

The House of the Spider

I.

They had been travelling for seven years. The columns of people moved through the steppe which stretched to the horizon. They were led by a group of horsemen, with women and children staying in the middle. Behind them, the heavily loaded wagons were slowly pulled by oxen with long twisted horns. The procession was closed by a troop of foot soldiers guarding the rear. Their route led them from the far-away city of Zhongdu encircled by over twenty feet high walls of black stone, through the red sands of the Central Desert and the contaminated marshes surrounding the deserted Kashagar metropolis built on the outline of a perfect hexagon. They usually walked by night keeping off the beaten track, away from the commercial routes. Their tents were woven from stiff sisal fibres obtained from a special species of agave and dyed red or deep brown. The technique was developed by their ancestors and perfected by later generations. According to the maps, soon they should see the salt-white banks of the Atal Lake surrounded from the North by a high mountain range, of which Mount Bogd Khan was the highest. There they planned to set up a camp and wait out the winter season – the season of snow storms and increased radiation from the demagnetised poles of the planet.

II.

Among them were people from all nooks and corners of the world. The proud and tall inhabitants of the distant Karakorum, famous around the continent for their metallurgical skills, their eyes gleaming with golden irises. The black fugitives from the Southern wastelands who had run away from the whips of the local landlords, with marks burned into their bodies as a testament to the violence they had suffered: infinity symbol tattoos representing eternal enslavement. The worshippers of the Moon persecuted by the priests of the Sun. The former slaves from the uranium mines, their bodies contorted from work so badly that they had to travel on carts. The digital nomads with their cerebral ganglia burned out by thousands of Internet connections through the network entwining multiple solar systems. On their necks they wore black coils of cables resembling tangled snakes, like amulets or antique fetishes. There were priests of the god Xay who believed in the existence of five sexes. At dusk, a mingle of voices reciting verses, singing melodies or whispering hundreds of prayers and invoking thousands of blessing requests floated above the tents.

III.

Occasionally, they would stop at the outskirts of major cities to replenish their provisions, leave messages or sell their products. They were often not welcome. In Urgench, the city sent the army equipped with hydrodynamic explosive munition. In Bukhar, someone set fire to their tents. Upon entering the rich city of Ilikar (famous for its aluminium products, so delicate that you would expect them to dissolve into thin air) they were forced to wear electric collars on their necks which controlled their movements, risking electrocution at any time. Sometimes authorities allowed them to comb through the local waste dumps to look for supplies, clothing and other useful items. In such cases, whole families would rummage through the piles of

garbage: their dark, slanted shadows growing longer as the time passed. They always left quietly at night. They rolled up their tents quickly and efficiently. Every time there were joined by a few others: desperate and insolvent individuals, struggling with diseases of the body and soul. The People of the Road grew in number.

IV.

They spent the last winter far away, on the eastern plateau of the White Hills, in the deserted underground village of Katpatuka. Years before unknown builders had created hundreds of corridors, chambers and storage rooms in the soft tuff rock. Some passages were so narrow that it accommodated only one person; others were wide enough to make room for a whole family. From a distance, the village resembled an enormous abandoned termitary: hundreds of window openings adorning the soft tuff rock let in the light from the two suns orbiting relentlessly around the planet, allowing it to reach the deepest underground levels. Inside the tuff rock hills there were three streams; the rustle of water lingered in the corridors and echoed in the big empty chambers. In one room, they found a faded wall mosaic with the image of large silver spiders with their webs entwining all known solar systems. The spiders seemed to be rocking on cosmic cobwebs, jumping from web to web lightly and swiftly. The mosaic suggested that village was founded by the 85th century followers of the heretical “string theory”, according to which the basic building blocks of matter were not particles but vibrating strings stretched between the edges of the universe. Considered extremely dangerous, the heresy had been crushed by the militia of the neighbouring cities.

V.

They decided to stay in Katpatuka for the whole winter season. The winter months were spent replenishing their provisions, resting and making products from eggshells of the mammoth bird, a large flightless fowl living in flocks on the nearby steppes. The products – dishes, fine jewellery, small decorative mosaics in wooden frames – were especially valued due to their unusual deep cobalt blue colouring. The production engaged the entire community regardless of gender, rank or role. And so they spent the dark long winter days – while the magnetic storms raged outside, smelling intensely of iodine and lightening up the sky with the phosphorescent purple – carefully processing the shells: cutting, modelling, gluing them together and painting. The fire illuminated their focused faces as they worked amidst songs and stories from the times of their fathers.

With the advent of spring, some of them started to argue that the People of the Road should settle down for good in the underground village on the White Hills. That this was their long-promised land, vaguely mentioned by some of the holograms in the sacred neutron memory scrolls. Yet their voices were soon silenced and their words proclaimed as dangerous lies. The Road was the only truth. *Thou shalt not own any land.*

VI.

They had been walking for many months when one day they finally noticed the silver banks of the Atal Lake shimmering from afar. They went down the grassy slopes towards the enticing waters that stretched in front of them. At noon, the first tents appeared at the edge of the pine forest surrounding the lake. A makeshift Internet signal receiving station was erected. Kitchen stoves were lit, cattle pens were built, someone threw nets into the lake to catch fish. The chronicler opened his notebook to write down: *On this fifth day after the Great Turn we have reached the place where we intend to spend the winter.* They could not possibly know that the cities of Sarai, Otrat and Nishapur decided to ally against the newcomers. The People of the Road were a threat to those that liked repeating the age-old spells: “nation”, “property”, “respect for the law”. Five armed troops were marching towards them; the light of the midday sun illuminated the hypersonic missiles, the ceramide armored cars, the magnetic acoustic guns. They were approaching from the West. On the bank of the Atal Lake someone looked towards the mountains. He wiped the sweat off his face with his sleeve. He raised his arm to cover his eyes from the rays of the setting sun. Then he saw the flash of an explosion.

VII.

There is a legend told among the People of the Road that goes as follows: Once there was a righteous man living in the far-away steppes, who stole cattle from the rich and gave them to the poor. One day he ran from the chasing guards until he reached the bank of a great wild river. He saw the distant top of the Holy Mount Bogd Khan and began to pray for his soul, feeling that the end was near. And so it happened that he and the stolen cattle rose up in the air and flew over the river until they landed safely on the distant slope of the Holy Mountain.