

Project seeking publisher

The Search for the Golden Cup: The Adventures of Batu and His Friends

By Zira Naurzbayeva and Lilya Kalas

This book is the first in a series describing the adventures of Batu, an ordinary Kazakhstani boy, and his friends. It is a fantasy, action, and mystery story for the middle grades. The book was published in Russian by Almaty Kitap Publishing House, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in 2014. Book 2 has been published in Kazakhstan and planning is underway for a third book and an animated film version.

Themes include friendship and courage; standing up to bullies, and how a bully can be reformed; and the value of understanding one's cultural heritage. The book includes strong characters of both sexes, and friends of different races working together. While it relies on ancient Kazakh mythology, those elements are well-explained in the original, and the English translation can adjust the treatment of the more obscure points to make sure the history and culture are understandable to English-speaking readers without any heavy-handed "educational" explanations. It's also firmly located in the present, with lots of references to skateboarding and Harry Potter. These references are sure to make the foreignness of the setting seem a little less foreign to readers from another country and culture.

Summary

The Golden Cup is a one-of-a-kind adventure story based on myths and legends from Kazakhstan, a place where human civilization goes back thousands of years, but whose history is little known today. The three central heroes of this story are modern-day Kazakh kids, the eleven-year-old best friends Batu, Sasha and Dana. Later they are joined by two more kids their age, Dana's classmate Hadisha and the bully Kayrat, as well as Batu's baby sister Tumar.

Batu is an ordinary kid to whom something extraordinary happens: He meets Aspara, the Golden Warrior, who steps straight out of his notebook cover — and out of Kazakhstan's past. Aspara tells Batu the story of the Golden Cup. The Golden Cup is a magical talisman sent down to the human world from the heavens, along with a golden plough, axe, and yoke. Those items helped human beings learn to tend to livestock, till the land, and build houses. But the most valuable object of them all was the Cup. Anyone who drank from it became wise, honest and just. But the Golden Cup was lost, and the human world was beset with war and strife. Batu and his friends start out to find it, never suspecting that cunning enemies are tracking their every move. The protagonists move through our own world and a fantasy world, overcoming countless dangers, confronting human and magical adversaries, and diving bravely into a whole series of mind-blowing adventures.

About the authors

Zira Naurzbayeva is a writer, journalist, blogger, and anthropologist specializing in Kazakh mythology.

Lilia Kalas is an author, screenwriter, editor and blogger.

Chapter-by-chapter plot points

Batu is a boy who is a little bit of a coward, but has a rich imagination. One day he happens to meet the Scythian prince Aspara, known in the legends as the Golden Warrior. Batu and Aspara head off to Bayterek, the Tree of Life, in the Chingiss Mountains. That is also the place, right in the center of the Eurasian continent, where the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing grounds were built after World War II.

Aspara wants to find the Golden Cup of wisdom and truth, lost since the ancient times. To do that, he needs information from Samruk, a gigantic, all-seeing, all-knowing bird. Batu and Aspara travel together using the magical vibrations of an antique stringed instrument, called a *dombra*, which belonged to Batu's great-grandfather. Batu's neighbor and friend, Dana, hears him talking with Aspara and decides to go with them, using her own *dombra* to travel. But something goes wrong, and Dana disappears.

Instead of Samruk, the boys meet Zheztyrnak, a wild woman with brass talons, and she begins pursuing them. The friends hide in a sacred cave, but Zheztyrnak finds them there. Aspara fights bravely, but when Batu's courage falters, he nearly dies. Batu feels terrible. He returns home, taking advantage of the fact that the aroma of the seven special cakes his grandmother bakes spreads throughout all the worlds.

Overcoming his fear, Batu uses the *dombra* to travel to an underground world, the lair of the Serpent King, and rescue Dana. There he is given a serpent skin, the traditional Kazakh symbol of a warrior.

Batu, Dana, and their bookworm friend Sasha go skateboarding at New Square in central Almaty, and discuss what happened. Skorobogat, the grandfather of Batu's sworn enemy Scorpion, is eavesdropping. Scorpion and his loyal friend Kayrat try to make trouble for Batu. To everyone's surprise, for the first time in his life, Batu acts with courage and prevails in the fight.

Skorobogat is worried about what he heard, and he decides to act. He installs a bug in Batu's apartment, and he uses Kayrat to pass the kids false information about Aspara. Meanwhile, Batu and his friends meet a *kuyishi*, a traditional musician. They learn a lot from him about how a *dombra* works, and he tells them the story of how Bayterek was destroyed, and with it, Samruk's nest. It turns out that the *kuyishi*'s daughter Hadisha is a classmate of Dana's at their music school.

Batu stumbles into Skorobogat's trap and asks Aspara a question he shouldn't have asked. Aspara disappears. The *kuyishi* tells him the true story of Aspara. Meanwhile, Skorobogat is still plotting, and he has Kayrat trick them again. The children decide to go to the cave themselves to search for the Golden Cup. Kayrat ends up in the cave with them, along with Tumar, Batu's newborn baby sister.

Thanks to Skorobogat's trickery, their search for the Golden Cup goes nowhere, and Zheztyrnak attacks them again. Sasha and Batu try to save Kayrat from the witch and are injured. The *dombra* can't help them, because it has somehow disappeared from the cave. Little Tumar is in danger, too, and Kayrat tries to fend off Zheztyrnak. But Hadisha, remembering her father's stories, begins to understand what is truly happening. She hands the baby over to Zheztyrnak, and the witch begins to nurse her. Zheztyrnak is in fact Samruk, whose wings have burned away, and whom people have forgotten. She has been wandering the earth in search of her last nestling.

Zheztyrnak/Samruk dies in a battle with a ferocious black bear, and her soul returns to the heavens, in its old, winged form. The bear wounds Aspara, who has returned suddenly, and it carries Tumar away.

By blackmailing the friends, their enemies force Aspara to surrender. Batu's friends put down their weapons and begin to quarrel. The kuyishi appears, restores peace among them, and begins to train them for a battle in which they will each have a part to play. He has noticed the stamp on the dombra and realized who must have made it. Sasha learns that his great-grandfather's dombra was made by *his* grandfather, a once-famous but now forgotten Russian instrument maker and scholar who had been sent to live among the Kazakhs and made his home there.

In the decisive battle, the friends emerge victorious, thanks to help from a resurrected Samruk, summoned by their musician friend. Kayrat joins the side of good, once and for all.

Old Skorobogat is killed by his master, the evil spirit Shakhrukh, in the form of a bear, for trying to flee. Batu is gravely wounded, and his soul descends into the world of the dead. With his grandfather, he watches the judgment of Skorobogat, and learns of all the evil deeds he committed.

The kids decide to let Scorpion go. On the hill where Bayterek once grew, and where the victors wait for Tumar and Hadisha, Batu's friends plant a new Bayterek using a seed that Samruk gave them.

The adventures continue in the second book of the series, now out in Russian and Kazakh.