We need to hurry."

They quickened their pace. The path wound between trees, climbing ever higher. Sometimes it almost disappeared, but Bakyt unerringly found the way forward. Finally, they reached a small clearing on the hilltop.

"From here, you can see the village well," said Bakyt, pointing down.

Alexei looked in the indicated direction. Indeed, from this height, the village was laid out before them. Black SUVs stood near several houses. People in dark clothing moved from house to house.

"Who are they?" asked Alexei.

"Karabaev's security," Dinara replied. "At least, that's what Bakyt thinks."

"Could it just be the police?"

Dinara translated the question. Bakyt shook his head and said something.

"He says the police don't drive such cars or act so brazenly. Besides, he recognized one of them—a former special forces soldier who now works for Karabaev."

They continued on their way, now descending the opposite slope of the hill. The path here was wider and more noticeable. Soon they emerged onto a small clearing where an old UAZ stood, camouflaged with branches.

"My car," said Bakyt, removing the branches. "Unassuming, but reliable."

They quickly got into the car. Bakyt started the engine which, to Alexei's surprise, ran quietly and smoothly. Evidently, the car's appearance was deceptive, and the engine was in excellent condition.

"Where to now?" asked Alexei when they drove onto a dirt road.

"To Ermek," Dinara replied. "He should know what's happening. And if Karabaev is really hunting for the medallion, we need help."

They drove along secondary roads, avoiding main highways. Bakyt confidently steered the car through wooded hills and along mountain streams. Sometimes the road became so narrow that tree branches brushed against the windows.

"We're almost at the lake," said Bakyt after a while. "Beyond that pass, you'll be able to see Issyk-Kul."

Alexei waited with anticipation for his first glimpse of the legendary lake. When they reached the pass, a stunning view opened up before them—an enormous blue lake surrounded by snow-capped mountain ranges. The water shimmered in the sun with every shade of blue, from azure to deep indigo.

"Incredible," Alexei exhaled. "Now I understand why there are so many legends about this place."

Dinara smiled.

"That's not all. When you see the sunset over the lake, you'll understand why our ancestors considered it sacred."

Suddenly Bakyt braked sharply and swore in Kyrgyz.

"What happened?" asked Alexei.

Bakyt said something quickly to Dinara, pointing ahead.

"There's a checkpoint ahead," she translated. "Armed men checking all vehicles."

"Police?"

"No," Dinara replied grimly. "They're not in uniform. Bakyt says they're Karabaev's men. They're acting increasingly brazen."

Bakyt turned the car around and drove back.

"Is there another way?" asked Alexei.

Dinara translated. Bakyt nodded and turned onto an even narrower road that seemed to lead straight into the mountains.

"He says there's an old road used only by local shepherds. It will take us to the lake below Cholpon-Ata, but it will take more time."

The road became increasingly difficult. In some places, it was washed out by rain; in others, it was blocked by stones. Bakyt skillfully maneuvered around obstacles, but even his expertise was sometimes tested.

"He's a real ace," Alexei remarked when they passed a particularly challenging section.

"Bakyt was a mountain guide until he injured his knee," said Dinara. "Now he's a farmer, but the skills remain."

Bakyt, hearing his name, smiled and nodded. Then he said something in Kyrgyz.

"He says if you can survive in the mountains, you can survive anywhere," Dinara translated.

They continued driving along the mountain road. The sun was already setting when they finally emerged onto more level ground. Below, the lake shimmered, and on the shore, the lights of a small settlement were visible.

"From here to the nature reserve where Uncle Ermek works is about an hour's drive," said Dinara.

Bakyt said something, pointing to the road ahead.

"He says it will be safer from here on. This isn't a tourist route, mostly locals use it."

They descended to the lake and drove along the shore. The sun had almost disappeared behind the mountains, coloring the water a deep purple. Alexei was enchanted by the view, but anxiety didn't leave him. Who were these people pursuing them? And what was so valuable about the medallion that they were willing to expend so much effort to obtain it?

It quickly grew dark, as often happens in the mountains. Bakyt turned on the headlights, and their beam cut through the darkness, illuminating the narrow road running along the lake. They passed several small settlements where occasional lights glowed.

"We're almost there," said Dinara when they passed a sign reading "Nature Reserve."

The road improved, and light poles appeared. Soon they saw a gate with a sign "Staff Entrance." Bakyt stopped the car and honked three times. After a minute, a guard approached the gate with a flashlight. Dinara lowered the window and said something to him in Kyrgyz. The guard shone his flashlight into the car, carefully examining the passengers, then nodded and opened the gate.

They drove through the gate and headed down an avenue lined with tall pines. At the end of the avenue stood a two-story Alpine-style house with a wide veranda. A light was on on the veranda, and there stood a man whom Alexei had seen in the photograph in Dinara's office—her uncle Ermek.

Bakyt stopped the car, and they got out. Ermek quickly descended from the veranda and embraced Dinara. Then he shook Bakyt's hand, saying something grateful. Finally, he turned to Alexei.

"Welcome, Alexei Igorevich," he said in clear Russian with a slight accent. "I've heard a lot about you from Dinara. And, of course, I knew your grandfather. He was a great man."

He firmly shook Alexei's hand. Ermek had an open face with deep wrinkles from sun and wind, penetrating dark eyes, and a thick, slightly graying mustache. He was dressed simply but neatly—in jeans and a plaid shirt like Dinara's.

"Thank you for the invitation," Alexei replied. "And for your hospitality."

"Come inside," said Ermek, gesturing toward the veranda. "You must be tired from the journey. Dinner is ready, and I have excellent cognac."

They climbed to the veranda. Inside, the house proved spacious and cozy. A large living room with a fireplace, walls hung with photographs of nature and wildlife, bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and a large wooden table already set for dinner.

"Dinara, show Alexei Igorevich to his room," said Ermek. "Meanwhile, Bakyt and I will take care of the car. We need to hide it in the garage so it doesn't attract attention."

The men went out, and Dinara led Alexei up the stairs to the second floor. There was a corridor with several doors.

"This is where the reserve staff live when they're working on long-term projects," she explained. "But now they're all out in the field, so the house is at our disposal." She opened one of the doors. "Here's your room."

The room was small but comfortable. A bed, a desk, a wardrobe, and a window with a view of the lake. On the walls hung photographs of local fauna—snow leopards, argali sheep, golden eagles.

"Make yourself at home," said Dinara. "The bathroom is across the corridor, the second door on the right. Come downstairs when you're ready."

She was about to leave, but Alexei stopped her.

"Dinara, wait. You still haven't told me why you were recording our conversation at the museum."

She froze for a moment, then closed the door and turned to him.

"You noticed," it wasn't a question but a statement.

"Yes," Alexei nodded. "And I turned off the recorder."

Dinara sighed and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I don't just work at the museum," she admitted. "I also consult for a government commission on cultural heritage protection. We track attempts to illegally export artifacts from the country." She looked Alexei in the eyes. "When you called and told me about the medallion, I had to report it. It's part of the protocol." She lowered her eyes. "But when I saw that it was truly what you described... I decided to wait. To understand what it was first."

"You don't trust your superiors?" asked Alexei, sitting down beside her.

"It's not about trust." Dinara shook her head. "It's just that lately, some of the commission's decisions have been... strange. Valuable artifacts were transferred to private collections for 'study.' Documents were forged. Reports of thefts weren't properly investigated." She raised her eyes to Alexei. "And behind many of these stories stands Karabaev's name."

"You think he's bribed commission members?"

"I'm certain of it. But there's no proof." Dinara stood and walked to the window. "So I decided to act at my own risk. I wasn't sure if I could trust you, which is why I recorded our conversation." She turned to him. "I'm sorry."

Alexei was silent for a while, considering what he'd heard. Then he nodded:

"I understand. In your place, I'd probably have done the same."

The tension between them eased somewhat.

"Uncle Ermek is one of the few people I completely trust," Dinara added. "He refused all of Karabaev's offers, though Karabaev offered substantial money for access to certain areas of the reserve. He's incorruptible."

"Good," said Alexei. "Then let's talk to him about the medallion. Perhaps he knows something that will help us unravel this mystery."

Dinara nodded and headed for the door.

"Rest a bit and come down. We'll be waiting downstairs."

Left alone, Alexei approached the window. Beyond it stretched the nighttime Issyk-Kul—a dark mirror of water reflecting the stars and silvered by the moon's path. Somewhere there, in the

coastal mountains, possibly lay hidden the secrets of the past and the mysterious "Solomon's Key" mentioned in the inscription on the medallion.

He took the medallion from under his shirt and looked at it closely. In the moonlight streaming through the window, the silver seemed almost luminous. The symbols on the reverse side seemed to pulse, as if trying to tell him something.

Alexei shook his head, dispelling the strange illusion. He was too tired; that's why he was seeing things. Leaving the medallion around his neck, Alexei washed up in the bathroom and went downstairs.

In the living room, Ermek and Dinara were already sitting at the table. Bakyt had apparently left. On the table stood dishes with meat, rice, vegetables, and boorsok—pieces of dough fried in oil. It smelled delicious and appetizing.

"Ah, our guest!" Ermek greeted him. "Sit down, Alexei Igorevich. We need to fortify ourselves before a serious conversation."

Alexei sat at the table, and Ermek poured cognac for himself and Alexei. Dinara declined, preferring tea.

"To our meeting," Ermek proposed a toast, raising his glass. "And to the memory of your ancestors, who were worthy people."

They drank. The cognac was indeed excellent, warming and aromatic.

"Dinara told me about your grandfather and what you found," said Ermek, serving Alexei meat and rice. "It's an amazing story. I remember Professor Sorin, though I was just a boy then. He came several times to meet with my father, Rustam. They would talk for hours in private. About what—I don't know, father never said."

"Is your father still alive?" asked Alexei.

"Yes, thank Allah, he's alive. He's 84 years old and still sturdy, though his health has been failing lately. He lives in a village an hour's drive from here." Ermek sipped his cognac. "He knows local legends and stories better than anyone. If anyone can help unravel the mystery of the medallion, it's him."

"Can we meet him?"

"I think so. But not tomorrow. Tomorrow we should first visit the site of the 1954 excavation. I know where it is. Perhaps we'll find some clues there."

They had dinner, discussing the plan for the next day. Ermek proved to be not only knowledgeable about local history but also a professional geologist specializing in rock formations in the coastal zone of Issyk-Kul. He showed Alexei maps and photographs of the area, noting regions where, in his opinion, Nestorian treasures might be hidden.

"Do you see this line of rock outcrops?" he pointed to a map. "They contain numerous natural grottos and small caves formed by tectonic processes. Some of them could have been used as hiding places. They're difficult to access and not visible from the lake."

"As in the inscription," Alexei noted. "Light in water, water in light."

"Exactly," Ermek nodded. "This phrase has long been known in local folklore, though most consider it just a poetic description of the lake's beauty. But what if it's actually an indication of a hiding place, visible only under certain lighting or reflection from the water?"

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of an approaching car. Ermek tensed and quickly went to the window, carefully drawing aside the curtain.

"A black jeep," he said grimly. "They've found us."

Dinara jumped to the window.

"Is it them? Karabaev's people?"

"Looks like it," Ermek nodded. "Four of them. Armed."

Alexei felt his heart pounding in his chest.

"What are we going to do?"

Ermek quickly went to the cabinet and took out a hunting rifle.

"We have an advantage—we know the terrain. Behind the house begins the protected area with mountain trails. I know every stone there. We can go through the forest to the eastern part of the reserve, where there's an old observation station."

"What about the reserve guards?" asked Alexei.

"There are only two for the entire area, and right now they're patrolling the far sector," Ermek replied, checking the rifle. "Besides, they can't do much against Karabaev's armed men."

From outside came the sound of footsteps on the veranda. A loud knock on the door. Then a voice:

"Ermek-aga! We know you're in there! Open up, we need to talk!"

"Go away!" Ermek shouted. "This is private property and a nature reserve! You have no right to be here!"

"We have all the necessary documents," the voice replied. "We're acting on behalf of the security services. We're looking for a Russian citizen suspected of attempting to illegally export cultural valuables."

Ermek swore in Kyrgyz.

"Lies. What security services? These are Karabaev's men. Leave through the kitchen, quickly."

Dinara grabbed her jacket and Alexei's backpack.

"Come on!"

They quickly passed through to the kitchen, which was located at the back of the house. Ermek opened a door leading to an inner courtyard.

"Run up the path, straight to the forest. There's a hunting shelter that only I know about. I'll delay them."

"Uncle, no!" exclaimed Dinara. "They're dangerous!"

"Don't argue," Ermek cut her off. "They won't harm me; I'm too well-known a figure. But you... Go. We'll meet at Rustam's."

From outside came a cracking sound—someone was trying to break down the front door. Ermek pushed them toward the exit:

"Run!"

Alexei grabbed Dinara's hand, and they ran out into the yard. The night was clear and moonlit, which was both good and bad—they could see the path, but they could also be spotted. A narrow and steep trail led up the forested mountain slope.

They heard a shot, then shouts. Dinara momentarily stopped, but Alexei pulled her onward:

"We can't go back! Ermek knows what he's doing!"

They ran up the slope, stumbling over stones and roots. Behind them came new voices and the beam of a flashlight sweeping through the trees. They were being pursued.

"This way!" Dinara pulled Alexei off the path, into dense shrubbery.

They squeezed through thick branches and found themselves in a small clearing hidden from the path. They crouched, listening. The steps and voices of their pursuers drew closer. A flashlight beam glided dangerously close to their hiding place.

"They couldn't have gone far!" said one voice in Russian with an accent. "Check the bushes!"

Dinara pressed against Alexei; he could feel her breath and rapid heartbeat. The medallion on his neck suddenly felt heavy and hot, as if heated by an internal fire.

The flashlight beam slid across the bushes behind which they were hiding, paused for a moment, and... continued moving. The pursuers passed them by.

"They probably ran further up the path," said another voice. "Let's go there!"

The footsteps moved away. Alexei and Dinara looked at each other in the half-darkness, not believing their luck.

"How did they not see us?" whispered Alexei.

"I don't know," Dinara whispered back. "But we need to move. They'll soon realize we're not on the path and come back."

They emerged from the bushes and continued on their way, now more slowly and cautiously, moving parallel to the path but staying in the undergrowth. The forest grew denser, and the slope steeper. Finally, they reached a rocky outcrop that provided a view of the lake and the reserve.

"Look," Dinara whispered, pointing down.

Three black jeeps stood by Ermek's house. Flashlight beams darted between the trees—the pursuers continued to search for them.

"We need to keep moving," said Alexei. "Where is this hunting shelter Ermek mentioned?"

"If I understand correctly, it should be higher up the slope, in the rocks," Dinara looked around. "There are several grottos carved by wind and rain in the sandstone. Ermek uses them to observe wildlife."

They continued climbing. The forest gradually thinned, giving way to rocky scree and low shrubs. After half an hour, they reached a rock belt—vertical sandstone walls about ten meters high.

"Now we need to go along the rocks," said Dinara. "The grotto should be somewhere around here."

They moved slowly along the base of the cliffs, carefully examining each crack and depression. The moon illuminated the stones, casting peculiar shadows that sometimes took the form of cave entrances, misleading them.

Finally, Dinara stopped before a small opening, almost completely hidden by shrubs.

"I think it's here," she parted the branches and peered inside. "Yes, definitely. Help me move the brush aside."

Together they cleared the entrance and went in. It was a small grotto, spacious enough to accommodate several people. In the back stood a simple wooden bench, and on a stone ledge serving as a shelf lay canned food, matches, and a kerosene lamp.

"There are even supplies," Alexei said with relief. "Your uncle is well-prepared."

"Ermek is always ready for the unexpected," Dinara lit the lamp, and a soft light illuminated the interior of the grotto. "He says that in the mountains, you need to be prepared for anything—from encountering a snow leopard to a sudden blizzard."

They sat on the bench, resting their backs against the cool stone wall. The tension of the chase gradually subsided, giving way to fatigue.

"What do you think happened to Ermek?" Alexei asked.

"I don't know," Dinara shook her head worriedly. "But I believe he's all right. He's an experienced and respected man; even Karabaev's people wouldn't dare harm him seriously."

"What should we do next?"

"We'll wait here for the night. In the morning, we'll try to reach the village where my grandfather lives. It's about fifteen kilometers from here."

Alexei nodded and unconsciously touched the medallion under his shirt. It still felt warm.

"May I see the medallion?" Dinara asked, noticing his gesture.

Alexei removed the chain from his neck and handed her the medallion. She examined it carefully in the lamplight.

"Amazing craftsmanship," she whispered. "Even today, it would be difficult to create such fine engraving." She turned the medallion over. "And these symbols... some resemble Syriac script, but others... I can't decipher them."

"My grandfather wrote in his diary that he couldn't fully identify them," said Alexei. "And he was a specialist in ancient languages."

Dinara returned the medallion to Alexei.

"Perhaps it's some kind of cipher or conventional notations, understandable only to initiates."

Alexei put the chain back on. The medallion seemed to press against his skin with relief, becoming warm again.

"Strange," he noted. "It's as if... it's alive. Always warm."

Dinara looked at him intently.

"Warm? Are you sure it's not just your own body heat? Metal usually takes on the temperature of the body."

"No, this is different." Alexei shook his head. "It was warm even when I first took it out of the envelope. And... this will sound strange, but sometimes it seems to pulse, as if it has a heartbeat."

Dinara nodded thoughtfully.

"In our mountains, there are legends about sacred objects possessing their own life force. Some shamans believe that certain stones or metals can 'remember' a person's energy or events." She smiled. "Of course, from a scientific perspective, this sounds fantastical. But here, in these ancient mountains, you sometimes start to believe such stories."

They fell silent, listening to the sounds outside. The wind rustled in the shrubs; somewhere in the distance, a night bird called. The pursuers, it seemed, couldn't be heard.

"We need to get some sleep," said Dinara. "Tomorrow we have a long journey ahead."

She turned off the lamp, and the grotto plunged into semi-darkness, illuminated only by moonlight filtering through the entrance. They made themselves as comfortable as possible on the narrow bench, pressing against each other for warmth. Nights in the mountains were cool even in summer.

"Thank you for coming to my aid," Alexei said quietly. "You could have simply refused when I called."

"I wanted to refuse," Dinara admitted. "But then I realized this might be my chance to learn the truth. About my grandfather, about the past... about everything."

"What truth?"

"I don't know. But all my life, I've had the feeling that there's some secret in our family. Grandfather never spoke of it directly, but sometimes, especially when he thought no one could hear him, he would whisper strange phrases. About light in water, about a key that would open a door... I thought it was just an old man's muttering. But now..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but Alexei understood. Now, with the appearance of the medallion, these strange phrases were beginning to make sense.

"We'll solve this mystery," he promised. "Together."

Dinara didn't answer, but in the darkness, her hand found his and squeezed it. And so they fell asleep—shoulder to shoulder, holding hands, under the protection of ancient rocks that held many secrets.

At some point during the night, Alexei had a strange dream. He stood on the shore of Issyk-Kul, and the water before him glowed from within, as if an enormous fire burned in its depths. From the water emerged the figure of a monk in dark clothing, who extended something shining toward him. Alexei wanted to move closer, but the water around the monk began to bubble and foam, forming a whirlpool. The monk shouted something Alexei couldn't understand and disappeared into the depths, and with him, the glow vanished as well.

Alexei awoke with a pounding heart. Beside him, Dinara breathed quietly, still holding his hand. Beyond the entrance to the grotto, dawn was breaking—the sky in the east was brightening, taking on a delicate pink hue. A new day was beginning, one that might bring them closer to unraveling the secret of the medallion and what it had protected for centuries.

Chapter 4: The Keeper of Secrets

Twilight descended on the mountain road as Bakyt's UAZ, having left behind the winding serpentine, entered a small valley. The last rays of the setting sun gilded the peaks of the surrounding mountains, but below, among gardens and low mud-brick houses, shadows were already deepening.

The vehicle bounced over countless potholes on the dirt road, raising clouds of dust from under its wheels. Alexei, who had been leaning tiredly against the door, straightened up when the first houses of the village appeared among the trees.

"My father, Rustam, lives in this village," said Ermek.

"Does he know we're coming?" asked Alexei.

"Of course," Ermek nodded. "I contacted him by radio while you were hiding in the grotto. He's expecting us."

Alexei looked at Dinara, who was silently gazing out the window. Her face revealed impatience and anxiety. Evidently, meeting her grandfather was an important event for her, but thoughts of pursuit and danger gave her no peace.

The UAZ drove along the main street of the village, raising dust and attracting the attention of the few pedestrians and dogs dozing in the evening shadows. It was a typical Kyrgyz village—single-story houses surrounded by high mud-brick walls, behind which the crowns of fruit trees were visible, occasional small shops, and a small mosque with a low minaret.

"Life here flows almost the same as it did a hundred years ago," Ermek remarked. "Of course, there's electricity, televisions, mobile phones. But the foundation remains the same—the land, the mountains, traditions passed down from generation to generation."

The car turned toward the outskirts of the village and stopped in front of a mud-brick fence painted blue. Bakyt cut the engine, and the sudden silence, broken only by the distant barking of dogs and bleating of sheep, seemed deafening after the long journey.

"We've arrived," announced Ermek, opening the door. "Welcome to my father's house."

They got out of the car. A tall elderly man in a traditional Kyrgyz kolpak—a conical white hat with an ornamental design—was already waiting for them at the gate. Despite his age, Rustam Kambarov looked fit and robust. He had a swarthy face with deep wrinkles, penetrating dark eyes, and a neatly trimmed gray beard. He held a carved walking stick in his hand but leaned on it lightly, more for convenience than necessity.

"Grandfather!" Dinara ran to him and embraced him.

"Kenzhem, my little one," the old man smiled, hugging his granddaughter. "How glad I am to see you."

Then he turned his attention to Ermek and warmly embraced his son. Finally, his gaze settled on Alexei. Something in that gaze—attentive, scrutinizing, as if looking into the very soul—made Alexei feel uncomfortable.

"And you must be Igor Nikolaevich's grandson," said Rustam, extending his hand. "I see his features in your face. The same eyes, the same chin."

"Alexei Sorin," Alexei introduced himself, shaking the old man's dry but firm hand. "Very pleased to meet you, Rustam-aga."

"You knew my grandfather?" he asked, surprised by how accurately Rustam had identified his relationship.

"Oh yes," the old man nodded. "Igor Nikolaevich was a good man. Honest. A true friend." He gestured for everyone to enter the courtyard. "But we'll talk about that over dinner. You must be tired and hungry from your journey."

They entered a spacious courtyard where a table had been set under a canopy of grapevines. A plump middle-aged woman in a traditional dress and headscarf was busy with preparations.

"This is Aigul, my helper," Rustam introduced her. "She has been taking care of me since my wife, Dinara's grandmother, passed away ten years ago."

Aigul nodded warmly to the guests and returned to her tasks. Bakyt, saying goodbye, left on his own business, promising to return in the morning.

They sat down at the table, which was already laden with traditional Kyrgyz dishes—beshbarmak, manty, boorsok, kurut, jam, and, of course, apples and peaches grown in Rustam's garden. The old man poured strong black tea into bowls.

"Eat, drink," he invited. "Help yourselves to everything God has provided."

During dinner, the conversation revolved around everyday matters—life in the village, harvest prospects, relatives' health. Rustam asked Dinara about her work at the museum and Alexei about life in St. Petersburg. It seemed the old man deliberately avoided the topic of the medallion and the pursuit, as if waiting for the right moment.

When the meal was finished and Aigul had cleared the table, serving fresh tea, Rustam finally got down to business.

"Ernek told me by radio about what happened," he said, looking intently at Alexei. "About the medallion, about Karabaev's men." He shook his head. "I knew this day would come. I've been preparing for it for many years. But it still caught me off guard."

"What do you mean?" asked Alexei. "What day?"

"The day when the medallion would return to Issyk-Kul," Rustam replied. "The day when the final chapter of a story that has lasted eight centuries would begin."

Alexei felt the medallion on his neck seem to respond to these words—becoming warmer, heavier. He took it out from under his shirt and placed it on the table in front of Rustam.

The old man did not touch the medallion but looked at it with reverence mixed with anxiety.

"So it is indeed the one," Rustam said quietly. "The very one your grandfather found in 1954 and then hid from everyone."

"You knew about my grandfather's find?" Alexei asked in surprise.

"Of course," Rustam nodded. "I was there when Igor found it in the cave. I was twelve years old, helping the expedition as a guide. I saw how the medallion first glowed in his hands."

"Glowed?" Alexei repeated. "You mean... literally?"

"Exactly," Rustam confirmed. "The silver began to emit a bluish glow when Igor took it in his hands. The expedition leader, Voronov, attributed it to some optical effect, a reflection of light from minerals in the cave. But Igor and I knew it was something more."

The old man sipped his tea and continued:

"After that, your grandfather began asking me questions about local legends, about the Nestorians, about sunken treasures. I told him what I knew from the stories of my father and grandfather. And then Igor decided to conceal the find from the expedition leadership."

"Why?" asked Dinara. "Usually archaeologists strive to register every find."

"Because Igor understood that the medallion was not just an ancient artifact," Rustam answered. "It's a key to something much more important. To a secret that had been kept for centuries. And this secret should not have fallen into the hands of the Soviet authorities, especially at that time—the height of the Cold War, spy mania, KGB everywhere..."

Rustam rose and went to a shelf where books and old photographs were kept. He retrieved a worn leather book tied with a cord.

"This is a family heirloom," he said, returning to the table. "The diary of my distant ancestor, Murat Kambarov. He was a shaman and healer. People from all over the valley came to him for advice and help. He began helping people after a man once came to him who changed our family's history."

Rustam untied the cord and carefully opened the book. The pages were yellowed, with handwritten text in old Kyrgyz, faded in places.

"It says here," Rustam began, slowly translating, "that in 1273, an old man named David came to my ancestor. He was very old, with a beard as white as snow, but his eyes were clear and lively. He spoke in a strange mixture of languages and wore a silver cross on his chest. The old man said he had come from afar to pass on important knowledge to one worthy of keeping it."

Rustam turned the page.

"David said he was the last keeper of an ancient secret. His teacher, a European monk named Thomas, had entrusted him with preserving knowledge about a Nestorian treasure hidden during the Mongol invasion. Among the treasures was a special item that David called the 'Key of Solomon'—a crystal with extraordinary properties."

"A crystal?" Alexei asked. "Not the medallion?"

"The medallion is a pointer, a guide to the crystal," Rustam explained. "The real 'Key of Solomon' is a crystal hidden in a cache." He continued translating: "David was too old to keep the secret himself. He gave my ancestor a map indicating the place where the treasures were hidden and said that someday a person would come who could find and use the 'Key of Solomon' for good. Until then, the secret must remain hidden."

"And where is this map now?" asked Alexei.

"Lost," Rustam replied regretfully. "During the civil war, our house was burned down, and many family heirlooms disappeared. Only this diary remained, which my grandfather managed to hide." He closed the book. "But even without the map, I know where to look. Our ancestor passed this knowledge to his son, who passed it to his son, and so on from generation to generation. Thus the secret came down to my father, and my father passed it to me."

"And you never tried to find the treasures yourself?" asked Dinara.

"I tried, when I was young and hot-headed," Rustam smiled. "But my ancestor left a warning: without the medallion, finding the cache is impossible. And the medallion was lost in David's time." The old man looked at Alexei. "At least, that's what we thought until your grandfather found it in 1954."

"But why didn't my grandfather use the medallion to find the treasures?" Alexei wondered. "Why did he simply hide it and tell no one?"

"Because it was a dangerous time," Rustam answered. "The USSR, the Cold War, the KGB watching every step. Igor understood that if the authorities learned about the 'Key of Solomon,' they would do everything to get it. And if the legend is to be believed, this crystal possesses extraordinary power. In the hands of those who crave power, it could become a dangerous weapon."

"What kind of power exactly?" asked Alexei.

Rustam smiled mysteriously.

"They say the crystal can heal diseases, prolong life, and even open the 'eyes of the soul,' allowing one to see the true nature of people and things. But there is also a warning: it amplifies both the light and dark sides of human nature. In the hands of a good person, it works miracles. In the hands of an evil one—it brings calamity."

"Sounds like a myth," Alexei remarked.

"Perhaps," Rustam agreed. "But your grandfather, a scientist and skeptic, believed in this legend enough to keep the medallion secret all his life. That makes one think, doesn't it?"

Dinara looked at the medallion lying on the table.

"What about these symbols?" she asked, pointing to the strange marks on the reverse side of the medallion. "What do they mean?"

"It's a combination of Nestorian script and special symbols known only to initiates," Rustam replied. "A kind of cipher. But I cannot read it completely. My father couldn't either. That part of the knowledge was lost."

"And the inscription inside?" asked Alexei. "'Lux in aqua, aqua in luce. Clavis Salomonis aperiet viam.' Light in water, water in light. Solomon's key will open the way."

"That's a clue," said Rustam. "Light in water, water in light' is a description of a special phenomenon that can be observed only at a certain time of year and in a specific place on Issyk-Kul. When the sun rises and its first rays penetrate the water at a particular angle, creating the illusion that the lake is glowing from within. And at that moment, an entrance to a cave, hidden at other times, becomes visible."

"Is such a thing possible?" Alexei asked doubtfully. "A cave entrance that's visible only under special lighting?"

"There are many unusual things at Issyk-Kul," Rustam replied. "But in this case, we're talking about a natural phenomenon. The entrance is located in a cliff and under normal lighting blends with the surrounding rocks. But when light falls at a certain angle, it creates a contrast that makes the entrance visible."

"And when does this happen?" Alexei inquired.

"Once a year, on the summer solstice," said Rustam. "Which, by the way, will occur in a few days."

Alexei and Dinara exchanged glances. What a coincidence. Or was it fate?

"So if we want to find the 'Key of Solomon,' we only have a few days?" Dinara clarified.

"Exactly," Rustam nodded. "But there's a more serious problem than the timing." His expression darkened. "Karabaev. That man is obsessed with finding Nestorian treasures. For years, he's been gathering information, financing expeditions, bribing officials. And now that he's learned about the medallion, he'll stop at nothing to get it."

"But how did he find out?" asked Dinara. "We were careful."

"In our time, it's difficult to keep secrets," Rustam sighed. "Especially from a man with such resources and connections. Perhaps someone at the museum told him about your conversation. Or they found mention of the medallion in Igor's papers in the university archive."

Ernek, who had been listening silently to the conversation, spoke up:

"Whatever happened, we must get ahead of Karabaev. Find the 'Key of Solomon' before he does."

"I agree," Rustam nodded. "But we need to be extremely cautious. Right now, his men are probably combing the area looking for us."

"Do you have a specific plan?" asked Alexei.

"Yes," Rustam replied. "Tomorrow at dawn, we'll go to where your grandfather found the medallion. It's a cave complex in the mountains not far from Kurmenty. There we'll find clues that will help us determine the exact location of the entrance mentioned in the legend."

"But won't Karabaev's men be watching these caves?" Dinara questioned.

"Surely," Rustam agreed. "But there are old paths known only to locals. We'll take those. Plus, we have an advantage—the medallion. Without it, Karabaev will never find the entrance, no matter how many men he sends."

Alexei picked up the medallion from the table and looked at it pensively. In the light of the kerosene lamp (Rustam principally did not use electric lighting in the evenings, preferring "living fire"), the silver gleamed dully, and the strange symbols seemed to come alive, moving in the play of shadows.

"Do you really believe that this crystal, the 'Key of Solomon,' possesses such power?" he asked Rustam.

The old man looked at him for a long time before answering.

"I've lived a long life, Alexei. I've seen many strange and inexplicable things. Especially here, at Issyk-Kul." He paused. "I cannot say with certainty that the crystal possesses all the properties mentioned in the legend. But there is something special about it. Something that made the Nestorians hide it from the world. Something that made your grandfather keep the secret all his life." He looked Alexei directly in the eyes. "And something that makes Karabaev so desperately search for it."

Silence fell in the room. Only the wick in the lamp crackled and night sounds came from the garden—the chirping of crickets, the rustle of leaves, occasionally the hooting of an owl.

"Now you need to rest," said Rustam, rising. "Tomorrow will be a difficult day. Aigul will show you to your rooms."

They followed Aigul, who led Dinara to one room and Alexei to another. The room was small but cozy, with a low bed, a small table by the window, and a chest for belongings. On the walls hung traditional Kyrgyz carpets—shyrdaks—with bright geometric patterns woven from rich red and blue threads, preserving ancient symbols and stories of the nomadic people, behind which the breath of high-mountain steppes seemed to hide.

Alexei sat on the bed, still holding the medallion in his hand. The events of the past few days swirled in his head, forming an incredible story—an ancient treasure, a mysterious crystal with mystical properties, a chase, danger... It seemed he had fallen into an adventure novel or film.

He put the medallion back around his neck and hid it under his shirt. The medallion responded with familiar warmth, as if happy to return to its place.

Alexei went to the window. Beyond it stretched a garden illuminated by the full moon—silvery apple trees, pears, apricots. And further—the dark silhouettes of mountains and the shimmering surface of Issyk-Kul, reflecting the stars.

There, in those mountains and under those waters, lay hidden a secret that generations had kept. A secret to which the medallion was the key. And in three days, they would have a chance to uncover it.

If, of course, Karabaev didn't get to it first.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," he said.

Dinara entered the room. She had changed into simple home clothes and let her hair down. In the dimness of the room, her eyes seemed especially dark and deep.

"Can't sleep?" she asked, sitting on the chair by the table.

"Too much information for one day," Alexei replied, returning to the bed. "It all seems... unreal."

"I know," Dinara nodded. "Even for me, having grown up with these legends, everything that's happening feels like a dream. Or a movie."

"Do you really believe this story?" asked Alexei. "About a crystal with unusual properties?"

Dinara pondered before answering:

"I'm a historian. I was taught to rely on facts, on documents, on archaeological finds. But I also grew up here, among these mountains and legends." She looked out the window at the starry sky. "There are things that science cannot yet explain. Especially here, at Issyk-Kul. The lake holds many secrets." She turned to Alexei. "And you? Do you believe?"

Alexei touched the medallion under his shirt. It was warm again, almost alive to the touch.

"A week ago, I would have definitely said 'no,'" he answered honestly. "But now... after everything that's happened... I don't know. This medallion behaves strangely. And people are willing to kill for it. So there must be something to this story."

Dinara nodded.

"That's why we must find the crystal before Karabaev. If the legend is even partially true, in his hands, the 'Key of Solomon' could become a dangerous weapon."

"Or the greatest blessing for humanity, if one believes in its healing properties," Alexei remarked.

"It all depends on the person who possesses it," said Dinara. "At least, that's what the legend says."

She rose, preparing to leave.

"We need to get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a difficult day."

At the door, she stopped and turned back:

"I'm glad you're here, Alexei. Despite all the dangers... I'm glad we're together again. Good night."

"Good night," he replied, watching her leave.

After Dinara closed the door, Alexei sat motionless for some time. Then he took off the medallion and placed it on the table by the bed. The silver disc gleamed dully in the moonlight streaming through the window. The symbols on its surface seemed to form mysterious patterns that were impossible to read but somehow felt familiar, like a long-forgotten dream.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow they would set out in search of the secret that the medallion had guarded. A secret that could forever change their lives.

With this thought, Alexei went to bed. He dreamed of mountains, caves, a lake glowing from within with a bluish light. And the figure of a monk standing on the shore with outstretched hands, as if offering something or warning about something. The monk was saying something, but Alexei couldn't make out his words. Only the medallion on the monk's chest glowed, and this light was the only guide in the surrounding darkness.

Chapter 5: The First Loss

Twilight quickly gave way to impenetrable darkness. In Rustam's house, everyone had long since gone to bed; only from a small window on the second floor did the faint light of a kerosene lamp filter through—Ermek was reviewing old maps of the area, trying to find the safest route to the caves.

Alexei awoke to the sensation that the medallion on his chest was vibrating. It didn't feel like anything natural—the silver disc was pulsating as if trying to warn him. He sat up in bed and listened. Outside, silence reigned—no familiar chirping of crickets, no rustle of leaves. A strange, tense silence.

He rose silently and approached the window. Moonlight flooded the garden, transforming the apple trees into bizarre silver sculptures. At first glance, everything seemed calm, but intuition told him something was wrong.

At that moment, Alexei noticed movement by the fence—a shadow gliding between the trees. Then another, from the opposite side of the garden. They were moving deliberately, surrounding the house.

Without wasting a second, Alexei ran out of his room. In the hallway, he collided with Dinara.

"They're here," he whispered. "The house is surrounded."

Fear flashed in her eyes, but she quickly composed herself.

"Wake Ermek," she said. "I'll warn grandfather."

Alexei nodded and headed for Ermek's room. But before he could take three steps, the sound of breaking glass came from outside, followed by a muffled explosion. The house filled with acrid smoke.

"Flash-bang grenade!" Alexei shouted. "To the exit!"

He grabbed Dinara's hand and pulled her toward the stairs. At that moment, the front door crashed off its hinges, and dark figures in masks and with weapons burst into the house.

"Upstairs!" Alexei commanded, changing direction.

They ran up the stairs just as Ermek rushed out of his room with a hunting rifle in his hands.

"Through the window, to the garden!" he shouted. "I'll hold them off!"

"No, Uncle!" Dinara exclaimed. "They'll kill you!"

"Do as I say!" Ermek snapped, taking position at the stairs. "Grandfather is in the far room, take him and leave through the western window. There's an apple tree there; you can climb down it."

Alexei pulled Dinara to Rustam's room. The old man was already on his feet, dressed, with a small leather pouch in his hands. His calmness in this situation was astonishing.

"They've come for the medallion," Rustam said, looking Alexei in the eyes. "Karabaev will stop at nothing."

From below came a gunshot, then shouts and sounds of struggle.

"We must hurry," Rustam approached the window and opened it. "Dinara, you go first. Help me climb down, and then Alexei should jump."

Without hesitation, Dinara climbed out the window and skillfully descended the thick trunk of the apple tree. Rustam handed her his pouch, then began to climb out unhurriedly. For his age, he moved with remarkable confidence.

Alexei nervously glanced at the door, expecting the pursuers to appear. From below came new shots and curses. Ermek was still holding off the attackers, but it was clear this wouldn't last long.

When Rustam safely descended, Alexei climbed onto the windowsill. At that moment, the door to the room burst open, and a man in a black mask with a pistol appeared on the threshold.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Without hesitation, Alexei jumped. The apple tree cushioned his fall, but it still hurt. A shot rang out from above, the bullet whistled past and embedded itself in the tree trunk.

"Run!" Dinara pulled him along.

They dashed through the garden toward the back gate, with Rustam following them at a surprising speed for his age. All around, shouts echoed, and flashlight beams darted among the trees.

"This way!" Rustam pointed to a narrow path winding between the trees.

They ran beyond the garden's bounds and found themselves amid tall cornfields. Dark stalks closed over their heads, hiding them from pursuers. Behind them, more shots rang out.

"What about Ermek?" asked Dinara, breathing heavily.

"Your uncle knows what he's doing," Rustam replied. "He's distracting them so we can escape."

They made their way through the cornfield, trying to move as quietly as possible. After some time, a glow flared behind them—Rustam's house was on fire.

"Their usual tactic," the old man said grimly. "Destroying evidence."

Finally, they emerged from the cornfield and found themselves at the foot of a hill. Here began a sparse forest, with trees growing on the steep slope.

"We need to go up," Rustam indicated. "At the summit, there's a cave where we can hide and wait."

The climb was difficult, especially for Rustam. Despite being in good physical condition, age was taking its toll. Alexei supported the old man by the arm, helping him overcome particularly steep sections.

"Are you all right?" he asked when Rustam heavily sat down on a stone to catch his breath.

"Just a short rest," the old man smiled. "In my youth, I could climb this mountain in twenty minutes. Now I need to stop."

Dinara nervously looked back at the valley from which they had come.

"They might follow our tracks," she said. "Especially if they have dogs."

"The path we're taking is frequently used by shepherds and their flocks," Rustam replied. "Our tracks will be lost among hundreds of others. Plus, it should rain soon." He pointed to heavy clouds obscuring the stars.

They continued their journey. The higher they climbed, the cooler the air became. The wind strengthened, bending the grass and making trees creak. Soon the first raindrops fell, and then a downpour began.

"This is good," said Rustam, although they were all soaked to the skin. "The rain will wash away our tracks."

Finally, they reached a small rocky ledge, behind which opened the entrance to a cave—a narrow crevice in the rock, barely noticeable in the darkness.

"We've arrived," announced Rustam. "We'll be safe here."

They squeezed inside and found themselves in a small but dry grotto. Rustam took flint from his pouch and lit a small oil lamp, which was also in his baggage.

"You came prepared," Alexei remarked, looking at the old man with respect.

"When you're eighty-four years old and keeping an ancient secret, you need to be ready for surprises," Rustam grinned. "At my age, you don't run as fast as you used to, but experience suggests what might come in handy."

Besides the lamp, Rustam's pouch contained crackers, dried meat, a bottle of water, and, most importantly, that ancient book with his ancestor's records.

"You specifically took it with you," Dinara noted. "You knew they would come?"

"I didn't know, but I suspected," Rustam replied, carefully taking out the book. "Since Alexei called you from St. Petersburg, I've been preparing for this moment. Secrets of this magnitude don't remain unnoticed for long."

He opened the book and, by the light of the oil lamp, began turning the fragile pages.

"What I told you earlier is just a small part of the story," he said. "This book contains knowledge that my ancestor received from old David, the last keeper of the Nestorian secret."

Rustam frowned, turning the pages.

"Strange," he muttered. "There should be a map here... Or at least a description of it." He quickly looked through several pages, then stopped.

"Here it is. The map was hidden in the medallion. In that very medallion you now have, Alexei." Alexei took the medallion from under his shirt.

"But I've already opened it. There was only a parchment with Latin inscription and a schematic drawing."

"Perhaps there's a second hiding place," Rustam suggested. "Let me see."

Alexei handed the medallion to the old man. Rustam examined it carefully, turning it different ways and studying each symbol.

"Interesting," he murmured. "According to the records, the medallion contains not only the location of the treasure but also the key to opening it."

He pointed to a strange symbol located in the center of the cross on the front side of the medallion.

"Do you see this sign? It's not just decoration. It's the arrangement of stars on the summer solstice. If you look from a certain point on the shore of Issyk-Kul, the stars align in exactly this order above the place where the treasure is hidden."

"So the medallion is a kind of astronomical instrument?" asked Alexei.

"A map, a compass, and a key," Rustam nodded. "The Nestorians were not only religious figures but educated people, knowledgeable in astronomy, mathematics, medicine. They created a protection system inaccessible to the Mongols with their primitive understanding of the world."

Rustam turned a few more pages of the book and suddenly froze.

"Here it is," he whispered. "Just as I thought."

On the page was text in old Kyrgyz and a drawing depicting a crystal of strange shape, surrounded by radiance.

"This is the 'Key of Solomon,'" said Rustam. "A crystal found in the mountains of Judea during the time of King Solomon and crafted by ancient masters. They gave it a special form which, it was believed, enhanced its natural properties."

"What properties?" asked Alexei.

"Healing," Rustam replied. "Insight. The ability to see the true essence of people and things." He shifted his gaze to Alexei. "That's why Karabaev is so desperately searching for it. He has a rare form of degenerative disease. Doctors give him no more than a year to live. He believes the crystal can heal him."

"How do you know about Karabaev's illness?" Alexei asked in surprise.

"In small communities, it's hard to keep secrets," Rustam shrugged. "Especially when you're rich and influential. His frequent visits to Swiss clinics didn't go unnoticed."

Suddenly, noise came from outside—through the roar of rain and wind penetrated the sound of engines.

"Have they found us?" Dinara asked anxiously.

Rustam approached the cave entrance and carefully looked outside.

"Not yet," he said. "They're combing the slope in a large group, but they haven't found this cave yet."

He returned to the book and quickly flipped through several pages.

"We need to find the exact location of the treasure before the summer solstice," he said. "And for that, we'll need another item."

Rustam pointed to a drawing in the book—a strange disc with concentric circles and unusual symbols.

"This is an astronomical instrument created by the Nestorians. With it, one can calculate the exact time and place to look for the entrance to the cave with treasures."

"And where is this instrument?" asked Alexei.

"I don't know," Rustam answered honestly. "According to the records, it was hidden separately from the medallion in a place called the 'Abode of Faith.'"

"'Abode of Faith'?" Dinara repeated. "That's what they call an ancient burial mound near the northern shore of Issyk-Kul."

"Possibly," Rustam nodded. "The records only say it's a place associated with great sorrow and the death of many people."

The noise outside grew louder. Flashlight beams darted across the slope, picking out rocks and trees from the darkness.

"They're getting closer," Alexei said anxiously. "We need to leave."

"There should be another exit," said Rustam, rising to his feet. "All caves in these mountains are connected. If the records are to be believed, this grotto connects to a large cave system that emerges on the opposite side of the mountain."

He raised the lamp and headed deeper into the cave. Dinara and Alexei followed him. The grotto narrowed, transitioning into a narrow corridor where they had to walk bent over. The corridor gradually descended, deeper into the mountain.

"Careful, it's slippery here," Rustam warned as they began descending a steep slope.

The air was becoming humid, and the sound of running water could be heard. Soon they found themselves in another grotto, significantly larger than the first. A small underground stream flowed here, disappearing into a crack in the far wall.

"We go that way," Rustam pointed to a narrow passage to the left of the stream. "It should lead us to the other side of the mountain."

At that moment, voices and flashlight beams came from behind—the pursuers had discovered the first cave and were now following them.

"Quickly!" Rustam commanded, heading for the passage.

But before they could take even a few steps, people with flashlights and weapons appeared from the opposite side of the grotto.

"Stop!" one of them shouted. "Don't move!"

They were trapped—the way forward and back was cut off. People in black clothing and masks surrounded them, weapons pointed.

"It seems the game is over," Rustam said calmly, lowering the lamp.

From behind the armed men emerged a tall, middle-aged man in expensive mountaineering attire. He had a well-groomed face with sharp features, dark hair with gray streaks, and eyes full of cold calculation.

"Timur Karabaev, I presume," said Rustam, looking at him.

"Rustam-aga," the man nodded. "At last, we meet in person. I've heard much about you."

His Russian was impeccable, with barely detectable accent.

"And you must be Professor Sorin's grandson," Karabaev shifted his attention to Alexei. "Alexei Igorevich, if I'm not mistaken. And, of course, Dinara Kambarova, talented ethnographer and special services employee."

"I don't work for the special services," Dinara replied coldly.

"Come now, dear," Karabaev smirked. "Your work on the commission for cultural heritage protection is a cover for counterintelligence activities. But that's not important now." He stepped forward. "What matters is that you have a medallion that belongs to me."

"The medallion belongs to no one," Rustam objected. "It's the key to a secret that our ancestors have guarded for centuries. A secret you are incapable of understanding."

"Oh, I understand its value perfectly," Karabaev replied. "Better than anyone else." He turned to Alexei. "The medallion, please. And the book too."

Alexei instinctively covered the medallion on his chest with his hand.

"And if I refuse?"

Karabaev smiled—a cold, soulless smile.

"Then I'll have to take them by force. And believe me, it will be unpleasant for everyone present."

Rustam stepped forward, shielding Alexei and Dinara.

"You will get neither the medallion nor the book, Karabaev," he said firmly. "You are unworthy to touch them."

"Worthiness—such a subjective concept, Rustam-aga," Karabaev shrugged. "Who determines who is worthy and who isn't? You? Your ancestors? The Nestorians, long since decayed in the earth?" He shook his head. "No, in our world, everything is decided by power and money. And I have both."

He nodded to one of his men:

"Take the medallion and the book from them."

The masked man stepped forward, heading toward Alexei. At that moment, with unexpectedly quick movement, Rustam drew a knife from his belt and lunged at the attacker. The knife entered the masked man's shoulder, and he cried out in pain.

Immediately shots rang out. Rustam jerked, taking a bullet to the chest, but continued to stand, shielding Alexei and Dinara.

"Run!" he shouted, pushing them toward the passage.

Dinara screamed, seeing her grandfather take a second bullet. Alexei grabbed her hand and dragged her to the exit.

"Don't stop!" Rustam shouted, taking a third bullet and falling to his knees. Blood soaked his shirt, but he continued to grip the knife in his hand. "Find the truth!"

At that moment, Karabaev approached him and pointed a gun directly at his face.

"Where is the disc?" he asked. "The astronomical instrument?"

Rustam raised his eyes, full of contempt:

"You will never find it, Karabaev. Even with the medallion."

"We'll see," Karabaev replied coldly and pulled the trigger.

Alexei, dragging Dinara toward the passage, heard the final shot and her desperate cry. He looked back and saw Rustam's body lifelessly sinking to the stone floor of the cave.

"Let's go!" he shouted, pushing Dinara into the narrow passage.

They ran through the dark tunnel, stumbling over rocks, scraping their hands on rough walls. Behind them came shouts and the sound of footsteps—Karabaev's men were pursuing them.

"Faster!" Alexei urged, though he could see Dinara was barely keeping on her feet from shock and grief.

The tunnel gradually widened but became steeper. They were sliding rather than running, grabbing at wall protrusions to avoid falling.

Finally, dim light appeared ahead—the exit from the cave. They burst outside and found themselves on the opposite slope of the mountain. Rain was still falling, turning the slope into a slippery mess of mud and stones.

"There, to the trees!" Alexei pointed.

They ran down the slope, slipping and falling. Behind them, the first pursuers emerged from the cave. Shots rang out, bullets raising small fountains of mud near the fugitives.

Suddenly Dinara stumbled and fell, rolling down the slope. Alexei dashed after her, trying to stop her fall. He grabbed her hand, but the momentum was too great—they both rolled downward, collecting mud, leaves, and small stones.

The fall ended in a small ravine overgrown with bushes. They lay there, breathing heavily, dirty and soaked to the skin.

"Are you all right?" asked Alexei.

Dinara silently nodded, but her eyes were full of tears.

"Grandfather..." she whispered.

"I'm so sorry," said Alexei, embracing her. "But we need to go. They're still looking for us." He helped her up. The bushes concealed them from pursuers, but it was temporary shelter.

"The book," Dinara suddenly said. "We lost the book! It's with Karabaev!"

Alexei automatically checked the medallion—it was still in place, hidden under his shirt.

"We have the medallion," he said. "So not all is lost."

He looked around. The downpour had turned into a drizzle, visibility improved. Below, in the valley, the lights of a village could be seen.

"We need to go there," Alexei pointed. "We need to find shelter and decide what to do next."

Dinara looked at him with eyes red from tears.

"Karabaev killed my grandfather," she said resolutely. "And he will answer for it."

"First, we need to survive," Alexei reminded her. "And find what your grandfather was looking for. Do you remember his last words? 'Find the truth.' He gave his life so we could continue the search."

Dinara nodded, wiping away tears.

"You're right. We can't give up now."

They began cautiously descending the slope, staying close to bushes for camouflage. Above, on the mountainside, flashlight beams still flickered—Karabaev's men continued their search.

"We need to search not for treasure, but for truth," Dinara quietly repeated her grandfather's words. "What did he mean?"

"I don't know," Alexei admitted. "But I'm sure we'll find out. For his sake."

The medallion on Alexei's chest warmed again, as if agreeing with his words. The mystery was only beginning to unfold, and the price had already been paid in blood.

Chapter 6: The Guardian's Vow

Morning mist shrouded the mountains, descending to the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul in milky swirls. The sun had just begun its journey, and its first rays, piercing through the veil, fell on the smooth surface of the lake, creating a fantastic play of light and shadow.

Monk Thomas stood on a rocky promontory, gazing into the distance. Behind him, on a small plateau, nestled an Armenian monastery—several stone buildings surrounded by a low wall. Here, in this secluded place, the surviving Nestorians had found temporary refuge.

He heard careful footsteps behind him. The monk did not turn—he knew who had come.

"Teacher," David said quietly, stopping beside him.

In the early morning light, the young man's face seemed especially youthful and vulnerable. Despite this, his eyes reflected a determination that Thomas admired.

"Good morning, David," the monk replied, not taking his eyes off the lake. "It's beautiful here, isn't it? As if the Lord Himself created this place to remind us of the perfection of His creation."

David nodded, but there was nervousness in his movements. He anxiously fiddled with the silver medallion that Thomas had given him the day before.

"You must leave today," Thomas said, finally turning to his pupil. "Before dawn."

"But the scouts report that the Mongols are still combing the area," David objected. "They know we're somewhere around here."

"That's precisely why you must leave now." Thomas placed his hands on the young man's shoulders and looked him intently in the eyes. "While their attention is focused on the monastery, you have a chance to slip away unnoticed."

"I cannot leave you all, teacher," David's voice was filled with despair. "I cannot abandon the brothers, sisters, children..."

"You are not abandoning us," Thomas gently interrupted. "You are fulfilling the most important mission. What we hid yesterday must be protected, and knowledge of it must be preserved for future generations."

He looked around to ensure they were alone and lowered his voice to a whisper:

"Do you remember everything I told you about the crystal?"

David nodded, involuntarily touching the medallion on his chest.

"It's the 'Key of Solomon,'" he said quietly. "A relic found in the mountains of Judea during the time of the great king. A crystal capable of healing diseases and opening the eyes of the soul."

"And?" Thomas pressed.

"And... amplifying both the light and dark sides of the human soul," David finished. "Granting light to some and plunging others into darkness, depending on what they carry in their hearts."

"Correct," Thomas nodded. "The Templars entrusted us with guarding it when the danger in Europe became too great. They knew about our community here on the Silk Road and believed that in these lands, far from wars, the relic would be safe."

He smiled bitterly.

"They did not foresee the Mongols. No one did."

Thomas turned away, looking at the rising sun. Clouds, penetrated by golden light, were reflected in the waters of Issyk-Kul as if in a giant mirror.

"Do you remember the map I drew?"

"Yes, teacher," David nodded. "It is safely hidden."

"And the cipher I gave you? The symbols for identifying other guardians?"

"I have memorized them as you taught me," the young man replied, touching the symbols engraved on the medallion. "I repeat them every day so as not to forget a single detail."

Thomas nodded with satisfaction.

"Now listen carefully, David. What I am about to tell you is not written in any book. This information is passed only from teacher to chosen pupil."

The young man straightened, his whole demeanor showing readiness to heed every word.

"The crystal is only part of the secret," Thomas began. "To use its full power, you need an astronomical instrument created by ancient masters. A disc with concentric circles and special markings. We deliberately separated them so that no one person could accidentally unite them."

"Where is this disc?" asked David.

"In a safe place," Thomas replied. "If the Mongols capture you and torture you, you cannot reveal what you do not know." He paused. "But I have left clues. The medallion contains instructions, understandable only to one who knows what to look for."

David looked at his teacher in confusion.

"You speak in riddles, teacher."

"Time will pass, and you will understand," Thomas smiled. "Right now, the main thing is to preserve the medallion and knowledge of the crystal. Find worthy followers who will continue to guard the secret after you."

He turned back to the lake.

"You know, I have pondered much about the power of the relic. About why the Lord allowed the creation of an object possessing such power, which can bring both blessing and curse. And I have concluded that it is a test for humanity. A test of our wisdom and our morality."

Thomas fell silent, as if listening to something. Then he continued in a different, more tense voice:

"I have created traps for those who will seek treasures out of greed. False caches, deceptive signs. He who craves gold will find only death." He looked directly into his pupil's eyes. "But he who seeks truth will be guided to it, if his heart is pure."

The wind strengthened, bringing freshness and the scent of water from the lake. Thomas shivered and adjusted his tattered cloak.

"You should know something else, David. The Mongol shamans... They sense the crystal's power. Some of them possess the gift of seeing the invisible. They are already trying to find it. Genghis Khan sent his best baghatur Subutai with divers to search for it at the bottom of the lake."

"But we hid the crystal in a cave, not in the lake," David frowned.

"Exactly. I have made sure to spread rumors about treasures being submerged. This will throw them off the track." Thomas smiled subtly. "Besides, the entrance to the cave will be visible only under special lighting, one day a year. At other times, no one will find it, no matter how thoroughly they search."

David shook his head with involuntary admiration.

"You have foreseen everything, teacher."

"Not everything," Thomas objected. "But enough to buy time. A lot of time. And now," he squeezed his pupil's shoulder, "it's time to say goodbye."

Tears glistened in David's eyes.

"What will happen to you? To the others?"

Thomas looked away.

"God will decide our fate." He was silent for a moment and added more quietly: "I will try to negotiate life for everyone, and if that fails—to buy time so that as many brothers and sisters as possible can escape."

"They torture prisoners," David whispered. "The Mongols. They tell terrible things..."

"I know," Thomas replied calmly. "But remember that physical suffering is temporary. They can break the body, but not the spirit."

He rummaged in the folds of his garment and took out a small leather pouch.

"Here, take this. Inside is what will help you on your journey. Some gold, the seal of our community, and a letter to the brothers in Kashgar. If you manage to reach there, they will help you."

David took the pouch but did not hide it, continuing to hold it in his hand as if he could not bring himself to accept this last gift from his teacher.

"And if... if they catch me?" he asked in a strained voice. "And I cannot withstand torture?"

Thomas looked at his pupil attentively. During his long years of wandering and service, he had seen much, but always found the strength to remain true to his principles. He had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem, fought in the Crusades before turning to faith and becoming a monk. He knew what fear and pain were. And he knew how to cope with them.

"David," he began gently, "do you remember the story of Saint Peter?"

The young man nodded.

"He denied Christ three times before the rooster crowed."

"Yes. Even the most devoted disciple can show weakness. We are all human." Thomas placed his hand on David's shoulder. "But what matters is not that we fall, but that we find the strength to rise. If you are captured and you break... Just survive, David. Survive and continue the mission when you can."

Tears stood in the young man's eyes.

"I don't want to leave you, teacher."

"But you must," Thomas said firmly. "Not for me, not for yourself. For those who will come after us. For those who may one day need the crystal's power."

He embraced his pupil, holding him tightly to his chest.

"Go by mountain paths," he whispered. "Local shepherds will show you secret trails. Stay away from main roads. And remember: light in water, water in light. Solomon's key will open the way."

"Light in water, water in light," David repeated. "Solomon's key will open the way."

They drew apart. Thomas pronounced a blessing in Aramaic, the ancient language of their faith, and made the sign of the cross over his pupil.

"Go in peace, my son. And may the Lord keep you."

David bowed his head, accepting the blessing, then quickly, without looking back, walked away. At the edge of the path leading down from the plateau, he turned one last time. Thomas still stood

there, against the backdrop of the rising sun, tall and straight. His figure seemed to glow in the rays of dawn, as if woven from light itself.

David raised his hand in a farewell gesture and began to descend. Within moments, he disappeared among the rocks and shrubs.

Thomas remained standing motionless for a long time, gazing after his departing pupil. Then he turned and looked at the lake, shimmering in the rays of the morning sun.

"Lord," he whispered, "give him strength to fulfill his mission. And give me courage to face what is to come."

He knew that returning to the monastery meant, most likely, condemning himself to death. The Mongols did not leave alive those who resisted. But Thomas had a plan—a mad, desperate plan that might give the remaining refugees a chance for salvation.

He took a deep breath, gathering his courage, and headed back to the stone buildings. A conversation with the abbot of the Armenian monastery, old Father Grigor, awaited him. They needed to prepare a feigned surrender of the monastery, while the majority of the refugees would secretly leave through an underground passage known only to a few.

Three days later, Thomas sat in a dungeon—a cramped cellar with an earthen floor and rough stone walls. His hands were tied behind his back, his legs bound with rope. His face was covered with bruises, one arm, twisted during interrogation, throbbed painfully.

The Mongol noyon Jebe was known for his cruelty, but also for his perspicacity. He quickly realized that Thomas was not just one of the refugees, but a leader, a keeper of knowledge.

The interrogations continued day after day. Jebe wanted to know where the treasures were hidden. He was not interested in gold and silver—he was looking for some special item. "The Stone of Power," as he called it.

Thomas remained silent, no matter what they did to him. Even when the pain became unbearable, he found solace in prayer and thoughts that David was already far away, beyond the Mongols' reach.

In the dim light of a torch burning in the corridor, he gazed into the semi-darkness of his dungeon and thought of those who had already left this world. The abbot of the Armenian monastery, Father Grigor, was killed on the first day of the siege when he refused to hand over the refugees. Many brothers and sisters died protecting the children. But a large group managed to escape through the underground passage while Thomas negotiated with the Mongols, deliberately buying time.

The creaking of the door roused him from his reverie. Jebe entered the dungeon, accompanied by his shaman—a thin old man with a bird-like face and eyes that seemed to reflect other worlds.

"You can still save your life, monk," the noyon said without preamble. "Tell me where the stone of power is hidden, and I will release you."

Thomas looked at him silently. He knew Jebe was lying. The Mongols released no one.

"Our shaman," the noyon pointed to the old man, "says the stone is somewhere nearby. He can feel its power."

The shaman nodded, not taking his penetrating gaze from Thomas.

"It glows in the water," the old man said in a creaky voice. "But there is much water around. The lake is large."

Thomas felt a chill run down his spine. Had the shaman truly sensed something? Or was it a coincidence?

"You know that sooner or later we will find it," Jebe continued. "The great khan has ordered every stone to be turned, every stream to be dried up if necessary. He wants to obtain the stone of power."

"Why?" Thomas asked, breaking his silence. "Why does Genghis Khan need this stone? He already has power over half the world."

Jebe smirked.

"The great khan is mortal, like all men. He seeks that which will extend his life, make him stronger." The noyon leaned closer. "They say this stone heals any wound, grants longevity and strength of spirit. Is that not so?"

Thomas turned away, not wanting to show how much these words troubled him. The Mongols knew too much about the crystal.

"If I had such a stone," he said slowly, "I would hide it so that no one could find it. Because the power you speak of is not meant for people. Especially for those who crave power."

The shaman suddenly made a strange sound—something between a laugh and a croak.

"I told you, noyon. This man knows more than he says. He hides the stone not out of fear, but out of conviction."

Jebe looked thoughtfully at Thomas.

"You know, monk, I respect your resilience. Not many can endure what you have endured." He straightened up. "But my patience is not endless. Tomorrow at dawn, we will continue our conversation. And if you do not tell everything you know, I will be forced to resort to extreme measures."

With these words, the noyon left, the shaman following him. The dungeon door slammed shut with a crash.

Thomas leaned back against the wall, trying to find a position in which his wounded body would hurt least. He understood that he would not survive the next day.

But this did not frighten him. The main thing was that David had escaped with the medallion, that the crystal's secret was preserved, that the knowledge would be passed down the chain of guardians, from generation to generation, until the time came.

In the dim torchlight filtering through the grate in the door, Thomas mentally repeated the ancient words of prayer, preparing for what lay ahead. He knew he would die, but he also knew that his cause would live on.

And in this knowledge, there was a strange, calm certainty that gave him strength to meet the final dawn with peace in his soul.

The guard had dozed off at the dungeon door when he noticed a strange glow seeping from under the loosely closed door. He rose, rubbing his eyes, and peered through the small window.

The cell was empty. The ropes that had bound the prisoner lay on the earthen floor, but the monk himself was nowhere to be seen.

With a cry of alarm, the guard flung open the door. He searched every corner of the cramped dungeon but found no trace of the prisoner. No tunnel, no broken lock, no other signs of escape. Thomas had disappeared as if dissolved into thin air.

The news quickly reached Jebe. The noyon personally searched the dungeon, then the entire monastery. He ordered a search for the fugitive on the lakeshore, in the mountains, and questioned all the local inhabitants.

But Thomas was never found.

Jebe, enraged by the failure, ordered the monastery burned to the ground. Flames consumed the ancient walls, turning the centuries-old abode into smoking ruins.

The shaman, observing the fire, approached the noyon and quietly said:

"This man was no ordinary monk. There was a power in him that we do not understand."

Jebe stared grimly at the fire.

"We will search for the stone without him," he said resolutely. "Send divers into the lake. Check every cave in the surrounding mountains. The stone must be somewhere around here."

The shaman shook his head:

"Now that the monk has disappeared, I feel that the stone's power has become more hidden, more distant. As if he has strengthened the protection of his secret."

"The prophecy states that the stone of power will one day return to the world," Jebe said thoughtfully. "Perhaps not in our time. But someday."

Wind from the lake scattered the ashes of the burned monastery high into the mountains. Gray flakes swirled in the air, like the last farewell of the ancient sanctuary.

And somewhere far from these places, young David continued his journey, carrying within him knowledge that would one day, centuries later, lead other seekers to the hidden sanctuary.

It was deep night. Lake Issyk-Kul was calm and dark, only a silver path of moonlight shimmered on its surface. On the shore, among the stones, sat a solitary figure. His face was hidden by a hood, but in the moonlight, one could discern ascetic features and attentive eyes.

Thomas gazed at the waters of the lake, knowing that he would never again see either David or the other brothers and sisters of his community. Now his path lay in another direction.

Thomas raised his eyes to the starry sky. He knew he had to go far, to where even the most skilled of Genghis Khan's spies could not find him.

With a heavy sigh, the monk rose and headed toward the dark silhouettes of mountains reflected in the waters of Issyk-Kul. Ahead lay his final mission and a long, solitary journey.

He did not look back. The past remained behind, and the future was in God's hands and those to whom he had entrusted his knowledge.

Thomas's figure dissolved into the night darkness, as if it had never been there at all.

Chapter 7: Betrayal

Dawn over Issyk-Kul was like the slow awakening of an ancient deity. The sun, rising from behind the mountain peaks, painted the waters of the lake in crimson and gold, casting long shadows from the coastal cliffs. In such moments, it was easy to believe the old legends of sunken cities and hidden treasures.

Alexei sat on a rock at the entrance to a small cave where he and Dinara had spent the night. Rustam's death still weighed heavily on his conscience. If he hadn't brought this cursed medallion, the old man would still be alive. Sitting in the cool morning breeze, Alexei turned the silver disc in his hands, studying the ancient symbols and trying to understand if it was truly worth the price they had already paid.

Dinara emerged from the cave, stepping quietly on the stony ground. Her eyes were red from crying, but her back remained straight, and her movements conveyed the determination of someone who would not allow grief to break them.

"How are you?" Alexei asked, rising to meet her.

"I'll survive," she answered briefly, looking at the lake. "Grandfather knew what he was getting into. He always said the secrets of Issyk-Kul demand sacrifices."

She turned away, brushing aside an unbidden tear.

"We need to go," she added in a firmer voice. "Karabaev's men won't stop searching."

Alexei nodded, tucking the medallion under his shirt. They descended from the hill and headed toward the nearest village, moving along goat paths to avoid encountering pursuers. By noon, they reached a small settlement where Dinara, using the local language, managed to buy some food and water, and arrange for a shepherd to drive them to Cholpon-Ata in his old truck.

"Do you think this is safe?" Alexei asked as they bounced along the rough road in the open truck bed filled with hay. "Karabaev is surely searching for us all along the shore."

"That's the point," Dinara replied, covering her face with a scarf against the dust. "He won't expect us to return to a major tourist center. Besides, Uncle Ermek has a house on the outskirts. We can rest and decide what to do next."

Alexei nodded, though a strange feeling of unease wouldn't leave him. The loss of Rustam's book was a serious blow—it contained important information about the treasure's location and the "Key of Solomon." Now they were left with only the medallion and fragments of knowledge that Dinara had received from her grandfather.

By evening, they reached the outskirts of Cholpon-Ata. The shepherd dropped them at a crossroads and, after receiving payment, drove off, raising a cloud of dust. Dinara led Alexei along a narrow path that disappeared into a thicket of poplars and willows.

"Uncle's house is half a kilometer from here," she explained. "Away from the main development, right by the lake."

They walked in silence, watchfully looking around. Twilight descended on the land, painting everything in silvery-blue tones. The air was filled with the scents of water, sun-warmed stones, and flowering herbs.

Ermek's house turned out to be a small single-story structure with a spacious veranda facing the lake. Old apple and cherry trees grew around it, and a small pier with a boat tied to it stood at the water's edge.

"Strange," Dinara frowned, approaching the house. "No lights, though Uncle's car is in the yard."

Alexei tensed. Something wasn't right. It was too quiet; even the birds weren't singing in the garden.

"Wait," he held Dinara back by the arm when she was about to step onto the veranda. "Let's look around first."

They circled the house, peering through windows. Inside, it was dark and seemingly empty. But when they approached the back door leading to the kitchen, they heard muffled voices.

"That's Uncle," Dinara whispered, listening. "But who is he talking to?"

They carefully crept up to the window and peered inside. In the kitchen's half-darkness, illuminated only by the dim light of a table lamp, Ermek sat at the table. Opposite him was a man in a dark jacket, whose face they couldn't make out.

"I did everything I could," Ermek's voice reached them. "I brought them to Rustam, as you asked."

"But they escaped," his companion replied coldly. "And the old man died without revealing all the details to us."

"That's not my fault!" Desperation sounded in Ermek's voice. "I didn't know they would run away! I thought you just wanted to talk to them, study the medallion..."

"Don't lie to me, Ermek," his companion cut him off. "You knew perfectly well what was happening. You knew that Karabaev would stop at nothing to get the 'Key of Solomon.'"

Dinara froze beside Alexei, her eyes widening with shock and the pain of betrayal.

"I thought I could protect them," Ermek continued. "Wanted to negotiate with Karabaev... so no one would get hurt."

The man in the dark jacket laughed sharply:

"Negotiate with Karabaev? Are you that naive or just stupid? This man will destroy anyone who stands in his way." He leaned forward, and the lamplight momentarily illuminated his face. Alexei recognized one of those who had been with Karabaev in the cave. "Now you must correct your mistake. Find your niece and that Russian. Bring them here."

"And then?" Ermek asked quietly.

"Then Karabaev will decide what to do with them."

Dinara backed away from the window, her face contorted with pain. Alexei embraced her shoulders and carefully led her away from the house.

"My own uncle," she whispered when they had gone far enough. "How could he? After everything grandfather did for him..."

"Judging from what we heard, he didn't want anyone to get hurt," Alexei carefully noted, though he too was shaken by what they'd overheard. "It seems he's confused and afraid of Karabaev."

"That's no excuse," Dinara said sharply. "He brought us to grandfather, knowing that Karabaev's men could appear at any moment. He..." her voice broke. "He's guilty of grandfather's death."

They moved even further away, deeper into the coastal thickets, and sat on a fallen tree to decide what to do next.

"Where to now?" asked Alexei. "We have no money, no transportation, no safe place."

Dinara gazed thoughtfully at the lake, shimmering in the last rays of sunset.

"I have a friend in Karakol," she finally said. "From university days. He works as a curator at a museum. We could try to reach him."

"How far is it?"

"About a hundred and fifty kilometers along the eastern shore of the lake."

Alexei whistled:

"On foot, we'd be walking for days."

"There are buses," Dinara objected. "But using public transportation is risky. Karabaev's men are surely checking all routes."

"What about a boat?" Alexei nodded toward the lake. "Your uncle has a boat. We could..."

"Steal it?" Dinara smiled bitterly. "Why not. After what he did, it would be fair."

They decided to wait until deep night, then sneak to the pier and take the boat. Until then, they remained in the coastal thickets, watching Ermek's house.

Close to midnight, a black SUV pulled up to the house. Several people got out, among whom they recognized Karabaev. The oligarch quickly ascended the veranda and entered the house.

"This doesn't look good," Alexei muttered. "Looks like Karabaev decided to personally control the situation."

Half an hour later, the SUV left, taking Ermek with it.

"Now," Dinara said decisively. "While no one's there, we need to take the boat."

They quickly descended to the pier. The boat turned out to be a small motorboat, powerful enough to cross the lake quickly. Alexei, who had some experience operating such vessels, quickly figured out the engine.

"Full tank," he reported. "We'll have enough to reach Karakol."

Dinara untied the ropes securing the boat, and they slowly moved away from shore. When they were at a sufficient distance, Alexei started the engine, and the boat slid across the dark water, leaving a foamy trail behind.

The night was moonless, stars hidden behind clouds, which worked in their favor—they were difficult to spot from shore. They kept at a distance from the shore, but close enough to see the lights of coastal villages.

"What will we do next?" Alexei asked, shouting over the engine noise. "We don't have Rustam's book, no detailed information about the treasure..."

"We have the medallion," Dinara replied. "And something else."

She took a small notebook from her jacket pocket.

"I wrote down some of grandfather's stories when I visited him last summer. Not everything, of course, but the main details about the treasure's location and the 'Key of Solomon.'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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