

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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THIRTEEN STEPS TOWARDS THE FATE OF ERIKA KLAUS (2010)
THE FORGOTTEN OUTPOST
ZABYTAYA ZASTAVA, ILI TRINADTSAT SHAGOV ERIKI KLAUS
Kazat Akmatov (1941–2015)

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OVERVIEW

Author Kazat Akmatov was born on December 23, 1941, in the village of Bosteri, Ysyk-Kol Province, Kyrgyzstan. He passed away on September 14, 2015, after a prolonged illness.

He graduated in 1966 from the Higher Komsomol School under the Central Committee of the Komsomol in Moscow and in 1967 from the Department of Kyrgyz Language and Literature at Kyrgyz State University. Akmatov began his professional career in 1954 as a laborer at the Horse Breeding State Enterprise in the Ysyk-Kol District. From the 1960s, he engaged in Komsomol activities. In 1972, he joined the editorial staff of the *Kyrgyzstan* publishing house as an editor and later served as deputy chief editor. Between 1974 and 1983, he held various positions within the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan. From 1983 to 1986, he served as senior editor at the State Television and Radio Committee of Kyrgyzstan. Between 1986 and 1990, he was Secretary of the Board of the Union of Writers of Kyrgyzstan. In 1990, he became one of the founders and the first chairman of the Kyrgyz Democratic Movement, a driving force in the formation of the country's modern political system and an important influence in the rise to power of A. Akaev. From 1990 to 1995, he served as a member of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic.

His first collection of stories, *Young Man (Boz Ulan)*, was published in 1974. He is also the author of novels, stories, and collections including *Sacred Homeland (Yiyk jurt)*, *Time (Mezgil)*, *Munabiya (Munabiya)*, and *The Years That Turned Around the Sun (Kundu aylangan jyldar)*. Several of his works were adapted for the stage, including the plays *Ajyrashuu (Ajyrashuu)*, *Munabiya (Munabiya, co-written with J. Kulmambetov)*, and *Accident (Avariya)*. In 2013, his work *Thirteen Steps towards the Fate of Erika Klaus (Zabytaya zastava, ili trinadtsat shagov Eriki Klaus)*, originally published in Russian, appeared in English in London. His final novel, *Arhat (Arhat, 2006)*, received the Toktogul State Prize of Kyrgyzstan for literature. Notably, the film *Munabiya (Munabiya)* was adapted from his novella for Kyrgyz cinema.

Kazat Akmatov received the Jubilee Medal *Manas-1000*, the Toktogul State Prize of Kyrgyzstan, and the All-Union Nikolai Ostrovsky Literary Prize. He is recognized as a People's Writer of Kyrgyzstan and is considered one of the founders of Kyrgyz democracy.

Novella The novella was published in the journal *Druzhba Narodov*, issue 7, in 2010 in Moscow under the title *Forgotten Outpost, or Thirteen Steps of Erika Klaus (Zabytaya zastava, ili trinadtsat shagov Eriki Klaus)* in Russian.

The novella was translated into English by Elizabeth Adams under the title *Thirteen Steps towards the Fate of Erika Klaus* and published by the publishing house *Hertfordshire Press* in 2013. In 2022, it was translated into Kyrgyz by Markabay Aamatov and published in the literary magazine *Ala-Too*.

This novella belongs to the post-Soviet neo-realist genre, combining social realism with psychological and criminal drama, while also incorporating elements of political thriller and moral tragedy.

Background The story is set in a remote border village in Kyrgyzstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following independence in 1991, many Central Asian border regions faced political instability, weak governance, corruption, and economic hardship. In such isolated areas, local military or border officials often exercised unchecked power due to limited central control.

The novella reflects this post-Soviet reality through the portrayal of a unofficial Russian led border post, even though Russia was no longer formally responsible for Kyrgyzstan's borders. This blurred sovereignty symbolizes lingering imperial influence.

Colonel Bronza embodies authoritarian leadership shaped by Soviet military culture, rigid, secretive, and punitive. His hidden bunker and smuggling network illustrate how organized crime, trafficking, and illegal trade flourished in unstable border zones.

The harsh mountainous landscape reinforces isolation and confinement, while eagles symbolize freedom. Culturally, the novella explores tensions between Kyrgyz traditions and Western ideals, represented by Erika's presence as a volunteer promoting education and human rights.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Erika – young Norwegian volunteer who comes to teach English in the village of Chet

Colonel Bronza (Kagan) – cruel head of the unofficial border post who rules through fear and violence

Soyuzbek Chabanov – school principal who tries to balance survival, corruption, and responsibility

Sovetbek – former soldier traumatized by the Afghan war and torn between fear and conscience

Stalbek – young policeman who slowly finds the courage to stand against injustice

Samara Orunbaeva – careful assistant principal who tries to protect her family in a system built on fear

SYNOPSIS

Erika, a young Norwegian volunteer, travels to the remote border village of Chet in Kyrgyzstan to teach English, ignoring warnings from home. Instead of the sunny land she imagined, she finds a harsh mountain valley ruled by fear. The village lives under the shadow of Colonel Bronza, known locally as "Kagan," the powerful head of a Russian-controlled border post. Though officially responsible for security, Bronza operates like a dictator, running smuggling routes, taking bribes, and secretly building an underground bunker to expand his criminal network. Russian border officers were responsible for guarding Kyrgyzstan's borders until 1999, when Kyrgyzstan took full control after the withdrawal of Russian border troops.

Soon after arriving, Erika's passport is confiscated and she is summoned for interrogations. The school is abruptly closed, and villagers, including assistant principal Samara Orunbaeva and her son Sovetbek, a troubled Afghan war veteran, they warn her not to interfere. Everyone is expected to cooperate with the border post as informants. Refusing to betray her principles, Erika becomes a target.

As Bronza's paranoia grows, so does his brutality. Refugees are arrested, prisoners tortured, and young women trafficked through a staged "beauty contest" for foreign buyers. When Sovetbek becomes entangled in conflict with Bronza, he is arrested and beaten to death in custody. His death shocks the village but deepens its silence.

Erika is falsely accused of threatening state security and imprisoned. She narrowly escapes being sold to traffickers. The only person willing to help her is Stalbek, a young local policeman who begins to question the corrupt system he serves. Risking his career and life, he secures her passport and arranges her escape.

But at the airport, Erika is seized and taken back by border authorities. Realizing what has happened, Stalbek makes a final, desperate decision to return to the border post and confront the power that has terrorized them all.

SCENES

Arrival in Chet Village Erika, a young woman from Norway, travels to the border village of Chet in Kyrgyzstan to teach English despite warnings from her friends and parents. A dusty wind blows through a market in Bishkek as she continues her journey, surrounded by the smell of melons and watermelons. The driver is a young man who shows little interest in her. He has been sent to pick up a Peace Corps volunteer and school textbooks. They travel in silence on a rough, winding road as the old car shakes in the wind.

Through the Mountains to the Chet Village Erika travels through high mountains on her way to the border village of Chet. The rocks hang above the road, and she feels afraid they might fall at any moment. The driver, Sovetbek, says the rocks do not fall often, only stones sometimes do. He speaks honestly about life in the mountains and his people. They talk in the moving car. Erika is surprised by the wild beauty and danger of the land. Sovetbek becomes quiet as the road enters a dark mountain gorge. Night falls, and he turns on the headlights as they continue deeper into the valley.

Two Hours of Sun "So, you've met," laughed assistant principal Samara Orunbaeva. "A dog doesn't bark at its own." In the living room, filled with animal skins, Erika thought, "The Green Party in Oslo would press charges for these." She asked, "Did your husband hunt them?" "From our grandfathers, for warmth," the hostess replied. "But I came for the sun. Isn't Kyrgyzstan sunny?" "True, but not here. In summer, the sun appears for only two hours. You've come at a bad time. And there's Colonel Bronza... the head of the border post of Russia. He is our authority and provider. You, dear, just teach our children English and don't interfere with anything. When the Border Post asks anything, tell the truth. As Kagan says, 'Truth will save the world.'" A Moskvich car stopped outside. "My son," Orunbaeva said, indicating the driver who had brought her from Bishkek.

The Daily Inspection As always, from eleven to one, Colonel Bronza—head of the border post, nicknamed 'Kagan' (ruler) by the locals—took his daily walk. He wore red shorts, powerful binoculars slung over his shoulder, his mood uncertain. His favorite dog, Cerberus, strode beside him on a leash. During these two hours of sunlight, he inspected the mountain path for any freshly dug earth his soldiers might have dropped overnight. So far, it was clean. Guard dogs barked from a locked kennel, but Cerberus ignored them; the colonel's favorite was housed and fed separately. At the path's end, Bronza stopped by a deep ravine where soldiers dumped the earth and covered it with brushwood. There were no tracks, only the piled branches. The colonel closed his eyes, satisfied.

The Colonel's Ambition The colonel is worried that the ravine may not be able to hold all the earth dug out for building his hidden underground command center. If the soil is not properly hidden, the construction could be discovered and his plans would be ruined. He sees the bunker as his secret base where he can control the local people. He thinks negatively about his officers and soldiers, accusing them of greed and corruption, and believes even the locals obey him because he provides for them. While drinking whisky and relaxing in the sun, he watches birds above the cliffs. Later, he observes a nearby settlement where people live simply and calls them "sun worshippers," mocking their way of life with arrogance and disrespect.

The Disbanded and Forgotten Outpost The colonel observes life in the nearby village of Chet and mocks the people there as lazy and backward, stereotyping them as "sun worshippers" and misunderstanding their culture and religion. Although he was instructed to learn local customs, he maintains a sense of superiority and shows colonial attitudes toward the population, believing he is guiding and supporting them while imposing Russian symbols and influence. At the same time, he feels increasingly disconnected from his own military system. He questions whether his unit has been disbanded and concludes that it has been forgotten by higher authorities. Despite this, he remains at the outpost, loyal to Russia even though he has been effectively abandoned.

The Bunker Work was Delayed The sun set behind the rocks, and the river in the valley of Chet turned dark. Time seemed to pass very quickly. The colonel was unhappy that the bunker work was delayed and called the soldiers lazy. He noticed pieces of wet clay on the path and became angry. After drinking whiskey, he returned to the outpost. He ordered soldiers who worked at night to be locked in the horse shelter and punished. He called them "scum" and treated them very harshly. The colonel believed these soldiers were

the worst people, including alcoholics and drug users. In his youth, he was also humiliated, and after joining the army, he rose in rank. Now he uses these soldiers to do hard and dirty work while he avoids direct punishment.

First Day at the School According to the special Chet school calendar, summer months are for studying, and winter months are holidays because of heavy snow. Erika's first lesson in the 8th grade is on June 4, during the hottest 40-day period called Childe in the traditional Kyrgyz seasonal calendar. In the afternoon, Erika goes to school with Samara Orunbaeva, the assistant principal. The school principal, Soyuzbek Chabanov, is waiting in his office. He says that Erika is invited to the border post and that Orunbaeva must go with her because she is new and does not know the way. Orunbaeva agrees and says they will go after Erika's lesson. Erika does not understand at first. The director insists that they are already under suspicion, and Erika must go to the border post immediately and skip her class instead.

The Egregore Confused about the mysterious Border Post, Erika rang the bell on a metal door marked with a star. A soldier led her into a room where a sergeant soon appeared. "We've been waiting for you," he chuckled. "Tell us, beauty, what brings you here?" "I didn't come for you," Erika replied coolly. "I'm a volunteer at the school." He scoffed at her teaching English. "Says who? The Queen of England?" "The Egregore," she said. "Who? What Egor?!" the sergeant asked. "It's the collective consciousness of the modern world," she explained. The sergeant's eyes went wide. Baffled by her philosophical answer, he gave up. "Just fill out this questionnaire."

The Taken Passport The sergeant, rushing out, cast his warning: "Don't hurry. Be honest. I'll check!" The same soldier led Erika away, a paper pressed into her hand. In the car, near untouched textbooks, Samara and Sovetbek waited. "We knew they'd keep you," Samara whispered, her hand on Erika's shoulder. Erika buried her face in her palms. Softly, Samara asked, "Did they touch you?" Erika shook her head. "My passport is gone." "It's the new way, dear. Kagan's rule now. All our papers are with them." Erika's voice rose, indignant: "I can't leave?" "If they permit," Samara replied. "You'll go."

The Pretext At home, two smiling teenage girls, Saykal and Aichurok, were preparing dinner. "Now I will teach you English, and you will teach me Kyrgyz," Erika laughed. But Samara Orunbaeva worried over the blank questionnaire. The deadline conflicted with Erika's very first class. "I wrote it all today!" Erika protested. "I told them my purpose: to teach children English. But they laughed and said it was only a 'pretext.'" She looked up, confused. "What is 'pretext'?" Sovetbek, her son summoned from the yard, sighed knowingly. "It means they don't believe you. They will keep dragging you back. They believe your true purpose must be something else."

A Bitter Morning Samara Orunbaeva sensed trouble was brewing for her. The yard dog had barked all night as someone wandered outside. Lying in bed with her daughters, she heard strange voices that eventually faded. In the morning, she found Sovetbek dead drunk in his Moskvich with the doors wide open. Two of his friends slept behind the shed. She could only sigh bitterly. As she wondered where the boys had found money for vodka, the village mayor rode into the yard. He told her the Border Post had summoned her—and she could take her "bonus" from the border post while she was there.

Bitter Bargains "Is it too early for a bonus?" Samara wondered, uneasy about the small amount of money. The village mayor smirked and said they would make a profit from the foreigner Erika, then rode away. Behind a shed, a drunk man woke up with a bruised eye. His friend asked if he had found anything. He said no and suggested selling the golden eagle. They walked through Sovetbek's orchard. The injured man complained that the eagle had almost killed him. He said even a strong captain would fall trying to catch it. They looked toward a cliff where the mother eagle was trapped in a net while feeding her chicks.

Funeral and the Eagle Bargain Around noon, two men arrived at the border post carrying a golden eagle in a sack. Soldiers stood in formation, flags were lowered, and schoolchildren and teachers, including Principal Soyuzbek Chabanov and Samara Orunbaeva, wore black armbands. They watched as a coffin was brought out, and an officer gave a speech for a young soldier who had died in service. After gun salutes, the coffin was taken away by helicopter. Later, Sovetbek's friends met a captain and tried to sell the eagle. He refused full payment, gave them alcohol as an advance, and told them to bring 'herbs' (drug) next time.

Closed School and Uncertainty For a week, children played football all day on the village lawn while the school stayed closed. No one seemed worried, but Erika felt lost. Her lessons were canceled, and no one knew when they would start again. She stayed in her room and cried, thinking about her purpose and the problems with the border post. At home, Samara Orunbaeva argued with her son Sovetbek, who remained silent. Later, he began repairing a small old house for travelers who needed a place to stay for the night. Rumors spread that the school principal was arrested, but in fact he was at the border post, explaining why strangers had been allowed to stay overnight in the empty rooms of the school.

Under Bronze's Power Principal Soyuzbek Chabanov often thought about removing Bronze, the powerful head of the border post. But he knew that without him, the village might not survive. Bronze had secured his position through agreements with the Kyrgyzstani government and ruled like a king. One day, Chabanov spoke carefully with Sovetbek about Bronze's control. Both men understood they could be reported at any moment. Sovetbek trusted no one and answered cautiously. They both felt that people were forced to betray each other just to survive. Later, Chabanov was detained for allowing *refugees*, suspected drug sellers from a neighboring country, to stay in the school and waited to face Bronze.

Chabanov in Detention Director Soyuzbek Chabanov had taken money from the refugees and planned to share most of it with Bronze, keeping a small part for the school. Bronze's strict rules controlled everything at the border post, and even prisoners had to follow written instructions. Bronze had burned many old documents and replaced them with his own regulations. Chabanov, now in detention, struggled with small daily problems and felt powerless. He thought about complaining but knew Bronze would justify everything as "protection of the border and people." Finally, Chabanov was called to see Colonel Bronze on the second floor.

Chabanov and Bronze's Confrontation Chabanov sat before Bronze. Bronze was known for his explosive temper, but he usually controlled himself. Bronze ordered Chabanov to sit farther away and insulted him for his disobedience. He accused him of causing trouble and demanded to know why he was disturbing him. Chabanov replied that Bronze had taken his woman, Ainura, for himself. Bronze laughed, scoffed at Chabanov's wife and other women, and mocked him harshly. Chabanov argued back, claiming that Bronze himself had a harem. Bronze turned serious, and the tense exchange ended when he ordered Chabanov to hand over the package of money and leave.

Bronze and Chabanov's Deal Chabanov told Bronze he would hand over the money but warned that the tenants might leave and live in private houses. Bronze angrily said private owners were more honest and demanded all the money, not small amounts. Chabanov hesitated and finally gave him a long plastic package filled with cannabis powder. Bronze asked again how much had been taken. As Chabanov left the office, he felt that Bronze was not angry, but the silence frightened him even more than words. Later, Sovetbek took his one-day turn on herding duty. It was Sunday morning, calm and cold in the valley, with dew on the grass.

A Morning with the Herd Erika asked Samara Orunbaeva if she could help Sovetbek with herding. Samara said there was little for him to do. Erika decided instead to watch the goats. Sovetbek walked behind the sheep, wearing a wide straw hat, while two white goats led the herd. Erika joined him, saying she wanted to try herding for the first time. Sovetbek agreed lightly. Her sandals got wet in the morning dew, and her feet itched from grass and thorns, so he led her to a dry path. They talked about nature and animals. Sovetbek explained that goats knew where to find better grass. As the sun rose, the herd moved toward the mountains.

Sunlight and Conversation As the sun rose from the eastern mountains, Erika asked if she could sunbathe without clothes. Sovetbek said there was full freedom and stepped aside. Erika lay in the sun, then dressed again when it set. Later she noticed Sovetbek resting nearby, his upper body exposed and sunburned. Erika asked him an awkward question about making love and quickly apologized, saying she did not mean to offend him. Sovetbek calmly replied that this topic was forbidden in Kyrgyz culture, but that everything from the West had also come there—music, clubs, internet, even drugs. He said he was a former Afghan war soldier and had seen violence. He believed people had become cruel and greedy, and now even stole livestock for ransom.

Control, Corruption, and Abuse of Power at the Border Bronza flew over the border checkpoints and saw traffic of cars, animals, and people. Some posts checked for drugs, weapons, and human trafficking, but his trusted men controlled all inspections and collected money. He sent armed groups and snipers to protect the routes, and his soldiers fought gangs when necessary. Rewards and money were given for loyalty and informing. Later, Bronza walked secretly along the river and watched migrant workers and suspected smugglers. He looked at women and a young boy of twelve with inappropriate desire, showing abuse of power.

Power, Violence, and Obsession at the Border Bronza stayed near the border and watched his checkpoints through binoculars. He saw delays and suspected corruption and bribery among the guards. After checking all posts, he went into the mountains near a snake nest. Feeling weak and sick, he followed the advice of an old Kyrgyz hunter, killed an argali, and consumed its blood, believing it would restore his strength. Later, after drinking brandy, he thought again about the boy he had seen in the mountains. He planned to bring the boy to the outpost, have him cleaned up.

The Death of the Innocent Boy Bronza met a boy with a smile and gave him a mobile phone with headphones. But the boy resisted when he tried to undress him, so the man used a shock device on him. Later that night, the boy died in the room of Bronza. He man woke up and dragged the body outside, throwing it near a building. In the morning, his officer reported a dead boy with no clear signs of violence.

Order at the Border Post The officer reported that the boy was likely an illegal border crosser. His mother had come and asked for a meeting. Bronza asked where the body was and was told it was kept in a refrigerator awaiting orders. Bronza ordered that the mother be charged with illegal border crossing. After she signed a statement saying she had no complaints to the border post, she was to be sent back across the border. When asked about the body, Bronza replied that unidentified corpses must be destroyed. The officer then asked permission to leave, and Bronza dismissed him.

The Marriage Signal In the village, people heard that a young man, Askarbek, had brought home a beautiful wife. Different stories spread about where she had come from. A report was also sent to the border post, which monitored both border violations and the moral behavior of villagers. Askarbek had tried for years to bring his bride legally from across the border, but rumors made the situation look suspicious. A sergeant questioned him, but he insisted everything was legal and promised an explanation from his wife. Meanwhile, a patrol was sent, including his brother Soyuzbek Chabanov, to investigate the case. Before they left, Askarbek warned him at home: "Brother, I know why you are going. When you return, I will shoot you. May Allah forgive me."

Border Arrest Soyuzbek Chabanov mounted his horse and angrily told his brother not to speak about God after profiting from his situation. A border patrol later discovered that Askarbek had brought his wife not from Bishkek, but from a neighboring country, illegally crossing the border using a raft made of inflatable bags. The couple, already married in a religious ceremony, was arrested and taken to the border post. Bronze became angry, thinking Chabanov was trying to profit even from his own brother. Askarbek confessed quickly, but his young wife could not speak Russian, causing further problems. Bronze ordered that a translator be brought to him. Later considered selling a confiscated jeweled sword taken from a smuggler.

Erika Opens the School Erika felt sad and confused. The school was closed, but no one seemed to care. People were busy making money, and she did not understand the situation. She hoped Sovetbek would help her, but he stayed distant. She asked Samara about him and learned he had fought in the Afghan war. In the schoolyard, children were playing football. Erika spoke to them and asked if they wanted to learn English. They agreed with excitement. She encouraged them to open the locked school, and soon they were sitting in class. Erika happily introduced herself and began her first lesson, feeling hopeful again.

Escape and Tragedy On a quiet July night, cicadas sang while soldiers on night duty grew sleepy. Suddenly, guard dogs sensed something and began chasing escapees. The pursuit followed the river, then moved up a hillside toward a deep ravine. The soldiers ordered the dogs to attack. No voices or gunshots were heard, only growling and struggle in the dark. Soon, everything became silent. When the soldiers

arrived, they found only one injured dog near the edge of a cliff. The next morning, villagers learned that Askarbek and his young wife had fallen from the cliff and died during the escape, along with a fierce guard dog.

Bronze's Dangerous Plans At times, Bronze had bold and dangerous ideas. The bunker was already built and could hide money and drugs. For now, he planned to use it to keep illegal traders and people involved in trafficking. He thought about inviting a candidate for the Kyrgyzstani president to gain influence and power, believing money could help control politics. But his main goal was bigger. He saw the bunker as a path to Europe, where demand for illegal goods was growing. He planned to expand his operations and profit from smuggling, dreaming of greater power and wealth through crime.

Conflict with the Minister Bronze wanted to rest, but an officer informed him that a commission had arrived to investigate complaints. He ordered them to be sent away. Soon, Marlenov, the Minister of Border Service called him directly and warned that disobeying orders would have serious consequences: "You are still on the territory of Kyrgyzstan. Know your place!" He demanded that Bronze allow the inspectors to enter and review the growing number of complaints. Bronze refused, saying the border post was secret. The minister replied that he knew about Bronze's activities and could report them to higher authorities. He made it clear he would no longer tolerate disobedience and ended the call.

A Visit of Power and Deals Bronze angrily cursed but soon called a government official, trying to secure support. The official joked about Bronze's power and later planned a visit to the border post during a tour of the mountains. Bronze welcomed the guest with a formal ceremony. Soldiers and villagers gathered, and flags waved. The guest praised the work of the post, and everything seemed successful. In the evening, during the farewell, the official acted distant, ignoring Bronze despite receiving expensive gifts. Bronze felt angry, thinking he would need to offer more. Yet as the guest left by helicopter, he smiled calmly, and the two shared a final embrace.

Assassination at Dawn Before dawn, a government official woke from a short sleep as his assistant brought shocking news: the Minister of Border Service, Marlenov, had been shot dead near his home. The official was stunned. It was already the sixth murder in just a few months, showing how dangerous the struggle for power had become. Even high-ranking officials with guards and armored cars were not safe. Marlenov had been a careful and experienced officer, trained in Moscow, though known for speaking openly. His death revealed the deep instability and violence behind political control and competition for power.

Pressure to Become an Informant Erika watched a rough horse game where riders fought over a goat's body. The violence disturbed her. She looked for Sovetbek but could not find him and noticed he had been distant lately. Samara Orunbaeva called Erika and told her to go to the border post immediately. Erika refused, but Samara insisted. She explained that everyone must cooperate and act as informants to report suspicious activity. It was considered a duty, and people were even paid for information. Erika felt confused and uncomfortable. She did not want to report on others, but Samara warned her that refusal could bring trouble for both of them.

Alone and Afraid Samara Orunbaeva became angry and warned Erika not to cause trouble for herself or others. Erika was shocked, as she had always seen her as kind and gentle. Erika insisted that informing on others was wrong, but Samara repeated that there was nothing bad in it and told her to write reports or call the authorities. Feeling overwhelmed, Erika went to her room and locked the door. Samara shouted after her that she had not come here to be stubborn. Erika felt completely alone. Fear grew inside her, and she imagined herself like the goat in the game—helpless and trapped.

The Officer's Order The local authorities had only one police officer, a young and inexperienced man named Stalbek. He wore a uniform but did not enjoy his job, as he struggled to deal with troublemakers. He had been given the position through connections. This time, his task was simple: deliver a written order to a foreign volunteer and bring her to the border post for questioning. Erika asked what the document meant, and he explained it was a warning order. While she read it, Stalbek quietly observed her, remembering he was responsible for her safety as a foreign guest in the village.

The Order and the Border Law Erika refused to accept the order, which was signed by Bronze, the head of the border post. The police officer explained that she must go to the post or there would be consequences. He told her that everyone in the village, including the school and even himself, had to obey the border authorities. Bronze was known locally as “Kagan,” meaning a kind of ruler or khan. Erika felt confused and did not want to meet him. She asked to call the Peace Corps office in Bishkek, but the officer said only the border post had communication. In the end, he agreed to let her make the call from the border post phone.

Interrogation of Erika Erika was taken to investigator Major Nigmatulin, who spoke in a calm but authoritative tone. He told her that a formal case had already been opened against her and had been under investigation for a week. He accused Erika, a Norwegian volunteer, of hiding her true purpose in Kyrgyzstan under the cover of teaching English. According to him, she had encouraged local schoolchildren to break the lock of a sealed school building and had acted in a way that threatened state security. He also claimed she had been moving around restricted border areas with Sovetbek to “study” them. He demanded a written explanation under the law on state borders. Erika insisted she did not understand the accusations. The investigator handed her paper and a pen, ordering her to write the truth and warning her of serious consequences if she refused.

Erika Faces Colonel Bronze Late in the evening, Erika was brought to Bronze. He spoke to her harshly and mockingly, calling her “beauty” and laughing at her confusion. He treated her accusations and questions with sarcasm and did not answer them seriously. When Erika asked why the school was closed, why a case had been opened against her, and why her passport was being held, Bronze ignored her concerns. Instead, he ordered a lieutenant to “prepare her for a beauty contest,” turning the situation into a joke. As Erika protested, she was told to leave with the lieutenant. In the corridor, Stalbek asked if she would be allowed to call the Peace Corps. The lieutenant replied sarcastically that there would be no call, only preparations for the so-called contest.

The “Beauty Contest” The next morning, a so-called beauty contest was held in the red hall. Bronze sat on the stage with two foreign buyers, one from Bahrain and another from Vienna. One by one, girls from the bunker were brought out. They were forced to make elegant movements, and then their clothing was removed as their names and ages were announced. The buyers carefully wrote down the names of the girls they liked in notebooks. The girls tried to smile and act charming, even though they were clearly uncomfortable and afraid. When the event ended, Bronze asked if anyone was left.

Deal for the “Wolf Girl” The officer reported that the volunteer Erika resisted and had to be tied up. Bronze decided to see her, calling her a “wild wolf cub” suitable for special buyers. He treated her like a product and said she could be useful as a servant. The European buyer felt uneasy and said he was not an agent and needed time to decide. He also asked how a European woman had ended up there. Bronze replied casually that people travel everywhere nowadays looking for opportunities. Bronze then explained that helicopters would arrive at midnight. The buyers would be flown out on a route from Tashkent to Istanbul to Vienna, with all documents prepared and border crossings arranged in advance.

“The World Is Me” Bronze told the buyers that all documents were ready and warned them not to miss customs, saying his men were everywhere. Erika shouted that she also wanted to leave by helicopter. Bronze laughed and joked that she could be taken too, even asking a price for her like an object. The buyer refused to pay immediately and said he would decide later. The local policeman Stalbek finally entered Bronze’s office after waiting a long time. He tried to report that Erika was illegally detained and protected by the Peace Corps. Bronze interrupted him angrily and claimed that “the Peace Corps is me,” saying he had power over both East and West.

Bronze’s Power and Threats Bronze told Stalbek that people are naturally weak and easy to control. He mocked him and said even strong officials are afraid inside. Then he showed a photo and said it was Osama Bin Laden, a terrorist, and claimed he would soon meet him. Stalbek asked about Erika, the volunteer. Bronze insulted her and said she was rejected and could even be taken as a wife, showing total disrespect.

He threatened Stalbek not to release her from the village and warned him to stay silent or face consequences. When Stalbek asked about contacting her and reopening the school, Bronze refused and said the school was unimportant and complaints should be ignored.

In the Cell Through the barred window, Erika saw a cold, setting sun. She turned away, feeling empty and hopeless. The cell was small, with a metal bed, a table, a chair, a cup of water, and a shelf fixed to the wall. In the evening, the door opened and the policeman Stalbek came in. He apologized quietly, saying he had not known what kind of people they were and that bringing her here had been a mistake. He offered to take her home or even to his place, as he had permission. Erika suddenly became alert and said that “Kagan” was a criminal and needed to be reported to the police. Stalbek replied that everyone in power was connected and that he was only a low-ranking officer. Erika then asked about a rope, saying she needed it.

Journey to the Eagle Cliffs That morning, eagles flew over the low valleys, hunting rabbits. Young birds trained by diving at crows and magpies, while the older ones guided them. The small animals in the gorge often escaped at the last moment, and even young eagles sometimes crashed while learning to hunt. Bronze and Sovetbek were walking toward distant sharp cliffs where eagle nests were located. They carried ropes, climbing tools, knives, and Bronze even had a gun. Although they were old enemies, they walked together in silence, each thinking his own thoughts. Bronze needed Sovetbek as a guide, but he did not trust him. He even considered killing him during the climb and making it look like an accident.

Accident on the Mountain Cliff In the silent high mountains above the glaciers, nature was ruled by sun and wind. Below the snow and ice, small plants grew in the rocky ground. Bronze and Sovetbek climbed a narrow cliff path, tied together with a rope above a deep abyss. Both of them could potentially cause the other to fall, and neither fully trusted the other. Bronze planned to kill Sovetbek after reaching the eagle nest. Sovetbek, however, thought about killing Bronze earlier as punishment for his crimes. As tension grew, the rope suddenly loosened and Bronze lost his balance. He fell over the edge, clinging briefly to a rock before disappearing into the abyss. Sovetbek heard gunshots as a snowstorm began and rushed for cover, realizing Bronze was still alive and had fired his weapon.

Rumors in Chet The children in Chet already knew that the English teacher had tried to take her own life. They looked at her with mixed feelings—some felt pity, while others were simply curious about the young foreign woman. In the village, even suicides happened, but they were treated seriously and buried separately. Soon everyone heard a new rumor that Kagan had given Erika to the local policeman as a wife. The older villagers approved, saying no one else would take her. The younger people were unsure and waited to see what would happen. Some doubted the story, while others believed it came directly from Kagan himself.

Bronze’s “Miracle” in the Hospital Bronze lay in a hospital bed in the bunker, remembering how he had been rescued from the mountain cliff. He had been hanging on a rope until a rescue team arrived by helicopter. During the journey, he said nothing, and his silence made everyone uneasy, especially Major Sidorov, who felt responsible for sending Sovetbek as a guide. Sovetbek had disappeared without a trace. After three days, Bronze woke from shock. He told a woman named Alena that he had heard a divine voice that saved him. He believed God had protected him and promised not to leave her.

Plans, Fear, and the Border Bronze was informed that two important foreigners wanted to meet him—one claiming to be a general and the other a religious leader connected to Al-Qaeda. He believed they were powerful international figures and planned to meet them the next morning. Meanwhile, Sovetbek escaped through the mountains, avoiding soldiers and dogs. He kept thinking about the gunshots he had heard and wondered if Bronze had survived. Fearing he was being hunted, he moved carefully through forest paths and reached the border near China. He considered crossing to safety, but hesitated. Instead, he decided he might return to confront Bronze near the “Snake Nest” and end their conflict once and for all.

Interrogation in the Cell After sending Colonel Bronze abroad for treatment, Major Sidorov was in a bad mood. Bronze had tricked him by leaving the second deputy in charge, which was against regulations. Sidorov also feared trouble after the recent attack. He became frustrated with Sovetbek, who remained silent during questioning. Sidorov reminded him that he had recommended him as a guide and demanded

answers about the events in the mountains. Sovetbek sat chained in a cell and said nothing, showing he had given up on life. Sidorov left him with an interrogator who beat him harshly with a rubber baton, trying to force a confession. Sovetbek endured the beating without making a sound.

The Final Interrogation Since ordinary torture did not work, a soldier used a stronger method without full approval. He injected Sovetbek with a medication meant to force confession. Sovetbek's body reacted violently, but he still did not speak. Even though he seemed to understand the questions, he kept his lips tightly closed. The soldier reported failure to Major Sidorov, who then tried questioning Sovetbek himself about Bronze. Sovetbek showed brief signs of awareness but refused to answer. Frustrated, Sidorov ordered them to try again the next day. However, Sovetbek did not survive until morning.

After Sovetbek's Death Sovetbek's death shocked Major Sidorov. He rushed into the cell and shouted in anger at the guards for not keeping him alive, remembering that Bronze had ordered the prisoner to remain alive. Now he feared punishment and possible accusations of conspiracy. He ordered the guard who was responsible to be punished and had Sovetbek's body moved to a cold storage morgue under heavy security, fearing it might be stolen. Sidorov also refused Samara Orunbaeva's request to take her son's body for burial. Even the local imam refused burial rites, saying the deceased was considered a killer, he said Sovetbek had tried to kill Bronze.

Mourning in Samara's House After Sovetbek's death, Samara Orunbaeva's home fell into deep mourning. She and her daughters cried silently, while neighbors avoided the house out of fear of being reported. Only Erika and the policeman Stalbek came, risking their safety. Erika cried with the family and remembered Sovetbek as one of the most respected people she had met in Chet. She had once asked him about his sadness and fear, and he had joked that he was born that way. He told her she was already helping by teaching his sisters English. Erika insisted they should demand his body and call Bronze a criminal, but Samara warned her to be careful.

Bronze's New Orders On the eighth night after the commander's departure, Bronze contacted the base via satellite phone. He asked about the situation and was told that Sovetbek had died of heart failure. Bronze was furious, saying the prisoner should have remained alive to provide information, and now Sidorov would be responsible for answering for everything. Sidorov, fearing punishment, quickly agreed with Bronze's demands. Bronze hinted that Sidorov would now carry out dangerous "assignments" but justified them as righteous. After the call, Sidorov realized he had avoided immediate punishment but now felt trapped in a dangerous role with no way out.

Escape Warning The school term in Chet was coming to an end as summer faded. Erika walked sadly through the dry grass toward school when she was suddenly stopped by Stalbek, who grabbed her hand and said he needed to talk urgently. He warned her that someone had reported her for speaking about Bronze and Sovetbek. Erika asked if it was Samara and her daughters, and Stalbek confirmed it was possible. He told her she might be arrested soon and urged her to leave immediately. He said he had arranged a way out using his official ID and had even bought her passport back from a sergeant so they could pass the checkpoint toward Bishkek.

Departure from Bishkek Bishkek, once a nomadic settlement, had grown into a busy Central Asian city. Stalbek stood in a long, hot airport queue and managed to buy a transit ticket to Moscow and London. Erika asked him if it was true that Samara and the girls had reported her. He confirmed it, saying the complaint had come through his contact in the police. Erika warned that Bronze would not be stopped by official authority, but Stalbek insisted he was acting independently. At the airport, the boarding announcement was made. Away from the crowd, they embraced. Erika told him she would call him to Oslo and marry him one day, but Stalbek remained silent, knowing they were parting forever.

Erika Taken at the Airport A long line of passengers waited to board the international flight when a woman with a red armband approached Erika and asked her to come with her into a service vehicle. The car quickly left the airport area before Stalbek could understand what was happening. Confused, he ran to the boarding gate, but it was already closed. Airport staff told him to check with customs, but they claimed everything was normal. Stalbek later found Erika's backpack left behind. Realizing she had likely been taken back to

the Border Post, he understood he could not interfere with its strict authority. The backpack was eventually removed as well.

Return to the Border Post As the training period of the young eagles was ending, the flock circled over the valleys and the village of Chet, watching the land below. In a deep ravine, an eagle observed a lone man moving painfully across the rocks toward the Border Post. The man was Stalbek. Despite knowing the danger of returning, he continued on his way, determined to save Erika. Fear of Bronze, the Border Post, and even death itself no longer stopped him. All his hesitation had disappeared, replaced by a single purpose.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Erika Klaus

Erika Klaus is a young Norwegian woman who arrives in the remote village of Chet as a volunteer English teacher. She represents Western idealism and the belief that education can bridge cultural divides. Unlike the local residents who are shaped by years of survival under an oppressive regime, Erika begins her journey with a sense of mission and a desire to help children, ignoring the warnings of her parents and friends about the dangers of the border region.

Idealistic Erika Klaus arrives in Kyrgyzstan carrying a deep sense of idealism born from her life in Norway, which is a society where people value transparency, peace, and human rights. Her journey to the village of Chet is driven by a romantic belief that education can act as a universal bridge to overcome cultural or political divides. Even though her family and friends warned her about the dangers of the border, she holds onto the hope that teaching English will give the local children a voice and a window into a wider world.

This hopeful outlook is most visible in her philosophical worldview. When she faces the cold suspicion of the border guards, she speaks about the *Egeregore*, which is the collective consciousness of the modern world. This shows that she sees humanity as one connected family rather than a collection of divided, militarized zones.

Her innocence is actually a byproduct of her own virtues because she expects the authorities to act with the same logic and fairness she knew back home in Oslo. Even when the shadow of Colonel Bronza's rule begins to darken her life, Erika remains firm in her conviction. She truly believes that simple truth and honesty have the power to dismantle a world built on fear and corruption.

Principled Erika has a strong internal compass that guides her even when her own safety is at risk. She is the kind of person who simply cannot go against what she knows is right. A clear example of this is when she is pressured to act as an informant for the border post. While many villagers have learned to cooperate with Colonel Bronza as a way to survive, Erika views spying on her neighbors as a deep betrayal of trust. She has a sense of moral clarity that makes her stand out in a community where most people have been forced to hide their true thoughts.

This same inner strength drives her actions at the school. When she finds the gates locked and her lessons canceled, she refuses to just give up and wait for permission. Instead, she gathers the children and opens the doors herself because she believes that their right to learn is more important than a soldier's order. This act of kindness and defiance is what truly makes Bronza angry. By choosing to live by her own heart rather than his cruel rules, she shows a level of independence that his system cannot control, making her a dangerous threat in his eyes.

Vulnerable Even though Erika is strong on the inside, she becomes deeply vulnerable when she realizes she is completely alone in a place she does not truly understand. That vulnerability hits hardest when her passport is taken away. In that moment, she loses more than just a document. She loses her identity and the only real connection she has to the life she left behind. Suddenly, she is no longer just a visitor. She is stuck with no way to go home in a world where the rules are hidden and power is shown through violence.

At times, she feels like the goat in a rough mountain game, something helpless that is passed around and fought over by men on horseback who do not see her as a human being. That feeling of being powerless follows her everywhere, especially during interrogations and threats, and reaches its peak when

she is treated like an object that can be traded or sold. Although she is pushed to the edge by fear and hopelessness, she survives and does not take her own life.

Colonel Bronza (Kagan)

Bronza has embraced the nickname "Kagan," an ancient title for a king, because he truly sees himself as the absolute master of the valley. He views the local villagers and his own soldiers as weak, lazy, and beneath him. To him, power is something you take and hold onto with a tight grip, much like the leash he uses on his dog, Cerberus. He believes that people are naturally afraid and that his role is to use that fear to maintain order, seeing himself as the only person capable of providing for and controlling the community.

Ruthless There is a cold, chilling lack of empathy in everything Bronza does. He treats human life as if it has no value beyond what it can provide for him. Whether he is punishing his soldiers by locking them away or causing the tragic death of an innocent boy, he feels no guilt or regret. His "beauty contests" are perhaps the ultimate sign of his cruelty, as he strips young women of their dignity and treats them like products to be sold to the highest bidder. He doesn't see people as individuals with feelings; he sees them as tools, obstacles, or inventory.

Predatory Bronza is a man who thrives by taking advantage of others. He has turned his military position into a private criminal business, using his hidden bunker to store drugs, money, and trafficked people. He spends his time watching the world through his binoculars, always looking for a new way to squeeze a profit out of someone else's misery. Whether he is taking money from refugees or stealing Erika's freedom, he always expects total loyalty in return for his threats. His greed has no limit, and he views the entire world as a map of targets he can exploit for more wealth and power.

Delusional Bronza's ego has grown so large that he is starting to lose his grip on reality. He does strange and scary things, like drinking the blood of wild animals because he thinks it will magically make him young and strong again. After surviving his fall in the mountains, he actually convinces himself that he is being protected by God. He is so lost in his own head that he believes he can control world events and even dangerous terrorists. When he says that he is more powerful than any government or the Peace Corps, he truly believes it. In his mind, he is a god who is above every law.

Parallels: *Between Colonel Bronza in Thirteen steps towards the fate of Erika Klaus by Kazat Akmatov and Colonel Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness.*

Both characters serve as a warning about what happens when a man is given total power in a place where no one is watching.

Isolation and the Loss of Rules Both men are military officers sent to the "edge of the world"—Kurtz to the deep African jungle and Bronza to the remote mountains of Kyrgyzstan. In these isolated places, they are far away from the laws and eyes of the civilization they used to serve. Without any central authority to hold them accountable, they both eventually "go rogue." They stop following the orders of their superiors and begin to create their own cruel laws. The wilderness acts as a mirror that reflects their inner darkness, and because there is no one to stop them, that darkness takes over completely.

Self-Deification and the Need for Worship A major parallel is the way both men set themselves up as god-like rulers. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz allows the local people to worship him, surrounding himself with symbols of his absolute power. Similarly, Bronza takes the title "Kagan," which is an ancient word for a king or ruler. He isn't satisfied with being a colonel; he wants to be a master. He treats the villagers like subjects and his soldiers like servants. Both men have a deep psychological need to be viewed as superior beings who are above the "weakness" of ordinary people.

Rule by Fear and Violence Both characters believe that fear is the only true way to lead. Kurtz uses extreme violence to maintain his ivory trade, while Bronza uses his hidden bunker, torture, and criminal networks to control the border. They both view human beings as tools or objects rather than people. Whether it is Kurtz's brutal methods in the jungle or Bronza's "beauty contests" and smuggling operations, both men show a

total lack of empathy. They believe that their "greatness" gives them the right to exploit and destroy anyone they choose.

The Descent into Madness Finally, both Bronza and Kurtz fall into a specific kind of madness caused by their own egos. Kurtz famously dies whispering "The horror! The horror!" after realizing the emptiness of his power. Bronza, too, begins to lose his grip on reality, drinking animal blood and believing he is divinely protected by God. They both reach a point where they believe they are more powerful than any government or moral code. Through these two characters, we see the terrifying reality of a man who has become a law unto himself, ruling over a "heart of darkness" in the mountains or the jungle.

Soyuzbek Chabanov

Soyuzbek Chabanov is the principal of the village school in Chet. He is a man who has learned to survive by bending the rules rather than breaking them. Unlike Erika, who arrives with fresh ideals and a belief in justice, Soyuzbek has spent years navigating the dangerous reality of life under Colonel Bronza's control. He understands that in a place where the border post holds all the power, standing up for what is right can cost you everything. Instead, he chooses a quieter path, making small compromises and accepting small corruptions if it means keeping the school open and the children safe. He is not a coward, but a man who has seen enough to know that survival sometimes means swallowing your pride and looking the other way.

Compromised Soyuzbek is a man caught between his duty as a principal and the hard reality of living under Bronza's rule. He isn't an idealistic hero like Erika; he is a survivor who has been shaped by a broken system. He makes the difficult choice to take money from refugees and drug traffickers because he believes it's the only way to keep the school running. He knows that in a place like Chet, doing the right thing often requires getting your hands a little dirty. This makes him a very human character who has long ago traded his innocence for the sake of survival.

Resentful Beneath his quiet and obedient exterior, Soyuzbek carries a deep and bitter hatred for Colonel Bronza. This isn't just because Bronza is a tyrant, but because it's personal, Bronza took the woman Soyuzbek loved for himself. Every time he has to stand before the "Kagan" and take insults, he feels the sting of that humiliation. He secretly wishes for Bronza's downfall, but he is also paralyzed by the fact that the entire village depends on the Colonel to survive. He lives with the constant, painful tension of having to bow down to a man he truly despises.

Conflicted Soyuzbek is ordered to investigate his own brother Askarbek's marriage because the border post monitors everything, including the personal lives of villagers. Askarbek has brought a wife from a neighboring country across the border illegally, using a raft made of inflatable bags. Since Soyuzbek is the school principal and a known figure in the community, Bronza's system forces him to participate in the investigation as a way to test his loyalty. This situation is deeply painful for Soyuzbek. He is trapped between his duty to the border post and his love for his brother. Askarbek even warns him before he leaves, saying, "Brother, I know why you are going. When you return, I will shoot you." Soyuzbek mounts his horse and rides out anyway, not because he wants to betray his family, but because refusing an order from Bronza would put his own life and position at risk. He has spent years learning to survive by obeying, and now that obedience forces him to become part of his own brother's tragedy. This moment shows the true cruelty of Bronza's system. It doesn't just punish people; it forces them to punish each other. Soyuzbek is made complicit in the destruction of his own family, which deepens his quiet resentment and shows how the border post poisons every relationship in the village.

Samara Orunbaeva

Samara Orunbaeva is the assistant principal of the school and the mother of Sovetbek. She is a kind woman who tries to keep her family safe while living under the cruel control of the border post. Unlike Erika, who trusts the world to be fair, Samara knows that kindness can get you killed. She spends her days walking a thin line between being helpful to the authorities and protecting her own children from their wrath. She wants to do good, but she is trapped in a place where survival requires compromise.

Protective Samara's love for her family is the strongest force in her life. She tries to shield her daughters and her son from the darkest parts of life at the border. Even when she warns Erika about the dangers, she does it out of fear for the safety of their own home. She puts her children before the truth because she believes the cost of honesty could be the loss of her children.

Compromised Samara has learned that doing the right thing often means breaking the rules of morality. She pressured Erika to cooperate with the border post because she did not want trouble for her family. Later, it is revealed that she reported Erika to the police to avoid suspicion herself. She makes these painful choices because she believes that betraying others is the only way to ensure her family survives to see another day.

Grieving After her son dies in custody, Samara is left with deep and lasting sorrow. Her home becomes a place of silence while neighbors stay away out of fear of being reported. She mourns alone with her daughters and carries the heavy weight of his death. The man she tried to please took her child, leaving her with nothing but the memory of what could have been.

Sovetbek

Sovetbek is Samara Orunbaeva's son and a quiet man who carries a heavy weight on his shoulders. He is a former soldier who fought in the Afghan war, leaving him deeply scarred by violence long before he arrived in Chet. As a driver and herder, he serves as a bridge between the local villagers and the outside world, specifically for Erika. While he is kind and helpful to those he trusts, he lives in constant fear of Colonel Bronza's power. His story is one of silent suffering, showing how an ordinary person can be broken by a system that offers no protection.

Traumatized Sovetbek lives inside his own pain because the war changed him in ways few people understand. He is often quiet and distant, not because he has nothing to say, but because speaking too loudly feels dangerous. He remembers the brutality of combat so vividly that he expects violence to follow him everywhere he goes. This makes him hesitant and cautious, always watching his steps and trying not to make any noise that might draw the attention of soldiers or officials. His trauma makes him appear weak, but it is actually a shield that protects him from further pain.

Quietly Resilient Unlike Erika, who speaks up openly, Sovetbek finds his strength in silence. He knows that protesting against the border post could get his whole family killed, so he keeps his head down and does his work. However, his silence does not mean he accepts everything. Inside, he resents Colonel Bronza for the way he treats his mother and people like cattle. He helps Erika when he can, sharing honest truths about the mountains and the village, but he never risks his own safety to save her openly. This makes him a subtle hero who fights his battles behind closed doors.

Desperate In the end, Sovetbek's patience runs out. When he is forced to guide Colonel Bronza into the dangerous mountains to hunt eagles, tensions rise until both men threaten each other's lives. After the accident, instead of running away, he stays silent during interrogation even when tortured by soldiers. He refuses to give them the information they want, choosing death over betrayal. This final act shows that despite years of fear, his spirit remained unbroken. He dies knowing he gave his life rather than become an accomplice to the crimes of the border post.

Stalbek

Stalbek is a young local policeman who does not really want his job. He got the position through family connections rather than skill, and he knows he is not strong enough to fight Colonel Bronze. At first, he simply tries to keep his head down and do the minimum work required. But when Erika arrives, something inside him changes. He sees the truth of what the border post is doing and cannot stay silent forever. His journey is one of finding the courage to become a hero in a world that punishes heroes.

Uncertain At first, Stalbek feels lost. He wears a uniform but feels powerless against Colonel Bronze, who rules with absolute authority. He knows Bronze can do anything he wants without consequence, so Stalbek

tries to stay out of trouble. He worries about keeping peace because he knows breaking the rules means severe punishment. This makes him seem weak at first, but he is really just trying to survive in a place where violence is common and fear is the law.

Conscientious Even though he is small in the system, Stalbek cares about people. When he is ordered to take Erika to the border post, he remembers that he is supposed to protect guests. He sees the danger she is in and realizes that the official rules should protect her. He feels deep guilt when he brings her to Bronze because he knows he is helping to harm her, but he tells himself he is doing it until he understands what will happen next.

Courageous Stalbek finally decides to act against his fear. He secretly buys Erika's passport back and arranges for her to leave the country before anyone stops her. He risks losing his job and maybe his life to help her escape. When the border police catch Erika again at the airport, he does not give up. He walks back toward the dangerous border post alone because he cannot leave her there. This shows that even a quiet man can find great bravery when he loves justice enough to fight for it.

Resolute By the end, Stalbek is no longer the cautious young officer who only follows instructions. He has become a man with a clear moral purpose. He understands that silence protects criminals, and that real justice requires risk. His final decision to return to the border post, despite knowing the danger, shows a new kind of strength: not brute force, but a steady refusal to abandon someone who needs him.

THEMES

History

Historical Background: *The First Years of Independence* After 1991, the world changed overnight for the people of Kyrgyzstan, but for many, the promised freedom felt more like a frightening silence. In remote places like the village of Chet, the collapse of the Soviet Union didn't bring instant prosperity; it brought a vacuum. The central government in Bishkek felt a thousand miles away, and the old Soviet safety nets had simply vanished. In this emptiness, power didn't belong to the law—it belonged to whoever held the loudest gun or the most influence. This was the era of "Kagans" like Colonel Bronza, men who remained at unofficial outposts, ruling like kings of a ghost empire while the rest of the world moved on.

For the villagers, these first years of independence were a confusing struggle between hope and survival. They were a people caught between a past they understood and a future that felt like a trap. The border, once a clear line on a map, became a blurry playground for smugglers and traffickers. Families who had lived together for generations suddenly found themselves divided by new, invisible fences and inflatable rafts. People like Soyuzbek and Samara had to learn a new kind of math: exactly how much of their dignity they had to sell just to keep the lights on. This was a time when "sovereignty" was a word spoken in the distant city, but in the mountains, it was just a new name for the same old fear. It was a raw, beautiful, and dangerous awakening into a world where they were finally free, but completely alone.

Illustrative moment: Sovetbek looked at his old, shaking Moskvich as the wind blew dust across the winding mountain road. The car, like the country, was held together by scraps and prayers. He remembered when the roads were paved and the guards were just soldiers, not masters. Now, every kilometer was a gamble, and every face he met at the checkpoint was a stranger looking for a bribe. He realized then that independence hadn't opened the world; it had just made the mountains feel taller. his heart beat faster than rifle shots.

Politics

Power: *Corruption, and the abuse of authority* Colonel Bronza, known locally as Kagan, is not simply a border officer doing a difficult job in a harsh place. He is a man who has turned military rank into a private empire. In the remote mountains of Kyrgyzstan, far from real oversight, he has built a world where his word is law and fear is the main currency. Villagers learn quickly that obedience is safer than truth, and that silence can protect a home, a child, or a job. Bronza's hidden bunker is more than a secret structure; it is a

symbol of how far he has drifted from any public purpose. Inside it, he stores money, drugs, and trafficked people, treating human lives as goods to be moved, bought, and sold.

The novella humanizes this corruption by showing how it reaches ordinary rooms and ordinary faces. Teachers worry about losing the school. Mothers like Samara calculate what they can say and what they must hide. Young men like Sovetbek carry the weight of knowing too much and fearing the consequences. Even Stalbek, a young policeman, begins to feel the shame of wearing a uniform that no longer stands for justice. When Bronza stages his "beauty contest," the cruelty is not just in the act itself, but in what it reveals: a man so secure in his impunity that he can turn a village into an audience for humiliation and profit.

As accountability disappears, the institutions meant to protect people begin to rot from within. The school becomes a bargaining chip, the law becomes a threat, and the border post becomes a private kingdom. The novella makes clear that corruption is not only about stolen money; it is about stolen dignity, stolen futures, and the slow destruction of trust between neighbors.

Illustrative moment: Bronza strides into the border post office without knocking. Major Nigmatulin rises quickly, but Bronza waves him down. On the desk sits a sealed envelope stamped with the star. He drops it like trash. Pointing at Erika, he says, "Prepare her," calmly, as if ordering tea. Samara arrives with the small bonus money and places it before him. Bronza smiles, takes it, and issues demands for reports, names, and silence. "Procedure," he scoffs, reminding everyone he makes the rules.

Slavery: Human Trafficking and Dehumanization In the cold, gray world of Colonel Bronza's border post, people are no longer seen as human beings with names, dreams, and families. Instead, they are treated as nothing more than products to be moved across a map for profit. This dehumanization isn't just an abstract idea; it's a living nightmare that plays out in the daily life of the village. The most horrifying example is the "beauty contest," where young women are forced onto a stage not for a celebration, but to be inspected like livestock by foreign buyers. In that room, their dignity is stripped away as their ages and features are recorded in cold, business-like notebooks. Their fear is ignored, and their humanity is erased, leaving behind only a price tag.

The novella shows how this constant mistreatment slowly poisons everything in its path. When you treat people like commodities, you destroy the very foundations of trust and hope that hold a community together. Parents start looking at their children with fear, wondering if they will be the next to vanish into Bronza's hidden bunker. The villagers stop seeing each other as neighbors and start seeing each other as potential threats or tools for survival. This loss of humanity is the ultimate goal of Bronza's empire. By turning people into objects, he makes them easier to control, easier to sell, and easier to forget. It's a slow, quiet violence that leaves the survivors feeling empty and hollowed out, as if the very best parts of themselves have been stolen and replaced by a cold, calculating silence.

Illustrative moment: In the red hall, girls were led out like cargo. They moved elegantly before their clothing was stripped away, exposing their terror. While buyers from Bahrain and Vienna wrote names in notebooks, Bronze laughed at the "wild wolf girl" who resisted. To these men, Erika wasn't a teacher; she was just inventory to be weighed and priced for a midnight flight. Their humanity was gone, replaced by a price tag and a cold, silent destination in the dark.

Psychology

Greed In the remote mountains of Chet, greed is the true ruler. It sits behind every decision, every deal, and every act of betrayal. Colonel Bronza is not satisfied with having power; he wants everything. Money, women, drugs, influence, even the illusion of eternal youth. He builds a secret bunker not for the safety of the border, but to hide his growing fortune from smuggling, trafficking, and bribes. What he cannot control or possess, he destroys. His greed is endless, cold, and completely blind to human suffering.

The most painful truth the novella shows is that greed does not stay only with the powerful. It slowly infects everyone. Villagers sell a golden eagle for vodka, mothers report their guests to protect their own children, and even the school principal takes dirty money from refugees just to keep the school running. In Chet, greed becomes a survival strategy. People stop seeing each other as neighbors and start seeing them as opportunities or threats.

Through Bronza, the story reveals that greed eventually devours the person who carries it. The more he takes, the more paranoid, lonely, and inhuman he becomes. He drinks the blood of wild animals, dreams of shaking hands with terrorists, and believes he is above all laws. In the end, his greed does not bring him happiness or security — it only leaves him empty and dangerous.

Illustrative moment: In the dim red hall, Bronza sat on his chair like a king, whiskey glass in hand. Two foreign buyers walked slowly past the frightened girls, writing names and prices in small notebooks. When they examined Erika like a horse at market, Bronza did not blink. To him, these were not ladies, not human beings, they were only future money to be stored in his bunker. His eyes shone with a hunger that had long ago stopped being human.

Fear In the desolate village of Chet, fear is not just a passing feeling. It is the very dust that chokes the air and the smell of ancient animal skins lining the walls of Samara's home. Erika first experiences this terror as a physical weight when she watches the jagged mountain rocks hanging precariously above her head, fearing they might collapse at any second. This hostile environment is ruled by the "Kagan," Colonel Bronze, a man who stalks the mountain paths with his massive dog Cerberus while searching for any trace of loose earth that might expose his secret underground bunker.

The fear in Chet is a poison that slowly turns families into enemies. It is visible when Samara, a woman once thought to be kind, suddenly snaps at Erika and demands she become an informant. In this world, survival means sacrificing the truth to the Border Post to stay in the Colonel's favor. This social rot reaches a horrifying peak during the "Beauty Contest," where young women are stripped of their dignity and their clothes. They are inspected by foreign buyers like pieces of property while Bronze mocks Erika by calling her a "wild wolf cub" to be sold.

Even the strongest characters are eventually crushed by this atmosphere. Sovetbek is silenced forever by rubber batons and chemical injections, yet he clings to his humanity by refusing to give his tormentors a single word. By the end, the village becomes a ghost town of mourning where neighbors hide behind locked doors to avoid being seen with the grieving family. Fear wins until Stalbek decides to walk back toward the ravine. His final journey is a desperate act of love in a land where the sun only shines for two hours a day.

Illustrative moment: In the village of Chet, fear is as heavy as the smell of animal skins in Samara's house. It is a land where the sun only shines for two hours, leaving the people to the cold shadows of the mountains. Colonel Bronze uses this dread to turn neighbors into spies. A chilling moment occurs when the motherly Samara turns on Erika, demanding she become an informant to survive. This terror is so deep that when Sovetbek dies, the village stays behind locked doors, too afraid to offer comfort. Fear turns a community into silent shadows where even a gesture of pity is a crime.

Ethics

Resistance and Moral Conscience: Erika's journey through the village of Chet is a slow, painful discovery of what it truly means to be a person of integrity in a place where fear is the only language people speak. In a world where everyone has learned to look the other way and keep their heads down, Erika's simple refusal to lie feels like a revolutionary act. While others, like Samara, have traded their honesty for the safety of their families, Erika clings to her principles even when it's clear they will lead her into danger. Her resistance isn't loud or violent; it's found in her quiet choices, like reopening the locked school for the children or refusing to become an informant for the border post.

Samara pleaded with her to just write the names on the paper. "It's for your own good," she whispered, eyes darting to the door. Erika looked at the blank questionnaire, then back at her friend's tired, frightened face. "I can't," Erika said softly. She pushed the document away, her hands trembling but her voice steady. The sergeant's laugh was cold as he snatched it back. "The truth won't save you here," he mocked. Erika walked out into the biting wind, knowing she had just traded her safety for her soul. Her heart beat faster than rifle shots.

Illustrative moment: Erika stands in the schoolyard with the children clustered around her, their football forgotten. The gate is still locked, but she has found a way in. She turns the key, pushes the door open, and steps into the quiet classroom. "We begin today," she says, voice steady despite her fear. The children

hurry inside, eager and hopeful, while the village watches from a distance, unsure whether this small act of courage will bring freedom or punishment.

Witnessing and Awakening

Stalbek starts the story as just another cog in Bronza's machine, a young man who prefers to look the other way rather than face the darkness of his own job. He wears the uniform, but he tries to keep his heart hidden behind it, hoping that if he stays quiet enough, the violence will pass him by.

But everything changes when he meets Erika. Seeing the world through her eyes, and witnessing her quiet, stubborn bravery, forces him to finally look at what he has been a part of. He watches as she is interrogated, humiliated, and treated like a piece of property, and for the first time, he can't look away. This awakening is painful; it strips away his excuses and leaves him with a choice he didn't want to make. He realizes that staying silent isn't just being safe, it's being complicit. His transformation from an obedient officer into a protector is a slow, difficult process of rediscovering his own conscience. It shows that awareness is a heavy burden, but it is also the only thing that can spark real courage. By the end, Stalbek isn't just trying to save Erika; he is trying to save the part of himself that he almost lost to the system.

Illustrative moment: Stalbek watched through the open door as the lieutenant laughed at Erika's tears. He held her confiscated passport in his pocket, feeling the cold plastic against his palm. For weeks, he had told himself that following orders was his only duty. But as he saw her being led away like a prisoner, the uniform felt suddenly too heavy, like a shroud. He realized then that he could no longer hide behind his badge. He had seen too much to ever be quiet again. His heart beat faster than rifle shots.