

Prolog

Near Charmula, Chiapas, Mexico

Five Years Ago

Isacc heard the men coming long before they reached his hut. He counted five voices, but recognized only one. The policeman, he thought, damning the man beyond words. As they got closer, he could hear the local man's tentative, almost pleading voice. "He knows what will happen when the army leaves," Isacc whispered to himself. "We will feed him to the pigs, a millimeter at a time." The other voices were strident, propelled by drink. They had no fear.

As he stood and pulled on his trousers, the voices outside caused Isacc's wife to stir in her sleep. He stroked her hair. She sighed and turned on the new straw mattress, fighting consciousness. The small frown that had clouded her brow disappeared. She was young and kept within her a depth of passion that amazed Isacc when it appeared. He bitterly regretted what was about to happen to her—to them both. At twenty-five, Isacc stood just under five feet six. His wide shoulders gave him an almost square silhouette in the thin light that filtered through the curtained window.

He would have to fight them, Isacc knew. They would expect it. It was part of the pleasure they hunted tonight. First they would beat him, then rape his wife. If he were lucky, no one would be killed or badly hurt. He slipped soundlessly to stand by the hut's door, holding his staff high, grimacing, muscles tensed.

The men stopped, speaking in slurred whispers, their poor attempt at stealth ruined by awkward stumbling and muttered laughter. Suddenly, the hut's door slammed open. "Security check!" an assailant bawled. "On your feet and outside, all in the hut!" Isacc understood the drunken Federale perfectly. Like most of the men, he spoke Spanish. His wife, like most of the women, did not. "What is happening?" she asked, still half asleep. She spoke the language of the people, the Tzeltal heard here for more than three thousand years.

The Federale leaned through the doorway. "Ah, a dove of Charmula," he said, laughing. "Now you will sing a new..."

Isacc put all of his strength behind the blow, striking the Mexican solidly across the back of the neck with his staff. The soldier fell heavily, as the others fell upon him with surprising speed. He fought as hard as he could, but they soon pinned him against the hut's wall. Two continued to beat him. The rest turned to the straw pallet. Isacc felt the knife attack his forehead, realized he'd lost sight in one eye. As consciousness escaped him, he heard his wife's pleas become screams. "They will pay," he groaned. "They will pay..."

To the reader of this letter:

I write to volunteer for any assignment your organization needs done. When you check my records (I know you will), you will find that I served my country with distinction during two tours in South Vietnam. Note that I have intelligence experience, and that I had both Top Secret and code word SIGINT clearances.

I left the army and never looked back, unless you count the flashbacks and dreams that have haunted me for decades. The VA gave me pills that got rid of the flashbacks, and my wife helped me with the dreams. Pat was my rock and my compass. Thanks to her, I was able to lead a normal life and raise a family. Words can't express how much I loved her, and the kids she and I brought into the world.

Now, suddenly, they're all gone. Pat died six months ago, and I buried my sons two years before that. It is a hard thing to bury sons. I loved them both with all of my heart. They were all the problems I suffered from corrected, all my shortcomings improved, the extension of me and my father, and his father before him, to the future. Now destroyed, shattered in a heap of steaming steel and plastic by a drunk who lost his license years ago.

I guess they'll eventually put the drunk in prison. It doesn't matter to me. There's no punishment devised that could balance the scales. He murdered me, and everyone who came before me. Yet I'm still here—still breathing and taking up space. Not surprising, really. When you check the records, please note that the one medal I never got was a Purple Heart. On all those missions, I never got a scratch.

Some of the missions were pretty tough, as the records will show. We had high casualty rates in my unit. The only time I get to see most of my old friends is when I visit the wall in Washington. Or in those dreams I still get, sometimes. I've always been a survivor, a guy who finishes the mission and comes back, whether I like it or not.

So I have an offer for you and your bosses, one I hope is too good to refuse. Give me a mission – a job to do. I know you must have places where you need a set of eyes— the budget cuts must have hurt you just like the rest of the government. I don't need a big paycheck; I've got nobody to send it to. And you won't have to think up a cover for how I passed away, if it happens. There's nobody around who cares.

Now, I know I'm no young pup, but I'm not in bad shape for my age. Young agents have families, loved ones, and aspirations. I've got none of that baggage. Think of all the missions you can't do now. There must be one I could qualify for. All I'm asking for is a chance to serve my country, one more time. Please give me the chance.

Sincerely,

*Barnett V. Stack
Former Captain, US Army*

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Chapter One: The Thin File
George Bush Center for Intelligence, Langley, VA
The near future

Jason Flask carefully placed Stack's letter—along with its accompanying forms from the Army, the FBI, and the NSA—in a file labeled “Potential.” As he replaced the file in the cabinet behind his Government Issue gray metal desk, he noted how thin it remained. The “Nutcase” file was far bigger. It had grown larger than a single file, and would soon demand an entire drawer for itself.

He rose from the desk, coffee cup in hand. The shift of weight to his bad leg made him gasp. Stars fluttered at the edges of his vision. At every physical therapy session, they told him he was making great progress. A walk down the hall for a cup of coffee said they were liars. Ignoring the pain, Flask levered his tall frame around his desk. “Face it,” he thought as he picked up his cane and limped toward the break room, “You’re going to be reading these letters for a long time.”

Flask's injury had interrupted a brilliant CIA career. He had been running a remarkably successful string of local agents out of the Islamabad embassy. Their intelligence had touched subjects as diverse as Pak nuclear weapons production, I.S.I. Taliban support, and the movements of Bin Laden's remaining associates. The debriefing sessions were always hairy, but he hadn't suspected that any of the men he'd recruited and trained could be turned so abruptly. Only his reflexes had put the bullets meant for his head in his leg.

Evacuated that same day, Flask had remained at a military hospital in Germany through three rounds of intensive surgery. After a timeless period of semi-consciousness punctuated by jolts of white-hot agony, the docs told him his leg had been saved. He'd be as good as new after six months of physical therapy, they promised. He was shipped stateside for that.

Four months into the program, Flask wasn't so sure about the prognosis. His bad leg still felt like it belonged to someone else. It had to be coaxed to obey even the simplest commands. The payment extracted for these grudging compromises was pain so intense it was breathtaking. Still, Flask pushed himself through each session with grim determination. He even surprised his trainers by asking for more when the scheduled time was over. They smiled and cooed—congratulating him for every halting step he took, every weight he strained to lift, every childhood task he relearned. He wondered to himself what they really thought.

He could walk now. That is, if the cane supported, foot-dragging lurch he used qualified as walking. He could drive a car—automatic only, though. The Porsche sat in a friend's garage, but Flask stubbornly refused to sell it. He could dress himself, feed himself ... hell, he was as good as new, almost.

The agency had sheepishly asked him to work a desk while he convalesced. “It’s just admin stuff,” his boss, Johnny Calder, had explained. “Normally, we’d give it to a smart clerk. But you know how the budget’s been cut since COVID. We’ve had to slice staff pretty heavy.”

Flask didn’t argue with the ex-Navy Captain, but he didn’t give in either. “I can’t let anything get in the way of my physical therapy,” he said.

“It won’t, I promise,” Calder replied, not letting up. “Look. You’ll get an office, some privacy, some quiet—and the work’s not tough. Try it for a few weeks, Jason. That’s all I ask.” Then a wink and a pat on the back, “You might even get to like it.” Flask got the message. The following Monday, he drove his new Ford to Langley.

Things went pretty much the way his boss had promised. The office was small, but private and very, very, quiet. It was tucked away in a corner of the Bush Center’s second level basement. The only noise was the barely perceptible hum from pumps that kept the building’s interior air pressure slightly higher than the world outside. The work wasn’t tough, either. It amounted to little more than reading mail.

Every week, the CIA receives tons of mail, hundreds of thousands of letters and e-mail messages. Every one of these letters and messages has to be read, analyzed, then acted upon or filed. Some just ask questions. Most of these can be answered through the agency’s public relations office—a bigger organization than most people might think. Others promise to do things for or to the agency, and these can’t be ignored. After all, Lee Harvey Oswald wrote such letters, and spies responsible for enormous damage to national security have been recruited by the Russians and the Chinese from similar communications. Some are from obvious kooks. Others need more study.

Flask’s new job was to study some of these messages—specifically, the ones from people volunteering their services. The total volume of these averaged more than fifteen thousand every week, but most were eliminated long before they reached his desk. Those from people worthy of serious consideration—from recent college graduates, active duty military, foreign citizens, or members of various organizations—were sent to other departments.

The requests routed to Flask’s desk were from men and women unlikely to be of value to the agency, primarily due to age. Still, each had to be read, analyzed, and filed (“After all, you never know...”). Sometime in the past, the office had acquired the nickname “Old Dogs,” and the name had stuck. Over the years or through clerical error, the tag had been shortened to “OLDOGS”—its current semi-official name.

Although he resisted at first, Flask grew to enjoy the assignment. The posts he examined fell into three major categories: bizarre (“... I can see the secrets in men’s minds ...”), senile (“... take the advice of an old soldier ...”), and what he came to call “Potential.” That last category captured Flask’s imagination. These guys were old, sure. Some were damn near ancient.

But most had real experience that could be valuable in one way or another. Even so, potential for what? A concept floated just beyond his imagination.

His thoughts solidified after a lunch with Johnny Calder. The two had made a habit of getting together at least once a week, since Flask's rehab had begun.

"We're really missing you in the field, Jason," Calder said, shaking his head for emphasis. He looked up, forgetting his listless salad. "We don't have enough agents out there. Even fewer who know what they're doing. The world has gone crazy since the virus hit. Too many hot spots. We don't even know what we're missing until it blows up in our faces."

"Well, the satellites ..." Flask began.

"Yeah, the eyes in the sky," Calder said with a wry grin. "Ears too, huh? All those phone conversations, there at our fingertips. The satellite boys and the drone queens are having a field day. Trouble is, even the fancy algorithms in the best computers we've got can miss things. They miss a lot more than you'd think, all the time."

"They get better every year, Johnny."

"So do the bad guys, Jason. Smarter, too. The Pakistanis and the Iranians fooled us any time they wanted to, until we got some human assets in place. The Indians made us look like monkeys before their nuclear tests. They had our satellite overpasses timed to the second. ISIS and Boko Haram can't always be traced electronically. Civilians have code keys our best crypto programs can't break on their cell phones and laptops, for God's sake!"

"Is there an answer?"

"There sure is, Jason. The answer is HUMINT. Guys like you, or even half as good, on the ground. That costs money, and our budget keeps getting whittled back. It's a negative feedback loop. Every time we miss something, every time we come up short, somebody on the hill uses it as another excuse to lop some more off our budget. If it happens much more, we'll be paying them."

A day later, as Flask scanned the morning's in-box, Calder's frustration triggered the beginning of an idea. As he read another old volunteer's plea, a thought ran through his mind. "Here we are, without the budget to do our jobs," he mused, "and these guys want to work for peanuts."

But what could a superannuated volunteer really do? Flask imagined what would happen to the best of the candidates from his file, in a situation like the one that had wounded him. "He'd be dog meat," Jason decided, and pushed the idea from his mind.

Still, over the days that followed, the thought kept returning. "Maybe not the dangerous areas," Flask mused as he read through more requests. "Maybe just the calmer places where we still need a set of eyes." He smiled at this notion, and shook his head to clear it from his thoughts. Even so, that day he began paying more attention to the "Potential" file.

To the Commander-in-Chief:

Don't bother to send me one of those "thank you, but ..." form letters if you don't accept my offer. I don't need any more to paper my walls.

I've got almost thirty years' service behind me, retired as a Chief Master Sergeant before I was fifty. I earned every medal on my chest, even the big ones.

Here's my situation. My wife's passed on, my children moved out sometime back, and I don't have anything to do with myself.

I tried civilian work, and frankly I can't understand how most people put up with it. In the service we had officers who were assholes, but they eventually took themselves out. At least everybody had basic respect for each other. That's not the way it is back in the world, at least not anymore.

I want to get back to work for my country. The armed forces won't take me, so I thought of you. I know I'm getting old, but I've learned a lot during my time—in combat and in garrison. I can still hold my own with some of those young pups your outfit is training, I bet. I might even teach them a thing or two.

You must have places, jobs, or assignments where I could help. I don't need much pay. I already have a good pension from Uncle. Give this request serious consideration. I did, or I wouldn't have bothered to write it at all. Make up your minds as quickly as you can. After all, I'm not getting any younger.

Sincerely,

*John Wayne Paxton
CMS, USA, retd.*

Chapter Two: Green Yarn

Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan

Bolat Umarov's office was not large. As Kazakhstan's Minister of Energy, he might have demanded—and gotten—a more elegant chamber. Umarov liked his modest quarters just fine as they were. Here he was masked from line-of-sight by any of the spy-ridden embassies that surrounded his building. The walls were solid and thick, proof against many forms of covert surveillance. He had the rooms electronically “swept” twice weekly—to discover any devices that might have been covertly planted by visitors. The amounts found always surprised him.

Umarov rotated his secretary out of the ministry pool every two weeks, allowing none to become too familiar with his habits, paperwork, or visitors. He harbored big plans—plans he wanted kept to himself until he decided the time was right to share them with others.

For the past year, the focus of those plans was depicted on a map hung unobtrusively from the wall near his desk, masked by drop-cloth most of the time. The map portrayed the Caspian region, with international borders marked in red and intrastate borders dotted blue. Black-headed pins indicated oil and natural gas drilling sites proposed by American and European investors. These were most numerous just off the Caspian Sea's Kazakh shore, less so near the coasts of Azerbaijan and Russia. From the clusters of pins, lengths of colored yarn had been strung across the map in varying directions. Red yarn ran northeast to Chelyabinsk, in Russia, where extracted Kazakh oil and gas would meet existing pipeline infrastructure for transport to Novorossisk. Blue marched south, through Turkmenistan, to Sabzevar in Iran, northeast of Tehran. Finally, green yarn stretched southwest over water to Baku in Azerbaijan. From there, the green continued in an almost straight line to Sonyas in central Turkey—then turned south to Mediterranean Ceyhan, and export to the west. “Green,” Umarov thought to himself, “the color of American money.”

The minister leaned back in his chair, pulled out and lit a black Russian cigarette from the pack in his breast pocket. He took a long draw, then held the cigarette in his left hand—as he uncovered and reviewed the map once more. Any planned pipeline had to pass through Azerbaijan and Georgia to reach Turkey. All proposed alternatives bypassed Armenia, for good reason: with no possible guarantee of stability, the capital necessary to finance that country's portion of any pipeline was impossible to find. To date, Azerbaijan was considered the linchpin of the project by all concerned.

Both the Russians and the Iranians were confident they could exert their will on cash-poor Kazakhstan to push the direction of any pipeline project to their advantage. Both factions could wield roughly equal pressure on the Kazakh government. Without any serious money—five billion dollars at least—Umarov knew his nation could only watch as the mullahs in Qom contended with Moscow's oligarchs in their tug-of-war over control of Caspian energy, each

patiently waiting for some advantage. Umarov was unwilling to allow his nation to settle for any crumbs left by the eventual winner of this standoff. He was determined to change the equation.

Just under middle height, Bolat Umarov had inherited the black eyes and big shoulders of his family. Built like a barrel, he kept himself shaved bald, and cultivated a dramatic goatee. His thick, spatulate fingers seemed ill-suited for bureaucracy. In fact, Umarov had spent much of his life as a soldier, and had fought for the old Soviet Union in the sadness of Afghanistan. His past would help him now, as he battled to secure a place for his new nation at the bargaining table for their own energy resources.

The man coming to see him might gain him the funds needed. Umarov glanced at his watch, noting that his visitor was several minutes late already. He shook his head and scowled. Tardiness suggested impudence, lack of respect. His thoughts were interrupted by a loud knock on his closed office door. "Come," he called.

His current secretary, a drably middle-aged local woman named Inzhu, opened the door and looked in. "Colonel Alexeev is here," she announced.

"Please send him in," Umarov said, standing from behind his desk.

Alexeev entered quickly. A tall, heavy-set, pale-eyed European Russian with short-cropped greying hair, he was dressed today in an ill-fitting grey suit rather than a uniform. He seemed apprehensive. Totally understandable. Alexeev was here to perpetrate a serious crime. If apprehended, he could expect no less than a life sentence in the worst of the gulags. More likely, a bullet to the back of his head after lengthy, agonizing torture would be his fate.

Umarov came around his desk, walked to the taller man, and jovially slapped his back. "Viktor Mikhailovich," he said in Russian, smiling broadly, "Welcome. Please, have a seat. Would you like tea, or coffee perhaps?"

Alexeev shook his head, frowning. "No, Bolat," he said, glancing nervously around the room. "Some vodka, if you have it."

Umarov led his visitor to an upholstered leather chair near his desk. "Sit," he said. "I'll have some brought in. I have been waiting to see you."

He sat at his desk and buzzed his secretary on the intercom. "Inzhu," he called, "some vodka for our guest. The Beluga, please." The vodka he requested, from the Marinsk distillery in the heart of Siberia, was widely considered the best Russia had to offer.

Soon, a tray holding a crystal decanter, two shot glasses, and a sliced, pickled cucumber was laid on the desk. Alexeev rose to claim his glass, but Umarov rose as well. "Please, Viktor," he said. "Let me serve you."

He filled a small glass with vodka, handed it to his guest, and filled another for himself. "*Za Vstrechu!*" he announced, raising his glass, then downing the vodka in a single swallow.

His guest did the same, quickly reaching to refill his glass. Umarov held up his hand. "First we must talk, Viktor. Then we can drink," he said.

He walked around his big desk and sat down again. “Now,” he said, leaning forward in his seat. “You must tell me. Is all in order? Has the package left the country?”

Alexeev sat, staring at the glass in his hands. “It is done,” he said. “I have taken great pains to assure that its absence will not be discovered soon. The personal danger I have faced was considerable. That Turkmen you brought to me has been excellent. The package transited the Bosphorus two days ago. It will be in Cyprus tomorrow. How will I be paid?”

Umarov nodded. This was the answer he had hoped to hear. “It will be as we discussed. As soon as my agent verifies receipt, you will receive ten million U.S. dollars, deposited to a numbered Swiss account. I will hand you the documents needed to access the account personally. You are a rich man, my friend. With that kind of money, you can go anywhere.”

He rose, came around his desk again, took Alexeev’s glass and refilled it along with his own. “*Vzdognem!*” he said heartily as both men emptied their glasses. There was no more serious work done in his office that afternoon.

Meanwhile, the package both men celebrated rested in the hold of a small Albanian steamer, plying the eastern Mediterranean from Bodrum to Famagusta. There it would be unloaded, along with a cargo of pistachios and sunflower oil. It was a large, heavy, lead-lined, coffin-like container—stoutly secured against any tampering. The steamer’s captain and first mate had both been well-paid to assure it was kept intact and untouched.

The next day, the package was the first piece of freight unloaded, hoisted directly from the ship’s hold to a waiting truck. Inspection of the item was cursory. Arrangements had been made. The man overseeing those arrangements was a tall, muscular Turkmen. His dark full beard and checked kaffiyeh suggested a middle eastern background, but the rest of his garb was western—khaki pants and shirt, a wide leather belt, heavy work boots. He smoked American cigarettes and spoke little. Instead he gestured to the truck’s driver, who dealt with the port officials and the freighter’s crew. His eyes remained focused on the package. He climbed into the truck’s bed and inspected it closely—checking all the locks and seams to assure himself no tampering had taken place, feeling the sides of the heavy container to be sure no severe dents or ruptures marred it. Finally satisfied, he swung himself from the truck’s bed, walked to the cab and climbed in, nodding to the driver as he did.

“As you wish, Gurban Tazhiev,” the driver said, as he put the truck in gear and drove from the pier.

To whom it may concern:

I'm as good an intel pro as you will find. My career in the Air Force in a number of roles proves it (see attached). As one of the first drone queens, I helped write the book on autonomous aerial surveillance. My work with Darkstar and Global Hawk is known and noted. On the physical side, I still get to Japan every couple of years to work with my sensei. I maintain a true and hard-earned black belt. I'm a fair shot as well, as the records will show.

The trouble is, I'm old – too far past my sixtieth birthday for USAF personnel wonks to abide. My kids have kids now, and they're leaving high school for college. Ed passed away two years ago, and left me comfortable, bored, and lonely. I need something to do. Liquor isn't an answer, and I'm no good at bridge or canasta. Nor do I knit.

I want a job—a real, useful intel job. Surely you could use someone with my extensive skill set. If you do, you'll find it money well spent—and you won't have to spend much, either. As I said, Ed took care of me very nicely.

Don't bother to send me a "no thanks" form letter. Just let me know you've got interest. You will be glad you did.

Hopefully,

Josephine DiVoll

Colonel, USAF (retired)

Chapter Three: Batman's Ghost

Famagusta, Cyprus

Semih chewed each fig with ponderous concentration, as though it might be part of his last meal. Though his table was at the rear of the beachside restaurant, he still enjoyed a sweeping view of *Akdeniz*, as the Turks called the Mediterranean. A carafe of strong thick coffee complemented the plate of figs and other dried fruit. Semih took his time with the simple meal. Aside from the meeting he was here for, his day would have little else to fill it.

A native of the stark mountains and wind-swept gorges of southeastern Turkey, Semih was still quietly awed by the endless vista of the sea, the mild climate, and the feeling of peace that came with both. The last, he knew, was a dangerous illusion. Behind the thick sunglasses he wore day and night, his startling blue eyes branded him as a Kurd—born of people unwanted in any of the five nations where they struggled to survive. He had chosen Famagusta specifically because of its proximity to the Greek side of the island. If today's meeting went badly, he could easily slip across the frontier.

Middle age had softened Semih's gaunt frame and thinned his once thick hair. Years of torture and deprivation in Turkish prisons had given him the limp and the tremors that punctuated his movements. These were observable results of the patriotism of his youth. The worst damage could not be seen.

Semih had realized from his first involvement with the PKK that the Turkish police could capture him someday. His worries became reality one night in Batman, the home of his family. He was arrested with several others and thrown into prison. He knew what to expect: endless maltreatment, brutal beatings, torture with fire, water, and electric shock. He had steeled himself to resist—to keep the secrets and the names he knew within himself.

He failed. After three months of sleep deprivation, starvation, and constant abuse, he had moaned the name of a comrade. It had been an act of frenzied self-preservation, done to stop the application of pain he believed was killing him. To his surprise, the torture ceased. He was given a cigarette, a drink of water. Later on, his dinner tray contained a bit more food. Still, he had told himself, there would be a limit to what he would confess. No more names, for one thing—just agreement with facts his captors already seemed to know. Semih sighed, remembering his decision as though he'd made it yesterday. That had been his first lie to himself. From then on, every betrayal had been followed by another empty vow, another compromise. After less than a year, he had given up all that he knew, including the names of family and friends. The torture continued until his interrogators were sure he was not—could not be—lying, until every shred of his self-respect had been destroyed.

People had died because of his weakness—people he knew and loved, members of his clan, men he had respected. Some of them knew who their traitor had been before they died.

Many years had passed, but he still felt their cold, dead eyes staring at him. His dreams were populated with their outraged spirits.

After the last dregs of his dignity had been torn from him, the Turks had sent Semih back to Batman. His mission was to draw as many of his movement's followers into Turkish hands as possible. By then he had become their willing accomplice, capable of any duty they required—so long as they did not hurt him any further. In his mind he was already dead. He had become his own ghost, haunting the world around him but unable to leave it.

It had been a long time since those betrayals. Since then, Semih had patched a life together at the soiled fringes of humanity. He worked as a smuggler's broker for the most part, putting parties in need of things in touch with those who could supply them. Drugs were the most common commodities, though he also had experience with weapons, jewelry, art, antiques, rare animals—even women and boys. His business took him around the world, but without much glamour. The cheap hotels, obscure bars, and back alleys of one city look surprisingly like those of any other. The money he made went to a collection of discreet banks. Semih needed very little to sustain himself. His personal belongings fit easily into the small, cheap suitcase he always kept near him, packed and ready for flight.

As he often did when the world around him seemed calm and unthreatening, Semih wondered to himself why he bothered to survive. Thanks to the Turks and his own failings, his life had become a horrible parody of what might have been. It would be easy to stop living. A subtle whisper to the right ears would send any of a dozen people he'd harmed in the past rushing to Cyprus. "I could probably make money on the deal," Semih thought, laughing to himself. Yet he still took great pains to keep living—always mapping an escape route, exquisitely sensitive to the slightest suggestion of trouble. Chewing another fig, he shook his head dolefully. It was a mystery.

A muffled sound made Semih look up. The man he was waiting to meet had arrived, and was now silhouetted against the vista of the bay. Unconsciously, Semih noted the position of his suitcase and glanced at his preset getaway path through the restaurant's kitchen. There were no new obstructions. All was clear. His automatic checklist complete, he rose from his chair. "Gurban Tazhiev," he called. "I am here."