Losing It in Anatolia

by oh_THAT_Keara

Summary
Ogedei (son of Genghis) Khan has a problem. Somewhere out in where-the-eff-is-Anatolia, his protégé Baiju Noyan has dropped off the map and taken his troops with him. Incoming reports have been increasingly sparse, inarticulate, and disturbing. Has the famously fierce Noyan gone native? Rogue? Insane? All of the above?

According to the royal diviners, rookie intelligence agent Nerguitani ("No Name Girl") is the best candidate for the mission. Sungurtekin (the Khan's Anatolian spymaster and a native of the Kayis tribal lands where the Noyan was last sighted) privately thinks the diviners have been drinking more spirits than they've been consulting.

Can a nice girl from the home steppes (with multiple options on not-so-nice) survive the dangerous company of Baiju Noyan and evade the wrath of his sworn nemesis Ertugrul Ghazi? Can she salvage the Khan's Western frontier before it becomes an epic Mongolian cluster... of embarrassments?

Notes

"It seemed the world was divided into good and bad people. The good ones slept better... while the bad ones seemed to enjoy the waking hours much more." --- Woody Allen, *Side Effects* (Ballantine Books, 1981)

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LISTEN UP, beings: All stunts in this story were performed by qualified fictional or fictionalized characters in a closed controlled reality. DO NOT ATTEMPT. I won't be responsible. I never have been responsible and I can't be starting now.

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Bless me, Knowledgeable Reader, for I have sinned. I have rearranged event sequences willy-nilly and sometimes even higgledy-piggledy. I have almost certainly failed to quash each and every anachronism. I made many things up out of ambient cosmic lint, including but not limited to National Bath Day. If I seem irreverent toward any character or group, know that I do not intentionally discriminate; you find me as the Eternal Blue Sky made me, with the same questionable attitude toward all.

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Trying to translate? I admit this work is full of American idioms and pop-culture references, and I feel your pain. If you get stuck, me know what isn't making sense and we can figure something out.
then came the dawn and then you were gone

Chapter Notes

Thanks for suggesting that regularly writing down specific statements of gratitude can stave off depression.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There's a funnel-cloud of lights in darkness where they keep all the songs. Sung and unsung, remembered and unremembered, written or unwritten or yet-to-be-written, in every language and none, from every real and imagined place. No one can give directions, but singers who need it will find it; one night in a dream, one day in a vision, one blink and it might be gone. Accept what it offers, and remember that the songs in its quiet eye are the dangerous ones.

Nergui awoke in the unfamiliar-smelling ger, finding her hairpin and her small waxed bamboo tablet by feel. On the wax, working from long practice without light, she scratched down what she could remember of the song from her dream.

Mee no seemo
Zell even chets
Dai nam la do, lepi lado.

No earthly notion what that means. It wasn't new or unusual for Nergui to "come back with" songs in languages she didn't understand. The aunties who taught her to change things with song thought it meant she might one day visit the places where those languages were spoken. "If you have an invitation to travel, then go," they would say. Well, see, I listened and here I am.

She shook her head, ran her hand over the scratch marks and poked the hairpin back into her hair. The song had been beautiful, but complicated. Some parts of it reminded her a little of the song she dreamed last year when the edelweiss came up, but although that one had complex melodies and harmonies, the lyrics had mostly been just holl, lei, loo, yah.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Too Much to Dream” song by The Electric Prunes
"Ladarke" song cycle by Emil Cossetto
"Hallelujah Chorus" song by Georg Friedrich Handel
welcome to the neo-golden age

Chapter Notes

Thanks to TRT for airing Resurrection: Ertugrul, and thanks to Netflix for buying the first two seasons with subtitles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A gnarled, wind-scarred knuckle tapped the open scroll. A remaining eye looked up, shrewd and measuring, from behind the trestle table that passed as a reception desk.

"No Name Girl, daughter of Nobody?"

"Nerguitani daughter of Khenbish, yes. It's---"

"A protective name to disinterest evil spirits, yes. Don't always get more than one in a family, though. Your father, Khenbish: would he be Khenbish son of Khunbish?"

"May he ride ---"

"--- forever in the sky," the ancient clerk chorused in with her.

"Yes. Nobody, son of Not-Human, that was he," she confirmed.

"I remember him. You've got quite the high saddle to mount," he nodded.

"I wouldn't know yet, Uncle."

Chapter End Notes

References

“Welcome to the Future” song by Hawkwind
"Nergui!" enthused the occupant of a tidy medium-sized office. Her initial beckon looped and leveled to indicate a nearby seat. "Good devils, you're all grown up! I'm your Wrangler, Chagaanirvys Darga. Daughter of Yesonbukh? I don't know if you remember... ?"

The negligently graceful woman behind the minimally embellished desk wore her blue-black braids piled on her head in elaborate loops. Her silver-buttoned wrap dress was a fine wool with a surface like ground-fog in the same blue-black. The faceted stones in her heavy silver earrings and ring were the same deep pine-needle green as her eyes. As if she drew stillness from a glass-clear well, every move her body made, down to a barely perceptible blink, looked fully intentional.

"Hmm," Nergui pursed her lips, crossed her ankles, looked at the ceiling, and tapped her cheekbone with the side of an index finger. "You were... a traveling teacher? Came through the lower Altai when I was what, six or seven?"

The Darga rewarded her former student with an approving hand-clap and a dazzling smile full of dangerous-looking teeth. "Beginners' Beheading, where you were first in class."

"I remember! As the kid who couldn't ride, being good at beheading meant a lot to me. I so wanted to save my final project, but the Aunties insisted I had to cook it that night with cabbage and onions."

The conversation slid into a moment of silent reflection.

"They did let me keep the horns, though," Nergui finally said.

"And then your scroll says you became a shaman, where it must have come in handy to know your way around a goat head. Sixty-three toli, wow! Pretty shiny. Our head diviner is on loan from the Khagan and he's only got forty-five toli. Which reminds me, did the diviners collect a sympathetic specimen from you yet?"

"I don't know; a guard leaned out a doorway as I came down the hall and yanked three hairs out of my head."

"That was it. Any experience with battle shamans?"

"No, I've been mostly working my way as a healer and ritualist. You know, come into town, officiate a Tengric wedding in the morning, then stitch up the combatants from the reception later on in the day."

"But no wedding of your own, hey? You were a Sealed One."

"Still am. The Agency midwife checked."
"Are you comfortable in an informal fight?"

"I think the guard who pulled out my hair could attest to that."

"How do you feel about being... un-Sealed?"

"You mean be allowed to ride horses like everyone else in Greater Mongol older than six months? Holl, lei, loo, yah, whatever that means."

"The diviners think your first mission might be improbable enough to need mojo that big. Here's a copy of the scroll; we'll go over it. Have you ever been to Anatolia?"

"Where the eff is - sorry, Darga. I meant no, ma'am."

The Darga smiled. "Another reason I got you put in my group. Recruits from the Home Steppes come in respecting the hierarchy all right - loyal as the day is long, and obedient to clear-cut commands - but we aren't used to much formality. I was the same. Just show that you're trying and you'll get some temporary newbie slack.

"OK, the scroll. The 'jolly-looking gentleman' in the picture..."
there's a killer on the road

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for bringing me into a world of religion and history where I could have this much unexpected fun. You won't want to read a whole lot further, though; trust me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"...is Baiju Noyan, commander of the Khagan's Western frontier force."

Nergui scrutinized the ink drawing of her quarry. It glared fiercely back like a god of... something scary, but not familiar-scary like floods or earthquakes. Some brand-new alien kind of scary, like the dream she'd once had about the strangely dressed men in the woods waving what first looked like giant steel erections. Then the phallic-looking objects resolved themselves into two-handed weapons that cut through full-grown trees like a hot drigug through yak butter. The things roared and stank and blew out black smoke. The cutting edges had a dark, blurry semi-transparency more ominous than any metal blade. Baiju Noyan looked like the god of... whatever those were.

"There's a lot invested in him," Chagaanirvys continued. "He's related to Jebe Noyan, and he served in the Kheshig and in Persia under Chormagan Noyan. Ogedei hand-picked him to take over after Chormagan fell. He had an open-ended charter to extend the Silk Road under the Pax Mongolica all the way to Constantinople. He has an uncanny knack for the kind of freestyle warfare that's been effective against the Arabs and Turks. He recruited more than half the Persian merchants on the southern and western trade routes to serve our Agency. His troops are fanatically devoted, saying he never leaves one of them behind. All in all, one of our best, but now...

"Somewhere in, yes, where-the-eff-is, Anatolia, we lost contact. Last message from him was months ago. Third-party reports from that area have petered out too now, and the last few with word of Baiju were disturbing. Killing his own warriors for any reason or none; he still doesn't leave any behind, he brings them back so he can kill them himself. Ill-timed, ill-placed offensives that cost us even more casualties. Using his army to take personal revenge on individual enemies. Terrorizing the caravanserai chain that's supposed to become a valuable Silk Road extension.

"Something happened to our Noyan out there. We don't know what. At one end of the 'maybe' string, he may have been killed and someone else, or even no one at all, is now in command. In that case, it's a straightforward administrative errand. At the other end, he may have discovered a communication breach and gone silent to track it down, and the recent messages are disinformation to turn us against our own man instead of on the intruder. If that's so, it will all come out in the wash if we wait.

"The middle possibilities are the causes of concern: Baiju's alive and making a big mess of a critical initiative. He may have changed sides or gone rogue. He may have had a breakdown and gone insane. He may be cursed, haunted, or possessed. It may or may not be possible to turn it around. But if it is possible, that's what our Khagan wants. Ogedei, for a wonder, can actually 'get off his horse and govern.' Greater Mongol really needs that right now. If he loses face over Anatolia, we'd be hip-deep in relatives who think they could do better, but couldn't."

Nergui held the ink drawing of Baiju Noyan up in front of her at arm's length and blew out a long
breath all the way back to the Altai. "Wow... Well, Mister Scowly! What's it going to take to turn that frown upside down?"

Chapter End Notes

References

“Riders on the Storm” song by The Doors
tombstone hand and a graveyard mind

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Tachi, a wolf's soul in a cat's body, for raising my awareness of trans-species issues.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was impossible to tell where the eyes’ irises ended and the pupils began, even in daylight and certainly not by fitful torchlight filtered through a grove of horns and antlers. Some were decorated with hanging fragments of metal or flint. Some were attached to skulls, their own and otherwise. The points of several dripped a dark, viscous fluid.
The eyes stared into the abyss.
The abyss suddenly remembered an urgent appointment (perhaps in Samarra?) and turned away.
“Tangut!” barked a rough voice accustomed to instant results.
“Yes, Noyan?”
The results had been instant. Tangut Darga had been lurking just within earshot. Baiju Noyan scowled, finding nothing to complain about. “Three of our Persian merchants are stopping by with reports. Send someone down to meet them. Get one of the Laundresses to pour out some of the latest airag - the really rough stuff. And whoever’s on Concierge duty should make sure the prisoners scream at least once a minute while the merchants are here.”
“Yes, Noyan.” Tangut was relieved to get such a routine, feasible set of instructions. Having the Concierges --- a not-that-funny nickname for the jailers --- making the prisoners scream for the benefit of guests was nothing unusual. On one recent occasion, the Concierges had found all the prisoners unconscious or dead at the critical time. After a short, panicked discussion rejecting the prospect of running out and catching some new prisoners within the next five minutes, the Concierges had simply done all the screaming themselves. It had been very convincing. The Concierges had only to imagine their Noyan’s reaction if the ruse was ever discovered.
Then, noticing an out-of-place flicker of a reflection, Tangut swallowed with some effort and said, “Oh… Noyan?”
“What is it?” came a too-quiet growl.
“You’ve… ah… you appear to have a dagger stuck in your back.”
“Again?” Baiju discovered he couldn’t quite see it and he couldn’t quite reach it, which was very irritating. “Don’t hide back there. Pull it out!”
“Yes, Noyan.” Steeling himself with a deep breath, Tangut closed the distance in two long strides, took the hilt in one hand and braced the other hand against his commander’s armor, and pulled the blade free, No gush of blood came with it. “Got it,” he announced, backing away quickly. “It’s a small blade, and I think it was just wedged in a gap in the seam of the armor. That’s why you… might not have felt it.”
“Still wouldn’t do to give our guests any ideas,” Baiju replied in a nearly normal-sounding tone. “Do we have anyone in camp who can mend armor? Anyone? Oh, Eternal Blue Sky grant me someone who can thread a damn needle around here one of these days!”
Actually, a number of the troops in camp could --- as long as Noyan wasn’t watching and making their hands shake uncontrollably. Tangut looked again for evidence of bleeding, didn’t see any, but was reluctant to get any closer. He badly wanted to know if his commander was all right, on a number of levels. Then again, he all too vividly remembered how the last three people who directly asked the Noyan that question had been summarily made-over into traditional raven feeders.
Chapter End Notes

References

“Who Do You Love?” song by Bo Diddley
"Beyond Good and Evil" book by Friedrich Nietzsche
"Appointment in Samarra" book by John O'Hara
except for that one with the yellowy eyes

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Bigdude, for being such a keeper and for not throwing me back either

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BN --- At this point I can only assume you have had to eat all your pigeons, paper and quills for some reason. For Prophet’s sake just send a runner to a Yam station and check in before they make me do anything I’d really rather not. --- SM

Sungurtekin sighed, aiming his breath carefully away from the drying ink on the tiny strip of parchment he held flat with a thumb on one end and a finger on the other. He’d written the tiny letters on the tiny scroll with a tiny brush and a tiny inkstone and it was becoming one of those days when everything in Mongolia was just too damned tiny, which usually meant he needed some arena time.

The door knocked. “Mergen, may we?”

“Yes,” he called out with a wave of his unoccupied hand. “Cha-cha!” he greeted one of his favorite colleagues. “What brings you?”

“This is Agent Nerguitani, daughter of Khenbish, who’s just started today,” said Chagaanirvys, “and have I ever asked you not to call me that?”

“La samah Allah, Darga,” he protested with a wolfish smile as he stood up… and then more up. On his way upward he reflexively catalogued the new agent who stood with eyes courteously downcast. Young but only a little tentative; milk-tea complexion that had seen some outdoors. Just a little shorter than the average Mongol (i.e. tiny); just a little more nip-waisted, with hair just a little thicker and more prone to sun-bleaching. Girl next door, if you live here. Pleasant but forgettable, which was useful in an agent. “Good to meet you, Nerguitani,” he held out a hand. “I’m the Khan’s Mergen for Anatolian affairs. Call me Sun.”

She took his forearm and looked up into his face and… whoa.

Her eyes (though just a little rounder than average) were the color of amber. The gaze she directed at him measured everything and reacted to nothing, in the frank manner of a small child or a wild-but-not-presently-hungry predator. It flattened the room into two dimensions and left an echo when she looked away.

“She’s the one we’re sending to find Baiju Noyan,” Chagaanirvys was saying. Wait, what?!

“Are you kidding me?” Sungurtekin, incredulous, encircled Nergui’s wrist with his thumb and forefinger and held it up to show that he still had two finger-joints’ length to spare. “You’re sending THIS… to Anatolia? And, oh, even better… to Baiju Noyan?” He let out two humorless brays of laughter. “Talk about a butterfly on the anvil! Whose grudge-fueled brainstorm was this, and how did she earn that big a grudge on her first day?”

“The royal diviners did a reading, and it came out of the oracles,” Chagaanirvys explained.
Sun pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head, looking pained. "Of course. Woo-woo! More freakin’ woo-woo. How long do I have to work here before I get used to all the woo-woo?"

Nergui shrugged, an operation much more elaborate than the economical gestures Sungurtekin was accustomed to seeing Mongolians use. Raise shoulders while spreading fingers and rolling palms upward, pull elbows way down while the upturned hands continue to separate, then shoulders and elbows come back to vertical center and everything settled. It was like watching a large bird prepare to take off. If her stare had compressed local space, her shrug opened it up to admit all kinds of unimagined possibilities. “Well, y’know… most extensive empire in history, can’t say it’s NOT on account of the woo-woo.”

The Mergen opened his mouth to retort, then changed his mind and went back to speaking as though Nergui wasn’t in the room. “Hmmm... I guess a good enough support squad could boost odds of her surviving… I can find out which of our Turkmen-fluent Specialists are available ”

“No Specialists,” the Darga vetoed. “If Baiju sees a bunch of G. I. Jochis he might assume it’s a hostile mission and kill everyone before they even know they found him.”

“Or they might kill him before she can try anything else.”

“Y-yeaaah,” Chagaanirvys hedged. “Maybe. Remember, every Ayyubid, Turkman, Arab, Kurd, Sufi, and weekend tourist coming through Anatolia --- including all your war-hero relatives --- has been trying to kill Baiju Noyan for the last few years and ‘wow, almost!’ is the closest they’ve gotten.”

“Good point.” Sun Mergen gazed gloomily at the place where the wall met the ceiling and twirled one of the Mongol-style small braids in his longish salt-and-pepper hair. “I guess not, then.”

Chagaanirvys gracefully folded her arms. “You guess not what?”

“I guess I’m not signing off on this --- this caravan wreck waiting to happen.”

“Putting aside whether we NEED you to sign off --- and with the latest reorganized authority matrix I’m not actually sure,” the Darga admitted, “Doing nothing also has a price, and I don’t think we can afford to do much more ‘nothing’ about this.”

“Hmph,” Sun grunted, absently itching his abundant beard. “Nergui, what’s your strongest skill?”

Nergui looked up again, smiling this time. “Woo-woo.”

“You any good, kid?”

Nergui did a two-handed Persian finger-snap at an ancient obsidian axe on Sun’s office wall. The accumulated gunk of the centuries obediently fell off. Stone fragments scattered to reveal a sharp new edge. The cracks in the handle mended themselves. The smell of new leather wafted from the wrapping.

Nergui looked at Sungurtekin and raised an eyebrow. *Butterfly gonna break the hammer?*

“Well, all right then,” he said.
References

“London Calling” song by The Clash
he dug up her grave and built a cage with her bones

Chapter Notes

Thank you, Tim Berners-Lee and everybody else who made Teh Interwebs possible.
Now, any time I wonder about something, I can look it up. Not only can, but usually MUST.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Go on down, Mergen.” The guard at the trapdoor waved Sun Mergen through without looking at the brass amulet he flashed. “And who’s this?”

“Agent Nerguitani. New peri. I vouch.” Sun beckoned Nergui to follow him down the stone steps. “You’ll get a paiza before you go. It gets you into government buildings, archive stacks, restricted stables, the whole Yam… and deaf bars like the Eyrie, here.” He caught Nergui’s eyes peering about the lamp-lit subterranean passage. “Name’s ironic, I guess.”

“What’s a peri, what’s a paiza, and what’s a deaf bar?”

“I’ll answer all those, but first tell Tsets what you want to drink. They cater to the homesick, so they’ve got everything from everywhere.”

“Um - just a kvass, please.”

The laconic woman, lavishly illustrated with floral-themed tattoos, pushed a woodburned menu plank across the trestle-table bar: “Which of our 25 kinds would you like?”

“Ummm…” Nergui couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a choice between more than three beverages. Frantically rifling her memory, she came up with: “Anything from Mörön district?”

“Got a Mörönic Kvassworks toasted rye.”

“Sure.”

“Mergen, the usual double Sharbat Salaam?”

“Not tonight, Tsets,” Sun answered with some regret. “I think I need something strong.”

“Well, we’ve got everything from aila to yangmei jiu - oh, we got a new bai jiu label that’s made me have to call the mercy wagon a few times.”

“Bai jiu ,” Sun repeated, then looked at Nergui, who responded with one of her multisyllabic shrugs. “Fate?” Nergui guessed.

“Yes, I’ll take one,” Sun decided, ”and by the time she finishes her kvass while listening to what I’ve got to say, we’ll probably each need one.” He took the brass amulet thing back out and put it on the bar. Tsets covered it with a small sheet of parchment and made a charcoal rubbing of the pattern stamped on its surface.
“That,” Sun indicated the brass object, “is a paiza. Everyone who works for the Khagan has one, and each one is unique. The rubbing she just made entitles her to get paid out of the Treasury’s Advisory account for our drinks. Here in KK it’s come to symbolize a person’s entire existence. Even the Khagan and the other Khans have them. Gold ones. Nobles have silver, Noyans have steel, Mergens have brass, Dargas have copper, everyone else has wood or leather. You’ll have yours before you go; make sure not to lose it.

“Full-time intelligence agents like you and your Darga,” he continued, “are called peris because now you see them, now you don’t, and someone’s always publicly denying there’s any such thing.

“This,” he said, picking up the drinks that had been slid across the bar and giving Tsets a quick, grateful forearm-clasp, “is called a deaf bar because all the ears have been sliced off the walls. In other words, those allowed in here may discuss work-related secrets, optionally while drunk, because everyone else is cleared for the same level. Also, you hear that noise? We’re right above an underground river. It drowns out conversations more than a few feet away.”

Nergui nodded. “Sounds a lot more practical than expecting people never to get drunk or blabby at all.”

“Exactly. The Khagans have gotten farther by perfecting systems to work with imperfect people than anyone who’s tried it the other way around. Now, Agent Nerguitani: Please bear with the way this imperfect person has planned to do this.” By this time they had approached two empty booths separated by a partition. “I will sit here, with my back to this side of the partition, and reminisce aloud to myself about some things I promised myself I’d never tell anybody else. You will sit in this next booth, with your back to the other side of the same partition, and you might not help but overhear some information that will help with your mission and would otherwise remain inaccessible.”

“I will be,” Nergui replied, taking up the position he described, “the most comforting, reassuring empty space you can imagine."

“You don’t think it’s… weird?”

“Not if it works for you, Mergen.”

“All right then.” Silence fell as they both sipped their drinks. The kvass was hearty, fizzy, tangy and just a little salty. The bai jiu ignited everything in its path and took no prisoners.

“You need to know this on your way in: Even before he lost it out there, or whatever happened, Baiju Noyan had a violent misogynistic streak and most likely still does.”

“I thought you two were friends from way back.”

“We were. Probably still are. That’s how I know. He’s from a whole male line of violent misogynists who like to tell everyone their favorite scents are blood and woman. The Khagan values them as officers who get results on the battlefield, not as cotillion-ball escorts for his nieces. I know what you’re starting to think: How twisted I must be to have ever been a friend to a guy like that? So I’m going to take you through the history by the scenic route.

“Sixteen years ago,” Sungurtekin began, “my Kayis tribe, along with other Oguz tribes, had obasi ranges in Khwarezmia near the Caspian Sea. The Shah of Khwarezmia offered land extensions and tax reductions to the obasis in exchange for detachments of Alp warriors to fight the Mongols. My brother Gun and I had just become Alps and could not wait to test our strength and skill against the Khan’s famous cavalrymen. Gun broke his wrist when his horse fell - one of those stupid accidents -
and had to stay behind when the rest of our group was called to Otrar to meet the invading army. Even a lean, keen and green one such as I could tell something was wrong when the ‘army’ turned out to be a Mongol trade caravan. The local governor who took charge of us said the carts were full of armaments we needed to seize and spies we needed to execute. Even when the entire caravan surrendered, we were ordered to kill every man, woman, child, and animal. We never did find any more weapons than a normal caravan would have used for self-defense.

“After that I made myself quit thinking about it. I just went where I was told to go and killed whom I was told to kill and everything just became what it was. Fight, try to eat, try to sleep, fight some more. I kept hoping to meet up with Gun again, or at least hear that he lived, but that never happened.

“When all the wheels finally came off Khwarezmia a couple of years later, I was one of a hundred or so men smuggling the fugitive Shah and his family out of the flames of Samarkand. The Mongols chased us to the Caspian shore, stole all the boats that we hadn’t already stolen --- we probably should’ve burned those other boats but we were in a hurry --- and shoved off after us. Then we only had time to exchange a few volleys of arrows before a sandstorm blew up on the windward shore and overtook us. The worst of both worlds swallowed us all whole in the dark.”

Nergui raised her glass to her lips and was surprised to encounter a taste like molten metal and ashes, then realized that Tsets must have silently and invisibly taken away her kvass mug and replaced it with a glass of *bai jiu* as arranged earlier. She licked her lips and blotted them with her sleeve, hoping they wouldn’t blister.

“I was pretty damned surprised,” Sun went on, “to find myself still alive when the light eventually came back. I was clinging to one end of a shattered mast, and a Mongol about my age was hanging on to the other end. There wasn’t a shoreline or an intact ship in sight; just more floating scrap wood, and here and there a body that might still hold some life or not.

“I looked at him and he looked at me and maybe we were both thinking: should we fight and both die, even though we know full well that the war’s all over anyway? Tough, stubborn sons of bitches that we’d both been brought up to be, we might have gone ahead and done it if something big under the water hadn’t grabbed me by the belt and pulled me away. I screamed and thrashed and kicked and it rolled over me as I’d heard crocodiles do; it wasn’t as big or heavy as I was but much stronger in its own element. I kept fighting but started wondering if its plan was to drown me or chew me up first, when all of a sudden something else slammed in and there was another impact and suddenly I could float again. The Mongol had grabbed the creature, smacked it on the head, and made it let go of me.

“I looked around for the crocodile, thinking a blow like that probably just pissed it off and it’d be back for us both. But there was no crocodile. It was a seal! Gray and spotted, with great big eyes looking all innocent and offended. It was pissed off though; it spit some water at us and then slapped the sea surface with its tail, drenching us, as it swam away. Baiju and I --- for of course it was he --- couldn’t help laughing like crazy men. Then we grabbed the mast again and kicked to follow the seal, thinking it might know where it was going.

“It took us two months of island-hopping and wreck-scavenging to make it back to the mainland, where I fully expected to have to escape execution, imprisonment, or at least conscription as catapult fodder. Not so; the Khan’s policy now that the Shah was gone was that if I surrendered peacefully, I could go home or join their regular army with a bonus.

“Since it seemed that my tribe’s lands were now under Mongol rule, I thought it would probably help them to have a son serving in the new regime. Then it turned out that Baiju, a Noyan’s nephew and
a Darga’s younger brother, was being sent to Avarga for Kheshig training now that he’d survived the Khwarezmian war. His family took a liking to me and invited me to go with him… but we had to go right away and I wouldn’t be able to detour home first.

“We hunted, raced, prize-fought, and generally sported our way up the Silk Road. I tried to send messages home, but the only word that came back was that the Kayis had left Khwarezmia and no one knew where they’d gone. We were invited to parties by friends and supporters of Baiju’s relatives along the way. It was when Baiju was around larger, mixed, socializing groups of people that signs started coming out that maybe everything wasn’t quite… right with him.

“First it was the girls. I find that most Mongol men, like most Turkmen, are polite to women, and in return their moms, sisters, and wives don’t kick their asses round the tent. Baiju would just get… way too… aggressive?”

When the pause dragged out, Nergui quietly prompted, “Wouldn’t take no for an answer?”

“Didn’t even imagine there might be a question. One night I stepped in and prevented a misunderstanding that might have caused an international incident as well as losing him one or more body parts. All the way back to our inn he talked about customs in the Gharid Sultanate and southward, where if you got tired of your wife you could just set her on fire.

“He wanted to try getting high on some spider venom he’d bought somewhere, so we were sitting out on the terrace under the full moon waiting to see what it would do. He said when he was thirteen his dad bought him a slave to clean his room and take care of his clothes and armor. He still had a picture he’d drawn of her. She was there for about a year, was always very sweet to him. Then one day his dad poisoned her and made Baiju watch her get sick. He handed Baiju a dagger and said the only thing that could be done for her was to put her out of her misery. Always hoped that was the spiders’ story and not his.”

“Didn't he have more of an emotional affair lately, though? Dodurga woman named… Gonchagul?”

“Her aunt Aytolun married my uncle Korkut Bey, the Dodurga chief. Gonchagul and her father Gumushtekin had been living in Konya so long they could have passed for Seljuk, which coming from me isn’t a compliment. She was fashionable, sophisticated, and poised to take advantage of anyone and anything within reach. She had schemes and headgames for every occasion, but they were wasted on salt-of-the-earth tribes-persons who couldn’t sneak up on a hibernating tortoise during a thunderstorm. I might have recruited her if her loyalty could have extended beyond her own skin.

“Originally Aytolun brought Gonchagul in to be Gun’s emergency backup baby-mama. Even though Gun’s wife, Selchan, is the least popular person in two tribes and hates every living, dead, inanimate, and purely conceptual thing on earth (until she suddenly loves it obsessively for a random amount of time), I still believe he dodged a flaming arrow by not adding Gonchagul to the mix.

“Ironically, it was after Baiju kidnapped Selchan that Gun fell back in love with her and broke it off with Gonchagul. Meanwhile, Baiju was kind of nonplussed by Selchan; maybe he’d never kidnapped a woman who responded by giving him spit-facials from thirty paces away, or maybe one killer instinctively recognizes and respects another.

“Eventually, Gumushtekin’s and Aytolun’s hidden agendas ended in blood that turned out to be their own. Gonchagul was all alone. She went to the Seljuks’ Grand Vizier, Sadettin Kobek, who made a career of conspiring with everyone against everyone else just like every other Grand Vizier in the history of the title. He sent her to spy on Baiju.
“Baiju was either smitten with her or he pretended to be; that was never clear. Like Selchan, Gonchagul had murdered someone, and she also had that sociopathic charm. Baiju did seem to be on his not-the-worst behavior while she was around. He’d still kill his own warriors for the least mistake, but he no longer killed them for no reason at all. He flattered, bowed to, and took orders from Yigit Shahzade because Gonchagul needed him to. Some of his Dargas were concerned that he might be ‘breaking good.’ He was certainly upset when she was killed, but again, maybe he loved her or maybe he resented her death being out of his control.

“So I guess one possible hint for you is that he seems most likely to respect women he can’t scare. Also, if it’s been a while since you killed anyone, you might want to take advantage of one or more of the many, many adverse encounters you’ll probably have on the road. Take some corpse-cards along; they’re some kind of new public-relations thing.

“At the Kheshig academy, Baiju was successful and popular. Other guys were willing to follow him down active volcanoes because he’d do whatever it took to win. He was in his element when he could lead from the front… which a lot of Dargas do but most Noyans don’t. Still, really good Kheshig Dargas just get promoted to Noyan sooner, unless they’re the kind of particularly devious bastards that get nudged over to the Mergen track like me.

“Noyans typically command over 10,000 troops. At the battle they stake out the place where they can see the most without the distraction of enemies trying to cut their heads off, and they have runners constantly coming in to tell them anything they might not have seen. Between battles they sit in forts and strategize, assimilating all the information they’re brought. If your target was that kind of Noyan, you probably wouldn’t need to be able to survive a battle because you wouldn’t be anywhere near it.

“Baiju did that in Persia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and he did it well, but he said it was like --- well, I won’t repeat what he said it was like, but my best guess is that seeing all those small, tight-knit groups of Alps in Anatolia doing the surgical hit-and-run raids he loves best eventually made him throw the Noyans’ combat manual out the smoke-hole in frustration. He’s out there somewhere doing the small-strike-force attacks he does best, and to stay close to him you’ll be in the thick of it too.

“I’m recommending a combat skills refresher and instruction in Turkmen fighting styles. It'll just take a few days and could really boost your odds of success --- and survival. Now what have they got you doing tomorrow?”

“Oh.” Unintentionally, it had come out in Two Voice. Her hand had moved involuntarily on the table and knocked over her glass, but fortunately it was empty. How many times had Tsets refilled it? Five? Six? “Darga says some kind of multicultural honey-trap intensive?”

“What, with Xiaowei Darga in Building 69? Her graduates are some of the best kept women on the continent.”

“No, mine’s an off-site at… I think it’s called Dower House 5?”

“Oh.” Sungurtekin had once accepted a tea invitation from one of the cordial aunties of Dower House 5 while waiting for an audience at the building across the road. He’d woken up in the alley behind the garden wall two days later with some odd minor injuries but no memory of what had transpired, “Um - good luck, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes
References

“Excitable Boy” song by Warren Zevon
it’s falling in a golden door

Chapter Notes

Thanks, whoever you were, for Hit No. 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui had insisted she could find her way back to the travelers’ ger without help, but when the full moon went behind a cloud and the streets of KK got darker than the inside of a yak, she sincerely hoped she hadn’t been lying. She shut her eyes as her brain sloshed.

At first she thought she imagined the tug on her sleeve, but when she reached down she touched a tousled mane. Even foals aren’t this short... Ah, creature, ah! You’re not a horse, you’re a dog. One of the big bankhars that run loose all over Mongolia. Bankhars weren’t a breed, but a landrace, designed more to a set of guidelines than an exact recipe. Local variations depended on what other stock was available and what traits best fit the environment. This was one of the ones with a mane like a Tibetan mastiff. It also had a collar, which was unusual, but then again this was KK and maybe there was some kind of city law about it.

“Hi, buddy,” Nergui yawned, scritching affectionately under its collar. Almost anything wearing a collar likes to be scritched under it. “Know where the Temuj Inn is?”

By the time shamans reached Nergui’s level, they had seen so much weird shit that she wasn’t at all surprised when the dog led her confidently away. She was only mildly surprised three streets later when it sat down and thumped her ankles with a wagging tail outside the faintly glowing door of the Temuj Inn. “Thanks, buddy,” she said, running her fingers all through the long mane and giving it a friendly clap on the ribcage. “If I had any treats I would share.” It seemed to nod at her politely as she went inside.

Once under the blanket, it didn’t take her long to drowse. The last impression she had was of the door becoming transparent and something big with black scales sliding through cosmic dust outside.

Chapter End Notes

References

“A Pillow of Winds” song by Pink Floyd
it’s a dirty job but someone’s got to do it

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Colin Higgins, for writing the character Maude from the movie "Harold and Maude." Before I met Terry Pratchett's Nanny Ogg or Anne Perry's Lady Vespasia, Maude was the first example I encountered of what I could be when I grew "way up" (after retiring from being Charles Addams' Morticia).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Dower House is usually associated with a palace, but separate. Specifically, it’s where a Queen Mother can strategically retreat, put her feet up and do as she pleases while the younger generation in the main palace gets on with doing as it pleases.

Ogedei Khagan’s Queen Mums and quasi-Queen Mums were Genghis Khagan’s widows. They numbered in the hundreds. Wisely, he ordered the building of as many separate Dower Houses as would keep the peace. “That’s the lad with all the people skills, all right,” elder wags would stage-whisper, nudging each other. “No flies on him, even when he visits his herds.”

Dower House 1 belonged to Borte, Ogedei’s mother, Genghis’s first wife and sole Empress. Dower House 1 was in Avarga, the old capital. Borte passed away there before World Peace Palace in KK had been finished. The site now functioned as a shrine; bowls of airag and plates of Borte’s favorite foods were offered daily in her favorite solarium by shamans, monks, and lay attendants.

Dower House 2 was for the morganatic wives. These women had legally and ceremonially married the Khagan to cement political or commercial ties, but the arrangements did not make them Empresses or place their children in the line of succession.

Dower House 3 was for those concubines or “concs,” live-in mistresses without marriage contracts, who had borne the Khagan at least one son. Dower House 4 was for concs who had borne him daughters but no sons.

Ogedei had encouraged the remaining multitude of childless concs to organize themselves into groups by personality and living preference. This turned out to be a stroke of genius. Aside from a few naturally solitary souls, most of them had quite enjoyed the communal aspects of harem life except for having to put up with “What’s-her-Face” (whomever the speaker’s personal nemesis might be). The resulting higher-numbered Dower Houses included isolated gers on working ranches with beautiful views, ger compounds in friendly KK neighborhoods, Chinese- or Indian-style temples, and other arrangements. Each of the bereaved women could choose her setting and way of life. Thus, kindred spirits gravitated toward each other and their respective “What’s-her-Faces” gravitated off someplace else.

Dower House 5, one of the new multi-story buildings in central KK, overlooked a vast and bustling market square. Its residents, settled head-on in the path of oncoming developments, overlooked nothing. In their days with the Great and Wise --- may he ride forever in the sky --- neither childbed nor conspiracy had really caught their interest. Instead, they were scholars of a multitude of backgrounds and disciplines.

Now, relieved of their romantic duties (which had never been too burdensome; Genghis liked to
learn by being read to, though there were plenty of large comfy divans and pillow-piles in the library just in case), the women of Dower House 5 spent their days becoming even more outstanding in their fields (in stark contrast to their rural-hearted sisters in Dower House 9 who preferred to be out, standing in their fields).

Some of the women of Dower House 5 had even invited their personal “What’s-her-Faces” to join them. After all, frenemies keep one on one’s toes and one would hate to lose one’s edge. The house motto was rumored to be “If you haven’t got anything nice to say about anyone, come sit next to me.”

As Nergui found out the morning of her tutoring appointment, Dower House 5 was far enough from World Peace Palace to feel nicely private and autonomous, yet close enough that the residents could easily arrange to “pop in” at the palace if anyone seemed to be needing advice or, alternatively, baking pie.

Next to the door was a thermometer of sorts; a brass statue of a definitely male monkey. Indicia lines on its thigh bore labels such as “much too cold” at the hip to “much too hot” at the knee. At its feet was a bowl inscribed: “If temperature indicators have frozen off, why are you still outside?”

Tentatively, Nergui lifted a wrought-iron handle and rapped it against a pair of raised disks mounted on hemispherical standoffs. She’d heard that some of the new buildings had impressive knockers, but…

The door opened. “Agent Nerguitani, right? Come on in,” invited a small Mongolian woman in a graceful brocade dress of deep maroon. She would have been called “apple-cheeked” if the apple had been thoroughly dried in the sun. “I’m Chimeg; call me Meg. We’re expecting you. Hang up your jacket anywhere.”

The hooks on the coat tree were thick and pink, with knobbed ends to keep the coats from falling off and sort of a ridged texture along the --- oh.

Meg laughed. “Just a novelty for our visitors. A little unrealistic, though; most men’s willies can’t hold a winter coat off the floor for more than a handful of seconds… Here, trade a pair of these slippers for your shoes and we’ll join the others in the rumpus room.”

Nergui took the slippers thankfully and set them down when she took off her low boots. She started putting a bare foot into the ankle-hugging folds of soft pink felt that terminated in a pink pompon over her middle toe. Sable trim ringed the outer edge of the slipper and…

Nergui gave a whistle of mock awe. “Is everything in the building shaped like a --- a body part?”

“We’ve been collecting for years, so pretty much. So many everyday objects look like body parts already, there’s always someone inspired to add those extra little details that make people suddenly take notice.”

As Nergui preceded her up the stairs, Meg changed the subject. “You should know that we researched you after the royal diviners recommended you and our consensus is that you’re perfect for this mission.”

“Really? Chagaanirvys Darga and Sun Mergen didn’t seem as enthusiastic.”

“That’s right, Chagaan’s your Wrangler. I knew her slightly, back when we were both traveling teachers, before I was called to the royal household. And Sun Mergen? Oh, yes, he’s that very tall Alp, isn’t he?”
“Alp?”

“An elite Turkmen warrior, my dear. They’ve got to be strong and they’ve got to be fast and they always are fresh from the fight. Quite a... stirring spectacle.”

“Oh. Huh. I ask because the only other times I heard that word, it sounded like an Alp was something to *climb.*”

Meg dimpled impishly and winked. “Could be, my dear, could be; Anatolia is awash in them, though a lot of them unfortunately hate Mongols. But let’s just worry about getting you on a horse first. Baby steps... I was going to say, I heard about the tiger negotiations you did in those Siberian villages when I taught the ‘Wake with a Snake’ drill up that way.”

“Oh! ‘Wake with a Snake’ was yours? That one’s useful. Sleep on the ground around here and eventually something deadly will crawl under the blankets… besides us, I mean. Last year I was treating a man for snakebite at a camp in Darkhan and five little kids came in and started singing ‘If you’re outside when you wake, you might not be alone.’”

Meg joined in; “A lonely chilly little snake might make your bed his own.”

More voices joined in as they entered a doorway:

“He doesn’t really want to bite,
But if you jump and yell he might,
So deeply breathe and slowly sli-ide...
Out the other side!”

A dozen brightly dressed women of uncertain age cheered and raised their teacups before launching into the coda:

“’Or... you’ll... turn...
Gray and white and yellow and red
And purple and blue and fi-nal-ly-y-y...
Dead!’”

They upended their teacups and subsided into laughter and more cheering.

The rumpus room had big sunny windows and the deepest carpet Nergui had ever waded through, There were big plushy pillows to sit on and low pedestals to put things on. Many of the pedestals were occupied by jade teacups and teapots thin enough to see daylight through.

“But we’re not here to talk about ordinary two-eyed snakes today, are we?” said the one with the most jewelry, the most makeup, and a presence that pulled the eyeballs. “That’s Tabanodval of Khongirad. Tabby’s too good for the rest of us, just ask her,” Meg explained, sparking more chuckles around the room.

“So you’re the camel-hunt that’s supposed to save the Western Front,” Tabby lowered her glittering eyelids appraisingly and pretended to delicately nibble a fingernail of frightening length. “Oh well, I suppose a mere Noyan didn’t rate sending a Khongi. Either that, or they didn’t want to waste one of the world’s most coveted consorts on such an obvious suicide mission.”

“Tabby’s a trained Sarcast, Nergui, so don’t let anything she says bother you too much,” Meg quickly interceded.
“Yeah, she’s our D.B.,” piped up the very youngest of the group, “Designated Bee-yotch.” This tiny woman in pigtails and a very short pink yak-fur robe was almost as heavily made-up as Tabby, but with loud-colored mattes and glosses instead of sparkles.

“And my pixie protege Kraya, there, will take over when I retire,” Tabby rejoined.

Meg cleared her throat and addressed the group. “As you’ll know from reading her file, Nergui’s rituals dramatically decreased tiger attacks around Sukhbaatar and Dornod. Tell them what you did, my dear.”

Nergui took a sip from a proffered teacup, realized the tea was vigorously spiked, kept her reaction down to a blink, swallowed, and began. “Tiger spirits are important protectors in that area, but the population of living tigers has been avalanching over the last few years. Anyone carrying a traditional offering of butcher’s scraps out into the woods was getting eaten up with it. If people stopped the offerings, the tigers went into the camps and ate anything made out of meat, pre-killed or not. I mapped the camps and the probable tiger lairs and chose locations that took the tigers away from the camps.

“Back in the camp, I’d wrap a live prey animal in a blanket sprayed with wolf pee to disguise the scent. In mid-afternoon, when the tigers slept, I’d go to the location, stake the animal out on a long lead, remove the blanket, and leave. The tigers now had a moving target they could hunt, which satisfied them on many more levels than scavenging scraps.

“It seemed to work; the tigers accepted the offerings and left the villages alone. Except that, curiously, in a couple of places small wild kills, otherwise uneaten, were found at some village entrances on mornings after a full moon.”

“What struck me,” Meg told the group, “was that she first sought a deep understanding of the nature of the beast, and then crafted solutions to honor that nature. That may be the kind of thing it takes to bring our Baiju back alive if it’s still possible.”

“Praise Tengri,” chorused some voices.

“So what kind of pee will you put on his blanket, No Name Girl?” Tabby raised her delicate eyebrows.

Nergui smiled wryly, unfolding a shrug. “I try to travel with a full selection, in case I have to improvise.”

“We laugh, but the cases aren’t as dissimilar as they might be,” Meg pointed out. “Like those tigers, Baiju Noyan’s been killing excessively and erratically, and you’ll have to be within sword’s, dagger’s, and hand’s reach quite a bit in order to do what you need to do.”

“Although even if you do get killed, there are still options,” Kraya pointed out.

“In Kraya’s homeland, ghosts can have coitus ectoplasmus,” Tabby explained.

“As interesting as it might be to try ghost sex, Nergui, the water-clock is dripping so your best bet is probably to just keep it simple and stay alive,” Meg advised. “Friends! Shall we break out the audiovisual aids?”

Kraya temporarily shifted her fistfuls of coat to one hand, reached into a bookcase, and removed a candlestick. (The candlestick held a curved, knob-ended purple candle of a shape predictable by anyone who had seen the downstairs of Dower House 5). There was a hydraulic gurgle and a grind of masonry as the bookcase and the one next to it folded out of the wall and slid sideways, revealing
a hidden chamber. The flames of butter-lamps sprang up to lap at the inflow of fresh air.

“Whoa,” Nergui marveled. The other women grinned conspiratorially at each other; it seemed to be the reaction they were hoping for. Every wall of the chamber held racks and racks of sculptures, with larger statues on a tiered dais in the center. In the two back corners, hallways led to branch chambers where books and paintings were visible. Since everything she could identify seemed to relate to sexual organs and the uses thereof, she assumed the others probably were as well.

Framing the doorway was a collection of different, yet similar, phallic sculptures. They differed in material (various inert semiprecious stones, gold, ceramic), construction (solid, hollow with a spout, textures or strap attachments on the base), highly individualized etched or engraved embellishments, and inscriptions in various languages. They were similar in that they were all reproductions of the same original model, in the same size,

“Each of us had our own custom-made one,” Meg smiled. “To practice with on our free nights.”

“How… nice,” Nergui acknowledged absently, still taking everything in. When the copper finally dropped, she started, letting out another, more enlightened “Oh!” and a blush too quick to stifle. In all her life, Nergui had never been in the right place at the right time to lay eyes on the legendary Genghis Khagan as many other working civilians of her generation had: from afar as he rode by at the head of an army, or a detachment, or at least with a small cohort of elite young officers-in-training from the Kheshig. This was because one of the first and foremost admonitions to Sealed Ones and their guardians, right after “No horseback riding until afterward,” was “Never let a Kheshig boy get closer than a dot on the horizon.”

And now she felt as though she had seen the father of Greater Mongol from very close up indeed. Closer than, it seemed, fathers in general should really be seen. Wanting to recover and change the subject, she waved at the wall full of phalluses and tried to sound breezy. “So! I’ve seen a few… things… because of treating wounds and the like, but… are there any examples of what I should expect?”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ve got one like that,” Meg shook her head solemnly. “From what I heard, I doubt anybody’s got one like that,” Tabby said enigmatically to the wall.

“Well, what about beyond surface anatomy?” Nergui asked.

“To the chart room,” Meg gestured dramatically. “Kaushiki, if you could dig out some chakra references? Ai Fan, meridians? Reminiscences, anyone?”

“Many of us met Baiju back when he was in the Kheshig,” explained the small woman who’d been introduced as Ai Fan, a former Taoist nun from the former Jin Empire. Very simply dressed and coiffed, with modest and disciplined affect, she wore no makeup but her sculpted bone structure and natural radiance could have stopped traffic. “From the beginning he showed a lot of promise. His fighting was athletic and intelligent, his socializing was boisterous, but away from a group he could be quiet and hard to read.

“He fell with shaman sickness when he was fourteen,” Ai Fan continued. “Surprised everyone. The spirits had never chosen anyone from the Kheshig before. Maybe the spirits knew better, or maybe the kids’ parents piled on the offerings to prevent it. Baiju’s commanders rolled with it despite his father’s growls and sputters. They let him train part-time with a palace shaman while he recovered. He seemed to come back even stronger, with unusual gravitas for his age. He even recruited other apprentice shamans to study battle magic so they could ship out with him when the time came.”
“He always said he wanted an army that could fight in all three worlds,” Meg reminisced. “Pretty big ambition.”

“It’s kind of encouraging to hear what he was personally like before Anatolia,” Nergui told them. “I’ve studied some systems of diagnosing and treating the mad as well as the physically ill. It might be important to figure out if he was born Unconstrained, or brought up to be Unreflective, or just recently went blood-blind because of what happened over there."

“It could be some of each,” Ai Fan mused. “His mother was apparently Turkish, so fighting the Turks would be particularly hard on a person with normal emotions. His mom died early in his life, and his dad is famously a piece of work who would have had no tolerance for internal conscience in a son and would have pushed Unreflectivity very hard. And if his dad is an Unconstrained, which would explain a lot, sometimes that runs in families.”

“Many of the Unconstrained believe it’s an advantage, not a deprivation,” Nergui picked up. “Never to feel guilt, shame, or regret? Never to worry about other people or feel their negative emotions? I’m not entirely sure they’re wrong. It’s only we conscience-bound bunnies who get uneasy about those hawks circling overhead. Sometimes I can’t help envying those carefree bastards.

“I always knew I’d probably be Unsealed by a stranger, but learning it’ll be a suspected war criminal who might be wearing his loincloth on his head has been a little daunting. But it sounds like he started out fairly sophisticated Maybe I’ll get through this with fewer bruises than I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh, make no mistake, the first time will almost certainly be a yes-rough-stuff kind of a deal,” warned Ai Fan. “Bring all your tools and supplies for treating combat injuries, and make sure you don’t use them all up on other people. I can give you some Iron Shirt exercises to practice on the way, but I can’t help you go back in time and start learning it several years ago, which would have been most effective.”

“To see what you need to see and do what you need to do,” pronounced Kaushiki, a former Tantric priestess from Delhi, “you’re going to have to intimately interweave your energy structure with his, and for that you’ll have to get physically close enough that he could cause you pain if he wants to.” Her cloud of blue-black hair reached her generous hips; her kohl-rimmed eyes were large and limpid, her aquiline nose ringed with gold, her rouged lips bee-stung, and her teeth small, white, and sharp-looking. “You’ll need to get that close just to figure out what’s going on and decide which threads to pull first. Don’t let him kill you or do any serious harm, but stay very aware, moment to moment, of how far out on the limb you are and how much further you’re willing to go.”

“Just remember: There’s a time to take control,” Tabby drawled, “and there’s a time to let a man think he’s in control. I’m only guessing, but by now Baiju Noyan might need control the way he needs air. You might need to wean him off it gradually and privately. Don’t cost him any face in front of anyone else, especially his troops, unless there’s just no other choice.”

“Stoop now, conquer later, my dear,” Meg nodded, “and part friends if you can. You’ve got different goals than we had. We needed to keep our Khagan happy and interested indefinitely. You’re meant to troubleshoot the Anatolia situation according to Ogedei’s priorities, tie up any remaining loose ends, and move on. So keep your exit strategy flexible, review your assumptions twice a day, and don’t get attached.”

“Don’t ever let your little-man-in-the-boat take the tiller,” Tabby chimed in.

“There is a natural tendency to cleave emotionally to one’s, er, Unsealer,” Kaushiki pointed out. “It’s why the arranged-virgin-marriage societies survive, and it also contributes to captor crushes.
Unrequited first love, fake or real, is always pretty debilitating, and he may have lost all capacity to feel anything for you. Add that to being all alone a long way from home, and you could be out of action if you don’t stay on top of mitigation. You’ll need to be good at rebalancing your own energies. Have you done chakra work?"

“I’ve done this one since I was nine,” Nergui replied, sending kundalini shooting up her spine to fountain out the top of her head. “My teacher said it would keep me from going crazy or being tempted if I had to wait longer than I wanted to.”

“Good,” Kaushiki nodded. “It takes some people a lifetime to do that, so you’ve got the strength and dexterity to do other things as well. But until you get where you’re going, do less of it. Let the red light pool at the base of your spine. Make the pool bigger and smaller. Make it whirl faster or slower. You’ll want it to be awake and aware now, but completely controllable by you.

“The green light at your heart is another thing you’ll want to train on the trip. You’ll need enough extra to feed his, though if he’s a true Unconstrained he may seem not to have one. If he’s got a lot of excess red, orange, or yellow, you can drain it off, draw it up, convert it to green and shoot it back at him. That should help back him off out of rage-driven operation. But be careful: you’ll also be taking in any impurities he’s got floating around, so neutralize and expel them from your own system whenever you get a moment. Remember, only the sane can un-crazy the crazy.”

Tabby shuddered. “Makes me glad I only deal in good old-fashioned sexual manipulation.”

“This is too big a job for just that.” Ai-Fan pointed out.

“No such thing, Ai-Fan,” Tabby scoffed. “I’ll bet I could turn that Baiju boy into putty in my hands even now.”

“Maybe you could,” Ai-Fan answered, “but they don’t want him all soft and mushy. They want his edge back sharp and keen. They want his will focused on expanding our borders. They want him wide awake and ready for war. External carrots and sticks aren’t enough to transform the undirected blunt spiked instrument he’s become. That has to happen from the inside out.”

“How?”

“You need to get his sexual energy - which I hear he has a lot of - engaged redirected along the right ways in his body. It sounds like maybe he loses too much or maybe diverts it to the spleen. First you find out where it’s going now. Second you find out where it needs to go instead. Third you make it go there.

“But before you do any of that, Nergui, you need to put some safeguards into your own body. I recommend you put the energy structure in place on the way there and then beef it up with some of the energy from your Unsealing.

“If you feel yourself getting uncomfortable emotionally after being with him, try running the kundalini in reverse, from your crown down to the base of your spine and into the ground. Be careful not to deplete yourself internally; just expel what’s making you feel bad.”

“If this works, I could see using it in future missions too,” Nergui commented. “I wish I’d known about it earlier; I’ve treated a lot of secondary disorders that started as broken hearts. Just out of curiosity, though… what if someday I really fall in love with a person, instead of just being bent out of shape by contact with a non-standard soul? Could any of these self-protection measures erase it by mistake? How do I know if it’s real?”
“The question everyone eventually gets to! You’ll know,” Tabby said, stretching a graceful leg out in front of her to check her toenail polish, “because you won’t be able to re-balance your emotions with any of these nice ladies’ energy tricks. Comes love,” Tabby smiled with enough of a self-deprecating smirk to make Nergui wonder about the shameless Khongi’s real story, “nothing can be done.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“We Care A Lot” song by Faith No More
"Holding Out for a Hero” song by Bonnie Tyler
"Wall of Weapons” and "Super Multi-Purpose Room” TV Tropes
"Fargo” movie by Joel & Ethan Coen; "Breaking Bad” TV show S1E7 by Peter Gould
"Comes Love" song by Billie Holliday
In the late afternoon of a fairly warm day, the tunnels under KK were all but deserted. Thanks to the good women of Dower House 5, Nergui now knew about the tunnels. They weren’t a big secret, but nobody went out of their way to point them out to newcomers. They’d be a freaking gods’ send when winter got its claws into the capital-city-in-progress. But at the moment, they were an empty space full of echoes.

Every singer at loose ends knows what to do with those. Nergui cleared her throat.

(Visualizing sunlight, rampant greenery, chirping birds)

"Mi no-simo
"Zel-en venchets
"Dai nam Lado, lepi Lado
"Zelen venchets
"Tee-ho vee-nay
"Dai nam

(Visualizing sudden trouser-soiling thunderbolt)

"Lado! lepi Lado!"

Nergui listened to the echoes die away, dreading shouts of “Hey! Shut up, you loon!” that happily never came. But the thought she didn’t want to think was right there in the front of her mind, and it was this:

*Did Meg say take two lefts and a right to get back to the office? Or two rights and a left? Crap. Crap on a cruller. Oh well, might as well just take the first exit to the surface and get my bearings.*

She started walking, but couldn’t resist doing the vocal-range stretching exercise she’d randomly pulled out of the dream world’s Well of Songs years ago. Its demands had proven to be even more unreasonable than that other one, “Osekan Yusi.” Starting as low as she could go:

"Tey-kon-mi (tey konmi)
"Tey-kmi-yon (tey kmiyon)
"Al-bi-gaw-ninnadeyor tuuWOO!"

The shriek at the end had not been a stumble over the nose-bleeding high note, but a reaction to something cold, wet, slippery and surrounded by fur suddenly shoving into the Palace of Labor point in the center of her palm.

Once she peeled herself off the ceiling, she realized by a nearby panting sound that the mystery object had been a dog’s nose. The light wasn’t great but it seemed to be the big Bankhar that walked her back to the Temuj Inn the night before. What kind of a dog tracks a new acquaintance all the way underground? Pretty impressive. Although --- weren’t dogs supposed to be sensitive to high-pitched noises? Maybe that was how it had found her again.
Once again, the dog took her by the sleeve and tugged, as if it knew where it was going. And once again, curiosity took her by the shoulders and shoved her in the same direction.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Take On Me” song by A-Ha
"Ladarke" song cycle by Emil Cossetto
"The Star-Spangled Banner" song by Francis Scott Key
she’d a soft brown eye and a look so sly

Chapter Notes

Thanks in advance to whoever gets me back my disappeared rough drafts, done in Bear Writer, off my iPad of a certain age. Some days you eat the Bear; other days the Bear eats you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Suddenly the dog let go of Nergui’s sleeve, sat beside a ladder attached to the tunnel wall, and whined softly. Nergui also thought she heard a human voice coming from somewhere. She climbed the ladder and cautiously raised the trapdoor an inch or two.

It had been, as Nergui suspected, a woman’s distress call, although now that she could hear it more clearly its tone was not so much distressed as aggravated.

"Hel-lp! I could use some help here! Any of you slatterns still here?” Then, muttered, “Of course not. The fountain’s on. They’re all out front getting frescoed.”

_Oh well, pitch in and don’t stand on ceremony, that’s the Mongolian way.”_ Hello?” Nergui called out. “I was just passing by, but can I help?”

“Oh, thank Tengri! I walked into a doorframe and I think I broke something.”

_Once again, the dog knows what it’s doing._ Nergui climbed up the ladder and shut the trapdoor to forestall any more accidents. “I’m a doctor. Don’t try to move, right? Just keep talking so I can follow your voice to find you.”

"Have you got a needle and thread on you?”

"Always. Also needles to use without thread.”

"You any good at it?”

"People seem to think so. Week to a month later, there’s usually no sign of the damage left.” _Wow-ee, where am I? Obviously, one of the new buildings, but: Gold leaf on the woodwork? One long carpet that goes all the way down the hall?

"I haven’t got that long. I’m late already.”

"Well, I’ll do my best,” Nergui tried to sound reassuring and not at all confused. She wondered, not for the first time: _Do people get rich first, and then it makes them unreasonable? Or is it that unreasonable people are more likely to get rich?_

There was a soft woof. The dog was on point in a doorway to the left. _It got up the ladder, through the closed trap door, and ahead of me somehow. Do I really want to know?

"Is this your dog, or did the kids find a lion somewhere?” A small, tawny, nimble-looking woman in purple silk sat on a bed inside the doorway. Only her voice and a certain depth in her almond eyes hinted that she was probably ten to fifteen years older than Nergui; otherwise she might have been
"It’s a dog that decided to walk with me today, but we don’t know each other well. You... said you had something broken?"

“Yes,” she said, “it’s this buggardly hat.” She gestured dismissively at a mystifying knee-high object on the floor at her feet; Nergui had guessed it was either an overdecorated stool or an oddly-shaped drum. “Short as I am, I have to squooch down to get through doorways in this thing! I’ll be OK once I’m out in the courtyard where everybody’s probably wondering if I fell down a well or something. Even the public rooms have higher lintels, but back here everything’s kind of poky. I thought I was doing all right, but then one stumble and these gilded peacock feathers that are supposed to stick way up over everything all snap off right at the stalk! Well, Doctor, what’s your prognosis?"

Nergui had been turning the hat over and over in her hands. Now she looked up and grinned reassuringly. “I think I can fix this. Would you mind very much if the feathers didn’t stick up past the top of the crown? If I just attach them running along the taper like this, they’ll be more protected and I think I can make it look intentional.”

“Have at it.” The woman rested her chin in her hands and watched Nergui produce a small sewing kit from one of the many pockets of her official jacket, select a needle and thread, and get to work. “That looks like quite a jacket,” she said approvingly.

"It’s my official uniform jacket. I’m told it’s a new design. Itch-free, lightweight wool with some kind of oil treatment to shed the rain.”

"So all the stuff on it - what does it mean?"

"The red leech on the sleeve means I’m a qualified medic. The light-blue embroidery is for Tengri clergy. The retractable fringe and the drum strap is for being a shaman. And the groups of nine little mirrors represent my shamanic skill level.”

“Well, you’re pretty shiny for your age, then. Unless you’re really sixty or seventy and have found a really good glamor spell, and if that’s so, could you do one on me?”

"No such luck; good thing you don’t need it. I am pretty young. I’ve just had nothing better to do than constantly work on leveling up, on account of this thing.” Nergui tapped the tip of her needle against her conspicuous new earring.

"Huh,” said the woman, leaning forward thoughtfully. “An old-fashioned lock, With a little clay Imperial seal? Looks almost like the locks you see on jail-in-the-boxes.” Mongolia had a sparse population that, as a rule, migrated often. Perhaps not coincidentally, it didn’t have much serious crime; few people owned more than they could easily transport, and people who couldn’t tolerate each other at close quarters could usually move away from each other. If a prison sentence came up, the regional authorities would bring a large wooden box with a small window, put it away from human habitations, lock the prisoner in it, and walk away. It was now up to the prisoner’s friends and any kindly-disposed passing strangers to provide food and water.

"It does, doesn’t it? It’s because I’m a Sealed One. It’ll stay on until I’m Unsealed.”

"I have… heard of that?” the woman said cautiously. “So you’ve never…”

"Nope. Nor ridden a horse either.”

"Whew! That’s harsh. My feet have barely touched the ground outside since I could sit up and hang onto something. And since my last wedding they haven’t touched the ground inside much either.”
Tori giggled and made as if to elbow Nergui in the ribs. Nergui, in the midst of some tricky stitching, tightened her lips in concentration and pushed her tongue out until it was barely visible. This was a trick another medic had taught her. Something about the gesture made people back off without being actually offended. This became a real sanity-saver because on the lonelier trails, even the simplest suture became a spectator event. Patients’ relatives and assorted bored looky-loos gathered around and, if left to nature, kept neither their speculations nor their hands to themselves. *Bless their souls,* Nergui added mentally, as befitted a compassionate clergymon.

Finishing off a knot, Nergui looked up with a broad smile and held out the hat at arm’s length. “What do you think, Khatun?” With the broken-off tips of the feathers disguising the places where the shafts had broken, and the lower shafts and upper shafts interwoven, the effect was convincing.

“I think you saved my wardrobe, Khatun,” the woman nodded.

“I’m Nergui.” She extended a friendly hand.

The woman in purple gripped Nergui’s forearm in a warrior’s greeting. “Call me Tori. And I also think another thing: If you’re not busy, you should come with me to the party I’m late for. See what you’re getting into, moving to KK, and be nearby in case of any further casualties. I’m sure half the women there will be wearing new outfits they ripped out of the dressmakers’ hands half-basted.

“...Oh, you’re fine, Nergui, don’t worry,” Tori continued, seeing Nergui glancing doubtfully down at her own attire. “That’s one thing about KK; office clothes and government uniforms are almost always socially acceptable. The fashion fight club is strictly voluntary for those who can afford the stakes. That said, I’m in till the wolves rip the couture from my cadaver.

“You know what? I don’t even like these oversize headdresses,” Tori confessed as she floated through the perplexity of hallways, her elegant posture and graceful motions belying her speed. “They’re enough of a buns-ache to keep balancing indoors, but walking or riding in any sort of wind – don’t even ask! The trouble is that some of my friends are crazy about them, and they insist they wouldn’t feel right wearing them if I didn’t. I don’t get that, but I humor them.”

The halls, and the rooms that were visible, had become progressively wider, higher, and brighter as they walked past furnishings and artworks from every corner of the world. Nergui found herself recalling the wardrobe choices she’d seen at Dower House 5 that day. She’d noticed that most of the women there seemed to dress along the allium-to-cranberry or periwinkle-to-indigo color gamuts: reds or pinks that were almost purple, or blues that were almost purple. Tori’s brocade dress, by contrast, veered neither to the red nor the blue in this natural light. It was emphatically just about as purple as purple could be.

When they finally exited into the sunlit outdoors, the suspicion that had begun pecking at its shell in Nergui’s mind burst forth, scattering fragments and gooey albumen everywhere. They had joined a lively party in a vast, airy courtyard with tall encircling walls softened by espalier trees and climbing vines. In its center was a silver sculpture of a tree, enjoying much attention from partygoers and servers who were filling their cups with liquid from the ends of its branches. As far as Nergui knew, there was only one drink fountain shaped like a silver tree in KK or, probably, in the world.

*This is World Peace Palace. I’m in the freaking Palace!*

Chapter End Notes
References

"Star of the County Down" song by The High Kings
Chapter Notes

Thanks, Lindor, for making gingerbread truffles. Dang, they're good. Even though the peppermint-bark ones, like Genghis Khan, are a heck of a tough act to follow.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was the first palace Nergui had ever seen. It was the first palace in Mongolia that couldn’t be folded up onto a cart and moved twice a year. Most of the architects, engineers, and construction workers had been brought in from Chinese or Arabic cities, but it didn’t look like a copy of anything else on earth.

The dog at Nergui’s side wasn’t the only one mingling with the humans, she was glad to see. There were even a few decorous ponies assisting the elderly and disabled. A highly ornamented rickshaw pulled up bearing Meg, Tabby, and Ai Fan, each in a highly improbable hat. “It’s our star student!” Meg beamed.

”How did you get in here?” Tabby asked Nergui pointedly.

”Joon,” Meg addressed the rickshaw driver in an attempt to derail the line of questioning, “why don’t you fetch us all some kumyss? Dear me, Nergui doesn’t even have a glass yet.”

”I snuck in through the tunnels,” Nergui blinked blandly at Tabby, affecting a highly irritating air of innocence.

”Oh, hogwash. Don’t believe her, Aunties.” Tori materialized, turning away from an adjacent conversation, and threw a bangled arm around Nergui’s shoulders. “She heard my cries for help and hastened to assist when all my so-called attendants had deserted me. I tell you, this young woman is pure Home Steppes, and I mean that as a compliment. The civil service needs more like her. No matter how urbane we get, we should never lose touch with that ancestral - “

A shriek, a crash, and a foreign-language imprecation interrupted them. The Dower House Five aunts’ rickshaw-bearer, Joon, had dropped a tray of drinks and rounded in outrage on the four-eyed Bankhar dog who stood behind him. Too late, Nergui noticed that her erstwhile canine companion was no longer by her side. “Hey!” she yelled at the dog in khoomei voice. It galloped over, sat at her feet, and cocked its head, panting and grinning as if it hadn’t two braincells to rub together.

“What the fish-guts did you just do?” Nergui stage-whispered harshly. She didn’t really expect an answer from the dog, and she didn’t get one.

”Nice command voice,” Ai Fan commented. “Once you activate your Clouds and Rain you’ll really start cooking with wood.”

”There’s one cup still on the tray that didn’t spill, Joon,” Meg tried to console their bearer, who stood looking at the ground, unnerved to the point of trembling. “Go ahead and drink it. I think you need it more than we do.” Then, in a murmured aside to Nergui and Tori, “Joon is a flower boy from Goryeo. They’re sort of the opposite of Alps. Their manners are as flawlessly smooth as their bodies, but they can be a bit... fragile.”
"Poor thing," Tori shook her head in commiseration. "Well, we can go get the drinks. Can’t we, Nergui?"

"Of course, Tori," Nergui agreed, slapping her thigh to get the dog to follow. Out at the margin of her vision she noticed a look of deep bafflement crossing Tabby’s face. The expression suggested that all of a sudden up was down, red was blue, and cheeses were marching down the street reciting the Epic of King Gesar.

As they drew closer to the Silver Tree fountain, Nergui could make out two very tall men leaning their sitting-bones on the rim of the catch-basin, which had been given a friendly curved shape as if to encourage this very behavior. The larger one seemed to bestride the landscape despite his relaxed posture. A considerable coterie of well-dressed people were drawn around him like pins to a lodestone. His wealth of dark wavy hair was streaked with sunset red, not unlike the classic coloration of a four-eyed dog coloration. His broad chest and shoulders tapered to a robust but trim waist. His large hands were adorned with equally large rings. Though visibly scarred and battered, they remained nimble and expressive. In the midst of luxuriant, impeccably barbered whiskers, his effortless smile lit up the space around him.

Tori elbowed Nergui in the ribs and growled, “Quit staring at my husband, you mare,” then immediately laughed and slapped her playfully on the back. “I’m KIDDING!” she whooped. “Don’t be embarrassed. EVERYONE reacts to him like that at first sight: Women, men, kids, horses, dogs, gerbils, sticker-bushes, rocks... If it still bothered me after twenty-five years, I might as well just tap out of the match.”

Of course, Nergui had seen the face before. She might “still have fleece clumps stuck to her skirt” (she’d been making note of local insults, in case she wanted to use them later), but she had seen some recently minted coins. She’d shrugged at how the artists must have idealized Ogedei’s appearance. Now she thought they hadn’t done him justice.

The Khagan’s eyes, which had been periodically scanning the crowd, lit up when he saw Tori. “Precious rose of my heart, where have you been?”

Well, that put the cherry on top. The only woman who wore exactly, precisely, point-of-origin purple. The one who hated tall hats but wore them for her tall-hat-loving friends’ sake, as their hat heights were never allowed to exceed her own. This woman she’d just been strolling around with and blathering away to, as if they’d met at the spring horse-market or something, must be Toregene Khagatun, Empress of Greater Mongol. Arguably, Nergui should have figured it out sooner... or maybe not. Sure, Tori swanned around the Palace as if she owned the place, which it turned out she did. To be fair, though, almost all Mongolians always acted as if they owned any place where they happened to be. The Khans’ conquests, in a way, simply supported it after the fact.

Tori fluttered her hands, shooing away the matter as if a pesky fly. “Wardrobe hassles - not important. This is Nergui. She is why I wasn’t even later. She’s a gifted hat doctor.” As Ogedei stretched out a hand, Nergui immediately dropped to one knee, bent over it, and kissed one of the rings. “Khagan,” she said reverently with head bowed.

Ogedei closed his big hand over Nergui’s and pulled her to her feet, then grasped her forearm as Tori had done earlier and leaned down to touch his forehead to hers. “Your protocol is technically flawless,” he said softly with a smile in his voice, “but unless we’re putting on a show, don’t do that again.”

Nergui’s head spun. *Oh my Tengri, he even SMELLS incredible. And it’s not just the traces of soap!*

After releasing her and systematically taking in her uniform so quickly only Nergui noticed it,
Ogedei resumed the conversation.

"Tori my rose, if it took a 63-toli shaman to heal your hat, we should really have a word with that milliner. Nergui, are you a new Agent? I haven’t seen you before, but then again you peris work at not being seen ---"

There was a yelp and a crash off to the side. A rank-and-file soldier in uniform lay sprawled on his stomach across the flagstones, a tray of snacks just out of his reach. The big Bankhar dog that had been by Nergui’s side only a second ago stood over him. The dog turned toward her, returning her indignant glare with a “What’s going on? I just heard the commotion and hurried over to investigate” sort of expression.

"Get BACK here!” Nergui hissed at it, slapping her thigh so hard her palm stung. “Right now! I don’t know what you’re up to, but cut it out!”

"I see you’ve found a friend,” said a new voice as the dog trotted unhurriedly back to Nergui. Belatedly she realized that the almost-as-tall, rangy man beside Ogedei --- the one by his side but not part of his coterie --- the one who unconsciously deflected attention almost as strongly as Ogedei unconsciously attracted it --- was the Turkman spymaster, Sun Mergen.

"More like it found me,” Nergui confessed, giving the dog a scratch behind the ears as a pretext for keeping her hand within scruff-grabbing range. “It walked me back to the inn last night and then found me in the tunnels this afternoon, both times just out of the blue. I don’t think it’s in trouble; it’s full of energy and obviously eating well. I can feel a collar way under the mane, but it squirms away if I try to find a tag to look at.”

"How mysterious,” Sun said directly to the dog in a rather pointed way. Man and dog traded unreadable looks.

"Excuse me, Nergui, may I?” Ogedei broke back in. He pushed away from the catch-basin rim to reach for Nergui’s earring. “Is that --- why, yes it is!” he concluded delightedly, at which Sun leaned over quickly and whispered urgently in his ear. A thin, feathery cirrus cloud of mild disappointment crossed the Khagan’s eyes, but he quickly recovered and nodded a couple of times, dropping his hand to Nergui’s shoulder and patting it in a brotherly way. “So she’s the one going to our Baiju,” he smiled with equanimity. “I was going to ask to meet her before she left but, as usual, Sun, you anticipate our every need. Good idea to invite her here.” Beside Nergui, Tori opened her mouth to say something, but then seemed to change her mind.

Both men glanced around as if to check who else was in earshot. Sun’s peripheral vision caught the dog trying to sidle around behind Ogedei. The Mergen snapped his long knobby fingers loudly, pointed at his own eyes and then emphatically at the dog. The dog skulked a little way away and lifted its leg on a lamppost. HIS leg, Nergui thought. Finally I can stop wondering what gender that dog is under all the hair.

"Baiju and I have been close friends since we were teenagers,” Ogedei confided to Nergui. “He was one of a handful of Kheshig guards my brothers and I always requested. Loyal, discreet, strong, smart, and unstoppable once he put his mind to a purpose. The shaman sickness almost killed him --- well, I guess you know how it does --- but he got through it with body and mind intact and became the first and most successful war-leader I appointed. He isn’t what I’d call a nice guy, but he’s won wars that would have devoured a nice guy in a flat second. It really does take all kinds.

"I don’t know what happened out there, but something did. Troops who were ready to die for him may now be ready to kill him, if only to stop him from killing them. But if the Baiju I knew can possibly be saved, he’s worth saving. I want you to know that because it may not be obvious when
you meet what he’s become. If you can undo whatever’s gone wrong, you will have done a great
service to our state, to our army, and to me. If you can’t, then take him out with merciful speed and
ask for any resources that will clean up the mess.”

“You should be Khagan,” she replied, “I’ll take your words to heart.” She fell silent, seeming to look
into a distance that was not part of the world they all shared. Finally Tori took Nergui’s upper arm.
“Hey, kiddo; didn’t we say we’d get drinks for Meg and them? Come on, they must be getting thirsty
by now.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Downtown” song by Petula Clark
Summer, 1204 C.E.

Meanwhile, back at Lake Khovsgol, the All Clans’ Kurultai gathering was getting in tents.

SCENE: The inside of a large, comfortably appointed ger. The four teenage sons of Genghis Khan slouch about, bored and restless. JOCHI, 18, lies on a divan and repeatedly throws a small knife into the ceiling. The knife sticks for a few seconds, then drops back into JOCHI’s hand. TOLUI, 12, lies on his stomach apart from the others, kicking his legs in the air and writing in a scroll. CHAGATAI, 17, and OGEDEI, 16, play cards unenthusiastically.

CHAGATAI: If it rains, you’re totally sleeping under all those holes you’re making.

JOCHI: I’m only piercing the felt a little bit. There’s hides on top.

TOLUI: Is there anything to eat yet?

CHAGATAI: The Buddhists’ protest about the fish made the barbecue start late. Maybe some marmot’s heated up. The goat’s probably still raw.

TOLUI: Gods, I could eat a horse.

CHAGATAI: Might be an option. Losers from the race today and all.

JOCHI: If you go out, Lui, you’re gonna have to sneak out. Dad said to stay in until we get some proposed laws written like everybody else is doing.

OGEDEI: I think that was assuming we could’ve had dinner by now. But hey, if we get the work done for Dad early, we can probably go out for the rest of the night.

JOCHI: And do what? Kurultais used to be fun, but now the more of the world Dad takes over, the more they suck. Everybody knows our faces now. We get watched everywhere we go. And all the best-looking girls are engaged to princes in the new territories.

CHAGATAI: Tell me about it. The guys from the other clans have started to let us win all the fights too.

JOCHI: Yeah, right, maybe they let YOU win, “Baby.” I still beat ‘em fair and square.

CHAGATAI: Shut up, “Stranger.”

OGEDEI: Have you forgotten, you guys? We’ll be able to make our own entertainment.

CHAGATAI: When is your Kheshig-shaman buddy getting here with The Stuff? What’s his name - Bijuu?
OGEDDEI: Baiju. As soon as his shift at the gate ends. Should be any minute.

TOLUI: Do all shamans’ drugs make you throw up, or just some? I guess my real question is: should I eat dinner first, or shouldn’t I?

CHAGATAI: I don’t know; everything we’ve tried so far, Jochi pukes and Oggy doesn’t, so I’m not sure it matters.

JOCHI: There’s two theories: one is, if your stomach is empty then you won’t barf. The other is, if your stomach is empty then you’ll barf harder.

CHAGATAI (sarcastically): There, Lui, was that helpful?

BAIJU (from outside): Highnesses! May I?

OGEDDEI: B-man! Just in time. Come on in. Want an airag?

BAIJU: Don’t mind if.

(BAIJU opens his messenger bag on the table while OGEDDEI gets out his coin purse and CHAGATAI finds and fills an extra glass).

OGEDDEI (to BAIJU): What are you up to tonight?

BAIJU: Help Master and Baldy finish setting up for tomorrow’s ceremony. Then I’ve got a date.

CHAGATAI: Way to go, kiddo!

JOCHI: How do these little gerbils have dates when we don’t? Shouldn’t they have to give us first right of refusal or something?

BAIJU: Why would you biggest men on any campus need even one pimp, much less the whole Kheshig guard?

JOCHI (outraged): Now he just said WHAT??

OGEDDEI (placating) Baiju’s training to be a Sarcast. They have to be able to improvise in any situation, so he’s always practicing. Right, B-man? Anyway, let’s see what you brought us.

TOLUI: Whoa! What is that?

BAIJU: Reindeer jerky.

JOCHI: Did you say “reindeer jerky”? How are we supposed to get high on dried meat?

BAIJU: This reindeer was fed on toadstools for weeks before it was butchered. If humans ate the toadstools, they’d just die immediately. But when we eat a reindeer that digested the toadstools, it sends our souls out of our bodies for a while and we get visions and stuff.

JOCHI: Well, let’s hope our souls have better places to go than we do. Will we barf?

BAIJU: Master says it depends on how much impurity has to be cleansed out of your body.

JOCHI: Meaning “of course we will.” Hey, I worked hard collecting all this impurity. I hope I won’t have to start all over.
CHAGATAI: Wouldn’t it be great if there were things that got you high without making you puke first? That’d be as good as that Mongolian Good Night’s Sleep Worm those scientists are trying to breed.

BAIJU: Master says there are, way down south in Kashmir and Khorasan, but they haven’t gotten up here yet.

CHAGATAI: Now I know where I want Dad to conquer next.

BAIJU: Well, I better go. You guys just each eat one of these little pieces, and you should have a nice trip and not die. Anything else?

JOCHI: We’re good. Begone, varlet.

OGEDEI: Ignore that asshole. You made our weekend. Thanks, B, I owe you yet another one.

JOCHI: Oggs Over-Easy. Such a frickin’ people pleaser. Makes me want to barf.

OGEDEI: Sounds like you can just eat one of these and "wish granted." Try to make it all the way outside this time.

CHAGATAI and TOLUI: OOOo0000!
she is the blue chip that belongs to the big fish

Chapter Notes

Thanks, electric blanket, for not setting yourself on fire last night. You could heat up just a little bit, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before guiding Nergui off in search of trays and glasses, Tori turned back to Sun Mergen with a thoughtful look. “Say, Sun, how did the Agency find Nergui anyway?”

“Our oracles picked her out somehow. Afraid I’m not the one to ask about how they operate, though.” He refrained from saying “because I’ve never placed any trust in woo-woo and I’m not about to start now.”

“Hmm,” said Tori. “I know it’s not your usual remit, but do you think they could find another Sealed One to screw some humanity into Guyuk?”

“Your son?” The spymaster raised his eyebrows.

Ogedei winced ruefully. “All the evidence seems to say he is, unless he got switched out with a goblin or something right after he was born. I just don’t know how Tori and I ever produced such a tight-ass.”

“We thought it was just teen rebellion, but now he’s into his twenties and still can’t fart without an appointment,” Tori explained.

“Also, he really, really wants to succeed me as Khagan, and in my experience anybody who craves power that much is the last one who should have it. I know I’m not Dad ---”

“--- may he ride forever in the sky ---” they all said.

” --- but at least I admit it and seek out good advice. Guyuk’s not even me, and as far as I can tell his ears are purely decorative. He might not even abide by a Kurultai electing someone else. Then what? Greater Mongol’s at a delicate stage. It still feels held together by spit and gaerin twine sometimes.”

“It’s held together,” Tori said gently, “by you.”

The Khagan blew out a breath and shook his head. “Don’t I know it.”

Nergui, who had put together a drinks tray to distance herself from the family conversation, said “I can take this over to the ladies,” and started away.

”I’m coming along,” Tori chimed in.

”You’ve got fight training tomorrow morning, Nergui,” Sun admonished. “You won’t want a hangover. And keep this dog out of mischief.”

Nergui turned and saluted, then kept walking.
"If your dog needs... a break, a lot of dogs seem to like that rock garden over by the wall," Tori suggested, then leaned over and whispered in Nergui’s ear, “Since you’re a peri, I’ll tell you a secret. It’s right below the top-floor window that Oggy sometimes tinkles out of in the middle of the night when he thinks nobody sees.”

*That image is going to be stuck in my head for a while,* Nergui thought.

Ogedei turned to Sun Mergen. “And how is Baiju not going to slice up that personable young woman for the stew pot on sight, after the way he disposed of our other messengers?”

Sun, who was gazing after the retreating women and wishing he’d never learned to read lips, took a moment to answer. "She’s got a lot of woo-woo. Maybe she can melt the blade."

“I always thought you didn’t believe in woo-woo, Sun.”

“Oh, I believe in it. I’ve seen too much of it not to. Relying entirely on it is what I don’t like to do.”

“This may surprise you, but me neither. How can we load her up with more lucky anklebones?”

"I’m working on backup. I’m afraid if I put any companions directly in her party Baiju could get paranoid, so I’m looking at less-obtrusive accompaniment, I briefly considered using the excuse of visiting my mom to be in the area myself, but I don’t need a close call like last time. I was riding with some Kayis Alps and who crosses our path but Baiju, Tangut, and a couple of his other Dargas. I had to yell, ‘The Noyan is mine’ and shoot at him a couple of times so he could get away before anyone else could take a shot, coming close enough to hitting him that nobody got suspicious.

"As if my relatives pushing me to kill Mongols wasn’t enough, I had Sultan Aladdin trying to order me to kill my relatives. Then that centipede of a Grand Vizier, Sadettin Kobek --- that reminds me, I should have Nergui check on him. If his greasy fingerprints aren’t all over that elk-turd-pie out there I’ll be very surprised."

"The Sultan still think you’re his man spying on us?"

"Far as I know. Away from Kobek’s influence, Aladdin’s a decent ruler, but I’m pretty sure the ‘whole new world’ he wants to show Anatolia doesn’t have us in it.”

"Pity. I know Baiju’s attached to the place."

"Yeah, and it’ll be with iron spikes at a crossroads if he doesn’t careful up. Nergui’s wrangler suggested sending a bunch of gifts along to make him less angry about the interruption. I think thundermix and firemix should top the list because it’s so hard, if not impossible, to get in-country. It’ll impress Baiju and nudge him back toward the kind of war he’s supposed to be fighting. Same with some of our new armor-piercing arrowheads and other new advances. Medical supplies. New banners. Several kinds of local airag and vodka to remind them what they’re fighting for. Any comfort food that’ll keep.”

"Whatever it takes to get Baiju and his forces back inside pissing out instead of outside pissing in, consider it authorized."

The gulp of airag Sun Mergen had just taken “went down the wrong pipe.” “Of course, Khagan,” he managed to rasp out.

Chapter End Notes
References

"Big Sister's Clothes" song by Elvis Costello
"Moose Turd Pie" story by Utah Phillips
Lyndon Johnson talking about J. Edgar Hoover in the 10/31/1971 New York Times
Nergui awoke with the sensation of a heat-thirsty weight on her chest and a delicate forked tongue tickling her nose. By the time she opened and focused her eyes, though, nothing was there. Everything felt a little askew, like the time she’d awoken from a trip to the Well of Songs after netting the Best! Battle! Song! Ever!!! ...but somehow the only lyrics she’d retained were something like *kilda wab-it, kilda wab-it*…

*Shiver back to Here-Now, No Name Girl. You’ve got a date with an ass-kicking.*

One bucket of cold water, one set of baggy woolies, and a secure up-do later, Nergui pocketed four pieces of saddle-softened dried mutton and hurried out of the Temuj Inn. Just as she reached a crossroads and lifted the first piece of jerky halfway to her lips, a soft woof stole her attention. There, again, was the full-maned four-eyed Bankhar who was becoming a very familiar sight. Its eyes, big and doggy, locked onto hers, shifted focus down to the jerky, and then back to her eyes, accompanied by a barely audible whine. All of this very clearly was meant to inform Nergui that this half-dog, half-lion, who almost certainly outweighed her, hadn’t been offered a morsel of food in days --- no, months --- no, all of its life, and what was more, its mother before it hadn’t ever eaten either.

Nergui stared back. She put her hands on her hips. She tilted her head to one side, then to the other. Oh, whom was she kidding? *Ah! Hellhound, ah! I suppose I do owe you this much.* She threw that first piece of jerky to the dog and stuffed the second one into her mouth while the dog was distracted.

The dog led her south to the Red Turtle Gate, where they left the city proper. Once outside the walls of KK, the vista opened up to the horizon. Little independent breezes ruffled the grass of the steppes this way here and that way there, while puddles of stillness basked in the interstices. The road became a tentative-looking concentration of tracks, one good rain away from obliteration. Scattered groups of people rode horses or drove carts both on and off the road in every direction. Sheltering it all, like a baby’s blanket that kept monsters confined well underneath the crib, floated Munkh Gok Tengri, the Eternal Blue Sky.


The Armory Complex was the only large structure anywhere nearby. It was visible for miles. The dog accompanied Nergui most of the way to the gate, then trotted purposefully away as if it had another appointment.

Nergui walked down a wide hallway of entrances to various training rooms. The variety of styles being practiced gave a new meaning to “pick a fight.” In one room, so many fighters were throwing each other to the ground that the cloud of dust beaten out of the reed mats made her sneeze. She’d
arrived early, but Sun Mergen had been earlier. He stood at the end of the hallway with a waxed plank and stylus, looking at some earlier notes.

"Morning, Agent. Ready?"

"As I’m ever gonna be.”

"I know you’ll be mostly relying on your shamanic skills to keep you safe, and I’ve seen them really work when they work, but today I want to see what you’ve got to fall back on if that goes sideways. It’ll help us figure out what kind of discreet field support you might need.”

Sun Mergen leaned into the doorway next to him, where four teams of six people each were leaping about, rebounding off each other like a bag of ballistic grasshoppers, and gave a structured-sounding whistle. A young man about Nergui’s age with tamarind-brown skin, strong facial bone structure, and thick, straight copper-streaked black hair deftly evaded all the flying bodies and loped over. Sun waved to the teacher in the front of the room, who waved back and nodded in assent.

"Agent Nergui, this is Dholi, one of our junior instructors,” Sun introduced them and led them to a small mat-floored room. “Dholi, Nergui is new to the Agency and she’s going to Anatolia, which is a rough place. She’s not a formally trained fighter and she won’t be in battle, but she may have to be battle-adjacent at times and she may be on her own for part of the trip out there. I’d like you to take her through some hand-to-hand combat drills, starting with absolute beginner stuff and getting progressively more challenging until I say stop. I’ll be evaluating her and I want to hear what you think too.” Dholi listened attentively, with periodic little confirming nods, then extended a forearm to Nergui, who gripped it in a comradely manner.

They proceeded to the center of the mat, where they nodded to each other and took a loose stance. Then "Marmot Raids the Gerbil’s Nest!” Dholi announced, leapt forward, and grasped both of Nergui’s shoulders, Nergui broke the hold, twisted, and delivered an elbow to Dholi’s stomach, stopping at the surface of his tunic.

"You can go full-contact, Nergui. He won’t break,” Sun called out. “Right, Dholi? You keep pulling your attacks, though.”

This time, Nergui lined up her trailing foot, hips, and spine behind the elbow. Dholi’s breath escaped with an audible whoof. He was panting a little, but grinned gamely as he went back to his starting position and she to hers. Then “Earthworm Evades Sparrow!”

Nergui grabbed Dholi’s shoulder and elbow as he tried to duck past and bore him to the ground, cranking the shoulder with a controlled pressure until he tapped out. On Turtles Meet in a Narrow Crevice, though, Nergui’s feet weren’t planted quite right and she went flipping over Dholi’s back.

“Again,” Dholi said when she got up. She shook her head briefly as if to reset some internal mechanism and steadied her posture. Then “Ferret’s Fury, Ribcage Xylophone, Spleen on a Stick, Farewell to Underarms, Tickling the Axolotl, and Saint Sebastian’s Pincushion.” Sometimes Nergui responded effectively, sometimes not so much, and sometimes she made intimate acquaintance with a wall. It didn’t matter. Striking or parrying or slinging or being slung, she was enjoying this. An exhilaration grew with every landing, as if all the worries and weirdness and first impressions and second thoughts of the past several days were being pounded into dust like clods of dried mud and the dust was eddying away in her wake. She visualized Baiju Noyan’s scowl in her mind’s eye and smiled back in defiance. Somewhere around the third announced variation of Repulsive Monkey, she was as startled as anyone else to hear her full khoomei voice burst out, “Oh for Erlik’s SAKE! SURPRISE ME!”
When everyone had finished laughing, Dholi bowed sardonically, took his stance, wiggled his curious gingery eyebrows, and did the palm-upwards four-finger beckon that was universal for “Let’s see what you’ve got, hot-shot.”

At first, though without the spoken commentary Nergui found distracting, it was still this move, then that countermove, and so on. Eventually, though, it merged into a continuous flow. They were no longer attacker and defender. They were no longer even This Fighter and That Fighter. They were a binary system, orbiting each other.

The outside observer, though, could see Nergui begin to tire. After her third barely-controlled fall, Sun Mergen called time and they all went to the tea station and out to a veranda overlooking a parade ground. Nergui was surprised at the position of the sun; she felt as if she had been fighting much longer.

"Well, Agent, you’re not as good as I could hope for, but you’re better than I expected,” Sun said. Nergui, who had just taken a sip of tea, snorted involuntarily and wiped her face with her sleeve. “Dholi, want to tell us what it was like close up?” Sun continued.

"Well, for someone who isn’t mainly about fighting, you’ve got agility and accuracy on your side. With more training you could hit a lot harder and faster, but because your aim is so good you can put a pretty good hurt on a person anyway."

"I’ve spent a lot of time learning anatomy, on account of the doctoring."

"Also, when you fight you don’t mess around. You don’t pose, or show off, or hesitate, or see whether half-measures might work. You don’t restrict yourself to a certain style or rule-set. You seem to just continually decide what will work and then act. There’s nothing you have to unlearn."

Nergui shrugged, though the movement was somewhat attenuated by fatigue. "I grew up with aspiring wrestlers for brothers. Mom let them pick on me and told me to learn to fight them off." (Nergui’s mother seldom explained her ad-hoc edicts, but about this one she’d said: “A Mongolian woman should always be able to keep her husband a little bit afraid of her.” When Nergui, wide-eyed with incredulity, had privately asked her war-hero father “Are you afraid of Mom?” he’d answered with a grave nod, “Absolutely terrified, frog-spawn. Wouldn’t have it any other way.”)

"And that smile you get no matter who is winning! Heavens to Lakshmi, a lot of opponents would start to feel like pissing their pants just wondering what that’s about.” Dholi ran a fingernail under the wide leather band around his neck, which had something like a miniature paiza riveted to it. Nergui was curious about it, but all she had found out was that it wasn’t loose enough to grab for leverage during a fight.

"Knowing Baiju as long as I have, though,” Sun put in, “he’ll probably just think it’s adorable. But that could be an advantage too.

"Good summary, Dholi; you’re doing really well. Nergui, I’ve got a little bit to add. What needs the most work is your stamina. You probably hold your own long enough to get out the door in Mongolian or Siberian bar brawls, and bandit gangs of up to three would be sorry they met you, but a pitched battle goes on for a lot longer. I’ll give you some exercises to try to improve that while you’re on the road.

"On the other hand, what will serve you best is your sense of timing. One of my teachers told me that in every conflict, whether between two people or twenty thousand, there is at least one pivotal moment when the right move could change the outcome. In most instances, those moments are only identified after the fight is over and strategists try to figure out how to see them coming next time."
Today I just saw you nail one after another without stopping to think. Not always with the exact right move, or a well-executed version of it, but with the right kind of action at exactly the right time. That is the kind of thing that can help you beat better fighters.”

A pigeon landed on the veranda railing. Sun Mergen expertly gave it a little acupressure squeeze to expel any impending poop before picking it up and deftly removing the message from its leg. “Nergui, your wrangler just pidged,” he relayed, using all his spy skills to quash any outward hint of the thrill he felt at holding a message that Chagaanirvys had touched just moments ago. “Says we’ve got another day at least until the oracles have your mission reading ready. I’ll recommend an extra day of fight training here. Instead of going all the way back into KK tonight and all the way back here in the morning, would you like to stay in students’ quarters upstairs tonight? They’ve almost always got spare space.”

That sounds great, if you’re sure. I feel kind of bad about pulling you away from your office so much.”

“I usually spend two days a week here, either studying or teaching, anyway. It’s the only way I can cope with spending the rest of my time behind a desk. Nobody else in KK knows more than I do about Alp fighting, and that’s what we’ll deal with next.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Kick Out the Jams" song by MC5
"Ride of the Valkyries" song by Richard Wagner; "What’s Opera, Doc?" cartoon by Warner Bros.
with the lights out it’s less dangerous

Chapter Notes

Thanks, clever person who opened a "Mongolian Barbecue" restaurant in Ulanbataar. Per multiple references, the "choose raw meats and vegetables from a buffet to stir-fry on a huge round griddle" cooking style is neither Mongolian nor BBQ, but was invented in Taiwan in the 1950s and attributed to Mongolian warriors who (purportedly) sliced up the meat with their swords and cooked it on their shields. But now tourists can relax; "Mongolian BBQ" has finally reached Mongolia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“’Tis some fearful mortiferous shite ye’ll be carryin’,” said Agent Smithereen very seriously, then fell silent with her fists on her hips, fixing Nergui with a penetrating look.

“’Tis it?” was all a mildly baffled Nergui could think of to say. Like Kara Koram itself, the Armory Complex was startlingly cosmopolitan to someone who’d never been beyond the Home Steppes. Agent Smithereen, the Agency’s Director of Various Incendiaries, was easily the most exotic-looking personage Nergui had ever seen. Apparently, people from her country had bright orange, riotously curly hair and pinkish-white skin with tawny polka-dots. Nergui reminded herself to blink.

“Aye. I told Mister Sun Mergen I’d rather send ye off to Anatolia with an unraveled string-bag full of vipers in yer knickers than a chest of thundermix. Then I got a kindly note from High King Ogedei, y’see. So here we are.” Smithereen’s fingers were smudged with soot and the end of her tunic sleeve looked charred. “Be told, I feel better now that I see you’re someone wi’ the Sight, or similar.”

“The Sight?”

“Can see things ye’re not lookin’ at, like. Get warnings in yer dreams, or just in yer head, when things aren’t right. Look at people and get feelin’s about them.”

“Yeah, I do get that sometimes.”

“’Twas the Sight brought me here,” she offered. “Dreamed of the firemix and thundermix of far Cathay. Knew I had to be part of it. P’haps bring some home someday.”

“Where’s home?” Nergui asked.

“An island in the west. Very, very far west.”

“Way out near Anatolia?”

”Farther west. Much, much farther.”

"Egypt?" Greater Mongol’s farthest-flung outpost to the west, Fort Bhumfuq, was in Egypt. Those who had been there would gladly fling it even farther. It was a posting with which soldiers and civil servants could be threatened.

Smithereen laughed, relaxing. “To my people, Anatolia and Egypt were all of a piece with Cathay. Imagine our surprise discovering all these bits in between.”
Nergui smiled and let the laugh trail off to an amiable pause, then said seriously: “Bringing some thundermix and firemix to our Anatolian force may save my life.”

“You don’t say? That would be a first. Usually it takes ’em. Lots of ’em. Hard to believe the alchemists were looking for an immortality elixir when they came across this.” Smitherene’s features softened and she looked off into an unknown distance. Then, “Yes, it will help keep you among the living… though what it does may not seem like help at the time. So let me show you.”

Smitherene produced a twist of rice-paper and opened it on the table. In the middle was a black powder with a slightly gritty feel, like fine sand. Nergui rubbed some thoughtfully between the tips of her thumb and forefinger. To her extra senses, the stuff was as packed with portent as a she-smelt was packed with roe, but to her normal senses it didn’t seem like much. Except --- “That’s some smell,” Nergui commented.

“Be careful, keep it on the paper,” Smitherene instructed. “What makes it useful… and dangerous… is how easily it catches fire and how quickly it burns. Firemix burns quickly, but thundermix burns in no time at all and makes a loud bang. It breaks things apart and throws bits everywhere. Sometimes the bits are on fire, so everywhere they land they set other things on fire. A whole field full of dried stalks could be instantly ablaze.

“The tricky part is to not get flames and booms before you’re ready. Dry mix is more eager to go off than a herd stallion in spring. Any kind of fire on the same side of a wall will do it. While you’re carrying it, never light an open flame inside the cart. Want a late-night read? Go sit outside. Lose something in there? Wait for daylight. Coming up to a checkpoint? Cross in the daylight so the guards don’t lean in with torches.

“Also, don’t get it wet. If it gets wet it won’t ignite until it dries. Drying out a powder like this without it blowing away or getting whatever dust mixed in can be trouble. I have noticed that people who live in dry places aren’t in the habit of making an effort to keep things dry. Comes some rain, they gape about like mooncalves for the first several minutes and everything gets soaked, so mind how you go.

“Recent editions of The Esoteric Protocols of al-Hazmat describe the mixes as ‘indifferent to earth, uncertain about air, discouraged by water, and overexcited by fire.’ I don’t know how you’re fixed for alchemy references. Do you want a fair copy of mine to take along?”

“I’d appreciate that very, very much.”

“Good. Now let’s withdraw to the parade ground and I’ll show you how to light it without losing eyebrows and fingers.”

“Oh, definitely, let’s,” Nergui nodded vigorously.

“If you like the way it smells now, it’s nothing compared to when it burns,” Smitherene promised. “This shite here will change the world, and more than once. Only, I hope there’ll be enough nappies to go round.”

Chapter End Notes

References
"Smells Like Teen Spirit" song by Nirvana
you're up, get down, i'll come work you out

Chapter Notes

Thanks, supermarket, for carrying frozen eclairs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui felt like she was hitting the wall in slow motion. She flattened her body to spread the impact over more surfaces, rebounded weakly, and didn’t quite stick the landing. She regained her feet, grinning like an outhouse rat.

“Take a short breather, get some water,” Sun Mergen said.

"I’m fine! Let’s keep going."

"You’re tranced. You’re starting to flag but you can’t feel it from inside. It’s that stamina we talked about. If you keep going now you might get injured right before your caravan out. Trust me, I’ve done the Silk Road with cracked ribs. Keep it off your bucket list."

"Mergen knows best.” She hit the hollow of her shoulder with the opposing fist in a salute and grabbed a wool flannel to her forehead. “You want anything?"

"Thank you, Agent. I'll take a water too, please."

Nergui had to agree she was tranced. She’d spread her consciousness over the surface of her skin like a thin, clingy mist so every part of her body could think for itself instead of waiting for instructions from head, heart, or gut. Every joint was like a thin glowing wheel rotating freely in all directions inside another thin glowing wheel. Once set up, the overlaid ectostructures managed themselves while she concentrated on reading her sparring partner’s pivot points and trajectories. Things felt klutzy until she hit her stride, Then it became hella fun and the challenge was not to get overexcited and fling good judgment to the winds.

She filled two sturdy onyx cups from the golden-brown ewer. A drink from it when she’d first come in in the morning had tasted awful; “brackish swamp-water with an infusion of unwashed socks” was the closest she could come to a description. Sun Mergen had told her that it was water from a desert spring that contained dissolved minerals. The minerals worked to restore one’s composition after exertion, at which point the body’s need for them would make them taste better. That was his story, anyway. Let’s see if he sticks to it now.

She hummed softly on her way back to the training room. She’d stayed in the Armory’s attic dormitories the night before and found it agreeable. There had been a group of people who gathered after dinner around an enormous oak table to improvise music. The chance availability of one or more strong khoomei voices (like hers) was an excuse to perform some old Mongolian standards that didn’t quite sound right without it. They’d sung “The Dark Horse,” “The Horse of A Different Color,” “The Tall Blond Horse with One Black Shoe,” and “I’ve Been Through the Desert on a Horse With No Description.” Horse songs were popular at Khoomei-Oaky gatherings because they almost never sparked controversy. By contrast, another prolific song topic, “Those Assholes We Had a War With Three Hundred Years Ago,” was tacitly avoided. Greater Mongol being what it had become, at least one of “Those Assholes” was bound to be in the room.
She passed a cup of swamp-sock water to her towering Turkmen tutor, who had apparently used the time to fetch in a pile of smallish armor components. She bent to examine them while keeping Sun Mergen in her peripheral vision. He sipped and swallowed his swamp-sock water with every appearance of relish, so she tried hers. Weird, very weird, but not nearly as icky anymore. Interesting effect of physical condition on flavor perception; there was one more thing to look into someday when she had time.

"So, here," Sun Mergen said after setting down his cup. "This is Alp armor. It’s my brother-in-law Yigit’s first set that he wore to Alp Camp. He was Seljuk, and fourteen years old, so it might fit you."

"’Was’?" Nergui echoed, holding up the cuirass to the light coming through the window and illuminating a five-inch slash in the upper abdomen area.

Sun Mergen looked away and gave his head a shake; its motion echoed away like a door-slam down a hallway. This, Nergui was learning, was what he did when he didn’t really want to talk about something. "Royal blood from a non-reigning family branch, poor kid. What a lifelong staggering ass-pain. Half the people he met wanted to use him to replace the Sultan. The other half wanted to kill him to thwart the first half. He had to be lucky every time, and the assassins only had to be lucky once. A month or two ago at his Alp Camp, they finally were.

"So," Sun segued without allowing room for more questions, "do you remember my first piece of advice about fighting Turkmen Alp warriors?"

"Don’t, if I can help it," Nergui recited back obediently.

"That’s right. They’re highly-trained, well-equipped, professional warriors that should be left to others of the same kind. I’ve seen Baiju Noyan and his better troops cut a pretty good swath. He likes to be right on the front lines where the action is, but don’t let him drag you along. Find an overhanging cliff or something and cast your woo-woo spells from there. Keep both hands on the ends of your wrists in case people need stitching up afterwards. And what did I say to do if you can’t avoid fighting an Alp?"

"Duck if I can, parry if I can’t duck, but don’t even try to block a strike."

"That’s right. That’s what we practiced all morning and you did fairly well. I was using less than a quarter-strength because there’s no value added by injuring you at this point. Nevertheless, I bounced you off the wall more than once, especially once you started to wear out.

"Alps can and do strike with anything --- their fists, feet, shield-edges, and heads as well as their hand-held weapons --- and the force is like a kick from an enraged horse. Now, you told me that Ai-Fan gave you some Iron Shirt exercises to practice and I think that’s great, but you won’t have time to get good enough to block an Alp’s strike. Physical armor like this would be better insurance. Let’s get you into it and maybe increase the impact a little bit."

"Alps learn to armor up in four minutes, just as a random fact," Sun sighed fifteen minutes later.

Nergui sneezed at the cloud of stirred-up dust that still hung in the air. “Sorry. I’ve only helped other people with their armor before, and only Mongolian armor.”

"Notice where it covers and where it doesn’t cover. Those gaps are where you’ll counterattack if you get cornered. The head, face, and neck are often vulnerable; I swear a lot of these guys skip the helmets just because it messes up their hair. Lay open the skin over the brow-ridge and the blood will flood their eyes. Break the nose and their breathing will become a problem. Either or both
distractions can be enough to give you an opening. Now try the drill we did.”

Nergui took a step and was appalled at how weak and clumsy she felt with all this heavy stuff attached. It felt like paving-stones tied to every limb. The shield wasn’t that big and it seemed to weigh a ton. The sword felt almost as tall as she was and severely tip-heavy. As she moved, she tried to use more chi to make up for the deficiency of muscle. She was just starting to make headway when Sun planted his foot on her hip and pushed, not very hard. She tilted, then collapsed in a flapping, thudding heap.

"Hey, this isn’t so bad to lie down in," she joked. “I guess I could wear it to bed… Sorry,” she apologized, taking Sun’s silence as disapproval and getting gamely, if not gracefully, to her feet. “What next?”

“Every day while you’re on the road, I want you to put this on for a while,” Sun said soberly. Her mentioning bed had reminded him to worry. Baiju’s hadn’t been a bed that everyone got out of in good condition. “Drill in it. Run in it. If there are trees or rocks handy, climb them in it. If you can’t do any of those, just do fifty jump-squats in place. And practice getting in and out of it quickly.”

"Mergen," said a young man from the doorway, waving a live pigeon by its feet. “Got a pidge.”

The tiny scroll tied to the bird’s foot had a row of blue eyes along one border. “Well, this is fancy,” Sun remarked. “I wonder if… yes, this is your mission reading from the Seers.” He handed it to her.

"Propitiate local spirits every day’,” she read, “That’s standard. ‘Sacrifice and cook a lamb for your hosts’; the Army guys, I guess. ‘Help all those in need’; convenient, means I don’t have to be paranoid. ‘Don’t worry about the dog’; what dog? Guess I’ll find out. ‘And above all, avoid the four sons of Suleyman Shah.’”

Sun barked out a laugh.

"What?” Nergui asked.

"Just when you’ve got me leaning toward believing in woo-woo, the seers come up with something like this. It’s already too late for you to avoid all four sons of Suleyman Shah. My full name is Sungurtekin. I’m Suleyman’s second son.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Destroyer” song by The Kinks
"Horse With No Name" song by America
seven stars that shine after three-thirty in the morning

Chapter Notes

Thanks, 2017, for bowing out gracefully.

Wafts of moisture sailed through the air above the trees, not ready yet to condense into dew. Through them the Anatolian stars winked and flickered indecisively, as if they too wondered what they were. The jumpy Dargas around the remains of the dinner fire felt, more than heard, the quietest of approaching footsteps. They recognized Tangut’s walk and relaxed.

Tangut could walk more quietly in the woods than an ant could fart at the bottom of a well. The only one stealthier was their commander, Baiju Noyan. From him, the first sound you heard was the blood splashing out of your throat.

Historically, only the enemy had needed to worry about that. Lately, such details as affiliation and combatant status seemed to have lost their former influence on the Noyan’s decisions. Thus, if Greater Mongol warriors at the Anatolian front heard approaching footsteps in the night, they fearlessly shrugged it off. But if they heard NOTHING...

“Graylight’s just coming on,” Tangut murmured softly. “Get your first guys back in place. Have them splash their faces with cold water or something so they don’t look like they’ve been asleep.”

"Hear that, Orang?” rasped “Sweet” Ali al-Akbar Darga. “Scurry ‘round and tell ‘em: Hands off bollocks, no more frolics.” He spat with deadly accuracy, knocking a hovering moth into the glowing coals where it sizzled. No one knew how Sweet Ali spat to shame a camel without ever uncovering the lower half of his face. Everyone hoped someone else would ask him.

"Rabbits have big feet / Yet in silence can they run / Orang, you should learn,” Ram Bu-Tan Darga admonished.

"Remember, if Noyan hears you, pretend you’re a lost goat,” put in Doldrum Darga. “Goats can be blamed for anything. Back at the monastery it always worked.”

Orang nodded and set off. A green recruit from nearby Persia chosen as errand-runner for the Dargas, he imagined he knew how goats felt.

"Do you think Noyan will stop the 24-hour shifts soon?” Doldrum turned a weary, but still unreasonably handsome, face toward Tangut.

“He does seem to be getting bored since he stopped finding anyone asleep to kill in the morning.”

”Don’t sleep, go bat-shit crazy,” Sweet Ali growled, blowing his nose with one finger and shooting down another moth. “He can’t sleep, nobody else can.”

”Could we find his mom? / If she sang a lullaby / We could all be saved,” Bu-Tan mused.

Around the fire they lit in a different random location every night, the Dargas sat silently with their own thoughts, each reassuring himself that when his secret plan came to fruition it would fix
everything.

Eventually in the distance there was a confused crashing, followed by a call of “It’s okay! I’m just a lost goat out here!”

The Dargas exchanged sighs, exhausted looks, and head-shakes, then got up and were soon lost to the light.

Chapter End Notes

References

"Planet Claire" song by B-52s
"Mosquitoes" joke by David Brenner (only females bite, but only males buzz; poss. 1974?)
The stars over Kara Koram blazed unflinchingly in a bone-dry sky. Viewed from the high places, the city and the countryside beyond were illuminated in preternatural contrast, full of sword-sharp edges. A biting breeze found its way through an open window of the Khagan’s private bedroom as liquid splashed placidly down on the rock garden beneath.

A projected thought went out:

- Are you there, Dad? It’s me, Ogedei.

- (I’m here, son. It’s, er, always good to hear from you, but what moves you to talk to me while you’re… draining the Death Worm?)

- I don’t know. I guess that’s when I feel relaxed, connected to the Earth. And powerful, in control of where my consequences land. Confident enough to contact the worlds above and below.

- (And I always thought Tolui was the odd bird in the mews. But that’s all right, son, I’m glad of the conversation, however it happens. And it’s just as well that you weren’t truly touched by the spirits, like your friend Baiju. It would have made these talks easier but you never could have been Khagan. I suppose the spirits just... waved at you from some distance away.)

- Speaking of Baiju, I met the Sealed One the seers picked to send him. It seemed like a good plan but now it’s bothering me.

- (I can’t imagine you’re uneasy for his sake. Is it for hers? Or... yours?)

- Once I met her, it just felt like a waste. She has --

- (All the bravery that comes with inexperience. A sharp mind that cuts quickly and deeply. A collector’s obsession with knowledge. A presence that can comfort or intimidate. And an accidental attractiveness of which she’s completely unaware. Is that about right, son?)

- … That’s about right, Dad.

- (Those all sound like reasons she’s a good fit for this mission. You probably shouldn’t have met her in person, for the same reason the big-hearted shouldn’t name the animals they raise for meat. Can’t blame you for wanting a Sealed One; they replenish the vital energies wonderfully and they’re always full of surprises. Treat yourself to a different one. You need Baiju back.)

Ogedei had never been a sulker. He’d always felt that his brothers, each in their own way, more than fulfilled the family grumble quota. But now he frowned, remembering what now seemed a multitude of social caravan-wrecks he’d had to clean up after Baiju in the course of their shared youth.

- Remind me why, Dad?
- (Because we’re still at war, and war can tangle circumstances into knots that only the heartless can cut. If you have a Baiju, you needn’t become one. If you tried to become one, it would be the end of you, or Greater Mongol, or both.)

- That all makes sense… but I can’t shake a nagging feeling that we’ll need Nergui in the future.

- (Well, you should make sure she survives, then, shouldn’t you?)

Chapter End Notes

References

“Solsbury Hill” song by Peter Gabriel
"Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" book by Judy Blume
and this bird you cannot tame

Chapter Notes

Thank you, birds who live near me, for not being the kind that scream in the middle of the night.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Seven times the sun has set.
Are we not out of Khitai yet?

Nergui tied off the knot in the silk thread and wiggled the little black leg to make sure the circulation wasn’t cut off. Not that she was expecting any thanks, now or later.

“OK, Gemtsen, let it go.”

The dog opened its mouth. The pigeon flew away. The message stayed on the pigeon’s leg. Nergui dropped a fragment of jerky onto the dog’s wet tongue. The dog closed its mouth.

“Thanks, boy.” Nergui found its ears in the shaggy mane and scratched behind them. “Now we’re cooking with dry wood.”

The big four-eyed Bankhar dog that had befriended her in KK was napping by the Red Turtle when her caravan came out of the gate. It sprang up, trotted over, and gave her an inquiring look. She stared back searchingly for a second or two, then patted the driver’s bench beside her. The dog jumped up to fill all available space and slimed her cheek with an affectionate lick.

She thought it might go home after a while, if it had a home to go to. It didn’t. It sat up front with her, snoozed on the tailgate of her cart, or ranged up and down the length of the caravan playing with children, teasing camels, dodging gobs of camel spit, and negotiating the hierarchy with other dogs. At the first caravanserai she brought it close to the fire while she burned a small talisman. It sneezed from the smoke, then cocked its head and grinned at her as if happiness only required a completely empty head. Any enchanted or other-world creature would have panicked and fled. In fact, fifty yards from the fire, a couple of local efreets lurking in the midden prudently made tracks. Therefore, no woo-woo (less than 20 hours in Sun Mergen’s company and that expression was permanently stuck in her head); just a natural, if slightly uncanny, canine.

When it emerged from under the cart the next morning to share her breakfast, she decided it was probably going to stick around long enough to need a name. She settled on Gemtsen (“Pervert”) after observing it seize every opportunity to push its nose against random men’s hindquarters. These were mostly the nicer-looking men. She’d given up apologizing for it after a couple of them replied that not only did they not mind, but she was welcome to do the same if she wanted to.

She couldn’t think of a snappy comeback. “Sorry, I’m on a mission from the Khagan to lose my virginity” could give them the wrong idea entirely. So she just told the dog to stop. It would obediently turn away and come to heel... for five to fifteen minutes, and as soon as it sensed her attention wandering it went right back at it. Then again, it seemed to sense when her last nerve was about to snap and take the opportunity to do something extremely helpful, like hold onto a pigeon.
The pigeons were an ass-ache unto themselves. Nergui had lived her entire life without sending a single bird-borne message... and then she’d come to KK. In the city, everybody constantly pidged everybody else, even if they were close enough to yell to out an open window. There was even a hand-signal for it: when saying “Pidge me” would take too long, people hooked their thumbs together into a beak and flapped their hands like wings. Because her mission was under a dripping water-clock, she hadn’t had a chance to practice pidging; they’d just handed her a cage full of the noisy sky-rats and given her a foot-push out the turtle gate. Of course, they couldn’t have known that they’d be forcing Nergui to confront a pantload of personal history.

Nergui wasn’t afraid of birds. Not really. Not exactly. She didn’t mind them perching nearby, hopping around the flagstones looking for crumbs, or flying around minding their own business (unless they guanoed her, but nobody likes that). She was just very uncomfortable handling them or trying to make them do something she wanted.

Thus, Nergui’s first-day pigeon viciously punctured the back of her hand, startling her into letting it go, before she even got hold of the message canister. She managed to grab the second-day pigeon solidly just below the crests of the wings and hold it upside down, but she couldn’t get the message attached using only the other hand, especially the way it was kicking and scratching and carrying on. Just after she gave up and stuffed it back into the cage, a kestrel landed on the roof of her wagon. Falcons couldn’t home the way pigeons did, but they could recognize people and pictures from a distance so they were better for nearby moving targets. Nergui gingerly set a small piece of jerky in front of it, snatched her hand away quickly to make it clearly not part of the treat, then apologized abjectly to the bewildered little raptor as she threw a woolen a pillowcase over it before grasping its legs to detach the scroll.

“Last message blank. Please resend.” Oh, for the love of Tengri. Luckily, the previous message canister was still in the pocket of her sleeve. She sat down, pinned the bagged kestrel upside-down between her knees, sang to it soothingly while she managed to attach the canister to its leg, and sent it off with another treat and a promise to be better at it next time.

The kestrel had been a good sport, all things considered. Maybe it was time to try making friends with birds the way she could with so many other animals. She stood up and went back to the pigeon cage and regarded the occupants thoughtfully.

Not gonna happen, at least not today, she concluded with a sigh. I was able to ease the kestrel’s mind a little because it had a mind I could detect. With these pigeon pains-in-the-ass, alas, there’s no “there” there.

A historical lack of exposure to birds wasn’t Nergui’s problem. In fact, her mother Udeskhlegmaa was a famous Birdspeaker, one of the best in Mongolia and maybe even all of Greater Mongol. Whole flocks of the largest, worst-tempered birds in the hemisphere came home to roost at Nergui’s childhood ger camp. Udeskhlegmaa had had a natural rapport with birds since birth, and expected the same of anyone born of her womb (or, wags sometimes suggested, “hatched from her eggs”). When her mother wasn’t shouting that her small daughter was doing, always had done, and always would do everything wrong, she was shouting at her to relax and show some confidence for once. When a bird pecked or taloned Nergui, it was because “she hadn’t shown it the proper respect.” When birds unraveled her hats or even pulled out her hair during nesting season, “she was supposed to feel honored that they found a use for her.” When every shiny or colorful ornament Nergui owned eventually disappeared, it was because “she was the type of person who can’t have nice things.”

This last was why the parting package from the Palace frankly freaked her out.

She’d been in her Wrangler’s office getting a last briefing when a crow (KK’s local-area message
birds) flapped noisily into the office and perched on the back of a chair. A small parchment scroll was attached to an equally small purple silk pouch on its leg. Chagaanirvys detached and unrolled the scroll with effortless grace, gave it a puzzled look, then said "Oh, Nergui, this is for you, not for me. Sorry."

"All's well," Nergui said absently, masking her considerable surprise. Who, other than those already in the room, even knew she was here? "'To Agent Khenbish's Nerguitani,'" the parchment read, "'Best of luck with B.N. Please accept and wear this protective talisman. Stay safe. and come back. Tori.'

"Oh my Kayra," a nonplussed Nergui murmured behind her fingertips. She carefully opened and tilted the pouch. A jeweled pendant slid into her palm with a discreet clink of nearly-invisible silver chain. A thumbnail-sized disk of colorless rock crystal was inlaid with a pea-sized circle of tiny, tightly-packed silver spheres surrounding a clear red stone the size of a millet seed. Small as the stone was, it kindled a brilliant interior flame from any available light.

"Oh, wow, this -- this is way too much," Nergui breathed. This small, simple artwork was exquisite. Equally exquisite would be her emotional suffering if, as she half-expected, she lost or broke it before the day was out. "I don’t know how I’ll keep it safe."

"Interesting. See the seal on the message?" Sun Mergen pointed out, looking over Nergui’s shoulder. "It's not Toregene's personal seal, it's the Khagan's official seal. That gives all those friendly requests the force of orders. "Seeing the last of the color drain from Nergui's terrified face, Sun decided not to elaborate on where he'd seen that pendant before.

"Well," Nergui speculated, "maybe a smith could make me a little steel cage for the pendant, attached to a matching torc by links as thick as soup noodles..."

"Nonsense," Chagaanirvys scoffed. "The weight would give you a blinding headache. Just be careful of sword and knife blades near your throat; that's always a good idea regardless. Turn around and hold up your hair. I'll put it on for you."

Nergui resolutely focused on memories of her brothers eventually finding her best bracelet and a couple of her hair-clips, splashed with guano, in trees and on rock ledges months after she'd "carelessly lost" them. "At other gers, you can sit around your outside fire like a person,” she once overheard a neighbor say. “Not at Udelegmaa's. Birds."

One of the thoughts to which Nergui’s mind kept circling back was: If she wanted any friends on this mission, feathered or otherwise, she would have to make her own. Traveling the Silk Road as an unaccompanied (except maybe by Gemtsen) young woman could turn out to be the safest part. The hazards of volatile weather, rough terrain, wild animals, and predatory people lay in wait for whoever happened to be there at the wrong time, not for her in particular. The Pax Mongolica and the Yam stations had reportedly helped a lot, and Nergui was employed by the government that created them.

Once she reached Baiju Noyan’s war theater, his troops might or might not welcome her housecleaning mission. If he’d whipped them into a high enough state of paranoia, they might assume she would throw them out with the bathwater. In that case, they’d probably stick with the devil they knew. She and the Agency had provided several reasons for the Noyan himself to be glad to see her, at least in the beginning. However that would only work if he hadn’t yet banished the Reason Clan from camp altogether.

So even those wearing the same (or at least a coordinating) uniform weren’t necessarily on her side. The enemy certainly wouldn’t be. Between the Seljuks’ military discipline and the Turkmen Alps’
sheer ferocity, they were trouble as big as any the followers of Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky, had faced. But the Agency’s seers hadn’t found any of the aforementioned dangers worth mentioning. They’d apparently seen Sungurtekin’s three brothers (and maybe him, too) as a bigger threat.

“I prefer not to think that meeting me before the seers delivered this reading has not, in fact, kebabbed your whole mission just because I’m a son of Suleyman Shah,” the Mergen had said. “I’m the black sheep, after all --- the one who left to swim in a bigger pond.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen a sheep swim,” Nergui had replied doubtfully.

”And --- and --- you’re very lucky I’m here because no one else in KK knows more about my brothers. So, in order of increasing potential threat: There’s Dundar, the youngest son. He’s still a teenager. Basically a good-hearted kid, always suspected he was Mom’s favorite. He’s always tagged around after Ertugrul, no doubt hoping some of the hero halo would rub off.

"If Dundar still adopts every thought of Ertugrul’s without question, as he did when I last saw him, that could make him dangerous to you. One of those thoughts is ‘one living Mongol anywhere is one too many.’ Another is ‘everyone but Islamic Oghuz Turkmen should stay the hell out of Anatolia,’ and you just don’t have time to learn to pass as one of them. A couple of years ago Dundar spent a few months in a coma after a Crusader almost gutted him, but he woke up and went to Alp camp and now I imagine he’s a fighter to take seriously. He’s probably become a ringleader in his age group as well, so chances are he won’t be found alone.

“Then there’s the oldest, Gundogdu. He’s a warrior, but he’s also a worrier. All his life our dad groomed him to take over as Bey of Kayis, which meant sitting in headquarters meetings and learning the complete set of administrative skills while the rest of us rode around shooting arrows and showing off for the girls. Speaking of girls, Gun got married early too --- to one of Dad’s wards, Selchan.

"Unlike some other Islamic cultures, we Turkmen don’t force our women into a graveyard-silent, out-of-sight, out-of-mind existence --- as if we could anyway! --- but growing up with Selchan helped show me where those other cultures might be coming from.

"Selchan’s on the opposite edge of the emotional rainbow from Baiju. Before the recent rampages he seemed to have almost no feelings. She’s got way too many feelings and they’re stronger than the rest of her. She’d be going along mixing dye or something, then suddenly a feeling would come out of nowhere, pick her up like a leaf in a strong wind, and dump her screeching like a kingfisher in the nearest focus of others’ attention. Everybody indulged her when she was little because our dad adopted her after executing her dad for treason; that could make any kid high-strung for a while. But she never grew out of it. She could give a rock an anxiety attack. She stirs up poor hyper-responsible Gundogdu without breaking a sweat.

"Gundogdu also hates Mongols, but he’s a very busy man. If he’s got other kettles of fish to fry, he won’t bother much about you. Unless you pose an active threat to him, his family, or Kayis. Or unless he thinks he could hurt Baiju through you --- but he’s already seen that Baiju doesn't care about other people, so that’s unlikely. Or unless Selchan decides she hates you and she goads Gundogdu to go after you; that sort of thing has happened. And once he picks up a sword, he picks it up to fight for all his people, and you won’t want to be on the wrong end of it.

"And so we come to Ertugrul. Ertugrul is a born hero. He fell out of the hero tree and hit every heroic branch on the way down. He is a charismatic leader and a champion fighter; he beat me last time we met. Everything he does, he does in the name of Allah. Never a doubt. Never a second thought.
"The saving grace is that Ertugrul is unlikely to take you by surprise. Everywhere he goes, he pulls attention the way a lodestone pulls iron filings. To avoid him, you only need to avoid the huge clouds of dust he raises until he loses interest and moves on.

"Ertugrul would kill you just for being a Mongol. He would cross the street, three mountain ravines, and fifty miles of desert to kill just any Mongol. To kill Baiju, he’d find a way to fly to the moon if he thought it would help. There’s some deeply personal shit going on there.

"At first Baiju tried to befriend and recruit him, but for some reason he thought the best approach was to ambush him, abduct him, and drive a nail through his sword hand, meanwhile sending a detachment to kill off half our tribe.” Sungurtekin fell silent, shaking his head a few times in bewilderment, then barked out a short bitter laugh. “Baiju also ‘outed’ me as a defector, which took quite a bit of explaining when I went home... Ertugrul vowed that all he’d ever be to Baiju was the angel of death.”

Nergui shuddered. “I’ve met a few angels. They were dicks.”

It was spring, and the road constantly reminded Nergui of what awaited her in Anatolia. Along one stretch, hundreds of frenzied rabbits tore across the road without warning, convinced that the most desirable mates were on the other side. No one hesitated to skin and roast the ones who hadn’t been careful enough of the wheels and hooves. Along another stretch, toads in amplexus ignored everything around them, but people saw that no other carnivores were taking advantage and ignored the probably toxic toads in return.

At one relief stop, Nergui found a pair of snails mating. Both were reared back to make full belly-to-belly contact (assuming the slick bottom surfaces even were their bellies). Their fleshy edges rippled and ruffled against each other with undulating grace, changing colors as they went. Nergui had seen plenty of other species copulating, including her own; from the outside, those processes had looked awkward and embarrassing. The snails were beautiful. Nergui carefully scooped them up, put them next to her on the driver’s bench, and watched them the rest of the afternoon.

It wasn’t her cart-horses’ first caravan. They quickly settled into following the rest of the line and required very little in the way of driving. This gave Nergui plenty of freedom to make notes and sketches, meditate, sing, and sew, all while keeping an ear open for sounds of Gemtsen misbehaving. Although she’d never been on this part of the Silk Road before, it wasn’t Nergui’s first caravan either. As usual, almost every day something needed quick mending: saddles, blankets, clothes, and in one case several small children in harm’s way when a pottery wagon tipped over. Nergui sang to them while she cleaned, splinted, cauterized, wrapped, and stitched. As a bonus, she rapidly embroidered small pictures on the bandages. As usual, flowers, ponies, wagons, and dragons were the most popular. As usual, she insisted she didn’t need paying, but was persuaded to accept meals with the kids’ families.

She was sharpening some experimental tools she’d had made in KK when Berkant Alp, one of the retired immigrant Alps among the caravan guards, rode back to meet her cart. “Just telling everybody, we’re crossing into the border zone of the Anatolian frontier pretty soon so more people will want to stay awake on the road. That gulch up there is a famous natural ambush spot.”


"Chagatai Khan sends some bullyboys to clear it out every so often, but as soon as they’re gone somebody else gets in. Maybe Alps or Seljuks if they took the region back, but more likely bandits or other scumbags. Careful up; we might be looking at an attack.”

Nergui blew the metal dust off the object she’d been sharpening, tested it lightly on a fingertip, and
smiled a very different smile from the one she’d directed at the injured moppets.

“Oh, good,” she replied half-absently. “I hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Free Bird” song by Lynyrd Skynyrd
"One Clear Call" book by Upton Sinclair ("The sun has riz, the sun has set, ain't we out of Texas yet?")
"Four Saints in Three Acts" poem by Gertrude Stein
"The Producers" movie by Mel Brooks
"Supernatural" TV show s4e2 by Eric Kripke
"Microcosmos" movie by Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou
"Open Season: Scared Silly" movie by Carlos Kotkin
Flashback: Birth of the Yasa, part 2

Chapter Notes

Thanks, deviantART, for having Temujin Comics and scads of other great stuff.

Summer, 1204 C.E.

Meanwhile, back at the All Clans’ Kurultai gathering, gers were beginning to grind.

SCENE: The inside of a large, comfortably appointed ger later that same evening. The four teenage sons of Genghis Khan sit around a trunk with paper and ink, each absorbed in his own hallucinogenic trip.

CHAGATAI: I’ll say one thing for this toadstool-eating reindeer jerky, it’s good when you get stuck someplace. I keep thinking I really want to go out and see what stuff looks like, and then I see something in here that’s so entertaining I want to stay. Look, the dirt under my fingernails is dancing.

JOCHI: You’ve probably just got fleas living under there.

OGEDEI: I wonder if the reindeer get high when they eat the toadstools?

CHAGATAI: I wonder if they barf as much as Jochi did.

TOLUI: We’ve never heard anything about the whole north woods being knee-deep in reindeer barf so probably not.

JOCHI: Can we please talk about something else?

TOLUI: Oh, like when’s Dad coming in?

(Short silence as the boys contemplate the implications).

OGEDEI: Relax, guys. How many Kurultais have we been to? And out of all of them, how many nights has Dad slept in our tent?

(Another short silence as each of the others looks in a different direction and counts silently).

CHAGATAI: Um… zero?

OGEDEI: Exactly.

TOLUI: The way he’s going, he’ll probably have, like, 20 million descendants in another 800 years.

JOCHI: And each of their Khanates will be, what, 200 people? That’ll be FUBAR.

TOLUI: So I can see why Dad wants to come up with some laws now, while things are still kind of simple.

CHAGATAI: Yeah, but why ask us?
OGEDEI: He asked all the clan leaders. I think this might be his way of treating us like men.

TOLUI: Bet he’s not making any of them stay in the tent until they get it done.

JOCHI: What do you want to bet the Nestorians just crib from the New Testament anyway?

OGEDEI: Let’s just get something down on paper, all right? Just to show willing. Then we can go out before we sober up.

JOCHI: How about “If it thunders, everyone has to get out of the river?”

OGEDEI: Isn’t that just common sense?

JOCHI: You’d think, wouldn’t you? But I heard Subutai Noyan complain about all the desert-grown recruits he loses to flash floods and lightning. If it’s the law and not just a good idea, they might pay more attention.

CHAGATAI: Oh, oh! I’ve got one: Once a year everybody has to bring their daughters to the Khan’s residence so he can pick some as wives and cons for himself or his sons.

JOCHI: Now you’re talking, Tai! You are smart, no matter what everybody says.

CHAGATAI: Oh, oh, and! After a battle, the Khan and the senior officers, that’ll be us, get first pick of the captured chicks.

TOLUI: Jeez! Letch much?

CHAGATAI: We’re propagating the royal line. We shouldn’t have to resort to all the scams everybody else uses.

OGEDEI: Oh, like courtesy and consideration?

JOCHI: Oggy, we know you’re a poon magnet. Don’t rub it in. So that’s one, two, three --- OK, Rule 4: No poofers.

TOLUI: What?

OGEDEI: Why?

CHAGATAI: Good one! No, wait; is it?

JOCHI: We’re trying to grow the nation, and poofers don’t make any kids. They get to keep all their money. Their clothes and homes always look nice without any spit-up stains or sticky handprints. They’ve got time to think up clever insults all day. It isn’t fair.

TOLUI: Remind me, what did Kokemuur say to you yesterday? ‘If you stick your nose any higher in the air you’ll drown next time it rains’?

OGEDEI: Could we get where you want to go some other way? No public mocking except by official Sarcasts? Nobody allowed to dress or decorate better than the royal family? Everyone obliged to raise children, and if you can’t make them yourself, some will be provided for you?

JOCHI: No. Just ‘No poofers.’ It’s short and simple and easy to understand.

OGEDEI: I don’t know. My gut says this could not only come back and bite us in the ass, it could keep chewing on our descendants for the next thousand years.
JOCHI: Maybe your gut’s just finally getting around to barfing the toadstool reindeer meat, little brother.

OGEDEI: How many people do you think we’d lose?

JOCHI: I don’t know, we never bothered asking about that stuff before.

OGEDEI: Exactly. We’ve been the government that minds its own damn business wherever possible, and so far it works.

CHAGATAI: Whoa, whoa, whoa. Guys, you’re boring my buzz away. Dad’s got a whole committee to cherry-pick the proposals. Stuff they don’t like won’t make the cut. I thought we were just writing stuff down so we could go out.

(Brief silence as the brothers collect their thoughts).

OGEDEI: How about ‘Mongols never, never, never shall be slaves’?

JOCHI: All those ‘nevers’ mean we mean it. Maybe put some exclamation points too.

TOLUI: You mean nobody could have slaves?

OGEDEI: Nah. Nothing that drastic. Just, if people want slaves, they can’t take anybody who lives here. They have to bring them in from outside the borders.

JOCHI: I kinda like that. It sweetens the pot for whoever joins us voluntarily.

CHAGATAI: Anyway, people have found out the hard way that we're the worst slaves EVER.

TOLUI: Now remember, Dad says the laws have to be administrable---

JOCHI (exaggerating pronunciation): Ad-min-is-tra-ble. You’re high.

TOLUI: I should hope so.

OGEDEI: Yeah, he said the simpler the better.

CHAGATAI: Well, we could just have the same punishment for everything so the judges never have to look it up or sit around and dither.

TOLUI: How about… death? That’ll make sure they never do whatever-it-was again.

JOCHI: Yea-ah! Now we’re cooking with wood! Oggs, gimme the stylus. ‘Whoever… stuffs his face… so fast… he chokes on food… shall… be put… to death.’

CHAGATAI: Hey! That’s kinda harsh.

JOCHI holds up the stylus with a flourish and presents it to CHAGATAI, who accepts it.

CHAGATAI: ‘Whoever… washes clothes… that are not… completely worn out… shall… be put… to death.’

OGEDEI: Is this about those raggedy chaps of yours that completely dissolved when Grandma washed them?

CHAGATAI: They were fine! The dirt was holding them together! I’d still be wearing them now if
she’d just left them alone!

OGEDEI (after snatching stylus): ‘Whoever… pisses… in drinkable… water… shall… be put… to death.’

JOCHI: Oggy, honest to Tengri, that was *not me* that one time.

*OGEDEI hands stylus to TOLUI, who chews on it a little before leaning into the center of the circle and beginning to write:*

TOLUI: ‘Whoever… compromises… an army commander’s… spiritual protection… shall… be put… to death.’ You know, like stepping on his threshold and smudging the demon barrier.

JOCHI: Wouldn’t it be a chortle if somebody found this and thought these were laws that actually passed?

OGEDEI: I’m sure Dad and the committee will put all these rough proposals in the tinder pile as soon as they come up with a final. Won’t they?

TOLUI: Even if somebody did find them, they’d know we weren’t serious about the joke ones.

OGEDEI: People who knew us would know. But what if it gets delegated to strangers, like those brush-pushers from one of the new annexes where they actually enjoy organizing pieces of paper all day?

JOCHI: You’ve got a point. I’ve never seen any of those button-hats display a sense of humor.

OGEDEI: I think we should put ”NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION” on it. Just in case.

CHAGATAI *(sniffs)* : Hey, do I smell dry cheese?

JOCHI: I smell it too! Lui! Are you holding out on us?

TOLUI: I just found a couple of curds in my shirt pocket. I don’t even know when they were from. And they’re gone now.

JOCHI *(grabbing stylus)* : Okay, brat, you asked for it! “Whoever... eats... in the presence... of others... and *does not share their food* --- “

JOCHI, CHAGATAI, and OGEDEI: “SHALL... BE PUT... TO DEATH.”
“Imperial agent, slug-pox!” Nergui announced, flourishing her paiza. “Capturing, trafficking, or owning Mongolian slaves is a capital offense under the Greater Mongol Yasa Code adopted at the Kurultai of Khovsgol Nuur in…” She looked down at the slaver’s cooling body twitching and outgassing gently in its puddle of blood. “Oh, pizzle. I bet I was supposed to do that part first. Sorry, all! Rookie mistake.”

She aimed an iron shamanic mirror down at the body and inhaled to draw in any life-force that remained around it. She held a ring-shaped obsidian amulet to her heart, aimed the iron mirror through it, and exhaled to clean and absorb the gathered energy. Not much left. The first hit, when the body fell, had been a doozy. Maybe the slaver had absorbed other lives on his own, either consciously or not.

I thought this would feel like a bigger deal, emotionally. Maybe it’ll hit me later. Other than one or two of those isolated incidents many country doctors encounter but never discuss, where the sole alternative would have been a slower, nastier death, No Name Girl had never intentionally pushed anyone through the underworld gate before. It didn’t really feel that different from killing a goat. And now that I sucked up the energy, Mr. Scowly Baiju Noyan should sense that I have indeed killed a human being --- of a sort, anyway --- and maybe he’ll take me a little more seriously than a gnat that landed on his dinner plate. Could happen, I guess.

”Good one, doc,” Berkant Alp nodded. “We only had to put down two more. When the rest of his crew saw you do that to their leader, they took off.”

This was what the slaver’s crew had seen: Their leader found Nergui wandering down the road with uncertain steps and a dumbstruck expression, as if she couldn’t believe what was happening and didn’t have the sense to come in out of a sandstorm. He had grabbed her shoulders with grimy ham-fists and cackled something shopworn like “This little beauty will fetch a fine price!”

Seriously? Who actually SAYS that? Nergui stifled a gag reflex, abruptly spun to face him, and put her hands on either side of his neck as if to plant a kiss on him. Suddenly his body had jerked as if struck by lightning while blood fountained from the side of his neck. Nergui had turned him to avoid the scarlet spray, planted a foot on the side of his hip, shoved him to the ground, and stood on his throat. In her best eerie multi-voice she had howled “Next! Come on! Who wants some?”

She took a test deep breath, held it, and let it out. On her first few ritual livestock butcherings for sacred meals, she’d tried absorbing the energy directly from the carcass-in-progress. Maybe she’d taken it in too fast, or maybe it hadn’t been as clean as she thought, but it felt like a lungful of fumarole fumes. When she tried to exhale the spirits’ portion she’d coughed, choked, and lost her last three meals. A senior shaman had reassured her that the Yasa law against choking on food was based on a policy against gluttony and sloppy table manners, and therefore only applied to food on its way in. Then he’d shown her the mirror trick, and she’d added the part with the obsidian ring.

Her color vision was most of the way back to normal. That was a difference she’d noticed between
this kind of deadly-serious violence and sparring, ring fighting, or even spontaneous recreational brawls. In the latter, things seemed to turn yellowish-green and “points for style” were a plausibility. In the former, everything got reddish-brown and muddy, yet she could still see every chakra, aura, and meridian of the people around her as if they’d been painted on. *Speed was the only thing that mattered: put 'em down fast because there might be more. Ideally, they’d never know what hit them, and afterwards you wouldn’t be all that clear on it yourself.*

Now, in Nergui’s hands, her new tools were still bloodied. The finger-mounted awl had gone under the edge of the slaver’s skull next to his ear and up into his brain. The finger-mounted thread-cutter had torn into the flesh of his neck until it severed the carotid artery. The tools had been experiments; now they were keepers. She could keep them always at hand because although it seemed as if every palace chamberlain, headquarters sergeant-at-arms, and backwater Checkpoint Chormagan these days made visitors surrender their *weapons*, no one really bothered about *tools*.

About to clean, oil, and thank her sharp-edged new friends before washing her hands ten or twenty times, she heard Gemtsen start barking above her and to one side. Just then Berkant Alp said, “You might want to check if these jokers left any slaves behind that they already caught. They might need help.”

"Good thought. Let me just see if I can get this parchment-work out of the way."

"I’ve never seen that before. What is it?"

"One of the Mergens called it a "corpse card." It's another one of those things I think only Ogedei could come up with. He noticed that lot of people seem to think we Mongols just run around killing people for no reason. In a war zone, which was pretty much everywhere in Genghis’s time ---"

" --- may he ride forever in the sky ---"

" --- that kind of reputation keeps the enemy’s diapers full and encourages them to send their non-combatants away from the fighting. But now we have a big chunk of the continent annexed. Those ex-enemies are now compatriots. We want to help them rebuild and stabilize, but first they’ve got to quit running and hiding all the time. So when we civil servants... hasten someone’s reincarnation… we’re now supposed to leave a little note assuring the deceased and anyone who finds them that there really was a reason. The hope is that it will calm the populace down and inform them about what behaviors we’d… y’know... really rather not see."
Sample: Blank Corpse Card

MONGOLIAN DEATH FORM UXL/04
(Ad-hoc Field Dispatch by Civil Servant)

Dear Departed:

You were dispatched (killed) by the undersigned on behalf of Greater Mongol or one of its subdivisions, because (check ALL that apply):

1. The undersigned believed that you threatened the:
   - □ Security, prosperity, or peace of Greater Mongol or its subdivision(s)
   - □ Survival or health of themselves or of someone they were protecting
   - □ Corporeal honor of any citizen of Greater Mongol
   - □ Locational continuity of horses, other livestock, or portable property
   - □ Livability of the Earth in general

2. AND/OR the undersigned had run out of:
   - □ Water or food
   - □ Transportation
   - □ Space
   - □ Time
   - □ Money
   - □ Patience
   - □ Other ideas

3. AND/OR
   - □ The only other choice was to leave you to a much slower, more agonizing death.
   - □ You were likely to seek revenge from the undersigned for someone previously or concurrently dispatched.
   - □ An example needed to be made of someone, and there you were.

Any misunderstandings are sincerely regretted. If you feel you were killed in error, request an appointment at Greater Mongol’s nearest Reparations Office during your next incarnation.

Sincerely,

(Dispatcher's Signature)
quarter past left alive

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Lucille the ball python, for 27 companionable years. I wish you an afterlife full of warm branches and docile mice.

About to clean, oil, re-sharpen and thank her new steel friends, she heard Gemtsen start barking above her and to one side. Just then Berkant Alp said, “You might want to check if these jokers left any slaves behind that they already caught.”

“Good idea.” She used her foot to turn the cadaver onto its back, spread its jacket out, and toe-poke for possible pocket locations. “Here we go.” She picked up a battered iron ring of crudely made keys and picked her way upslope.

Seven or eight ragged men and women were chained onto a common coffle that unlocked easily. “You can go,” Nergui told them. They looked at her blankly, then at Gemtsen apprehensively. Suspecting a language barrier, she gestured the dog to heel and made a chicken-shooing motion with both hands. The slaves ran away, except for one small, slender woman --- correction, one teenage girl --- whose braids, under the copious dirt, were so blonde as to be almost white. The girl looked stubbornly back at Nergui from changeable gray-blue eyes under nearly invisible eyebrows.

"Why don’t you go?" asked Nergui, slowly with exaggerated pronunciation and gestures.

"Stay… with Yelena," the girl said, indicating the empty space next to her.

_all right, maybe we need to back up a little._ The girl’s speech patterns reminded Nergui of her dad’s relatives on the Siberian side. Changing her speech to match her memory of theirs, Nergui pointed to herself. “Nergui,” she said. “From,” she waved into the northern distance, “Greater Mongol. Altai.”


Nergui let out a low whistle. Kievan Rus! She’d heard of it, but only as the back of beyond, on a level with the Egyptian Fort Bhum-Fuq. After a pause for thought, she adjusted her vision and looked again, more thoroughly, at the empty space. It wasn’t quite as empty as it looked. The spirit spectrum revealed the wavering image of a slightly younger blonde girl. Gemtsen, who looked like he was licking his lips, was actually licking Yelena’s cheek. A small smile sneaked out under the girl’s ghostly tears.

"If you would like to, both of you can travel with us for a while,” Nergui ventured carefully, “while you think about what to do. You’re free as of now, so we can see about getting you home. Or you can stay here; our country is growing fast and there’s plenty of work.”

Yulia looked at Yelena. Yelena, who now had her arms around Gemtsen’s neck, nodded. Yulia nodded too.

"Did the bad men make you leave Yelena? Before?” Nergui asked on their way back down to the road.
"Yes. First they take us two from home. Then Yelena sick. Morning, no waking up. I try to stay but he drag me. Night, Yelena come. Find me. Follow me."

Wow. Do either of these girls realize yet that one of them died? Nergui had encountered Bon priests who spent forty full days guiding the newly departed and their survivors through a ritualized separation process. Left to themselves, many Tibetans would just keep trying to carry on with their old routines after death and eventually run into trouble — anything from scaring off their heirs’ sheep to losing their place in the reincarnation queue. As it was, most of them prayed to reincarnate into the same family or at least the same town as soon as possible. A lifelong compulsive explorer, Nergui didn’t get it, but filed it under “it takes all kinds.”

On rejoining the caravan, Nergui introduced Yulia and Yelena to Berkant Alp with an arm around each girl’s shoulder, explaining with many significant wide-eyed nods that Yelena had fallen seriously ill a few towns back and they’d both had a very hard time in captivity, so Nergui would try to restore their health on the road. The retired warrior knowingly nodded back. Berkant Alp could not see ghosts and did not want to, but he’d seen enough combat over his long life to recognize shield-shock. Sometimes conversations with what others saw as empty spaces were the only thing that helped a fellow to soldier on.

At the next caravanserai both sufferers were given access to warm soapy water and unchallenging bowls of porridge with apple chunks and just a little pork fat. “Eat slowly, my friends. No choking,” Nergui admonished with a smile. “Hate to get you killed the first night.”

“That’s right, it’s ill eagle,” pronounced the pottery-trading family’s smallest daughter, who had won the brief skirmish over who got to re-braid Yulia’s impossibly pale damp hair. Many of the caravan kids adored the exotic teen sisters and thought it no big whoop that one of them was invisible to most of the adults. In fact, Nergui was pretty sure that a couple of those kids could see Yelena, but the question of whether to have a word with their parents could wait.

By the time Nergui gave the lecture about no fire or water inside her cart, poured an anti-nightmare tisane for the girls and took some herself, and gave the energy inside the cart a good cleansing and grounding, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to burrow under the blankets in the cart and drift off to sleep with Yulia’s tenuous body warming her right side and Yelena’s weightless soul chilling her left. Nergui’s dreams that night were abstract, and the living walls of black scales and intermittent glances of cold depthless eyes had become so familiar they were almost comforting.

It was just like the old saying: When life gives you horseshit, dry it out and set it on fire.
biting wool and pulling strings

Chapter Notes

Thanks, everyone lined up to tell me this plot element is based on a disproven old etymologist’s tale re: hashish and the original Assassins. I knew. I just couldn’t resist.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kunduz and Popokafa were pleased with themselves, and with the world in general: a heady and wholly unfamiliar feeling. Perhaps that was why they couldn’t seem to stop laughing.

”Agha,” said Kunduz. “Think about it. We just kill this one spy, and then we’ll be ASSASSINS, agha!”

”Hu-hu-huh. Yeah. We bring the spy’s head to that Yalanci agha. He’ll take us to meet the Old Man of the Mountain agha. And we’ll be in!”

“No more bricklaying and running over the foreman agha’s foot with the wheelbarrow, agha!”

”Uh-hu-huh. No more herding sheep that fall off cliffs, agha!”

”No more cleaning floors and getting some agha’s expensive carpets wet, agha!”

”The application fee cost everything we had, but it’ll be so worth it, agha! Assassins get RESPECT, agha.”

”Yeah, we can go home and say ’Who’s the empty-headed waste of space now… Mom?’”

”And ‘Who’s the troll that got switched at birth for your son now… Dad?”

”Not to mention, chicks really dig assassins.”

”Hu-hu-huh. Yeah, chicks… Hey, agha, remember our parents always telling us that chicks were like devils?”

”Yeah, agha. So?”

”I think it’s true. You just spoke of them and… they appeared. Two blonde chicks and the other one looks Cathayan or something.”

”What are you talking about? I only see one blonde chick and a Cathayan one.”

”Hey, boys,” Nergui greeted them. “Quite a fire you’ve got going.”

”Come sit with us, agha-ettes,” Kunduz invited. “We got a job to do, but not till it gets darker.”

”Hu-huh, hu-huh. If you’re not wasted, we’re not wanted,” Popokafa chimed in. “Wait, no, that’s not how it goes…”

”And what are you fine ladies up to tonight?” Kunduz continued, very suavely he thought.
"Gathering herbs,” Yulia replied, flourishing her basket. “For medicine.”

"Hu-huh. We got some pretty good herbs,” Popokafa began, pointing to a drawstring bag at his feet.

"That we’re NOT SUPPOSED TO TALK ABOUT,” Kunduz cut across him. “Remember?"

"Oooh,” Nergui perked up. “A secret? That’s exciting!”

"If you don’t want it, don’t waste it,” Popokafa tried. “No, that still isn’t it.”

"If we told you who we were, you’d probably be so surprised you’d pass out.”

"Hu-huh. And then we’d kiss you. Till you woke up. And slapped us.”

"Shhh! Popokafa!”

"What, Kunduz agha? That’s what happened every other time.”

"So aren’t you going to tell us the secret?” Nergui pleaded wistfully. “We won’t tell anybody else. We promise.”

"Your secret job must be very important,” Yulia’s tone was hushed with awe.

Yelena tugged on Yulia’s sleeve. “Tell them we never dream we would sit by fire with such important men,” was her reed-thin whisper.

"See, agha, that’s the other blonde chick,” Popokafa announced triumphantly.

"Agha! What is?” Kunduz shook his head in confusion.

"Yelena’s… quiet,” Nergui explained. ”She often feels unseen and unheard.”

"Agha. I can relate,” Popokafa was suddenly serious. “I felt that way my whole life.”

"Yeah, we both did,” Kunduz admitted shamefacedly, then brightened. “But no more! Once we’re assassins —” Suddenly realizing what he’d said, he broke off abruptly.

"Oh, you’re Hassan i Sabah’s men?” Nergui gushed eagerly, washing away the awkwardness with a flood of cordial warmth. “The Old Man of the Mountain? Well, we don’t mind! We know lots of those guys. We’ve never been to see his famous mountain fortress, though. What’s it like?”

"We haven’t been there either,” Popokafa said, ignoring Kunduz’s elbow in his ribs. “But we’ll go for sure, after we just finish this one thing.”

"What one thing?” Yulia asked breathlessly.

Kunduz and Popokafa exchanged awkward looks. The silence deepened.

Nergui was all understanding. “Oh, right, it’s probably a secret! Don’t worry, you don’t have to tell. Hmm… Assassins go around and kill people, don’t they? Most people would experience a lot of stress doing a job like that, I’ll bet.”

The guys exchanged more glances, this time of relief, and nodded.

"So if I was the Old Man,” Nergui continued, “I’d want to know that my new recruit could kill someone before I invested in training him as an Assassin.”
"Exactly," Kunduz confirmed, relaxing.

"Hu-hu-huh, they get it," Popokafa confirmed.

"So of course you’re here to do your qualifying kill," Nergui deduced. “The Assassins don’t go around doing random murders, so they assigned you one of the Old Man’s enemies, liiike…”

The silence stretched like a wool sweater in the rain.

"A Mongol spy,” Popokafa piped up helpfully. “There’s one traveling with that caravan down the hill. Like they say, waste whoever he does not want.”

Nergui heard Yelena stir and made a “stop” gesture over her shoulder, making it look like an idle stretch. “Really?” she asked the guys, widening her eyes with fascination. “Wow. I’ve heard they’re really dangerous. What does he look like?”

Once again Kunduz and Popokafa looked at each other. Neither saw anything hoped-for. “I guess... part of the test must be to figure that out,” Kunduz ventured.

"How do you think they knew he would be in that caravan, though?“ Nergui wondered idly.

"Oh, our contact Yalanci said there’s one in every caravan coming into Anatolia so we couldn’t go wrong,” Popokafa supplied, delighted to have a good answer.

"So... How?” Yulia asked in a sepsolchral half-whisper. “How are you going to kill the spy?”

"With this hashish,” Kunduz indicated a small leather bag at his feet. “We put it in the campfire and they’re supposed to go all goofy and fall asleep. Then we can stab them or strangle them or whatever.”

"That’s very clever,” Nergui approved. “How do you get close enough to put it in their campfire?”

One more time, Kunduz and Popokafa looked at each other. An inconvenient truth gradually dawned. In perfect unison, they slapped their foreheads.

“THEIR campfire!”

“We were supposed to put it in THEIR campfire!”

"I sort of wondered how this was supposed to work.”

"Agha! We wanted to, but we got wasted!”

"Oh, too bad. But you’ll get it next time. Cheer up,” Nergui encouraged them. “Hey, you know what else really perks up a campfire? This.”

She pulled a few small paper-wrapped packets from her pocket and tossed them into the fire, flattening out on the ground and dragging Yelena and Yulia with her.

Chapter End Notes

References
"Villiers Terrace" song by Echo & the Bunnymen
"Beavis and Butt-Head" TV show by Mike Judge
"Wayne's World" sketches and movies by Mike Myers and Dana Carvey
never thought they’d do those things

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Marvin the Martian! You know why.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It wasn’t quite an earth-shattering kaboom. But it got the job done.

”I think they will still be running in the morning.” Yulia speculated, shading her eyes to follow the break-neck retreat of the aspiring assassins.

“They probably weren’t that big a threat to me,” Nergui admitted, “but they might have killed somebody else in the caravan by mistake. Or tried to, and gotten stomped flat by our guards or chewed up by GemtSEN. Now they won’t.

“And... I’ve also verified that the thundermix is still potent. I love killing two birds with one stone.”

Yelena tugged on Yulia’s sleeve. ”What does Boss have against birds?” she whispered hollowly.

Nergui’s attention had been snatched away by the sight of the hashish bag, which seemed to have weathered the explosion without damage. She shrugged expansively, got up, walked over, picked up the bag, and pocketed it.

”Waste not, want not.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Villiers Terrace" song by Echo & the Bunnymen
"Hare-Way to the Stars" cartoon by Warner Bros.
Nergui hopped off the cart to excuse herself into some roadside bushes, confident that she could easily catch up to the caravan afterward. She chose a spot with sufficient cover that she couldn’t see the caravan road, hoping that meant it couldn’t see her either. When she straightened up, though, she was surrounded by a dense green forest that hadn’t been there before.

*Uh-oh.* She’d heard that some trees grew very fast in southerly lands, but this was ridiculous. She didn’t think she was somewhere outside of Boğaz anymore. Had she accidentally disrespected a grave, or a shrine, or some wild invisible’s home? No wonder no one wanted to be a shaman; even potty in an unfamiliar place was fraught with risk. A normal person might be forgiven an ignorant misstep if the affected spirits were in a charitable mood. Shamans were expected to know what they were doing, wherever and whenever, and thus got no slack at all. But she’d checked for hints before ducking down. She always checked.

There was a nearly imperceptible leaf motion and change in air pressure signifying something large nearby moving very, very quietly. Then:

“I’m nobody! Who are you? Are you nobody too?”

A long, pointed, inquisitive nose was suddenly inches from Nergui’s face. The hair and beard around it was inseparably merged into a wild, bushy halo with bits of leaves tucked in at random. The eyes were round, goggling, and incisively bright.

Nergui took a breath and stood her ground. “No, I’m Nobody’s daughter. No Name Girl.”

The questioner blinked and drew back a little. Shaped like a man, which Nergui knew didn’t always signify humanity. He held a long wooden staff, topped by a multi-point section of antler, like an innocent walking-stick. Yet a reddish-brown substance had dried in flakes on some of the points. Could be an attempt to decorate with ochre paint. Or... not...

"Things fall apart," he said. “The center cannot hold. The falcon cannot hear the falconer.”

"The falconer sent me," Nergui replied. “To fix it if I can.”

"When the stars threw down their spears and watered heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see?”

"We came to unite people. Not to make them suffer.”

"Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be?”

He turned his bright round eyes to the moon (wait, hadn’t it just been daytime?) and his attention
inwards, as if listening to voices only he could hear. Then he looked back at Nergui and nodded firmly. “Control needs death,” he said, “because Control needs to control.” He turned and walked back into the trees without a sound.

The world reeked. Nergui’s face was covered in slime. There was a whining sound. She opened her eyes on the Anatolian afternoon she’d recently left and scratched Gemtsen affectionately under the collar buried somewhere under his mane.

“Your bark may or may not be worse than your bite, boy,” she told him, “but your breath is worse than both.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Brain Damage" song by Pink Floyd
"I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" poem by Emily Dickinson
"The Second Coming" poem by William Butler Yeats
"Tyger! Tyger!" poem by William Blake
"Carrion Comfort" poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins
"Ah Pook the Destroyer” monologue by William S. Burroughs
a place of falling rivers where we can breathe again

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Wikipedia and other online reference sites, for allowing me to instantly look up Sheikh Ibn-Arabi of Andalusia. I could tell he was Somebody when he first appeared on D:ERE; unassuming-but-helpful strangers near the beginning of a narrative are hard to miss. This one turned out to be like a continent inexplicably left off all the maps I grew up with.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Visualize: sunlight, rampant greenery, chirping birds)

Mi nosimo
Zel-en venchets
Dai nam Lado, lepi Lado
Zelen venchets
Tseep-ko vee-nay
Dai nam
(Visualize: sudden trouser-soiling thunderbolt)
Lado! lepi Lado!
(Visualize: fitful pre-storm winds in leafy trees)
Ya-bo ke-treez lat-ne nan-yem,
Pur-vo dai-mov pol-ye nash-e
Dai nam
(Visualize: sudden trouser-soiling thunderbolt)
Lado! lepi Lado!

The night sky seemed to approve. A fragrant breeze blew towards the two-and-a-half women standing on a low hill above the caravanserai.

"I love that song," Yulia sighed. "Some of it sounds a little like our language, but not exactly. You say it came in dreams?"

"Yes," Nergui explained. "There’s a place I’ve gone in my dreams since I was little. I don’t know what its real name is but I always call it the Well of Songs. It’s a whirlpool of white sparks in total darkness. Each spark is a song I can pull out. Some of them are in languages I don’t understand, like this one. I also get the feeling some were written long ago and forgotten, and some of them won’t be written for a long time. I use them for medicine."

Yelena tugged on Yulia’s sleeve. "I think even regular singing can be medicine," she said, more audibly than she usually spoke.

"I think you’re right," Nergui said in a faraway voice. Since Yulia and Yelena had joined the caravan, there had been a lot more singing. It seemed to calm the two girls and detach the horrible recent past from their minds. The only exception, they soon found, were church hymns they’d learned at home in Kievan Rus. Now they avoided those.

They’d gone through all the horse songs until the younger children begged them to sing about some other animal. The kids’ favorites, taught for the asking, either made fun of common authority figures,
made fun of famous serious songs, or sounded like they were going to be dirty but, by a last-minute word substitution, stayed clean. After the kids went to bed, the moms introduced songs that sounded clean, but turned out to be dirty if one listened very carefully. (“But it’s only an agricultural song. The young farmer invites his new bride to choose a place for him to plant his cucumber!”) Then sometimes, long after dark, some of the guards’ favorite songs could be coaxed out of them: the ones that sounded dirty and then actually were.

Yulia’s conclusive sigh brought everyone back to the present. “You’ve probably both been wondering,” she said, her voice its strongest yet, “why I still haven’t gone to heaven.”

"Mm,” Nergui shrugged noncommitally when Yulia didn’t respond right away. She had indeed been wondering that very thing, but hadn’t wanted to bring up the topic. When she’d rescued the teenage sisters from the slavers scant days before, it hadn’t been clear whether either of them knew that only one of them was still alive. What had been clear was that they were inseparable. Nergui had worried that forcing Yelena to cross over too soon would do more harm than good to them both.

"You don’t have to wait for me,” Yulia told Yelena. “I thought I’d be right behind you, but now it might be a while longer.” Nergui sighed with relief, but controlled her breath to keep it slow and silent, not to disturb the flow of revelation. It seemed that some combination of Nergui’s remedies and immersion in the free life of the caravan had succeeded in anchoring Yulia to the Middle World of the living.

"I’m scared,” Yelena confessed. “I don’t know if Jesus will forgive me. That night when I was sick, one of those men --- I must have tempted him --- “

Nergui’s sigh of relief ended in a subsonic growl amid a grinding of teeth. She calmed herself with an effort. She had nothing against Jesus. She’d encountered him in passing and he seemed like a splendid fellow. Some of that human crowd he’d been running around with, though… It was none of her business, but she hoped it became the business of someone like her: someone who wouldn’t hesitate to go in with an urga and thin the herd.

"From what I’ve seen of Jesus,” Nergui said in a voice she forced to be level, “he forgives everyone if they’re truly sorry. You’re sorry, so he will forgive you. Never fear.

"The difference between your religion and mine, though, is that Tengri wouldn’t think you’d done anything that needed forgiving. On the other hand, that cowardly molester would have to work it off for as long as it took, either here or in the Lower Worlds, no matter how sorry he was.”

"Our priest always said the Tartars --- that’s what he called everyone to the East of us --- don’t have a religion.”

"Greater Mongol’s got lots of them, including Christianity, though not a kind that the Pope and Patriarch own. Genghis Khagan, may he ride forever in the sky, always said he followed the path set for him by Munkh Kukh Tengri who embraces all religions. You should see our new capital: churches, mosques, temples all over the place. All under the Eternal Blue Sky: room for everyone to get to know the Eternal, with or without a book or a building.”

The women had made their way back down the hill. A single fire still burned in the caravanserai courtyard. A white-bearded man in a white turban sat there alone, leaning on a long staff and gazing into the flames. He looked up and nodded amiably to each of them.

To each of the three of them.

Ohhh...kay, Nergui silently recognized that detail. And I suppose he has to sit out here, seeing as
how his aura’s too big to fit through the door. She smiled a blessing at the obvious holy man, but kept walking.

”I see by your outfit,” he turned and called after her, “that you are a healer.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Andalucia” song by Doves
"Ladarke" song cycle by Emil Cossetto
"Streets of Laredo" song by Marty Robbins
she’s a hurricane in all kinds of weather

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Andalusia, for giving us flamenco’s barefoot ancestor, the exuberant Zambra Mora.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pa ké, pa ké, pa ké seguir llorando pa ké
Pa ké, pa ké, pa ké seguir llorando pa ké
Seguir llorando...

In a far corner room at the caravanserai, Nergui beat a flat drum and sang the melody. Yulia and Yelena clapped in a complex rhythm and sang harmony. Sheikh Ibni Arabi swayed and intoned a drone. They all sat around a bed where a young man lay still as death, an unwholesome putty-gray underpainting his tanned olive complexion.

“I’d like to consult your opinion about a patient,” Ibni Arabi had said. “His body has responded to treatment, but he remains in a coma. It’s as if his soul seems reluctant to return. I was thinking a shaman like yourself might be able to retrieve it. If I might appeal to your better angels…”

"I’ve met a few angels,” Nergui interrupted. “They were dicks. But notwithstanding; sure, I’ll help."

"You are kind, daughter of Tengri. I will tell you that the patient is a devout Muslim who has fought the Mongols and may do so again if he recovers. Does that make a difference?"

"You are forthright, son of Allah; no, it does not. My Khan encouraged me to do what I could to repair our reputation in these parts, so please let people know. Besides, if I refused to help someone today just because they might try to kill me tomorrow, I’d have nothing to do today or tomorrow."

A different scene played out in parallel, in a soul-space that could have been a star’s reach or a mere shadow’s thickness away. A series of ascending flat surfaces too deep for stairs and too shallow for terraces led from dusky dimly-colored depths to a blindingly lit doorway. Yulia danced on a lower level with a wide-awake version of the man-child who lay on the caravanserai bed. Yelena danced on a higher level with a translucent younger boy whose eyes stayed locked on those of Yulia’s partner. Ibni Arabi, nonplussed at first to find a strange, flat-faced, bulge-sided stringed instrument in his hands, played a pair of intertwining melodies as if he had just discovered another reason he had been born. Nergui danced alone and flailed a wooden ring full of jingling silver disks as she sang. Her plain, loose Eternal-Sky-blue dress was transformed into a congeries of electric-blue sparks that clung to her torso, obscured her limbs with weightless swirls, and parted over occasional glimpses of wrist, ankle, shoulder, and back. Every so often one of the sparks would shoot off to fade somewhere in the darkness.

This was one of the times she understood some of the words she’d brought back from the Well of Songs, despite not knowing the language:
"I was summoned to bring him home from Alp Camp in the mountains, where he’d collapsed," the Sheikh had explained. “The only mark on him was a snake bite on his ankle. I administered antivenin, and with Allah’s blessing the swelling and discoloration subsided over the next day. But, as you see, he’s still unconscious.”

Ah, another Alp, ah. Nergui had shaken her head inwardly, feeling a premonition coming on, though she’d kept her professional demeanor as smooth as the surface of a puddle in a cave. If a group of artistically-inclined creator deities had set up a celestial Build-a-Boy Workshop, Ibni Arabi’s unconscious patient could have been its flagship product. In repose, his brow was smooth, his expression completely untroubled, reminding Nergui of another of her Well-of-Songs finds: something about “you’re innocent when you dream.”

Nergui had pushed up a cuff of the patient’s light cotton trousers and found the bite. “I’m going to release just a few drops of blood so I can have a look,” she’d explained, holding her finger-mounted awl in the lamp flame before applying it to the skin at the edge of the scab.

As soon as blood emerged from the pinprick, Nergui’s vision had blurred. “Hm,” she’d huffed impatiently. She’d rubbed her hands together rapidly several times, closed her eyes, and held her fingertips to the lids while rolling her eyes several times underneath. Opening her eyes, she looked around the room; everything was clear as normal. When she looked back at the wound, though, it was blurry again. “What the - “

“Oh, the blood-fog?” Ibni Arabi had guessed. “First time in Anatolia, then? Just one of the little quirks of this place. Human blood exposed to air makes a blurry fog. Healers find ways to work around it. It’s like the thick patches in the air that temporarily slow down anything passing through. Pretty eldritch, Nergui had noted. Could this sort of thing have destabilized our Noyan and his troops after long exposure? Nergui had adjusted her vision then, and found she could see the wound clearly just outside the usual daytime spectrum. She’d smeared a tiny amount of the patient’s blood on a silver mirror, a little more on a bronze mirror, and the last drop on an iron mirror. Then she’d gone to the window to lay the three mirrors on the sill, exposing them to moonlight.

After a moment or two, she’d pronounced, “No physical toxins in the blood anymore, Sheikh. The antivenin was well-made and well-chosen.” The Sheikh had nodded, acknowledging her concurrence. “There’s still some spiritual crud in here, though,” she’d continued, “because he wasn’t bitten by a regular snake. It was a Shahmaran. Seems strange; they’ve become a nuisance in the north of Persia, but I never heard of them this far south, have you?”

"No. Not at all."

"Worth finding out if somebody’s bringing them in; you don’t want a breeding colony. So that’s probably what drove this guy’s soul out of his body to begin with. Normally, with a patient this age, life’s just starting to get interesting, if you know what I mean and I think you do, That would motivate the soul to snap back into the body as soon as the environment cleared. But then there’s the dead kid hovering around too. Friend of his?"

"Best friend and new brother-in-law. Unfortunately, he attracted the wrong kind of attention everywhere he went, which was rough on both of them. Almost died several times this past year, then an Assassin finally got him a month or two ago. That poor boy had to be lucky every time, but his enemies only had to be lucky once. That might even be where the Shahmaran came from.”
“Those two could be trying to stay together somehow, somewhere the worlds of the living and the dead,” Nergui had theorized. “First we need to find them, then we need to persuade them to let each other go. That’s the trouble with souls. Once they get out of their bodies, it can be hard getting them back if they don’t want to come back.”

Nergui had run the awl through the flame again and aimed it at the pad of her palm. “This part gets a little dangerous to me,” she’d warned. “I don’t scatter trailheads around that could lead back to me unless I really have to, but in this case I believe I do.” She’d squeezed a little more blood out of the patient’s leg, slapped some dried poppy petals against it, and pressed the small puncture on her palm on top. When the blood had mingled, the other soul-space had opened like a shocked rose.

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"Searching for freedom, searching for land,” Nergui understood as she sang. Aren’t we all, kids. Aren’t we all. Translucent gold tendrils entwined both pairs of dancers. Nergui stepped up to Yelena and her ghost-boy partner, placed an arm around each one’s shoulders, and turned them to face the white doorway. The almost unbearably bright light beat on them like a hot-cold wind, then abruptly calmed and reversed direction at a fraction of its former force, a gentle pull that swept the golden tendrils inward. The couple joined hands again and danced toward the door. At the last instant, on impulse, Nergui called out “Yigit Shahzade!” The boy turned. Nergui gave him a Turkman fist-to-shoulder salute, meaning… what? Sorry your life had to be so short? Thanks for taking good care of your armor, I’m making good use of it?

Yulia and her partner gazed after Yigit and Yelena, arms outstretched, but did not try to follow. Nergui leaped in front of them and began driving them backward down the stairs with flails of her sparkling skirt like pounding ocean waves full of stars as the doorway faded and finally disappeared.

The ear that is not listening is not feeling
That is what I see!
The mouth that is not speaking is not lying
That is what I see!

To an instrumental crescendo Nergui began whirling, forcing the pair of dancers to twirl in the opposite direction, down into the shadows, into a dim hallway, back into the physical space of the caravanserai room. At the threshold, she whacked the boy not-quite-accidentally on the hindquarters with her tambourine to chivvy him into the room, then slammed the door for good measure.

One person on the bed and three people surrounding it suddenly inhaled, as if they’d forgotten to breathe for a long time. “Yowza,” said Nergui, fanning herself to dry the sweat pouring down her face. “Let’s have some water.” Ibni Arabi nodded and produced a canteen while he wiped his own face with a trailing end of his turban. Yulia had collapsed unconscious, her head resting on Dundar Bey’s chest (for their patient could be none other than Suleyman Shah’s youngest son).

“Beginners,” Nergui waved her hand in Yulia’s direction. “Her color’s good; she’ll wake up thirsty in a few minutes.” She briefly studied Dundar. “Him too; he’s back with us. Now, I won’t ask whether you knew our top Seers told me to avoid Suleyman Shah’s sons on this trip. And I’m still glad I could help; the kid’s got quite a soul on him. Maybe if I’m gone before he wakes up, it won’t mess up my mission too badly. But I will ask if you could maybe find a place for Yulia. She knows basic first aid and she can see souls, so she can help you two on the road if anything else happens. Where I’m going, it’s just too dangerous for her, and your reputation precedes you.”

"She will be a guest of Allah,” Ibni Arabi said solemnly, “giving and receiving blessings wherever
"That you’re a very wise scholar who writes prolifically. That you’re a powerful mystic who once bested our eminent battle shaman Ulu Bilge, without harming him in the process. That you’re extremely morally upstanding, which is why I’m trusting you with Yulia. And that everyone who meets you seems to convert to Islam, which Yulia is free to do if she likes."

"And what about you, learned colleague?" The Sheikh’s eyes twinkled with humor.

"To say ‘never’ would tempt fate," Nergui answered carefully, “and I’m not much of a Seer anyway. But for now I’m content to be a full-fledged member of my society, free to live by whatever merits I can cultivate, under the Eternal Blue Sky."

"Good road to you then," Ibni Arabi nodded with good grace. “May you be a credit to your ancestors. If you change your mind, or find you need anything, speak to my good friend Geyikli. You met him this afternoon. He can wander innocently in and out of any cobra’s nest because almost everyone takes him for a harmless madman. In fact, the only difference between him and a madman is that he is not mad."

Dundar’s closed eyelids began to flutter, his eyes moving from side to side beneath them. “That’s my cue,” Nergui said, gathering her belongings and heading for the door. “Allah bless, or… whatever.”

"According to my good friend Rumi, Baiju is a friend of God,” Ibni Arabi called after her. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”
frogs and dogs were raining from the sky

Chapter Notes

Thanks, whoever or whatever scattered those delicate little yellow flowers where I walked today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Now that Yulia would be safe, Nergui decided to split off from the caravan. Even the assassin wanna-be goofballs had been too much negative attention. If people expected spies to come in with caravans, then she wouldn’t come in with one. Berkant Alp let her copy a couple of his local maps in exchange for some of her vodka “for medicinal use only, of course,” and she drove on through a progressively greener landscape.

The taiga where she’d grown up had been green, but mostly muted dark green. Bright new needles had tipped the twig-ends only for a portion of the spring. Now she was seeing loud, brash greens that seemed to vibrate her eyeballs. The constant chatter of birds, too, overloaded the ears of one accustomed to the occasional isolated screech, hoot, or caw. And, possibly because she’d taken Dower House Five’s advice and collected a pool of primal red energy at the base of her spine, the smells and colors of blooming flowers struck her as the brazen sexual invitations they, in fact, were. Well, salt my tea, she marveled. Is this what it’s like to be a bee? No wonder they sting if you interrupt them.

There was a price for such burgeoning fecundity: rain and mud. Then more rain and more mud. Nergui used to have to make the effort to jump in a river or lake to be surrounded by so much water. Here it managed to find her wherever she was. Despite the pleasantness of being able to sample the joy of frogs and newts during and after each downpour, the novelty soon wore off.

She was glad to have spotted the caravanserai before the visibility plummeted to zero. One minute the sky was Eternal Tengri blue. Then a black line appeared on the horizon. With astounding speed it thickened and spread, swallowed the sun whole, and the visible world was caught in a sideways waterfall. There hadn’t even been time to get all the wagon shutters battened down before everything outside commenced pissing in. Oh, Lord Kayra, don’t let any of that thundermix get wet!

After she latched all the latches, she suddenly remembered she hadn’t seen Gemtsen. She splashed down from the driver’s bench into a mud puddle that soaked her skirt. Walking beside the cart, she called the dog as loudly as she could over the aqueous pandemonium. And called him. And called him until the mud clutched at her feet and legs with such strength she feared the wagon might get away from her. She sighed in resignation. Gemtsen was a big damn dog, and only sort of semi-quasi-tame. She’d just have to trust that he’d find his own way through the storm. She grabbed the tailgate and half-scrambled, half-flopped into the wagon --- almost on top of Gemtsen, who was sprawled across the blanket, seemingly without a care in the world.

Rain, hail, wind, lightning and other meteorological ammunition battered the caravanserai walls as Nergui’s wagon approached the gate. Reluctantly she parted the veil that hung from her hood, taking a barrage of ballistic raindrops to the face in an attempt to see better through the raging weather. The gate was closed. Another wagon and two horsemen stood directly in front of it, showing no signs of impending forward motion. She waited out an immeasurable interval while nothing continued to
"Oh, pus," she finally muttered, and splashed down into the sucking mud toward what she expected to be an equally appealing confrontation.

The outriders and their horses were so tall that Nergui had to tilt her face up into the extra-crunchy deluge to address them. "Hi!" she hollered in what she hoped was a friendly way. "How is it going?"

"Nobody's come out to let us in. It's suspicious." Nergui shook her head while still looking up, and immediately regretted it. "I don't know what their usual service is like, but in this weather I could believe they might cut that corner. May I?" When no one moved, she walked past the horses and pulled at the handle of the gate.

It opened easily.

The horsemen still didn't move. "There aren't any lights," said the one who'd spoken before. "This isn't normal. Our Bey and his family are in that wagon. They've got enemies. We can't take chances."

Nergui unleashed her best flat stare, but it had no effect. Probably can't even see it from up there. Finally she gave up and said "I don't blame you. They probably shouldn't go in, and you probably shouldn't leave them alone, until you know more. So how about this: I'm nobody." Or at least I'm Nobody's daughter. "I don't have anyone hunting me." Not yet; at least I don't think so. "If you'll back up and let me go in, you can watch and see if I die. If I don't, it might help you decide whether to go in or not. If I do, you can slam the gate and take off. At least I might die faster from whatever's in there than waiting to drown or catch my death out here." She meant to turn sharply on her heel and stalk indignantly back to her own wagon, but lost her footing in the mud, fell on her rump, and wrecked the effect.

Her horses were enthusiastically deepening the puddles when she opened a shutter, extracted Yigit Shahzade's cast-off helmet and popped it onto her head, snatched up the sword and shield that went with it, and called the dog.

--- And called the dog again.

--- And reached way back into the wagon and unceremoniously hauled the dog out by the scruff of its copious mane.

"They might have meat! Meat!" she yelled above the hammering din to Gemtsen, who immediately perked up and went bounding and baying through the gate. She followed, sword and shield at the ready but loose-limbed and without hesitation. At her hand signal, the horses and wagon followed. As she passed the Bey's wagon again, a child's voice said "Bey! Hanim! There's a lion!" and a man's voice said out the window to the outriders, "You know she's making you guys look limp, right?"

No ambush, avalanche, or apocalypse came. Nergui busied herself situating the horses and wagon. She threw a few tools and supplies in a day-bag, along with a cloud-soft dove-gray woolen robe she'd picked up from a Simroun trader on the way out of KK, and headed for the lodging door without so much as one glance back.

Like the gate, the door wasn't locked or barred. Inside, though, was as pitch-black, chilly, and silent as the dark side of the moon. "Hello?" she called out. "Anybody?" After an emphatically unresponsive moment, she patted Gemtsen's ribs. "Go find the people," she told him. "Find who has the meat!" He agreeably ran around sniffing at doors. Nergui shifted her consciousness and reached out --- carefully, since something about the place rang ominous --- but although the residues of human fear and anger were liberally smeared across the floor, walls, and ceiling, the only sentient invisibles present were the kind of minor spiritual scavenger vermin that normally gravitated toward
human gathering places. People had recently been angry and afraid here, but they’d left under their own power.

She lit a fire and struck a small brass bell. “First, last, and only warning, oogie-boogies,” she announced. “You’ll be banished if you stay, and you won’t like it.” She pulled a pouch of herbs out of her day-bag and threw some onto the fire, letting the smoke touch every part of the bell. Then she walked around and struck the bell three times in every open room, followed by a pinch of salt on every threshold and windowsill. Then she found and lit a couple of lamps and found a kettle to hang over the fire. She threw on her Simroun robe and hastily, discreetly removed her wet clothes from underneath it. She stretched out with her feet toward the fire, Gemtsen by her side. So far, on sign of the other party. *Oh, well; not my traveling show, not my dancing bear, not my problem.*

Her tea was almost ready and she was halfway through a crusty roll into which she had inserted dollops of pine-nut butter and cloudberry jam when voices came in from the foyer:

“There was a lion, Bey, I saw it!” piped a youngster’s voice.

”Turali, the only lions around here are you and me. Got it?” said a gruff but affectionate adult male voice.

”Let’s go in and sit by the fire and have something to eat before we go to bed, Turali,” said a woman’s voice bursting with determined sweetness, “and forget all about lions.”

A Turkmen boy of about eight walked in, stopped short, took one look at the heavy-maned four-eyed Bankhar dog by Nergui’s side, and yelled out “Aaah! Lion! I told you there was a lion!”

A well-dressed Turkmen couple in their late thirties followed the boy in. The woman skewered Nergui with her pale green-gray eyes and looked as if she wanted to follow suit with the dagger at her belt. The man took off his Alp hat and rubbed his head as if he had a migraine.

“I’m sorry,” Nergui began in her most buttery, wildflower-scented voice, but Turali pelted across the room and threw his arms around Gemtsen, who bore it with doggy equanimity.

”Aces! A real live lion!” the child enthused, laying his head against Gemtsen’s shaggy ribcage. Then a second thought arrived in Turali’s head and he sat up to turn and look at Nergui. “Is he going to eat us?”

”Blue Sky, no!” Nergui reassured him with a smile. “He’s already had his dinner.” Then, turning to the adults: “He might look kind of like a lion, but he’s really just a dog, and he won’t hurt anyone who doesn’t try to hurt me. I’m Nergui; I’m a traveling medic. Gemtsen here has been traveling with me and he’s used to strangers and kids.”

”Gundogdu of Kayis,” the man introduced himself, putting his hat back on. “My wife, Selchan,” he continued, indicating the woman, “and that’s Turali.”

”A dog?” Selchan gaped incredulously. “That’s… your dog?”

Nergui hesitated. “...Yes?” she admitted warily.

”How dare you bring that unclean beast inside a Muslim-friendly establishment?” Selchan railed. “While you’re at it, why don’t you just… hang a picture on the wall?”

Nergui shrugged and turned baffled eyes to Gundogdu. He fielded the look easily, as if he got a lot of them. “There’s a Hadith, a collected story of Mohammed, that says Mohammed wanted the angel Gabriel to visit his home, but the angel warned him that he wouldn’t enter a house if it had a dog or a
Nergui gave a snort of sympathy for Mohammed. “I’ve met some angels,” she commiserated. “They were dic-” (a halt as she glanced at little Turali sitting there with his ears wide open) “tatorial and arbitrary and arrogant. Not to mention high-maintenance. They thought they were the boss of everybody.”


“Boo! Mongols!” Turali hooted derisively.

“Anywaaay,” Gundogdu continued, “some Muslims, though not all,” he seemed to be directing this part at Selchan, “read this as an instruction not to let dogs into human living spaces.”

“I’m sorry,” Nergui found herself saying again. “Muslim lands are new to me. Having him around,” she scratched Gemtsen’s ears fondly, “makes me feel safe. And the weather out there - “

“You wouldn’t want to send a dog out in it, would you?” Gundogdu thoughtfully bit his thumbnail and looked into the middle distance. “There’s a story in the Quran that speaks well of a dog who stretched its forelegs across the mouth of a cave to protect pious youths who were sleeping inside. Given that, it should be all right for him to lie down in the doorway. Selchan, wouldn’t you agree?”

Selchan was still perturbed, but she didn’t argue. Instead she went to the entrance of the sleeping section and called out, “Time for bed, Turali.”

Turali lifted his head from Gemtsen's flank. "He's nice. I want a dog."

"No, you don't. You're going to have to wash your hands and the side of your face seven times now. Every time you touch a dog you have to do that."

"Worth it."

"I said: Time for bed. Go sniff the Bey good night."

Turali got up, ran over to Gundogdu, and hugged him. Gundogdu bent down and they inhaled each other's scent. Turali broke free and ran over to Selchan. "Smell you later, Bey," he called over his shoulder.

"Smell you later, short stuff," Gundogdu called after him.

Before turning to follow the boy, Selchan shot Nergui a vicious glare, as if to say “I’ll get you, benim güzel, and your unreasonably large dog too!”

Gemtsen had gotten up and was walking toward the doorway Gundogdu had indicated. “Well, look at that,” the Turkman said, impressed. “He’s pretty smart.”

“You’ll want to put your back to the wall until he goes by,” Nergui suggested, ignoring Gemtsen’s reproachful look. She realized that everything had come apart so fast that she hadn’t had a chance to offer the family refreshments. The Yassa legal requirement to share food didn’t really apply to people one met in public dining establishments, but this deserted place was devoid of cooking staff, and the weather had made it about as isolated as a lone ger on an empty road.

“What happened here, do you know?” Nergui asked Gundogdu. “It hasn’t been boarded up or marked ‘Closed’ or anything. But judging by the dust no one’s set foot in here for weeks.”
“That dirtbag Baiju Noyan happened, that’s what. If this wasn’t one of the places he actually came in and murdered everyone in the place single-handedly while some weird bald guy played a drum, it’s one of the other places where everyone decided to quit while they were still alive and the Sultan’s men can’t find anyone to replace them.”

”You don’t say?” Nergui *tsked* in sympathy. “That’s really messed up.”

”Yeah,” he said with hard eye contact. “Yeah, it is.”

She sniffed the air. The tea she’d started smelled about ready. “The storm gave me a headache,” she began. “I made some medicinal tea for it. It helps with sleep, too. I’ve got enough to share, if you’d like to try it. You know, in case you have a headache.”

”I was born with a headache,” he replied with a wry grimace, “and I expect to die with one.”

Nergui unfolded a grand shrug. ”You can get rid of it for the night and still do that.”

Gundogdu peered into the kettle and wrinkled his nose. “What is that stuff?”

”An herb mixture from the Hindu Kush. They call it *bhang.*” Seeing him still dubious, she said, “Look, you can drink out of your own cup or rinse one out from the kitchen. And I’ll drink first so you can see me not die from it.”

”My uncle’s tribe should do that. They’ve had a whole series of poisonings this year.”

Nergui nodded, “It’s not just a good idea, it’s actually the law where I come from.”

”Which is Mongolia.” His voice conveyed no doubt,

”What makes you say that?”

”The wet felt covering your cart smells like mutton.”

Nergui pondered the situation for a moment. “If you’d rather not share a cup of tea with me, I won’t take offense.”

”On the contrary, Doc,” he said, producing a wooden cup and plopping it down on the hearthstone with a smile. “*Bhang me.*”

Chapter End Notes

References

English closing theme from "Crayon Shin Chan" anime by Yoshito Usui
"The Wizard of Oz" movie by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
"Just so you know, there is no alcohol in this mixture and this herb is not unknown in the formularies of madrasas." As Nergui filled Gundogdu’s proffered cup with bhang tea, her shaded smile and simultaneous wink and were so fleeting that he was only sure he'd seen it because of the spots in front of his eyes afterwards. Oh boy, he thought, is she going to try to seduce me now? Don’t female spies do that? If Selchan caught us, she’d rip both our throats out with her teeth. Then Turali’s voice from earlier echoed in his mind, saying “Worth it!”

Nergui straightened up and walked toward him carrying both cups. Oh Allah, please make me strong, he thought. But their hands did not touch as she handed him the cup, and they easily could have. Instead of snuggling up next to him as an aspiring temptress would, she breezed past him through the doorway and sat against the other side of the wall. He heard her blow on her tea to cool it for a while before taking a sip.

“Met a fellow once,” she finally said, “who needed to tell me some things but was in two minds, or more accurately two hearts, about it. So we sat this way, back to back with a wall between us, and he talked to himself out loud and I happened to overhear what he said. Fellow’s name was Sungurtekin.”

"Interesting," Gundogdu replied. "I’ve got a brother who spies on the Mongols for the Seljuk Sultan Ala ad-Din. His name is also Sungurtekin.”

"Some people are like the bolts of silk I brought to trade," she said. "They’re one color or another depending on where the light comes from.”

"The sons of Suleyman Shah are not silk, but good honest wool,” he rejoined firmly. “Their color is the same in any light, and even in the dark.”

"No doubt,” she seemed to concede, but her smile was audible and she didn’t sound chastened. Then, more seriously: “He did tell me how the two of you were separated for years. He always thinks about the family. He’s always looking out for ways to protect you. And Kayis. I suspect everything he’s done has been about that.”

Steam rose from the teacups as they sipped in silence for a while. Gundogdu gave up and accepted the strongest likelihood; whatever devil’s business had brought this strange woman here, seducing him apparently wasn’t part of it. Instead of the relief he expected, though, he felt an irrational irritation. Did the Mongols discount his importance? After all, when his uncle’s brother-in-law Gumushtekin had plotted a coup against the Sultan, he’d assigned his own daughter Gonchagul to romantically manipulate Gundogdu. Gumushtekin had been a nefarious traitor, but at least he knew how to show respect. By rights, Ogedei Khan should be sending a whole series of sexy spies to flirt and flatter him...

...for about thirty seconds apiece until Selchan caught them and ripped their throats out with her
teeth. *Maybe that’s it,* he consoled himself: *Mongols won’t fight battles they're likely to lose.*

Gundogdu sighed, mostly to himself. "Why don’t you Mongol shitbirds just go home?" he said in a voice too weary to hold any real rancor.

"We are home.” Nergui took a long sip. “One of our prayers says, ‘May the lands where we wander and fight, where we kill and die, become our home.’ Wherever we go, we walk around like we own the place, and then pretty soon we do. I saw a horse-blanket patch a few weeks ago that said ‘If you were a Mongol, you’d be home by now.’"

"Why do you have to take over the whole world? What are you after?"

"We don’t *have* to take over the whole world. We’re just on a roll and we want to see how far it’ll go. We want people from the East and the West to travel and do business with each other. Sure we want a piece of it; roads and caravanserais and marketplaces don’t maintain themselves. We want all religions to flourish without conflict. We want all talented people to rise on their own merits. And most of all.... We want to be free. Free to do what we want. Free to ride our animals without being hassled by the Man.”

"What Man?"

"ANY Man. A generation ago we were a handful of scattered tribes, squabbling with each other and getting stepped on by townie states that want everyone to pick one place and stay there so the authorities can always find them. Stop me if any of this sounds familiar!

"Genghis Khan united us, and then our neighbors, and then their neighbors. Now we’ve got the biggest state in history and we’re still growing. Everywhere we go, we free the oppressed.”

"What oppressed?"

"You, for one. Don’t the Seljuks tell you where and when you can migrate? Aren’t they pushing to control internal tribal affairs? Don’t they want to start appointing tribal Beys instead of letting you guys keep electing them? Didn’t Kayis get stuck with two dry, barren territories in a row last year and almost starve to death? Sultan Aladdin must be rubbing his lamp if he thinks that's how to treat a tribe that sends so many Alps to fight the Seljuks' battles. Or, given the Sultan's fairly good reputation, he's trying to make you a better deal than you're getting and it's somebody in the middle who's skimming off the top. But even assuming everybody on both sides of tribal-state relations is straight as one of your arrows, the Seljuks have been settled in towns for hundreds of years. Palace people who've only ever migrated to their summer villas have no clue what a tribe needs to survive and no notion of finding out. We Mongols live the same way you do. Even our Khagan and his city people are, at most, one generation out of the gers. We could coordinate better conditions and more choices for the tribes here. Believe that.”

"So you people actually have aspirations beyond mass murder?"

"Yes. ‘We people’ actually do. We'd much rather make friends than enemies. We always try first to come up with terms everybody can live with. But if that’s not possible...” He couldn’t see her, but it was as if he could feel the motion of her eloquent shrug through the wall. This was some really good tea. "Listen, Bey: I grew up on the edge of a big ass-freezing forest. Really big; I’m not sure anybody even knows how big. It’s almost all evergreens up there. Ever burn branches from one of those? You know how they flare up in a blink and spit sparks everywhere? Now imagine hundreds of those trees catch fire. Nothing and nobody survives that. It all turns to dirt and ashes and charred dead trunks... at first. But a few years later, it’s growing back, and there are a lot more different kinds of plants and animals than before it burned. Some people think the Eternal Blue Sky is using us as its lightning or
its meteor; smiting through the congealed old canopy to get sunlight all the way to the ground.”

"Wow," Gundogdu gave a short bark of mirthless laughter. "Just… wow. Well, whatever it helps to
tell yourselves."

"I wish you could meet Ogedei Khagan. He’s incredible with people. Everybody likes him."

"Wasn’t he the one who sent us Baiju Noyan?"

"Baiju," Nergui repeated in a tone Gundogdu couldn’t interpret. “Well… Baiju…” She sounded
troubled, certainly. Was there something she regretted not being able to say? Not for state reasons,
but for personal ones?

"That boy Turali who’s traveling with us? Baiju’s troops killed his parents."

"It’s a good thing you’re doing, taking him in.” Her tone was nothing but approving. No undertones
of defensiveness or anything else.

"I’m next in line to take over the headquarters. When my father Suleyman Shah was Bey, he and my
mother always looked out for the stray children of Kayis. My wife Selchan was one of those orphans
herself.”

"Ah. How did her parents die?"

"My, eh… my father executed her father.”

"Ah.” As neutral as clear water. No tinge of now I see; you guys are making enough of your own
orphans and you’re afraid we’ll flood the market. “How old was she then?”

"Seven.”

"That’ll mess a person up.”

"She’s… always been a little… high-strung.”

"But she never went in for revenge about it?"

"That issue did eventually come up, but we’re past it now.”

"You do seem well-adjusted to each other.”

"We had some problems for a while…”

"Like when you were going to take your step-cousin Gonchagul the palace poisoner as a baby-mama
second wife?"

Nergui could hear Gundogdu’s jaw drop on the other side of the wall. “How - “

"It’s a gossipy old hemisphere, Bey. Assume we know everything; you’ll make better decisions. But
it looks like that blew over.”

Gundogdu chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Actually, it took Baiju Noyan abducting Selchan to remind
me how much I’ve always loved her: baseless suspicions, screaming rages, and all. I got her back
and we reunited and now she’s with child.”

Nergui hoped it had happened in that order, but only said, “Bayar khurgeye!”
"Say again?"

"Congratulations. You know, Ibni Arabi said his friend Rumi said Baiju was a friend of God but didn’t know it."

"Yeah, still won’t send the Noyan a gift basket. Are you saying you met Ibni Arabi and you’re still not a Muslim? Wait... is he all right?"

"I left him completely alive and perfectly well. We’ve got some folks that might kill the Buddha if they meet him on the road, but I don’t think any Mevlevi brethren are on our list. If they’re all like the Sheikh, they’re good people. And he was in fine persuasive form. He converted a Christian girl who was traveling with me. I’m just too attached to Tengri. As clergy, I’ve invested a lot more of my being than a lay person would, but it’s not just that. The freedom to discover what I’m good at and do it really well for my community, notwithstanding my lady parts, is something I’ve never seen in another religion."

They lapsed into silence. Somewhere in the Hindu Kush, a field of tall leafy plants nodded affably to a passing breeze under the Eternal Blue Sky.

"You know what’s eventually going to wear you heathens down?" Gundogdu asked in a drowsy voice. I’m woolgathering, he realized. Then he giggled. Which is funny! Because my tribe herds sheep!

"Hm?" came from the other side of the wall.

"Your --- Tengri, is it? --- cuts you too much slack."

"Envious much, Bey? Should I watch out for the Evil Eye?" She sounded as though she started to make a warding gesture but it turned out to be too much work.

"No, hear me out. Before I forget what I was going to say. “When you’re allowed to make your own decisions all the time, you use up a lot of time and energy deciding. And some of those decisions could be bad ones, and the way they come out is all on you. Now: with a more hands-on kind of God who hands down rules for everything, all your decisions are pre-made. You look it up in the book and you’re done. No doubts, no questions, no discussions. If it leads to bad results, it’s not your fault. You did what you were supposed to. It’s God’s will.” Gundogdu dug at the floor in front of him with the toe of his boot. “Well, I’m going to turn in. Last chance to make a pass at me, which I would righteously decline."

Nergui twiddled her large lock-shaped earring. “Not allowed to help you there, Bey. Anyway, I didn’t come all the way here to get my throat ripped out by Selchan’s teeth.”

"So you do have a rule. See how quick that made it?"

In spite of himself, he couldn’t hate Nergui. Allah --- or, who knew, perhaps her own strange gods --- had blessed her with a social ease poor Selchan had been cruelly denied. He suspected Nergui found sympathetic sisters and protective brothers everywhere she went. Where Selchan was constantly charged for a lightning strike, Nergui seemed to carry a deep well of solace inside. Gundogdu darkly wondered what copper-ante Sultan, Pasha, Shah or Grandmaster would be presented with the key to her earring-lock. Probably someone who deserved to have his face and scalp clawed off by leopards, not to rest his repugnant head on smooth milk-tea skin that might smell of a starry night in a pristine wilderness...

She’d shut the dog out. She appeared unarmed. She wouldn’t expect an attack now. He could kill
her, he supposed, to thwart any enemy plans she was part of. But that would wake Selchan and Turali. And bring his headache back, which he suddenly realized had been gone for some time. No, he was really tired. He should just go to sleep. Or... rifle through their bags for something to eat. Anything would do; he was suddenly very, very hungry.

Chapter End Notes

References

"Wish You Were Here" song by Pink Floyd
"The Wild Angels" movie by Roger Corman
forecast into the freezing cold

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Petfinder.com, for letting prospective adopters know where they can rescue Anatolian shepherds and many, many other dog breeds. They don’t seem to have Bankhars today, but for Simpsons fans they do have Bouvier des Flandres.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui awoke to faint gray light, a fussing of doves outside the window, a heavy weight compressing the mattress next to her, and hot moist panting whiskers in her face. Thanks to having internalized Meg’s Wake-with-a-Snake protocol, she gathered all available information before physically reacting. "Gah! Gemtsen. How the plucked duck did you get in here?" she demanded under her breath as she shoved the big dog off the bed with an unceremonious foot. Wrapping herself in the blanket and standing up, she continued, "Come on. Back outside before you start a jihad."

She went over to the window. It was latched from the inside, as was her room door, just the way she’d left them. Seriously, how had this freaking dog --- She opened the window and motioned him out. He cocked his head to one side and gave her his best uncomprehending stare, but didn’t move. She crossed her arms, tapped her foot a few times, took him by the collar and tried to assist him through the window. Rather than cooperating, he relaxed into an amorphous blob that seemed to weigh twice what he usually did.

Oh, for fart’s sake.

She drenched the sleeve of her robe, again, when she went to smash the layer of ice in the jug and it turned out not to be there, again. She finished her ablutions, wrung out her sleeve, and changed into her most-like-local day clothes, including her official jacket with the hood up and the veil down. She carefully opened the door a crack and peered out.

Any hope that she was the first one up vanished immediately. Gundogdu, Selchan, and Turali occupied the center of the front room and were tucking into some form of pastry. She grabbed Gemtsen’s collar and scurried for the door, staying close to the walls like a guilty kangaroo rat. “Sorry sorry sorry,” she cringed to no one in particular, "don't know how he got in." Gemtsen for his part, looked back at the first family of Kayis with a tongue-lolling doggy grin that strongly implied a distinct lack of sorriness on his part. He turned to pull his collar out of Nergui’s hand and started to detour around behind Gundogdu. Nergui, sensing an impending shenanigan and wanting no part of it, snapped her fingers and flung a spark of static at the tip of the dog’s nose.

After a brief recoil and a yip, Gentsem joined Nergui at the outer door, gently mouthed her wrist and tugged politely but firmly. What's the matter, boy? Did Timur fall in the well? She stepped into the boots she’d left by the door and followed the big Bankhar outside.

Not surprisingly, mud and wet sand were splattered everywhere and the courtyard was half-flooded. Nergui picked her way between puddles big enough to fish in until they reached the relative shelter of the stables. Gemtsen whined. An answering whine came from a corner.

A pregnant dog lay there, breathing shallowly, too exhausted to raise her head. Nergui made sure the
animal hadn't gone into labor, picked her up, carried her to the overflowing horse trough, supported her while she drank a little, then laid her gently back down in a warmer, dryer spot with more light. At the trough, Nergui wet a section of her skirt hemline, wrung it out, and sat back down. Cradling the mother dog's head, she sang a traditional long-song about looking for a missing horse as she began blotting the mud away from its face. The revealed short fur was pale gold. The dog licked its lips and sighed, its trembling beginning to subside.

"She’s a karabash. They call them ‘Anatolian shepherds,’ but they don’t actually herd the flocks. They guard them against wolves, bears, and wild boar," said a voice, quietly nudging aside the reverie. Gundogdu was leaning on a nearby stall wall; Nergui hadn’t heard him come in. "A regional treasure. Turkmen herders prize them, even while barring them from the tents."

"She's been starved and beaten recently," Nergui observed, keeping her eyes down and trying, but not quite succeeding, to keep her voice matter-of-fact. "Interesting way to prize a treasure getting ready to increase."

"I've... heard stories," Gundogdu said carefully, "of some local working dogs being punished and displaced for mating with the foreign war dogs you Mongols brought along."

"Bitches get the blame every time, don’t they?" Nergui sighed heavily, scratching her patient behind the ears. "Well, her luck will be improving. I've got a wagon full of medical kit and I know how to use it. If my country caused her condition, it's the least I can do. The puppies might even make cute diplomatic gifts. I'll think of something; it's the Mongolian way."

There was a thoughtful pause. Nergui resumed singing.

"Uh-huh. Right," Gundogdu broke back in with a sarcastic disdain that was not wholly convincing. "If you think I'm handing you the moral high ground on a silver platter, Doc, you've got another think coming. We Turkmen take care of our own, people and animals both. I'll take her in our wagon. We've got a couple of good medics at the obasi, and it isn't far."

"Turali will jump over the moon! But won't there be... other trouble...?"

"I'll think of something. That's the Turkmen way."

"So let’s see. Why don't... I clean her up in my wagon so we're both out of sight, and then you pop by and get her at the very last second before you get moving?"

"All right, I suppose I'll allow you that small redemptive act, against your many, many sins," he conceded sternly, and turned away to hide his grin.

"Bey is most magnanimous," Nergui acknowledged, and bit her lips to keep from laughing.

Chapter End Notes

References

"Dogs Eating Dogs" song by Blink 182
"Lassie" TV show by Robert Maxwell; "Timmy's in the Well!" book by Jon Provost
without the protection of infancy’s guard

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Konya Municipality of Turkey, for restoring and reopening the Zazadin Han, a caravanserai built by the historical Emir Sadettin Kobek in 1235-36. It isn’t the setting for this chapter, though, because it seemed unsuitable for the Diriliş character Kobek’s large-scale clandestine shenanigans. Zazadin is so convenient to the Seljuk capital that activities there would be unlikely to escape the Sultan’s notice. Also, the surrounding terrain is as flat and bare as a dry lake bed, so anyone coming or going could be seen for miles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

According to Nergui’s map and notes, there was a caravanserai here. The building was likely-looking, but the road going in and the surrounding grounds were bare of arrivals, departures, hitchhikers, unlicensed hawkers, and pickpockets. On the other hand, this place was far from deserted. No fewer than six guards in Seljuk uniforms were arrayed around the gate. These guards were no scruffy, neglected frontier troops, either; they looked strong, well-fed, and dressed to impress.

They couldn’t have failed to see her. Anything but a smoothly continued advance would probably look suspicious.

“Sorry, miss,” piped the youngest one, who barely looked old enough to be in uniform. “The Blessed Emir’s courtesan auditions closed last week.”

“The… what?”

An older guard took the young one by the scruff and guided him backward. “Sorry, hanim. What’s your business here?”

Let’s try innocent bewilderment; I’m most of the way there already. “Well…” she began, accompanying her words with vague, mind-fog-generating gestures, “I was told there was a caravanserai here somewhere? I hoped to stay the night, or at least grab a quick meal before going on.”

“Closed to the public,” the older guard said, his tone polite but inviting no debate. “Emir Sadettin Kobek, the Sultan’s Grand Vizier, is in residence. No one admitted without an appointment.”

”Ah, well. Too bad. I heard they mixed a mean Sharbat Salaam. Have a good evening.” She turned the cart around and went out the way she’d come in.

As she passed by on the main road in the slanting sunset, an odd movement in her peripheral vision made her look downhill. About twenty people were hunkered down on the slope, facing the commandeered caravanserai. They looked to be in the same place but not “together.”

Gemtsen woofed softly. He was right; this could be worth checking out.

After securing the cart, she picked her way downslope in the gathering gloom while Gemtsen stayed higher up, just off the through road. She descended as quietly as she could, but her foot rolled on a
rock and sent pebbles bouncing. A man dressed like a merchant turned around, but did not seem
alarmed. “Ah! A new one, I’ll wager!” he said softly in mock astonishment. “Welcome to the Pine-
nut Gallery. The Blessed Emir’s popularity just keeps growing.” He gestured toward the
caravanserai below.

From here it was possible to see over the wall and into a large lighted window. The people inside
were formally arranged. A brace of Seljuk soldiers stood at attention. Another turned to take custody
of a visitor’s weapons. Holding court at a low table, on a pile of cushions, sat a man in velvet and
brocade in shades of blue that matched the soldiers’ uniforms. His hat was similar to the soldiers’ as
well, but but black and trimmed in sable and silver. The hanging sections of his divided coat were
tucked in neatly with exact symmetry. His beard was luxuriant; neither stiff and bristling like many
Turkmen’s nor feathery as seen in the Song Dynasty, but fine and curled at the ends like an Angora
goat’s. Viewed from the side like this, it was clear that one of the functions of the hill of cushions
beneath the Emir (for this must surely be he) was to add the intimidating height that Nature had
denied him.

As a bonus, the side view afforded at least the possibility of reading the lips of both the Emir and his
guests, if one knew how.

Looking away from the lighted window, Nergui could barely see her own soft-booted toes through
the gathering gloom. In the clear air, the light faded quickly after sunset, and the Pine-nut Gallery
would have been shaded even at noon. She wound her way around a few trees, then hunkered down
and began observing. After a while, a man arrived and was admitted. He wore the turban and long
loose coat common to many Islamic lands, but the turban looked wadded rather than wrapped, and
the coat was too short to cover what were clearly (to Nergui, anyway) Greater Mongol army boots.

Bad Disguise Man didn’t appear in the audience room right away. Maybe there was a queue.
Nergui’s ankles began to bother her, but she didn’t want to leave her perch, so she dropped the final
few inches to a seated position in the ground. Landing on what she assumed was a tree root, she
wriggled her sitting-bones forward until she found flatter ground covered in dry leaves and tree-
needles. She crossed her legs and leaned forward on her elbows.

A while later, her back began to bother her. If she got back onto the tree root, maybe she could lean
on the trunk. She reversed the sitting-bone-wiggling process and slowly leaned back… and back…
this was weird; the trunk wasn’t growing straight up, but slanted away from her. And even when her
back was resting, the back of her head couldn’t find ---

*Oh crap.* She sat up quickly and turned around.

"I don’t mind, hatun," rumbled a baritone voice. The largest Alp she had yet seen was sitting behind
her. She’d sat on his boot-toe and leaned back on his shin.

"Sorry." She covered her face with her hands and peeked shamefacedly through her fingers,
grimacing. *Hi, I’m Ditzy Dandelion, the world’s least threatening person. “I --- thought you were a
-- tree?”*

"I get that a lot. Tree. Boulder. Small building. I think I’m just too big for a lot of people to see. And
the other ones I scare.” There was something in his voice that seemed to cross a vast and lonely
distance.

A full moon had come up over the caravanserai, illuminating his face but leaving hers thankfully
shadowed by her hood. His hair, whiskers, and eyebrows were black and thick, but sleek. His
cheekbones were prominent, his nose straight, his forehead high and square, and his hairline had a
slight widow’s peak. The moonlight made his features look carved out of marble. He had his head
tilted down slightly so that his eyes were only visible as hollows of darkness under his lowered brow-ridge. Nice, came the uninvited and unwanted thought, then Oh, no, can’t go climbing any Alps just yet; it would wreck my whole mission. On the way home, though…

"I know how that goes.” Knowing she was visible only as a silhouette, if that, she shrugged even more elaborately and expansively than normal. “I grew up with huge brothers. They always said people either shrank away from them or walked right into them. After growing up with them, I just automatically feel normal around big fellows. Well. maybe a little safer than normal.” She rummaged in her jacket pocket. “I’ve got some dried cheese I was going to snack on. Would you like to share some?”

His mouth quirked up at the corners and he exhaled percussively, a sound that might be a brief, self-deprecating laugh. “Why not? And how shall I arrange myself as a leaning surface?”

"You don’t have to do that. Especially not if it’s indecent for you guys to be gratuitously leaned against by strange women.”

"My name is Turgut. Now you know me.” Slight bow of the head and an Alp salute.

"Nergui. Likewise,” She copied his gesture.

"And don’t worry. What happens in the Pine-nut Gallery stays in the Pine-nut Gallery.”

"That’s a relief.”

"Here, why don’t you sit between my feet and lean back on both my shins? Wait a second, let me move this axe.” He picked up an enormous battle-axe with a chopping head as big as a… oh, my, as a… very big… thing. As its angle changed, the moonlight reflected from a maker’s mark.

Kayis.

Ertugrul’s tribe.

Oh, fan-freakin’-tastic.

Nergui fought the urge to hyperventilate. She clung to stillness and only inwardly acknowledged the falling feeling in the pit of her stomach and the hairs standing up on the nape of her neck. Just because the axe is from Kayis doesn’t necessarily mean Turgut is, she reminded herself. Good steel knows no loyalty. It serves whomever pried the last set of cold dead fingers off it. She made herself flop back carelessly, summoning a cozier memory to relive as she described it in breezy chatter.

"Now this is just like when I was little. My brothers and I would loll around the fire at night, making up stories about what we thought we saw in the flames.” Batbolor and Baterdene were very literal-minded; most of their stories were about things burning down. “Then our mom would go ‘That’s enough flames for tonight, you kids! Bank and bunk before you ruin your eyes.’”

In the window below, the Emir flung whatever he was holding across the room and began yelling and gesticulating, going red in the face.

"Mashallah, something set him off,” Turgut said. “What do you think he’s saying?”

Nergui, reading Kobek’s lips, knew exactly what he was saying --- well, within a certain margin of error, given that a lot of sounds use the same lip-shapes and Kobek’s particular top lip was often hidden by the fluffy mustache. Her snack-sharing ethic, however, did not include sharing all the tidbits of information she gathered. Especially not the Mongol military title that popped up
repeatedly. “Oh, he’s probably saying ‘What do you mean, my clean underwear didn’t get here yet? What does my mother think she’s playing at?’” she improvised, barely suppressing a giggle.

More percussive exhalation from Turgut. “And now the senior officer is saying, ‘Calm down, Blessed Emir, you can borrow my spare underwear.’”

"But now the Emir says, ‘Is it silk, with little flowers hand-embroidered on it? I would venture not! Unacceptable!’”

Some of the other silent watchers on the slope aimed irritated glares in their direction. However, pouring disapproval on spontaneous inappropriate humor is like pouring lamp oil on accidentally-ignited skillet contents. Trying gamely to quiet down, Turgut and Nergui held their breath, bit their lips, covered their faces, and dared not look at each other. Unsurprisingly, everything they did just made it worse; every time they’d start to regain control, an image of Emir Sadettin Kobek in flowered silk underwear (and his fancy hat, of course) would pop back into their heads.

"It feels good to laugh again,” Turgut finally said when he could trust himself to speak. “I never thought I would. Now I wish I’d had a sister who could have talked me back to a state of reason before things got this messed up.”

"Hmmm?” said Nergui. A question open at every end. Voiced in a half-absent tone that didn’t demand, intrude, or trigger self-consciousness.

"My wife --- died.” he said in a bleak and empty voice.

Cue gentle sympathy: “That’s always awful. I’m so sorry.” Sorrier than she knew, it would turn out.

"Her name was Aykiz.” He said the name like a prayer. “She walked tall. Her black hair fell all the way to her feet. Her eyebrows would tighten like a bow. Her cheeks could blush as red as autumn apples. Her mouth looked too small to fit so much as an almond. Now how can she arise and reach me from where she went? I fell to her infinity. Now I can only wait on her path for death to come to me.”

Nergui knew of several possible ways to put Turgut and Aykiz back in touch, but she also knew that in the religions of “The Book,” God intentionally separated the dead from the living by an impermeable wall with a one-way door.

In Nergui’s opinion (which the Book God had not asked and likely never would), that solution eliminated the many risks and pitfalls of inter-vital communication by dint of sheer brute force, but on the other hand it guaranteed the worst possible separation trauma for those on both sides of the wall. Nevertheless, in by-the-Book cultures the mere contemplation of any other arrangement carried a stiff penalty: often, the accused contemplator was transformed into a stiff. So she kept quiet.

"My Bey --- well, now my former Bey,” Turgut continued, "says that my wife is a martyr of Allah and I should be happy, not sorrowful or in pain. He said I should pray to be martyred myself so that Allah may allow me to see her again.”

"Mmp-mmp-mmm,” with a slow headshake, the universal expression of “Whoa, that’s messed up, agha.” If my Bey said that to me he’d be my former Bey in a heartbeat too. And what the plucked duck --- when you finally get to heaven there’s another impenetrable wall? Around a “Martyrs Only” section? The ‘Ghazi Strip’ or something? What if you’re galloping down the road to get martyred on the battlefield, and you accidentally get clocked by a low-hanging branch and die? Are you still not allowed to see your martyr buddies ever again?
"I was away when the Mongols raided our obasi and burned my Aykiz alive while she fought them," Turgut was saying. Nergui’s eyes suddenly snapped wide open and her mouth went dry --- what? --- but years of “Wake with a Snake” kicked in and paid off; her muscles remained relaxed despite the unpleasant surprise. “We captured that Noyan who is their leader. I said to my Bey: ‘Kill him here and now.’ My Bey said no, that we would take him back to our camp and let the whole tribe watch. We had Noyan on his knees, my Bey lifted his sword. And that --- Sadettin Kobek --- rode in and said ‘you cannot kill Noyan, he belongs to the Sultan and he is to be exchanged for three Seljuk commanders who are prisoners of the Mongols. Because my Bey wouldn’t kill him immediately, that Noyan is still alive and free! So I left my Bey. I left my tribe. I live only to spill the blood of every Mongol I meet. Until we cast out the last Mongol from this land and my body is laid to rest, I cannot stop. I have no home except my grave.

"These days we can’t even tell a friend from an enemy," he continued. You’re not the only ones, Nergui thought. “The enemies may be right beside us” --- here Nergui couldn’t stop a shiver running down her back but Turgut didn’t react --- “or even within us. We are blind to all but ourselves. We wallow in our darkness until we drown in it. Instead of taking our sworn revenge, we gently cradle the contemptible degenerates in our hands like pigeons and wait for them to bite us like snakes.”

Pigeons will give you a pretty good bite too, Nergui couldn’t help thinking even as her mind reeled, her stomach sickened, and all the edges of her world became razor-sharp.

"I come here to wait for Mongols to visit Kobek. Mongol blood is as halal to me as my mother’s milk. If we don't make those bastards pay for their atrocities, I will be ashamed of being a man,” Turgut declared.

Well, I saw several go in and out of that building this evening. Thank Tengri, "Spot the Mongol" may not be Turgut’s game, Nergui reflected. Lucky for me.

Chapter End Notes

References

"Passover" song by Joy Division
"The Goon" comic #41 by Eric Powell
Thanks, Neil Gaiman, for writing the short story “Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar,” in which a character identifies the two-humped species of camel as “Batrachian.” The image of a camel/frog cross-breed is now stuck in my head forever. May your life be Endless (if you want it that way).

Nergui dragged Mr. Bad Disguise off the caravanserai branch road and into a convenient clearing in the trees twenty or so yards away. Knocking someone unconscious without causing any lasting serious damage was trickier than people thought. It was, however, a useful thing for a doctor to learn. Supplies could run low sometimes. So could the sense that a patient was presumably born with.

Nergui favored a two-step process; enough of a clip on the head or box of the ears to stun, followed quickly by a sharp, clean, fine needle in a particular point at the base of the neck. They almost never woke up before she pulled the needle out, and almost always woke up promptly afterward.

Nergui had kept her fear tightly sucked into her pores while leaving the Pine-nut Gallery, stepping lightly and unhurriedly. She had not looked back, or needed to. The image of Turgut was still with her: the moonlight reflecting from the edge of his axe-blade and its Kayis maker’s mark, illuminating his strong features and brooding expression, but never penetrating the shadows over his eyes. As if his eye-sockets were as empty as a skull’s.

What do these Muslims call their Grim Reaper, again?

Azrael.

The sight of Azrael was reputed to do more damage than a thousand blows with a sword. Having seen what a scant few sword blows could do to a human body, Nergui found her imagination strained.

The Alp she had just met aspired to be Azrael for all Mongols. Certainly for Baiju and any of his troops. Undoubtedly for her too, if he realized she’d come to help Baiju.

She’d liked Turgut. Had even been kind of… ”interested” in him. But if she crossed his path in the light of day, as it were, he’d realize she was a devil of his world and he would kill her. It hadn’t shaken her trust in her own intuition at all. Hormonal chemistry was its own entity with a reputation for randomness and even cruelty. In all the crushes she’d watched from the sidelines growing up, the worst result had been rejection. Even in those cases, the object would feel at least secretly flattered about inspiring the crush.

The stakes here were a whole lot higher. She should probably forget about climbing any Alps until she got home to the Turkmen who voluntarily lived among Mongols.

And, speaking of Mongols, here came another one whose eye for local sartorial details was on a par with his ear for echo-locating bat squeaks.

She should give these guys some pointers on dressing to blend in while she was here. No doubt. She knew she was no fashion maven like Empress Toregene or Chagaanirvys Darga, but she could do way better than what she was seeing. Women warriors were welcome in the Greater Mongol army and they enlisted in respectable numbers, but they all pulled whatever strings they could to avoid the minority of worst-behaved commanders. And then Rule 4 of the Yasa said “No poofers,” Tengri only knew why; it didn’t seem like the kind of thing to bother Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky. A minority of woman-pursuing men had an eye for details of appearance, but they weren’t in evidence here. The whole Anatolia detachment was probably very used to being dressed down, but couldn’t dress up to save their lives.

The scarf around the lower half of the captive’s face slid off.

*And you’ve got guts a mile long, haven’t you?* Nergui tucked the scarf back in place. *Your secret’s safe, at least for now.*

*Burning Turgut’s wife alive. Really?* Her eyes stung from just thinking about it. If Baiju had a good reason for that, she was willing to listen, but she couldn’t imagine what one might be. Some things could be written off as war’s inevitable sacrifices. Some could be smoothed over with reparations. Some would never, ever buff out, no matter what, and she suspected that raid was one of those. She was going to have to find and face everything her countrymen had done here, and own it personally, before she could make sound recommendations. *Surely that’s what Ogedei would do.*

*Look sharp, No Name Girl; here comes another guy who thinks he’s sneaky.*

When she’d come out of the Pine-nut Gallery, Gemtsen had gently mouthed her hand and urged her along with a series of growls and whines that sounded more worried than plaintive or angry. If she didn’t know better, she’d thought it was some kind of lecture about talking to strange men who were just after her body (her dead body, to be precise). What was she going to do with this scrupulously protective dog that first night at Baiju Noyan’s camp? How could she explain across the human/canine language barrier that certain things had to happen and, if it was a yes-rough-stuff kind of a deal as expected, it might be upsetting to an outside observer but he couldn’t interfere unless things went absolutely critically wrong? She wasn’t even sure she’d adequately explained it to herself. How bad was she willing to let it get? And if there were… objections… to her retreat, then what?

*And I think this might be the last member of the clown troupe coming up the road now.*

None of the fake non-Mongols had gone in together or left together tonight. Each of them probably thought he was the only one conspiring with Sadettin Kobek. Kobek didn’t seem to want them comparing notes. It was also possible that the atmosphere at the camp had made them so paranoid that no one trusted anyone else. In humans at least, a pervasive fear of everything one sees will create blind spots until the hypervigilant are the most vulnerable of all. The Blessed Emir seemed just the type to eat that up like Turkish delight.

*This crap has got to stop right now.* This mission was a tall enough order without trying to keep track of half a dozen independent background conspiracies. On the bright side, all these Dargas (she’d checked their paizas when she got them to the clearing) obviously wanted their conditions to change, and were willing to take some serious risks. Tengri willing, Nergui just needed them to buy into her agenda for change, as received from the Khagan and the Seers and the Agency in KK.

That was why she’d lain in wait to gather all of them: so she’d only have to say it all once.

First, though, she had to get their attention and keep it until they were convinced. Fortunately, in her previous travels she’d learned a technique for getting something scared, stubborn, and stronger-than-her to cooperate.
Chapter End Notes

References

English opening theme from "Pokemon" TV show by Satoshi Tajiri & Ken Sugimori
Thank you, White Rats Morris Dancers, for performing with bells sewn directly to your skin. Better y’all than me.

“...You’re probably wondering why all your noses are sewn together.”

Nergui had pulled out all the nerve-needles and splashed water on her captives to wake them up. They lay in a star pattern, their heads at the center, connected by a fine silk cord running through piercings in their nasal septa. They wriggled and swore as they came to, but hushed when she dramatically cleared her throat.

“Tangut Darga, Ali Darga, Bu-Tan Darga, and Doldrum Darga,” Nergui fanned out the fistful of copper *paizas* she’d confiscated. “Hello. I’m Agent Khenbísh’s Nerguitani from Intelligence in KK. An Imp peri. I caught you. It wasn’t very hard. Lucky for you, I’m your friend, unlike the Blessed Emir back there.”

As protests began, she held up a blocking hand. “No, no, no! You guys” (a quick eyeball-slide in Ali’s direction) “have to hear me out. That’s the only reason I did the camel-bridle thing.” Like the horses, the dogs, and everything else, Mongolia’s camels were only minimally tamed. Once they got to know who took care of them, most were allowed to wander when they weren’t working because they’d be back for dinner and drinks. When it was time for work, camels often needed a little extra motivation. The traditional Mongolian camel bridle --- a wooden spike through the camel’s nasal septum with a rope attached --- was motivation tried and true.

Nergui’s design adaptation for use on humans, using a much smaller sterilized steel needle and clean heavy-duty silk thread, was kinder and safer.

“After a short chat I’ll let you go,” she reassured her string of mutineers. "Tomorrow, when I get to your Noyan’s camp, you will all meet me for the very first time. You will have never seen me or heard of me before. I won’t know anything about you either. Got it? Good. And... I don't expect any of your noses to get infected, but see me if it does' I’ve got some goop for that.

“Now: There are four of you here. Each of you went separately, in disguise --- sort of --- to talk to Sadettin Kobek. Are any of you surprised to see the others? All of you? Uh-huh. All right, how many of you agreed to kill Noyan in exchange for command of his troops? No, you don’t have to turn your head; just wave a hand in the air. Wave it like you just don’t care, that's right. And how many of you agreed to kill one of the other people I've stitched you to? Oh, nice circular firing squad here. And how many promised to support Sadettin Kobek replacing the Sultan? Mm, hmm, you get the idea.

"So if *any* of these conflicting plans had been allowed to play out, Noyan would be dead... but so would whoever killed him.... and so would anyone who knew of the plan. And just on the off chance Sadettin might have missed anybody, they’d still be guilty of mutiny under the Yasa. Which is a capital crime --- but, hey, what isn’t, am I right?
"And for what? Hm?"

"For a little... bit... of money."

Nergui blew out her breath and shifted her weight, hands on hips, channeling Auntie Altansarnai from the camp of her childhood. Nergui’s mom’s displeasure was like a splash from a scalding geyser, but Auntie Altansarnai had a way of killing you one gentle raindrop at a time. "There’s more to life than a little bit of money, you know..." she continued, sounding oh, so gently sad.

"So here we all are. On this beautiful night. But lucky for you, I do understand it.

"I know things have really sucked for you guys lately. Ogedei Khagan sent me because he knows things have sucked. Of course he does; it’s a gossipy old hemisphere. The battlefront out here seems to have bogged down lately. To our great Genghis ---"

"--- may he ride forever in the sky --- “ the Dargas chimed in sheepishly.

"--- bogging down is the next worst thing to losing. In a bogged-down battlefront you get starvation, disease, long-term imprisonment, and other badnesses that need time and stagnation to grow. People go stir-crazy and blood-simple. That's atrocity weather. Also, every day you bog down is a day the enemy's got to try and pull its act together. Better to keep moving quickly, the Great and Wise would say, even if it means having to quickly kill them all and straighten it out in the next incarnation.

"Do you know what Greater Mongol’s most valuable treasure is? Not gold. Not steel. Not the silver booze-dispensing tree in front of the palace, though that’s at least in the top five. Not even our amazing people, though I bet you thought I’d say that.

"It’s our undefeated record. Mongols! Don’t! Lose!

It’s true. We have not lost even a single battle while we’ve been uniting Greater Mongol. Can you conceive of what that’s worth? Of how many kinds of piss it scares out of every other nation on earth? They have no idea where to even start with us, because so far nothing has worked.

"But it’s such a fragile treasure, my friends. Fragile as a bubble in a pond. As soon as somebody does beat us, everybody else will suddenly think they can too. And sure we'll still win in the end, but it'll cost us more blood because the other guys will really try, and it'll cost us more sleep because we'll always have to watch our backs. Always.

"This battlefront started bogging down because we came in with a few wrong assumptions and it took us a while to find out... but also because these Turkmen are tough. They live like us and they understand how and why we fight, but they don’t understand the advantages we offer as allies. Maybe they fight us because they’ve gotten so bored with fighting each other.

"If any of you were with Baiju Noyan in Persia or Georgia or Azerbaijan, you know what he can do. All that victory! All those spoils! Lately, though... lately it seems like you can't count on seeing the next sunrise even on days of no battle. Our Khagan knows about it even though communication out of here's been scarce to nonexistent lately. And he knows it has to be fixed because if it gets much worse we might... lose.

"That's why he sent me. Besides an Imp and a peri, I’m a doctor and a shaman. I’m trained to deal with illness, madness, enchantments, possessions, hypnosis, or plain everyday bullshit and bad advice. Whatever the hell happened out here, I’ll find it. And I’ll either fix it or I’ll pidge KK to call the game.

"Don't get me wrong; after I fix it, it'll still be a wartime army and that comes with an irreducible
minimum ration of shit. The Turkmen and Seljuks will still point swords at you; they won’t trade them in for scented peacock feathers. You won’t get a piece of Turkish delight on your pillow every night. What will change, though, is that you will not be in more danger from your own commander than from the enemy. And you’ll be moving forward, winning again.

She fell silent. One of her captive audience --- Tangut, she thought --- waved a hand in a bid for attention. “That all sounds great, Doc, but what if he just kills you as soon as he sees you? None of your plans will come to much.”

"Very true, and I’ve heard he does that. While you should never underestimate what a shaman of Tengri can do from beyond the grave, things will work way better if I stay alive for now. So I’ll be wary, but I want you guys to back me up if you have to. I also need you to put a temporary hold on all your plans for killing Noyan and killing each other or killing the Sultan and whatever else you’ve got going with Sadettin Kobek. You cannot trust him any farther than you can pound a cooked noodle into a tree trunk. Don’t tip him off by saying anything; just be unavailable for a while. Let him get wrapped up in whatever other intrigues he’s got going; he seems to have plenty. Then, if anything does go wrong with my mission, you can just go back to him, make up an excuse, and pick back up where you left off. Or wait for whoever the Khagan sends to find out why I went missing; he, she, or they might just torch everything and start over.

"I know I may be putting you in some deep shit, but it’s not really any deeper than what you’re already in. I won’t be safe either; every part of me will be on the line in ways you wouldn’t believe if I told you. Let’s just say a death in battle is only one way to give your body for the State.

"Wave your hand if we’ve got a deal, so I can cut you loose and see you tomorrow."

"You gonna go along with it?” Sweet Ali asked Tangut, wrinkling a stinging nose.

"Sure, why not?"

"You think she’s got a chance?” Doldrum asked.

"Like an abandoned baby bunny in death worm country after a summer rain. But it’ll sure break up the monotony.”

Chapter End Notes

References
_Legends of the Gobi_, 2001 documentary narrated by Derek Jacobi
_Fargo_, 1996 Coen Bros. movie
Chapter Notes

Thanks, late nights, for quelling all the background noise and revealing what escaped our daytime attention.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui headed for the cart, closely and protectively trailed by Gemtsen. She yawned at the moon. It had been a busy night. Tomorrow, when she expected to reach Baiju Noyan’s camp, would probably be a busy day. She would check the thundermix one more time and then get some sleep.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw what looked like several tiny yellow lights through the trees. They were about where the caravanserai should be, but she hadn’t seen it from this angle before.

Spying is never having to say “It’s none of my business.”

This was a different side of the compound from the one overlooked by the Pine-nut Gallery. The wall was high here, and the ground near it was kept bare of climbable objects. However, one or more enterprising souls had dug out sections of mortar here and there, making narrow slits in the wall. The lights she had seen were little slivers of the diffuse light from inside the caravanserai, leaking through the slits in the wall. Sure enough, when Nergui looked through a slit she could see a small private dining room. Emir Sadettin Kobek was daintily dipping his fingertips in a bowl of water and drying them with a large cloth.

When Nergui had approached the wall, she didn't intend to stay long. Although people inside the dining room wouldn't be able to see her because of the wall, on this moonlit night she would be conspicuous from the back to any patrolling sentry who rounded the corner. She didn’t know the significance, if any, of having the entire wall to herself at the moment. Maybe the risk of being spotted was really high right now and she was the only one who didn't know it. Or maybe nobody expected anything interesting to happen on this side of the building at this particular time. Or maybe it was just late and the whole locality was winding down for the night. She was picking up no intuitive impressions one way or another, but guessed it was the better part of valor to just have a quick gawk and call it a night.

She moved over to the next slit and peered in. And, apparently forgetting both caution and fatigue, became riveted to it.

She had a clear view of Kobek’s dinner companion. The artist from the Agency who drew the picture in her mission scroll had been good. She’d studied it so many times she’d know Baiju Noyan’s scowl anywhere. And it was currently right in front of her, about fifteen yards away, unmistakable even in the deep black hood of the trying-too-hard-to-be-inconspicuous black cloak he wore.

Clearly Turgut didn't see Baiju Noyan go into the building, or he’d be dismantling the walls with That Axe right now.

The Noyan was very displeased about something, and felt free to vent his displeasure on the table. He splashed in the finger-bowl, spilled it, then chucked it out the window. He savagely snatched a
fistful of lamb chops off the crown rack in the center of the table and gnawed on them like a starved wolf.

("Did he who made the Lamb, make thee?")

Nergui spun around. She could see no one. She was fairly sure the voice had been inside her head, not outside, anyway. It had been familiar. Whose?

Thirty or so heartbeats went by and nothing around her stirred. She didn’t even hear any night birds. Had there been night bird sounds before? She wasn’t even sure.

**Birds! Mom was right. I’m hopeless with them.**

She looked back through the slit. It was like passing by the remains of a burned wagon still smoldering, and not really wanting to see but compelled to look anyway. The fussy Emir was remonstrating with the wrathful Noyan, who was taking big bites of a stuffed flatbread he’d skewered on his dagger. The Noyan gestured with the dagger, and about half the stuffing escaped the flatbread and landed on the table. The Emir slammed down his cup and slapped both hands on the edge of the table and pushed himself to a standing position, his entreaties abandoned in favor of threats: “Whoever wields more influence in these mountains than Sadettin Kobek will have his tongue cut off. That goes for everyone, even you!” The Noyan threw down the dagger and the remains of the flatbread and started yelling with his mouth full. Little was to be gleaned from their conversation except that neither found the other to be an ideal dinner companion and each was beginning to doubt the other’s genealogy. At the beginning, though, there had been brief snatches of other topics.


**Ertugrul.**

Nergui turned away and headed back into the trees, trying to make sense of the whole evening. The Mongols and the Seljuks were purportedly at war out here. A recent truce proved to have the life expectancy of a mayfly. So why was the Seljuk Emir meeting the Mongol Noyan after hours in a discreet back room? This was no official negotiation. Both parties obviously knew each other well and there was no love lost there. And what about the Dargas coming to see Kobek about multiple parallel plans to kill Baiju and each other?

Whatever this Anatolian cluster is, Kobek’s elbow-deep and stirring the pot. That crap has to stop no matter what else is going on. I need to report it to KK too. Ugh - I’ll probably have to pidge. Maybe somebody at camp can give me a hand.

And something else: Isn’t Baiju supposed to be from an aristocratic family? How did his table manners get so wretched? Are all his... physical... interactions going to be that crude and oblivious? Ew.

“They swore the dog had lost its wits to bite so good a man,” someone said.

Suddenly the moonlight reflected from something white in front of her face. It was another face: wide, slightly bulging eyes and pointed nose set in a coarse halo of hair and whiskers.

"Geyikli… right?"

The small man bowed with a flourish. “And you are Nobody’s daughter, No Name Girl. Khenbishi's Nerguitani, the forest birds instructed me to give you Shaykh Ibni Arabi’s compliments if you got this far.”
"Compliments on what?" she wondered but only said, "Thank you, and thank them."

"They said your soul was beautiful and terrible as an army arrayed with banners," he said, then cocked his head and gave her a look that was somewhere between puzzled and disappointed. "You don't find it... strange that I converse with birds?"

Nergui puffed out a sardonic burst of air. "Turkman, please! My mom would rather converse with birds than people. You two probably know some of the same birds."

"You... you think I'm sane, don't you?"

Nergui made a gesture. "How many fingers did I just hold up?"

"Three."

"That's right. So by the standards of Tengri shamans like me, you're perfectly sane. Almost all of us go crazy eventually, but most of us spend so much time alone that if it happens slowly we might not even know. When we see each other, we hold up a random number of fingers for the other shaman to count. It's a quick check and a reminder of that fogbank that follows us all our lives and could swallow us up any day."

"That's... quite a way to live."

"It's why nobody where I'm from wants to be a shaman," Nergui shrugged. "The spirits have to drag us in kicking and screaming. Only thing worse is, you get the calling, you try to weasel out. Those folks are really sunk."

"Because, more than a dog, I think she will not want this snake. Control needs death because Control needs to control. Mad dog or sick puppy?"

"Uh --- all right, you lost me."

"Mad dogs and sick puppies go out for a noonday sin. What's the difference? What's the cure?"

"I guess the sick puppy can get well with the right medicine, but the mad dog has to be put down."

"That's correct! What tragic choices such a dog presents to visitor or friend! But Ibni Arabi said I may help you if you need it."

"That's very kind. How would I find you?"

"I'm the hermit around these woods. Everybody knows me. Just ask."

Later, when Nergui was brushing a light dusting of thundermix off her pillow (she'd been able to determine that it was still dry, but a little had spilled) she thought back to Geyikli's valediction:

"O mine is still the lone trail, the hard trail, the best,
"Wide wind and wild stars and the hunger of the quest."
"The Dog's a Vapour" song by Bauhaus
"The Tyger" poem by William Blake
"An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog" poem by Oliver Goldsmith
Song of Solomon 6:10, The Bible (Old Testament)
"Mother Doesn't Want a Dog" poem by Judith Viorst
"Ah Pook is Here" spoken word recording by William S. Burroughs
"Mad Dogs and Englishmen" song by Noel Coward
"To a Lady with an Unruly and Ill-mannered Dog Who Bit several Persons of Importance" poem by Walter Alexander Raleigh
"Lone Dog" poem by Irene McLeod
waking up to ash and dust

Chapter Notes

Thanks, priests of a widely-known but well-disguised cradle of spirituality, for explaining how a person may choose initiation into either a good side or an evil side of a particular path... but evil is a lot cheaper.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Baiju Noyan was having the kind of shitty day that discomposed the sphincters of humans, animals, plants, and rocks for hundreds of yards around him. The plants and rocks were particularly unsettled because they had never known that they had sphincters.

The night before, he’d eaten late (because Emir Sadettin Kobek had to pretend to listen to every whining sycophant that happened to wander into the caravanserai before locking up and ordering dinner), slept badly (not because he and Kobek had badgered each other like rabid badgers throughout the meal --- although they had --- but because the food, as usual with Kobek, had been gratuitously grotesque. Larks’ tongues in aspic? Trout mask replicas? That couldn’t be right) and awoken with a stomach complaint (see previous parenthetical).

For weeks he’d suspected that the Dargas were up to something behind his back. Today he was sure of it. They kept squeezing their nasal septa when they thought he wasn’t looking. Was it some kind of signal? For what?

A couple of the merchants he’d been paying for information had slunk in to tell him they were very sorry but they had to quit because they were afraid of Ertugrul. “More afraid than you are of me?” the Noyan had asked. Reluctantly they had admitted it. The Noyan had shown them the error of their ways and kicked the bodies off the cliff. That was one handy cliff. He should make sure their next location would have one too.

“My headquarters is on the edge of a cliff. Drop over anytime.” Smirk.

He’d taken a “dirt nap” --- a shamanic ritual for communicating with the dead, involving live self-burial --- to attempt a talk with his late battle-shaman and sole confidant Ulu Bilge. It hadn’t gone well and had only added to his unendurable irritation. The connection had been horrible; trying to keep it open had been like a bad inner-ear infection. What was more, Ulu Bilge refused to speak any of the languages they both knew, instead choosing a spirit-language that sounded like someone desperately fighting to keep their viscera on the inside.

Maybe there were things Ulu Bilge couldn’t express any other way and Baiju just had to find a way to understand it. Maybe Doldrum Darga’s accompaniment on the Tibetan singing bowl and tingsha cymbals didn’t match Baiju’s ethno-etheric frequencies the way Ulu Bilge’s drum and mouth-harp had. Maybe that Kayis Alp’s damned huge axe damaged the cognitive part of Ulu Bilge’s soul when it split his head in two down to the chin. Or maybe Baiju should have become concerned a little earlier, back when Ulu Bilge was still alive and Baiju first realized he couldn’t remember the last time Ulu Bilge wasn’t possessed.

That had been right before the Noyan’s own blackouts had started.
Had Genghis Khagan, may he ride forever in the sky, ever had days like this?

While Baiju had been underground, it had rained: a fine, gentle drizzle that those above ground would have barely noticed. As a result, instead of the usual small dry clumps of dirt he had to brush off his hair and armor, there was mud. By sheer force of will he didn’t just take his sword and chop the head off any of the troops assisting him. Monitoring him while he was in a deep meditative state wasn’t a duty he felt comfortable giving just anyone. He was also forced to admit that he’d killed former assistants for bringing him out of trance early, so the current batch would have been reluctant to do so just because of the weather.

As Baiju stomped irritably up the hill to his reception fire, he saw Tangut sitting there with a stranger, chatting away as though he hadn’t a care in the world. The stranger wore a gray jacket with a deep hood, blue-trimmed shoulders, and tiny mirrors sewn on in groups of nine.

Seeing his commanding officer, Tangut leapt abruptly to his feet. “Visitor from KK for you, Noyan,” he said, indicating the newcomer. “Wanted to wait rather than disturb you.”

"Is that your dispatch bag there?" Baiju asked.

The stranger nodded.

"All right then," Baiju nodded as he fluidly drew his sword and swung for the stranger’s neck. He’d thought he’d need to kill again today, and travelers were ideal; nobody’d miss them for a while.

He was completely thrown off when the stranger ducked and parried with a large round drum he hadn’t noticed. The Tengri symbols on the head were unmistakable. Damage one of those while its owner was still alive, Baiju knew, and you could end up under a very bad-ass curse indeed. He backed off.

The gray hood had fallen away, revealing a Mongolian woman grown but still young. Her slightly unnerving amber eyes met and held his. Her expression was completely unreadable. With her free hand, she held up four fingers.

Small predator arranging itself to look bigger, his hunter’s instinct told him even as he said “Four” and held up two fingers. He knew the custom very well, but still felt vaguely insulted.

"Two,” she replied. “I’m Agent Khenbish’s Nerguitani, and not everything I brought you is in that bag, so it’ll be worth leaving me alive for at least a little while. If you want to fight later we can have a match, but under the Yasa you’re not entitled to take my life outright. As a peri, I’m a civil servant, not in your chain of command.”

The Noyan paced back and forth, nodding his head, raising his eyebrows slightly, and scowling. “Far be it from me to defy the Yasa,” he finally said, stopping and scrutinizing her. “I write to KK asking for five hundred light cavalry to replace troops I lost. Why did I get you instead?"

"As I understand it, they’re concerned about a recent scarcity of information and want to know if conditions have changed. Also, several consecutive messengers disappearing.” Nergui waved a negligent hand, “…stuff like that. But if I can go back to KK and say I’ve thoroughly evaluated the situation and five hundred additional light cavalry will nail down Anatolia for us, you’ll get them.”

"I see.” He gave his beard a thoughtful stroke. “And if you… disappear like the other messengers?”

“Then Sun Mergen sends in a specialist team to kill you. And if they disappear too, the Khagan sends in some big-city auditors from the Northern Song to go over your detachment’s books and bring them up to their standards. You’ll wish you’d just let Sun’s guys kill you.”
Chapter End Notes

References

"Radioactive” song by Imagine Dragons

"Larks’ Tongues in Aspic” music album by King Crimson

"Trout Mask Replica” music album by Captain Beefheart
Baiju Noyan quickly looked around to pick out the lowest-ranking troop within reach, which turned out to be the Dargas’ gofer, Orang. A dagger appeared in the Noyan’s hand --- nobody ever saw how it got there --- and, with a whipping stroke like a scorpion’s tail, he slashed the youngster’s upper arm. Orang gasped, but suppressed all other reactions except for slapping his hand onto the wound. *Kid has the sense to immediately apply pressure*, a detached part of Nergui observed from a safe emotional distance.

Those present who had seen this kind of thing before made no move except to draw into themselves and try to disappear. Nergui drew in a breath and opened her mouth to protest, but before she could, the Noyan pointed the red end of the dagger at her and shook off some drops in her direction. “Your fault, Agent,” he declared. Nergui drew in even more breath and opened her mouth even wider, but again he pre-empted her: “I’ve had a really bad day, and now I don’t even get to kill you. Yet.”

Anger and bafflement fought for control of Nergui’s face. Then without warning she snatched the dagger out of Baiju’s hand and proffered it, hilt-first, to the group between her and the fire.

“Heat this up for cautery, please. Sit down next to me, kid. I guess I’m going to work while we talk.” Orang, his complexion grayish-white under its normal deep olive color, plummeted straight down onto the bench.

“Won’t the steel lose its temper?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Not before I do,” Nergui growled under her breath, then, louder: “Don’t anneal it. Just get it teakettle hot. And speaking of tea-kettles, please boil some water.”

”Does that mean I’m going to have a baby?” Orang said in a small voice.

”What? No, son, just going to steep some herbs,” Nergui said absently as she dug through the many pockets of her jacket. “Here,” she handed a fistful of clean loose wool fibers to a random bystander, “get his sleeve rolled up and press this down on the wound. We want it to bleed a little, but not too much…”

Once Nergui got to the routine stitching part, she could divide her attention. By then Orang had a bellyful of very, very soothing herb tea that made him drowsily docile. They still had an attentive audience, since the process was the most interesting thing around to watch. “So, new development not in the scrolls, and I think the whole camp needs to know this,” Nergui raised her voice to carry. The Noyan, absorbed in cleaning his dagger on the other side of the fire, nodded but did not look up. “Emir Sadettin Kobek needs to be crossed off our New Year’s list immediately. No matter what he says, he means us absolutely no good.”

”He was our eyes and ears in the Sultan’s palace,” Tangut contributed when his commander remained silent.

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**scarlet billows start to spread**

**Chapter Notes**

Thanks, sharks, for keeping your pretty teeth so pearly white.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"He may have been, but he’s acting like some different body parts now."

"He saved my life not long ago," the Noyan said, still not looking up.

"That’s good, but he may just be saving it for dessert. I’m just going by what I personally overheard at one of his audiences: he talks as if he’s on everyone’s side, but the only side he’s on is his own. He may have started out playing both ends against the middle, but now he’s playing each side against itself until the last dog standing eats its own tail.

"Since he’s screwing everybody else just as much as he is us, I recommend ignoring him rather than confronting or eliminating him. For a while, he may not even notice we’ve left the table. During that time he’ll leave us alone, and he’ll keep all the other players running in too many circles to really pay attention to us. If things change during that time and we want to resume dealing with him for some reason, we can pick up where we left off and not have to patch anything up. I’m proposing we make ourselves unavailable to him for at least a couple of weeks. Noyan, what do you think?"

Again, a nod, but no comment or eye contact.

Loath to just trail off awkwardly, Nergui looked around for a subject change and spotted a non-uniformed woman stirring a translucent gray viscous mass of something that bubbled sullenly in a cast-iron pot over the fire. “Oh, are you guys making your own boiled-hoof glue? Good for you! It’s great for fixing tents and tack and boots, all kinds of things. A lot of people don’t even know how to get it that sticky anymore. Worth putting up with the smell for a while, isn’t it?"

The woman looked up dully at the Dargas. They looked at her and then at each other. Finally Tangut said, “Put the, uh… glue... away for now, Shokoh. We’ll want to make dinner on this fire.” Then, taking Orang by the unbandaged arm, Tangut muttered in his ear, “Get some guys into the woods and bag anything edible that won’t take all night to cook. Even” (stifling a shudder) “plants.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Mack the Knife” song by Kurt Weill, 1954 translation
the lengths that i will go to

Chapter Notes

Thanks, clouds, for snowing where I can see it but not where I’d have to shovel it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If I understand this correctly,” Baiju Noyan gestured at the scrolls in front of him, “this” --- he brandished a tiny key on a silk cord --- “is for me.”

“Conditionally, yes,” Nergui nodded at her plate while she pushed around scrambled eggs with mushrooms, chives, and hazelnuts, prepared by Orang under Bu-Tan Darga’s instruction. She had watched --- surreptitiously, she thought --- as the Noyan deftly sliced his into equal bite-sized squares and neatly picked them up one at a time. Far cry from the splatter-fest at the caravanserai, she thought, delicately dabbing her lips with a scrap of cloth pressed into napkin service. It was just then that he’d raised his eyes to hers and stared her point-blank in the face, challenging: “What?” She’d looked down, given her head a diffident little shake and turned her attention to getting her kumyss glass refilled.

The food tasted as good as it looked and smelled. She wished she’d eaten faster because all of a sudden her appetite was gone.

”And it opens this… ornament on your ear.” He’d reached over to grasp her earring between thumb and forefinger, leaning in for a closer examination.

”Correct,” she said, trying not to squeak. At least she’d had the presence of mind not to nod again and painfully twist her ear.

”And the significance is that by extension, you… are for me.”

”In a limited sense, yes. If you accept the conditions.”

”And no one else has ever... opened this before?”

”No. We grow up with all kinds of restrictions. I was never even allowed to ride a horse for fear the… earring might come loose. From all the bouncing around.”

”Now wait,” cut in Tangut incredulously. “You’re Mongolian.”

”As Mongolian as shoe-sole cakes. Grew up in the Altai, on the edge of the taiga.”

”Where babies get plopped onto a saddle as soon as they can sit up, mothers sit on saddles to give birth, and old folks have to fall off of a saddle to die.”

”Seemed that way.”

”And you’ve never been on a horse?”

”Never.”
"Wow, how much has that sucked?"

"A lot. But once the earring’s off, I can ride whatever I want."

"Is that a fact?” Tangut grinned widely, clearly appreciating all the implications.

The Noyan still held the earring. “I’m impressed you got this all the way through Chagatai’s Khanate intact. Hell, that you even got it out of KK.”

"It was the advice of the Agency’s seers that I go to you. The Khagan seemed to think you needed it more than he did.”

That has to be a first, Baiju thought a bit sourly. Oggy must really be worried. “You mentioned conditions, Agent.”

"You accept me as your spiritual advisor for all matters affecting your forces here in Anatolia for the duration of my mission, and ensure my safe passage back home afterward.”

"Hey, she’ll be the new Ulu Bilge,” Orang piped up, the combination of blood loss and kumyss temporarily overbalancing food and fear.

"There can be no new Ulu Bilge,” the Noyan pronounced, his face hardening. “He and I were shaman-apprentices together. We partook of a shared soul.”

"I understand, Noyan,” Nergui said sympathetically, “and the Khagan does too. He’s interested --- and I’ve heard you might be, too --- in broadening the scope of shamanic deployments in warfare, because of the success of partnerships like yours and Ulu Bilge’s. I would have been different anyway, because I’m mainly a medic. It was my dad who was the big battle shaman.”

"Wait,” said Baiju. “Your father was that Khenbish?” It wasn’t an uncommon name in Mongolia; the steppes were full of “Nobodies.” To Baiju, virtually everyone else in the world was a Nobody. But some Nobodies stood out. “Who rode with the Great and Wise? Who was considered the strongest shaman in the country, save only Teb Tengri himself?”

"That’s the one.” She’d been too young and too necessarily sheltered to have seen her father perform his most celebrated shamanigans, but she’d heard stories. Many, many stories.

"Very well,” said the Noyan, releasing her earring. He ran his fingers down into her hair, gathering a handful and wrapping it around the knuckles of a loose fist. “I accept.”

Nergui’s mouth went dry. “You don’t have to make up your mind right away. If you’d like a skills demonstration or something first, I could ---”

Baiju stood up, pulling her up with him firmly but not roughly. “I trust my Khagan’s judgment implicitly, Agent,” he said, and began walking her to the large tent nearby. “I believe we can dispense with the formalities.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Losing My Religion” song by R.E.M.
and ev’ry fond hope is reviv’d

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Arabkitsch.com, for “Exploring Middle Eastern Stereotypes in American Music.” You’re up there with two of my favorite documentary films, “Reel Injun” and “The Slanted Screen.” I might feel embarrassed for my country if I wasn’t pretty sure everybody everywhere, intentionally or not, creates and distributes distorted images of everybody else. In an ideal world it would never happen, but as long as people are people, good luck with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Out of sight, out of mind, little puppies, thought the Noyan as he steered Nergui through the tent flap ahead of him. He couldn’t remember the last time his men had acted so… eager to please! I am the only center of attention in this camp. Until I decide whether or not to eliminate this distraction, I will surround, absorb, and assimilate it.

His hand still in her hair, wound up snug to the nape of her neck, he abruptly swooped in for an intentionally rough kiss. He tightened his grip against the struggle he expected. When instead she began to respond in kind, although tentatively like someone stepping out of bright sunlight into a darkened unfamiliar space, he turned her head and ran the broad flat of his tongue up her neck and face from collarbone to temple. It was a favorite tone-setting gambit of his. An unmistakable usurpation of her personal space, calculated to shock and intimidate, it also allowed him to waft her scent over his palate as animals did to analyze each other’s secret feelings. This time, when he pulled back, he met a pair of impossibly guileless amber eyes looking mildly curious about what would come next. How can she seem to have no idea that what I just did is Not Done?

While he hesitated, she raised her eyebrows slightly. His anger, lately as ever-present as the air, flared. Nobody raises an eyebrow at me and gets away with it! He pushed her onto the bed behind her and bore her down backward to loom over her. Then he paused for effect out of habit, despite a growing doubt about its producing the usual rewards.

She shrugged. Shrugged!! Her way was more like an unfolding of raptor wings, but still...

"No flinches, Agent?" he asked her sardonically. "No shudders? No shrieks? No tears?"

"Mmm, not so far, Noyan," she replied blithely, but --- with a hint of apology? Then, with no trace of the bitter, defensive sarcasm that would actually have softened the blow: "Are you used to women not wanting to? I can pretend, if that will help. Should I fight, or try to get away?"

Baiju used his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. His headache was coming back. "I don't need... 'help.'" He knew that his father used a secret brothel of no fixed address, where the women discreetly and exclusively catered to upper-rank military officers in exactly that way. The idea had always revolted him. (Not the idea of rape; that was a perk, or at least a widely accepted part, of wartime life. But paying for fake rape? Squalid).

He sat back up, leaned his chin with his unoccupied fist and scowled: not out of the escalating anger he might have expected, but merely as a thing to do while he thought of what else to do. After decades of practice, consuming a serving of the commodity called "woman" normally cost him less
thought than wringing a duck's neck. Dear, deadly, dead-eyed, desperate Gonchagul had seemed quite different, at least at the time, but with her he’d had an instant fixation spurring him on. Hundreds of prey and one too-brief fling with a demon goddess, however, had in no way prepared him for the creature both alien and familiar who faced him across the blanketed game-board now.

Alien because she didn’t react like the others. If he had to re-think his strategies now, he would need circulation to return to his brain. The prospect didn’t thrill him.

Familiar because she was from home, she knew his friends, and she’d had the same shamanic training (to the extent that any shaman’s training was “the same” as any other’s). He wasn't looking at her anymore, but he could feel that person --- nothing else to call her --- looking at him. The only thing more dampening to his customary ardor would be for his mother to be sitting by the bed saying "Go on, son. You're allowed to. In fact, you're supposed to."

Absently, he released his grip on her hair, passed his freed hand over his forehead and smoothed back his own hair. Suddenly his eyes went wide.

Slowly he placed that hand over his nose and mouth and inhaled. Then he put it in front of her face, noticing peripherally that the fingers were trembling. "This smell." His voice was still commanding, but with overtones of wonder. "What... IS that?"

Nergui sniffed carefully. "Oh," she said, as if it wasn’t anything very important. "I brought you some thundermix and other war goodies. Not with me right now, but if I’m still alive I’ll show you tomorrow. Now I remember, a few grains spilled on my pillow last night."

Thundermix! The sudden elation went through him like a lightning shock. Every war-leader's shining daydream, but not a reality for him or anyone else this far west --- until right fucking now! He grabbed the woman’s shoulders and spun her around and buried his face in the back of her hair and inhaled as deeply as one about to drown. Yes! There it was! He could smell sulfur and burnt wood like the devastated forests of the World Below. The promise of the light! And the heat! And the noise! Even more than blood and woman, it smelled like... victory!

His entire body was transformed into the steel of the divine mountain. His heart battered it like a blacksmith's hammer. He threw the woman's body on the bed face-down and leapt upon it, fighting his way furiously through one obstacle and then another until finally ---

He blew out a frustrated puff of steam. WHY are these things always so hard to get open?!

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 1 of “No Name Girl's Scrubbed Scrolls,” a separate work, extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“Ah! What is the bosom's commotion?” from the 1807 play “Forty Thieves” by Sheridan & Colman

“Apocalypse Now” 1979 movie directed by Francis Ford Coppola
what made you forget that i was raw

Chapter Notes

Thanks, gods of thunder and lightning, for all those storms when I needed them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

OH boy, Nergui thought in mid-air, A yes-rough-stuff kind of a deal anyway. In those few scant seconds that were all she had, she found an empty sword-belt, doubled it over, and bit down on it. The herbal ointment she'd put on would help where she'd applied it, but now she wished she'd put it everywhere.

She assumed a physical state of non-collapsing relaxation, snapping all the tension out through her hands and feet, extending along a plane surface like a water-beetle to spread impacts over a larger surface area. She emanated her Iron Shirt; the slams were still loud and hard, but her reaction was to meet and reflect them rather than shrinking away.

She'd intended to persist mindfully, accepting every sensation and harnessing its energy for her own purposes. Instead, before she realized it, her surroundings reshaped themselves. She was now alone in a small ger on an infinite steppe being battered by an unholy electrical storm. Faint blue plasma hovered on each of her fingertips as she squatted on tiptoe to avoid touching any more of the ground. The plasma spread over the rest of her body and shot out along the length of her spine. Her dress and tunic tore. Her hair scorched.

The ground trembled, dropped, and snapped back up as she fell. Again. And again. Suddenly the land fell still and a flood of warm water, velvety with dissolved minerals, washed over everything. She was floating. She could breathe. She opened like a lotus. There was a fragrance of desert plants. It was as if a door from the tender Upper World had opened into the harsh Lower World.

And just as suddenly, it closed again. A blade of blinding light ripped through the wall of the ger from ceiling to floor. It sliced into her flesh. She knew she was screaming, but the pitch was too high for her to hear.

Ball lightning was skittering over the floor and what was left of the ceiling. She had to snare as much as she could before it scattered away.

She inhaled, drawing it in. It burned.

She turned her skin to conductive metal. The burning stopped.

The remains of the ger blew away in a devastating gust of wind. The lightning and plasma were trapped under her skin now. She was the only physical thing in a freezing, roaring blackness that tried to tear away the few remaining rags she wore.

Far above her a red-orange glow attempted to illuminate a vast, empty space. The ground had lost its solidity again, this time to shallow continuous ripples. A bright line appeared at the base of the glow. With a rumble deeper than thunder, a panic of sparks fled to the heavens. The bottom edge of the glowing line sagged under an impossible burden, then split into lengthening branches and fingers of incandescence reaching down for her. Her breath seared her lungs as she tried to flee and found she
could not move. It converged and swirled around her, a continuous coruscating whirlpool. When it reached her she split the light and heat into spectral components, opened every chakra on her spine as far as it would go, and drew in the fiery deluge until it darkened, slowed, and finally stilled.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Mama Said Knock You Out” song by LL Cool J
you think you're tired now but wait until three

Chapter Notes

Thanks, clouds, for snowing on the mountains where we need you to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sudden and drastic pressure drop body-slammed Baiju into a maelstrom of vertigo. He held himself still and slowed his breath until it began to abate. Feeling fragile as his forcibly drained energy centers began closing down one by one, he lowered himself gingerly onto the woman's back and lay down his weary head, their sweat commingling as the rhythm of his breathing shifted to match hers. When the feeling of falling in every direction at once faded enough to admit other sensations, he realized that he felt cleaner and clearer than he had in a long time. He raised his head and shoulders enough to place kisses on her spine and the point of each shoulder-blade with something approaching reverence.

Thank you, Tengri. Thank you, Oggy. Thank you, Sun. This was very refreshing.

Her skin tasted light and very subtly sweet beneath the saltiness of their exertion. He gathered up a fistful of her hair and inhaled again. It smelled somewhat like a windswept mountain meadow, but there was that whiff of that thundermix again… It smelled like a windswept mountain meadow that was about to explode.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Let’s Go to Bed” song by R.E.M.
the stars will be your eyes and the wind will be my hands

Chapter Notes

Thanks, house-feral cat, for relenting and experimenting with sociability in the late night hours.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In her body. She was back. He was... still. He both lay still and was still... there. In her body. She was not alone in her body.

Deep breaths and slow. Feel everything. Ointment took an edge off but still. As though stabbed, sliced, bruised, stretched, crushed. They’d told her so but hearing and imagining was one thing and push really coming to shove was something else.

She took a longer, deeper breath and took hold of the offended surface with her mind and... rearranged. Now she felt an ambitious but feasible stretch, just outside the boundary of comfort. Above her, the man stirred slightly, probably aware of the reshaping of their intersection. If he asks me what I did I’ll say I added another dimension. And if he asks me to reassure him that it’ll let him out I’ll say “Probably.” Just to be a little bit mean.

So that’s this part of the mission over with, she told herself, hunting through her psyche for lurking emotions but not really finding any. Will the rest be easier? Or harder?

I’d better not doze off until I make sure the bond will hold.

She opened up a soul-space just for the two of him. She sat between the bucket of blue lightning and the bucket of red lava, plucked thread-ends from both and fed them onto a giant drop-spindle that hung below an opening in the floor. She folded time and it was done, all blended and wound from the spindle to a spool. On the shadow of his body, the meridians glowed yellow and the functional points glowed green. She unwound etheric leads from the spool and attached them. Here. There. Main networks. Redundant systems. With a sickle blade made of moonlight she cut all the distal ends. She attached them in groups to her fingers.

When her mission was over, she could remove all this, ideally without ever having to use it. But she had a strong feeling she would be using it. At least once. Probably more. Probably within the next 24 hours.

Now, though, she could rest.

Except that she couldn’t. Back in body-space, he was awake. She hadn’t finished a moment too soon. He lifted his upper body away from hers. On her back, cool air met sweat and raised gooseflesh in the mild Anatolian night. Maybe this is the part where he rolls over and falls asleep.

Except that he didn’t. He rummaged under the side of the bed and retrieved something. There was a rice-papery crackling. In front of her face he held a fingertip-sized dollop of something that smelled like roses and looked like tar. “Take some of this,” he said. “It should help with the pain. Then we’re going again.”
Oh, we are, are we? she thought a bit sourly. Is this that military thing where they never apologize and never explain? This wasn’t the time to make a scene, though. Besides, she thought she recognized most of the components of the herbal tar and looked forward to making the acquaintance of the combination.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2 of “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls,” a separate work, extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References
“Far From Any Road” song by the Handsome Family
“She Wore a Yellow Ribbon” 1949 movie directed by John Ford
the first cut won’t hurt at all

Chapter Summary

Thanks, old friends, for looking me up, even though I have no idea what to say I’ve been up to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Baiju gave the rhythm its head and let it take over. Hooves never shod, galloping endlessly over black flowering soil. Long, slow strokes of the bow, drawing appreciative sighs and moans from the resonant string.

Trusting his body to carry on predictably, like a horse that knew its way home, he detached his soul and left the rest to its own enjoyment. Floating in this form, he slipped over the threshold of the woman’s aura like smoke through a keyhole, seeking her sanctuary.

Casing other people's sanctuaries --- those dream-places they kept on the spirit planes as retreats, sheltered from external hardship or unrest --- had been a hobby of his since he first began shamanic training. Finding them had always been easy for him, especially when using entheics. Even people without conscious spiritual inclinations often had sanctuaries they visited in dreams. The variety was fascinating, and the features often reflected the dreamer's personality.

Baiju's own was a cave-riddled cliff where the scrub desert met the true Gobi. One entered by descending from the stark, empty summer sky. The soughing of scattered breezes and the impatient clacking of scavenging birds' beaks gave way at low altitude to the susurrus of reptile scales over warm rocks. Inside the caves, water dripped from a few stubborn caches of ice. The swollen droplets' impacts shook spider webs, setting the usually patient occupants into a fidget. Wherever Baiju traveled, he kept his desert with him and listened to what it had to say.

Ogedei's sanctuary had been a vast mountain-ringed grassland in mid-spring with cranes overhead, taimen leaping in an impossibly tangles river, elk munching the shrubbery, and well-fed tigers lounging in the golden afternoon light. Sungurtken's sanctuary had been a high, rocky outcropping frequented by majestic birds of prey, quarreling rams, and extremely cautious rodents who watched everything from sheltered crevices.

And now here was the little Agent's sanctuary: an evergreen forest glade with a waterfall a little shorter than the tallest of the trees. The day was sunlit and mild, but scattered dustings of pristine snow persisted in shady spots. Animals were everywhere, mainly small predators just like her. Foxes and lynxes turned to look at him with only mild curiosity, then walked on. A family of otters sporting in the waterfall ignored him. A large frog with luminous-looking skin blew a defiant throat-sac bubble. Delightful!

As Baiju wondered at its apparent lack of wards and other defenses and imagined how he might annex it to his own astral territory, a warning whiff prickled the hairs on the back of his neck. Large rocks along the riverbank leaned on each other to form a natural den he hadn't noticed before. An ominous snarl sounded from its depths, accompanied by a sharp and hostile musk. Two bared rows of sharp yellow-white teeth and a dribble of saliva were just barely illuminated by the outside light.
All right, perhaps not so undefended after all, Baiju reconsidered, and smoothly backed away.

His body, when he returned, was preoccupied by its own pursuits and hadn't missed him a bit. Satisfied, he allowed himself to break as a succession of waves across the woman’s sinuous shore, and felt an answering tremor begin in her body, grow until she nearly flung him off the bed, then subside like a brief summer squall and leave her bonelessly relaxed.

That's... unusual. Had his body injured hers somehow while his consciousness wandered elsewhere? He suddenly realized that his hands had fallen above her ear on one side of her head and against her cheek and jaw on the other side. The merest twitch in the right direction could snap her neck.

No, he decided. Instead he ran his fingers through her hair, gathered two loose fistfuls, and held them to his nose as he lay his head on her shoulder-blade and surrendered to his first real sleep in --- how long? As long as she doesn't try to kill me, she can have at least another day.

Chapter End Notes

References
“Duel” song by Propaganda
“The Simpsons” TV show episode 16
the second only makes you wonder

Chapter Notes

Thanks, things that get worse before they get better... but then actually GET better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Oh, now this is different*, Nergui silently observed. *More hypnotic. Less ballistic. Goes very well with the entheics. Almost a shame I really should keep working on the mission, but the water-clock’s dripping and I need to carpe every diem I’ve got.*

Her soul sat in her sanctuary, closed her eyes, counted backwards, and asked to go where she could make the biggest immediate difference. In mid-fadeout, she felt Baiju’s projection come slinking down the hill. He was pretty stealthy, but this was a place she’d created. Here, she was like Mother Nature. *So that’s what he’s up to! It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature. But... there’s probably not much damage he can do, and that doesn’t seem to be on his mind anyway. I just hope the Shredding Stench doesn’t get too annoyed; that musk stink hung in the air for days last time.*

She wondered if she’d land in his sanctuary, but as soon as she opened her eyes she knew this wasn’t a safe place for anyone.

She walked across a battlefield after the battle was over. A setting sun painted the undersides of the clouds a lurid crimson. Bodies and weapons lay around, but became indistinct, as if sculpted out of sand, when she looked directly at them. Ravens and crows of all sizes flapped and swooped overhead. Additional corvids hopped and… ew: feasted… underfoot. In the distance, thundermix --- or maybe real thunder --- flickered and boomed through rising smoke.

She carried a pair of water buckets on a yoke over her shoulders. She wore neither shaman’s ceremonial robe nor doctor’s coat nor her official jacket, but an apron and a head-scarf worn in some parts of the Gobi by traditional layers-out of the dead. She walked with the preternaturally smooth, almost gliding gait they learned so that no precious water would be spilled except intentionally by the action of spirits. In the waking world she had known none of these things.

The surface over which she walked was about an inch of sand over solid bedrock, horizon to horizon; true Hard Desert with nothing to offer anything living. The real Gobi, the border zone too dry for scrub where a savvy camel could still find enough moisture and nutrition to survive, was a jungle compared to this.

Ahead of her, a space in the air roiled and whined. As she walked, there were fewer birds in the air and more on the ground, and the birds on the ground were quieter and more fixated in the same direction. Soon they crowed so densely that her ragged-edged skirt brushed against their feathers.

The roiling disturbance of air resolved itself into a cloud of insects, flying in furious spirals but unable to descend. Below, Baiju Noyan’s blood-covered body lay stretched out formally on its back. A great flock of carrion-birds encircled it at a distance of a few feet, silently watching.

Nergui stepped past the innermost ring of beaked observers and set down her buckets. Taking a cloth from one of the buckets, she wring out the excess water back into the bucket and whipped the cloth straight into the hovering swarm of insects. Agitated, they thrummed in protest, but finally began to
That’s right, buzz off! The insect presence banished, Nergui looked down and snapped the cloth at a couple of the birds who had edged closer while she was otherwise occupied.

She dipped and wrung the cloth again and applied it to his face. The blood had dried in a thick, stubborn layer. She re-dipped the cloth, squeezed out only enough water to prevent dripping, and pressed it against his forehead, temples, and cheekbones while she prayed to Bayatur Tengri, protector of heroes and Dayisun Tengri, receiver of war sacrifices. This time the blood liquified and drained away when the cloth was lifted. More seemed to exude from the pores as she wiped, but after more work the skin was clean. She repeated the process for the chin and neck, then pressed her fingertips against the collarbone. The pulse was weak and thready, but it was there.

After cleaning both of his hands, she looked up and noticed a curious thing. The left side of the halo of blood that had run off his face and neck was a visibly different shade from the right side. She began unfastening his armor so she could wash underneath it. The laces were stiff and sticky. As she worked against the resistance, she touched her tongue to her upper lip in concentration, then licked her lips as her breathing quickened.

Do I have some kind of kink for taking warriors’ armor off? Or are the sensations I’m having here projected by what’s --- mmmm --- happening to my body in waking space?

She became aware of weight and sharpness. Birds were perched on her head and shoulders, holding on with their talons. She tried to discourage them by flicking the wet cloth, but the talons only gripped tighter. She gave up; she was only slightly unsettled by them and soon became resigned. Then a couple of them fluttered over to the body. She was ready to attack them with the cloth if they tried to injure them, but they only pulled at the laces that held his armor on, helping her remove it.

Do these birds like him? she wondered. Do they appreciate all the meals he prepares for them every time he takes to the battlefield? Or have they only become curious about his flavor and anxious to discover it? She wished she could ask her mom, the expert on all things with feathers (except possibly hope) but this was a secret mission and anyway her mom had no patience with her. “Useless as a hooked bill on a woodpecker” was only one of her expressions.

Under his armor and the dried blood, his skin was criss-crossed with scars from swords, knives, and arrows. The work did not go quickly. She reached out beyond the sky to the Well of Songs and began to sing the inexplicable lyrics that coursed through her down a thread of white light. She sang the song about the good-hearted woman; she sang the song about the knife. She sang the ballad of the legendary grave-digging champion, the Ace of Spades. She sang about not fearing the reaper, not paying the ferryman, knocking on heaven’s door, taking the highway to hell, and coming back in black.

A large raven pulled another wet cloth out of the bucket and dropped it in her lap, soaking her apron through. She picked it up and remembered something. What had Ai Fan called the extra mojo she’d just unlocked? “The Power Of Clouds and Rain.” She held the wet cloth high over her target’s body and wrung it out as she entreated the black-and-red sky, “I call on the power of clouds and rain!” And it began pouring down, only over her immediate area, sending a few of the birds flapping and screeching for cover but most of them fell silent and hung on. As she lifted off the last piece of the armor, lightning flashed and the world went white.

She was back in a body heavy with exhaustion and humming with residual sensation. She found herself accepting the man’s co-occupation of space.. except for his hands on the sides of her head, behind one ear and in front of the other. But as she pondered how to get his attention without triggering the completion of the snap-and-twist motion for which he seemed poised, he took the initiative to move his hands to less dangerous positions. Good choice, hot-shot, she half-dreamed. Good choice.
References

“Duel” song by Propaganda
“The Birds” film by Alfred Hitchcock
“Snow White” movie by Walt Disney (Helpful Bluebird scene)
"'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers" poem by Emily Dickinson
“Walk of Life” song by Dire Straits
“Ace of Spades” song by Motorhead
“Don’t Fear the Reaper” song by Blue Oyster Cult
“Don’t Pay the Ferryman” song by Chris de Burgh
“Knocking on Heaven’s Door” song by Bob Dylan
“Highway to Hell” song by AC/DC
“Back in Black” song by AC/DC
the third will have you on your knees

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Afro-Caribbean drummers, for introducing a song to the “Citizens of Heaven.”
Sounded like Tengri to me...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As always, Nergui awoke carefully, in case of snakes. Continuing to breathe like a sleeper, she intentionally noticed without opinion the numerous pains in her body, the proximity and quiet wakefulness of the man beside her, the shape of the negative space in the tent, the activity of humans, animals and spirits outside. Cooking, weapon sharpening, and armor repair went on with minimal, subdued exchange of words.

"Finally you return from Dreamland," Baiju Noyan muttered half-absently. "Fetch me a kumyss before my skull falls apart," and with a firm foot in the small of her back...

...he pushed her out of the bed.

AND there it is, she concluded, getting to her feet and ruefully dusting off her hands and knees. All right then. Time to test the NEW system.

Facing away from him, she closed her hand into a fist, yanking the invisible etheric leads she’d attached to him the night before. They snatched the breath from Baiju Noyan’s lungs, drained the volition from his muscles, and dissolved all the buffers between him and his hangover. She waited until she was sure she had his attention, then looked over her shoulder at him with the leads still in her grip.

"Ah, Noyan, ah!" she scolded him, then hitched a hip to one side and continued in two distinct voices, "Do you think our Great Khan Ogedei loves you so much that he’d go to this kind of trouble to send you just another disposable paper doll?"

Even as he struggled to move, breathe, and not vomit, Baiju had to come to Tengri and admit to himself that he actually had been under that impression. Now he realized that he probably should have kept the blood flowing to his brain just a little longer the night before; in light of the increasingly frustrated tone of Oggy and Sun’s recent messages to him, and considering the somewhat unusual experiences of the night before, that conclusion was highly improbable.

“Even a legendary consecrated blade won’t work a single wonder if you use it to scrape shit off your boots!” she reproached him in that eldritch chorus of voices. “I am medicine, not… dessert!”

Baiju became aware that whatever shamanic whammy she’d thrown, though impressive, was all but superfluous. Her disdainful amber glare would have been enough to pin him to the bed. The sight of her standing over him, smeared with his mud and her own blood, dotted with bruises and as free of clothing as the Eternal Blue Sky made her, would have taken his breath away all by itself. She lacked the calculated, exaggerated, and ultimately predictable visual erotic triggers that made the women of Khongirad famous. Nor had she Gonchagul’s merciless hard edges and sharp corners. Instead, her form was enchanting in a natural, believable way emphasized by a decisive posture and unconscious grace: a wildflower, not a hothouse flower.
He had once called guileful, guarded Gonchagul a shady oasis in his personal desert. This little Agent was more of a high-velocity Taiga snowball to the face.

The risen sun, attenuated by the tent fabric, struck a spark of red light at the Agent’s collarbone. Here was another thing that darkness and preoccupation had hidden from Baiju the night before! Of course, Baiju recognized the pendant. How could he not? Baiju, in the course of his long-ago palace duties in the Kheshig, had seen it on its previous owner countless times. It was not something that would find its way to a rookie intelligence agent by chance. No, it had to be a coded but definite message to Baiju from Ogedei: possibly that the wearer, like the jewel, had significant material value and even greater sentimental value to one or more members of the royal family, and if either the pendant or the wearer were to go missing, Questions Would Be Asked.

Ogedei Khagan, like Genghis before him, did not believe in sweating any small stuff. He was flexible and easygoing, especially for a head of state. People he trusted got a lot of latitude. When he did put his foot down, though, anything stubbornly standing underneath would be summarily crushed.

Good thing Baiju hadn’t killed this woman yet.

When Nergui saw the man’s eyes begin to bulge and his lips begin to purple, she presumed she’d gotten her point across. She opened her hand and let the etheric leads go slack, at the same time feeling the entire floor with her feet to prepare for a counterattack.

None came. He was staring transfixed at the blood smearing her nude belly, hips, and thighs. No doubt he was recalling that he had been the one to draw it from her... and reminiscing about exactly how... His eyes darkened with heat; his breath, once caught, did not slow.

Relenting, she padded over and hopped back into bed beside him with a sunny smile. "Kumyss sounds good," she told him in an ordinary, agreeable voice. "I think I'd like to have some too."

"Hey!" He shouted to the outside world in an audibly hoarse version of his battlefield voice. "Large flask of kumyss! Drop it by the doorflap and Go! Away!" Then, abandoning all rational thought, he descended on her.

"Have I told you," he said conversationally between diligent licks of the dried blood from her skin, "that blood and woman are my two favorite scents?" She let out a noncommittal sound between a hum and a purr, keeping to herself the thought: No, but I heard about it from practically everyone I met from KK to wherever-we-are now. Worst-kept secret on thirty-nine steppes.

His fingertips, archery calluses notwithstanding, found the ragged edges of her flesh where he had changed her fate forever. This mark would make her remember him always, long after he had forgotten her. His pride surged wildly. Touching was not nearly enough. He had to taste...

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 of the separate work “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls” extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“Duel” song by Propaganda
“The 39 Steps” film by Alfred Hitchcock
take away my mind like you take away the top of a tin

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Girl Scouts, for not running out of Thin Mints before I got some.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Maybe, Nergui was forced to admit, smiling at the roof of the tent for no reason, it's not so bad to be dessert.

Baiju Noyan rejoined her in bed with the flask of kumyss and two wooden cups on a tray. He poured the first cup and offered it to her. A definite behavioral improvement! She gave him her most dazzling smile and nodded her thanks. They sipped in silence, each with their own thoughts, or possibly their own absences of thought.

He picked up the empty sword-belt that lay by the side of the bed, held it up in front of her, and ran his finger over the sets of tooth-marks she'd made. “I think this one is my new favorite,” he said. Then, after a moment, “But why do you stifle all your cries, whether of pain or joy?”

She shrugged with a new fluidity, spreading her hands to take in the whole perimeter of the tent. “Discretion. The walls have ears.”

His eyes lit on a dozen or so shriveled leathery ovals hanging from a rawhide thong on one of the support posts. “So they do,” he conceded. “I could put those away.”

He refilled their cups and they sipped again. He ran his free hand over her body, just because he could. "Not exactly as men do, but... sort of. For one thing, I've been told that for women it doesn't have to be the end."

"I don't think I ever heard of women doing that. Are you the only one? Is it a spirit-gift, or did you do a spell or something?"

"I only just found out I could. I didn't do anything special. I've been told that some women do, others can't, and the rest would just rather get presents... but I got the impression it's more complicated than that. It often isn't... reliable? It takes time, or tricks, or certain conditions. The best lovers of women have to be patient."

The Noyan scowled his iconic scowl. "Not one of my strong points. Or my friends' either." Except Oggy. Tai always accused him of making up all those stories, but I stood lookout on some of Oggy's dates and it wasn't always quite out of earshot.

"Well, see?" Nergui smiled and spoke softly into his ear. "If you learned how to show women a really good time, word would get around. It’s a gossipy old hemisphere. Then every place the army raided, all the women they caught would say 'Please send us to Baiju Noyan. He's the best!'"

One corner of his scowl quirked ever so slightly upward. "That would really piss all the other guys off."
"You’d have to be careful, though,” Nergui cautioned. "Women who aren't used to having a man make them feel that good might get obsessed with you."

"What's wrong with that? Let them worship me."

"It won't be like what you’re thinking. They'll throw screaming tantrums or passive-aggressive sulks whenever your attention goes to something else. Work. War. Especially other women."

"Maybe it’ll be fun to watch them fight over me."

"Maybe. Many men think so at first."

"Are you going to get obsessed with me? Now that I took you to the Upper World and back as your first man?"

She gave a small dry laugh. "Not if I can help it."

"Oh. Can you help it?" He sounded a little disappointed.

"I hope so. The Agency sent me to fix you, not break myself. Actually, the first-time factor is an advantage. For all I know, I might have that good a time in anyone’s bed."

The headache that had been chased away by the kumyss suddenly stabbed him behind the eye with a vengeance. Baiju hid his reaction by turning to put his feet on the floor. “Your mission, Agent,” he said. “Lest we forget. Let’s get on with the rest of it.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Six Blade Knife” song by Dire Straits
The Dargas rose at Gegenschein to give all their troops a good morning cuss-out. Abrupt awakenings, strenuous physical activity, loud noises, and unrelenting insults were a time-tested military way to chase any pointless, above-pay-grade worries out of the common mind. After all, on some levels it didn’t even matter whether they were still in the Greater Mongol Army they’d originally joined or a bloodthirsty maniac’s depraved torture cult completely cut off from the rest of the world. Either way, the humans and animals both needed water and food brought in and garbage, pee, and poop taken away. An occasional snakebite resulted from the abrupt awakenings, but there were always trade-offs.

After running their troops a couple of times around the mountain with pauses to shinny up and down trees and rock outcroppings, the Dargas dispatched them to scouting, perimeter patrol, paddock duty, weapons and armor maintenance, inventory, tending the protective shrines and talismans, and training in local combat styles (i.e., getting a good kicking from the Alp recruits). No one in camp could know when or for what Noyan would summon them, but the Dargas had learned to postpone worrying until there was something specific to worry about. In each present moment, no orders were good orders and they might as well get on with their lives.

While Orang and a couple of Bu-Tan’s men made their breakfast, the Dargas thought it might be a good day to break out a bottle of the olive oil they’d looted in a bygone raid and fix each other’s hair. Bu-Tan still wore the characteristic long ponytail of a Song Dynasty scholar. Unlike the Song Dynasty ponytails he’d seen other Mongol warriors wearing, his was his own hair growing on his own head which was still attached to his own body. Though he prudently tucked it away for fighting, it made him feel better to keep it smooth and glossy.

Doldrum, a former monastery boy from Tibet, was experimenting with letting some of his hair grow out and trimming it into patterns. His facial hair would have been sad on anyone with less-mesmerizing bone structure, but smoothness, stubble, or scraggle all made Doldrum good-looking in different ways. Damn him.

Sweet Ali, the newest Darga (and the hardest to get to know), was all but devoid of vanity. He cropped his hair close to keep it out of the way and would rather have it uneven than let anyone else get that close to him with a blade. His whiskers, if any, were a mystery hidden behind the scarf he never took off.

Barbering pairs, where possible, were arranged so each pair’s operations took about the same amount of time. Thus Sweet, who preferred (indeed, permitted) no attention at all, tended Tangut, who had the fanciest hair in camp and required shaving, combing, trimming, and braiding.

"Think You-Know-Who will lie in today?" Doldrum asked.

"We have not been called / For body disposal yet / That is a good sign," Bu-Tan ventured.

Thanks, Mighty Mug (TM), for making a sippy cup for grownups.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Sweet leaned away from Tangut's head and spat into the fire a couple of yards away. "What do you think, brothers: do we trust that Imp peri?"

"'Bats flew past the moon / When I cast the sticks last night / Asking about her: / ‘Perseverance and / A strong individual / Are what armies need,’” Bu-Tan mused.

"Her energy field sure was strong, even when she had it folded away. I think she’s got some heavy-duty allies in the spirit world, but they’ll have to be paying attention every minute."

"I’ve never met any other career spies... at least, I don't think I have," Tangut amended, rubbing at his freshly shaven scalp, "So I don’t know how much they lie to people on their own side. Last night convinced me that at least she's brave as gods-dammit, though, which I respect. I mean, could you take one for the team the way she did? Pretty sure I couldn't."

"I had my blankets over my head," Orang admitted, passing by. “It didn’t really help.”

"So I guess Tangut can kill or die for his country, but don't ask him to fuck for it?” Sweet guffawed.

"Well, now, it might depend on whether I was the fucker or the fuckee,” Tangut backpedaled, taking out a dagger and tilting the blade to squint at his reflection.

"You can’t see anything that way. Use this." Doldrum tossed a bronze mirror to Sweet, who held it up to Tangut's face.

"Dang me, Sweet," Tangut marveled at the symmetry of the trimmed and shaved pattern, the gloss of the long braids and short whiskers. "You are the jewel in the bellybutton of the Greater Mongol Army, no matter how you smell."

Sweet Ali had been promoted from the regular troops on Tangut's recommendation after they’d lost Bortlu Darga. Where Bu-Tan and Doldrum had formal education, Sweet had a work ethic that could drive a sword through a stone. Whenever a job was messy, smelly, or an inconvenient distance from camp, Sweet had already started it before the end of the call for volunteers. He was happy to sit by himself in a cliff cave with a long-distance bow for days on end, waiting for the right target to walk by and be skewered. He’d set up a leather tannery for the camp so no dead horse went to waste. He’d almost single-handedly redirected a mass migration of skunks to skirt the perimeter of the camp rather than marching straight through the center.

As much as Tangut would have liked to take Sweet along as a barber when (“when,” not “if,” he kept telling himself) the Khagan assigned him his own thousand-troop tumen, he suspected it would be a waste. Sweet was smart, agile, daring, and an excellent marksman. If only the guy would mingle more. He was always somewhere else when Noyan demanded the Dargas' company at his dinner table. He never even joined the rest of the Dargas for a leisurely evening pee over the edge of the cliff. Probably a religious thing, Tangut had decided, and none of my business anyway.

An out-of-breath troop sprinted up, stopping in front of the group. “Noyan says he wants the Black Bitey in the best tack and saddle in front of his tent immediately. He also wants Doldrum Darga there with his ink-box and fresh paper.”

Tangut stood and raised his voice. “You heard him, friends. A horse and an artist. That, we can do.”

Chapter End Notes
References

“Alabama Song” poem by Bertolt Brecht
it's the way you ride the trail that counts

Chapter Notes

Thanks, sakura mochi, for getting me hopelessly addicted and then becoming mysteriously elusive (even during the season when they used to be available). I’ve got a darn cherry tree out front and there are recipes online and I should stop being lazy and make my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the interest of expediency (and to limit casualties), Tangut took it on himself, as one of the camp’s best horsemen, to fetch the enormous stallion known as The Black Bitey from the paddock. A pair of recruits especially experienced with Arabian horses then took over, tacking it up in the best parade rig, nimble-handed despite the customary chainmail gloves.

The troops near the Noyan’s residence tent no longer needed to be told to clear a wide path for the small procession. The Black Bitey was the kind of horse that a certain type of horseman (who only ever sat in the saddle and had servants for all the rest) liked to call “spirited” and that those who took full care of their own horses were more likely to call “criminally insane.”

Doldrum was already set up there with his inks and brushes, quietly praying.

Baiju Noyan, in his best armor except for a sword-belt that some sort of beast had apparently chewed up, swept aside the tent flap and said over his shoulder, “Excellent! Agent, come see.”

Outwardly disheveled, inwardly composed, barefoot, and clad only in one of the Noyan’s spare tunics, Nergui stepped out.

”’Her head is bloody but unbowed!” yelled a voice from somewhere in the trees.

”It’s that crazy hermit again!” Tangut muttered to the nearest troops through grinding teeth. “Chase him away. How in the Lower World does he keep getting in?”

The Noyan had noticed, but to everyone’s relief, he only murmured, “Still bloody? Fix that.” He turned the Agent toward him for inspection. A small cut in the middle of a blossoming bruise on the side of her forehead had reopened and was trickling slightly. With something of the attitude of a mother tiger cleaning a cub, he held her head still and licked the blood away. She flinched slightly from the pressure on the bruise, though she tried not to.

He led her around at a safe distance to The Black Bitey’s head. “You’re finally going to ride a horse, Agent,” he announced triumphantly. “Isn’t this a fine beast? Would you like to pat his nose and feed him an apple?”

Nergui suspected that someone was confusing a specific lack of riding experience with a lack of any familiarity with equines. The Black Bitey was magnificent: half again as tall as a Mongolian horse, well-muscled and glossy, black as midnight down a coal mine during a lunar eclipse, and most definitely a stallion. But Nergui also noticed the steam from its nostrils, the little bit of white showing around its eyes, and was that a tiny bit of froth clinging to its lips? See YOU, Jebe, she concluded.
"I’d love to, if you’ll show me how first," she answered the Noyan in a neutral voice, amber eyes wide, so innocent that yak butter wouldn’t have melted in her mouth. Tangut dipped his head to hide an involuntary grin.

The Noyan’s scowl deepened, but only slightly."Mm-maybe later,” he demurred, climbing into the saddle in a single smooth motion as natural as inhaling. “Come on up.” Nergui stepped in the stirrup, grasped the pommel, and launched herself up. Not at all like climbing a tree or a rock face, and not like getting into a boat either. She felt like she still would have made it without his grabbing her ass with such an ostentatious slap, but if that’s what it took to amuse him… for now….

Ow. Between the wide-legged position and the high pommel that pressed into her pubic bone and lower stomach, the whole arrangement seemed contrived to aggravate her sore spots. She breathed deeply and tightened her scalp to pull her face smooth for the benefit of everyone watching.

Baiju pulled out the Sealed One earring he’d claimed and held it up by the silk cord attached to the inserted key. He snaked his other arm around Nergui’s waist, pulled her to him, and grasped her breast, positioning the nipple between two fingers so that it traitorously popped up under the thin fabric, making itself clearly visible. “Doldrum! How do we look?” he called out. ”Does she look uncomfortable? I want the picture to show how sore I made her last night.”

She was supposed to be thoroughly humiliated by all this, she knew. Luckily, “face” was the first mundane luxury a successful shaman learned to give up. The spirits liked to test a candidate’s dedication early on by demanding public behavior that provoked as many questions as possible. As a result, Nergui had long since purged her soul of all but the loosest, most pragmatic concern about what other people thought of her. Whatever her goals required, she could brazen it out. She had the brass mirrors to prove it.

“A little, but she’s hiding most of it,” Doldrum tattled.

Baiju looped the key-cord onto the finger that rested just below Nergui’s nipple, freeing his other hand to yank the hem of her tunic back toward him and up. “Then maybe I’ll try it in here tonight. Hm?” he said softly into her ear, clarifying the specifics with a hidden finger slipped down behind her.

“That’s it! That’s perfect!” Doldrum cheered, wielding his brush like a battle-crazed warrior with a sword. “Stay just like that!”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Happy Trails” song by Dale Evans Rogers  
“Invictus” poem by William Ernest Henley
Flashforward: Kara Koram reacts several days later

A crow on its way somewhere else fluttered onto a windowsill at Greater Mongol’s Office of Communications.

“Is that five?” called out Ukheltuyaa, the nine-year-old girl at the desk closest to the window.

“That’s five,” confirmed Ildangerel, her eleven-year-old supervisor. “Treat it and bring it in.”

The Office of Communications was shared between the Agency and the new Department of Imperial Infrastructures. One good result was that they never ended up at cross-purposes. Another was that it attracted very bright young interns with a knack for encryption, decryption, and other fiddles to ensure that messages either did or did not reach the addressees. The most common first stop for the interns was a B.S. (Bird Services) job.

Pigeons, with their homing abilities, were tried and true for long-range communications to fixed points. The Office of Communications was experimenting with crows, which did not home the way pigeons did but were much smarter, as a possibly more flexible local-area messaging system. Crows could remember multiple locations within a limited range. For now, each location was associated with a particular treat. If someone gave them a recognized treat and sent them off, they would get another one when they arrived at the corresponding location. During this trial period, the Bird Services interns were intercepting and weighing every fifth crow to make sure all the treats weren’t making them too fat to fly.

It was important to weigh only the bird, not its payload. Ukheltuyaa carefully removed the small scroll from its leg. While Ukheltuyaa weighed the crow, Ildangerel picked up the scroll so it wouldn’t fall on the floor. Reading the intercepted scrolls wasn’t really part of the experiment, but counting crows all day long got really boring.

This one was just a picture with no words. Without knowing exactly why, Ildangerel sensed that there was something a little bit naughty about it. He told Ukheltuyaa he’d be right back and ran downstairs to see his friend Sharsantoms who worked on Rapid Copying experiments.

A few hours later at Dower House 5:

Joon the flower-boy servant from Goryeo bore a silver tray into the solarium, where nine or ten of the ladies were partaking of tea and mid-afternoon nibbles.

"Crow message for all of you, ladies,” he said, proffering a tightly-rolled cylinder of paper.

"Oh, do please open it, Joon,” Meg pleaded. “Tabby’s fingernails are too long and the rest of ours are too short to get it started.’ It took some picking, but finally the sheet was fully flattened out. Instead of the more common written message, this was a picture. A scowling Noyan sat on a huge black horse that looked as though it would have liked to scowl too. On his lap he rather impolitely held a rather underdressed young woman with wide eyes, raised eyebrows, flushed cheeks, and parted lips. A pendant was visible around her neck. A miniature lock dangled by its key-cord from the Noyan’s finger.

It took Meg a little while to figure out what she was seeing. Once she did, she smiled and held up the picture for everyone to see. "Looks like our Nergui made it to Baiju Noyan's camp. Home and dry," Meg announced.

"Not too dry, I hope,” Tabby bantered, then looked closer. “Say, doesn’t that look like Borte’s
pendant she’s wearing?”

”...Why, I believe it is,” Meg agreed after further scrutiny. “It was a spoil from the first raid Jochi, Tai, Oggy, and Lui all went on together. They wanted to give their mother something special on the occasion, so all four boys and the whole Kheshig pooled their loot and looked through it. This wasn’t the fanciest piece, but it was beautifully made and the maker’s mark showed it came from Constantinople, where our dear Genghis ---”

” --- may he ride forever in the sky ---”

” --- wanted to put the other end of the Silk Road. Borte was delighted with it and wore it almost every day.”

”Wasn’t Baiju one of the Kheshig boys who went on that raid?”

”Yes. Rumor had it that he was the one who found and contributed the pendant.”

”So he would recognize it if he saw it again. Tori probably knew about that, and that’s why she arranged to have it loaned to Nergui.”

”Are we sure it was Tori’s idea?”

”Oh, Tabby. You don’t think Oggy --- “

”Hey, depending on your point of view, the harem wing at the Palace is either half full or half empty.”

The following day at the Agency:

Sungurtekin’s acute situational awareness had served him well as an Alp. It continued to be useful in his new, mostly-desk job in the capital. He heard the panicked scurryings and shufflings from the offices down the hall and sensed the wave of adrenaline wafting through the air. Both were moving closer. He set the best visitor seat at an inviting angle to the other side of his desk, got out a clean teacup, and turned up the heat under the pot before folding neatly back into his chair and arranging to look diligent in an unhurried sort of way just before Great Khan Ogedei walked in unannounced.

Sungurtekin rose and the two men grasped forearms. “Welcome, Khagan. Have a seat. Some tea?”

”What cheer, Mergen? Certainly.” Sungurtekin could see with relief that Ogedei wasn’t seriously upset. Yet something did seem to be nagging at him a little more than he could comfortably ignore.

”Thank you for letting me know as soon as you heard from Baiju yesterday. It helped me sleep better last night,” the Khagan began. “But... Agent Nergui’s mission is supposed to be secret, is it not?”

”Of course. It’s strictly need-to-know, even within the Agency.”

”Then why am I seeing these,” withdrawing a folded sheet from his coat, “plastered all over the city?” Sungurtekin unfolded the paper, only to see an imperfect but recognizable copy of the picture Baiju’s pigeon had brought him the previous morning. The details of the removed earring, the nipple manipulated for display through the covering, and the expression of shock near the edge of fear with the beginning of excitement had certainly come through. Its apparent popularity with one or more miscreants was understandable. Didn’t everyone want to get that “is this even possible?” look from a lover at least once? Slowly he inhaled through his nose until he thought better of hogging all the oxygen in the room.
"I do not know," he finally said, “but I will find out. I sent it to” (forcing his voice to sound dead-neutral) “Agent Nergui’s Wrangler, Chaaganirvys,” and what would such an expression look like on her? whispered his treacherous imagination. “She said she wanted to inform the Agent’s mentors at Dower House 5. Following protocol, they sent the original back to me so it wouldn’t go astray.”

“She’s got a tough mission already. Even if this doesn’t put her in more danger by alerting the enemy to watch for her, what will she think when she comes home and finds herself famous for all the wrong reasons?”

“You’re absolutely right, Khagan. I’ll have the Sanitizers over at Infrastructure take them all down immediately and get someone to track down the source. I’ll destroy this copy you brought me right now,” he vowed, waving the offending sheet.

“You needn’t go that far,” Great Khan Ogedei pinched the paper to cease its waving. “My Chinese and Arabic advisors constantly nag that we’re crap at keeping records, and they’re not wrong. According to them, all the top empires before us have run ass-deep in paper. No one ever throws anything away. ‘Because you just never know,’ apparently. So I should probably keep this one copy in a safe place. For archival purposes.”

Cautiously, like someone entering an unlit and unknown room, Sun replied, “Or… I could take the copy for the Agency file and give you the original? To keep in an extra-secure Master Archive at the Palace?”

"Perfect!” the Khagan approved. “We’ll show those brush-biters,” thinking The nightstand drawer in my private room should work; the maids all know to stay out.
Chapter Notes

Thanks, bees, for the lavender, staying for the cherry blossoms and pollinating their pistils off before the next storm comes through.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Which way is your wagon, Agent?” Baiju Noyan asked. “I want to see the presents you brought me.”

“By the sentry post next to the creek on the northeast side. It’s close. I walked it easily yesterday.”

“And today you’re finally allowed to ride. So we’ll ride. Like real Mongols. We’ll stop at the main paddock on the way so you can see some of our other horses.”

“Can I shift around a little? My circulation is kind of cut off.”

“Of course. This saddle is built for one person, not two, and for speed, not for comfort. Also, my hand is taking up some of the space, is it not?”

Actually, the Noyan’s uninvited finger, still where he’d put it to elicit an unguarded facial expression from her for the picture Doldrum had painted, was starting to feel almost good compared to all the other contact areas between her body and other surfaces at that moment. But she decided to say nothing, lest he think of some way to make her even more uncomfortable.

Both arms wrapped under her ribcage, he hoisted her up onto his armored lap and centered himself in the saddle underneath her. “Better?” he asked, though she doubted he really wanted an answer.

Marginally, I guess. She nodded wordlessly. She had a feeling that learning to ride at the age of twenty-two would be a different proposition than starting at six months old like everyone else.

“Good,” said the Noyan. Then he slid one hand down her belly to rest between her pubic bone and the hard vertical pommel of the saddle. The fingertips curled under her, activating sensitive areas and forcing her to catch her breath. “Keeping you from getting bruised,” he murmured.

Must be the famous Kheshig-boy gallantry, Nergui concluded wryly. Still, she didn’t feel urgent about making him stop.

He inhaled the herbs-and-thundermix scent of her hair and relaxed against her. I never felt, he mused distantly. I used to think. Now I only want and need, and Tengri bless you if you understand it.

Another odor prompted him to raise his head. “This is the inner paddock, where fresh horses wait for us. We rotate the tired ones to an outer paddock to rest.” A tall chestnut mare with a white blaze sniffed the wind, then fixed her eyes on the approaching humans. “That’s The Sweet Georgian Brown. She’s my usual mount. Less visual drama, but also less drama in general. Still, she’s quick as a whip and turns on a tael.” As if to demonstrate, The Sweet Georgian Brown reared up slightly and smoothly turned on one rear foot to trot away from them.

“Do you think she’s jealous because you’re riding The Black Bitey?”
"No. She knows The Black Bitey is just for showing off. He’s the second least practical horse we’ve got. She’s just been unhappy with me lately."

"Which one is the least practical?"

"That would be The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch over by the far gate." A pale, pale gray stallion, almost pure white, stood in a large empty space and glared at them, flat-eared. Lean yet powerfully muscled, it looked almost like an artist’s abstraction of a horse, stripped down to everything that would make it run fast and absolutely nothing more. ‘That’s the ultimate show-off horse in this part of the world. They breed them in Azerbaijan for riders with more money and vanity than common sense. Fastest, most beautiful things on four hooves, but they hate humans with a vengeance. This one dumped his rider, the Shirivanshah’s heir, flat in the dust in front of me as we faced off before a battle. Wasn’t much of a battle after that. Took five of Tangut’s best riders to catch it. No one’s been able to ride it. It seems to hate me in particular more with each passing day and I don’t know why. Good thing my feelings don’t get hurt easily."

When they reached the clearing where the cart was parked, Nergui dismounted, stifling a number of agonized sounds. She turned and gave Baiju a dispassionate, searching stare. "I've got both thundermix and firemix in there," she said matter-of-factly. "Those things will... smell the way they smell. Now: After last night, will you be able to control your reaction to that, or do I need to tie you to this tree as a precaution?"

Baiju gave a heavy sigh that was mostly irritable but betrayed just a hint of embarrassment. "You don't need to tie me up, Agent." Most of his mind was stung by the insulting suggestion, but a shadowed, all-but-forgotten back corner wondered if she’d use a ribbon that had been in her hair. And what she might do once she had him secured...

Meanwhile, Nergui walked around the wagon and seemed satisfied that nothing had been disturbed. She saw plenty of big dog footprints but no Gemtsen, which was probably just as well. She opened the back shutter and crawled inside --- still no Gemtsen, but one never knew --- and began rearranging cargo. Baiju came over and crawled in beside her.

"I thought you said you were going to stay back there and behave yourself," Nergui said, turning and making significant eye contact while she blew a stray tendril of hair away from her face.

"No, I didn't. If you’ll recall, I only said I wouldn't lose control the way I did last night. And see?" He sniffed the air demonstratively. "I'm not losing control." He very slowly pulled the end of her hair-tie --- plain leather, he noted, but newly tanned and supple and of good quality --- until it unknotted and slid out. Then he wrapped it around his wrist. Purely for safekeeping, he told himself, though a little unconvincingly.

"What are you doing?" she asked guardedly.

"I want to show you I can behave like an officer and a gentleman capable of a more delicate courtship style, my petal-skinned inquisitor," he explained, smoothing her emancipated hair out over her back and sliding his hand down her ribcage to her waist. "Your fortitude, resiliency and good sportsmanship have earned you the extra effort."

"And you're no longer absolutely sure I can't put you down like a mad dog if I conclude you're criminally insane with no redeeming qualities, she thought but didn't say. He heard it anyway but didn't react.

She turned to face him fully. "All right then." She lifted her chin and gave a slightly twisted smile. "Let's have it. Romance me."
"You are unlike any other woman I have ever met," he began in a tone that left a hint of doubt as to whether that was good or bad.

"Promising start," she nodded approvingly. "It's a classic for a reason. No matter to whom you say it, it's bound to be true in some sense. Never give a compliment you don't truly believe; every man, woman, child, dog, horse, gerbil, and tree can tell the difference."

He placed his palm on her cheek and gave it a gentle stroke. "Pedantry and sarcasm are anaphrodisiacs. You do know that. Hm?"

She lowered her eyes. "Fair enough, Noyan." The fleshy pad of his thumb felt oddly rugose, as she'd noticed in passing the previous night. She took his hand in both of hers to have a look. That kind of finely ridged scar tissue could only have been made by many dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of roughly parallel individual knife cuts that had each healed before the next began. She covered her alarm by bringing his hand to her lips. My gods, how much blood magic has this maniac been doing? Nergui’s father had told her a couple of times, though it had seemed hard for him, that overuse of blood magic was an endemic occupational hazard for battle shamans. Supplies of everything else could run out, but there was always plenty of blood everywhere. It was a versatile shortcut, but one that could take a serious toll. Needn’t interrupt him right this instant, though. We can burn that bridge when we come to it.

"What sweet words from a suitor might move you personally, Agent?" she realized the Noyan was asking her.

"Well..." She raised a hand to his shoulder and drummed her fingers lightly while she thought it over. "I'd say, something that's about me, personally. Or at least it would apply to very few other people. Shows you're paying attention and didn’t just memorize a bunch of generic compliments from The Unofficial Kheshig Book of Seductions."

He looked down, one corner of his mouth almost fully un-scowling, and gave a brief puff of a laugh almost like a tiger's cough. Then his eyes returned to hers. "How’s this: Even as the smoky scent of thundermix stirs up all my howling inner demons, your underlying aura of evergreens, eternal ice, and faint woodsmoke keeps me anchored to humanity."

"That is very good," she smiled, turning over and nestling her distracting hindquarters against his belly and thighs.

"Now you be fair and do one for me." It wasn’t really a request. His mouth was going a little dry and he didn’t want to be on the spot all by himself.

"Hmm." She twisted her upper body around and looked back up at him through her eyelashes. "Your eyes are like deep, dark caves in the Mother Mountain of the Gobi. Does the abyss staring back at me offer shelter? Or oblivion?" She reached up and drew two fingertips down from the center of his mustache to his chin. "Or both?"

With his own fingertips he traced the inside of the too-wide neckline of the borrowed tunic she wore, coincidentally pushing it the rest of the way off her shoulder and reaching even further down the front. "No matter where I touch you, you fit my hand perfectly, like an agate polished by a flowing river for thousands of years. An unbreakable talisman of beauty and comfort I could carry into battle without fear."

She indulged a delicious shiver. This was fun. He was good at it. Hells, she wasn’t so bad herself. "You... go into battle at the head of the mightiest army in the world, You captured Persia, Georgia, Azerbaijan..." (here, she emphasized the name of each country with a gentle hip-bump.) "Now even
fair Anatolia begins to bend. After that, how could my own poor heart stand against you?" She clasped his palm against the general vicinity of her heart and felt him gratifyingly harden against her hip. *That's probably spreading it on a little thick, she thought, but we both know we're playing.*

He drew a long, slow breath, "Your orders from the Agency were silent about the disposition of your heart," he said a little huskily. "I don’t dare aim... so high."

Several leather-creakings and textile-rustlings later, they were free of confining fabrics and turned with their heads toward the open back hatch to catch the fresh air. Nergui stretched a leg lazily, pointing a toe up at the cart roof. Baiju ran a hand up the graceful calf and carefully pulled the ankle toward him until, without resistance, it rested on his shoulder. "Oh, sweet Umai," he murmured with a soft involuntary laugh, and moved forward, but then deliberately paused at her threshold and looked directly into her eyes. "I'm beginning to wish this went without saying: You've completed your official duty. You may refuse me and I shall withdraw. Even now." He moved very slightly, causing her to claw up a fistful of the nearest fabric like a raptor scooping up a rabbit. "And you should know," she whispered huskily, "that I will not use that for blackmail or other out-of-bed leverage." He backed off, as if needing to think. "But then how, Agent, shall you bend me to your will?" Grinding her teeth, she replied, "I'll think of something! Now please..." As it happened, that was just what he wanted to hear.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Abou Ben Boogie” song by Tot Seymour
the cold reveal of my murder face

Chapter Notes

Thanks, memory, for being able to reconstruct enough of the draft the computer ate when I wasn’t clever enough to guess where Bear Writer put the Undo button

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Assured that Baiju Noyan had started breathing normally again, Nergui thankfully abandoned her vigilance and hung her head back off the tail of the wagon to catch the afternoon breeze. She gave a short, soft laugh. A ball of sunshine buoyed up her sternum and her skin felt effervescent. Thoughts drifted like clouds across the sky of her mind. He was almost a nice guy this time... what is it they say, don’t nice guys finish last?... is it because they make their lovers finish first?... yes, there is definitely a viable person left, maybe not in one piece, but I think all the pieces are here... at this rate of progress I might even be able to go home early. Ride... home early...

Black spots appeared on the insides of her eyelids like drops of ink in a sunlit pond. He was massaging trigger points in the front of her neck. See? Nice... Wait, wait, something’s... HEY

And the light flashed a few times and went out. Yuck, I've been drooling. And she must have fallen asleep in a weird position because her neck hurt. And a row of knobs kept smacking into the side of her head. And her stomach wasn’t just upset, it was furious.

(Well, sit up and ride properly now that you’re awake, you stupid Eyes-In-Front. It's bad enough having to carry it again. You’re a dead weight with a seat like a bag of sand.)

Nergui’s hands had been dangling in mid-air. She moved them around until she found what was holding her up. Warm. Alive. Long hairs and short bristly hairs. A cadence of mechanical shocks like the first rhythm kids learned to play on the mouth-harp. She’d been slumped over the neck of a galloping horse. Black Bitey?

(I wish. The leader-man can’t ride me when he's empty, but when it comes and wears him, it always takes me. I can’t stop it from controlling me and it knows I hate that.)

A fist closed around Nergui’s hair and hauled her upright against the armored body behind her. “Ah! Noyan, ah!” she protested “Now what - “

”Noyan is not here,” rasped a voice like a steel file on glass. “I am this army’s true leader. Everything this man thinks is his, is mine. His body. His army. His horse. And --- “ He yanked her hair and pulled her head farther back by way of finishing the sentence.

”Don’t think so,” Nergui retorted through clenched teeth. “This is the army of Greater Mongol. I am from the Agency of Greater Mongol. We all ultimately answer to Great Khan Ogedei. My orders explicitly said ‘Baiju Noyan,’ not --- who are you?”

”I am Korkuyiyen the Voracious. I answer to no one!”
"So... no one bigger is backing you up?"

"Insolent woman, I need no one bigger, and soon you will find that neither do you. Clearly this man I wear has been coddling you. There is barely a mark on you. You'll both look much better with a little more... color."

"That man’s body is the property of our state. If you can’t produce the proper authorization you’re going to have to take it off and pay for any damage."

"Authorize this, lady." Something large and covered with cold slime slapped against her spine.

_Ew. What in all the hells is that?_ She gathered up all the etheric leads to Baiju Noyan’s body and pulled hard, twisting them a little for good measure.

"Impressive," said Korkuyiyen after a moment or two. “This body felt a lot of pain from that. Now it’s unconscious. Keep it up and you’ll kill him. I’ll keep wearing and using him regardless, though."

_Holy crap,_ Nergui thought as she released the leads. Most spirits didn’t like to possess a body in pain. Whole classes of exorcism methods were based on that. And while a wide range of entities could possess a living person, especially one with training like hers or the Noyan’s, few could move and speak through a completely unconscious person and hardly anything could animate a corpse. From what Nergui could sense, this thing had none of the complexity of a god, a top-rank demon, or even a highly elevated ancestor. An angel might act like this much of a dick, but Nergui wasn’t getting that really unpleasant reverberation in her inner ears that she’d come to associate with them.

No, whatever was calling itself Korkuyiyen the Voracious had the limited (and somewhat noisy) spectrum, stunted perception, and unimaginative appetites of an everyday djinn generated by a natural event right here in the Middle World. But how had it gotten so freaking _strong_? It was like a horsefly capable of carrying off the horse.

Nergui turned a little, hoping to discreetly remove the armored hand from holding onto her breast. _Did the djinn access the Noyan’s memories? Did the Noyan’s hand reflexively go there no matter what controlled it? Or would every Timur, Delkii, and Hurichabile like just push their luck with her like that from now on? “So... Korkuyiyen Bey... what are we doing out here?”_ she asked as casually as she could. They were out of the hills and trees, racing across a wide, flat grassland she didn’t recognize. If she did pull off an equestrian exorcism, she would have to hope that either the Noyan or The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch knew the way back to the camp.

"Taking you for a _real_ first ride! And stirring up bloodshed."

"How come? Do you feed on blood or something?"

"Blecch! No. It’s the fear, dear! The fear that bloodshed brings. That’s what my name means: Eater of Fear.

"You’ve been... disappointing so far. If you’d just been scared like the other girls, I would have come in and Unsealed you myself last night. Instead, I had to just hover --- until this afternoon: until just for a second or two he feared that his breath would never come back. That was finally enough to let me in. Now I have to know. What does it take to get some fear out of you?"

They burst through a treeline and onto a rutted track that led to a large village of the tents favored by Turkmen. Nergui thought of them as “warm-weather gers” because they had no solid doors and fewer insulating layers than the gers at home. Blue banners flew everywhere, all with the same white “IYI” symbol. The last place Nergui had seen it was at the Pine-nut Gallery. It had been stamped on
the head of Turgut Alp’s mighty axe. This must be the Kayis’ obasi.

The djinn in the Noyan’s body drew two swords and continued to ride, holding them out at arms’ length. Nergui seized the reins he’d dropped, but they did her no good; Korkuyiyen kept full control of The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch with his knees and feet. They burst through a gate, where Alps on guard started shouting and beating large drums. They pounded down a wide avenue lined with Kayis banners, panicked citizens scrambling to get out of their way. Before the stairs of a large main tent where more Alps stood guard, Korkuyiyen made the horse rear up while he shouted in a wholly unearthly voice:

“Hey! Kayis! Your mothers embroider altar cloths for Crusaders!”

With that, he wheeled the furious horse around, charged back out through the gate, and led a merry dance around the obasi perimeter. It would be a while until the enormous Alps roaring around with edged weapons drawn --- she thought she might have seen Turgut among them --- could mount their horses and give meaningful chase, but the arrows started straight in.

(Oh, just go ahead and use me for a shield, I don’t mind) was what Nergui picked up from The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch when she clutched its mane and slid down sideways on the far side of its neck, exposing as little of herself as possible. She had never received such human-like communication from a horse before. This one had even mastered sarcasm! But she’d marvel properly later. Hey, she sent out silently. These are Turkmen. They love horses, and they must know how valuable you are. If they’re afraid they might hit you, they’ll think twice about taking a shot at me.

"How about it? Are you scared?" the djinn asked.

"Yes! All right? Yes! I almost peed the saddle and I still might!" Nergui’s words were carried away by the wind as she clung for dear life.

"I can smell it. And taste it," Korkuyiyen gloated. “But I still wanted to hear you say it.”

Yep. Definitely enough of a dick to be an angel.

A blonde girl, less painfully thin now, excitedly jumped and waved. “Hey, Nergui!” It was Yulia. And here came the boy Turali, a golden dog at his heels. “Nergui! She had her puppies! Come see them sometime!” On a platform raised above the Alps’ training field, Gundogdu shaded his eyes and watched them, frowning. He didn’t draw a sword or pick up a bow, but he didn’t tell anyone else to stand down either.

The atmosphere was becoming more arrows than air. Might be time for some divine intervention, priestess. Any time now, came from the horse.

What should I try? I’m supposed to have all this new mojo now. I only used some of it last night. What did Ai Fan call it? My Power of Clouds and Rain.

Clouds and Rain...

The only thing the Well of Songs offered her was something choruses of small children sang on national holidays. Still, it was addressed to an elevated ancestor who was bound to be on her side. So, as bravely as she could, she sang it:

"Tengri bless Genghis Khan
"And the horse he rode in on...

Anyone who’s ever done shamanic workings knows they don’t always... work. Spirits get cranky.
Words get misremembered. Ingredients get stale. The gods never stop playing knucklebones with the universe.

Why bother, then? Two reasons.

Those chosen as shamans have no other real choice. And...

When it does work, it works like a meteor strike

The sky went dark like a slam of Heaven’s door, and the blinding deluge began.

Chapter End Notes

References

“The Devil You Know” song by Anthrax
At the prisoner area of Noyan’s camp, torches guttered under the dripping trees. The sudden cloudburst had rinsed most of the blood and other ritual substances off the animal skulls and bundles of feathers topping some of the poles. Somewhat counterintuitively, they smelled worse now. Nergui, her borrowed tunic reduced to shreds barely big enough for a mouse’s nest, lay like a discarded rag doll in the mud at the base of one of the poles. A twisted stream of red leaked into a nearby puddle.

The prisoners also lay or slumped inert in their chains, as if following her example. The “concierges,” as everyone called the jailers, were nowhere in sight. Wherever they’d run off to, Tangut hoped they’d keep running.

The other Dargas stood behind Tangut at the edge of the prisoner area and fidgeted, boots squelching in the mud. Occasional worried glances were exchanged. An angry Tangut was a shouting, cursing hothead who might strike out unpredictably at people or inanimate objects (though never horses or dogs). A very, very angry Tangut went cold and still as a frozen lake and spoke very softly. Others’ ears instinctively strained to hear him, though, as if they somehow knew that any slap or punch that this Tangut deemed necessary would be no less than a killing blow.

"So nobody saw them leave camp? And nobody saw them come back?" Tangut asked in a deceptively innocuous voice.

"They left by the back gate of the paddock. The archers saw them go, but they were too far away to notice that Noyan… wasn’t himself,” Sweet Ali was careful to keep his own timbre low and even.

"Didn’t notice that they were riding The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch? The horse that lets no one ride it, especially Noyan?"

*The usual assumptions are out the window since the Agent got here,* Sweet thought but really didn’t want to say. *They might have thought it was part of her plan. Who knows what she can do? Maybe charm that nasty-ass horse too.*

"When they came back, nobody could see anything in all the rain, and everyone was running around trying to keep the whole camp from sliding down the hill,” Doldrum chimed in bravely but gently.

That was disappointing. Tangut had hoped that someone within reach had earned the retribution he itched to deliver. The amount of offense he’d taken at the scene before them had surprised him. He hadn’t even been aware of any homesickness before the Agent had come and handed out chunks of carefully wrapped dried cheese and described the progress of the new capital in that cute Northern accent. Sure, she’d bridled him like a camel with a leather thong through his nasal septum, but she’d had her reasons. Now he liked it and was even considering putting a ring in it. She seemed to know the job was dangerous when she took it, and had weathered the first night without complaining. But *this* --- there was just no fucking excuse. It was like seeing a Mongol flag torn up and stomped into
the mud. "Orang," he said without volume or inflection, "would you go get a blanket to wrap her in, please?"

_Tangut said ‘please’ to a subordinate? the other Dargas thought. How in Tengri’s, Allah’s, Buddha’s, and Confucius’s names much trouble are we in, exactly?

"Take her to Noyan’s tent?” the aide-de-camp asked.

Tangut’s head snapped around, but Bu-Tan was already explaining in soothing tones: “While we do not know / What is wearing Noyan’s flesh / She should not go there.”

"Take her to her cart,” Sweet suggested, spitting into the mud. “Leaks less than the tents, and there’s probably medical stuff in there she can use when she wakes up.”

"If she ---” Orang blurted without thinking before catching a pointy elbow in the ribs.

She had a pulse. She was breathing in a faint, wheezy way. When the Dargas lifted her out of the mud, her eyes fluttered. They wrapped her in the blanket and Tangut and Sweet carried her chair-style.

"Wasn’t… Noyan,” she murmured urgently. “Possessed by… Fear Eater.”

"We know,” said Doldrum. “Well, not exactly but we could tell something came and rode him. I think it might be the same spirit Ulu Bilge worked with. The voice. The attitude.”


"Looks like you banished it in the end, anyway,” Tangut ventured.

"No,” Nergui said in a desolate monotone, shaking her head and immediately regretting it. “Went away by itself. Might come back by itself. Unless we shut it out. Or shut it down.”

The wet walls of Nergui’s cart exuded a mutton smell that lifted Tangut’s heart. _Just like home! Even a whiff of… wet dog?

“YAAA! What just poked into my ass?” Orang yodeled.

"Are we near my cart? Might be a dog’s nose. Men aren’t safe. Gemtsen! Behave.”

"WHOA he’s over here / looks too big to argue with / will he eat my head?”

"Doubtful. Gemtsen, come on. Sit! Cur.”

"Too bad he didn’t do that to the Fear Eater. Distract it at least.”

"I don’t know. I’d have hated if it hurt him. Be a lot worse if I didn’t know a little Iron Shirt. And Iron Knickers.”

The Dargas helped Nergui into her cart and walked away. The big Bankhar sat by the tailgate and watched them go. The last thing she’d said was “We’re gonna need a bigger shrine.”

Chapter End Notes
References

“The End” song by The Doors
“Single Ladies” song by Beyonce
“Super Chicken” cartoon theme
drop me and i fall to pieces

Chapter Notes

I re-titled this chapter and moved the original title to the next chapter. The rest is still the same. Like in the movie "Poltergeist" where they moved the headstones but left the corpses there.
Thanks for the phone message early this morning in the uninflected monotone that filtered through the chambers of my anti-sleep-apnea air compressor to become a devotional chant from an alien world. Miking it will be tricky, but so worth it if it works!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Baiju opened his eyes and stared at a tent ceiling, probably his own. Turning his head slightly at the cost of considerable pain, he spied the string of dried ears he still hadn’t taken off the wall and confirmed his location. He was sprawled on the floor near one of the sturdy supporting poles, and from the state of his head and neck he surmised he may have bounced off it on his way down. His throat was raw, his ribs were sore, his innards felt twisted in knots, and his gonads were ready to secede from the rest of his body.

It wasn’t dawn, or even pre-dawn. It was that ominous shank of the night when wolves and tigers are most likely to decide “Damn the knives and fire, I’m hungry enough to chance it.” When a human who is alone --- be he the meanest son of a bitch in the Valley of Death or not --- is most likely to wish he wasn’t.

Where was the little Imperial Agent? He’d spent last night with her, and this morning, and this afternoon, and --- then his memory died and his skin chilled. He’d had another blackout. Lately, blackouts meant bodies. He ignored his many aches and pains (worse than usual; someone must have put up a fight), rose to his still-booted feet, and ventured outside.

His fire was still going, and a kettle was boiling. A hooded, veiled figure sat at the table, a teacup held in two small, slender hands bleached pale by the dying moon. Tiny silver disks glittered on the shoulders. His relief was so intense that he missed a step and nearly tripped.

"Awake?" he inquired politely when it appeared she wouldn’t open the conversation.

"Not by choice, but it’s not good to fall asleep after a hard whack to the head.” Her voice sounded far away. She brushed back her hood, which took the veil with it.

Baiju’s scowl deepened dangerously. Earlier today, she’d had a bruise or a small nick here and there because he’d been less than careful while flinging her around his tent the night before. That had amused him. Now, even in the dim light, he could see that she’d been subjected to a thorough and deliberate beating, and he didn’t find that amusing at all. A subsonic growl began deep in his chest. He couldn’t claim that he’d never struck a woman, but he’d had no inclination to strike this one. Even if he had, he never would have delegated the job. Someone had trespassed on his rights. That someone would pay.
"Can you see if my eyes are the same size?" she was asking him. "The pupils, I mean. The black dots in the middle."

He rose and tilted her face to the light. She flinched at the touch, but quickly recovered. "Yes, it looks that way," he said dispassionately, trying to match her surreal matter-of-factness. \textit{Does this happen to her often?}

"Good. I can sleep soon, then. Thanks." Now her relief was evident. She gulped down the rest of her cooled tea and pushed her cup toward him for another refill. He ducked his head to hide an infinitesimal grin as he promptly poured. \textit{Her solicitous houseboy, that's me.}

She took a small sip, then put down the cup and looked him full in the face, Her eyes were shadowed by the angle of the light again, and one was partly closed, but he could feel it. "Korkuyiyen," she said very distinctly. "'The Vicious'?"

\textit{Ohhhh shit.} He'd been afraid of this. "It's been with us since we came to Anatolia. An ally spirit that boosts hand-to-hand fighting ability. And... motivation. My original shaman, Ulu Bilge, cultivated it. Took our shock-and-awe to a level even Turkmen couldn't ignore."

"Ah," she acknowledged. \textit{With "allies" like that, who needs enemies?} she thought but didn't say. By the slightest narrowing of the Noyan's eyes she could tell he heard it anyway. "Which of you used to carry it?"

"Both. It would wear Ulu Bilge to speak to me, and then when I needed to... perform, Ulu Bilge would invoke it on me. And then later, we invoked it on some of the regular troops. For especially tough missions."

"What did you feed it up with?"

"Blood."

"Animal blood sometimes, or..."

"Our blood. Sometimes captured enemies' blood. Human blood was all it would accept."

\textit{Of course.} "Going back to the possessions. I think you were saying that in the beginning, it only possessed trained shamans, and then progressed to untrained people under ritual invocation?"

"Yes." Though her questions were those of a government investigator, her tone lacked the judgmental asperity he hated. This felt more like explaining his symptoms to a doctor whose discretion could be trusted.

"Did it always need to be invoked before it could possess someone?"

"At first, but Ulu Bilge wanted faster access, so he gave it in-and-out privileges."

\textit{So it could just pop in anytime.} "Right. And did it only jump into him to offer advice? Or when he practiced his skills? Or...?"

"It pretty much had the run of him. It would jump into table conversations and training sessions. It started showing up more and more to taunt prisoners and barge into interrogations."

"What did you think about that? You seem like the kind of leader who... might not welcome that kind of random input."
"It was starting to piss me off. I tried to discuss it with Ulu Bilge privately, but he couldn’t seem to
shut it out for long enough."

"Mmp-mmp-mmm." She shook her head sympathetically before she remembered that her head really
didn’t want to be moved. She’d heard this song before. Overheard it from her dad’s old cronies when
they thought all the kids were asleep. Battle shamans wanted their allied spirits there to help them
instantly in ambushes and things, but open invitations to possession could be very hard to shut down
general. The aggressive, violent spirits that chose battle shamans would be especially disinclined to
graciously vacate any territory they’d entered. “But it still needed an invocation to get into you?"

"That’s right, and I wanted it that way. A commander can’t afford to lose touch with earthly reality
except maybe in an occasional, very bounded ritual."

"Sensible. So…?"

He looked down at his teacup and used both hands to turn it slowly around and around. “So then it
figured out how to invoke itself on me while wearing Ulu Bilge. I would black out and then wake up
with a blade full of blood and people would be dead or badly wounded. Visitors. Local
collaborators. Our own troops."

"And then after Ulu Bilge passed…?"

"I was… apprehensive. I kept having nightmares where we were all slaughtered without an ally spirit
backing us. I quit sleeping even though I’d seen what that did to people; I was that desperate. Lack
of sleep made me paranoid, startling at shadows. It used that fear to force its way in the first time.
After that, any fear around, no matter whose, I was its bitch.” It was a painful admission even to
make to himself, much less this… stranger… He let his palms fall to the surface of the table and
scowled at the Agent across the divide. “So what is the Agency’s precious shiny shaman going to do
about it?"

Nergui took no more offense than if a wounded child or animal she was treating had lashed out at her
in its pain. “Sometimes agreements with allied spirits can be renegotiated when expectations and
results get mismatched. I don’t think it’s likely here, though, because this is what I heard from it this
evening:

“The Fear Eater told me it has basically overthrown you. It’s taken your army, your camp, your
horse --- that’s why The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch hates you more after every blackout, by the
way --- and feels entitled to anything else coming to you, including women. You scare them, and it
uses their fear to get into your body and use it on them. Then I came along, was supposed to be a big
deal, but I didn’t give it anything to work with so it couldn’t get in and it was really pissed.

“I tried to stop it by pain, paralysis, oxygen deprivation… did nothing. I even made you pass out for
a minute and it never stopped moving and talking. It said I could kill you and it would still be able to
operate your body. It dragged me all the way out to the Kayis obasi and got their archers shooting at
me -- and at your body too --- just to get some fear out of me. Then it rained so hard the archers
couldn’t see, so they quit.” Enough freak storms happened naturally around here that she didn’t feel a
need to say more. “I think that broke the Fear Eater’s momentum for a little while, too; it didn’t try to
stop the horse bringing us back here. It went to the prisoner poles and pulled me off the horse and…
well there’s nothing bigger than a handkerchief left of the tunic you lent me. Sorry.”

He gave her a moment, then refilled her teacup. “There’s more. Go on,” he said pointedly.

"Not really,” she said, lifting the cup.
He reached out a hand and stopped its ascent. “Go. On.”

She put her cup down, gazed into it as if for an escape route, and sighed, rippling its waters. Perhaps she shouldn’t expect a right to modesty from this man anymore. “It slammed me into one of the poles and tried to... batter down my back door with some totally inhuman, hooked, spiny appendage, all right? Not successfully, thanks to the Taoists’ Iron Knickers, but not for lack of trying. I’ve seen possessing spirits temporarily change people’s musculature, the shapes of their faces, even apparent height and weight, but this… this was one for the scrolls. Hate to recommend eliminating exceptional specimens, but this one needs to be cut into the tiniest imaginable pieces and each one of the pieces needs to be individually exploded. I’ll find you guys a different allied spirit and build some boundaries into it. Are you okay with that?”

”Yes,” he said. “But you should rest now. Come to bed.”

”Sorry, but I’ll need to ward you first so the Fear Eater can’t get back in. You won’t be able to get possessed by anything else, and your extra senses may be a little dulled, but it’s temporary. You’ll be back to normal when we get rid of this thing.”

”I’d better heal your damages first, then.” He picked up both teacups and put them on the bench.
“Lie back on the table, this won’t take long.” He drew a dagger and put it against the scar-corrugated pad of his thumb.

”No!” she protested. “Noyan? See, that --- right there --- is part of the problem!”

But he’d already sliced, faster than she could follow, and a ribbon of red reached for the earth. “Too late,” he announced. “On... The Table. Don’t make me waste it.”

Chapter End Notes

References

"Lost weekend" song by Lloyd Cole"
“The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You” song by John Sinclair
taste the way that you bleed

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Rohit Purohit, for playing Razia Sultan’s young, carefree Mirza Altunia to remind me of the Chinese Monkey King! Maybe he picks up Hanuman’s self-control and dedication later?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How am I supposed to feel anything with this on?” Baiju Noyan fumed.

“Please hold still, Noyan, I have to make sure it doesn’t tear,” Nergui coaxed as she unrolled it onto him. “It’s for your safety as well as mine and… everybody else’s.” She turned and picked up the oil lamp.

“You have to light it on fire now?” he protested. “That does not sound very safe to me.”

“Oh, be a man,” she retorted without any real rancor. It had been an awfully long day.

After pressing down the unrolled charm-scroll onto the transfer gel spread on his bare back, she swiftly tore the scroll off. Satisfied that the sigils had printed through to his skin clearly, she made sure his hair was out of the way, then ran the flame quickly across the gel. It went up with a quick whoof, leaving behind only the sigils on his skin and a puff of pungent smoke in the air. “I use this on kids and teens who get too open and attract poltergeists and other pests. It’s easy on the human system and fully reversible. If we get rid of the Fear Eater, or learn enough about it to switch to something less… broad-spectrum, I’ll take it off.” The tricky part done, she looked around. “Ugh. Sun’ll come up, less than an hour.”

It was a little like having a stuffy nose, only in his whole body. He could see her, himself, the trees, and his personal shrine-poles, but nothing had an aura and some of the colors were gone. He could smell her pleasant-enough personal scent, her woolen jacket, and the herbs she’d been working with, but not the evergreens, fresh snowfall, and woodsmoke of her home taiga. He could feel the ground he was stepping on, but nothing underneath it and nothing ahead of or behind him.

Maybe if he slept, he’d wake up a little less disoriented. He pulled her into bed, more tentatively than he wanted to. She returned his embraces with easy affection, soothing away the fish-out-of-water feeling and reaching his inner fire through the fog. With no windows into otherworldly spaces to offer flashes of inspiration, he relied on both mental and muscle memory to navigate her body. He twined like a schizandra vine around her warmth, savoring the elongating musculature in lazy feline stretches, and when they reached a point in time and space that felt right, he merged with her effortlessly. The sudden intense sensation, lacking the others that usually balanced it out, took him by surprise and made him hesitate.

Beneficent Bughra, he thought. Is this how it always is for normal men? He remembered overhearing that the thing to do in this situation was to think about something else, preferably something complicated but not very exciting. Names of one’s ancestors. Component parts of siege engines. Teams and scores from historic Dead Goat Polo championships. Gods damn it, it was like having to think about three-day-old gruel while eating a prime steak! How did anyone stand it? By not knowing any better, of course.
Nergui abandoned her brain and let the rest of the nerve endings take over. She felt as if the Noyan no longer approached her as a challenger to be subdued by either main strength or guile. Now she felt like part of the bed furnishings, a large pillow perhaps, to be arranged just so before he slept. Welcome, familiar and comforting, but inanimate. She’d had a feeling that he wouldn’t want to go directly to sleep, no matter how much more sensible it would have been. Why else would he have insisted on healing her with that blood ritual before going to bed?

It had been effective, and it beat the Lower World out of continuing to hurt all over, so she’d postpone the lecture and graciously make him as comfortable as she could. Her body now looked and felt as if it had been at least a week since the Fear Eater’s assault. When he’d shown her his sliced-open palm as a fait accompli and the first drops of red had splashed into the lingering mud, she had sensed untold numbers of ambient invisible creatures sniffing the air. They’d hovered, famished, as he traced methodical calligraphies and sigils on her face, feet, hands, front, and back. When he touched his cut hand to her lips, it burned like chili oil at first, then turned sweet as black cherry preserves for a few pleasant, floaty seconds that were over too soon.

Then she felt all the discomfort she would have felt during a week of natural healing, compressed into about thirty seconds, and had to struggle not to scream. It left her panting in a mist of cold sweat, but otherwise much better. Most of the ethereal pests had been chased away by the reverberations, but they’d been thicker in the air than she’d ever seen them. This place needed some serious work before it would be safe, even for the toughest army in the world.

She could say he’d only healed her for his own selfish reasons, i.e., so her pain wouldn’t be a distraction from his instant gratification. However, for her own personal sake she was thankful to have it done and didn’t care why. For the sake of her mission she had to ask herself: would the Noyan she’d met that first night have bothered healing her at all? He might have declared her a non-responsibility of his and not cared about hurting her more. Provisionally, there had been progress.

Interesting things happening elsewhere in her body caused her consciousness to be sucked down her brain-stem. To allow for his newly distorted senses, she’d instructed her body to match his attitudes and movements, not pushing him or making him push her. She’d lapsed into cerebral thought; did that mean he’d gone elsewhere in his mind too? He didn’t quite seem all there. Still, the friction of their skins did its mechanical work, and she felt the now-familiar tingling as her response launched and gained altitude. Come back, Noyan. She planted soft, feverish kisses on his lips and cheeks. You’d want to be here for this. And he did.

Later, she opened her eyes. They lay on their sides, her forehead burrowed into his chest. “I know what we have to do,” she realized aloud.

"Hm?" A hand moved an inch or two down the length of her hair.

"Ulu Bilge got the deal with the Fear Eater started.” Control needs death because Control needs to control. “We have to talk to Ulu Bilge.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Kill of the Night” song by Gin Wigmore
The mud was cold. It squelched. If Nergui hadn’t summoned rain so real it washed all the scum off the goat-paths the night before, she could be buried in nice dry(ish) soil right now instead. Of course, then the burial might be permanent because the Kayis had shot her full of arrows and she’d died, in which case she couldn’t have enjoyed it anyway. If “enjoyed” was really the word. Which it probably wasn’t.

She held Baiju Noyan’s muddy hand in hers as they lay side by side, breathing through bamboo stalks. She’d discouraged his attempts to hold other things instead; Kraya, the retired concubine from Sukhothai, had spoken of her own people’s afterlife as wildly orgiastic. Today Nergui had serious things to discuss with certain departed folks and didn’t need the waters muddied (so to speak) by that distracting element. Above them on the surface, Doldrum Darga played the singing bowl and a few other troops with some mystical training chanted or twanged mouth-harps.

The “dirt nap” ritual of burying oneself alive to speak to the dead was a new one on Nergui. At home, the permafrost layer was never very far down. Burial wasn’t associated with death there because it wasn’t a practical way to dispose of dead bodies. But when in Anatolia, do as the Anatolians do, she guessed. The Noyan had emphasized that contact between the shaman’s skin and the earth was critical to the ritual’s effectiveness. In case it was true, she’d stripped down to her smallclothes. In case it wasn’t, and anyway on account of the audience, she’d balked at going any further.

She squeezed his hand. I’m ready when you are. Call him.

_Ulu Bilge, mighty and wise shaman, vessel of the Eternal Tengri! I, Baiju Noyan, friend and comrade-in-arms, call to you from across the veil between life and afterlife. I am in need of your guidance. Please hear me and answer._ Baiju did his best, but didn’t hold out a lot of hope. On his last couple of attempts to contact Ulu Bilge, the reception had been for crap. Very blurry apparition, unintelligible thought/sounds. Now the Agent had warded him to keep the Fear Eater from possessing him. He got why it had to be done, but one of the side effects was that any shamanigans he ventured felt like trying to do calligraphy while wearing blacksmith’s gloves.

To his pleasant surprise, though, Nergui absorbed his message and sent it out amplified. Loud enough to wake the dead, which was the point, after all. Then she opened her receptivity and shared it with him. So suddenly it made him dizzy, he was standing next to her on a surface that felt like desert hardpan. Drifts of mist chased each other like slowly swimming turtles. A dim, watery sun blinked and jittered overhead. Strange, unfriendly-looking vegetation emerged from cracks in the ground and whipped tendrils out at passing insects. Baiju had never been able to see so far and clearly into the land of the dead before. When he turned, the view spread out in all directions. Must be a benefit of all those additional toli Nergui had collected while Baiju had been climbing the military ranks.
“Two,” he heard Nergui say and turned back around. The landscape revolved around him, lagging a bit and then oscillating a bit as he came to a stop. Ulu Bilge was standing in front of them, in a translucent form of his former body, holding up two fingers in the shaman’s traditional insanity-test salute. “Two,” Baiju concurred. Nergui held up four fingers in response.

“Four, shiny lady, though where I am it matters no more,” said Ulu Bilge. Instead of a cryptic language of the gods or the inhuman snarls of the Fear Eater, he spoke Mongolian with a slightly echoey version of his original human voice. “B-man, is this the new skullhat they sent you? You must be moving up in the world.”

"On the contrary, Baldy,” the Noyan answered. “From what I can gather, Oggy and Sun think I’m hanging over the world’s edge by a mere spider-ass-full of thread. Khenbish’s Nerguitani, here, is the troubleshooter the Agency sent. If she can fix me, though, she’ll probably sit in on my first couple of battles to make sure I’m back on the level.”

"You said her dad was Khenbish? Khunbish’s Khenbish who slung mojo for Great Khan Genghis?" Ulu Bilge let out a low whistle, coinciding with a small puff of steam from where the two halves of his head were stitched together. “We all wanted to be him,” he acknowledged while making his eyes glow a lurid green. Nergui instantly covered herself with tiny mirrors that fragmented the Envious Evil Eye light and reflected it away.

"May he ride forever in the sky, yes,” the Noyan steered the conversation back on-topic. “Daughter here is a medic rather than a battle shaman like him, though.”

"Still not bad to have around once the blood starts splashing,” the dead man winked at them. “Plus she’s prettier than me. Plus you got to Unseal her. Not a bad deal.”

"You know about that?"

"Hell, I watched, bro... No, I didn’t. I’m just jerking your chain. Maybe I should’ve acted crazier while I was still alive; they might have sent me a Sealed One too.”

"If there was a single complaint I never heard in those days, it was that you weren’t acting crazy enough, brother. Which brings me to why we’re here. We need to know everything we can about Korkuyiyen the Vicious.”

"Wow, that thing’s still around? Is that why you’re wearing that thick-ass ward like a toddler’s first snowsuit? I swear, when that big Alp’s axe split my head open and it finally had to vacate my body, I just felt the greatest relief.”

"That last month or two I started to wonder whether you were still in there at all,” Noyan reproached him.

"Most of the time I could see and hear what was going on, but I couldn’t control it. Believe me, I wouldn’t have crawled into your bed while you were sleeping and tried to eat your hair if I could help it. That was all Korky.”

"Could we start at the beginning?” Nergui interjected into the awkward pause. “How did you and... Korky... meet?”

"It started out as sort of a pet. It lived in those caves we set up as a contingency retreat. I’d go in to get some more arrows or check the water jars or whatever, and it would whistle in and out of the crevices in the walls, following me around. It started hanging around the woods when I was drumming or singing. Once I cut myself to make an offering and the thing battened right on. I had to
salt the cut to make it go away, That was no fun. But five minutes later this really pissed-off little fuzzy squirrel drops out of a tree and starts slashing open my scalp. And that little fucker was strong. I couldn’t shake it. I had to bang my head into a tree trunk until I broke every bone in its body. But when the squirrel fell, Korky was right there, soaking up the energy from my blood. I think I passed out for a while then.

"The whole following week Korky possessed whatever little critters it could and made them attack me to try and get blood out of me. Birds, chipmunks, bunnies. It drove me batshit. But then I thought: What if I could be proportionally just as strong and mean on the battlefield as these little animals? After all, I had to play my drum while I sang the battle songs, so I couldn’t carry a sword or a mace. Just my special drumstick with the shank built into the pointy end. So I went to Korky and told it that if it left me able to sing and drum, it could possess me on the battlefield and take human blood from whomever attacked me, but it wasn’t allowed to hurt any of our guys. It worked like free salty bar snacks! Next battle we had, I took out four or five Alps by myself. It even enhanced the effect of my voice and drum on our troops.

"We had a big victory that day. Remember, Noyan? Korky sat around in me, surfacing any time something looked interesting, for another week or two. But what it found the most interesting was you. You were the Noyan. You ran the show. On the battlefield and off it, your word was law. Opportunities for bloodshed were everywhere and everywhen. Korky definitely wanted a piece of that action."

"It promised me I could astral-project and see the whole battlefield while it did my share of the fighting,” the Noyan contributed ruefully. It did, too. It was like I could see everything in slow motion, making five sword cuts while everyone else was thinking about making their first one. But then it started hanging around between battles. It put ideas in my head, like the caravansary bloodbaths. How daring it would be! How unexpected!"

"You can say that again,” Nergui put in with a grimace. “Who would expect us to scare everybody away from the very trade routes we hope to expand?” She caught their chagrined looks then and dropped her gaze to the ground in front of her boots. “Sorry, fellas. At some point I need to sort out how many of the actions ascribed to Noyan were actually Korky’s doing, or at least its instigation. But I’ve heard enough to be convinced it’s outgrown its usefulness and has to go.

"Before I got here, I hoped that if the camp had any evil spirits they’d be the sensible kind that would waft off if we banished them and stay the hells away if we quit feeding them. And the whole camp does need a head-to-ass-end exorcism, scrub-down, and warding, but that’s just the beginning. If we only chase them past the perimeter, they might only run as far as the next unwarded settlement and we could find ourselves fighting a Korky-possessed Turgut or Ertugrul in the next battle. That’s my freakin’ nightmare right now.

"It helps that things like Korky would probably find the Turkmen a lot harder to wear than us. From what I gather, they believe in djinn as one of Allah’s (s.w.t.) creations but they don’t get possessed by anything on purpose. We’re trained and conditioned as vessels for spirits so we can get their messages and use their power; the risk is that stuff we don’t want can sometimes sneak in and stuff we do want might be tempted to take advantage. Korky wants to take Noyan’s place completely; turn this place into a big puddle of blood and fear that it can play in, with no goal in mind and no end in sight. I saw it operate his unconscious body and it says it could animate a dead body. That’s how strong this damned thing’s gotten.

"We didn’t mean to start it, but we did and now we have to finish it. With the tools and skills we’ve got, I’m pretty sure we can. The Dervishes have been living with djinns a lot longer, but they’re kind of a wild card. Asking for their help might convince the locals we respect them, or it could open up a
whole new jar of death worms. I don’t think we want to owe them any big favors right now.”

"So… can we kill it? Or change it into something less dangerous? Or send it someplace it can’t come back from?" the Noyan asked.

"I’ve seen a lot of shit since I died," Ulu Bilge told them, “That last approach can bite you unless you know a lot about the place you’re sending it. The living have to go to a lot of trouble to communicate between worlds, but over here a lot of portals are open full-time. Skull-hats from one world banish something to another world where it’s just as much of a painy-ass. Half the unfamiliar pests we got were banished from somewhere else.”

"I’ve heard of djinns being trapped in objects. Closed containers," Nergui thought aloud. “But probably so have they. We need to know how to lure it in and then lock it in."

"For you, shiny companion of my old friend, I’ll ask around,” Ulu Bilge nodded."Now that I can see it from the outside, I never should have let it get as far as it did.”

"Hey, I’m curious,” Nergui confessed. “How does this dirt-nap thing work to talk to dead people who weren’t buried?"

"Hey! We prefer to be called the ‘after-living’," Ulu Bilge admonished her sternly, then broke into a big grin. “Kidding! Gotcha. Well, my own body was burned, but I wouldn’t think you’d want to duplicate those conditions.”

"I can see that,” she nodded. “Not sure I’d want to be flung far away by a small springy tree like we do at home, either. Although in the summer we kids would sometimes find a sapling right at the edge of the lake and play Dead Body Splash until somebody made us stop."

"You’re a hoot, lady,” Ulu Bilge chortled. “Smoke her while you got her, Noyan; have her take care of anything major you want done, ’cause her replacement probably won’t be a patch.”

"Another one, while we’re here?" Nergui asked. “What’s the deal with Ertugrul?"

Ulu Bilge rolled his eyes to whatever was still above him. "‘What’s the deal with Ertugrul?’ You couldn’t be just a little more specific, could you?"

"I could be, but I’d rather keep it open-ended and see what kind of fish swim in. Out of all these Turkmen tribes and all these warriors cluttering up the landscape, how does this one Kayi guy --- who, as I understand it, isn’t even Bey of his tribe --- merit so much of our state’s attention?"

"Well,” said the deceased shaman, “he’s a hella good fighter, but that’s only the start. He’s got one of those larger-than-life personalities. Like mine and Noyan’s, I guess, but less disturbing to the average person. He can make speeches that stir people up to the point where they don’t care if they die; they’ll follow him into hell just to say they were there. He pulls attention everywhere, and you can tell he craves it. On the one hand he’s a show-off, but on the other hand he has stuff worth showing off.

"For a while we wondered if his marriage to Halime Sultan would cement a Turkmen-Seljuk alliance, but no; Sultan Aladdin had ordered her whole branch of the family executed. The Sultan never exactly changed his mind, but the assassination attempts slacked off after he killed her little Alpling of a brother. Little Prince Yigit. Beautiful, beautiful boy. Probably had another couple of good years before he got all wild-boar rank and bristly like the rest of them. What a waste.”

"I wonder how he’s doing. Have you seen him over there?"
"I searched for a while after I heard he’d been killed, but I don’t know where he went."

"He locked himself into the Interzone for a while to be with his friend Dundar, who was in a coma from a Shahmaran bite, but he was headed for the Afterlives last time I saw him. I don’t know if a political assassination arranged by a Sultan would get him into the gated Ghazi Strip or not, but he must have qualified for regular Muslim Heaven. Not sure how permeable those divisions are up there... And not about to mention that I introduced him to a nice departed Christian girl and they seemed to hit it off..."

"I don’t know much yet either," Ulu Bilge admitted. "Maybe I’ll find out. Anyway, I was about to say: The primary beef about Ertugrul was the prophecy. If not for that, we probably would have just buggered off and thought of a Plan B when we found out he’d be so much trouble to recruit. But I had this really strong vision — or maybe Korky and I had it together — that clearly showed that unless someone killed Ertugrul, ‘the land’ — which we took to mean Anatolia — would be his, and his descendants would rule the world."

"Ohh boy. Yes, it makes sense now! Since we’re here to secure those very things for the Khagan, we’d better not let that happen. If this one guy could bring this much trouble, we do need to concentrate on getting rid of him."

"Well, of course," Noyan fumed. "What did you think: I was having PMS? Hah? That I was mad at Ertugrul for saying my armor made me look scrawny?"

"Sun and Oggy --- fling it, now I’m starting to call him that! --- didn’t know what to think because you weren’t telling them," Nergui explained tersely. "And Mongols still don’t micromanage, but this was unusual enough, especially combined with everything else, to raise questions. So here I am, asking. And please, Noyan, I’d be happier if you didn’t ‘hah’ me. My mom did it whenever she yelled at me."

Mongol parents (Turks, too) go in for Socratic scolding. Some other cultures lecture, using long strings of statements about how idiotic your actions were and what kind of idiot you had to be to do them and how mortified they are to be raising such an idiot and so on. Targets of scolding can learn to let the endless stream of words wash over them while they think about more interesting things behind a mask of attentive contrition, peripherally listening for the silence that means it’s over. In Socratic scolding, however, each admonition is phrased as a question followed by a pause (“What were you thinking? Were you thinking at all? Are you an idiot? Do you think I’m an idiot?”). At random intervals, “Hah?” and another pause are inserted. Silences are thus no indication of the end of the scolding, and there is no easy way to tell when it’s over. There is no rhythm to lull the mind, only choppy arrhythmia that jangles the nerves. What’s even worse, any one of the questions may either get the target smacked for answering or get the target smacked for not answering. There’s no way to tell the difference. Certainly the “Hah?” is not correlated with anything. It’s just a percussive-sounding reminder that a smack is never far away.

"That funeral you gave me absolutely kicked ass, Noyan,” Ulu Bilge changed the subject.

"Right until Ertugrul and his boys showed up and dragged us all away,” Noyan sulked.

"Yeah, but did you see what he did after he had you guys all tied up in the wagon? He destroyed my drum! Just like shamanic tradition says to do! Oh, he burned it instead of slashing the head, but I’ve heard of places that do that too. Ertugrul is a friend of Tengri,” Ulu Bilge concluded triumphantly. "He just doesn’t know it.”

Chapter End Notes
References

“Carry Me Home” song by The Sweeplings
“Taxi Driver” movie directed by Martin Scorsese
“Interzone” book by William S. Burroughs
within the memory of water

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Sheila Chandra, for all the years of music to stretch my comfort zone by.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui shoved off the river bottom with her feet, breached the surface with a splash, threw back her drenched hair and took a big inhale. She floated on her back, vigorously scrubbing her fingers through her hair and across her scalp to soften and loosen the mud. “This is great,” she enthused, then looked around for the audience she’d just discovered was missing.

Baiju Noyan stood on the river’s bank, well back from the edge. Arms folded disapprovingly. Scowling even more than usual. “You could have just filled a bucket and had a sponge-bath in my tent. I would have helped.”

She dove back under and came up several yards from where he stood. “I could’ve,” she conceded with a guileless smile, “And I’m sure you would’ve. If the water was too rough or too shallow or frozen over, or if it was lightning… ing… ing, I’d have had to. But this is wonderful! The water’s so warm I don’t even have to tummo.”

“Tummo? What’s that?”

“Crank up my body heat to tolerate really cold water and air,” she explained as she took off her breastband just under the waterline and scrubbed it vigorously. “Old Tibetan trick my dad and his fishing buddies knew. Aren’t you coming in? It feels great to get rid of the mud.”

He looked away from her, off into the distance. “After growing up in the Gobi, they always struck me as a shocking waste of water.’

“What --- baths?”

He waited while she ducked back underwater, did something complicated, and re-surfaced to continue scrubbing. “Rivers,” he answered. “All that water in one place, more than a desert dweller ever dreams of, just running away as fast as it can. Washing with water too, I suppose. Most things can be scrubbed clean with sand, purified with salt.”

“Well, if you’re staying there, could you do me a favor, please? Could you hang this up on some branches to dry?” She wrung out her breastband above the water, wadded it up, and tossed it to him. “These too?” She followed suit with her knickers. “Thank you!” she called out before turning and diving under again with a movement that just happened to moon him before she disappeared entirely.

Less than an hour earlier, when they’d emerged from their Dirt Nap:

“How’s the river for bathing?” she’d asked. “Ideally I’d like everybody in camp to have a Cooties-B-Gone ritual wash.”

Uniform blank thousand-yard stares.

“I… see.”
“It was not too cold / When we ambushed the Kayis / Seven miles downstream,” Bu-Tan Darga recounted.

“Oh, that was epic,” Orang bubbled. “A bunch of us were under the water breathing through those bamboos. Some of the others set straw dummies in armor on horses walking down the stream and the Turkmen ambushed them. Then they realized the guys they were attacking weren’t real and while they were all ‘WTF’ we came up from underwater slicing and dicing!”

”Actually, they were so happy killing the dummies that it took them a while to notice,” Doldrum shook his head. “I thought I’d be under so long my skin would prune.”

”All right,” Nergui nodded. “All right. We can work with this. I’ll go down the hill and try out our stretch of river myself. I don’t want to spend the rest of the day covered in all this mud anyway.”

”I’ll come with you,” the Noyan volunteered. “It could be dangerous.”

She dipped her head to hide a smile. “Thank you, Noyan.” *Such selfless concern! How befitting of an officer and a gentleman.*

Now her behind had disappeared under the water, momentarily replaced by gracefully pointed toes, but the image had stuck in his mind. She came up again, her face and hair now mud-free, and rubbed her shoulder thoughtfully. “Some people say soaking in mud softens the skin. I don’t know if it did anything or not.”

If her skin got any softer, would he be able to find its surface at all? Baiju Noyan ground his teeth, frustrated but not exactly in the worst way ever. There was a word for this. This game she was playing. This teasing with sexual undercurrents. A word so unfamiliar that he’d never had occasion to use it, and had only even heard it once or twice. Ah, there it was:

”Agent!” he called out across the water. “Are you flirting with me?”

She turned and floated on her back again. Her nipples stiffened in the breeze. “I don’t know. Am I?”

”What do you expect me to do about it?”

”Nothing you don’t want to. That’s what makes it flirting and not coercion. I’m just in a good mood from how nice this water is and how good it feels to be clean. And probably a little punchy from lack of sleep.”

”I’m not afraid of the water, you know.”

Something in his tone stilled her splashing and drew her eyes to him. “I didn’t think so.”

”I’ve crossed hundreds of rivers on horse and on foot. Even been in a boat or two. I just… don’t like it very much, that’s all.”

”Maybe if you had a really pleasant experience in the water, you’d feel differently. Hm?”

”What… kind of…?” He couldn’t believe he was still standing on the bank like a goof.

Neither could Doldrum, perched on the cliff edge fifty feet up and busily sketching with his charcoal stick. “Oh, come on,” he said under his breath. “The light’s really good right now.”

”I’m about ready to jump in there myself,” Orang confessed in a careful indoor voice. “What do you think would happen?”
Doldrum put down the charcoal. "If the fall didn’t kill you, one of them would. And I’d have to send somebody for more paper so I could capture all the swirly patterns your blood made in the current.”

Below them in the river, Nergui stretched out a hand and began singing in harmony with herself. Baiju took her hand in his before he realized he’d waded in waist-deep. Her wet hands wiped the mud from his skin and worked it out of his hair. All the while she sang. Hadn’t a Black Sea merchant captain once told him about ships that sank while pursuing suspicious singing women in the water?

With one hand on his chest and the other between his shoulder blades, she floated him beside her as she walked into a small niche in the cliff (which just happened to spoil the onlookers’ view) where a small tributary stream tumbled down into the main river. She sat him down on a natural bench formed by the rocks, settled on his lap, and kissed his cheek and the side of his neck. Then she slid off his lap and dropped beck beneath the surface.

Oh… so this was where she’d been going with all that...

That was his last coherent thought for a while. He found he was not in the least inclined to give instruction or impose any particular choreography. Whatever riverine muse was already whispering such tantalizing instructions in her ear would be respectfully left alone to get on with it. He was content to stroke the ends of her hair that swirled in the current like some rare aquatic grass as the slight coolness of the water alternated with the warmth of her lips and tongue and the tickle of playful bubbles. As time lost meaning, it was a way to reassure himself that she was still there, and had certainly not been replaced by some ominous gilled creature nuzzling and nibbling preparatory to taking a bite. It never even occurred to him to wonder how she held her breath so long. At length the boundaries dissolved between his body, her body, the river, and everything in it. His entire being understood why some fish swam miles up rivers… to spawn… until they died.

A little later she was beside him, murmuring “Noyan? The Fear Eater really seems to like that prisoner area best of all. I think cleaning it out would help a lot, Are you holding anyone there now that you’re sure would do something really useful if they stayed longer?”

Damn, Baiju thought somewhat dreamily. Even during a bath, this woman fights dirty.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 5 of the separate work “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls” extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“Not a Word In the Sky” song by Sheila Chandra
can you rinse it off do you suppose

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Marvel, for making the “Black Panther” movie. Glad to see Hollywood's ability to make a diverting film for hard times didn't shrivel in 1941.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If you’re trying to find a tactful way to explain that long-term prisoners and torture aren’t Original Genghis, save the effort; I know it as well as you do, Agent,” the Noyan chided as they threaded their way through camp.

Nergui spied a pot of green milk-tea with toasted millet and helped herself to a ladle-full. Her own milk-tea complexion was looking as though it was made with green tea. Whoa, someone liked it very salty; it wasn’t so much a chaser as an astringent.

“It’s just that after Persia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, I felt I’d developed a system. Then this blasted place! Everything I considered to be tried and true just crashed and burned. Friendly overtures fell on completely deaf ears ---”

“Are those the ones you’ve got hanging on a cord in your tent?”

“Some of them. Financial negotiations bogged down; we’d settle on amounts and then they’d change their minds the next day. When Emir Sadettin Kobek advised me that the nomads only responded to shows of overwhelming strength, it didn’t seem that implausible from what I’d seen and it wasn’t something I’d tried yet.”

Passing another firepit, there was a pot of black milk-tea with caramelized rice-pot scrapings. Worth a try. As she guzzled it, a young Han troop said “Let me make some more, Agent; that batch has been sitting around for hours.”

“No need; I’m just after something for the palate; say, aren’t you one of Bu-Tan Darga’s cooks?”

“Yes, Agent.”

“Can you possibly lay hands on a little piece of ginger root? It would be perfect. I’d owe you guys one.”

“Sorry, but no, Agent. Some sort of rodent got into it and we haven’t gotten any more.”

“Thanks anyway, Noyan, you were saying…?”

“The Turkmen do admire their heroes, so I thought if I could recruit Ertugrul to our side, the rest of the Kayis and some of the other tribes would follow. Sadettin assured me he was ready to flip and just needed an excuse to be away ---”

“So that’s when you --- or, I suspect, Korky --- massacred the caravanserai customers and staff, burned the bodies even though some weren’t dead yet, and put Ertugrul’s rings on one of the charred corpses? To buy him some time away from Kayis to see how much better life was in your camp?”
"I had Tangut kidnap him because of the Emir’s advice about a show of strength. I went to the
caravanserai intending to unchain him and treat him to dinner. You know: bad invader, good
invader. But I gather the Fear Eater had other ideas because I blacked out."

"According to the reports you had about twenty bodies piled up and when Ertugrul came you said
something like ‘Welcome to Noyan’s Hell’ and lit them up. When a couple of still-alive victims tried
to crawl out, you kicked them back in. Had to have made an impression."

"Only pissed him off more. Convinced him that I was the devil, but not in a good way."

"So here’s what I recommend. I think a good spiritual cleansing of the camp is badly needed, both to
disenchant Korky and to prevent some other nastiness moving right in when he’s gone. So I’ll
provide a bucket of consecrated salt. Would you please order everyone to dissolve it in water and
wash their bodies and clothes? Say it’s National Bath Day, whatever. The Laundress Corp too, with
their tell-tale pale soft hands; now they can say they’ve done some actual laundry at least once.

"Meanwhile, I’ll clean out the prisoner area: patch up the ones I can save and put down any I can’t. I
need troops to get both the living and the dead out of camp. I’ll give the live ones something to screw
up their memories and the troops can bag their heads for the ride out. That way they won’t tell any
enemies where the camp is."

The Noyan grimaced, but then nodded.

"Then I could use help clearing out the etheric yuck that’s been collecting there. Same guys from this
morning, when they can spare a minute? And have the concierges report for purification later, when
they’re done with their clean-up."

"Sure, I can do a blood ---"

"No, my dear Noyan, please! Blood rituals, especially with your blood, will just make Korky
stronger. Since he can’t get into you right now because of the warding, he might be considering
some other approach. Let me just use one of my ways."

Discomfort showed in Baiju Noyan’s eyes, with rage beginning to rise behind it. “You don’t mean
you’re going to ---”

Nervousness escaped Nergui in a yip of laughter, and suddenly she guessed what he thought. “No!
Oh my Tengri, no. I wouldn’t go that route, regardless, in a case like this. Just a simple scourging
should take care of it. A mild and platonic one that won’t interfere with any other duty you assign
them. You’ve probably done worse to them yourself."

He subsided. ”Oh, believe me, I have,” he admitted, calm again.

She let out a slow breath and released the etheric leads she’d gathered up. Gods, this mission is
already like being expected to win at Naadam the first time I get on a horse. I’m not about to jump
on several other horses in the middle of the race just for fun! But this exchange does show that he’s
capable of brewing up storms of unreason all by his human self… I’ll have to figure out whether I
should try to fix it or whether it might just mess him up; don’t want to lean on a load-bearing pole...

"Then we’ll all take some more of the blessed salt and clean and sharpen our blades, and I think it’d
be good to share a meal. Is there a fire pit area that will fit a lot if people?"

"Yes, in the valley just over the summit."

"Good. I lucked into a special treat on the way here. Now I’ve just got to go to the tent for some pre-
trash clothes and a slug of vodka.”

He pulled her closer and spoke for her ears only. “Ah, Agent, ah! Drinking chaser after chaser since we came up from the river. Was… was it really that bad?”

Nergui considered how to respond. “Nah,” she finally replied, carelessly with only a one-shoulder shrug, “but clearing my palate’s the only way I’ll be able to clear my head.”
After receiving their orders, the Dargas stood in a circle around the bucket of salt.

“Stuff”s s’posed to be consecrated?” Sweet Ali sounded doubtful.

Doldrum picked up some salt on a fingertip and tasted it. “It is,” he confirmed.

Sweet belched. “Aw, you woo-woo types always stick together.”

“So if each of us take a big bowlful out of this bucket, and each of our troops takes a handful or so, everybody should be ready to wash up,” Tangut summarized. “They should probably just take bucket baths individually; otherwise with that many people it could turn into a bare-handed hedgehog roundup. Which is not to say that we ourselves couldn’t hit the river and relieve some executive stress.”

”It looked like it was good for that this morning,” Orang leered suggestively. Doldrum elbowed him in the ribs.

Sweet’s face had paled under the grime. He looked like a frog stunned by sudden torchlight.

”With clean skin and clothes / Through the scarf around his nose / How will Ali smell?” Bu-Tan kidded him.

Sweet looked at the ground. “I’ll just use a bucket in my tent,” he muttered softly but stubbornly.

”No pressure, it was just an idea,” Tangut made a placating gesture. Not for the first time, he wondered why Sweet, coarse-mannered enough to shock an ogre and brave enough to fend off a dragon by means of a wooden spoon, was so shy socially. Also not for the first time, he wondered why he, Tangut, so often felt the urge to protect the perfectly capable (and consummately standoffish) young warrior. Was Sweet the grubby little brother Tangut never had, or what?

”Can all this… scrubbery... possibly do us any good?” Sweet asked scornfully while thinking The kitchen middens should have some freshly soured milk and maybe fish guts; the trick will be grabbing it without anyone seeing.

Tangut threw a comradely arm around Sweet’s tense, bony shoulder. “I’ll tell you what, boyo. At this point, if the Agent said she was the reincarnation of King Gesar and she could piss that djinn away from here, I’d say fine and dandy. I’d even help her aim.”
References

“Africa” song by Toto
“Jaws” novel by Peter Benchley
once you were tethered and now you are free

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Cleo, for a demonstration worth a thousand discussions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Where are you?” Nergui asked each of the half-dozen prisoners. She checked their breathing, pulse, eye response, and the state of their heart and crown chakras. Two had one foot in the afterlife already and could not be persuaded back, even to go home. She used her needles to shut down their brains and let out their souls with almost no pain. A mirror and a spinning slice of geode filtered and scattered away the residual emotions that could tempt them to stick around and seek revenge before moving on. Under the Eternal Blue, everything came out in the wash eventually. Someday their scores would be settled; just not now while they could mess up her mission.

The others were the worse for wear to varying degrees, but were able to rally at the prospect of getting out. They willingly drank the mixture she’d specially prepared and drifted off into painless and tranquil dreams while she cleaned and stitched wounds, set bones, relocated joints, poulticed abrasions, and finally handed them off to some of Ali Darga’s men who would blindfold them and drop them off at the edges of different nearby towns. They would remember almost none of their recent past; Nergui called that a win-win.

When she turned around, Gemtsen was sitting just inside the area boundary. “I need all this ground dug up,” she said to the big dog, not really knowing what would happen, just as she didn’t know what it did or where it went when they weren’t together. She mimed digging with front paws and waved her hand to indicate the area. Gemtsen readily obliged, his huge feet displacing impressive volumes of soil.

Animal skulls had been attached to the tops of some of the poles. The densely oppressive aura that pervaded the whole place made it hard to tell whether they were devotional, decorative, or a little of both. Using a wineskin modified with a multi-hole nozzle, she wet each skull and pole down with a broad spray of salt water to soften the dried layers of substances she refused to think about. After the last one, she changed nozzles and went back to the beginning to rinse each one in turn with a narrow high-pressure stream and wipe it dry.

She sprinkled salt over the disturbed earth and invited Gemtsen to dig it over and mix it in. Again, the Bankhar seemed very happy at its task. Nergui took out a blade, blessed it, and went into the woods to cut two handfuls of birch branches and one of cedar branches. She stripped the leaves from one of the birch bundles and left them on the other. She bound each bundle with a white strip of hemp-cloth and tied another strip onto a short riding crop she kept for ritual purposes.

Just as she attached the last of nine smoldering incense bundles to the clean skulls on the poles, the three “concierges” arrived in somewhat of a snivel. “Getting beat up by a woman,” one muttered.

“Well, if your mama ever spanked you, that caravan has already left.” Nergui retorted crisply. “Gentlemen, this is a medical treatment, not a punishment. As far as I know, or ever want to know, you followed Noyan’s orders and did the job that was in front of you the way soldiers do. It was a dirty job in the same sense that coal mining and leather tanning are dirty. After a while that kind of dirt gets under your skin. If it stays there it can make you sick. This procedure fixes that, and it only
stings a little. Strip to the waist, please.”

"Oh, now come on ---"

"You men are Ayyubid recruits, right? If there was a male doctor available who knew how to do this, I’d make that allowance, but there isn’t. You want that fear-eating djinn gone from camp, don’t you? This will help. I won’t tell anyone from your hometowns if you don’t."

"Should the one who gave these men their orders be treated the same?" asked a new voice from the edge of the clearing.

Nergui turned, pleasantly surprised. “Yes, Noyan, that would help. Thank you.”

That put an end to the arguments.

Four bare backs in a row. First a warm-up with the birch twigs that still had leaves, brushing away the outer layer of loose and casual dust with a back-and-forth motion. The action pulled a song out of her, one she hadn’t realized she knew:

**L’amour c’est une oiseau rebelle**  
*Que nul ne peut apprivoiser*  
She had the vague idea that it was something about a bird that could not be tamed. Another one? Popular topic! I don’t feel so bad about having trouble with birds now that it seems like a lot of other people do. But now is no time to lose focus. She gradually put more wrist-flick into the brushing motions, then switched to the fragrant cedar branches and long drawing-down strokes.

**L’un parle bien, l’autre se tait**  
*Et c’est l’autre que je préfère*  
Now some shorter flicks upward to promote circulation before picking up the stripped birch twigs. These would take more of a striking motion, but with the sides rather than the tips of the twigs.

**L’amour est enfant de Bohême**  
*Il n’a jamais, jamais connu de loi*  
Now for the part that needed the most finesse. After putting down the bundle of twigs, she shook out her hands and arms and worked her wrists and fingers, singing all the while, before picking up the consecrated riding crop.

**L’oiseau que tu croyais surprendre**  
*Battit de l’aile et s’envola*  
Tiny little flicks, just enough to sting their way through the semi-numbness brought on by the previous stages. Before her eyes she could see dots that showed her where to aim. A little muscle twitch response here and there was fine; if any of them jumped and screamed, though, she would know something had gone wrong. Thankfully, no one did. Then the cool-down, a very brief rabbit-skin rub and a wave of the incense bundle.

**Mais, si je t’aime**  
*Si je t’aime, prends garde à toi!*  
She flourished the incense bundle and she took an impromptu bow as the men turned around. The three ex-torturers looked moderately stunned; as one, they saluted her, then hurried away. Baiju Noyan closed the distance to her in a few long strides, then slowly reached out and took a lock of her
hair between his fingers, twirled it idly, and inhaled its incense-laden scent. His shadowy eyes unreadable as ever, he thought: *What will become of us all when she goes? Or if she stays?*

Chapter End Notes

References

“*This Is the Sea*” song by The Waterboys

“L’amour c’est une oiseau rebelle” song by Georges Bizet from the opera *Carmen*
he said there’s room for maybe just one more

Chapter Notes

Thanks, movie "The Two Horses of Genghis Khan" for providing so much jaw-dropping scenery and haunting music.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And our teacher never made us do sword practice in a thunderstorm again,” local recruit Hamsa finished up. Everyone clapped.

The topic around the unusual-smelling fire was “Times We Almost Died.”

"The day I took my first step, I fell in the Altai River,” Nergui recounted. “It was spring flood and the current was pretty fast. I ended up on the opposite bank about a half mile downstream. I guess I hadn’t taken on much water because I was yelling at the top of my lungs. My dad was already on his horse and lit out after me right away, but another family was setting up camp near there and they found me first. When my dad showed up, they said they’d been praying for a baby for months and I must be Tengri’s answer. He tried to explain that I already had parents, but they just said ‘then those parents shouldn’t have let her fall in the river.’ He finally had to trade them one of my mom’s champion hunting eagles to get me back. When she came back, she was so mad! But he told her that when he heard the splash and turned around, that bird was hovering over the river right where I went in, and if that wasn’t a sign from the Eternal Blue then he didn’t know what was.”

Bu-Tan’s cooks had stir-fried bite-size bits of re-hydrated venison with fresh fiddlehead ferns and wild parsley from the surrounding forest. Their cooking knives had earlier undergone the same salt-purification and sharpening as everyone’s weapons. It had been such a peaceful scene, everyone sitting back-to-back in meditative silence taking tender, loving care of their sharp objects; never mind that most of those objects were intended for non-peaceful purposes. Afterward, Nergui had distributed the Khagan’s shipment of new brine-quenched arrowheads, which reputedly pierced armor more effectively than the regular variety. Everyone who’d been in the Greater Mongol Army for more than a week could make a decent arrow, so the new ones would probably be thunking into targets before noon tomorrow.

While the fire was warming up for cooking, Nergui brought out some paper twists of thundermix for a demonstration. “For those who want to keep their fingers,” she went over the safety measures from The Esoteric Protocols of al-Hazmat. She also invited the troops to contribute smallish objects to blow up, though she declined a proffered dead weasel on sanitary grounds.

“All these things should convince you that Great Khan Ogedei’s got your backs,” she emphasized. “He knows you’ve had it really tough, but the West is strategically vital in both the military and monetary sense. He’ll give you whatever it takes to win. You troops have been out here a long time and KK may seem like another world to you by now. Keep in mind that message birds and express riders can get there in less than a week. You are not isolated or forgotten. All of Greater Mongol stands behind you.”

She stole a glance at Baiju Noyan, hoping he wasn’t angry at her for pulling focus or for deciding that the less said about him right then, the better. His gaze was heavy-lidded and impassive and his scowl was fairly mild. Her guess: So far, so tolerable, but she’d better keep watching her step. She
turned away before casting her eyes up to the Blue Eternal and letting out a long, slow sigh that wouldn’t show in her shoulders or back. It was probably the best she could hope for.

Showtime! She threw some Assassin’s Incense in the middle of the fire and firemix with copper dust around the edge. She donned her veiled skull hat and the coat full of snakes and jingles. She picked up her drum and laid down a beat and circled the fire. When enough people caught on and clapped or stomped along --- and only then --- she latched onto the Well of Songs and began belting out a victory song.

Get on your feet open the door
Walk on down you know the score

She “went out” into trance almost immediately. In the other place she was dancing on a mountain as it was rising out of the earth, with two long spears festooned with feathers and… oh, gosh, not a stitch on! Hilarious. Probably a product of the audience’s thoughts. A couple of times she returned to the reality in which she’d started out and was relieved to find she was still next to the fire and hadn’t fallen in.

You get it together you can get it all
The weak will fall, the strong remain...

When she’d blasted all the crud off everyone and everything inside her vocal radius, she began to wind down. She became aware of Doldrum Darga following unobtrusively a few paces behind her, ready to act as a “catcher,” a common-sense practice when combining active-body trance and possible possession. Getting knocked down, thrown around, or moved to dramatic places such as the tops of trees or the edges of cliffs was fairly common. But this time she happened to “stick the landing,” which was always good when she had to build respect in a new congregation. She didn’t need any more assistance than help taking off the regalia, a cool wet cloth to wipe sweat, and a glass of something strong. Still, she was glad someone was there who probably looked after Noyan the same way when he tranced out.

"And now, as a token of my personal goodwill,” she panted with a reckless grin, “more special ingredients for the dinner fire. I saved this herb mixture from some would-be Assassins on the way here. It’s killer stuff, but not literally. It does wonderful things for food and music, but it does temporarily cut down on vigilance. So troops on watch tonight, and anybody who avoids intoxicants, probably should move to the back.”

Dinner was eaten with great gusto. Instruments were played. Songs were sung including “I’m Gone to Ovorkhangai ‘Cause I Can’t Get Over You,” “Twice as Far by Tsaagan Sar,” “Rockabilly Horse-Head Fiddle,” “Mr. Sandworm,” and “Don’t Drink From the Silver Tree (With Anyone Else But Me).”

Nergui caught everybody up on KK news and gossip, including the new public-relations initiatives and the whole question of “once you’ve scared people into letting you take over, how do you chill them back into pride and productivity?”

Tangut had been thinking about putting funny sayings on horse-blanket patches. A big enough variety would get locals to come out when riders approached, just to see if there were any new ones. “It could get them thinking of us as human beings with a sense of humor. They could say things like ‘It’s not a Horde! It’s a Club.’ Or ‘Spare a Horse: Ride an Invader.’” Other people began chiming in:

“Taxes or Axes? You Choose”

“Nomad Life is In-Tents.”
“Hunt in the Nerge. Get Big Bucks!”

“Tengri Tolerates You.”

“I’m Only Here for the Buuz.”

“Move Aside, Tea. This Is a Job for Airag.”

“Does This Horse Make My Butt Look Fast?”

“Build them a fire and they’ll be warm for a night. Set them on fire and they’ll be warm for the rest of their lives.”

“Co-Owner of the Whole Damn Road.”

”We Did Ask Nicely.”

“High Horse, Tiny Sword.”

“Tired Of Following a Horse’s Ass? So is the Person Behind You.”

“I Shot an Arrow in the Air, Sorry if it Mussed Your Hair.”

Nergui knew these would be perhaps moderately funny under ordinary circumstances, but under the combination of Assassin Incense and post-trance punchiness she laughed until she feared that her body would expel something ungracious from somewhere if she laughed much more. Baiju Noyan’s portentous hand on her shoulder was just the reprieve she needed. When she stood, he took her hand and led her toward his tent. She followed obligingly, though still bursting into intermittent giggles. She could feel the infinitesimal throbbing of capillaries and the sizzle of nerve impulses in both his hand and hers. The nonchalant tangle of limbs and lips that collapsed onto the bed had not long ago been two distinct and particular people in a serious and unforgiving world. For now, though, that world could sit and spin.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 6 of the separate work “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls” extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“Dead Man’s Party” song by Oingo Boingo
“No Pain, No Gain” song by Scorpions
plenty of his black sheep died before he finds a cure

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Epstein-Barre, chronic fatigue syndrome, systemic exertion intolerance disease, myalgic encephalomyelitis, encephalomyalgia, energy depletion by extradimensional parasites, or whatever they’re calling it this week, for making me the least interesting person in the real world but reviving my once-rich fantasy life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later they soaked in gratifying afterglow. What he asked surprised her so much she almost moved. But she didn’t.

“What’s next for you, Agent? What do former Sealed Ones go on to do?”

He was interested in something that had nothing to do with him? Had to be; the alternative was that he was feigning interest in order to seem like a nicer person, which was completely out of character. “Well, some of them are Unsealed after their state weddings, so things are pretty much mapped out. Others have become concs or courtesans, especially if their healing or other sexually-triggered mojo turns out to be renewable instead of one-shot. Some advance further as shamans. Some retire and raise horses or whatever.

“I don’t know what kind of plans the Agency has for me if I succeed in this mission and return to KK. I was halfway under the impression they didn’t expect me to live this long. Anatolia’s a dangerous place, after all.”

“And a beautiful place,” he said in a faraway voice, at the same time taking a close-up delight in resting his hands on the nipped-in curves at the sides of her waist. “I’d like to be Darugha, provincial governor, here after getting it pacified.”

”A lot of generals retire and become Darughachi,” she confirmed.

"I wouldn’t want to pacify it too much,” he confessed, sliding one hand up her ribcage and cupping one of her breasts thoughtfully. “A few pockets of rebels or Crusaders making trouble every now and then would keep me sharp as a fighter. I’ve been fighting so long I’m not sure I’d know how not to. And I’d hunt; the game here is not to be believed, and I’d much rather chase it myself than sit around while a hawk or an eagle has all the fun. And then I’d start my dynasty, of course.”

"Don’t you have one already?"

"No.” His thumb fiddled idly with her nipple. “Despite my father’s nagging, I’ve never married, nor heard that any of my… affairs… bore fruit. Slince going into the field I’ve campaigned almost nonstop; if my temperament and preoccupations didn’t drive a lady away, the rough life would. I always thought I’d just buy a harem of slaves when I got a province, but sometimes I think it would be nice to have a favorite woman as well. I’d go out in the morning and kill some troublemakers. My majordomo would summarize all the requests and complaints of the populace and I’d make some quick decisions. I’d go riding or hunting with friends or diplomatic guests in the afternoon, followed by dinner and drinks. Then I’d bed a woman or two, either from the regular harem or sent to me by friends and sycophants. Finally, well past midnight, my favorite would give me a relaxing bath and
listen to me recount the day’s experiences. Then I’d bed her and sleep for a couple of hours. When I
woke up, she’d have breakfast ready for me and our five --- no, seven sons, it’s always good to have
extras --- and everything would start all over again.”

”Goodness,” Nergui said, bemused. *Nice work if you can get it, I suppose.* He seemed to be waiting
for her to say something else, so she improvised, “You really think Gonchagul would have put up
with all those other women?”

As soon as the words were out, Nergui knew she’d said the wrong thing. His body seemed to go
tense and cold beneath her. “It’s --- it’s just that Sun Mergen said she agreed to be a second wife
and baby-mama to Gundogdu when Selchan was having such trouble getting and staying pregnant,”
she explained hurriedly. “Her mom and uncle put her up to it just to get control of Kayis when
Gundogdu became Bey. But then she said Gundogdu had to completely shun poor crazy Selchan
after that, which would have made him look like a shitheel to the rest of the tribe because Turkmen
who take multiple wives --- not that many of them seem to --- are supposed to treat them all fairly.
That story made Gonchagul seem really jealous and possessive.”

He was silent for another moment, then rolled Nergui off of him. “You never knew her,” he fumed.
“What gives you the right to talk about her? What gives you the right to even say her name?”

She took a deep breath and lowered her eyes to the floor. “I’m sorry, Noyan,” she said. “I misspoke
and it sounds like I crossed a line. I didn’t mean to upset you. I won’t mention her again. Will you
please forgive me?”

He was still angry, though She’d hit a sore spot, he had a good head of steam worked up, and he just
had to use it all. The next conversational foothold that presented itself looked decidedly unstable, but
he went ahead and stepped on it anyway: “Just because you are in love with me, do you think I feel
anything for you like I did for her? Do you think a bumpkin from the north like you could possibly
replace a sophisticated Palace lady like her? Hah?”

Nergui winced away from the final “Hah?” as if from a windup to a physical blow, but when she
spoke again her tone was calm and matter-of-fact. Only its reverberations and undertones were
colder than Erlik Khan's outhouse seat at 3 AM in midwinter. "No, Noyan, I don't,” she answered
with deceptive mildness. “I've never thought I was the least bit like her.”

”She was as desolate, fervent, and brutal as the Gobi. Yet to me she was the most welcome rain,
making an oasis of wherever she was. She put my heart to rest and set the wind-horse of my soul to
neighing. She came to me despite her fear of all that belonged to me. She was an expert artisanal
assassin. And she was a real spy.

"But you: You’re neither. You’re... a candy-striper. Sent by veterinarians. To change my dressing.”

She tightened her lips and nodded. “Thank you for the information; I’m glad we cleared that up. But
if we’re going to resurrect your brave and brilliant self, you need to get your sleep. And as long as
I’m here for you to bark at, my dear sick puppy, you’ll stay awake. Consider today’s dressing
changed, and I’ll leave you to it.”

Her valedictory baring of teeth might have passed for a smile in poor light. She snatched the best
blanket off the bed, wrapped it around her, and stalked out.

*Hah! I won,* he exulted in his mind. Then, *Wait… did I?*
References

“Let My People Go,” song by Diamanda Galas
“Apocalypse Now” movie by Francis Ford Coppola
she don't ride double get a horse of your own

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Thor, for this afternoon's thunder. And for making sure Marvel's Ragnarok movie was so very entertaining.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(I hear one featherless bird but I smell two. Who's out there?)

Now what? Nergui had paused to put on the boots she’d had the presence of mind to grab. Now she was making a bit more noise, but not nearly as much as she would if one of the many sharp things on the path succeeded in drawing blood. Her next inhale told her she was near the paddock.

Since the words she’d heard had arrived in her mind without traversing her ears, she sent out a verbal/telepathic reply. Ask a mental question, get a mental answer. It’s Tengri Shaman Khenbish’s Nerguitani. I’m alone, but I… borrowed someone else’s blanket. I’m just passing through, not looking for any trouble. Not right at this moment, anyway, although in a sense her whole mission was to look for any trouble she could find in the camp. And then squash it flat and scrub the guts away.

(Can you come to the paddock fence for a few minutes, Tengri Shaman Khenbish’s Nerguitani?) the oddly familiar mental voice asked.

Are you a… horse communicating with me?

(I am THE only horse here who is able to speak to you this way. I am Summer Cloud Sultan.) An eerie white form emerged from the misty gloom as Nergui approached the fence. It was horse-shaped, yet different, like some sort of futuristic concept horse. Nergui tried to pick up thoughts from other horses in the paddock but got only sense impressions; pictures, sounds, smells, flavors. Nothing remotely resembling words.

It’s The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch! she caught herself thinking before she could stop herself.

Oops! Was that offensive?

(It was not. And when I tell you why, you will know something that the rest of your kind has forgotten for long, long lifetimes. But first, put that blanket downwind; it smells of someone I hate.)

I’m sorry. It was chilly and this was there. Did the Noyan use this blanket while the djinn was wearing him?

(You noticed how an inhabiting spirit can change someone’s smell, eh? No; while I do most passionately loathe that djinn, I never liked the Noyan much either, even by himself. Cut from the same cloth as that wretched prince I was forced to carry before him. In the words of Eid Efendi, ‘The Man will always be on our backs until we run under a branch of the right height to scrape him off.’)

Fair enough, I guess. She hung the blanket on a downwind tree branch and returned to the fence, shivering slightly.
(Gather round, nags! Breathe some warmth on this attentive creature.) Immediately five or six young mares and geldings joined The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch. They craned their necks over the fence and exhaled warm, moist, planty-smelling air on Nergui.

(Now where was I? Oh yes. Most other horse cultures give names to individual horses. You Mongols don’t; you just identify us by description. It’s because you know we already have our own names and respect our right to name ourselves. If a horse tells you its name, you’ll use it, but not in front of any other human who doesn’t know it.)

So, ‘Summer Cloud Sultan:’ is that your name that you just told me?

(Yes, in gratitude for getting the djinn to stop its last sadistic frolic early. And to invite you to be my Burden. You may place things, including yourself, on my back and I will not try my hardest to immediately eject them. In return, you will care for me as needed and keep away things I dislike, including others of your kind. You should know that most of us Azerdeli go our whole lives without giving any one of you our names or willingly accepting a Burden.)

I am most honored, Summer Cloud Sultan, but you need to know that I had never in my life been on a horse before a scant couple of days ago. As a beginner, I’m a completely unskilled rider. It’ll take me a while just to work my way up to mediocrity.

(We can work on that. Because you’re a Horse Listener, I can teach you as we go. It is more important to me, No Name Girl from north of nowhere, that you lack that stench of self-importance exuded by most of the humans who purchase our rarefied company. As a special bonus, your natural cushioning feels good against my back. Moreover, if I am not mistaken, you called water down out of the sky on that day of our little ride. I have never seen anyone do that. In these dry lands, a horse can dream of no friend more useful.)

I did pull it off that one time, but I can’t make any promises about future range or reliability. I’m a good healer too; you might value that... Will it irritate you if I sing a lot, though? Because I do, especially on long trips.

(What do you sound like?)

She took a breath and belted out a harmonic-intensive verse of “Praises of Altai.” The younger horses nodded and whinnied their approval. Finally Summer Cloud Sultan nodded too.

(It’ll do. I might want you to learn some of the Muslim calls to prayer I used to hear when I lived with my mother.)

There are nice songs about Tengri too. Say, do you mind if I ask: Why do you send thoughts that a human hears as words, when the other horses don’t?

(Most Azerdeli have an uncanny talent of some kind. The first three pairs of us resulted from a djinn granting a wish... Hmm, that may be why this other djinn likes to single me out for its abuse; I don’t know. But it is the reason our virtues are so stunning and our flaws so staggering... I had an ancestor who could speak your languages aloud. He credited the miracle to Allah because he was born just when the new moon rose at the end of Ramadan: the famous Eid Efendi. He was the wonder of Baku in his day, always giving blessings and reciting prayers. Down the generations, the talent faded. Your kind can receive my words only if they listen very, very well with their hearts as well as their ears. The way you do.)

Thank you, White Cloud Sultan. Nergui sniffled and blinked away a tear. She hadn’t realized just how exhausted and unappreciated she had been feeling before. The horse’s generosity had been like
a chisel smacked into a crystal at exactly the angle to split it right down the middle.

(Would you like to pat me on the nose and feed me an apple?) the white horse ventured uncertainly. (The one you call The Black Bitey gave me to understand it might be something you aspire to do with a horse.)

Sorry, haven’t got any apples on me right now. Do you like to be patted on the nose?

(I… don’t know. I’ve never let anyone do it. Not and keep all their fingers, at least.)

She reached out to lay a tentative palm on the silky, snowy forehead. If you don’t like it, please just say so, she entreated. She patted the horse’s muzzle in short strokes that followed the nap of its hair.

(Oh, my. That’s… rather pleasant.) The horse blew air ever-so-softly through loose lips to produce a sound that was almost purring.

I’ll try to arrange for the Noyan to owe me a favor your size so he’ll willingly let you go with me. But just in case that doesn’t work out… can you outrun the next-fastest mount he’s got?

The stallion snorted. (Am I hung like a horse?)

Blushing a little, Nergui shielded her eyes. I’ll just assume so.

Chapter End Notes

References

“She Loves to Ride Horses” song by Guy Clark
“Altai Magtaal” song by Egschiglen
“Mister Ed” TV show by Filmways
mating rights go to best of breed

Chapter Notes

Thanks, culinary sage blossoms, for having such an unexpectedly sweet and fruity scent!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Summer Cloud Sultan was relieved to have settled that. He had a feeling his new career path would take him to new and exotic places. Where he could meet interesting people. And kick them.

That was the future, though. Now, unsurprisingly, he had to urinate like a racehorse.

(Hey. Horse Agha. Ever try lifting one leg up? You can mark higher places that way.)

It isn’t like that for us, the stallion responded. It’s more about volume. Don’t come too close; you might drown. The paddock was quiet for a few moments except for the splashing sound. But is a carnivore your size really here to discuss micturition strategies?

Red eyes glowed in a huge maned shadow outside the fence. (No, Horse Agha, just making small talk. Your new Burden calls me Gemtsen. You and I might be working together. I wanted to thank you for attaching herself to her. You see, I might not be able to escort her home from here, and I’m less concerned now that I know she’ll have you. Thank you.)

I’ve smelled you around, Summer Cloud Sultan admitted. Why wouldn’t you be able to escort her home? Aren’t you her dog?

(Alas, I’m neither her dog nor my own,) Gemsten sighed hugely.

When the big Bankhar didn’t elaborate further, the horse asked You can send and receive thoughts in human words, like me.

(Yeah, keep it under your mane, will you? She doesn’t know.)

How is it you have that ability?

(I don’t know. My whole family can do it. Our whole hometown does it. Never really thought about it.)

Can you do it without making dog noises out loud?

Gemtsen’s nose tilted to the sky while a big hind foot scratched diligently behind an ear. (Maybe, but why would I want to? Making noise is one of the great joys of caninity. Say, if you don’t mind my asking...)

Go on.

(You and that monster black stallion over there could each be king of any other herd. But I’ve never seen you fight each other. Who’s the boss?)
That would be Earth Cradle of Treasures, the one they call The Sweet Georgian Brown. Our lead mare. As long as we behave ourselves, we share her and she organizes time with any of the other fillies we want. Whoever didn’t behave would be out of here with a flea in his ear.

(Is she in charge because she’s the Noyan’s horse?)

She’s utterly devoted to him. Thinks he hung the moon. Told him her name and everything. Summer Cloud Sultan shook his head and let the shudder propagate through his whole body. Just no accounting for taste. To be fair, he always treats her with respect; I’ve also noticed that mares like all kinds of smells that stallions don’t. But that’s not why she’s boss. She’s smart and steady and the other horses trust her implicitly. A lot of herds are run by a lead mare just because it’s a way to keep peace with multiple stallions.

(Will you miss her?)

I’ll miss this whole damn herd. I only snub them when people are looking, the way my mother taught me. They know it’s a game and they play along. I think your kind and mine are alike that way; we just have to have company.

(You’re right. I look forward to working with you.)

Just one thing, the horse said as the dog turned away. I’ve seen how you act around the troops. If I ever feel your cold nose anywhere near my hindquarters, be ready to kiss your lower jaw goodbye.

(I’ll take that under advisement, Horse Agha.)

Chapter End Notes

References

“Dog and Pony Show” song by Descendents
nothing quite like the feel of something new

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Inexplicable Cat, for suddenly deciding I’m a worthy helper-monkey again. I still haven’t figured out what makes you decide to love me or avoid me, though,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tangut was summoned by the paddock-keepers almost as soon as he’d dispatched them in the morning. Apparently, the Imperial Agent had asked for help saddling The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch, and the experienced troops equated that with flossing a crocodile’s teeth. Not that they themselves were afraid at all --- certainly not --- but they didn’t want the Imp doing herself a mischief on their watch.

”Good morning, Agent,” Tangut approached with some caution. “What are we... up to?” She was brushing the white stallion’s mane as it stood quietly munching. Carrot greens hung from its muzzle.

”Well, now that I’m allowed to ride horses, I should really learn how,” she explained blithely. “I need to know which tack I can use without inconveniencing anybody, and I could use a talk-through on the finer points of cavalry tack; it looks a bit different from what I’ve seen herders use.”

Tangut fingered the tip of his small beard-braid, absorbing the information.

”Noyan encouraged me to practice with camp horses when officers and troops don’t need them,” Nergui blurted to fill in the silence. “As I understand it, no one except the Fear Eater ever rides this one.”

”There are… reasons for that,” Tangut said. He prided himself on being the best horseman in camp, and she’d already exceeded the total amount of time he’d been able to get that close to The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch. “This horse is kind of… a challenge.”

”Oh yes, I know. He hates people.” She patted the horse affectionately on the neck, keeping the brush in contact with the ribs. “Don’t you hate people, you magnificent beast? Hm?” she addressed the animal. Then, to Tangut, “But he said it’s all right for me to ride him.”

”He… said,” Tangut repeated warily, not knowing whether it was the horse or the Agent making the back of his neck prickle unsettlingly. “But...”

”Oh, don’t worry, I haven’t gone crazy yet. I know how it must sound,” she reassured him cheerfully. “No one can talk to a horse! Of course! Well: more accurately, anybody can talk to one; it’s listening that’s tricky. Not that it probably occurs to a lot of people to even try. But I bet you do, don’t you?”

Tangut thought about it. “Yeah, I guess I do.” When something was up with a horse and he couldn’t figure out what, he’d put a hand on its neck, look into one of its eyes, breathe with it, and soften his focus. Often he’d get a picture or other sense impression that helped. The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch wouldn’t tolerate his proximity for more than a handful of seconds; the only impressions he’d gotten were human swear words, which were probably his own and not the horse’s.
"Sure," he finally said. "Let’s go to the tack tent and take a look." Tangut and Nergui walked off, the stunning white stallion trailing patiently after them like a well-behaved creature of Earth.

After the ride, she reflected that with horses, just as with carts and sleds, “built for comfort” and “built for speed” appeared to be opposite ends of the same spectrum. She was sure the white stallion would go like greased lightning once she could have it open up a good gallop, but after just a little walking and trotting she was sorer (although in slightly different places) than she’d been after her first night in Baiju Noyan’s tent. Maybe she’d mention that to the Noyan. No, on second thought he’d probably take it as a challenge.

The day was unusually warm, so she treated herself to a brief dip in the river. She found she couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d done there the previous morning. Nor could she stop smirking about it.

In a part of camp she hadn’t visited before, she had a short meet-and-greet with the unofficial “Laundress Corps” of female (or at least dressed-like-female) camp followers. She found them to be quite a practical group, being mostly innkeepers’ daughters. When Baiju Noyan stayed at caravanserais and other inns, if he’d come in unaccompanied he would usually appropriate the innkeeper’s daughter for a few days. After that, in the stricter Muslim and Christian territories, their families and hometowns didn’t want them back. That the parents had agreed to the transaction, whether at actual sword-point or the implied threat of same, didn’t signify. With nowhere else to go, the girls stayed with the Mongol camp, doing whatever would keep their bodies and souls together.

Nergui introduced herself, accepted some tea, and described some of the official opportunities for women in the service of Greater Mongol, which far and away surpassed those previously available in the annexed territories. Basically, if there was a skill that was needed and a woman who was good at it, she was welcome to join up and do it. It wasn’t too far of a leap from “innkeeper’s daughter who helped around the place for free” to “quartermaster’s assistant at full pay and benefits with room for advancement.” Almost every officer needed someone around who could read, write and speak the local language. Counting and keeping lists was becoming increasingly important as the rudiments of record-keeping were introduced. Some of them might not be averse to twanging arrows and swinging swords at the townspeople who had cast them out. And there was certainly work for those who had come to enjoy dressing up and entertaining at parties, oh yes.

Walking away with a fistful of notes on the meeting, including some non-urgent medical and clerical requests she’d respond to over the next few days, she decided to try returning the Noyan’s blanket she’d... borrowed... last night. He had to be over being mad at her for mentioning his Turkmen ex-girlfriend by now. Her route to the Noyan’s tent took her past the fire where a couple of the Dargas were in discussion. When she came out of the woods and they realized what direction she was heading, the Dargas and nearby troops turned and started at her with expressions ranging from pity to dread to pants-wetting panic. As she went past them, Tangut called out softly but urgently "Agent! Agent! AGENT!!"

When she spun around impatiently, he stage-whispered with wild gesticulations, “Don’t go over there right now!”

"What? If the Noyan’s in a bad mood, I should check and see if it’s anything I can ---”

"No! No! No!" Tangut insisted in a strangled voice, "It’s nothing like that! He’s just... he’s... not alone."

Oh, Nergui thought, hesitating.

Into the sudden silence sounds carried on the wind from the direction of the Noyan’s tent. Slams and
slaps and growls and high little shrieks like ---

*OH*. She turned away and walked quickly back downhill, trying in vain to relax her hands and stop digging her fingernails into her palms. *Oh well*, she told herself resolutely, *That's the way the knucklebones bounce, I suppose.*

She felt oddly light-headed, unmoored. She took longer, deeper breaths as she walked, working to ground herself. *He’s just doing what he does; what it says all over his file that he does. The file that I read all the way back in KK and re-read several times on the way over. He doesn’t have a very long attention span for individual women are concerned. Luckily, I knew that and everything that needed intimate proximity is already done. I can do all the rest of my shamanigans remotely. Beg some help from the Dargas for building the new shrine. Figure out where my place in the battle will be. It’d be nice to have his help, as another shaman, to trap the Fear Eater permanently, but if he’s... busy... I can do that myself too, maybe with Doldrum for backup. This was going to happen sooner or later and it’s later than I thought it would be. What would Dad say? ‘Count the fish that didn’t get away, frogspawn.’*

Behind her, she heard a troop say, “Hey, if Noyan’s done with her, is she for everybody now?”

Followed by the sounds of several people shushing and punching the speaker.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 7 of the separate work “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls” extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“The Only Time” song by Nine Inch Nails
“Mr. Ed” TV show by Filmways
in the pines in the pines where the sun never shines

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Sun Basket, for the online Mongolian milk tea recipe. I liked it, though it helped that I also like salted caramel and Japanese genmai cha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Now, Nergui decided, I've got a legitimate right to be pissed off, and I don't need to burn energy pretending I'm not. That's a load off.

In a base camp of the world’s strongest army, elite troops who had been gossiping and speculatively leering at the smallish, unarmored (as far as they knew) young woman, previously cordial to a fault, now stomping past their stations growling and grinding her teeth (“wow, she’s kind of cute when she’s angry, too”), learned about second thoughts firsthand. Eyes lost their acquisitive gleam or turned away. Steps slowed, halted, or changed direction. Conversations died down or shifted to other subjects. Hope was cautiously rekindled when she stopped, clapped her hands, and shouted “Naash ir, Gemtsen!” (“Come here, Pervert!”), then completely extinguished when an enormous dog bounded out of the shrubbery to answer her call.

The walk to her cart was still pretty nerve-wracking. Arguably, she’d been thoroughly prepped to work around Baiju Noyan’s legendary fickleness, She didn’t suppose it had ever occurred to anyone in KK to ask what happened to the Noyan’s cast-off women. Or maybe they knew but didn’t think it would be helpful to tell her...

How many troops were in this camp? More than a mingan, less than a tumen, she reckoned. Probably 300-to-600-ish. All men, from the look of them, though looks didn’t always tell the whole story. Women recruits assigned to a commander with a reputation like Baiju Noyan’s might not be anxious to trumpet their gender from the treetops. Nergui didn’t blame them one bit. They shouldn’t have to pretend they’re men, Nergui mused, but that’s an extra bonus fix if I have time, or something to report to KK if I don’t. I’m just here to make sure their lives are safe… well, as safe as can be in a war, anyway...

As far as she knew, the Noyan had not officially declared open season on her. He’d gotten another bedmate from somewhere and everyone just assumed. “When you assume,” she instructed Gemtsen in a teachery voice, “you make an ass out of ‘u’ and me.”

She was an official government worker on a mission blessed by the Khagan himself. According to everyone within arm’s reach, though, she was also fresh fish. The Agency was a whole separate chain of command from the army; she didn’t have to answer to anyone here. If these folks killed or injured her, there would probably be a serious investigation… which wouldn’t make her any less dead or injured. With Tengri’s blessing and some fortunate decisions, she could defend herself effectively with her woo-woo, at least for a while… but after she’d come all the way out there to make the Noyan stop killing these guys before the enemy had a chance, it would really suck if she ended up having to kill some herself.

Time to puff up and look big, she decided.

Twilight was falling as she approached her cart. She told Gemtsen to guard, crawled in, and located
her headdress with the toothy taimen-skull focal, otter pelt, miniature-antler accents, and fossil-coral beaded veil. That should make the homeboys pause for reflection. She briefly considered the whip-trimmed robe with the full-sized toli mirrors and decided to save it until after she got the fires lit. She paused for a fortifying slug of vodka.

Leaving the cart, she quickly dug a small fire-pit downwind and many yards away and got a modest fire going. She offered three ladles of airag to the sky. Many eyes watched her from the woods, but seemed content to leave it at that. Then she put a teakettle on because she’d probably be thirsty later. From one goat-horn funnel she poured out a mixture of salt and finely ground volcanic rock in a large circle around the cart and fire. From a second she poured out firemix with powdered copper ore directly over the salt circle. She went over the circle one more time with a line of consecrated, scented hemp-seed oil. With a long stick she wrote and drew in the dirt all around the inside of the circle, then inserted the stick in the fire to get the end lit while she chanted an eerie foreign song in multiple voices. It was actually a children’s song from Goryeo about the redness of monkeys’ buttocks, but the onlookers were unlikely to know that.

When she carried the burning brand to the edge of the circle, she came face-to-chest with five enormous, muscular, shirtless warriors. “You must be lonely, Khatun,” the leader said. “We’ll be glad to keep you company tonight.”

The darkness behind the impossibly ancient fossil-coral beads was absolute. It revealed no expression and made not a flicker, betraying not a hint of what the shiny shamaness was thinking. Which was Daaamn! This might not be so bad after all! ...But whatever happens is going to happen on my terms or it’s not going to happen, the end. Otherwise, it starts with the camel’s nose and then --- or is it the camel’s toes? No, that’s something else.

The leader seemed unsettled by the air being empty of words for so long. ”We are half of the arban known as Strike Force One. With our five other brothers, we are the best in the army at close combat. As any day may be our last, we intend to quaff it to the fullest. We find you worthy to belong to us.”

Nergui’s hackles rose. Oh, you do, do you? She inhaled as she reviewed what she’d heard: and did I hear correctly, this is a package deal for ten guys? Thinking I could handle five was probably the vodka talking, but ten? There’s not enough vodka in the world...” She came to the end of her inhale and spoke.

”Thank you boys, that’s very sweet. But I still have spiritual work to do here and I can’t run around trading energy willy-nilly. If the dust settles I’ll let you know. Good evening.” She touched the burning end of the branch to the arc of the circle between them. Green flames shot up higher than their heads and raced in both directions to close off the circle with her on the inside and them on the outside.

The igniting powders crackled. The burning wood under the teakettle popped. A short Mongol riding crop snapped. “Clear out!” Tangut Darga bellowed as the leader of Strike Force One winced and rubbed his upper arm. “You want to quaff? Hah? Quaff off on a rolling djevrek, you meatheads! Praise Tengri, we still have a command structure around here. You five, tell the night watch you’re there to relieve them. Both shifts.” Tangut looked at the ground and shook his head. “They are really good in a fight, and they’re not bad guys at heart, but they get all full of themselves and sometimes they get carried away. Sorry, Agent.”

Nergui sighed and took off the elaborate headdress. ”On my way down here I overheard some guys asking each other: now that Noyan took another woman to his tent, am I ‘for everybody?’ I don’t want to be ‘for everybody.’ For one thing, I wouldn’t be able to work with all that shit going on.”
"Agent. Agent." He tried to reach through the flames to take her reassuringly by the shoulders. "Ow! Gods damn it." He pulled his hands back and shook them. "You’re not ‘for everybody.’ And you won’t be."

"Because the other troops recognize I’m not another innkeeper’s daughter?"

"Because I already called ‘next.’ Though apparently the news hasn’t gotten all the way around."

Nergui gaped at him. "Un. Believable --- " she began before recalling that she probably needed all the friends she could get from here on out. Then she elaborated: "What I mean to say is, that's unbelievably kind of you, Tangut. I appreciate it."

The head Darga shrugged diffidently. "I like having you around. I had no clue how homesick I was until you showed up with your khoomei voice and your cute northern accent and your huge repertoire of cusswords. Even if all you want to do is talk to me and sing to me and work on the horses with me, and maybe cook something from home once in a while, I’m fine with that. I've got two bespoke Laundresses to do the ‘other stuff’ already. Though if you want to do the ‘other stuff’ too, I’d never turn you down."

"Oh, Darga.” The smoke was starting to make Nergui’s eyes sting. At least, that’s what she guessed was doing it. “I’m touched, but can I please have a few days? Right now I have to review, re-think and re-plan the rest of my time here.”

"Sure. I’m a grown man, and I can only imagine the kind of week you’ve had.” And if you can keep me from imagining things about other grown men, so much the better, he silently added.

When Nergui finally crawled into her cart, the green flames outside lasting far longer than they sensibly should, her hand landed on something soft that proved to be very sticky when she tried to pull it away. Her imagination boggled at the gruesome possibilities, but when she sniffed her hand it smelled like roses. Cautiously she touched the gelatinous blob with her tongue. Yes, no doubt about it: Someone had snuck in and placed a piece of Turkish delight on her pillow. Remembering how she’d promised the mutinous Dargas that if they ghosted Emir Sadettin Kobek for a while so her mission could succeed, she’d make the camp more livable although “it’ll still be the Army. Nobody’s going to put a piece of Turkish delight on your pillow every night,” she started to giggle and found herself unable to stop.

She ate what she could salvage of the candy before it could make more of a mess or Gemtsen could come bounding in to slobber on it. Then she sipped more vodka. Then she had a big glass of water. Then she slept.

"Nokhoi khor!" The traditional “Hold the dog!” greeting Mongolian visitors used when approaching someone else’s ger jarred Nergui awake far too soon. Even in the inky-black interior of the cart, she was sure the butt-crack of dawn was still a long way away.

"Who's there?" she called out groggily, knowing it was just a vain attempt at stalling since there was very little mistaking that parade-ground voice.

"Noyan!" came the answering shout.

Oh, I know this one! “Noyan who? It's ‘a Noyan’ to be woken up in the large intestine of the night just after I finally got to sleep!”’ was what she didn’t say. Not because she didn’t want to, but because she was a professional and this might be about work.

And monkeys might fly out of my butt.
No, really; they might. A shaman has to be ready for anything.

...Oh, for fart’s sake. Barefoot in her nightie, she climbed out of the cart and went to the somewhat reduced circle of green flame, across which Gemtsen and the Noyan were exchanging ill-tempered snarls. She grabbed the dog’s scruff, but just to scratch supportively under the collar. ”Yes. How may the Khagan’s civil service help you today?”

”I want to come in and I don’t want to catch on fire.”

”Why? You’ve got someone new to sleep with.”

”Yes, but I’m going to wake up with you. Or… I could just stand out here and yell some more.”

Kayra H. Khan on stilts. Wordlessly she waved a limp hand and the flames went out. Then she turned and, without a thought for whether or how the nice dog would move on over so the big bad dog could move in, she flopped back into the cart on her belly and went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

References

“In the Pines” song by Cecil Sharp
“The Odd Couple” TV show, “My Strife in Court” episode written by Jerry Belson (aired 1973)
“Wayne’s World” movie directed by Penelope Spheeris
“Move It On Over” song by Hank Williams
don't try to understand them just rope and throw and brand them

Chapter Notes

Thanks, air, for continuing to be breathable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nergui awoke with her face mushed against the felt wall of the cart cover. Baiju Noyan was next to her and Gemtsen was not, so that was how that struggle for dominance had come out. She slipped out to tend to urgent biology and get a pot of tea going. She was poking the fire with one hand and petting the dog with the other when the Noyan stepped out into the light and she forgot everything else.

“Gezar’s guts, Noyan, what happened to you? Did your new girlfriend do that? No wonder you came and hid out here.” He had a blackened eye, a bloody nose, a split lip, and vicious scratch-marks on his face, neck, and chest. “There should be an open bottle of vodka right inside the tailgate. Grab that and some loose wool fiber and I’ll fix you right up. Kayra have mercy…”

“I appreciate it, Doc. But no, ‘the new girlfriend’ didn’t do this. You did.”

“I did not!” she guffawed incredulously. “I would think I’d remember a thing like that.” She waved a hand to indicate his general state of disrepair.

He closed the distance, took her wrist, and held up the back of her hand in front of her face so she could see the cut and bruised knuckles and the unsavory darkened shreds under the fingernails. Ew, she recoiled. What the ---

“Were you upset about losing your place in my bed yesterday evening?”

“No! I knew it would happen eventually and I’d gotten everything done that would require that kind of access. Anyway, if I was upset enough for violence, I’d keep the damage where it wouldn’t show. I’d never intentionally do all that to your face, for instance. My goal is to give your troops back the commander they’d follow into the Lower Worlds. They might lose respect if you took that kind of damage outside a battle.”

“So either someone else was using your body ---” he began with all due sarcasm, then paused as he realized that with shamans it was a plausible explanation.

“Well, I can’t think who --- or what --- wait a second,” she interrupted herself, staring intently at his chest. She fetched the vodka and loose wool and began to dab delicately, clearing away the blood and staring past the criss-cross of obscuring scars. His muscles quivered involuntarily; he was resolved not to flinch.

“Ohhh boy,” she finally sighed. “This is the mark of one of my patron spirits. She’s, like, total chaos and destruction. The formless void between successive creations. I don’t even say her name out loud. Wow, I can’t believe it. She must really like you.”

“Why, because of the mark? Her other actions didn’t seem very friendly.”

“Well, the mark too, but mainly because she left more of you here than a little pile of dust.”
"Mm-hmm. And you didn’t think you should warn me about this dangerous friend of yours before?” He was tempted to tack on a “Hah?” but kept it in reserve.

“No, I didn’t expect I’d have to… Look, she claims only a few people in the world at any given time. She’s only worn me twice before, and one of those times was when I was initiated to her. Both times it took days of fasting and hours of invocation and even then it’s never a sure bet she’ll show up. She isn’t the type who just… pops in out of the blue.”

The Noyan nodded wordlessly. It would do.

“So: I remember being asleep, letting you in, and going back to sleep, I didn’t wake up until just now. What do you remember?”

“I woke you up, you let me in, the dog tried to come in, I kicked the dog out, I lay back down and… rubbed against you, but you said to leave you alone and let you sleep.”

“I don’t remember that last exchange at all. ...And did you? Leave me alone?”

"Of course not!” he retorted. “I am nothing if not determined. Eventually you did wake up; at least I thought it was you… I’m recalling something from my own training: Patron spirits sometimes step in when their charges are in distress, yes?” His eyes locked onto hers.

"Broadly."

He stepped toward her. "And they might take steps against whatever or whoever caused the distress, correct?"

"Sometimes, but ---” She took a step back. A tree was in the way.

"Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle! Little silvery minnow, would it really be so terrible to be caught?” He placed his hands on the tree trunk just above each of her shoulders, trapping her. “Might this nameless one of yours have had a notion that I upset you somehow?”

She connected her aura with the tree’s root system and stood firm. "Well, I was upset. But not at what you did; I was ready for that,” she spat. “I just wasn’t ready for what it made every-damn-body else do.” “Did you know,” she challenged him, narrowing her eyes, “that the whole camp considers your cast-off women fair game for any of them? And that as soon as you bring a new one in, to them it’s a signal that the previous one has been cast off? If it wasn’t for Gemtsen and my bag of woo-woo tricks, I’m pretty sure there would have been bloodshed, and not the fun kind.”

His eyes drilled into her for another moment, then fell away. His face colored slightly. "I wasn’t thinking about that,” he finally admitted.

And who could blame you? You had so much else to think about. She kept the bitter thought to herself.

"In only a few days here, you have won my respect and that of many others,” he stated. “I no longer see you as just another one of my bedmates, and I thought it was clear to everyone under my command.”

That sounds like an explanation. Careful, Noyan; it’s a first step down that slippery slope to apologizing. She half-smiled wryly. “I guess it wasn’t. Maybe they haven’t had many new women lately and they got carried away.”

"Not since Gonchagul, was killed, I suppose,” he said almost inaudibly, then “Before I get carried
away devising punishments for those idiots ---” he said, “See? I can make that choice now thanks to you --- what do you think the unwritten rule in their heads is?”

”Women who sleep in your tent are off-limits until they’re replaced,” she replied without hesitation.

His scowl all but disappeared. "Then the solution is obvious. My tent is your tent until you leave camp altogether.” At her surprised look, he clarified, “Oh, I might not always be there myself. I’ll have an extra tent set up for my other… meetings. But absolutely no one would approach my tent without permission, so you’ll be left in peace.’

“That sounds promising. Here, I think I need to get your face healed a little faster.” She brought her thread-cutter from her pocket, rinsed it in a little vodka, and made a small vertical cut just below the center of her lower lip. As the blood welled, she caught it on her fingertip and traced over his facial injuries.

"I thought you said we aren’t supposed to do blood magic.”

"No, I said you aren’t supposed to do it because you’ve been overdoing it. I haven’t been. And note how little I’m using, just enough to get the job done. So all right: as long as I’m in camp, I’ll sleep in your tent and sometimes you might sleep with other women in… let’s call it a “guest” tent. You could make it really nice for them in there; some pretty fabrics, maybe fresh flowers…”

"I don’t know if I want to go that far. I had the Laundresses fix up a chamber in the Cave of Courage for Gonchagul, but I really wanted her to stay. So many of the others, it’s just power games. Or business: the one last night was sent as a goodwill gesture by a village that needed a few extra weeks to pay its taxes. I didn’t want to insult the headman by sending her back or delegating her to an underling; it wouldn’t be the Mongolian Way.”

"A-ha,” she dimpled as she gently dabbed her own blood over the bruise around his eye. “So you’re required to canoodle for your country sometimes. Just like me.”

"You must be stricken with short-term amnesia, Agent, if you venture to describe what I do as… ‘canoodling’.”

"I will, of course, show your tent all due respect. If you won’t invite anyone else in, neither will I. So where should I go if I want to… widen my horizons?”

The scowl came back, but more doubtful than angry. “Ah… what was that again? Seem to have lost the thread there.”

“If I wanted to experience another man --- oh, I haven’t got anyone specific in mind,” she qualified hurriedly when the scowl went deadly. “It’s all just so new to me. I don’t know what kind of sexual person I am yet. What if I’m like you; what if I need… variety?”

The Noyan paused a moment for thought, not least because he had a sudden and overwhelming urge to hunt down and murder her one or more hypothetical swains even though he had no idea how to go about it. He settled on taking a section out of her scroll: veiling strong emotions with professional concern. “Well… you probably shouldn’t carry on with any of my troops; that would confuse them about your status again. And steer clear of the locals; I don’t want to have to send a rescue squad. For you or them. And the enemy… well, they’d suspect you of being a spy, of course, and they don’t tolerate spies. No, we should keep this simple. Any… needs or urges or curiosities that arise, you may bring directly to me.”

She ran a wet finger over his split lip. He could smell the blood and her skin at the same time. “You
didn’t share your toys when you were little, did you?”

“I did not,” he replied a little stiffly. “But I gave away the ones that bored me. And the ones I broke.”

“Will all those other women leave you enough energy to cope with me too?” She took his face in both hands and applied rapid healing energy. It felt like two hundred bees stinging him in the face all at once for a few seconds, but then all the pain was gone.

“Agh! Tengri! Must you…” Then, his breath recaptured, “The gods blessed me with a surfeit of masculine energy. My desires don’t draft any promissory notes that my wedding tackle cannot remit in full.”

“I see.” A trickle of extra blood ran down out of the cut and collected on her chin.

Even though the Anatolia Effect blurred the sight, he could not take his eyes off it. “You sound skeptical, and you insist on provoking me.” He caught the drop of blood on one finger and licked it off. “You will see, Agent, and right now.” And he bundled her into the cart.

A while later, they were completely absorbed in their activities when they heard a voice outside. “Agent Nerguitani? We’re sorry if we might have come on a little too strong last night, and we wonder if you’ve reconsidered our offer at all?”

Nergui blushed furiously. Baiju Noyan laid a finger on her lips and looked up. “Agent? Did you hear something outside?” he asked in an overly loud voice.

There was a brief silence, then the muffled pitter-pat of stealth-trained running feet. Nergui stifled her giggle in a pillow that still smelled faintly of Turkish delight.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Rawhide” song by Frankie Laine
icy grip, telling me to leave with you and your friends

Chapter Notes

Thanks, personal attempts at Mongolian milk-and-millet tea, for no shortage of alchemical mysteries: Batches 1 and 3 (half-and-half) smelling like (but not containing any) meat; Batches 4 and 5 (with some buttermilk added) curdling when the tea was added but having a pleasant citrus-like overtone on the palate (while containing no actual citrus); Batch 6 (whole milk) prepared “the long way” like Batch 1 and staying smooth through the addition of tea and millet but suddenly curdling when I stuck the wooden stirring paddle in. Can’t wait to see what’s next...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Bakshish the merchant, the only thing better than selling something was selling it repeatedly. Information, he found, could be sold to any number of customers without depleting the stock on hand. Moreover, it weighed nothing, took up no space, and never incurred import duties.

For some customers, though, he was willing to make exceptions and leave their money on the table. Or in a tree, a pond, or someone’s underwear for all he cared. Trying to get their money into his own pocket it was more than his job was worth. In some cases, it was more than his life was worth.

Bakshish’s native Persia was part of Greater Mongol now. To keep the right to travel beyond its settled boundaries, he and his fellow merchants were required to report what they saw and heard to relevant Mongol contacts in the area. Bakshish had no trouble with the general principle. It was only that the principal general in his territory… had turned out to be Baiju Noyan.

Bakshish had visited Baiju Noyan’s camp exactly once, along with half a dozen other merchants. The camp, wrapped in tendrils of misty miasma, had stunk like a three-day battlefield. Animal skulls had stared from poles in every direction, dangling bones and feathers. Terrified troops and mousy camp-followers had scuttled from one shadow to another. Somewhere, prisoners had screamed intermittently. The scowling Noyan had looked and smelled like he’d climbed out of a grave. He’d explained what kind of information he could use, stressed the importance of discretion, then put a handful of gold in front of each of them.

Obviously they’d be paid for their extra effort! Why else would they do it? And their response should have been no more surprising than a hungry dog eating meat placed in front of it. They had all snapped the gold up immediately except for Bakshish, who had to sneeze first. He’d sneezed, blown his nose, reached toward the gold, looked up, and saw that all the other merchants were bleeding out into their laps from “second smiles” across their throats. Any good merchant can read a mood, and this one had been a few short words in very large letters. Bakshish had rerouted his hand to brush a spider off the table and left the gold where it was.

“Can’t stand greed,” explained the general who had taken over roughly a country a year since he’d assumed his command. His tone was offhand, as if he hadn’t just personally slaughtered six men in the space of a sneeze. “So: Bakshish, is it? Looks like you’ll be handling these fellows’ territories too. Congratulations.”

He’ll only deal with abstemious merchants? May as well hold out for brilliant sheep. No way in Jehennam was he ever going back there. Playing nice and showing willing to the new overlords was
all in a day’s work, just as it had been with the old overlords, but there had to be some alternative to
approaching within slashing distance of this bloody-minded archdemon of a Noyan and his
homemade Hell on Hooves.

Now he thought he’d finally found one.

A thoroughly agreeable young woman with rather unusual eyes had stopped by his stall at the
Ankara market. She wore her surroundings with confidence, but no arrogance; plausibly a local of
moderately respected position. Others might have taken her for a head housekeeper at a kulliye or a
minor noble’s town house. Bakshish’s practiced eye, however, immediately recognized the coarse,
nubby material of her informal veil and galabeya as raw Cathay silk --- definitely not something seen
every day this far west. This inspired him to receive her with more-than-ordinary courtesy.

Accepting a cool, syrupy sharbat and a small square of saffron brittle but otherwise getting down to
business as directly as politeness would allow, she bought a selection of small metal and ceramic
teapots, some beeswax, and some spools of different kinds of twine. While packing her purchases
onto either a very large dog or a very flat-backed camel, she asked his name in case she needed to
come back for more. Curious, he asked her how she planned to use that odd assortment of goods.

She discreetly flashed a Greater Mongol Intelligence Agency paiza identifying her as Khenbish’s
Nerguitani and said it was a long story. He replied that he’d just come from Nicaea and had some
interesting stories of his own; why didn’t she join him for dinner at the inn, and they could talk some
more?

And perhaps get a room if it got too late, he thought. He’d heard all about what female spies got up
to. Insatiable, every last one of them.

But she thanked him with a regretful smile and said she was due to visit one of her countrymen’s
military camps a little way east that evening and Army folk were famously impaled (that is, they had
a big stick inserted somewhere) about punctuality. But here was an idea: since he obviously had to
report to them too, he could come with her and be back in time for a short nap before opening in the
morning.

Bakshish fought the impulse to soil his fine under-linens in horror at the thought of going back to
Hell on Hooves, but thought he hid it well. Obviously the canny Agency had sent a rookie out here
who had no idea what she’d be walking into. He wished her a long life --- longer than a few more
hours, at least --- but felt no impulse to put his own throat on the line trying to protect her. As one of
those notorious female spies, she could probably canoodle her way out. And if not, perhaps that
beast, whatever it was, would be of use.

“An excellent idea,” he told her, fighting to keep his voice nonchalant. “When shall we go?”

“I’ve got more errands, probably take another hour or two,” she estimated.

“Until then,” he replied with a low bow he considered rather flirtatious. He puttered around the stall,
watching her in his peripheral vision until he was out of sight. Then he locked the day’s receipts in
the strongbox, shuttered and locked the stall, and sprinted for the stables.

He sat down in his saddle with a sigh of relief that only lasted for the second or two until someone
dropped from the rafters into a pillion position behind him. It was a quintessential Mongol move that
the rest of the world found deeply unnerving. Members of annexed nations that disagreed about
absolutely everything else could commiserate with “Don’t you just hate it when they get right up on
your horse with you?”
"Don’t get your shoe-toes all curled up," said a hoarse, gruff, yet young-sounding voice directly into his ear. “I’m your courtesy navigator to the Army post. Just in case you forgot where it was. It’s been a long time. We’ve all missed you.”

Bakshish found himself looking at another paiza thrust before his eyes: ”Ali al-Akbar Darga,” it said. So: quasi-local boy, then. Not Mongolian by blood; just by allegiance, training, and attitude. And he’d climbed the ranks; must be that “meritocracy” thing they talked about. But something about the armored torso mushed against Bakshish’s back felt… well, just a little off, even beyond the usual unsettling effect… but he couldn’t say exactly what.

"You smell like horse manure," Bakshish grouched. He accepted that he’d completely lost control of his situation, but he didn’t have to be nice about it.

"Thanks for noticing, bro," the Darga behind him rasped, a smile evident in his voice. "You smell like a pile of wilted flowers heaped over a dead weasel. But even good Muslim boys like us gotta come to Tengri sometime. Better soon than late.” And on went the blindfold.

Soon:

"Pull up over there," Sweet Ali directed Bakshish. “When the horse comes to a full and complete stop, you’ll dismount and hand your reins to the groom.”

"We’re at the camp already?” Bakshish asked, surprised. “But I didn’t… smell…” Probably this Ali just shut down my nose, he guessed.

"Civilian in camp! Pass it on!” Sweet yelled. “Everybody hold your doggies!”

It looked like the same route to the Noyan’s area as last time, but it was considerably spruced up. The animal skulls had been cleaned, their decorations refreshed, and their poles straightened so they seemed to stand at attention along the path. Some showed smears or drips of fresh offerings. It had been frightening when the ritual structures had looked long-abandoned and haunted by a few lonely, listless ghosts. Now they looked well-maintained by a devoted and organized congregation and watched over by plenty of keen, attentive ghosts: in other words, more frightening to a modern adherent of a big Book Religion who felt a lot safer thinking of the older pagan religions as long-abandoned superstitions.

Another Darga was tending the command fire. Cathayan by the look of him, his demeanor was refined and composed. “Bu-Tan Darga here / Please sit down and have some tea / Noyan’s on his way,” he said with a polite shallow bow. If there’s one thing a Song Dynasty scholarly upbringing teaches a person, it’s how to make everyone else feel like their hands and face are dirty, they didn’t study for the test, and it’s much too late to go back in time and not be raised by feral pigs.

Allah, Allah (swt), thought Bakshish, surreptitiously cleaning his fingernails under the edges of his sleeves, Somehow this man and Baiju Noyan work together?

Bu-Tan Darga set a teapot and cup in front of Bakshish. "Southern big-leaf tea / Always changes over time / How is it today?” Seeing Bakshish’s horrified, wide-eyed look at the cup --- is this another trick? Will a wrong answer bring death? --- Bu-Tan sat down opposite Bakshish and soothed “Thinking of poison? / Let me put your mind at rest / The Mongolian way.” He picked up the cup and took a small sip, produced a snowy white handkerchief from somewhere, wiped the rim of the cup, and put the cup back down in front of Bakshish with a fresh part of the rim facing him. Then he calmly proceeded to stay alive and in apparent good health. No poison there.

Finally Bakshish took a sip. He did not remember ever having better tea, and he had attended palace
functions in four different countries.

Now he felt all at sea. Having braced himself so thoroughly against the expected grime and punishment that so far had failed to materialize, he felt rather foolish, as if he’d flinched from an imagined blow from the hypothetical sword of a notional opponent. Yet he knew the previous meeting’s mayhem had been all too real. In his mind’s eye he could still see the other merchants around this very table, face-down in puddles of their own blood...

There was a very loud pop in the middle distance and a tinkle of shards hitting a hard surface. Thunder and lightning? Surely not! The sky was a clear, eternal blue...

Bu-Tan Darga couldn’t help noticing the merchant’s consternation at the unfamiliar sound. ”Air-filled goat bladders / Can be kicked around for fun / But they sometimes pop,” he explained with a sublimely serene shrug. “Orang, will you go / Tell the lads to keep it down / While our guest is here?” A loose-limbed young troop with natural ringlets, excessive eyelashes framing big fig-colored eyes, and an Emperor Darius nose darted off into the trees like a deer.

Bakshish stared after the youth. Was he real or a hallucination induced by fear or perhaps something in the tea? The survival of something so strikingly beautiful in this accursed place defied all logic.

After the snapping and crackling of brittle fallen twigs died away, Bakshish realized how quiet it was. “No screaming. I don’t hear any screaming,” he said, half to himself.

”From now on you’ll hear / No more screaming prisoners / When you visit us.”

Bakshish’s imagination, which had been champing at the bit with increased impatience, broke free and ran wild. The prisoners were suffering so much that they could not even scream anymore? How bad would despair have to be to produce such silence? “Such terrible, unthinkable silence,” he said aloud without realizing it.

”We have Laundresses / who have started learning songs / Would you like to hear?” Bu-Tan Darga offered, a little perplexed. In his experience, most fussy city people were bothered by noise, not by silence. Bakshish only shook his head, staring at something a thousand yards away that only he could see.

A little less than ten minutes later, Bakshish heard a voice he had never wanted to hear again. “There you are, Bakshish Agha!” Baiju Noyan greeted him. “I’d begun to despair of you. I hated to think of anything bad befalling you.”

The Noyan was back in black, though now it was a tunic and trousers instead of partial armor. Still scowling --- though perhaps not maintaining it as actively? Still wearing multiple wicked-looking blades within easy reach on straps and belts he was even now in the act of re-buckling. But his posture was lofty, his long plumbline-straight blue-black hair was glossy, and his face and clothes were clean. His hands, though, were sooty as if he’d been making charcoal, despite his continuing efforts to dust them off, and his eyebrows looked slightly frizzled as if an oil lamp had flared up in his face.

Behind the Noyan walked the Agent that had met Bakshish in the market earlier that day. It took a second look to recognize her with her hair uncovered and pulled back, her sleeves negligently pushed up to the elbows, and her veil loose around her neck like a sweat-towel at a hammam. A sooty handprint on her slightly flushed cheek led Bakshish to wonder if the Noyan had slapped her, Bakshish certainly wouldn’t put it past him… but she wasn’t comporting herself like she’d just been
slapped at all, much less by the person standing two feet away from her, and there was no sign of a hard impact to go with the handprint. Her own fingers were a little sooty; maybe she’d touched her own face without thinking. But her hands were smaller…

The two representatives of Greater Mongol sat down opposite Bakshish. Bu-Tan produced more tea and faded into the forest. Bakshish’s heart leapt up his throat. *No more witnesses! Will anyone ever find out what happened to me out here?*

Over the teacups, one pair of charcoal eyes and one pair of amber eyes regarded him with interest. *The way two tigers would look at a baby rabbit,* Bakshish imagined.

"So…what have we got?" the Noyan finally asked.

Bakshish swallowed his panicked saliva with visible effort. “Nicaean troop movements, Noyan. And … Agent. About a thousand armored cavalry. Heading due east out of Karabuk two days ago.”

The Noyan shook his head, but his scowl was a puzzled one. "We don’t have a beef with Nicaea. At least, not an active one. Not yet. As far as we know, they’re spending all their hate on the Seljuks and we’re a problem for another day.”

"All the big Seljuk cities are way inland from where they’re going,” Nergui observed. “You think they’re trying to sneak over to Trebizond without the Seljuks knowing?”

"Stay put and hold that thought,” the Noyan interjected. “I’ll get the map.” He ran to the tent and came back with a big sheet of vellum. “So they’re here,” he pointed to the dot marked Karabuk, ”going this way. The thing is, there aren’t that many passes through all these mountains. If they use the coast road to the north or the one at the edge of the plain to the south, Seljuks will see them and probably hassle them. But if they stay out of sight in between the mountains…”

"We should talk more about this tomorrow,” Nergui suggested. “Let’s pay Bakshish and drop him back at his stall. It’s a longish ride.”

The Noyan emptied out a purse of gold in front of Bakshish, who went rigid and gray with terror. “Maybe,” said Nergui, noticing, “a troop could pack it on his horse for him. Stuff’s heavy, it might rip his robe.”

"Fair enough,” the Noyan said, and went off to summon someone.

A rogue zephyr disarranged the veil around Nergui’s neck, exposing a second sooty handprint on the bodice underneath. She caught him looking and stared back flatly: *Go ahead. Smirk. Say something laddish. See what happens.*

*Not me, Khanom. I like being alive.*

Chapter End Notes

References

“Ride Wit Me” song by Nelly
“Back in Black” song by AC/DC
As soon as their informant was out of earshot down the road, the Noyan summoned the Dargas and their seconds to meet around the Map Table. “And don’t let that Sweet Ali Darga weasel out of this one! I don’t know what’s with that guy.”

Nergui was pretty sure she knew, but a spy has to keep some secrets. “I’ll go grab the files they sent with me from KK,” she volunteered. “I know some of them by heart, but not all.”

An uninviting clump of sticker-bushes in a clearing concealed the Map Table. It was ten feet square altogether, with an eight-foot square of foot-wide boards in the middle. It still looked like an ordinary banquet table or perhaps a raised stage for performers, until the eight center planks were turned over to reveal an unembellished but painstakingly carved relief map of Anatolia and its nearest neighbors.

"Wow,” Nergui enthused as the carving came into view. “This is incredible. Doldrum, was this you?”

"Just part of it,” the Tibetan Darga shrugged. “Ulu Bilge, may he ride, would possess some birds for a few hours at a time and when he woke up he had me draw a flat map of what he’d seen. Then a couple of our troops who are good at wood carving made the bumpy map from my flat one with Ulu Bilge keeping us all honest.”

"My dad brought home some nice flat maps from some of the closer-to-home campaigns, but I’ve never seen anything like this.” She found herself suffused with a new respect for the late Ulu Bilge. Back before his wings started to melt, he must have been a powerhouse blessed with heavy-duty talent and the practicality to put it to use. Hell of a combination for a battle shaman. No wonder the Noyan missed him.

This part of the clearing, Nergui noticed, was positioned to get the best available natural light at any time. What was more, each sizeable city had a little well carved out for a miniature lamp. Wow, this was a class act.

Tangut sat down next to her with his second, one of the big Strike Force guys who conspicuously waved and winked at her. She looked down and ran her fingertips up her forehead and into her hair to cover her eye-roll. The Strike Force guy flinched as if someone had stomped on his foot really hard under the table, and subsided.

Nergui shuffled through her files, pulling the scrolls she thought were important part-way out of the drawstring bag. “You guys, I should pidge KK about this. If I write the note and give you one of the Agency Urgency birds, can somebody send it?”

Sweet Ali, orbiting the table and not anxious to sit down, was behind her at the time, “Listen to our mighty demon-buster! Izzums scared of wittle birdies?”
No more than you’re scared to wash in the river. Or maybe at all, Nergui thought but didn’t say. “Sweet, what on earth do you smell like now? Not horses anymore.”

“Found a big patch of wild garlic. Peeled it for the kitchen,” he answered proudly.

“Ali, you know Noyan’s nose is as sensitive as a bear’s. Go sit downwind,” Tangut scolded. “Agent, give Orang the bird. He’ll send it.”

Orang perked up in his seat. ”Who’s giving me the bird?"

”Noyan’s here,” a lookout yelled.

Mouths fell silent, backs straightened, eyes went blank, and gluteus muscles clenched all around the table. Surrounded by statues, Nergui went meditative.

"Friends, we’ve just discovered,” the Noyan began, putting a boot down on the bench between Nergui and Tangut, who immediately took the hint and shifted further apart, “that a thousand Nicaean armored cavalry left Karabuk not long ago, heading east.” He scanned the stoic faces looking straight ahead. “A full tumen. That’s a lot. It’s more troops than we’ve got. But the more they are, the more glorious it is to win and the more plunder we will secure. At the very least they’ll have weapons, armor, and horses we can use. Probably some gold on hand too. And depending on their orders, who knows what else? Besides, they’ll all be wearing those big red crosshair targets right over their hearts, just like Crusaders. Saves us a lot of guesswork.”

Twenty people tried to chuckle politely without actually breathing. It was a remarkable sound.

”Agent, can you give us an intelligence overview?”

”Thank you, Noyan,” she responded politely, though she didn’t feel very intelligent at the moment. Turning to address the table at large: “I’m sending for an update, but it might or might not get here in time. Here’s what I know from my briefing before I left KK:

“What used to be the Byzantine Empire is a total dog’s breakfast now. After the cretins in charge of the Fourth Crusade sacked and demolished Constantinople --- their ally’s city --- on their way to Jerusalem, most of the Byzantines packed up and bugged out, and the Empire splintered into a bunch of little shard kingdoms that get along like cats in a sack.”

“Several of these splinter states claim to be the one true continuation of Roman Empire. The Anatolian Peninsula has three: Trebizond here, Nicaea here, and one around Constantinople on the other side of Nicaea, helps to know it’s there but I won’t say more about it now.

“They’re all Christian states run by rival companies of ex-Crusaders. They all hate the Seljuks and Turkmen, but lately they’ve only had copper-ante little border beeps with them. Maybe the way You-Know-Who Ghazi Bey handed those super-elite Templars their asses at Antioch gave ‘em a little pause for reflection. KK thinks it’s more likely that each of the three petit states hopes to eat the other two and send a combined force after the Turks. If that’s so, it’s been suggested that some other state more capable of decisive action could probably snap them up before they get off their thumbs… just saying what I heard…

“So far, we’re the ‘musk-ox in the room’ they won’t acknowledge. The Khagan sent the usual diplomatic letters to each of the three rulers. No reply. Then he sent ambassadors. They didn’t kill them --- maybe word has finally gotten around that anyone who tries that goes straight to the top of the menu --- but they did put them off and shine them on and screw them around for a couple of months till the Khagan had mercy and said come home. So from what we know, those knights
probably aren’t after us. But the limited number of passes through these mountains might land them in our laps by accident, and then our secret hideout won’t be secret anymore.”

She unfolded a shrug. "Maybe if we just weren’t here when they arrived, and nothing looked like we’d ever been here?” she suggested. “They're not looking for us. As you said, we’re not today’s headache for them. And if anybody else was out here, seems like we’d know it. Most likely they’re just passing through from A to B and they won’t be paying tracker-grade attention, so we needn’t clean up perfectly.”

"We don’t need anybody from the outside knowing exactly where we are,” the Noyan stated. “We could sprint to meet them as far between here and their position as possible to misdirect them. Or if we make sure to kill them all, it won’t matter where we attack them. That opens up the possibility of waiting to see if they even come this way. If they veer north or south before they get here and end up passing us at a distance, we can ignore them completely.”

Nergui bent over the map, tracing a line through the mountains with her finger, letting her foot jiggle as she thought. Then she tapped a spot with her finger and drew breath to speak, but Baiju Noyan’s hand came down on her shoulder, softly but with a lot of weight. She stilled and looked up into thundercloud eyes blazing over a scowl carved in granite. He looked around the table and her eyes followed. All the Dargas were silent, still, and focused on listening. Check yourself, the message seemed to be. Where are you? Who are we? What’s our purpose?

Slowly and smoothly she backed away, as she would from a predator she’d surprised in the woods. Her face heated with embarrassment. She’d gotten so excited she forgot to read the room. There are times and places to be creative and participatory, and a military planning session wasn’t one for a civilian with no battle experience. "I’ll be right over here if anyone has questions about Agency stuff,” she said diffidently to the ground, and went to check the fire.

She was impressed by how tactfully the Noyan warned her off, considering what a disruptive ass-pain her actions probably were. She could never resist poring over maps; that was part of it. Ruefully she remembered how her father and his friends would gather around one of his maps to plan hunting and fishing trips. Before they retired, those same men had stood around maps in meetings just like this one to discuss strategy and tactics with the likes of Jebe Noyan, Subutai Noyan, or even Genghis Khagan himself, may he ride forever in the sky. The thought had thoroughly awed her small self, but rather than subduing her to hide unseen in corners (finding a corner in a ger was a tall order to begin with), it spurred her to wiggle right up to the edge of the table and say helpful things like “What’s over here?” and “I think you guys should go this way” until her tall father scooped her up and said, “Frogspawn! We need your help. Go out and see if you can predict what the weather will be like between the ridge and the river tomorrow.”

Not being expected to talk didn’t stop her from thinking, though. The repercussions of that many knights disappearing would depend on what they were up to in the first place. If the Nicaean troops were being lent or leased to Trebizond, Trebizond would be expecting them and would send someone to investigate if they didn’t show up. But since Nicaea and Trebizond were rival successors of the Roman Empire, an alliance was probably less likely than an invasion.

If the Nicaeans were an invading force aimed at Trebizond or some strategic part of Seljuk territory, their targets probably weren’t expecting them, and would be fine with them not showing up either way. The Nicaean commanders who sent them probably wouldn’t expect to hear from them for a while. If they never heard at all, well, that’s a war for you.

Her underlying assumption, that the Mongols weren’t the Nicaeans’ target: could that be wrong? And if it was, then what? ...Oh, bugger it. She had a headache; she’d swill down some bhang tea and
wait for instructions.

"We’ve got another advantage we should hang onto besides our secret location,” the Noyan was saying. Because everyone else was so silent and attentive, she could hear him clearly. Even the fire seemed to muffle its crackling. “Nobody knows how many of us are here, either. The Turkmen have only seen ten to thirty of us at a time, though they must have noticed we never seem to run short. We’ve been hassling the Seljuks with small precision raids as well, tempting them to assume that’s all we can do. Disappearing a thousand armored cavalry is going to require more than thirty swords. The trouble is that because there are only a few passable routes from anywhere to anywhere else in these mountains, if we march a few hundred men any appreciable distance, somebody’s going to see it. We know we’re not the only ones perched up on the heights watching the passes.

"For that reason, we’re going to filter through the forest down our own mountain and some will cross over to the other side of the pass. We’ll lay an ambush not far from our doorstep. If they come, we’ll fight them. If they don’t, they’ll have detoured too far away to be our problem. We don’t have to chase them down. We’re not desperate for anything they have. Scouts will find and follow them and we’ll figure out what’s going on with our Christian neighbors.

“Tomorrow morning we get up, take a scant few days’ provisions, and move out. There are a couple of shallow ways down to the road and we’ll station a few arbans of cavalry there. The rest is too steep for horses in a hurry so we’ll mostly be on foot. Archers will spread out over the longest stretch of road and will start firing on my signal. The front and rear ranks will be the most guarded and alert, so we’ll let the front go past and we’ll hit the middle hard...”

Nergui sipped her bhang tea and listened to the plan. She found it oddly soothing to listen to someone who had everything all figured out. The Noyan spoke in a smooth, resonant voice she didn’t think she’d really heard before. Growling, barking, murmuring, whispering, all kinds of other things, but not this. This, she theorized, was the Noyan that Great Khan Ogedei wanted to redeem. She could see his point. She didn’t want to push for it tonight, but she looked forward to catching the Fear Eater and getting rid of the wards that prevented unwanted possessions but also seemed to make it difficult for Baiju Noyan to access his full spirit power.

And now the meeting was breaking up and he was standing in front of her. He took a long, fully entitled sip of her tea and handed it back. ”Agent,” he said, “I expect to be walking around helping everyone get ready for several hours yet. Since we’re not sure how reliable the exploding teapots will be, I just want to take the few we made today, If you have any rituals to do, tonight, take Doldrum Darga with you; everybody gets stirred up on the eve of battle and I don’t want any more misunderstandings. Otherwise, go to my tent and get some sleep and see what your dreams have to say. I’ll check back with you in the morning.”

Wow, Nergui thought. All business tonight. As he should be, no doubt.

As if he’d heard her thoughts, he turned back, reached out, and smoothed her hair with his fingertips. “Victory party when it’s over,” he promised. Wait --- had that been a smile?

Chapter End Notes

References

“The Wizard Blew his Horn” song by Hawkwind
Chapter Notes

Thanks, ABC-TV, for renewing “Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.” And thanks, Adrian Pasdar of “Agents” for playing a general-with-screws-loose that made “I can fix this” the scariest four-word sentence in the English language.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun shone cheerfully on the knights in white satin. Their chainmail glimmered as if it had never been fought in. When the wind shifted, Nergui detected the sharp smell of the polish. Enormous red crosses clearly marked the location of their hearts. Bummer of a pennon, pals.

The road between the wooded cliffs forked just ahead of the Christian soldiers marching as to war. If they took the left branch, their day had a chance of proceeding as they'd planned. If they took the right branch that passed too close to the Mongol camp for Baiju Noyan’s comfort, they’d have to clean up that armor again very soon. Well… more accurately, somebody still alive would probably have to clean up that armor.

The planned ambush zone was close to half a mile long, Nergui had been up and down the road at dawn, splashing milk with a ritual nine-chamber ladle and asking the blessing of any and all sympathetic spirits above, below, and beside them. The ladle was carved from a lightning-stricken beech bough. It had belonged to her father Khenbish, who had been a celebrated battle shaman. Its handle was beautifully carved, and it lofted all the milk drops in perfect synchrony. No Name Girl, who had no battle experience at all, sincerely hoped her dad would be available to back her up.

Baiju Noyan, predictably, had wanted to wield that ladle himself when she’d carelessly mentioned its provenance. She’d stalled, saying she’d ask if given the chance to. She was none too sure how her affable but fiercely protective late father would feel about the Noyan’s role in her life. She suspected that Khenbish privately hoped his only daughter would be Unsealed by a Silk Road trader grown rich enough to delegate danger... or perhaps even a minor scion of the Golden Family with blood ties to Genghis himself, may he ride forever in the sky.

Now all the unusually widespread milk-slinging had made her arm sore. Maybe she should have let the Noyan have his way.

On second thought, no! If an incensed ancestor spirit caused Baiju Noyan defeat or even death today, her mission (and everything she’d rolled with to make it work) would be straight up the smoke-hole. Forget about that. She wanted at least the opportunity to get bored with Palace parties in KK before she torched her career.

Besides --- Tengri help her --- she really wanted the Sick Puppy she’d adopted to take Best in Show again. And she couldn’t quite convince herself that it was only for professional pride. Did every rookie spy discover one day that the lies she learned to detect included her own?

"Pssst! Coming down!” Nergui stage-whispered to the four Laundresses she’d recruited as trainee medics. She slid down the tree, a smooth-barked beech, that she’d chosen as a lookout post; harder to scramble up than a rough-barked oak or maple, but easier to slither down in a hurry if casualties started coming in. She gave the trunk an appreciative pat, thanking it for not dropping her. Some
trees could be temperamental, as many a Taiga child learned the hard way; horses, at least, sometimes gave warning signs before shedding a pesky hanger-on.

A collection of (relatively) clean rag strips rolled up for bandages. Wooden boxes with tight-fitting lids held smaller wipes moistened with vinegar or vodka. Straight sticks for splints. A jar of dried chamomile. A jar of honey. A clay pot of glowing coals. A box containing needles, knives, thread, and various medicinal mixtures. It had all been there the last time she looked and it was still all there now.

Should she check on the bomb-flingers at the outer ends of the ambush zone? No, not again or she’d seem worried. Really, she wanted to catch a glimpse of Baiju Noyan, she admitted to herself. Preferably without his glimpsing her back. But he was wherever he was and it was where she couldn’t see him.

She slipped into a clump of bushes she’d scoped out in advance and piddled without incident. No ghosts, visions, or poetry-spouting hermits intruded on her process. She quietly returned to the beech tree, sat with her back against the trunk, and meditated with eyes almost, but not quite, closed and ears and nostrils wide open.

She was too amped up. This wouldn’t do. An immeasurable gray void of forced inactivity stretched between her and the first possible moment when something could possibly happen. She didn’t bother kidding herself that the waiting was the hardest part. Even before seeing her first battle up close, she knew damned well it wouldn’t be.

As Ai-Fan had shown her at Dowerhouse 5, she circulated qi down her spine, up the tree trunk, and down her spine again. Then she reversed the flow. She welcomed the calm, grounded qi of the tree into her body and invited it to make use of any extraneous or unhelpful emotional energy in her body. Trees were reliable for this sort of thing because they operated on a much longer timescale than humans. Even a particularly nervous tree would feel steady to a human, while humans’ fluctuations were too fast for a tree to sense in any detail. A person could water a tree with tears every day, and it could still take fifty years or more to become a sad tree.

They had gathered in the predawn to wait for Noyan’s marching orders. The Dargas had considerately sent Orang to discreetly slap the tent flap a few times to make sure Nergui was up. She was mildly surprised to have had the bed to herself all night. One heard about hunters and warriors “preserving their essences” just before planned events to keep their minds focused. Noyan didn’t strike her as the type to skip any opportunity to share his essence with the world. Hiding several hundred people for an ambush probably wasn’t trivial, even in these conveniently wooded and cave-riddled hills. And if there’d been any thundermix issues, nobody would have been shy of waking her up last night.

The camp had never seemed all that big to Nergui because it was dispersed through the woods and only birds got to see the whole thing at once. The terrain obscured things even more now, in the faint gray light filtered through patches of sparse mist, yet Nergui could sense the presence of hundreds of troops she couldn’t see, as if their heartbeats vibrated through the earth into her shoes.

Then Baiju Noyan seemed to coalesce out of nowhere in front of them. "Friends! Are we ready? Last chance if there’s anything I need to know… All right then: Brave warriors, Genghis Khan, may he ride forever in the sky, sent us to conquer these lands for our Greater Mongol State. May these lands where we fight, journey, and spill blood become our home. Battle Shaman, do you have a blessing for us?"

Uhhh --- It made perfect sense now that it came up, but she hadn’t thought about it before. Wing something, quick! She took a steadying breath: "Munkh Gok Tengri and all the holy spirits. Steel
Mountain, Gold Mountain, Impervious Great Tree. Your children of Greater Mongol salute you as we go to meet the Nicaean enemy. If blood is shed today, may the sky and the earth and the water consume it and leave no stain behind. May great Genghis smile down on us and may we make him proud. Above us, wandering clouds are watching. Below us, hidden waters are listening. Behind us, relentless ice is following.

“In addition, may Allah (s.w.t.), Buddha, Jesus Christ, Confucius, Zeus, Mithras, Malik-Taus, Ahura Mazda, any gods I should not name aloud and any I mistakenly omitted, forgive my formal deficiencies and accept my pure-hearted intentions when I ask you to safeguard any of your warriors with us today.” She filled the nine-chambered ladle from the first vessel of milky liquid she saw and flung the droplets skyward, then visibly returned to ordinary space. “Remember, boys,” she grinned wolfishly, “Martyrdom in battle is like dessert at a party. Bring enough for everybody and serve your guests first!” And with a discreet cheer --- you never knew how sound would carry in the mountains --- they were off.

Now she had charge of the small medical station she’d just as soon not have to use. Another advantage of a tree with a view, though; if even a sparrow fell on the road, she’d see it and dispatch assistants.

She found a comfortable branch and sat. Gradually all her itchy extraneous thoughts and feelings fretted themselves to sleep. She lost interest in time approaching and time departing. The moment around her contained enough to fill up all her senses and more.

When the explosions began, she knew exactly where to be and what to do. Grabbing her drum, she scrambled as high up the beech tree as she dared and began a rapid roll that increased and decreased in volume in varying waves. As the booming of thundermix at both ends of the battle zone died away, the drum roll was audible over the whooshing of arrows from both hillsides down onto the road. When the knights in the road looked up, she began to sing:

(One voice)  
Mi nosimo  
(Procesional major key, Two voices)  
Zel-en venchets  
Dai nam Lado, lepi Lado

Her skin goosebumped with a sudden chill. The ghosts of Yigit and Yelena flanked her on either side. She exchanged smiles and nods, then led them onward:

(One voice)  
Zelen venchets  
(Add ghost voices)  
Tseep-ko vee-nay  
Dai nam  
(Switch to ominous minor key)  
LADO!

Nergui almost fell right out of the tree. *HOLY STOVE FUEL that’s a lot of extra voices! Where the clot are they all coming from?*

*Lepi Lado!*

Somewhat stunned but game, Nergui sang on, the unknown voices chiming in with crystalline harmony. She craned her neck to look for clues in the scene below her.
Ya-bo ke-treez lat-ne nan-yem,
Pur-vo dai-mov pol-ye nash-e
Dai nam
Lado! Lepi Lado!

About half the knights’ horses were extremely unhappy, and not just about all the flying arrows. Those knights were brandishing drawn swords --- or were the swords brandishing themselves and the knights just happened to still be attached? The pointy ends of the blades were no longer shiny, but seemed to be emanating a frosty mist, Human forms became visible in the mist. More ghosts! Hundreds of them.

(They were people who were killed by those swords,) Yelena explained, cold enough against Nergui’s ear to cause pain. (They’re from the same country as the song. It’s a ways west, between Konstantinopol and Venetsiya. You Mongols haven’t gotten there yet, but the Latins have raided there for slaves a lot lately.)

Nergui nodded with a grim, tight-lipped smile. Payback’s a tigress. Maybe someday in the distant future something else will make the world go round, but in our lifetimes it’s definitely revenge.

They’d gotten to the fast part of the song. The haunted swords suddenly got active, hacking and slashing at the other knights. Several surprised Mongols had to dodge out of the way in a hurry, but the swords weren’t after them; they were after anybody that looked like the ghosts’ killers.

The knights’ bows and arrows did not seem similarly affected; maybe they were shorter-lived and none from the same battle as the swords were here today. Ali Darga’s squads kept up a steady hail of sharpness from both above and below, some situated in the trees and some supine on the ground behind rock shields. Almost no armor shielded the wearer’s armpits; an archer lying down and firing upward could put one right through the shoulder joint of a mounted adversary raising a sword. Even if the rider wasn’t killed or unseated, the sword arm wouldn’t be much use for all the time that mattered. But the knights were experienced enough to return fire even in the confusion. Downslope a tree bucked and a body fell. “Ali!” somebody yelled. Across the road Tangut, whose troops were stopping knights from fleeing upslope, looked up and stared around wild-eyed.

“Gods damn it, Tangut, hold the line!” Nergui ground out under her breath. She yelled down the tree: “Aisha! Soraya! Take a stretcher down and check Ali and the other shooters! If anybody can’t either keep fighting or hang tight where they are, bring them! And if you can, let Tangut see you without getting the enemy’s attention.”

Just then Nergui saw Baiju Noyan leap down to the roadside, a sword in each hand, and throw himself joyfully into the fray. The sight of him brought Tangut back to himself to resume hemming the enemy into the storm of their own traitorous blades. Noyan had already cut a path halfway across the road… was he grinning?

If Nergui hadn’t seen it herself, she never would have believed it possible. I love it when a random impulse comes together.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Warrior Song - Hard Corps” by Sean Householder
“Nights in White Satin” song by Moody Blues. For years I thought it was about knights with a “k.” In conscientious research, disappointment is always an option.
“Bummer of a birthmark, Hal” Far Side cartoon by Gary Larson
“The A-Team” TV show created by Stephen J. Cannell and Frank Lupo
where is the lamb that gave you your name

Chapter Notes

Thanks, air, for finally cooling off tonight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nergui made her way to a faint, bluish, medium-pitched, slightly cool, sour-tasting glow flickering through the trees in dark that had long since fallen. For a mercy, this knight was unconscious and his breath was reduced to soft hiccup, but the glow of his soul was still stubbornly stuck to his body, She traced a cross on his forehead to march the one on his satin tabard and opened his carotid artery with her duly consecrated thread-cutter. “Shoo,” she said not-ungently, making a waving motion at the flickering light. “You don’t have to go to heaven, son, but you can’t stay here.”

At first she’d sung, over each lifeline that needed cutting, the Die Jesu Domine, dona eis requiem chant the Well of Songs had popped out for her. After a while, though, it had made her want to hit herself in the face with a wood plank. It had been a very long day, she’d been at this for a couple-or-three hours, and she was getting punchy, so now she winged it.

Why was she still out here? Oh, right; she didn’t want any vengeful enemy ghosts around. Soldiers stuck with nothing to do after the fighting ended were trouble waiting to happen, no matter what their state of vitality. And she wanted to make sure none of her own dead or wounded had been left here by accident, but no Mongols had been reported dead and she’d patched up all the wounded, of which there’d been few.

Ali had taken an arrow in the upper arm near the shoulder joint and insisted on waiting until the less-lucky troops had been seen to. Nergui gave him a scant few poppy drops to take the edge off and they put him to sleep, Tengri bless him. As soon as the fighting was over, though, Tangut came pelting over, yelling Ali’s name. Nergui had her hands full of biological things better left undescribed, so she couldn’t head him off. She swore under her breath as he did what people usually did when someone had that kind of wound: unwrapped Ali’s scarf and turban, unbuckled the breastplate, opened up his shirt to give him some air and --- Nergui could see the color leave his face from seven yards away. When the nearest bandage-rolling Laundress took a look and scoffed "We’ve known about her for ages," it didn’t seem to help

"Hsst! Tangut! A word!” Nergui stage-whispered urgently, jerking her chin to indicate that he should join her.

"Doc, something’s really wrong with --- Eww,” he reacted when he saw what she was working on.

"Please stand back and don’t touch anything.” Then, dropping her voice,""The only thing wrong with Ali is the arrow. Please keep his secret. He got promoted for being one of our best men and he is one of our best. He’s just…not a man.”

"You mean he’s been a girl in disguise this whole time?” Tangut gaped. Then suddenly a huge grin split his face. “Thank Kayra! I was afraid I might be a poofter. Which is illegal, you know.

“But... why?” he continued. “This is the Greater Mongol Army. If you’ve got guts, no one cares about your gonads.”
"In principle, yes --- and then there’s the reality when you get this far from home. Just for a moment imagine you woke up one morning and had... lady parts. You really think Noyan wouldn’t care if he found out?"

"I’d… prefer he didn’t,” he admitted. “So that was why Ali went to so much trouble to act macho.”

"And why he always did the stinkiest jobs: to disguise his scent.”

“And never wanted to go to officers’ dinners,” Tangut added. “Noyan bragged that he can smell a female at fifty paces... When you get done with Noyan, could Sweet Ali drop the disguise, do you think?"

"Depends on what traits came from outside and which from inside. I think I can get him to where he wouldn’t threaten or hurt a woman officer. But he still might hit on her.”

"My next promotion, I wanted to take Ali with me even when I thought he was just a phenomenal barber.”

"That’s marmot-stuffin’ nice of you, Tangut, I love you too, man,” Ali drawled without waking up.

After the victory, the troops had been instructed to clean up thoroughly. It wasn’t a very busy road, but it was on the Seljuks’ and Latins’ maps and people did use it. Leaving all these corpses and carcasses around would draw unwanted attention. "Too bad we can’t freeze them or something, to scatter around when we eventually do want attention.” Nergui had overheard one of the Dargas lament. He had a point; nothing got a message across quite like a pile of dead bodies, and it was tedious to have to make new ones every place they went… “Anybody here gonna see Doldrum soon?” she raised her voice to ask anyone within earshot. “I want to write him a note.”

The cleanup had been simple; every troop still ambulatory was to drag two or three bodies off the road and abscond with anything valuable. If the Mongols couldn’t use the weapons and armor themselves, there were always mercenaries willing to buy it. Nergui briefly considered exorcising the haunted swords, then decided that any mercenary who had attacked the folks who sang that pretty song probably deserved the consequences.

This obviously wasn’t their first battlefield clean-up. They made extremely short work, for example, of stable-or-stewpot triage of the newly riderless horses. But it occurred to Nergui that if she or someone like her walked this road, even if all sights and smells of carnage had vanished, they would still sense the characteristic echo of past mass violence. That gave her the idea of adding a spiritual scrub-down.

But that was before she had any notion of how long it would take or how draining it would be after she’d finished her battle-shaman and healer duties. She clung to another song from the Well to keep her going:

Walk not the earth but fly through space
Like lightning flash or thunder’s race

Yeah. Nice work if you can get it.

Without warning another hypnagogic scene grabbed her and dragged her in.

Scene: A caravanserai, early evening. An innkeeper’s daughter, disguised as an innkeeper’s son by virtue of some left-behind male guests’ clothes and some sheep wool stuck on for whiskers, clattered
down the steps to a cellar where her parent was shifting some barrels.

"Mama! I mean Papa! A whole bunch of people just came in!"

"There were supposed to be some Crusaders coming through. Is it them?"

"They don't look like any Crusaders I've ever seen. Maybe you’d better get up here," the youngster suggested, bounding back upstairs.

The innkeeper’s wife, thankful for once that she had a bit of a natural mustache, sighed, grabbed a towel and headed for the stairs. Then she hesitated and called up in an intentionally gruffened voice: "They're not wearing big floppy black hooded robes that cover them up completely, are they?"

"No."

That was a relief. They'd instituted the dress code after a number of bad experiences. Big floppy black hooded robes always seemed to be a prelude to a fight. If it wasn't Alps disguised as Christian friars, it was mass murderers and death-drummers disguised as customers. Not to mention those nine really creepy guys who'd lost a ring or something; the inn’s staff had been really glad to see the back of those weirdos.

Bunch of guys in black armor. It all matched, so not mercenaries, thank heaven. Most regular army groups weren’t too bad. The false-whiskered youth was pointing out the sign inside the door: “Wash Off Blood at Courtyard Pump Before Being Seated.” At first the men made as if to argue about it, but a woman in a gray jacket who’d come in with them turned and gave them a silent look that apparently changed their minds.

The presence of a woman in the party, especially one they seemed to heed, was another reassurance. The staff still wasn’t about to disclose that their ranks included any women, not since innkeepers’ daughters had become an endangered species hereabouts.

Still, which army wore black? Crusaders wore red and white. Seljuks wore blue. Alps wore brown. Mongols? Sheol, everybody hoped not. This had always been a nice quiet stretch of road, and the Mongols had a nasty reputation.

They were back, damper but cleaner. “Baiju Noyan, party of 600,” said one near the front, and the rest laughed so hard they almost fell over.

The woman stepped forward, appearing slightly soberer. “Party of twelve,” she said. “And if you’ve got a table that’s kind of out of the way...”

Were these the guys that had nearly destroyed the Anatolian hospitality industry? Blast it, there was no way to know. If only the survivors of those other incidents could have circulated pictures of the offenders so other establishments could ban the buggers! But no. No pictures, because pictures repelled angels. Had this policy resulted in frequent and lucrative custom from the angelic trades and communities? No, it had not. But at the dark thread of twilight, the word for their religion meant “surrender to God,” not “fact-check the writings of God’s prophets' followers many years later.”

The big boss was, according to rumor, the one who had made the biggest dent in the innkeeper’s-daughter population. This group’s leader, though, was mainly paying attention to the woman they’d brought with them. There’s an art to looking sexy while showing perhaps five square inches of skin, an art that every generation of the local girls worked diligently to advance while their fathers tore out the few gray hairs left on their scalps. Little Gray Beaded Riding Hood over there had done things by gathering fabric into fibulas and belts that had the innkeeper’s wooly-whiskered “son” scribbling
surreptitiously in a notebook behind the counter.

But other than flicking some fava beans at each other, the warriors in black weren’t behaving too badly. So far. Maybe this evening wouldn’t end in disaster after all.

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Nergui opened her eyes and for a moment didn’t know where she was. She’d been most of the way asleep, but for how long? And had she walked or stood still during that time? She was having trouble getting both eyes to focus in the same place. The moon had come out from behind a cloud, but its light was not very helpful.

Too bad the ghosts she knew couldn’t have stayed around longer. It took a lot of energy, though. Yelena had said she’d pop back down tomorrow night to usher any remaining Nicaean stragglers up to Christian Heaven. Even though she’d converted to Islam and gone over to Muslim Heaven with Yigit, she still remembered the way.

From Yelena’s explanation, Nergui had understood that dead Christians’ first stop was the gate of their Heaven. Whether they were waved through or diverted elsewhere was up to Saint Peter, a fellow with a long white beard and a list that told him whether each approaching supplicant had been naughty or nice. Or, wait, was that Saint Nicholas? One played the harp, she thought. And was it the other one who had reindeer? Nergui had a distant uncle who had reindeer… she thought… How many religions did military chaplains have to understand? How did they keep it all straight without their heads cracking in half?

Swift as the arrow from the bow  
Come to me so that no one can know

Before she realized it, she slid back into half-sleep again.

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Back in the caravanserai, the Mongol warriors still hadn’t killed anyone. They’d just murdered several plates of chicken shawarma and were hitting the sharbat. This particular caravanserai’s sharbats were formulated to impress Alps who drank a pint or more of grape molasses before breakfast every morning. The staff had suggested that visitors should try it at half-strength first, since outsiders might not be able to handle the tooth-dissolving sweetness so beloved by the locals.

But these strange people would have it full-strength or nothing. The Noyan and his woman were drinking out of a single sharbat cup through a pair of hollow reeds. As the last few drops rasped loudly around the bottom of the cup, the sugar rush visibly hit. The Noyan brushed aside the young woman’s beaded veil and the reddish-black hair beneath it and kissed her on the cheek. Cheek-kissing in public was allowed, but this was the kind of kiss that got rules rewritten.

Not for the first time, the innkeeper wondered whether the local militia would just happen to be more available when these rough crowds showed up if fresh, hot simits were made available at night.

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A burning brand was seen to fall,  
It lit the darkness of the hall

She’d blinked out again. And her hand was wet.

Blood?
"Gemtsen, can you see souls?" she asked. “Can you --- can you be my Seeing Third Eye dog and help me find the other stuck souls? Oh, wait, they call that ‘second sight.’ So that would make you a Second-Seeing Third Eye dog. And possibly you’d be the world’s first Second-Seeing Third Eye dog. ..” She giggled with no breath left, then sighed indulgently as she put her arm around a tree trunk and leaned on it.

_The flying hoof beats circling in_
_Comme me and let us spin_

“And you know what else?” she continued after a while. “I could probably use a Standing Leg Horse too.” She could almost hear its harness jingling.

When next she fell, Baiju Noyan dismounted from The Sweet Georgian Brown just in time to catch her.

Chapter End Notes

References

“What He Wrote” song by Laura Marling
“Monty Python and the Holy Grail” movie directed by Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones
“Magnu” song by Hawkwind
“Fellowship of the Ring” book by J.R.R. Tolkien
be my mirror my sword and shield

Chapter Notes

Thanks, guy in the doctor’s waiting room who picked up the change that spilled out of my purse. If I’d gotten down on the floor after it, getting back up would have been an open question.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Baiju Noyan spread the beautiful cloth over his bed, stepped back to admire the effect, and gave a small scowl of satisfaction. It was part of the spoils from yesterday’s battle that he and the Dargas had been dividing. He wasn’t usually much of one for textiles, or anything that could be damaged easily, given his living situation and his temper. But the knights had mostly been carrying practical things and there were only a few objects of beauty, and this blanket was truly exceptional. (Perhaps it had been meant as an altar cloth or something, but it would be a blanket now). A light yellow silk that draped like falling water, embellished with small rectangles in white, black, shimmering silver-gray, and righteous cloth-of-gold. In all his raids and all his travels, he’d never seen its like.

As commander, the Noyan got first pick of the loot. There were no swords nearly as fine as the ones he already had, and chainmail had an unfortunate tendency to snag his hair, but there was still a pile of heavy gold and silver rings with precious stones and fine metalwork to go through. Some still had fingers in them, as was often the case, but a little soap and, failing that, a sharp knife would make short work of that.

It was unusual for him to absent himself before the spoils-dividing meeting was over, but he couldn’t resist taking a brief moment to see the marvelous blanket in-situ. It looked good on his bed. It might even bring out the amber eyes of the woman underneath it... if she would only open them.

His scowl deepened. Really, it affronted his military sensibilities for someone to sleep this late. It was probably sullying the feng-shui of his regulation tent. Granted, the Agent had a long day yesterday, but so had they all, and she hadn’t even physically fought. Civilians! As his temper flared he considered smacking her awake, anticipating the sight of the red mark his hand would make on her cheek and the tracks of her penitent tears across it. The ruby in rock crystal lying in the notch of her collarbone glinted a warning, though: the Khagan wouldn’t approve of such treatment. Idly the Noyan wondered if a similar length of silk could be patterned in concentric circles like the ruby and the rock crystal, with circles of circles like the ruby’s granulated silver halo.

And then something in him gave way. With a subvocal growl he told himself that he really should see the blanket from underneath before he made up his mind. Not removing his boots, but letting his feet hang off the side of the bed, he got in beside her and pulled the blanket over himself. Her hair brushed his cheek and its scent filled his internal world. But so soon after a battle and all the accustomed routines that went with it, it seemed incongruous and he resisted it. He would freely own up to a profound gladness at being rid of the howling, drooling, ravenous parasitic influences that had nearly dragged him irretrievably over the edge of counterproductive insanity. But as he reclaimed a mind and body he could recognize as his own, he found himself impatient to banish all the new and strange things that had no accustomed place in his world.

He saw no advantage in sustaining an ongoing fondness for one particular woman. It was a
weakness that his enemies could and would exploit if they found out. Just look at the way he had been behaving! He was well rid of his old troubles, but for what new woes had he traded them?

Lately he’d made a private game of sneaking into the bed without waking her, which was usually far more challenging than it seemed to be this morning. He’d found that it helped to warm up his hands and feet and wipe the scents of other women off his skin before joining her under the covers. Silently and stealthily he would entwine with her until his battle-scarred chest and belly conformed to her smooth back and exquisite bottom and the domed crown of his spire immersed itself in the welcoming dew of her entranceway. On her first waking breath he would curl his tailbone forward and glide smoothly in. He wanted her first waking thought to be that he was there, occupying her center, an established fact of her life. Her inhalation became a gasp of pleasure and a lascivious stretch that completely engulfed him. His logical mind would briefly and cynically wonder if he were sure just who had bested whom before the roar of blood in veins drowned it out.

Just as his smaller head now encouraged him to stay and skip the rest of the meeting, his larger head recalled how interested and apt she’d been at discussion of strategy and tactics and how well she’d kept her head in yesterday’s skirmish. What kind of battle shaman might Khenbish’s daughter become, given opportunity and mentoring? What kind of ideas might they trade in the private space and time already secured by the privilege of his rank?

And there: That was just the kind of pointless speculation he had to avoid. The hot and cold hells would probably bloom with Damascus roses before Oggy and Sun agreed to second her to him for an extended time. They knew his history of damaging women, either in fury or through carelessness. They might send him another battle shaman, probably a male. None but Tengri above would ever know what he and Ulu Bilge had shared, but that would probably never recur.

Meanwhile, they would send this No Name Girl… where, once they knew her worth from the way she had saved him? To the beds of other reckless, profligate brutes at risk of becoming full-on monsters threatening the integrity of the State? One after the other until one of them killed her? He didn’t care for that idea. Would it be kinder for him to kill her tenderly and mercifully before that happened?

This time it was the primal chaos goddess’s mark on his chest that crackled a searing warning. *(You, Baiju, are all brains, balls and blasphemy, with no time or space for foolish sentiment. I like that about you. But this woman is my vessel and I choose very few. Preserve and protect her life while I need her, or learn to feel genuine regret.)*

He was unsure whether he had ever felt regret, remorse, or anything of the sort, though he’d done many things that might drag them from an average person’s heart. Some had suggested he felt nothing at all. They had to be wrong. A day seldom went by that he was not visited by an emotion on the irritation/anger/rage spectrum. He could also remember being profoundly satisfied and even exultant on much rarer occasions.

He turned onto his side, toward the sleeping woman on the bed and experimentally touched his lips to her cheek. With no sign of wakefulness, she turned to fully face him, gathering the neckline of his tunic into her hands and pressing her forehead and nose into his breastbone. Some unintelligible thing she murmured might have been his name. He felt a tingling down the vagus nerve as her chi fed into his central meridian and his automatically followed hers.

Before, she’d always maintained some veils of psychic discretion between them. She tried not to pry into more than she needed to know to carry out her mission. She also whisked away an unknown quantity of her own personal secrets whenever he got too close. If they slept side by side, they faced the same direction or else away from each other. Now, exhausted spiritually and physically after the
battle and its long epilogue, her body acting on blind instinct, she opened to him completely under
the beautiful golden blanket and expected him to do no less.

It was too sudden and too much. He recoiled as if from a too-bright light, tearing himself from her
grasp. He found himself standing again on the floor, unsure of how he’d gotten there. Still asleep,
she made a sound that might have been disappointed and turned her face down into the bedding. A
less fearsome sight would be hard to imagine. But was he driven to flee from her? Or from himself?

It was her calling to care for the unsettled, to soothe the mad until the day she joined them. She was
the one he would probably have to ask. When she finally awoke.

Until then, he would do what he knew. The spoils table. Those jeweled rings weren’t going to de-
finger themselves.

Chapter End Notes

References
“When I Ruled the World” song by Coldplay
"The Kiss," "Woman in Gold," "Death and Life," and other paintings by Gustav Klimt
Nergui awoke to slanting sunlight, but it slanted in the wrong direction. Her disorientation hinted at epic and arduous dreams, though she could remember none at present. She’d been out for many hours; perhaps even more than a single day? Not even the familiar importunate cock had awakened her at dawn. Had she just been that emphatically asleep, or had the stewpot finally claimed that noisy rooster?

“Nice blanket,” she murmured, smoothing it over the bed before shrugging into the first clean tunic she found and pulling on boots. Venturing out of the tent, expecting to find dinner preparations in full sway, she found the fire deserted. The bottom of a cauldron still held some tea, and she ladled some out to sip while she woke up.

After a few sips, a sloshing noise made her look up and rap sharply on the table. Gemtsen was ear-deep in the cauldron, finishing the tea. Even that shameless dog wouldn’t try that one on unless the whole area was deserted. "Hey! Boy!” she summoned him. “Where is everybody?” The big Bankhar came over, licked the hand she’d draped over her knee, walked to the other side of the fire, and stopped to look back at her. She stood and followed.

The silence in the camp was refreshing at first as she followed Gemtsen through the trees and gathering mist, but as she walked farther and it got darker it became surreal and began slanting toward eeriness. Clearings and structures petered out, and she wasn’t even sure they were still within the camp perimeter. Then all at once the full moon came up over the eastern mountains and the woman and dog found themselves on a low rise at the edge of a bowl-shaped meadow filled with silent warriors. A new ovoor shrine, a circular platform of stacked unmortared rock, gleamed in the moonlight. The Dargas stood around its perimeter, The Noyan stood by the peristyle under the fluttering white and blue silk khadag prayer cloths tied to its apex.

"Got tired of waiting for you to get up,” the Noyan greeted her in a mild conversational tone that nevertheless carried quite clearly across the intervening distance. “Decided to send the dogs after you.”

Nergui felt breathless. And speechless. And clueless. “Is this...new? ” she marveled, then shut her mouth so that, as her mother had been wont to say, the flies wouldn’t get in.

"Yes. Everyone here helped build it. I believe your exact words were ‘We’re going to need a bigger shrine.’ We hope you’ll oblige us by consecrating it while you’re here, to protect our souls until the Khagan assigns us a permanent battle shaman.”

"Oh! You guys!” she gushed. "Of course I will! I’ll do it right now, before any invisible vermin find ---”

There was a sound as if, all around her, hundreds of sphincters clenched as one in terror.
"What? What’s wrong?" she stage-whispered to the nearest officers.

"I believe they’re wondering," Tangut drawled with somewhat ghoulish nonchalance, "which of them will be the sacrifices. Since we don’t have any prisoners at the moment."

"Oh." She opened her mouth intending to clear matters up, then closed it again. They reeked so strongly of fear that even she could smell it. Baiju Noyan shifted almost imperceptibly from foot to foot, He was still warded, but he still had a sense of smell as keen as a bear’s. This group was a beacon of bait to anything pining for a little panic. Which... might be perfect for tying up a certain loose end.

"All right," she said, pulling a small container out of a pocket, opening it, and holding it out. “This will help me decide. Everyone in the first five rows, please put just a couple of drops of your blood in here. And if you’re sweating, scrape some sweat in too, please.”

When she leaned on the edge of the ovoo to wait, Baiju Noyan materialized beside her. “Is that sacred vessel you’re passing around… a mostly-empty pine-nut butter jar?” he asked her in a dubious undertone.

"Yes," she replied quietly. “It is.” Sensing from his psychic pull on her brain that he expected more explanation, she took a breath and continued: “The pine-nuts that grow along my clan’s migration trails possess special spiritual power.” And that’s all you’ll get right now.

When the jar was eventually passed back to her, she announced, “Thank you, volunteers. It won’t necessarily be one of you, you know.” The anxiety in the immediate area spiked again, even higher than before. Beautiful! Fear Eater... come out to play-ay...

"Stay right there, Noyan," she said softly but firmly. She released the warding from his crown chakra and held the jar of blood and sweat above his head, swirling the contents but being careful not to spill any. In less than fifty heartbeats there was a sound like a brass cymbal being struck, but the sound was backwards, with the reverberation at the beginning and the percussive strike at the end. Something hit the liquid in the jar, splashing it high, but by that time Nergui had swooped the jar away and clapped its lid on. “Hello there, Korky,” she effused as she sealed it seven ways from sunrise. “Welcome to your new home.”

The Noyan leaned over. “Is that really ---”

"Yes,” Nergui replied. “Banishments never seem to work on djinns for very long, but confinements do. We just have to make sure this jar stays sealed and in a safe place where nobody will find it for, oh, a couple hundred years. Maybe a thousand. And just in case it is discovered, maybe we should leave a note on it. Like ‘This djinn was unwise enough to irritate Mongols. It’s probably not smart enough to grant your wishes. Don’t let it out.’”

(Hey!) yelled a tiny voice. (This is humiliating! And I hate pine-nuts!)

"And that’s the end of the Fear Eater’s frolics for a good long time,” she proclaimed to the assembled gathering, holding the jar overhead. “Thank you all for your consternation. You can relax now. I won’t be sacrificing anyone tonight. Everybody of Darga rank and below can leave and get on with your evening. A minimum of 200 yards away, please. The shrine will be ready for your devotions in the morning.”

“What are the holy spirits telling you,” asked the Noyan as Nergui hopped onto the shrine and took his hand, “that they didn’t tell me?” All his extra senses began to return now that the warding was off. He felt like howling at the moon.
“They said that in this case,” she answered, “a little death is as good as a big one.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Feather” song by William Wild
“The Warriors” movie directed by Walter Hill
kissed as though nothing could fall

Chapter Notes

Thanks in advance, gentle readers, for remembering that this is a work of fiction. Should you ever come across an old ovoo shrine within the borders of the former Mongol Empire, thanks for NOT imitating out heroes’ behavior in this chapter. Or, at the very least, thanks for not blaming it on me if local authorities disapprove.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Before we, er, get started on the consecration,” Baiju Noyan said quietly, barely scowling at all, “You were very, very effective as a battle shaman. You did your father credit. The army could use you. I’d gladly recommend you for a special commission. But --- pay close attention, Agent --- I realize you may have your own thoughts and feelings about that, as I’ve been emphatically made aware that other people, particularly civilians, often do. I would like to hear about them, and you may speak freely.”

Nergui pressed her lips together to suppress an amused grin. De-twinkling her eyes took a few seconds more. “I think it was an unusual situation. That song happened to find me when I was still back in KK and I just couldn’t get it out of my head. I dreamed about it repeatedly. I taught it to two slaves I freed on the road. I was up in that tree and just got lightning-struck with the inspiration to sing it when I did. I can’t count on that happening every time. I’m not sure I’ll see divine providence and profane coincidence converge that perfectly ever again. It was exhilarating… but I think I still feel more at home patching people together than slicing them apart.”

“Yes, the few wounded we had sang your praises; not only for you, but the women you trained to help you. And then you very severely wore yourself out making sure all those knights we killed didn’t suffer long and that their souls detached from their corpses and headed off in the right direction. Why go to so much trouble for the enemy? I know for a fact they wouldn’t have done the same for us.”

“Well… I’m giving the moral high ground away for free here, but I did it for us more than for them. They died close to the camp. Historically, a lot of spiritual pests have been eating our lunch out here. I’ve been working my butt off to banish them. No way was I going to let a bunch of enemy souls hang around and sour into vengeful ghosts just when I’m finally getting things cleaned up.”

“Very pragmatic. I agree. Let’s train a detail to help with that too next time. Next question: Whether or not all your exhausting labors were driven by some overarching compassion, did it bother you that we ambushed them intending to kill them all?”

“Not my place to second-guess your warfare decisions, Noyan ---”

“Not in front of the troops, no, it wasn’t. But here we stand with only Tengri to hear us ---” he gestured toward the dark sky, which was clearing and filling with stars, “and I’m asking you because I want to know. I don’t get many opportunities for a fresh and confidential pair of eyes on my strategy.”

“Well… around the map table, I guess it itched me a little when it sounded like nothing short of a hundred-percent kill had been considered.” She raked her fingers through her heir and looked up
again. “But I admitted to myself even then that my head was full of my dad’s stories of clever schemes for bloodless victories that succeeded. But the more complicated a plan gets, the more risk. Who knows how many others failed and we just don’t talk about them? Also, people say that Genghis Khagan, may he ride forever in the sky, always left a few alive to spread the story. But this time the story was about where our camp was and we didn’t want it spread.

”And then, this was the first big battle I’d ever personally witnessed. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of dead! My gods; so different from the way we spies usually pick people off one or two at a time. I was overwhelmed. But it was your home field. You’d been through things like this over and over, and if you thought leaving anyone alive was too risky then you were probably right.”

He thought for a moment, then said, ”We Kheshig boys had, among other teachers, a Greek who taught us about Iskander’s campaigns. The story of the Gordian knot resonated with me. If I see a tangle I cut through it by reflex, but one day I might wish I had some of that rope back.”

”I’ll remember not to ask you to comb my hair.” she teased him with a smile.

Solemnly he took her hand and cast his eyes down, ”Mother Shaman, my name is Baiju and I am Noyan of this camp. For the purposes of protecting and strengthening my army, my soul and body are at your disposal.”

Whoa. “Mother Shaman.” Openly addressing me as senior in rank... This must be how it would have gone if he’d been himself when he met me, she imagined. ”Thank you, Noyan,” she told him. “Let us begin.

”We’re going to do a Tantric consecration. I’ve had a little bit of theoretical instruction, but I’ve never actually done it. Since it’s new for both of us, I think it’ll be all right if we cut a few corners on the physical maneuvers. Why don’t you sit cross-legged with your back against the peristyle, right… here.”

”Is that all? I can sit up straight all by myself.”

”Trust me, you’ll thank me a few hours from now.”

”Hours? What are we going to do for hours?”


”Oh,” he caught on, gamely shedding his shirt and undoing his breeches to show willing. “...What’s the difference from regular sex? Do we say a prayer, other than just yelling ‘Oh,God!’?”

”Well,” she replied, slipping out of her robe, facing him, and stepping forward to plant one bare foot on either side of his hips, “it combines a spiritual experience with the physical sensations, and the energies we release will be directed for a particular purpose, that is, giving this shrine the power to protect the camp.”

Magnificent by moonlight, he was thinking as he looked up. “Uh… huh,” was all he could get out.

She grasped the peristyle for support and let herself down onto his lap very… slowly… “Now for this kind of ritual, we have to build and concentrate the energy, so you can’t spill because that’ll scatter it all away.”
The mesmeric spell around them broke, making a rude noise. “Wait! You just said what now?”

“Oh, you still get to feel a climax. Probably more than one. But you’ll cycle the energy back into your body instead of spraying it out, so no physical by-product. And… instead of feeling really, really good just here --- and maybe here --- you’ll feel that good all through your entire body. You’ll be able to feel it through my body too, if we get it right.” Oh, don’t start scowling again... She adjusted their anatomy and slid the rest of the way down. In his long, quivering inhale of a reaction, she sensed an attitude change. Thaaat’s right...

She reached up the peristyle, loosened a couple of the longer silk scarves tied to it, and fashioned them into a sort of sling to lean back against. Her motions and the attendant weight-shifting made an already pleasurable sensation almost maddeningly intense. He lifted her up from the bottom and prepared to give her the ride of her life.

”Shh-shh-shh,” she kissed his lips lightly, coolly. “Hold your horses. And don’t put the cart in front of them. That kind of pace isn’t sustainable for the kind of time we need.”

”Try me,” he growled through gritted teeth.

She swiveled her hips around in a slow circle to get his attention. She got it. ”We can move, but only internally. Nothing an outside observer could really notice.”

”Hours of hardly moving at all? That sounds boring,” he scoffed, unable to restrain himself.

Then she did something that took his breath away completely. “Oh, I’m sorry; am I boring you? Was that boring? How about this?” She did something else. “I’ll bet there are internal things you can do, too. Experiment. We’ve got time. Oh, and here’s a part you’ll like. Bet you’ve missed this.” She reached behind her, pulled her robe closer, and withdrew a small double-edged dagger with amber and jet inlaid in the handle. “Blood, sacred blood. From both of us.” She clasped his right hand with hers, the blade crosswise between them. The edges were sharp; only the briefest, subtlest bite before the warm tide was released to trickle down to the point of the blade and drip onto the surface of the shrine.

”You mean now I’m free to...”

”Sparingly, yes,” she confirmed. “Special occasions only. And this is one of those. When I shield this camp I want it to stay shielded. Don’t make me come back out here!” she pretend-scolded, touching the tip of his nose with her free hand.

As they entered a meditative state, he realized that they were more intimately blended now than they’d been under the blanket when he’d spooked and retreated. But now, without the muffling wards and with the full spectrum of his senses functioning, he felt no unease, only a willingness to go as far as it took.

With his free hand he tilted her chin up and touched his lips to hers. This was the restoration Oggy and Sun intended for me, went his last distracting thought, and now I’m just supposed to send her back?

”Monastery boy, you’ve got a fuckin’ death wish,” Tangut Darga murmured very softly, fifty yards away in the trees on the ridge.

”But look at that. It’s perfect,” Doldrum Darga protested, neither slowing nor halting his ink-brush. “They look just like some of the sacred thangkas hanging in my old meditation hall.”

Tangut snorted, though very softly. Even someone passing within a few feet might have mistaken it
for a squirrel’s fart. ”So monks have porn all over the walls to look at all the time? That doesn’t sound very holy.”

”It’s god porn,” Doldrum shrugged innocently.

”Just so you’re ready to meet the gods early if either of those two ever sees this.”

”I guess I could add some horns and extra arms later on, so they’re harder to recognize,” the artist mused. But he probably wouldn’t, because it was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

References

"Heroes" song by David Bowie
i hear your soul song singing from a fire

Chapter Notes

Thanks, my sister, for sticking life out as long as you did. I hope the world is ready for you the next time around.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nergui swirled her tea. With millet tea, which was almost a porridge, there was a trick to getting it all out without having to resort to a spoon. Turks were proud of their finely crafted wooden spoons and were seldom caught without one. It was one of their proclivities the Mongols largely didn’t share. Ladies, sure, for cooking and serving, and then there was the ceremonial nine-chamber ladle for milk offerings, but eating from a spoon was associated with toothlessness, an undesirable condition in a carnivorous culture. Nergui was planning to buy (if she didn’t have an opportunity to pillage) a few of those Turkish wooden spoons on the way home to give as gifts.

Spoons, spoons, spoons. She tried to recall some of the patterns she’d seen. It was something to think about that had nothing to do with Baiju Noyan and therefore might help her gather her aura back into her body. In the three days since the shrine consecration, she knew where he was all the time, if she let her mind go there, and she didn’t always want to know those things.

Did the effect seem to be wearing off a little? Tengri, she hoped so. Even in childhood, she’d valued the physical kind of personal space, even if it was mostly defined by an absence of birds. Her shamanic teachers later demonstrated that there was also such a thing as psychic personal space; they thought nothing of barging in and digging around in her thoughts whether she was asleep or awake. If she ever had students, she intended to treat them with more respect… given the choice, at least.

"Agent, shall we take a ride this afternoon?"

Startled, Nergui spun around to see the Noyan only feet from her. “You snuck up on me!” she accused. Then, realizing what that meant, she flew at him and hugged him out of sheer relief. “Oh, gods bless you!”

"I always thought it made you uneasy. That’s one of the reasons I kept doing it,” he said, somewhat taken aback.

"Oh, don’t worry, it does. Or rather, it did, And soon it will again."

"You’re in an odd mood,” he observed a little warily.

"Tell me, Noyan: After the ceremony two days ago, did you suffer any after-effects?"

"I noticed some after-effects. I don’t know if I’d say ‘suffered’.”

"Did you feel like we were still connected? Like we were in the same skin, or at least the same small space, regardless of actual distance? So much that it was hard to think about anything else?"

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"Me too! I think maybe we over-blended or something when we did the Tantra. I pidged Kaushiki
It bothered you? That our minds stayed… overlapped?

"Only because I didn’t want to invade your privacy. A lot of your life is none of my business,” she equivocated, looking down and away.

He fell silent for several beats, his onyx eyes fixed on her face, measuring the moment. Then, "As human beings go, I find you unusually tolerable,” he confessed. “Even if you physically accompanied me everywhere, including the latrine or the... guest tent, you would not be unwelcome. A little clairvoyance here or there doesn’t signify. I’m a career soldier raised by a family of the same; I wouldn’t know privacy if it fell in my soup. Invade to your heart’s content; isn’t invasion why we’re here?”

She nodded, accepting the logic. Still, she was no less relieved that the overblending seemed to be temporary, “Where are we riding to?” she deftly retrieved the original topic.

"We call it the Cave of Courage. It’s a network of caverns high in the mountains. We used it for storage -- it’s cool and dry all the time -- and Ulu Bilge liked it as a ritual and meditation space. We even retreated there for a while after the Kayis drove us out of our old camp, before we resettled here. It’s still a place we sometimes use, so it occurred to me to have you take a look.”

There’s something else, she knew, and I could probably see it if I looked for it, but all the details aren’t right in my face.

Good!

Later, on the mountain:

Ow! No offense, Summer Cloud Sultan, but I’m getting really sore, Nergui communicated silently. Is it just because I haven’t ridden much, or are you an unusually uncomfortable horse?

(No offense taken), the horse thought back at her. My ancestors were bred for speed and beauty. A further requirement of comfort for human riders would have overconstrained the problem.)

Feeling all the big lumpy vertebrae right through the saddle, she understood now how riding horses might have jeopardized her Seal. A few more layers of blanket might help for now. Maybe the Azeri who raised these horses might have a more compatible saddle design; she might be able to find out on her way home.

When she and the Noyan had gone to the paddock, Summer Cloud Sultan - aka The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch - had come to the gate a few respectful steps behind Noyan’s lead mare The Sweet Georgian Brown, then walked up and sniffed Nergui’s forehead in greeting. She’d moved sideways into its like of vision, stroked its neck, and sneaked it a carrot she’d swiped from Bu-Tan Darga’s vegetable crate.

"You’ve made quite a friend,” Baiju Noyan commented. Nergui had taken the Azerdeli on a number of short training rides, making no attempt to hide. At the beginning a mute and nonplussed Tangut had helped her with the tack. The whole camp knew about it, but this was the first comment the Noyan had ever made.

"This ride will be all steep, rocky paths,” she’d told the horse aloud. “You’re a racehorse. It might not be much fun for you.”

It had nickered, tossed its head, and nipped her nose with surprising gentleness. (I’d sooner endure
that than the thought of you riding some other horse), it had said straight into her mind.

Alpha males! Honestly! You probably didn’t know, but Mongols often switch horses several times a day, she had telepathed matter-of-factly, That way the horses never get too tired or hungry, and they can go barefoot, too.

(Hmph! You might have to feed me more than a few bites of Mongolian moss a day; I’m a big guy. But I won’t get tired. And why would I want to go barefoot? I LOVE beautiful shoes.)

No doubt about it; besides a saddler, she’d have to visit a granary and a blacksmith along the Caspian Sea when she left.

Is there something I could be doing better? she asked the horse as they picked their way along the mountain trail. I’m trying to post like I’ve seen other riders do, but it just seems to make everything worse. It’ll feel smoother for a few of your steps, then all of a sudden, wham!

(Ah. That would be the time signature. Like when you play your shamanic drum, it’s a question of rhythm. Have you heard much music from this part of the world?)

Regrettably not, Horse Efendi.

(My gaits are syncopated, with an odd number of beats per measure. So instead of going down-up-down-up-down-up as you might on an ordinary horse, you need to go down-up-down-up-and-hold, down-up-down-up-and-hold. I’ll think of a song you can follow. Let’s see: "Rampi rampi, rampi rampi, Shimdi de geldi konak vakti…”)

"Rampi rampi, rampi rampi, Shimdi de geldi konak vakti…” Nergui sang aloud as she posted along. “Hey, it works!”

"Chadirimin ustuneh ship dedi damlad," a clear baritone chimed in.

Suddenly not a bird chirped. Not a leaf rustled. The sun itself seemed to halt in its ruddy descent.

"What??" the Noyan challenged the sudden, stunned silence. “My mother liked that song. We used to sing it while she made coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“(Get off Your) High Horse Lady” song by Oasis
“Rampi Rampi” traditional song of Turkey, Greece and environs
she said you are the perfect stranger

Chapter Notes

Thanks, all the scorpions I saw this past weekend, for being in randomly chosen movies instead of real life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Nergui slid out of the saddle, her legs gave way. She found a stick to lean on and hauled herself up, dragging herself into the cave.

Though the entrance was narrow and, because of an abrupt bend, looked from outside like a blind alcove, the caverns were surprisingly roomy. Below a fissure that allowed natural ventilation, many fires had been built. Nearby was a pantry filled with barrels of fresh water, jars of dried meat, and hanging sacks of cheese. Under another fissure was a small anvil and bellows and another rockbound fire circle.

Nergui flung herself belly-down along a bench. “Wonder if it stays dry enough to store thundermix,” she murmured absently.

Baiju Noyan paused while lighting one of the hanging lamps. “There’s much more to see.”

”And I’m interested in seeing it,” Nergui told the bench, “but at the moment I’m too wobbly to stand up and too saddle-sore to sit down. Is there any strong drink around the place?”

“I think there might still be some of Ulu Bilge’s special potions, come to think of it. I’ve been too leery to try them.”

”Oh, so you’ll let me try them first to see if I die?”

”No!” he denied a little hotly. “I thought you might be able to identify some of them. Your shamanic education being more extensive than mine.” His voice echoed as he retreated down a side passage.

As long as none of those bottles are really what’s-her-name’s --- Poison Lady’s --- Gonchagul’s, Nergui thought. Remembering that the late Gonchagul was a sensitive subject for the Noyan, she said nothing aloud. She was aware that the Agency had its own poison specialists, the formidable Spider Women (as well as some amazing Spider Men). In fact, she’d considered it as a career track because she had a head-start on herbs, fungi, and animal venom. Now she realized that somewhere along the way it had lost its allure.

”You know, the view from here gives me some ideas,” he said, suddenly behind her.

Of course it does, she thought, not really all that pleased. That’s probably why we came up here alone. To make out. Although he usually doesn’t much care if anyone’s around. But a neutral “Hm” was all she let out.

”You sound a little tepid,” he said critically. ”Maybe you need warming up.” He swatted her soundly on one upward-facing buttock.

”Ow! Hey!” she protested. But it didn’t feel completely bad. In fact, it seemed to bring some
circulation back to the numb areas. With just a little less force… “Hold that thought for a little while. Let’s see what you found.”

The first bottle smelled like dead minnows marinated in coal oil. “Not sure what it is, but I’ll pass,” she said.

The second one made her eyes water so heavily she had to get the stopper back in by feel alone. Once a well-traveled friend had brought her father some pinky-finger-sized dried peppers, bright red. Her mother obligingly added them to that night’s mutton stew, but one of the wizened objects bounced off the rim of the pot and fell directly into the fire. The smoke burned everyone’s eyes and nostrils so badly it cleared out the ger within seconds. They had to bribe the neighbors to let the family sleep over. This bottle contained something very much like that. “If you ever get too many bugs in here, open this, leave, and come back in three days.”

The third one proved to be a charm. Cautiously holding it at arm’s length, she uncorked it and wafted the scent toward her nostrils. Notes of cherries, myrtle-bud, and honey; nice, and rather familiar. “Did Ulu Bilge do much scrying?” she asked.

"Fallen leaves. Paths of birds and fish. Game entrails, sometimes.”

"I think this is a scryer’s potion. Quiets the mind. Opens the senses. Helps pull pictures out of random patterns.”

"Shall we try some?"

"Sure. But just a little to begin with. Even if it’s the exact same recipe I’ve run across before, the potency of the ingredients varies all over the place.”

Noyan produced a pair of clay airag cups and Nergui decanted about half a Turkish spoonful of the potion into each one. She raised herself onto her side and they touched cups with a clink. “Eruul mendiin toloo,” they recited, and tossed back the drinks in a single gulp. Right then they could have been any two people in no particular hurry to be anywhere else in the world.

"You know before?” Nergui said after a while. “If you’d spanked me just a little less hard, it would have gotten rid of the numbness from sitting all that time.”

"You mean… like this?"

"Ow! Crap. No, that’s still too hard.”

"How about that?"

"That’s too weak. I hardly felt it.”

"There’s just no pleasing some people.”

"Pretend like you’re swatting a fly. Use just as much force as that takes.”

"I detest flies. I leave as big and flat a smear as I can, to discourage the others.”

"Okay, bad example. I guess I have to demonstrate on you.”

"Oh no, you don’t.”

"You might like it. You sit in saddles all the time. It might feel good to get your circulation back.”
"No, no, no. Let me try again. I’m sure I’ll get it right eventually."

"Maybe when I’m black and blue and red all over. Forget it!" Nergui’s leg muscles had at least partially recovered, and she ran further into the cavern. When she suddenly stopped short, he almost ran into her. He gave her a swat, but she barely noticed.

"Wow," she breathed. "What is this?" Crystals studded the ceiling, glowing and glittering even in the faint light from the torch in the other chamber and the small hand-lamp he’d picked up. In the center of the space, stalactites and stalagmites had grown together to form a complex column of filaments. There was another fire area with a small iron cauldron and natural stone ledges forming benches and shelves.

"This was Ulu Bilge’s favorite spot for meditation and ritual, at least if he didn’t need to be directly out under the sky. He said his drum got very good resonance here."

Not having her drum on her, she clapped a couple times, then sang a few notes, then gave a whistle of approval. “Nice,” she said.

The Noyan seemed to arrive at a decision, giving the impression it had been a long time coming. "You think this is nice? It gets nicer," he said, taking her wrist and pulling her onward.

Something in Nergui’s stomach flashed a wordless warning. "Uh --" she began, pulling back.

"Really," he urged, continuing to pull her, “Trust me,” then confided in almost a whisper “I get huge when you trust me.”

It was dark this far back in the cave. From what little she could see, it was so little used that no one had even put torch-brackets on the wall. He seemed to know his way nevertheless.

In the grotto, everything glittered. The curtains covering the entrance were Egyptian assuit cloth, a moderately heavy open-weave with tiny shiny pieces of silver hand-hammered in to form a pattern. Nergui only recognized it because Tabanodval, the retired Khongi concubine from Dower House 5 in the capital, wore a dress made out of it. Nergui pulled the edge of the curtain toward her to feel the material (something she never would have tried with Tabby’s dress). Though the fabric draped very fluidly, so that the silver bits shimmered like moonlight on river ripples, it was ponderously heavy — that dress of Tabby’s must have weighed as much as a goat! — and as scratchy as a sticker-bush to touch. Trust a Khongi to withstand all manner of torture for beauty's sake, Nergui thought wryly. She let go of the curtain and found that it wouldn’t fall back until she disengaged the silver bits that had snagged in the fabric of her deel.

"It helps if you strip before going through the curtain,” the helpful Noyan contributed. Just the thought of that vicious fabric against any sensitive part of her body was enough to make Nergui wince involuntarily, but she Mongoled up regardless. Quickly peeling off her matte-black raw silk long tunic and loose trousers, she parted the curtains carefully with her knuckles and ventured into the draped grotto, wary of more objects that might be unpleasant to touch, no matter how wondrous to look at.

Past the curtains, everything glittered even more once she lit the hanging lamp, but except for some rather rough metallic cloth there was mostly brocade. Overhead was a canopy of Kushite cotton with tiny mirrors sewn in, the kind that were supposed to deflect the evil eye. Nergui distractedly wondered what the ceiling of the cave had to worry about in that department. Lamplight flattered the purple, orange, and green colors of the cotton, which in full sunlight might have been almost painful to the eye. Soft cushions underfoot made for careful walking.
Something had her on edge. Gooseflesh rose in the faint breeze the lamp’s heat created in the cool, damp air. When Baiju Noyan came in behind her and ran his palms down her ribcage to her waist, she jumped, as if she hadn’t expected anyone to be there. He swept her hair aside and tasted the nape of her neck. “What do you think?” he murmured. “Did I make it beautiful? I know I can curate beauty ---” he touched the rock-crystal pendant, which after all he’d been the one to find, “--- but can I create it?”

“You’ve combined some nice visual textures here,” she hedged, “It’s possible to forget we’re in a cave...”

“Can you tell whether I loved the woman I made it for? With your… extra senses?”

She turned to face him, searched his shaded eyes.”Oh… This is what you made for...” She hesitated to even say the name, given how contentious he’d become the last time she had.

“Gonchagul,” he confirmed. “The other spy in my life,” he attempted to lighten the mood.

“You wanted to give her back a little of the luxury she’d enjoyed as part of the Sultan’s Court in Konya,” Nergui ventured in a carefully neutral voice while thinking Ech, no wonder! Her ghost hasn’t come back here, but I still feel her glaring at me out of every mirrored piece in this canopy. “You didn’t need to see her in this kind of setting,” she continued. “You aren’t that fussed about atmosphere. You might have been imagining how she would feel about living in a cave and so you went to some effort to put her at ease.”

“Was that love, then?”

“You cared about her physical and emotional comfort. That’s kind of a foundation, a facet of love. Unless you were just calculating that you would get,, better results if she was more comfortable,” she lowered her voice and hurried to the end of the sentence. To avert any impending wrath she kissed the hollow of his throat, then his collarbone, then his breastbone near his heart.

“And are you perhaps calculating right now how to get my mind onto another subject?”

She stopped. ”Sorry. I’m just not sure what I’m doing here. Before --- ”

“Before,” he took over, “you were interested in studying my relationship with Gonchagul as part of your… diagnosis.”

“At first I thought it might be important,” she admitted, “but you seemed to feel very strongly that it was none of my business. After a little thought, I decided I could afford to leave it alone. I’m just supposed to get you back into exceptional fighting form, not get you voted Boyfriend of the Year.”

“I... changed my mind. I want to know, for my own sake, whether I’m a true Unconstrained or whether I have any capacity to love. If I did love one person, that would answer it.”

”Aren’t you sure whether or not you loved her? Normally, the need to ask that question supplies its own answer.”

”Nothing about that time was normal. I thought then that I was in love, but by then I was thinking a lot of… unreliable things.”

She softened, despite her aversion. ”Fair enough, Noyan,” she nodded solemnly. She thought she heard a hiss, but it might have just been water in the lamp. She was too aware of the hundred eyes of Gonchagul glinting malevolently from the canopy. And the smell; she realized she’d been blocking it out until now. A musty, damp overlay of cave-stored textile was neither strong nor exactly
unpleasant. Under that, Baiju Noyan had definitely been here. Not exactly the same man who stood so close to her now; something much closer to the version of him that had Unsealed Nergui on her first night. The rest must be traces of Gonchagul, a fading remnant left in this world.

An expensive-smelling perfume heavy with ambergris; definitely not Nergui’s taste. Sweat. Turkman wool from Gonchagul’s previous role as prospective Bey’s baby-mama. Something acrid: echoes of the poisons she worked with? Rage. Resentment. Fear.

A lot of fear.

The kind that waits for a lonely shank of a night to ooze out of a person’s bones and constrict her entire body.

*The Fear Eater would have lapped that right up.*

Nergui sighed with relief to find herself beyond the barrier of her personal distaste, finally able to feel compassion for the Seljuk spy whose shadow was there in the grotto with her. With her and with the man who was as close to her as her quivering skin and yet as far away as the North Star.

*Gonchagul.* Pimped out by her own father to further his political ambitions. Probably dazzled by Palace life in the beginning. Had the dazzle faded by the time she was offered to Gundogdu Bey, an honest and intelligent man but the presumptive heir to an ephemeral kingdom of felt tents? Had he represented a humiliating demotion or a breath of fresh, if somewhat agricultural, air? Had she loved him as she claimed, or had she simply been obsessed with defeating the equally duplicitous (though supposedly reformed) Selchan?

Then, as if in the blink of an eye, Gonchagul’s father Gumushtekin had been exposed and killed, Selchan had implicated her in an old murder done in panic, and she’d somehow landed in the oily hands of Sadettin Kobek.

Who, in turn, had wasted no time bartering her to Baiju Noyan, a monster he hoped to muzzle and whip to a frenzy at will. Men in charge here seemed to enjoy handing out women like free drinks, without much thought for their fate.

*But didn’t Ogedei Khagan kind of do the same to me? ... No. He didn’t. I wouldn’t be wearing his mom’s pendant if he did.*

This, she realized, was where Gonchagul had come to the end of her rope. Dangling above the abyss, the slightest breeze could have swayed her to any side.

*This is the end,* echoed the Well of Songs in Nergui’s head. *Beautiful friend.*

A new scent reached Nergui’s nostrils. Olive oil. It was warm on her tired muscles, The ridged scars on his chest slid across her back. And his fingertips…

”Are you sure you want to go *there... in here?*” she asked him abruptly. “It’s supposed to release trapped and hidden darkness. Especially the first time; nobody knows what might be in there.”

”That is exactly,” he answered her as she breathed deeply and willed herself to relax, “why yours should be at the hands of a shamanically trained men of great... worldly experience.”

”They probably don’t get much more experienced than you,” she acknowledged.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 8 of the separate work “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls” extends this scene in explicit detail for readers permitted by law to view adults-only material.

References

“Tunnel of Love” song by Dire Straits
“The End” song by The Doors
footsteps of a rag doll

Chapter Notes

Thanks, big black post-surgical gas bubble in my eye, for finally going away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“And another thing,” said Baiju Noyan, looking up at the glittering canopy of Gonchagul’s grotto and seeing only the presumably innocent stars. “I understand diversionary tactics as well as anyone alive, but you shouldn’t be walking around with no name. It’s made you brush over everything you touch. You’re like a ghost. Nothing holds you. It’s as if you expect to fade from the memory of everyone you meet only minutes after leaving their sight. I might not be able to form proper human attachments, but you might if you had a proper name. Don’t you think?”

Just about then he realized he’d been talking to some pillows that had gotten bunched up under a blanket, and in fact he was alone.

Further up the mountain on a ridgeline, Nergui lounged in a tree, taking big gulps of crisp oxygen-laden fresh air and confronted with one of the most amazing views for hundreds of miles around. Here in the shank of the night the sky was its blackest behind stars that might have been holes poked through to heaven. The moon had come out and its light brought every terrace and striation in the cliff faces into stark relief. Trees grew wherever they could, grouping together on ledges and poking improbably out of crevices in the sheer rock. A big owl swooped by, its passing not heard but felt by the breeze it stirred.

The white stallion she’d ridden in on stood at the foot of the tree, dozing and occasionally craning down to nibble on fern fiddleheads. She’d hobbled him next to the Noyan’s Sweet Georgian Brown by the cave entrance, but of course he’d wiggled out of it somehow. Maybe he felt obligated to keep an eye on her since Gemtsen wasn’t there.

Had she given Noyan the answer he had asked for? She wasn’t sure. Trance memories were even trickier than the regular kind. Yet every time she tried to backtrack she was stricken by nausea. She’d even tried to throw up, hoping to get it out of her system, but she was too empty.

Nergui realized that she fully accepted Baiju Noyan’s ingrained avidity and the way it drove his style in the sexual arena (an expression she now found more literal than metaphoric). Tonight he’d bested her two falls out of three and claimed some new territory. She could still feel it. But a big chunk of her consciousness had been grasped in a rapacious talon and yanked into the past to watch him with Gonchagul. Not even just to watch them; to feel all the conflicting emotions the two of them were feeling.

Gonchagul was terrified of Noyan, and not without reason. She hadn’t been around to see the aftermath of his army’s raid on Kayis, but but from the women of the Kayis/Dodurga weaving and dye-works she’d heard plenty. She had no confidence that Sadettin Kobek could, or even that he necessarily would, protect her. With her uncle dead, she was reduced to a bargaining chip.

*Bet you can’t eat just one, heh heh.*

Gonchagul admitted to a little bit of excitement -- all right, more than a little -- at being with the most
feared man in five countries. His talk of laying the world at her feet swayed her, She wondered what his harsh Gobi homeland was like. She was intrigued to see the Imperial capital and try her luck among the scions of the Golden Family. Compared to Greater Mongol, what was left of the dwindling Seljuk Empire seemed pitiful. She’d always known she was meant for greater things.

And at the same time she’d played him. She couldn’t help it, any more than a scorpion could help stinging anything that came too close, She’d convinced herself that she’d loved Gundogdu, now that she’d lost him, but she’d played him too. Had her pursuit of Gundogdu really been about winning his heart, or had she mostly relished the prospect of dragging Selchan’s dignity though the mud?

Any compassion Nergui had scraped together for Gonchagul back in the grotto was gone without a trace. She shook her head in an effort to clear it. None of this was what she’d been asked for. It was just extra bonus information, like all the squirrel noises a hunter heard while listening for a deer. Had Noyan. Loved. Gonchagul? Answer that for him and be done with this noisome metaphysical morass she’d stumbled into. How Gonchagul had felt about him, in whatever she used for a heart, had nothing to do with it. Even in her limited experience with romantic relationships, Nergui knew that.

Maybe she was having so much trouble focusing on the question because it was the wrong one to ask. Love wasn’t something identifiable by testing. There were no dangerous liquids to dissolve everything but the love in an unknown lump of mixed emotions, as she’d once seen someone extract gold from an uninteresting rock. Besides, even the definition of love was in constant dispute.

"Rock warms up each day / Snake returns to sun itself / Are these two in love?" Where had that come from? Probably something Bu-Tan Darga said once. It sounded like him.

"Let us share two minds / Lever up reality / And see underneath,” was front and center in Baiju Noyan’s thoughts when he fully awoke again. Had he found that one afternoon, written in Ram Bu-Tan’s fluid hand on a scrap of parchment? Or had he only dreamed he had?

It had been many days, he realized, since he’d lost any time except for normal sleep. He’d had no trouble remembering who he was, where he was, what he’d recently done and what he would do next. Even the elusive flickering BetweenSpace where he was neither awake nor asleep seemed to have settled into a semblance of consistency... but there were changes there. Whenever he drifted into that hypnagogic realm for more than a handful of heartbeats, he got the impression that the part of him that lived there needed something. Needed it like air.

If he came out of it next to the No Name Girl, or in the best case intertwined with her, the unsettling feeling evaporated instantly. But if he woke up alone, it lingered and nagged like a sky-wide cluster of bloated grayish clouds that couldn’t decide whether to piss down or bugger off. Should he find her? Tell her? Ask her? What?

This might be one of those questions with no right answer, Nergui brooded. Which would mean there are no wrong answers either, right? So if nothing comprehensible drops out of my intuition, I could go back and tell Noyan whatever he wants to hear and it wouldn’t be wrong, right? Now if I could just figure out what that is...

If the horse at the foot of the tree hadn’t been in her peripheral vision, she might not have noticed it rousing itself and disappearing silently into the shadows. She heard the other hoofbeats coming up the mountain, accompanied by jangling harness, and understood. People were coming, which didn’t always bode well for an unaccompanied horse. When Summer Cloud Sultan, aka The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch, wanted to, it could be as quiet as if the ground was covered in a six-inch-deep carpet of rose petals.
Gonchagul means “rosebud,” floated through her mind unbidden, which is a common euphemism for ---

Ambushed by her own gag reflex. How ignominious.

"Hey, hey, Dogan brother,” said a husky, deep male voice. “Was that another one, those big owls? ”

"Could be,” said another male voice tinged with mild doubt. “They always vomit after they eat, Bamsi brother. All the indigestible parts, like the bones and fur.”

"How big, mm-hm, how big do you think those owls get, Dogan brother?” the husky voice rejoined. “Sounded like it horked up a whole goat. That last one.”

"We’ll stop and wait for Turgut here,” said a third male voice, one that resonated with confidence even when speaking under its breath. “From this spot, if anything bigger than a mouse moves, we’ll see it.”

Well, shee-ee-ee-it, Nergui really wanted to say out loud. But didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Spellbound” song by Siouxsie and the Banshees
A mountain game-path. A tree.

Shank of the night.

Bamsi sat on a rock, and tried to take off his boot. He pulled at it with both hands, panting, then gave up, exhausted. After a brief rest he tried again, but nothing had changed. Ertugrul, who had been pacing impatiently, stopped and looked down at Bamsi.

Bamsi gave up again and shook his unruly mane of hair. “Nothing to be done, Bey,” he sighed, his rumbly voice half-choked with frustration.

Ertugrul took a few short, stiff strides past Bamsi, legs wide apart. “I begin to wonder if you are right, my brother. I keep denying it, telling myself ‘Ertugrul, be reasonable! You haven't yet tried everything.’ And I keep struggling.” He looked downslope, brooding, musing on the struggle, then turned back. “So there you are again.”

’Am I, Beyim?’ asked Bamsi, baffled, then turned to see that Dogan had walked up behind him.

”I'm glad to see you back, brother Dogan,” Ertugrul continued. “I thought you were gone forever, la samah Allah.”

”Me too, Beyim,” Dogan replied. “There’s almost no place level enough to squat down without falling over up here.”

”When Turgut comes, we’ll be together again at last!” Ertugrul declared. “We’ll have to celebrate. Stand up, Bamsi, and be ready to embrace him.”

Bamsi indicated his uncooperative boot. “At the moment I cannot, Bey.”

”Allah, Allah,” Ertugrul shook his head impatiently. “When I think of it . . . All these years . . . But for me . . . where would you be? You'd be little heaps of bones like those owl pellets at the present minute, no doubt about it. It's too much for one man.” Then a sudden grin lit up the depths of his formidable beard. “On the other hand, what's the good of losing heart now? That's what I say, brothers.”

”Pardon me, Bey,” Bamsi rumbled, “it’s only that Shaitan has possessed this cursed boot! Haven’t you ever had trouble with your boots?”

Ertugrul rounded on him. ”Boots must be taken off every day, I'm tired of telling you that. Why don't you listen to me?”

”Let me try to help, brother,” Dogan suggested to Bamsi. “Does it hurt?”
"Of course not," Bamsi scoffed, then after a reflective pause added, “Though if I were a lesser man than an Alp, I can imagine it might hurt a great deal."

"I might be in some pain of my own, too, if I were not an Alp," Dogan confessed. "Having to leave Banu Cicek’s company just when I want it most would certainly torment the fork of an ordinary man."

"Keep it buttoned up until after the wedding, brother," Ertugrul advised. "Your fiancee is as skilled with a sword as you are. Better to let it ache temporarily than to part company with it permanently."

At that moment Dogan fell backwards, having managed to pull off Bamsi’s boot, which landed near Dogan’s face. “Ugh!” Dogan cried out, holding his nose. “Bamsi, I believe you about this boot being occupied by Shaitan. It truly smells like Jehennam.” Dogan held the boot upside-down at arm’s length and shook it, then took a stick and carefully poked into its interior. “It seems empty of rocks and insects, though. Will you put it back on?"

"No, brother," Bamsi replied, choking a little at the released vapors. "I’ll let it air for now. We have to wait anyway until Turgut comes to meet us, inshallah."

Dogan made a face, tossed the boot several feet away, and fanned the air irritably. ”Are we sure it was here?"

"What?" Ertugrul gruffed, as if interrupted from another activity.

"Where Turgut was supposed to meet us."

"He said by the tree on the ridge above where the road crosses the river," Ertugrul replied curtly. "Do you see any others?"

Yes! silently shouted the part of Nergui’s consciousness delegated to listen to the men’s conversation a few yards beneath her. This place is lousy with trees, you dillweeds! Go loiter under a different one!

"Say, what kind of trees are these, Dogan?" Bamsi wondered aloud.

Most of Nergui’s concentration had been directed toward convincing the world at large that she was just another part of the tree in which she hid. Once she convinced herself, that was usually enough for ordinary humans who didn’t get too close. A fellow shaman like Baiju Noyan might still notice her. A specialized tracker like Tangut Darga or Berkant Alp could probably find her if they were looking for her. Ertugrul and his bravos were so wrapped up in their own business that they might as well be on a different mountain… for the moment… but she did have to contend with a tougher audience as well, in the form of an owl that had nested a couple of branches up.

**Birds. Why did it have to be birds?**

Nergui hadn’t heard any hatchlings, which she reckoned was why all her blood was still in her body. It was the kind of thing she’d have checked first if she’d planned a stakeout, but tonight all she’d wanted was a few minutes’ break from total immersion in the whole “Noychagul” vibe. So Mr. and Mrs. Owl had come home from an evening of small-rodent bulimia to a nest full of undisturbed eggs or air. Not being on triple red alert, they found no definitive cause to pitch a screeching, rending fit. And yet… and yet something about their tree wasn’t quite right.

Not terribly fussed about the humans far below who didn’t appear to be hunting, the owls walked back and forth on all the limbs near the nest, repeatedly traversing the one that looked swollen and felt soft. They conferred in low hoots and wing-rustlings. It seemed to Nergui that they’d almost
decided to pop out for another snack, but then one of them discovered a thatch of incredibly long, soft nest fibers. They couldn’t believe their luck. Since then they’d occupied themselves with plucking Nergui’s hair out a few strands at a time and arranging it among the gathered twigs and evergreen needles.

The prospect of losing a big, unsightly patch of hair to a clutch of spoiled-rotten owlets was the least of her worries, however. The more time went by, the more likely the Noyan would wake up and wonder where she was. From what the Dargas said, he was probably too good at sneaking around to get caught, and these three Kayis boys weren’t making themselves difficult to see or hear. She wouldn’t put it past the Noyan to ascend the tree as quietly as smoke and molest her, challenging her to maintain absolute stillness and silence or start a major bloodbath with these guys.

Actually, that might be kind of fun.

"He should be here,” Dogan was insisting.

"He didn’t say for sure he’d come,” Ertugrul hedged.

"And if he doesn't come?” Bamsi asked, somewhat sourly.

"We'll come back tomorrow,” Ertugrul answered confidently.

"And then the day after tomorrow,” Dogan guessed.

"And so on.” Bamsi added,

"The point is ---” Ertugrul tried.

"Until he comes,” Bamsi pronounced.

You're merciless, Bey,” said Dogan almost under his breath.

"Weren’t we here yesterday?” Bamsi wondered, scratching his head.

Oh my Tengri, you guys! Nergui thought. I’m stuck clinging to a branch with owls pulling my hair out and this conversation is even more painful! Will you bristle-jaws say something useful before I completely lose it up here?

"No, you’re mistaken, brothers. We weren’t here.

"Then what did we do yesterday?”

"Yes, Beyim, what did we do yesterday?

"We . . . looked for Mongols to kill, I guess! You men have a way of messing up my memory.”

"That’s what I wish we were doing now,” Bamsi avowed. “Finding some Mongols and killing them.”

"And that’s why we’re waiting for Turgut,” Ertugrul explained patiently. “He said he found one of the Mongols’ hiding places.”

Oh really? Nergui thought. This just suddenly got interesting.

"Is it around here somewhere?"
"It must be. Why else would he want us to meet him here?"

"Haydir Allah!" suddenly rang out of the trees.

"Hakdir Allah!" the three Alps shouted back. Nergui reckoned she could stop worrying about Baiju Noyan; even if he was still dreaming of his lost Palace poisoner, he had to have heard that.

After much hugging and back-slapping and other enthusiastic greetings, Turgut dropped his voice to a low mumble. Nergui strained to hear his description of the place he found. To her relief, it didn’t sound like the cave she’d just been in. Maybe they had another supply cache in the general area. A person could hide almost anything in these mountains.

Finally the tea party seemed to be breaking up. The four Turkmen set off in a direction Turgut indicated. With any luck, Nergui could double back quickly and quietly, get the horses into the cave, and warn the Noyan. When the Alps’ footsteps faded, Nergui inched around the trunk and let herself slide down it as quickly as she dared. As she slid down, her robe bunched up, but there wasn’t much to be done about that. Just before her feet touched the ground,

"Hey!" Turgut’s voice called out of a too-near distance. “Is that a deer back there?”

"They usually hide and nap this time of night.”

"I thought sure I saw a flash of white tail,” Turgut insisted excitedly. “Dogan, let me borrow your bow a minute.”

Crap, Nergui thought, landing and hurriedly yanking the back of her robe down.

"Don’t get distracted, Turgut. Eyes on the prize, remember?”

"I promise I’ll just shoot it, gut it, and hang it up to bleed out. We can come back and finish the butchering later.”

While she’d been in the tree, the angle of the moon had changed and moved the sheltering shadows away from the tree trunk. Scrambling back up wasn’t an option; it would rustle too many branches. Her best bet would be to move toward them until she could follow a shadow into one of the numerous crevices in the cliff face and shrink back into it until they lost interest.

She made lots of noise running forward, like a deer (or something else) charging an intruder, then slipped silently sideways into the shadow of the rocks. Not bad for half-asleep legs, she just had time to think before the ground underneath her gave way.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Bear's Gone Fishin'” song by Widespread Panic
“Waiting for Godot” play by Samuel Beckett
“Twin Peaks” TV series by David Lynch and Mark Frost
“Raiders of the Lost Ark” movie directed by Steven Spielberg
Thanks, Caitlin Canty, for looking so much like Esra “Halime Sultan” Bilgic in one of your Web pictures that I took it as a sign to quote from your lyrics at the end. Otherwise it would have been U2 or Bladerunner by way of Pop Will Eat Itself.

And today just keeps getting better and better! was Nergui’s next conscious thought. It was ink-dark. She was floating in water so cold it shrank her lungs; she could only take miserly sips of the humid air. Either the water was moving her or other things were moving in the water. Every once in a while she hit something, or it hit her.

As her eyes adjusted, she found she could see a little. The outlines of things glowed faintly. Rocks. More rocks. Edges, Arches. She soon decided she was being carried along on an underground stream. That made more sense than thinking she was lying still and everything else she could see was moving past her.

After an uncertain length of time she brushed along a sandy bottom and fetched up feet-first against something soft. She rolled over and crawled out of the flow into standing, warmer water. A lake or a pool. Maybe warm from just sitting. Or maybe a warm spring was another of its feeders. Or maybe something had recently peed in it.

Ew. Didn’t need that image. Or maybe I did: I can’t be positive I’m alone down here, and I need to factor that into how I behave.

She kept crawling quietly through the water. Then she found dry land. The air was cool and she shivered, but she found herself more tired than cold. Not hearing any other movement, she lay down to rest her eyes for just a moment.

Without opening her eyes she could tell she was back in Baiju Noyan’s campaign tent. Through her eyelids the faint light hinted that dawn would come soon. Past the textile and animal smells of the tent, the aroma of the night-duty soldiers’ tea wafted by.

As per the new usual, he had wrapped himself all around and through her while she slept. She stretched all her muscles without moving, as every Mongol who’d slept in a family bed or out on the ground with Tengri’s other various creatures knew how to do. By his heartbeat and breathing, he was awake, and had been for at least a little while.

"Hmm?" she vibrated almost inaudibly, meaning “Whatever you’re thinking, should I be thinking about it too?”

His breath caught; he seemed surprised, as if she’d discovered him doing something furtive and as if he gave a good godsdamn that she had. Then he tightened his coils around her. "Don’t go,” he said in a tone of voice she mostly heard from patients bracing themselves for arrow removal.

"Well, I’ll have to use the latrine eventually,” didn’t seem like the right response. She reconsidered: might he be in a sleepwalking state rather than really awake? “Don’t go where, Noyan?” she asked
"Back," he said. Back to KK. Back to Oggy, she might have felt him think, but it might have just been noise in the air, the hisses and clicks you got sometimes that always tried to sound like words, but...

"DId something stop working?" she said aloud, worried. "Have you felt worse?" She tried to raise up on an elbow and look at him, but he held too tightly. There was a tearing sound. Out of the corner of her eye she saw sharp talons rip through the roof of the tent. A big lammergeier vulture, perhaps three feet tall, plopped through onto the floor, hopped up on the edge of the bed, and fixed first one glowing yellow eye and then the other on them, as if deciding whether to try eating them.

Why does it always have to be birds?

"You healed him well," the vulture said in a surprisingly melodious female voice. "He is even stronger and cleverer than before, and just introspective enough. You were able to do that thanks to your mother, you know. He has great victories to come if his spirit stays strong and steady. It will, if you stay near him."

"Well, I guess I could pidge the Agency for an extension, say I got good results but want to make sure they stick… wait, what was that about my mom?"

"You think you got all your shamanigans from your father, but your mother’s the one who gets through to difficult souls and helps them break through their limitations."

Now it was Nergui’s turn to scrutinize her visitor closely. “Do you know my mom? Udeshlegmaa? Are you one of her birds?” It was certainly big and scary enough. She’d heard there were some Birdspeakers who worked with cheerful chirpers or picturesque world travelers. Nergui and her brothers would have had quite a different childhood with one of those.

"Yes, Udeshelgmaa trained my voice. Not another Birdspeaker in the world could have made it so beautiful. In fact, the advice I just gave you isn’t why I’m here. I just happened to overhear and thought I could supply some insight. Your mother commanded me to find you so I could sing you a song:

"Happy Birth-day! Hunh!
"Happy Birth-day! Hunh!
"May the cities in your wake
"Burn like candles on your cake
"Happy Birth-day! Hunh!
"Happy Birth-day! Hunh!"

This doesn’t seem quite right, Nergui realized. I never thought my mom even remembered the day I was born. Even though you’d think, if anyone would remember it...

"Ah-hah! Something shiny!" the bird squawked in a much more vulture-y voice, diving for Nergui’s throat. “I’ll take that!”

“The hells you will!” Nergui snarled, enclosing Empress Borte’s pendant in a fist and rolling onto her stomach to shield it. “And it’s too late to try to act plausibly! I’m onto you..."
And she was face-down in cave sand. It was the maybe-relatively-safe-at-the-last-place-she’d-used-for-a-home scene that had been the dream. There were no talons at her throat here, but when she looked up, there was a foot in front of her face. She looked up and up the white robes. At the white beard. At the saintly white turban.

"Salaam aleikum, Sheikh ibn-i Arabi," she said politely, rolling onto her back so she could speak clearly, too tired to sit or stand yet. “We meet in the strangest places.”

The venerable Dervish, glowing a bit around the edges, said nothing. Eyes black as obsidian and with just as sharp an edge, he gestured toward something behind Nergui in the mirror-faced, chilly pool.

She struggled to a seated position to look. There was a lump, somewhat bigger than person-sized. It might be the softish thing that brought her to a halt when she floated into it.


On her feet by sheer force of will, she sloshed back out into the water, every step threatening to knock her down.

Unless bears were wearing armor these days, this wasn’t a bear. Although, if bears had taken to wearing armor --- did people think they had some kind of natural right to arm bears? ---it explained a lot of the Alps she’d seen. Falling down with a splash several times, she dragged the inert form to shore. She rolled it onto its side and let the water run out of the nose and mouth. She could feel breath coming and going through the thatch of scrub-brush whiskers; thank Tengri for small favors.

She said a gathering prayer to collect her diffused consciousness from hither and yon and focused the present moment to suck it all in. She placed a hand over his heart and another next to the crown of his head and sang one of her lowest notes, checking on his soul, hunting for suggestions on how to help him.

When the sudden, unexpected big zap seared her palms, it only confirmed what she suspected, which was regrettable; the least a phenomenon could do if it was going to hurt that much was reveal some really handy information. Shaking her hands like a cat that had stepped in something it thoroughly disliked, she said a few things that definitely were not prayers. Then she said, “Some soul, all right. This wouldn’t be Suleyman Shah’s Ertugrul, would it?” and looked up toward where ibn-i Arabi had been standing.

He was gone. Of course. And it all had a certain inevitability about it.

"Avoid the four sons of Suleyman Shah," the mission reading had said. Well, Sungurtekin was Ogedei’s agent just like Nergui… at least sometimes. Dundar was a nice kid who’d spent more time in comas than most boys his age spent hiding between hay-bales trying to see girls getting dressed. Gundogdu and his family were caught in that nasty storm, and banding together in horrible weather was just the Mongolian way. But this one… Was anyone else a bigger pain in Greater Mongol’s ass? Well, yes, she could think of several, but… in Anatolia? Lately?

What would Saint Genghis --- may he ride forever in the sky --- do?

There was a blank, black silence that seemed to suck everything into it. Then, Nergui began to know:

NOT take advantage of the opportunity to slit his throat in his sleep, that’s for sure. It might seem
expedient in the moment, but it was not an act that would strengthen the Mongol spirit. On the contrary, it would be a cowardly attack on the destiny of the world that would spawn other problems that would be many times worse. This was why both Mongols and Turkmen valued exceptional enemies in ways others never seemed to understand. Mighty Genghis’s birth name, Temujin, was chosen to honor an enemy his father had only barely defeated.

Genghis looked upon Ertugrul and nodded approval, smiling grimly. A champion chosen by destiny knows another one. They contest in an arena as vast as the stars, much greater than any State. Their clashing swords polish each other until the reflections they create are brighter than the origins of light. From the long, long view of the growth and flowering and fruit-bearing of humanity and the world, the one who wins or loses matters much less than the rightness of the battle. The highest-elevated battles are fulcrums, capable of changing the very path of Time.

(Daughter of my great friend Khenbish, you are no coward for thinking the thoughts that you did. You are very young, small of body, and as yet unblooded in essential face-to-face battle. Your shadow, compact and elusive but deep and sharp and adamant, tried to protect you. The heavens are also known to pivot on deeds of stealth, or of healing, or of harnessing the invisible, but the man at your feet is not prey for any of these. You may simply walk away and incur no debt. Hidden wheels will turn and something else may fall from the sky to help him. But you asked what I would do. I would recognize his path and lead him back to it. Give away the anchor stone that starts an avalanche of blessings.)

"The minute he wakes up, he’s going to want to kill me,” Nergui murmured aloud.

(Don’t let him.)

And the saintly presence was gone.

She dropped into a sitting position and rested her chin on her hand. She looked at the fallen warrior this way and that, trying not to imagine that Great Khan Genghis and Sheikh Ibn-i-Arabi were sitting side by side just out of sight and laughing at her.

How to level the playing field?

Let’s start with the obvious.

Ertugrul carried no shield or bow, and his quiver was empty; probably all lost in the tumble from the surface. His sword rested firmly in its scabbard. Didn’t heroes often have special swords?

I’m standing here in my freaking pajamas, she reminded herself. Even a second-hand third-rate sword could probably put me down, no trouble. She undid the whole sword-belt, found that it went around her waist an inconvenient two-and-a-half times, buckled it at its shortest circumference and slung it over her shoulder. Feeling better already, she relieved him of two additional daggers.

Of course, this bruiser still has the option to just kick me to death, she silently admitted to herself, scowling in an actually not-too-bad unconscious imitation of Baiju Noyan.

Without much hope, she felt through her hair for a spare needle. Before she’d come to the army camp, she’d traveled all over Greater Mongol seeking new knowledge and sewing up any trouble she couldn’t sing away. Her hair she’d kept braided up day and night so it would grow instead of tangling and splitting. She often entertained herself on the road by trying out intricate patterns she’d seen in the places she visited. It was easy and painless to keep a few spare needles and lengths of thread spiraled into the centers of the braids.
The last several weeks, though, she’d been wearing it loose or caught into a smooth ponytail. Her mission didn’t leave her much time to dink around with hairstyles. She had to be ready to pop a helmet on and have it fit correctly at a moment’s notice. And, not least importantly, ever since her first night Noyan liked having big hunks of her hair clenched in and wrapped around his fist on any and every occasion. Sometimes she thought a palm full of needles might serve him right; hell, he might even like it --- but her sense of duty always won. So, no needles now. Nothing but her wits. After a day this long and exasperating, the odds didn’t thrill her, but she might as well get on with it.

As a final precaution, she undid his bootlaces and used them to bind his wrists in front of him. He has to be able to walk because he's too heavy to carry. but at least I'll limit some of his options. Then she took the fallen Bey’s big hand --- it had some kind of extra metal thing across the back that went all the way past the knuckles --- and patted it briskly to encourage the circulation.

”Get up, get up, get up, before the road pulls you under!”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Walking and Falling” song by Laurie Anderson
“Barbarian Birthday Dirge” song, origins lost in mists of time and intoxication, late 20th cen. CE.
“Get Up” song by Caitlin Canty
hearing every sound running into mines and fires

Chapter Notes

Thanks, second jar of suutei tsai, for waking me up enough to finish this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Happy, sunny major key)
Mi nosimo
Zel-en venchets
Dai nam Lado, lepi Lado

Ertugrul was taking his sweet time coming around. In the meantime, Nergui might as well try out the acoustics of what looked like a pretty big subterranean chamber.

Zelen venchets
Tseep-ko vee-nay
Dai nam
(here comes the dramatic shift to minor key) Lado! lepi Lado!
-- o -- o -- o -- o...

Sweet dingleberry pie, this place had one salad-tosser of an echo. Coming back from almost every direction. As she turned her head she noticed a couple of dead spots. One of them was back the way she’d come in on the chilly stream, but there was another one too, one that was further inshore and might not be full of water.

Dead spots meant nothing to bounce off of. Like you might find in, for instance, unblocked tunnels.

Thanks to the faint ghost-light, she could see, at least for a yard or two. If she figured this out, she might be able to hear quite a bit farther.

She might, in fact, be able to hear a way out.

Ertugrul was stirring. She turned back toward him and patted his knuckles again.

"Wakey wakey, you fell in the lakey! Up and at ‘em! Today is the first day of the rest of your death!”

"What --- where --- Brothers? Turgut? Bamsi? Dogan?"

"Sorry, Bey. Just sen ve ben down here. You and me."

"And who are you?"

"No Name."

"You’re not one of those sphinx things that talks in riddles, are you? I’m not sure my skull can hold itself together for that right now.”

"I’m serious. My name is Nerguitani. It means No Name Girl. Just like ‘Ertugrul’ means Angry
"Bird."

"No, it doesn’t, it means Fierce Male Goshawk."

"That’s what I said. Angry Bird. Come on, let’s go." She turned away and started walking. He lunged at her, but off-balanced and fell back down.

"What’s with my boots? And why are my hands tied?"

"We do that with all the warriors down here. It limits the damage they can do if they lose their tempers."

"Lose their --- Why, who could possibly lose their temper after waking up beaten, battered and soaking wet in a chilly pitch-black cave to be bossed around and sassed back by an insolent, annoying bitch?"

"Who, indeed?" Nergui sighed with as much interest as a leopard opening one eye from a nap after a very big dinner. She walked a little further, stopped, and looked around. "Coming?"

With an effort, he bit back his first reaction, instead settling for "Where?" in a tone heavy with suspicion.

"Through the Caves of Death. The passages between life and the afterlife."

"Wait! Are you saying I’m… dead?"

"You could be. Then again, you might not be. It’s not as this-or-that as a lot of people think."

"Yes, it is."

"You know it’s not. This is where Tugtekin went when he lay in the pit. It’s where Dundar went when he wouldn’t wake up. They both came back to life after that. You might too if you make the right decisions."

"Oh?" he said flatly. "And what would those be?"

"First of all, follow your guide. That’s me. If you attack me, whether you can actually hurt me or not, you’re never getting out of here."

"Never? If there are really the Caves of Death, shouldn’t people be popping in and out of here all the time? I could just follow the parade, couldn’t I?"

"Maybe so, if they weren’t so big that the earth would fit inside them the way a grain of little millet fits inside a cauldron of stew. Everyone enters in a different place. In a decade or two someone else would come along… if you’re very, very lucky. Ask yourself, Ertugrul: Do you feel lucky?" Her retreating footsteps echoed back to him.

He struggled to his feet and waddled after her in his unlaced boots. "Wait, wait!" By the time he caught up, he’d thought of an argument. "Hey. What about this; Ghazi martyrs such as myself are supposed to be escorted to Paradise by angels. You don’t strike me as an angel."

"I’m not. You’re not missing much. I’ve met a few angels. They’re dicks."

"Insolence! Filthy language! And, if I’m not mistaken, a Mongolian accent! Some sort of demon, I’m guessing."
"Ah! Ertugrul, ah! How does such a big man live in such a teeny, tiny reality? I’m no angel, so therefore I must be a demon? Hah? There are so many other possibilities! I could be an interdimensional guardian, or a psychopomp, or... or even Death. With a big D."

Ertugrul snorted, "Death is a wisecracking young woman? That’s as likely as people walking around on the moon."

Ignoring him, Nergui walked to one of the tunnel entrances and let out a high yip that made Ertugrul’s back hair stand on end. Nergui worked her way down some more vocal harmonics, sometimes sliding into the next range, sometimes cutting off abruptly, turning her head from side to side. Finally, she let out a long, low rumble that shouldn’t have been able to come out of such a small throat. She hitched a hip, tapped a foot, and considered. Then she went to the next tunnel entrance she found and repeated the process.

"What’s the matter?" Ertugrul jeered. "Did you forget the way out?"

"Nope. Just scaring away the land leeches."

"I don’t believe there are land leeches in here."

"Not anymore," Nergui agreed.

"If you’re not a demon, why do you make demon noises?"

"Those aren’t demon noises," she retorted indignantly. In fact, they were Tuvan Dad noises. While a great many Mongols learned to sing khoomei, their northern allies the Tuvans took the abstract sculpting of harmonic tones to even greater heights. And depths. And breadths.

One old story said it all started when a Tuvan ancestor couple got tired of their children being awoken and frightened by wild-animal noises outside the ger. Every time it got late enough for the kids to fall asleep so the couple could discreetly canoodle, a wolf howled or a bear complained or a tiger whuffed and that was all she brush-painted. The kids were instantly wide awake and screaming, and sometimes it took until almost dawn to settle them down again. One night, as they sang their repertoire of lullabies yet another time, the husband started adding exotic harmonic sounds. The kids knew it was their dad, so it didn’t scare them. The animals outside, though, were deeply disturbed. What kind of alien monsters made noises like that? They decided not to stick around and find out. After that, no Tuvan dad who diligently cultivated his harmonics was ever cock-blocked again.

Khenbish the battle-shaman had been one of several Tuvans on Genghis’s general staff, including the formidable General Subutai. After Khenbish came home, the neighbors nearly fainted with awe when Subutai and his family visited Khenbish’s camp. Later, in the shank of the night, when the unseemly noise showed no signs of softening or abating, they might have felt differently.

"I never heard of angels singing like that," Ertugrul pronounced.

Nergui finished fixing her echo-location image in her mind before answering. "Well, I may not be an angel, but you’re not exactly a martyr either. You’ve fought a bunch of battles in the name of Allah all right, but none of them killed you. The last thing you remember was falling in a hole, right? And you probably weren’t even in a fight at the time. That’s not martyrdom. That’s just the breaks."

"My warrior brothers and I were scouting for infidel Mongols. That’ at least a war-related activity."

"Scouting calls for taking your time and looking all around you, doesn’t it? How do you fall in a hole when you’re being that careful?"
"All right," Ertugrul confessed, "Turgut thought he saw a deer, so we thought we’d take a chase break."

"It could have been a gazelle; then you might have gotten another wife out of the deal."

"One’s enough," he said with a convert’s zeal.

"For an alpha male like you? Well, I guess you’re on the road a lot."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"You hot shots are unbelievably high-maintenance. It’s not fair to dump that whole burden on one woman’s shoulders. A team of wives, though --- they can handle the kids and the cooking and the finances and the herds and the state occasions and at any given time, at least a couple of them can make sure the big guy doesn’t feel neglected."

Ertugrul snorted. "Where did you hear that folktale?"

"A group of Genghis Khan’s widows."

"Oh, I see. Genghis Khan."

"May he ride forever in the sky."

"I was so sad when he died… because I wasn’t the one who got to kill him."

When his statement failed to get the reaction he wanted from Nergui, he went on "And what kind of benediction is that anyway? We pray for our martyrs to rest peacefully. Having to go on riding forever sounds like more of a curse."

Nergui paused, considering. "Have you ever heard someone say something like ‘Let’s keep going, I’ll rest when I’m dead’?"

"Yeah, Bamsi sometimes."

"The Great and Wise didn’t even want to do that. He said his soul would shine on forever as long as he didn’t get bored." They walked a little further. "Don’t get me wrong, your Alp Fu is pretty good, But I don’t think you could’ve killed him, one on one."

"Was he that great as an individual fighter? Or was he just good at organizing others?"

"I never got to see him in action, but I’ve heard he was both. Most good fighters, sooner or later, come to a fork in the road. They can keep refining their individual skills and become a champion. Or they can learn a whole new set of chops from scratch and become a leader. It’s very rare that someone does both. You might do both, later on. You might have to."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you’ve got that presence. Mash’Allah," she said, gesturing to ward off the Evil Eye of envy, even though in their present surroundings it was anyone’s guess what those eyes might be attached to. "You know how when you light a lamp outside in the dark, all the flying bugs come out of the woods for miles around to see what it is? You’re that lamp. People instinctively want to follow you, so you’re going to be stuck leading them whether you want to or not. And that, all by itself, will generate enemies for you. Maybe the, the night-flying birds in the forest will be saying ‘Hey, where did my bugs go? What am I supposed to eat now? It’s that light! That light took my bugs. I have to
put that light out.’ So they’ll come after you. You won’t know where and you won’t know when.
You might be on your own sometimes. You’ll have to be able to fight them off every time because
they only have to get lucky once.

"Champion fighters who are also leaders, when they do crop up, are most often war leaders. Like
your forerunner Alp Arslan. Or Genghis, may he ride. Or Baiju Noyan, he’s another one."

"Now him, I will kill," Ertugrul snarled bristling. "I hate that devil’s bastard."

"You might not want to kill him too soon. He’s your best shot at improving. Nobody ever gets better
by winning too easily."

"I’ll take that chance."

"Really? Wasn’t your falling-out with brother Turgut because he wanted to kill our Noyan right
away and you didn’t?"

"We’ve reconciled. There’s a chance… he might not have been… that completely wrong."

"Wow. That is one giant step toward effective leadership. How do you feel?"

"Unsettled. Like I just swallowed a fish that was still alive."

"Keep working at it. It’ll get better. No one will fault you for getting your ideas or your plans, or
even your energy, from other people as long as things keep working. After we take over ---"

"You mean after we take over," Ertugrul interrupted with an audible smirk.

"One way or another," Nergui amended with exaggerated patience, "peace is going to break out,
and the demand for peacetime leaders will grow. The Great and Wise himself once said ‘Riding in
and conquering is easy. Getting off the horse and ruling is hard.’ But Tengri gave him a son who
could do just that, and still kick troublemakers’ asses from here to Heilonggang if he has to. I wish
you could meet Great Khan Ogedei. Even you might like him. Everyone does. You could come with
ibn-i-Arabi and he could lead a few prayers at our new mosque. It’ll be the center of a full kulliye in a
couple of years."

"We won’t be bought that cheaply."

"That’s not what we’re trying to do."

"No, you want to enslave the world and oppress everyone who doesn’t support you."

"No, we want to unite all tribes and nations, end oppression, and make peace."

"That’s what we’re trying to do."

"And to do that, you’ve moved onto land that didn’t already belong to you, yes?"

"I suppose so, but that land was destined to be ours."

"But not all the people living there agreed, did they? You had to fight some? Even kill a few,
maybe?"

"Only the ones that were oppressing all the rest,"

"Of course."
"Any worthy divine mission eventually calls for sacrifice."

"Oh, it does that, all right. And this war you’re waging for peace: how will you know when you’re done?"

"When every Muslim, everywhere, is sheltered by the great, spreading plane-tree of a holy empire."

"See, that’s what we’re after too… except it’ll be Muslims and everybody else."

"A state without a religion?"

"No. A state with all the religions."

"Impossible. Every state on earth chooses one religion and rules by it."

"Oh, nobody said it wouldn’t be nine kinds of painy-ass, but for the trade and the education and the development of open-mindedness in the populace --- and, of course, every excuse for festivals and food --- we think it’ll be worth it. Ogedei will get it figured out."

"You sound as though you personally admire this second-generation Khagan."

"Sure I do. I and everyone else. And probably everything else."

"Are you hoping he’ll choose you as one of his whores?"

Time jumped. Ertugrul finished saying the last word of the sentence, and then a hundred reflections of a mighty SMACK were bouncing off the cavern walls while Nergui continued speaking, softly but very intensely: “Number one: I’d never make it as a professional concubine back home, They’re all hand-picked and they train for years. Number two: Ogedei Khan has never needed to pay for it. Ever. Number three,” she continued, trying to shake the sting out of her right palm, “I regret doing that. It would have made Sungurtekin really unhappy."

"That you, a lowly woman and a filthy Mongol, would dare raise a hand against his beloved brother?"

"No, that I used that big, dramatic roundhouse wind-up. It takes up time, takes up space, and doesn’t actually add much to the impact. He taught me better. I forgot myself.” Also, I completely blew the ethereal cover I constructed so carefully, she reflected in silent chagrin. I demonstrated unmistakably that I’m solid enough to hit him. That raises the possibility that I’m solid enough to be hit. Brilliant, No Name Girl. Just clotting brilliant.

"That does sound like Sungur.” Ertugrul took hold of his bearded jaw and wiggled it cautiously. "Since no one else whose opinion matters was here to see it, and since I only felt something like a moth fluttering against my cheek, I forgive you. We’ll say no more about it. You Mongols and your tempers."

Something shifted inside Nergui. In the absurdity of the moment, her self-reproach disintegrated. "Oh, to be a Turkman who never, ever gets angry,” Nergui managed to get out before dissolving into helpless laughter. Ertugrul stood aghast for a moment, then began chuckling. Then chortling. Then finally guffawing. In that instant he realized that if he really was dead, it was turning out to be more entertaining than he expected.

"So how,” he asked at last, “did I get a Mongolian guide to the afterlife anyway?"

"We’re taking over everywhere. Haven’t you heard? Also, all the Mongols you killed asked for you,
special. Anyhow, you’re lucky I snapped you up while Azazel was still lacing his boots. We’ve got a lot more choices than just heaven or hell.”

“So --- are you going to tempt me?” Ertugrul broke in abruptly.

Nergui raised her eyebrows invisibly in the dark. “Do you want me to, Bey?”

“It’s how these things always work. In the stories, you know,” he explained, wanting to sound less awkward than he suddenly felt. “In the belly of the beast, in the dark night of the soul, the hero is offered temptations. Usually three of them.”

“Oh. I see,” Nergui nodded unhurriedly as she walked. “I guess I can do that. We aim to please, and it’ll pass the time.

“Hmm… Alcohol could work, if I had any airag on me. But I don’t.”

“What is that, anyway?”

“Fermented horse milk.”

“Yuck!”

“Oh, everybody says that until about the third glass. Let’s see, what else? You’re married to Hottie-May Sultan, so it’s doubtful you’re missing much in bed.”

“Her name is Halime. Allah-Allah, what an indecent creature you are! If my hands were untied I’d throw you over my knee and spank you! ”

“Nice try,” Nergui replied with an audible yawn, “You are a credit to your Creator, bestriding the horizon the way you do, but it’s not on the table today. Or on the floor. Or up against the wall. Or hanging upside-down like a bat… but I digress.

“Hmm, Hmm. Hmm. Is that sword hand of yours still bothering you? The one Baiju Noyan drove a nail through? I could heal that.” she said offhandedly, as if she’d just then thought of it.

“You’d heal me? But… you just slapped me a minute ago.”

“That was also a healing. I stimulated a pressure point that reconnected your mouth to your brain. If it comes loose again, I’ll fix it the same way.”

“If I accept… what will you want me to do?”

“Only this: Spend a little time in thought. I imagine it’s a tall order for a man of action, but even so. Do you know what we do to warriors who lose the use of their sword hands, especially when it’s probably temporary?”

“Kill them outright? I’ve seen Noyan do it for a lot less.”

“Things out here have been, shall we say, unusual lately. Normally we see if they can use the sword with their other hand --- a lot of us learn. Or if they can shoot arrows, or tend one of the new siege engines, or set traps, or take care of the horses for a while. If it’s the leader, he can still take care of strategy and training while his second takes over in the field. Wounds are just some of the shit that happens in a war.

“But what did your uncle and cousin do to you? Stripped you of every title and duty, as if you were useless. And you let the wound get infected, trying to hide it because you knew they would do
something like that. Tell me you’ll think seriously about whether people who behave like that are worth your life."

"That’s it? Just think? No matter what I decide?"

"That’s it."

"I’ll take it. Show me what you’ve got."

After a pause, Ertugrul felt her grasp his wounded hand and drip a warm, coppery-smelling liquid on it. As he considered grabbing her wrist and seeing if he could break some bones, perhaps ending with her neck, she sang an ear-scraping harmonic note and clamped his hand between both of hers and it was too late. All his energy went into screaming.

First he re-experienced all the pain he’d undergone in the months since the infection. Compressed into about five endless seconds. Backwards. Then he experienced all the pain he would have felt during those months if the wound hadn’t been infected. Compressed into about five endless seconds. Forwards. By the time he’d stopped screaming and started to realize the pain was gone, she’d retreated somewhere back in the darkness. Gingerly he touched his palm with a finger of his other hand.

"There’s only a little bit of scar tissue here," he marveled in a raw voice.

Nergui had been listening to the flutterings of rudely awakened bats somewhere up ahead. Definitely a sign of a way out! Although it might just be a bat-accessible one. "I could have taken that away too, but I figured you’d want to keep the bragging rights. Most of my warriors do. It’s a harsh shortcut, but it works and you seemed like someone who could take it. Now you can’t say Greater Mongol never did anything for you."

"Why did you do that for me?"

"Because I’m compassionate. Because the Khagan said to do a few good deeds while I’m down here, Because neither he nor I wish harm to you or your tribe. We’d just prefer you to be inside the ger pissing out, like the rest of our Turkmen, instead of outside pissing in. And another thing --- pfaugh! EW ew ew! Yuck!" She’d walked face-first into an enormous spider web --- a hazard of leadership in a dark cave situation. Nergui clawed at it irritably and hoped its creator was either long gone or at least not TOO venomous... And her wish was granted. A waft of a smell she’d come to know well, but not to like at all, informed her that the inhabitant, though highly venomous, was long gone. What she’d walked into wasn’t a spider web at all. It was a hanging mesh curtain of assiut cloth.

Somehow, praise Tengri, she’d blundered their way to Gonchagul’s Grotto...

Chapter End Notes

References

“Spies in the Wires” song by Cabaret Voltaire
“Dirty Harry” movie
“Sandman” series of graphic novels by Neil Gaiman
The Bible, Revelations 6:8
“John the Revelator” song by Blind Willie Johnson
here but now they're gone

Chapter Notes

Thanks, book-blockers, for finally getting bored and going away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

… which was now mercifully dark and empty.

Wow, I never thought I’d even be thinking this, but --- ”Thanks, Gonchagul,” she said aloud with a gesture of benediction.

Thanks for stinking up the place so I could find my way back. Thanks for serving as a warning to fledgling spies everywhere. Thanks for making Baiju Noyan care about someone besides himself… or at least seriously wonder whether he could.

”Gonchagul?” Ertugrul demanded abruptly. “Did you know her?”

”Only... by reputation.” And I’m not likely to invite her to any between-world parties in the future, either. But I’ll credit her with doing this part of the world a favor, even if she didn’t mean to. “She and her concoctions sent a lot of people through these caves on their way to the next world. She was a real celebrity down here for a while. But your fangirl Gokche finally got the drop on her. Only to follow her a couple of hours later, as it turned out. I wonder if they met again? I’d have liked to be a bat on the ceiling for that conversation.”

”Vai vai vai, spirit lady! That’s cold enough to chill ayran all summer. Yaziklar olsun; shame on you.’

”Ehhh...” Nergui made her multi-stage shrug audible in the darkness.

”Say,” Ertugrul broke the silence after a moment, “Now that I’m dead, can you explain some of life’s mysteries to me? Like, why do all women hate each other so much?”

Now draw him into a conversation so he doesn’t start noticing where we are.”They don’t all hate each other. They just spend a lot of time worried and exhausted. When you get a whole community like that --- constantly on edge, with no room to step back without falling and no time or energy to think anything through --- they’ll start feeding one another’s anxieties without even meaning to. Add even one shit-stirrer unsettling the others on purpose and there’ll be blood on the henhouse floor sooner than later.”

”What makes a woman become a shit-stirrer? I grew up with two sweet foster-sisters that ended up trying to tear the whole obasi down around our ears.”

”Oh, men can be shit-stirrers too. You’ve met Sadettin Kobek.”

”Freakin’ Sadettin Kobek,” Ertugrul growled.

”Freakin’ Sadettin Kobek indeed. He’s a good example. For whatever reason, he thinks he’d make the best Sultan, so it doesn’t matter how he gets it. Shit-stirring can start wherever a lot of unused human potential builds up. Somebody feels ignored or prevented from exercising their talents. They
get desperate to make things happen and be noticed, and they get to a point where good things or bad things, credit or blame, none of those distinctions matter anymore. Sometimes it’s possible to catch those sick puppies in time, give them work to do that shows them the advantages of good attention before they grow up to bite everyone who comes close.”

Ertugrul pinched the bridge of his nose. Gundogdu or Sungurtekin would probably follow this with no effort at all, but this was much more abstract than he usually got. “Examples?” he was rather proud of himself for thinking to ask.

"Well, you take Banu Chichek, for example. She’s an Alp. She’s had the same training as the men, and I know nobody took it easy on her. Her skills are first-rate. She’s won contests. In the Mongol army, she’d probably be in charge of a hundred by now. Really, if Noyan could work around women to save his life, she’s the one he should have recruited. But does she ever go into battle with you guys?"

"Well… we need some Alps to stay and guard the camp while we’re away. We never know when or where you sneaky bastards will attack."

"Fair enough. It can be useful to swap troops around every so often so they learn different duties, but not every commander thinks it’s worth the trouble and sometimes the main-tent people want a full-time personal guard. But now Banu Chichek’s married to your pal Dogan. You could bring her into your inner circle with him. Do a little hunting. Drink a little sharbat. All champions and friends together. But you don’t."

"Not every couple wants to work together."

"Too true, but did anyone ask? What I’m getting at is this: Right now she’s not a shit-stirrer. But keep her stuck in one spot and treat her like an unusual pet, and stirring that shit might start looking interesting by comparison. For instance, if something happened to Dogan, Allah forbid, while you guys were out on an adventure and she was home on ornamental tent-flap duty again? You think she’d go the Alp’s way of planting a boot up somebody’s keister? Or the woman’s way of chewing their ear off, then sewing it back on just so she could chew it off again?" She could smell just a hint of outside air now. How light would it be outside the cave? She realized it almost didn’t matter. Even with no moon and full cloud cover, it’d be almost like daylight compared to the inside of the cave.

"I thought I smelled… cheese."

Of course you do. Guys your size would starve if you couldn’t smell food for miles. We’re pretty close to the storage caves but you don’t need to know that."There are always weird smells in caves. It might be just dried-up old bats’ milk,” she improvised.

"I didn’t know dried-up old bats gave milk. I mean, I didn’t know any bats gave milk."

"They do. You should see them with their babies. They’re really cute. People trapped in caves can survive on bats’ milk for months, did you know that?” she prattled while her mind weighed alternatives. This is a great retreat center for when the army has to retreat. It would suck if the enemy knew where it was. What should I do? Blindfold him until the entrance is out of sight? Risky, getting that close. Temporarily blind him with a sudden bright light? Where do I get one? Knock him out? And drag him away how, exactly? Maybe the horse…?"

She doubted the feasibility of keeping the cave a secret, even if she turned away from the exit she knew about and somehow lucked into another one before they got thirsty and hungry enough to start milking bats. She doubted her prisoner’s continued credulity. She doubted her own sanity and the entire universe’s.
When in this kind of triple-distilled doubt, there was only one thing to do.

She reached an etheric tendril up toward the Well of Songs.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Don't Fear the Reaper” song by Blue Oyster Cult
birds came flying from the underground

Chapter Notes

Thanks, University of Arizona Dance School Class of 1981, for the show using a song that got stuck in my head for the next 37 years.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the woman, or demon, or whatever she was began to sing, Ertugrul was entranced in spite of himself. After the hours of darkness, his mortal eyes felt weak from starvation and his mind’s eye was happy to take over. Everything else around him seemed to fall away. He’d always had more of an imagination than most of his fellows, and he’d never been sure whether it was a blessing or a curse. This woman was a pagan and probably an enemy, but right then he couldn’t think of resisting. He had glimpsed that larger, chimeric world where the hermit Geyikli got his strange verses, where Ibn-i Arabi and the reclusive Whitebeards found hidden strings to pull. This No Name Girl was also part of it.

Ertugrul could carry a respectable tune. The better singers of Kayis and Dodurga could soar and flutter up and down the musical scale like brilliantly colored butterflies on a summer breeze. A talented Turkish singer could wring tears from the stone cliffs of Cappadocia. This stranger did something of an altogether different order, something that bypassed the heart and the tear ducts and went right for the spinal cord.

She sang of golden cities and golden towns. Of cold outside, mittens forgotten, long lines and great big signs saying foreign things like “Hallelujah” and “Yodellay-hee-hoo.” Of a metropolis that was half a dream, navigated by landmarks that weren’t yet physical, but soon enough would be. Where everywhere he went he stayed a stranger. Where it was every man for himself.

Was she singing about the land of the dead? Ertugrul wondered. Or the empire of the Great Khans?

Thanks for the ride, the echoes hissed effervescently away in his head.

Somehow they’d gotten out of the cave. There were trees. There were clouds being chivvied past the setting moon by restless winds. There was a crunchy gravel trail. There was... a horse.

Or something horse-shaped, at any rate.

Ertugrul’s mysterious captor flowed into the saddle like a spring bubbling out of a cairn. From that vantage point, she leaned down to release his bonds while the horse snorted an admonition to keep still. ”Your fate’s been decided, Angry Bird,” she announced. “Congratulations! You get to come back to life and take another shot at martyrdom. Just remember to stay well and whole until you can die in battle. It won’t be easy getting yourself killed properly, not for a badass like you. But when you’re ready --- maybe, for instance, sometime after you’ve been ritually fasting for weeks --- we hope you’ll consider falling to a Mongol warrior. Our army offers a full range of martyrdom services throughout the hemisphere.”

The instant Ertugrul’s wrists were free, Nergui’s horse seemed to sense it and took off into the night with its rider, its brilliant white coat gleaming like a second moon. Ertugrul’s reflexes were fast, but even so, when his hands made a grab they closed on empty air and his target was already tens of yards away.
"Death rode out upon an ashen-pale horse, and all Jehennem followed..." echoed from somewhere in Ertugrul’s mind. Perhaps something Ibn-i Arabi had spoken of once? Someone he’d called Yahya the Revelator?

_Could she really be...?_

Just before woman and horse vanished, a wayward breeze blew up the back of the oversized black tunic Nergui wore as a nightgown... making a third moon, as it were, visible for only a moment.

_Naah_, he decided, forcing the hairs on his back to lie down and turning away.

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Chapter End Notes

References

“Speed of Sound” song by Coldplay
“Big Science” song by Laurie Anderson
“John the Revelator” song by Blind Willie Johnson
Back at World Peace Palace, Ogedei Khagan held informal court under the Silver Tree. Sungurtekin Mergen, Agency spymaster for Anatolia, gently freed himself from a clowder of cougars and ambled over. From long practice he located the branch holding the non-alcoholic drink spout and filled his cup with something that frothed.

"I believe that’s our attempt at Turkish ayran today,” explained the Khagan. “How’d we do?"

Sungurtekin took a sip. ”Perfect, Khagan,” he lied. It was very good, but not like home. Nothing was like home except home. But it honored him that the effort had been made.

Ogedei sipped from his own cup, which almost certainly contained alcohol. Yet even Sungurtekin, with his spy’s eyes, had never seen Greater Mongol’s Emperor disadvantageously drunk.

The two men leaned on the rim of the fountain, in companionable silence except for greeting others who came up to get drinks out of the Tree, until all the casual eavesdroppers succumbed to the impatience of the warm-blooded and sloped off in search of better entertainment.

"Baiju’s doing very well,” Sungurtekin said in a neutral tone.

"Vanished a couple thousand Latin Knights without a trace, didn’t he?” Ogedei smiled with pride in their mutual friend. “Started sending regular dispatches again.”

"According to my sources, troop morale’s much improved. No disciplinary deaths for a few weeks.”

"That Agent of yours exceeded expectations, Sun. Congratulations.”

"She exceeded my expectations when she survived more than a day or two in his camp,” Sungurtekin reminded his ruler dryly.

"A win is a win, Mergen. Let’s bring her home.”

"Baiju pidgeed me today, Khagan. Terse but highly coherent. Requesting ---- well, he might call it ‘requesting’ --- secondment of Agent Khenbish’s Nerguitani to his staff for an indefinite period.”

"You don’t say?” Ogedei sounded surprised, which didn’t happen often. “What did you tell him?”

"Nothing yet. I wanted your reaction, for one thing.”

"I’d wonder about hers. Do you suppose he consulted her about it?”

The two men turned toward each other, exchanged frank looks, then burst into simultaneous sardonic laughter. Baiju consulting anyone about anything was about as likely as a bear negotiating a honey trade with a queen bee.
"He says he’s better with a battle shaman, and he’s not wrong.” Sungurtekin was back to his usual serious self. “He also says a trained medic is useful for keeping the troops healthy, which is a new level of concern for him.”

"We’ll send him someone else,” Ogedei decided. “Two someone elses, if need be. Pull Khenbish’s daughter out of there. She’s suffered enough.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Painted Horse” song by Deep Purple
world’s in trouble, there’s no communication

Chapter Notes

Thanks, illness, for enabling me to look at forum solutions to my software challenges and immediately say “****, NO!!!” to the ones likely to waste four or more hours and then not work anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This party sucks!
It real-ly sucks leave me alone I'm going home this party sucks!

Despite the low visibility in the dark and the rain, Nergui was sure she wasn’t imagining it. The Alps on patrol approached her a little closer each time they went by, like wolves circling potentially dangerous prey. Would her fearsome primal-chaos patron goddess protect her now if one or more of them attacked her? Or had the other incident been less about protecting her and more about testing, approving, and marking Baiju Noyan? If that were the case, and if none of these sidling would-be predators were up to the goddess’s standards, Nergui would be on her own.

"Never forget, frogspawn,” her dad had said in one of his most serious moments at home, “the Tengri have their own reasons for everything they do. They don’t often bother filling us in, even though it affects us. Maybe it would be like trying to explain the finer points of cheesemaking to the goats whose milk we take.”

He hadn’t been wrong.

Or maybe they just didn’t bother saving shamans from the consequences of their own dog-shite decisions. She hadn’t even stopped to consider that her marmot-brained attempt at a rescue hadn’t been within the four corners of her orders. It couldn’t even be squeezed into the margins. Why in all the hells had she bothered?

That morning:

She’d let Summer Cloud Sultan have his head on the way back to camp, and the distance had snapped like a sausage casing under the eldritch stallion’s hooves. The Dargas told her the story she’d been afraid of hearing: The Noyan had awoken and trailed her to the tree, where it crossed the tracks of Ertugrul and the Kayis Alps, then become too muddled to follow. He’d gone back to camp to make sure she hadn’t somehow made it back there, then decided to ask the one man who always seemed to know what both sides were up to: Sadettin Kobek.

Tangut Darga had tried, as Nergui herself would have, to persuade Noyan to send a messenger or at least take a ten-man squad along. “Exactly,” Nergui had concurred. “Those full metal jack-offs in the strike squad would have been favorite.”

"I know, I know. But he said he had to go because he was the only one Kobek knew ---”

"As far as Noyan was aware, anyway,” she interrupted with generalized bitterness but no personal rancor. The Dargas’ private machinations had stopped and remained their and Nergui’s secret.
"And he’d always gone alone and in disguise before, so showing up with a bunch of buddies would raise a forest of red flags."

She grimaced, but nodded. There was solid logic there; at least Noyan didn’t appear to be backsliding. “He went to Kobek’s caravanserai then? How long ago did he leave?”

"Long enough that he should have been back by now."

"Crap.” She calculated furiously for a couple of beats. “I’m going to check it out. If I’m not back by noon ---”

"Oh, for Tengri’s sake, don’t you run off with your ass half out of your tunic now,” Tangut argued. “That’s all we need.”

"I won’t even go up to the gate,” she promised. “I’ll leave the horse in the woods and cut around to the wooded slope that faces the entrance. There are always people there spying on the place. I’ll just ask them.”

"Still, let me send a few troops. Local recruits in their own clothes. They’ll ride a little ways ahead and a little ways behind you. It’ll still look like you’re alone.”

"Thanks, Tangut.” The Noyan was her patient and her project, she told herself. All the work she’d done, all the hassle she’d endured, would be for nothing if he got himself killed so soon. That was why in all the hells she’d bothered. It had sounded reasonable at the time.

Now:

She sat in the mud, splinters from the pole digging into her back, shoulders aching from the forced position of her bound wrists. Rained on but not getting clean.

*And as I sit and talk to you I see your face go white
This shadow hanging over me is no trick of the light*

*(Lucky,)* accused a voice that came from no living throat, but had unmistakably spoken Mongolian.

*Excuse you? Nergui retorted mentally in her best bad-part-of-Kara-Koram gutter patois, which somehow had evolved faster than the city-builders could dig any actual gutters.*

*(You heard me. You’re lucky. You can sit down. You can even take a deep breath. This is how those Kayis bastards hooked me up.)*

The soldier’s ghost hung by his wrists from a high hook on a nearby pole, able to stand only on tiptoe.

*Harsh,* she nodded. *How long were you up there, brother?*

*(Maybe twenty minutes,)* he shrugged --- he could do that now that he didn’t have to support a heavy body anymore --- *(then some old geezer choked me to death. He wasn’t supposed to. The Bey was really pissed.)*

*I can help you move on if you need me to,* Nergui offered.

*(Already been,) the specter scoffed. *(I just come back every time they capture Noyan. Just to see how he weasels out of being executed. Absolutely worth watching, if you’re still around.)*

*Great,* she thought with chagrin. *I’m completely surplus to requirements. Noyan’s just got some*
strange long game going with the Kayis that didn’t end when I fixed him. If I even fixed him at all! I thought I was saving his life and all I did was bump the game board and spill all the pieces. If I die tomorrow, it’ll be for no good reason what-so-freakin’-ever.

Parenthetically, she congratulated herself for still being optimistic enough to think “if” rather than “when.”

A few hours after the previous flashback:

On the slope facing the caravanserai, Nergui hadn’t even needed to ask any questions. The whole Pine-Nut Gallery (from which a towering Alp with a giant axe was conspicuously absent) had been abuzz. Someone wrapped up in a big black robe (“how original,” a couple of wags commented) had come to the gate, been ambushed by about thirty Kayis and Dodurga Alps, and been revealed as the infamous Baiju Noyan. They’d beaten him and taken him off behind the leader’s horse with saddleropes around his bound wrists and his neck.

Gonna need a bigger plan, she decided.

A bit later:

"Dumbest plan I ever heard of,” Tangut responded.

"It only has a china plate’s chance of working because Ertugrul and Turgut are somewhere off the obasi,” Nergui explained. “Gundogdu has met me and didn’t hate me as much as he wanted to. Dundar owes me one, if he remembers any of that. Yulia would’ve put in a good word for me, and nobody else knows me from Eve. I’ll drive the wagon in, full of silks to trade, and find out what’s what. Meanwhile, you guys put together a bunch of thunderpots and surround the obasi just out of sight of the sentries. If neither one of us comes out by tomorrow morning, set them off. Make a lot of noise, set a few fires, get everybody panicking. Then come get us in the confusion.”

"Why not surround the main tent, factory, biggest sheepfold, and smithy and blast them all to Smithereen’s… office in the KK Armory?"

"Well: Numero nigen, the Turkmen guard the daylights out of those prime targets; numero khoyar, you might blast Noyan and/or me too; and numero dorben, there’s some kind of fate or destiny shit going on there that isn’t advisable to step in."

"Ah. Woo-woo. Why didn’t you say?"

"Yeah. I’m starting to think it might be best to nibble around the edges of Kayis. When they’re in their own little bubble surrounded by a hundred miles of Greater Mongol on every side, we can see what they say then."

Meanwhile, back in the future:

I don't give a damn about my reputation
I've never been afraid of any deviation
An’ I don't really care if you think I'm strange
I ain't gonna change

She could feel the patrolling Kayis Alps thinking about disservicing her in the dark and the rain where nobody else would see. It felt like many tiny exoskeletal claws crawling along her skin. From the few whiffs of their sweat she caught, however, they were all morally conflicted about it. If she counted as a human woman, it would be a sin because she wasn’t married to any of them. If, on the other hand, as an infidel enemy national she was more like an unclean beast, it was also a sin but for
different reasons. *Haram* if she was and *haram* if she wasn’t. You had to love these Book religions.

*If the 999 Tengri aren’t in a non-negotiable hurry to drop-kick me into her next life,* she ruminated, *there’ll be a “first otter into the river” that’ll come over and try it alone. I’ll get him so he can’t stand not knowing what my hands could do if they were untied. Then…*

She shook her head, which made it ache worse and splattered raindrops off her hair. *Simplify, simplify,* she admonished herself. *Ideally it shouldn’t have to get that far. Too many path branches between here and there. Any of them could go the other way. Like what if it’s Banu Cicek and all she wants to do is torture or kill me? Or what if she doesn’t; what would I even do about that? I guess the same things Kaushiki and Ai Fan told me to do for myself. But all the angles will be weird. Should I tell her to bring a mirror?*

*No. Still too convoluted a strategy. Rub it out, so to speak, and start over. Not every problem has a sexual solution. Have I been using my hammer so much these past weeks that everything’s started looking like a nail?* She hoped not; she didn’t want to be a career Honey Trap. It was a short career. Realistically, though, Regrettable Sacrifice being retired tomorrow was a much shorter one.

*Whammy them from a distance? Or whammy myself so they forget I’m even here?* It shouldn’t be too hard to blend in with the rain in the dark, especially if it was *her* rain. But there was the problem, right there. Whammying seemed even dodgier than usual here in the Kayis-Dodurga camp. She hadn’t been able to use her etheric leads to locate Noyan on the way in. If her yanking on them (first to warn him and later to punish him) affected him at all, he wasn’t giving him the satisfaction. She didn’t even know if she’d semi consciously brought on all this rain or if it had just randomly rained all by itself. Ever since she’d come through the *obasi* gate her thinking had gone… wooly.

*Maybe it’s all the sheep.*

Maybe she could transfer the Alps’ cupidity from herself to the sheep! *That* story would buy her *years* of drinks back home.

The biggest joke of all was that they’d decided to tie her to this outdoor pole, soaked and shivering and fair game for a score of potentially predatory men and possibly a woman or two, to *preserve her decency.* Their reasoning went like this:

1. They only had one cage tent.
2. They’d shut Baiju Noyan in there.
3. Baiju Noyan was a man. She was a woman.
4. It would be indecent to keep unrelated male and female prisoners in the same enclosure.
5. The Noyan was the higher-value prisoner and the bigger flight risk (never mind that the Kayis cage tent was famously less secure than a pile of wet leaves), so:
6. *He* got to stay in the warm and dry while *she* was liable to catch her death of cold before she could even be executed.

As things stood, maybe it was just as well. If they’d put her in with him after his stunt at the Headquarters, one of them might have killed the other one, depriving the tribesmen of fully half of tomorrow’s rare entertainment. Or else he’d find a way for them to canoodle and the noise would keep their executioners awake all night. She’d be a hard sell, as mightily pissed off as she was… but she knew better than to put anything past him. The man had some moves. She had to give him that.
Earlier in the day, but later than the last flashback:

The faces of the Alps guarding the Kayis’ gate bristled with implied threat and profuse whiskerage. Two of them began beating huge drums as Nergui pulled up to the gate.

**Ben yürürüm yana yana**
**Aşk boyadı beni kana**
**Ne âkilem ne divane**
**Gel gör beni aşk neyledi** Somewhere, a baritone voice sang, unmistakably Turkish but something about it itched in her ears, as if there were something she ought to remember. Most of her consciousness scanning her surroundings for danger, she softly and half-absently joined in..

**As I walk side by side**
**Love paints me with blood**
**What is a mind? What is a spoon?**
**Come see what love has done to me**
**All my works blows away in the wind...**

”And who are you, hatun?” asked a guard.

”Nobody’s daughter,” she replied. “No Name Girl.”

The single continuous thick eyebrow wrinkled in the middle. “Are you trying to be funny?”

”No. I haven’t needed to try for a while now.”

”Why are you here?”

“I heard there was going to be a wedding.” She hadn’t, but she reckoned it was a solid bet. In a place where male and female non-relatives were heavily discouraged from even speaking to each other until they married, and where life could be very boring when it wasn’t in mortal danger, there were a lot of weddings. “I’ve got some very nice silks for sale. The mothers might be interested.”

”Where are you from?”

”I come from the Silk Road, and I go back to the Silk Road,” she waved her hand airily.

”Well, if you’re a stranger, we can’t let you in. We’ve had a lot of trouble with the Mongols lately.”

”Fair enough. If someone will just let people know I’m here...”

”She’s not a stranger!” a young voice piped up. “She’s the lion dog lady. Hey, lady, where’s your dog? You guys gotta see this dog. You’ll freak!”

”Turali! You and your friends come back here!” a woman’s voice screeched."Yulia! Go get them!”

Sounded like Selchan. That dear, cranky, batshit-crazy harpy hadn’t changed a bit.

”Don’t worry, Mother Selchan! I’ve got them!” a familiar voice called out from close by. “Auntie Nergui? Oh, it is you! Salaam aleikum!”

Worried about Noyan as she was, Nergui still had no trouble returning her protegée’s enthusiastic hug, measure for measure. “Salaam aleikum to you too, Yulia! Looks like this life agrees with you.” The former slave from Kievan Rus, once meager and listless, had become strong and sun-gilded, wide-set muscari-blue eyes shining, pink cheeks dimpled.
"Oh, it’s Alia now. I converted."

"Of course you did." _More than half an hour in the company of Sheikh ibn-i Arabi seems to do that, Nergui reflected wryly. No harm done if she’s this happy._

"And you want to know what else? I’m engaged!"

"Of course you are. Congratulations!" _In this kind of close-knit tribe of mostly hotheads, a young, pretty female newcomer is a disaster waiting to happen until they get her safely married. “Is it young Dundar Bey?” I kind of hoped it would be._

Yulia --- no, Alia --- gave Nergui an astonished look and burst into peals of laughter. “No! It’s Wild Demir, the blacksmith. He’s quite a bit older, and he’s had a lot of tragedy in his life, but he’s been nothing but sweet to me.”

"You don’t say? To whom?" Nergui was thoroughly puzzled.

Apparently demigods, like devils, have a predilection for popping up when their names are spoken aloud.

"Finally!" came a young man’s shout. "How did you know where to find us? Did Sheikh Ibn-i Arabi or Geyikli tell you?"

It wasn’t a voice Nergui recognized. That stood to reason. When would she have heard it? The only other time she’d encountered its owner, he’d been aggressively unconscious.

The living artwork that was Suleyman Shah’s youngest son Dundar came running up, breathless with excitement. A few more of his whiskers had come in - looking soft and pleasantly tickly, not like the stiff, abrasive-looking scrub-brushes gracing his brothers’ faces. He also looked healthier than the last time she’d seen him… physically, anyway; the expression fixed on his handsome face reminded her of patients back in the taiga who’d had trees fall on their heads.

"You’re here! I can’t believe you’re here! Nergui --- am I saying that right? --- I’ve been asking everyone who comes through if they’ve seen you, if they know where you might be.”

This would probably be thrillingly flattering to a normal woman in ordinary circumstances. To someone who was supposed to be discreetly creeping around in shadows, coming and going like the wind, leaving no trace, and similar, it was not a little alarming.

"Please, come on in. You have to meet everyone. They’ll be thrilled.” He made as if to clasp both of her hands, but then realized it might be too forward and beckoned her after him instead.

_It’d be nice if “thrilled” was the word for it..._

"All right, so… we’ve got some customs we have to observe first. I know you guys don’t stand on ceremony as much, so please bear with me, it gets better once you’ve been introduced around. Mom!” he called toward the main tent as he half-jogged down the banner-lined bare-earth
promenade. “Mom? Mo-omm! Mom! Mom! Hey Dumrul, do you know if Mom’s around? Turali, have you seen Grandma? Mom! Mom?”

The towering Alps standing on either side of the main-tent doorway began shifting from foot to foot, exchanging nervous glances.

A stern-looking woman in her fifties, covered in fine embroidery and dripping with silver plate-and-chain jewelry, swept aside the front flap of the main tent so smartly that it gave an audible pop as the guard Alps visibly fought the urge to cringe away. She bustled out impatiently, her aspect so formidable that Nergui only realized she wasn’t tall when she stood beside someone else. “Allahallah,” she remonstrated with Dundar, an undercurrent of indulgent love tangible under the surface irritation. “Son! What?!”

”Mom, this is Nergui,” Dundar announced portentously.

Her sharp dark eyes, so like those of a bird of prey, went instant-mom-suspicious as they fixed on the interloper. Dismissing the possibility that this complete stranger might have the slightest significance, she looked back at her son. “Who?”

”Khenbish’s Nerguitani, Mom. She’s the one who saved my life. And Yulia’s --- I mean Alia’s --- life. And Sarisi’s and her puppies’ lives. And Yigit’s and Yelena’s… deaths. All the way here, Alia -- when she was still Yulia --- told me how Nergui sister helped and protected everybody in the caravan. I’ve dreamed about her every night since she danced me away from Death’s door. I’m in love with her.

”I’m going to marry her, Mom.”

Suddenly the whole world went as silent as an unstruck bell. Nergui froze like a hunted rabbit, feeling as nonplussed as if the world were suddenly full of melted sundials and flaming long-necked ungulates. More so, considering that one of her frequent-fallback visionary potions predictably yielded liquified timepieces and oddly-proportioned incendiary beasts nearly every time she drank it... but this time she had no such excuse.

Then she concluded: O-kayyy... this is new... but it might even help. You never know. And reality’s deluge came flooding back.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Bad Reputation” song by Joan Jett
“This Party Sucks” song by The Slickee Boys
“Turkish Song of the Damned” song by The Pogues
“Gel Gör Beni Aşk Neyledi” song by Yunus Emre
Chapter 85

Chapter Notes

Thanks, body, for always being ready to sleep. Unconsciousness is, after all, our best entertainment value.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Oi! That’s our boy Yunus Emre’s song! No filthy Mongols allowed singing it!” The shouter outside whacked a fist on the wall of the Kayis cage tent, to no great acoustic effect. Tents could be unsatisfying in that respect.

(Now I believe you have Turkish blood,) said the ghost of Kojabash, hovering over the cage tossing his head from one hand to the other. (Who knew you could sing at all, much less without making all those bowel-loosening noises your people seem to prefer?)

"Suck pus from a dead dog’s arse,” Baiju Noyan answered tiredly, flexing his fingers to maintain circulation in his chained wrists.

(I was saying something nice about your singing voice. No need to show off your Turkman-grade swearing too. Gilds the lily, don’t you think?) Kojabash tossed his head --- not as a horse would to rearrange its mane, but from one hand to the other, as only the decapitated can manage.

"Haven’t you reincarnated yet? Have the holy Tengri spirits decided the world has too many cockroaches already? Never seemed to stop them before.”

(No respect! None. I’m hurt, Noyan. It was your idea to recruit me as your spy in Dodurga. And I served you faithfully --- well, mostly --- right up until Ertugrul jumped off his horse and beheaded me without so much as a by-your-leave. No, I’m sticking around to see how many times these Kayis bull-nipples manage to catch you but end up letting you go.)

"They won’t kill me this time either. But if they do, we’ll both be in the same world so I can cause you some serious pain. Maybe your best course... would be to tread lightly.”

(How can I tread any more lightly? I’m floating in mid-air. Anyway you still haven’t explained why you recruited me but then always acted as if you despised me.)

"Because,” Noyan growled, his scowl reaching a dangerous depth, “you’re a smirking, scuttling sidewinder that no one in their right mind would trust.”

(Well, then, why ---)

"To draw attention away from my more discreet spies, of course! And then, when you inevitably got caught, everyone would assume their Mongol spy problems were over.”

(Not fair, Noyan. I can’t help being descended from the Rat Clan. I was Korkut Bey’s best Alp. Well, aside from Tugtekin and Kaya... and Dumrul and Samsa. And I was smart. When Gundogdu brought in that Karakhitan grunt and tied him up outside the main tent, I got Hamza to take a break and let me fill in guarding him. I was wondering how to discreetly snuff the prisoner before he could talk, and then that rabid bear of a blacksmith whose daughter died took care of it for me. Of course,
the idiot sealed his own fate with his lousy Turkish. The blacksmith asked him why he attacked
women and children, and he probably meant to say ‘to bind them all’ - hepsini tutmak - so none
would be left to grieve and starve, and the families could reunite in the next life. But what the fool
said was hepsini tatmak, which means ‘to taste them all.’ Of course, that went over about like you’d
think, ha-ha? So I just stood back and let the bonehead be strangled until Gundogdu came out and I
had to show some token objection. Gundogdu beat the brains out of Hamza for leaving his post, and
eventually, Hamza went over to you. See how I did that?

But Kojabash had lost his audience, captive as it was. Noyan had turned away and was looking in
one direction as though his eyes could burn holes in the tent wall. His nostrils flared and he breathed
in little whiffs, as if unsure whether he smelled something important or not.

(Ah, well.) Kojabash coquettishly tossed his head again. With a casual flip of the wrist, he lobbed it
up through the cage tent roof.

Baiju Noyan used the respite to eye the rope lashings of the sapling trunks that made up the cage.
Was there a weakness within kicking distance? He knew when he was going to die and it wasn’t
today, or tomorrow either. He just wasn’t sure he was in the mood to hang around for the whole
clown parade this time. If he went back to camp he could have a bowl of milk tea and a game of
anklebones; try the new batch of airag and see if there was a girl in the guest tent and then...

Kojabash’s hands caught his head as it plummeted back down through the tent roof. (Vai, vai, vai.
Big goings-on out there), he reported with an impressed whistle.

The Noyan waited.

The deceased Alp refused to give his former patron any kind of satisfaction.

"If you would elaborate for me, Kojabash, I shall listen most attentively,” Baiju finally said, only
grinding his teeth a little.

(Remember Dundar Bey, Ertugrul’s youngest brother?) Kojabash bubbled. He’d actually been
bursting to tell someone and, in a camp that staunchly refused to believe in ghosts, his options were
limited.

"The pipsqueak who shot me in the back with an arrow? Yes, every time it’s about to rain. Why?"

(He’s getting married! His bride is here and they’re holding a Headquarters.)

"Oh, good. Hope someone explains to him what to do with a woman at some point.”

(No hurry. Kayis wedding nights start with four hours of prayer.)

"Seems excessive. I’ve never bothered with the actual wedding part myself, but I understand we
make do with screaming ‘Oh, God!’ a few times.”

(Apparently the bride is one of your people. Maybe she’ll sway him.)

"Horseshit! That can’t be right. The Kayis hate Mongols even more than they hate plague-bomb-
carrying lepers these days. Plus nobody said boo to me, and if the Khagan did somehow arrange an
alliance marriage out here he’d want to make sure I didn’t accidentally kill off the whole wedding
party.”

(That’s what they’re saying. Though it is hard to believe that a nation of such pig-ugly men could
produce such stunning women.)
"Funny. We say the same thing about the Turks."

(Easy to tell this one’s no Khongi, but who’d waste a Khongi out here? Even our Beys’ wives have to work hard. Sometimes harder than the rest. This one’s passably cute but not Palace material. Kind of feral-looking. Weird yellowish eyes you wouldn’t want to see reflecting your torch in the woods at night. But it’s easy to imagine her with a wool shears on one hand and a churn handle in the other. She’s welcome to churn my butter anytime, know what I mean?)

"Mmm-hmm.” Not the laddish chortle Kojabash had hoped for. The Noyan seemed abstracted, far away, as if engaged in another more important conversation.

(On the other hand --- wish it was my other hand), Kojabash continued undaunted, (That Ass! Mashallah! I’ve seen some butts that don’t quit, but I don’t think hers even takes tea breaks!)

Baiju Noyan was gripped in a cold and venomous stillness. How could she even contemplate going with that mewling whelp after being with me? Does she think all men are interchangeable? Then it occurred to him: Maybe she does. How would she know?

(Hey, maybe as a wedding gift she’ll ask for your release. If she knows you’re here, that is.)

Kojabash began to guffaw. (And if she’s never met you.)

Baiju Noyan did not hear any of that. "ER-TU-GRUUUL!" he had begun shouting, over and over at the top of his lungs.

After a while Gundogdu appeared, a prickly picture of snapped equanimity, snapping the tent flap with a crisp loud pop that exhibited long experience at expressing anger around soft architecture.

"Ertegrul’s not here, Noyan,” Gundogdu explained with a brief, omnidirectional snarl. “Is there anything I could perhaps help you with? Quickly, as I seem to be late for a Headquarters to which my own mother forgot to invite me?”

"Ah! Kayis smart boy, ah! I would rather talk to you. How do you feel about getting a Mongol sister-in-law?"

"This punch-drunk delirium of Dundar’s? I’d rather wipe my ass with stinging nettles."

"Has he only just met this woman today?"

"No, they’re saying he met her on the road and she woke him up from a coma. Our tent-keeper Alia traveled with her for a while. Even I met her on the road a while ago. She shamed me into rescuing a dog. It had puppies and now we have four dogs. She didn’t strike me as an entirely bad person, but a pile of coincidences that big makes me suspicious; three slim chances in a row can add up to one fat chance. Also, our family’s been fighting you dirtbags for a few generations now and I can’t think of a single heroic dastan of the Oguz that ends with the hero marrying into the villain’s family and bringing peace to all."

"It can be hard to back up a decision your legends don’t support."

"I guess you think it’s a great idea?"

"King Gesar's mummified balls, no! I mean, Genghis Khagan, may he ride forever in the sky, did favor marriage alliances over military conquest, Tengri knows why. But this one… Your tribe will never accept her. The other tribes will see your tribe as sell-outs. Ogedei will pack me off to Constantinople or Wallachia or Fort Bhumfuq, Egypt where there are no places to get decent simits at the crack of dawn. But Dundar’s being stubborn, isn’t he? Oh, he must want so badly to be
Ertugrul."

"Not nowadays. Ertugrul got himself temporarily banished."

"Which only made him the misunderstood and persecuted hero who’s now bound to notice and appreciate a younger brother taking his side. So now, just like Ertugrul, he insists on marrying the woman of his literal dreams, despite the caravan of trouble it could bring to his family and tribe."

"What? The --- that creature out there is nothing like Halime!" Gundogdu was so carried away with outrage that he pointed outside with his index finger, a very rude gesture among the Turkmen.

"You're right. She's not. She’s not related to any assassin-magnet shirtdress Shahzades. She hasn't been tiresomely wooed by any smitten Ayyubid Sultans. And when swords start swinging inches from her face, she doesn’t stand there gawking and assuming she won’t get hit. Instead, she brings the good graces of the largest empire in history and the infinite blessings of the Eternal Blue Sky.

"But all that's beside the point. Once a guy Dundar's age decides he's in love, especially if his family disapproves, it's almost impossible to change his mind. Almost."

"Blah, blah, blah. What are you trying to say?"

"I have information that will utterly shrivel Dundar’s ardor for this girl. He will toss aside the idea of marrying her as he would a used sheep-gut wrapper… and he’ll be convinced it was his own idea."

Gundogdu scowled. "Even if you could make that happen, I won’t spare your life."

Noyan's own scowl faded almost to neutral. “Of course not, Smart Boy. All I’m asking is that, if I succeed, you examine your… what’s that thing called again? Right: ‘Conscience.’”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Wish You Were Here” song by Pink Floyd
“Revelation X: The Bob Apocryphon” book by The SubGenius Foundation
“Breaking Bad” TV show by Vince Gilligan
it must be somethin that the angels done plan

Chapter Notes

Thanks, English language, for having “shameful” and “shameless” mean pretty much the same thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hayme Hanim had to hand it to Allah (SWT). She’d had a long eventful life as the wife of the late Suleyman Shah Bey of Kayis, not to mention as the mother of those little scamps Gundogdu, Sungurtekin, Ertugrul, and Dundar. And still, just when she began to think she’d seen every possible random kerfuffle that could be instigated among a few thousand nomadic, tent-dwelling herdspeople living at close quarters, the Almighty and Everlasting never ceased to produce another surprise.

Her youngest son Dundar, her precious baby who had twice been thought lost to this world, knelt on the supplicant’s mat next to the oh-so-wrong woman he’d gotten his heart set on marrying. This was the kind of thing that happened when young people shopped around for spouses unsupervised. Honestly, the timing couldn’t be worse. A lean and uneasy winter of sharing the Dodurgas’ camp after a horrifying Mongol raid after a vicious coup attempt after all the trouble with Ertugrul’s insistence on marrying Halime Sultan...

Now that Hayme thought about it, maybe Dundar just wanted to copy Ertugrul and take a non-Kayi bride. Or one-up his older brother by choosing someone even more foreign. At least Halime was a Seljuk, descended from nomadic Turkmen, though the Seljuks had been settled in cities and palaces so long they’d probably forgotten how to pitch a tent anywhere but under the blankets.

Where had Dundar even found this one? She was dressed in silk, simply cut and only a little bit embroidered but with a fluid, Evil-Eye-inspiring drape to it. On the other hand, her skin spoke of time spent outdoors: not yet weathered, but flushed and burnished. Coached by Dundar in a hurried whisper, she’d come forward to kiss Hayme’s ring and bow over her hand. Now this odd interloper crouched on the mat in a properly supplicant posture, but as Hayme drew out the wait it was obvious that the pose was a difficult one for the younger woman to hold. Her body fought to be released --- into an insouciant lounging sort of attitude, unless Hayme missed her guess; one that might look lazy and careless, but from which the stranger could suddenly leap across the tent in less time than it took to blink.

"Hatun," Hayme addressed the woman, using the formal address for an adult rather than the friendly “daughter” she would have used for a bride-candidate of her own choice. It prefaced a wary, arm’s-length conversation. It also called attention to the fact that this woman was Dundar’s senior. Twenty years later those few years would shrink into insignificance, but ten years earlier Hayme might have hired her as Dundar’s babysitter. Barely-nubile maidsens were married to ancient, grizzled Beys with inescapable regularity, but an older woman with a younger man was a rarity. “Who are you?” Hayme demanded imperiously. “Who are your people? What gave you the notion that you could possibly be good enough for my baby boy?"

"Aw, Mom," Dundar groaned under his breath, but such a silence had fallen that everyone heard him anyway. He blushed, mortified. Nergui squeezed his hand supportively. Hayme sucked air through her teeth. Holding hands! In front of everyone! During a solemn assembly! She’d give this little
vixen the gate in short order.

From what she’d heard in her travels and what she now saw, Nergui had Hayme Hanim's measure. The Mother of the Tribe would spot a lie as easily as a falcon could spot a rabbit, and she would pounce just as fiercely in response. Even if Suleyman Shah's widow hadn't been protecting her young from a perceived threat, she was still the most dangerous person in the headquarters right now. Nergui drew in a breath. No fancy dancing, she told herself, and no sass --- if you can possibly help it.

Nergui, who had fixed her gaze submissively on the floor, looked up. Hayme was momentarily discomfited by the unusual amber color of the irises. It made the eyes hard to read, but Hayme detected neither defiance nor disrespect.

Nor any trace of fear.

"I am Khenbish's Nerguitani," she stated matter-of-factly, "of the Altai Telengit nation. My parents were tribal shamans Khenbish and Udeshelegmaa. I met Sheikh ibn-i Arabi on the road. Somehow, he was aware of my medical training. He asked for help with a comatose patient, who turned out to be Dundar Bey."

"Yes, and she saved my life, Mom," Dundar reiterated emphatically. "I wouldn't be here without her. Do you even care about that?"

Nergui patted Dundar’s hand and he subsided. Hayme was impressed in spite of herself. Dundar, as the youngest of four sons, would only succeed to the seat of tribal Bey if all his older brothers died before any of their sons became men. Still and all, perhaps a slightly more mature wife had the best chance of making a Bey out of --- oh, a dear, loyal, hard-working boy, and the apple of her eye of course --- but a boy who, some days, could give a saint a migraine. And if Nergui really had been consulted by ibn-i Arabi, that changed the picture in Hayme’s head considerably.

"I did what I could," Nergui continued, "with help from the distinguished Sheikh and my helper Yulia --- I believe her name is Alia now?" Alia waved happily from one of the back rows. "It seemed to work. The young Bey’s condition went from halfway through the door between worlds to natural sleep. But I left before he awoke, so really it’s only just now I met him in the daytime world. I find him admirable. He has a beautiful sunny soul. But I honestly have no idea whether I’d be a suitable wife for him or not. From my side, it’s the first time the question’s come up."

"I don’t believe I’ve ever met any other… Altai Telengit," Hayme Hanim mused thoughtfully. "Where are their lands?"

"Well, you know the Kazakhs?"

"Oh, yes. We used to be near them back when I was your age."

"If you go to the far north of their range, then east and over to where the taiga starts ---"

"Mongolia, Mom," Gundogdu interrupted, striding in, looking as though his headache was back with a hammer and spikes. "What she’s really trying not to say is that she’s a Mongol. You know. From Mongolia."

The tent fell completely silent except for one of the older Beys marveling “So they do have women of their own?"

After a while Hayme, her face drained of color, asked "Is this true?"
"Yes, Hanim," Nergui replied quietly and without emotion. "I’m a Mongol. From, as Gundogdu Bey correctly surmises, Mongolia."

"Dundar! Yazıklar olsun! Shame on you!" Hayme scolded. "While you were having sweet dreams, her people massacred half our tribe! Did you know she was the enemy?"

"She saved my life, Mom! What kind of enemy does that? Anyway, I hardly had the chance to ask her."

Out of the corner of her eye, Nergui saw Yulia/Alia wince, blush a little, and look down at the floor. She’d bet the first New Year’s dumpling that Dundar had asked somebody. “I’d rather not be your enemy. The Great Khan feels the same.”

This time Hayme felt free to snort. "Oh, really? That raid could have fooled us. We will never forgive you."

Nergui had nothing to say to that. She lowered her face into her hands and shook her head hopelessly. She’d been over that damn raid in her mind again and again. Raiding before an alliance had been offered and refused wasn’t the Genghis way. It could have been a fuck-up. The Fear Eater pulling Noyan’s strings. Or Bortlu acting on his own initiative and then dying before he could be reprimanded. But alternatively, it could have been an indirect strike at the Seljuks through the Kayis. After all, a bunch of Oguz tribes had sold their swords to the Seljuks in exchange for the use of grazing lands, and the Kayis were the biggest and most-feared. Maybe Sultan Ale-ad-Din’s representative had bragged to Ogedei’s representative that the Mongols would never take the Sultanate of Rum because of all the badass Turkmen tribes defending them. Taking out the biggest, baddest tribe in a single afternoon seemed a logical reality check to make the Sultan reconsider. Nothing personal against the Kayis themselves.

Of course, killing folks, burning their tents and stalls, scattering their herds, and stealing anything that looked interesting could never help but feel personal, so none of those explanations would help. Neither would any apologies.

Somewhat to Hayme’s surprise, when Nergui looked back up, those creepy nocturnal-predator eyes were filled with a sadness as vast as the steppes.

"We can’t bring back your martyrs ---"

Hayme rolled her eyes. Everybody said that.

"--- not after they’ve been dead this long, not in any form you’d really want to see ---"

A chill shot down Hayme’s ramrod spine and the tiny hairs stood up on the back of her neck. Not everybody said that, she was forced to admit.

"--- but if I become a bride of this tribe, I will do right by Dundar and the rest of you, and you might be surprised at how much right I can do. I’m a trained healer of both people and animals. I wasn’t born noble like Dundar, but my parents are both Mergens now by virtue of their own hard work and talent. That’s how Greater Mongol’s meritocracy works. If this marriage could end the bloodshed between Mongol and Kayis, and perhaps break a trail toward peace with other Oghuz tribes in the process, the Khagan might decide to give me any title you’d consider worthy.

"I understand some land on the Nicaean border interests you. We could take it and convey it to you. If your Alps would rather conquer it themselves, we could arrange it that way too. Meanwhile, all your non-combatants could stay here in peace until your new home is safe."
"I also understand the Seljuks sent you to two shite locations in a row. You might have irritated somebody. Or a couple generations of living in castles have made them forget what it takes to keep a tribe going. Most of us still live the same way you do, only in worse weather. We get it. We'll do better by you.

"And all you have to do is pay a few taxes. You pay them to the Seljuks now; what's the difference? With us, your gains from living on better land and trading all up and down the Silk Road should make up for that. As long as there's no trouble you can keep governing, worshipping, and living as you please."

"La Samah Allah," murmured Gundogdu to his mother. "If Ogedei had sent her instead of Noyan in the first place, our horses would be running around barefoot already."

"As wonderful as all that sounds," Hayme growled doubtfully, "my son deserves someone who loves him. Have you fallen in love with him, or are all these political machinations all you've got?"

Nergui blinked slowly to collect her thoughts, then proceeded carefully. "Right now I'm overwhelmed with surprise. I was stricken by the beauty of his soul when I met him. I can't yet say I've fallen in love... but I think I can walk there from here."

"I don't know how marriages happen where you come from," put in Gundogdu. "Which is Mongolia," he repeated just in case anyone had missed that part. "But among us, they're prefaced by extensive discussion between the families of the bride and groom, tribal authorities, and so forth."

"I understand," Nergui nodded. "That part may need to wait a while, but not as long as you'd think--"

"My thoughts exactly," said Gundogdu. "Wha... what's that smirk about? Nergui wondered, suddenly suspicious. "Mother, you speak for both the family and Kayis these days. And the man in charge of all the local Mongols is, as it happens, also available." He went to the front flap and opened it. Two very large Alps escorted Baiju Noyan into the tent, his wrists bound behind him. "At least until we cut his head off. Luckily, this development came up before it was too late."

There was a minor uproar among the assembled. Except for Hayme and Nergui, the women reflexively dove for cover. The men snarled protectively.

The Noyan would have taken more notice of an invisible thing being very quiet and standing very still. "Dundar," he scowled. "I hear you want to marry that woman there."

"I'm going to marry this woman here," the young Alp corrected him. "I already shot you once. I can do it again."

"That's right, boy. You did shoot me. In the back. I, mighty Noyan with the stormy Mongol blood, was brought low by a babe in arms." Baiju Noyan straightened up and addressed the entire tent: "You know, Ertugrul once said the sons of Suleyman Shah would make me pay someday, but I never thought it would be Diaper Boy here."

"Did you have something to say about the subject at hand, efendi," Hayme inquired snidely, "or are you auditioning to be our village idiot? Because I warn you, the competition is fierce." She cut her eyes at Dundar disparagingly.

"Dundar, you have excellent taste in women," the Noyan began unctuously. "Nergui is dutiful, loyal, brave, intelligent, and beloved of the gods. She also cleans up into quite a striking piece of arm candy. You should also be aware that she's had some value added since you met her."
"Why, if you’d woken right up that night on the road and gone after her, you’d have had a crude, unfinished version of her. At that time she’d been to several other worlds and across a fair bit of this one, but still lacked any social sophistication at all. Hugging her dad goodbye was the only time she’d ever touched a man… non-violently, at least. Everything else had been left as an exercise for the student. Which would have been you, if you hadn’t waited.

"Instead. Well. It was I."

A threatening rumble of audience muttering washed over the tent like a spray of dragon pee that briefly ignited, then went out. The Noyan didn’t wait; he only spoke louder. “Since you last saw your dream woman in the flesh, that flesh has been transformed from a dull blank slate Into a seasoned and tuned instrument. In our country, only having a child could increase her value as a bride any further.

“And you can all forget any suspicions about her being sent to entrap Dundar. He wasn’t even on their radar. She did good deeds on her way here to repair Greater Mongol’s reputation and happened to meet him. I was the one to whom she was sent. I took full advantage. There is no hill, valley, mountain or cave in all her terrain where I have not planted my flag of conquest. I’ve showered her until I nearly drowned her in my... attention. Why, we ---” And here the Noyan launched into an extensive litany of sexual acts, many with names that sounded fanciful but were actually fairly explicit if you thought about it. Others with names that couldn’t possibly be mistaken for anything else. How they did it in the woods. How they did it wearing hoods. How they did it by the fire. How they did it in the mire. How they did it in the tent. How they did it wherever they went. How they did it in the grass. How they did it...

Five minutes went by in this fashion.

Then another ten.

The assembled Beys were pale, wide-eyed, and barely breathing.

For Tengri’s sake, Nergui thought, by now prostrate on the mat and resting her forehead on her folded arms so no one could see her face. Does anyone believe this? Even if he had the tallywacker equivalent of the Seven Headed Hydra it’d take at least a year to do all that! I’ve only been here, what? Six, seven weeks? No, that’s not right. It has to be less than a month, because ---

”And is this true?” Hayme was asking.

Nergui began raising herself up, then paused, hesitating. She wanted to talk her way onto the better side of the Kayis --- but was that even possible? The Beys were mostly cranky old conservative men who’d consider her a floozy even if she’d been forced. To their minds, a virtuous woman would find a way to die rather than let herself be forced. Nothing short of a diamond dropped from the sky would put a dent in that conviction.

So you know what?

Mutton butt. He wants to publicly humiliate me for some reason of his own? I won’t make it easy.

When she looked up again, her expression was back to being unreadable. “Is what true, Hanim?”

Nergui looked around and saw that the Beys, to a man, were incandescent with shock and outrage. Because they imagine I might've done all those things? she wondered ironically, or because they know for a fact that they haven't?

”All this --- snuggling he says the two of you did. Did you or didn’t you?”
"Not all of it, Hanim."

"What do you mean, not all?"

"Well, we didn’t complete some of the really advanced balancing ones, Hanim. I still fall off horses and he still falls out of trees."

"Are you Mongolians all... like that?"

"Not all," Nergui shrugged, thinking of her own twenty-two years of enforced horselessness. No wonder it had been Khulan-bar-the-door after that. "Probably a lot, though. Maybe most."

"And you people took over half a continent despite all this constant snuggling?"

"I’d say it was because of it, Hanim,” Baiju Noyan jumped in helpfully.

"Sorry, Dundar," she murmured under the hubbub. "Those were my orders."

He didn’t look at her. "Would you have told me?"

"Yes! I know that kind of thing is important to you guys. But I would have pulled just you aside in a quiet moment. I wouldn’t have blurted out a general announcement to all these distinguished old dillweeds. Plus your mom!" she shuddered.

What on a rolling simit is Noyan up to? she inwardly seethed. Does he realize I’m trying to gain some leverage to keep his head on his shoulders? Would he tell his troops "Swim across these rapids” and then say “oh, by the way, you have to carry these boulders with you”? ...Well, yes, probably, she concluded after only the briefest thought.

Dundar’s serious melted-caramel eyes, under his serious thick-yet-thankfully-well-separated eyebrows, met hers. “Good enough for me,” he said quietly, then raised his voice to carry. “Thank you for sharing all that, Noyan! And your point might be?"

Noyan suppressed his surprise in a flash. No one who wasn’t looking for it would have picked it up. "I believe Muslims don’t value... experienced brides the way we do at home. I was concerned that it might be an issue," he said smoothly.

"For the older generation, it might be,” Dundar retorted, “but to me, the Mongolian way makes much more sense,” Dundar retorted.

Once again, shocked noises gave way to shocked silence.

“Really. A couple of my Alp-camp buddies who’ve gotten married told horror stories. The girls are like mushrooms, kept in the dark and fed bullshit. They came to the tent so scared the guys had to spend weeks talking them down off the roof. But if Nergui’s really done even half those things already, we’re going to have a hell of a good time. All my friends will be so envious I’ll have to guard against the Evil Eye. Plus,” here he paused for effect, “she’ll see what a difference it makes to be with someone young and good-looking.”

Noyan’s scowl froze. One of his eyelids began to twitch, but he shook his head quickly and it stopped. "Good for you, boy,” he told Dundar. “Good for you. One thing, though: How are you ever going to look at her after today and not think of me? Long after the wolves have carried the last of my bones away, you’ll still remember. Young as you are, after all, you’ve got a long time of clearly detailed memory ahead of you. Why, here’s a thought... It’ll be almost as though you married me.”
Noyan let the consternation in the tent build for a little while, then, as if suddenly recalling it, he appended: "Oh yeah --- and her first baby might be mine. You'll have to watch your back for more than spit-up, son."

Nergui could feel the horror radiating off of Dundar. Poor kid.

Just then Selchan burst in through the tent flap. The assembled Beys breathed a collective sigh of relief. For the past few years, wherever even two or three of them were gathered together to discuss some tribal matter, odds were better than even that Selchan would burst in at some random point in the middle and start shrieking like a homicidal peacock. It had first gotten on everyone’s nerves when Selchan had been evil, but she seemed to do even more of it now that she was good and trying to atone for all that evil. Now, at least for this meeting, that shoe had finally dropped. Its smell would spread. The immediate future was predictable again.

"Such arrogance!" she harangued the assembly. "For shame!"

The Beys closed their eyes and let the anticipated scolding wash over them. It was like releasing a long-held bladderful of urine into a ditch. For her part, Nergui was at a loss. Was dear, sweet, bat-shit-crazy Selchan defending her now?

"What if this pagan Mongol slut is a guest sent by Allah?"

"Hey, now!" Nergui straightened indignantly. "Pagan, yes. Mongol, yes. But where are you getting ‘slut’?"

The Beys exchanged glances: She’s a stranger. She doesn’t know she’s just prolonging the outburst.

"I’ve canoodled," Nergui declared, "with exactly one man. One. And it was by order of official authority; it wasn’t like our eyes met across a burning battlefield or something. How is that different from any respectable married woman? Don’t you guys let widows remarry?"

"Widows’ men are dead," someone pointed out.

"Wait till tomorrow, then," Gundogdu smirked.

"She can repent!" Selchan continued ignoring the interruption of her interruption. "Our Sheikh can show her the right path. And the love of a good man could redeem her!"

"The love of a good man," Noyan scoffed, "would ruin her."

The main tent fell into an uneasy silence. People looked at each other, searching for any sign that anyone understood the strange statement that had flopped into their midsts like a giant newt with two tails.

"This young woman is a rare soul," Noyan explained impatiently. "One of the few able to minister effectively to the world’s ruthless bastards and survive. Apex predators such as myself serve a purpose, but we need to be kept in check. At my best, I’ll admit, I’m a bloodthirsty brute. She endured weeks with me at my very worst. And for that, I might be a better person or at least a more self-aware brute. A good man like young Dundar-head would never discover those qualities in her, much less vitally depend on them. For the world’s safety, she should be left to the monsters who need her."

Hayme wasn’t sure she followed the argument, but she knew it irritated her. "And what would a savage like you know about making a woman happy?"
"Oh, she could be perfectly happy with him," Noyan replied disdainfully, "or at least contented enough with the safety and affection that she’d do whatever it took to ignore the boredom. My guess is, she’d have enough children to keep her too tired to think of the past or the future. But little by little her edge would dull and her steel would rust and crumble. And then if, Tengri forbid, a massacre needs averting, she’ll be as useless as everyone else." Noyan shook his head in disappointment. "The spymasters will have a hard time replacing her."

No doubt about it; Hayme Hanim felt a migraine coming on. "Excuse me: ‘Spymasters’?" came out sounding weaker than she intended. She’d definitely picked the wrong week to stop skimming Syrian rue from the dye supplies.

"Oh, yes. She’s a spy. I love having spies around; tight lips, if you know what I mean and I think you do. She came primarily to spy on me, but she might have side errands I don’t know about. Somebody should probably search that wagon of hers. Be sure to take a lamp or even a torch; it’s getting dark out there."

It took Nergui less than a second to weigh the possible outcomes. She’d long since offloaded all the thundermix, but it was powder and the ride had been bumpy and some had spilled at least once. There could easily be some in cracks between the boards, folds of the trade silk, caught in the fuzzy halo of the felt cover.

She went from her knees to her feet so fast she seemed not to spend any time in between. "NO!" she yelled. "Wait till tomorrow, I’ll take the cover off. You can see whatever you want. Just don’t take any flames out there!" The guard Alps, alarmed, took both her arms and leaned on them to force her back down to the mat. "Gods damn it - NO FIRE!"

Chapter End Notes

References

"Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man Of Mine” song from "Showboat" by Jerome Kern & Oscar Hammerstein
"Green Eggs and Ham” book by Dr. Seuss.
"Airplane” movie by Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker
Any novel by Robert Rankin. Or any article by Joe Bob Briggs
Thanks, neighbors, for putting up a mysterious arrangement of decorative lights. The question of what it was supposed to be diverted me for a couple of minutes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was an earth-shattering kaboom.

References

“Fire” song by Arthur Brown
“Hare-way to the Stars” cartoon by Warner Bros.
down in the mud when the rivers all run dry

Chapter Notes

Thanks for macadamia nuts. They prove a food can be good even with no discernible flavor.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Son of a million pus-maggots!" Nergui yelled, jumping up. The kaboom had been so loud she couldn’t really hear herself, so she yelled louder. “Bugger it to bloody blisters! I told them not to do that!”

"But you knew these obstinate blockheads would!” Noyan exulted, though to Nergui he was barely audible. “What a plan! Cut me loose and let’s kill all the ones in here.”

Dundar pulled her around to face him. "You planned this?"

"Hells, no! Let me borrow this a second.” She snatched the dagger from his belt and dropped into a backward roll, then cleared the distance to Noyan in two big steps. At this distance, her etheric leads worked fine. He winced in pain.

She held the point of the dagger under Noyan’s ear. "If I cut you loose you will run out of here,” she snarled, “like your ass is on fire! NO extra death!"

"Aw. You used to be fun,” he answered.

She released the leads, pushed the blade in between his bound wrists, and sawed the ropes frantically. Noyan’s half-stunned guards, belatedly realizing that things were still happening, shoved her back and pulled him away. She went flying up against Dundar, who stood firm as an oak and wrapped an arm around her neck, his thumb knuckle pressing against her pulse.

"Nergui! Why?” he growled in her ear.

"I think he only got caught this time” --- she drew in a breath with some effort --- “because he went looking for me. I would’ve gotten him sent away from here. And I would’ve done right by you.”

"We don’t really deal well with mixed loyalties,” Gundogdu, now standing next to Dundar, explained.

Sungurtekin does, Nergui thought but kept her mouth shut.

Meanwhile, Hayme was coming back to her senses. And I was that close to blessing her marriage to my darling baby son? she thought, shocked into temporary speechlessness by the scene played out in front of her. What in Allah’s name was I thinking?

Hayme had been born into the highest class of Turkmen society (the ones who lived in the largest, best-appointed tents along the widest, cleanest bare-earth pathways in the center of every encampment). As the daughter, sister, and eventual wife of tribal head Beys, avoiding any unladylike behavior was as ingrained in her instincts as ignoring any pain associated with wearing a nine-pound silver headdress all day, every day.
Therefore, when she rose out of the royal settee, ramrod-straight, quivering with righteous rage, it
was the first time her hand had ever pointed at someone with the index finger! It was absolutely
wrong. But oh, it felt so right. She held her arm straight out and sighted down that manifestly
offensive finger at Nergui and bellowed loudly enough to drive birds out of nearby trees:

"OFF! WITH! HER! HEAD!"

"And now I’m about to feel like the world’s biggest shit-heel,” Dundar grumbled. “Because I really
do love you... but I can’t say Mom’s wrong. You brought an incredibly dangerous thing into our
camp,”

"I didn't bring it into your camp! I left it outside. Your guards brought it in. Then I said not to bring
fire near it, but one of your guys just had to."

"Even so," Dundar argued, his voice heating up, "You brought it to these lands to use in warfare!
Against us!"

"Against the Crusaders!" Nergui protested in a yell of utter frustration. Well, them too, more
precisely...

"Did you hear that?" piped up an outraged Bey. "These Mongol scum were going to kill all the
Crusaders with that --- weapon --- and not leave any for us to kill!"

Some days, Nergui thought, you wonder why you didn’t just let the wake-up snake bite you and get it
over with.

"STOP!" bellowed a voice like thunder. The tent flap had been opened. At first, only smoke and
darkness entered. Then an upright, turbaned figure in white strode in.

"I cannot allow you to behead this woman,” Sheikh ibn-i Arabi pronounced, for it was he.

Thank Tengri! And Allah too, Nergui thought with immense relief. The help I gave him, some of it
against my better judgment, must be paying off. Everything will be all right now.

"She is an extremely powerful witch,” the Sheikh explained to the assembly. “Beheading won’t kill
her. She’ll stay hidden in your obasi, waiting to fling her severed head with preternatural force into
the groin of any Kayi man who leaves his tent at night. Nothing short of disbanding the tribe would
get rid of her.”

Sounds entertaining, Nergui thought. Almost a shame it isn’t true. Way to improvise something
convincing, though.

"No,” ibn-i Arabi continued, “Only blessed water can purify her soul. You’ll have to drown her.”

Chapter End Notes

References

“If I Should Fall from Grace with God” song by The Pogues
“Alice in Wonderland” book by Lewis Carroll
Some distance away in the woods, Ertugrul lay awake. His three closest Alp companions snoring mightily as they slept. They always had to find some river rapids to camp alongside to avoid scaring away every enemy infidel and other game animal for miles.

"A restless mind makes for an active bladder." Had anyone actually said that, or was it just so true that no one had to?

They’d heard that afternoon that the Kayis had captured Noyan. Ertugrul, Dogan, Bamsi, and Turgut were on fire with curiosity about what kind of random fuck-up would kebab the execution this time, particularly without the four of them there. They couldn’t even clearly remember why they had to stay out of the obasi this time. Probably the Dodurgas were pissed at them again. Freakin’ Dodurgas.

Noyan was the reason the Kayis had to slink up to Dodurga’s gate with their pointy leather Alp helmets in their hands in the first place, and now they wouldn’t even get to see him get the chop. At least, not from anyplace with a really good view; they did plan to sneak up and watch from somewhere discreet.

Guess I’ll have to get up and “tend an unknown grave” if I want to get back to sleep.

At ground level things were quiet, but a lofty wind blew clouds across the moon and stars and made patches of dappled silvery light chase each other across the ground. Ertugrul was well into the thick of his task before he realized that some of the ghostly light was reflected from the body of a breathtakingly handsome white stallion who moved like a ghost through the trees.

(Hello again, Father of Emperors,) came a voice in Ertugrul’s head.

"Was that you?" he asked the horse, aloud but not loudly. Though not a senior Dervish like ibn-i Arabi or a shaman like Nergui or Baiju, Ertugrul had held enough significant conversations with his departed father Suleyman and his not-yet-arrived third son Osman to have made peace, of a kind, with weird shit happening more often than most people imagine.

(Does Sultan Aladdin rub his magic lamp? My ancestor Eid Efendi could say human words out loud, but this is the best I can do.)

There was a drawn-out hissing noise in the darkness. Moments later a spreading puddle of steaming liquid washed over Ertugrul’s bare feet.

(Sorry! Ever heard the expression “I had to pee like a racehorse”?)

"Don’t you belong to someone who acts like Azrael’s little sister?"

(I don’t belong to anyone.)
"Good! You’ll be an excellent gift for my new friends, the secret white-bearded men who steer the world’s destiny."

(I don’t think so. I don’t belong to you either, or to these secret white-bearded fellows you mention. The young female Horse Listener with the delightfully padded saddle is my adopted Burden. She belongs to me.)

"I don’t see her. Where is she?"

(In trouble with tribals, I fear.)

"Well, if they’re my families’ tribals, she probably won’t be back. So you can come with me and serve the important men who adopted me.”

Summer Cloud Sultan snorted derisively. (If I had four stomachs like a sheep, I’d be sick to them all of important men. They don’t thank those who carry them.) Having finished creating a small lake on the forest floor, the horse turned and trotted off.

"Aktolgali!” Ertugrul called his own horse. “We have a challenge!”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Blessed are the Dead” song by Megadeth
asked the lady to die, she kissed the reaper's face

Chapter Notes

Thanks, every state that legalized cannabis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They say if you’re tied to a stake outside the Kayis Obasi main tent, you can watch the whole world pass by.

"They" probably licked the loony lichen off an entire cliff face right before they said it.

Nergui’s eyes, crusty and sore, opened in spite of themselves. The rain was down to a drip here and a drip there. A choking white fog had moved in to cover everything, but it seemed lighter than when she’d last closed her eyes. Had she slept? For how long?

When a man knows he is to be hanged, it may concentrate his mind wonderfully, but the same didn’t seem to be true of a woman who knows she is about to be drowned. Nergui couldn’t have found a coherent thought with a dowsing rod at that moment.

She became aware of a well-made pair of boots planted solidly in front of her. So this is it, she concluded. One of these Alps has finally decided I shouldn’t go out without a bang. I wonder which of this afternoon’s list of activities he wants to try? I wonder which of his body parts I can detach in the process. They’ll be pissed, but what can they do, kill me?

Slowly she let her gaze travel up, narrowing her eyes to keep out the persistent remains of the rain. Any group of actors needing someone to play a hero would pick this man. He had not been born like a normal person; he had fallen out of the Hero Tree and hit every heroic branch on the way down.

He towered silently over her. She could tell, despite the poor visibility and in the midst of her exhaustion, that his face had once smiled often and easily; that his hand had not always rested twitching on his sword-hilt; that his eyes had once twinkled with good humor, sparked with mischief, softened with love, and blurred with grief. Now his expression was stony, his eyes flat with a zealot’s disdain. "What’s wrong, Little Death?” Ertugrul’s voice was sarcastic. “Looks like you picked the wrong side.”

"Death," Nergui rasped, then coughed and tried harder to make her voice work; “Death picks all sides. Eventually.” What the hells is wrong with my throat? Maybe she’d caught a chill sitting out in the cold wet mud all night. Wouldn’t she even be able to sing a death song today? Well, that just about tied the urkh on the toono.

Then she remembered something. "You’re banished from this camp. Aren’t you? Why are you here?"

"I was chasing a horse. The horse you rode off on. I’m going to present him to the men who steer the fate of the world.”

"Good luck with that. That is one people-hating horse.” Then she had a thought. “There was a dog, too. Haven’t seen him all day, but if he appears… after… let him stay if he wants. He likes Turali.
And he’ll probably guard herds really well.”

"You’ll die for Noyan, then?"

_Because_ of Noyan, certainly. For reasons only Noyan could guess. But none of that was any of a random Turkman’s business. “For Ogedei,” she murmured dreamily, letting her eyes close and remembering the Khagan leaning on the wall of the Silver Tree Fountain, the descending sun making his hair blaze under the glittering boughs, his smile like a freshening breeze laden with scents of trees and deer. “And for our State.” Every mountain. Every lake. Every dune. Every river trying to flow every way at once.

"But Noyan is something to you. Or your masters.”

"He’s one of the best there is at what he does,” she sighed. “What he does isn’t very nice. But it’s useful.” She looked up. “The sun’s coming up soon. The horse you were chasing is probably halfway to Samarkand. If you’re going to nail me without getting caught, Angry Bird, now would be the time.”

Erugrul shifted his weight uncertainly. “If I’m going to… what?”

Her head-tilt was coquettish, but her grin was more lupine than human. "You know. Nail my hand to something. Like you nailed Noyan’s hand to the tree after he nailed yours to a pole. Isn’t that a thing we’re all doing now?”

The Ghazi gave a sardonic chuckle. “Sorry, Little Death. I forgot my hammer. Maybe next time.” He took his time walking away but disappeared into the fog in a couple of blinks.

The next thing Nergui knew, she was being detached from the post and put into a wooden collar-and-handcuff assembly. Her legs were asleep and wouldn’t support her, so she was borne up by two gruff Alps. Two more Alps brought Noyan out in a similar set of hardware.

"Well, good morning, Agent,” Noyan called out. “You look… rested.”

The Alps who arrested Nergui had given her a few hard wallops to discourage argument; she knew she had a split lip and at least one black eye. Noyan’s head was much more thoroughly bloodied. Yet still unbowed.

"Noyan - ” she husked, swallowing to wet her vocal cords but just making her whole throat feel lacerated."Why?" Her voice cracked, which made her sound whiny. _Gods damn it._

"You weren’t cut out to be Queen of the Sheep," he jeered scornfully. "I changed your fate. You’re welcome.”

"I would have done my best if I’d gotten a good enough deal! A working alliance, and somewhere in all the hundreds of distracting details, you would have walked. Now I’m going to be drowned! How’s that better? _Hah?_”

It was a good, challenging “hah,” spiked and serrated and dripping with vitriol, but it felt as though it had cost her throat an important layer of skin.

"You really came to save me?”

"Yes.”

"That was stupid. I would have gotten away anyway.”
"How do you know?"

"I know when I’m going to die, that’s how. And it isn’t today."

That gave Nergui pause. She knew some shamans got that questionable gift. "How nice for you. But why did you have to ---"

"I don’t know."

"You don’t know?"

"I heard about the proposed engagement and it was like a sudden battle trance."

"Why? You were done with me. So wait: Your army's gotten bogged down here. The risk is mounting and the returns are diminishing. Meanwhile, all of Europe and its piles of treasure wait for you just around that corner of the Black Sea. Are you seriously saying saying that with all your access to hundreds, maybe thousands, of women, you couldn’t give up just one to pacify Anatolia and move on?"

He scowled one of the scowliest scowls she’d ever seen. "Of course I could give up one woman! Or five! Or ten! Or fifty! Just not… just… not…" The scowl dimmed, and for an instant he looked almost lost before he remembered where he was and shuttered his expression again.

The Alps had led them to a cleared area encircled by what looked like the entire Kayis tribe. Hawkers strolled with water-skins and trays of food with wonderful smells that struck Nergui as one more insult; she hadn’t had so much as a bowl of milk-tea since their dinner in the Cave of Courage. In the center, Gundogdu stood with an ornate sword and Dundar stood next to a barrel of water.

"Last time I had my blade at this Mongol scum’s throat,” Gundogdu announced. “I made such a long speech that Sadettin Kobek had time to show up and save him. This time it was Kobek who handed him over… but I’m still not going to make the same mistake again. I am going to let him watch his ally die first, however.”

"Makes less than no difference to me,” Noyan scoffed loudly. “Didn’t you read my scrolls? Come to that, can you even read? I world-famously do not give a flying fuck on a spinning simit about other people.”

(Pause for shocked and outraged reaction).

“Especially split-tails; they don’t even really count as people.”

(Pause for a complete absence of shocked and outraged reaction).

“Go ahead, Kill her any time, however you want. It won’t make me suffer any more. In fact, let me do it. It’ll be fun. On the other hand, if you were to let her go, I wouldn’t suffer any less.”

There was an uncertain silence, then Gundogdu stepped back up. “Noyan, even if you’re telling the truth for the first time in your degenerate life, this woman is a spy who traffics in incredibly dangerous substances. She’s so good at convincing her enemies that she’s their friend that she almost became my sister-in-law. Dundar, show us all what she gets for trifling with a young Bey’s heart.”

Dundar took Nergui’s upper arm and drew her toward the barrel. She turned back to look in Noyan’s direction, through him and a thousand yards beyond. Her eyes were drained of anger, leaving a peculiar stillness that was neither apprehension nor peace. If she hadn’t quite forgiven him, she appeared to have relented.
"On yonder, Baiju," she said. Barely more than a whisper, with a small and very weary smile. His breastbone turned to cracking ice.

Then she turned to her executioner and gave him an enthusiastic kiss on the cheek.

Turkmen and Mongols share an ability to acknowledge admirable qualities in their enemies. Bravery is high on the list. Dying well is respected, no matter by whom or under what circumstances. And style is always worth extra points.

The assembled Kayis cheered themselves hoarse.

Under cover of the uproar, Nergui asked softly, "Do you hate me that much, Dundar?" The Kayis had no full-time executioners. The task belonged to whomever had the biggest grudge against the condemned person or, in a case like Noyan’s where the contestants would include half the tribe, to the acting Bey. That was currently Hayme Hanim, and she really would have enjoyed putting paid to Noyan, but the arthritis in her hands was acting up so she had delegated to her older son.

"No, Nergui, don’t ever think that," Dundar said miserably. "I stepped up because Alia gave me a little blade coated with a drug that will put you to sleep right away. I’m not quite the man I hoped I was, but at least I’ll make sure you don’t suffer."

"All right then. Let’s do this."

She felt a little nick in the side of her neck as her head, shoulders, and upper torso were plunged into the cold dark water and held there.

In a little while everything went away.

Chapter End Notes

References

“The Fugitive Kind” song by The Trigger Code
“Life of Johnson” book by James Boswell
"Wolverine“ comic mini-series by Chris Claremont & Frank Miller
“Invictus” poem by William Ernest Henley
we like explosions it's only right we should

Chapter Notes

Thanks, cat who’s been voiding where prohibited, for wetting the bare skin of my leg; I can clean that off without the help of our currently “Donalde” washing machine. It’s amazing what one can find gratitude for if one tries hard enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was an even louder earth-shattering kaboom.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Explosions” song by Devo
“Hare-way to the Stars” cartoon by Warner Bros.
don't try to hide when the dice have been cast

Chapter Notes

Thanks, old secondhand HEPA filter, for making the air in our house more breathable with all the smoke from the wildfires outside.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This blast seemed to come from every direction. The effect on the crowd gathered to watch the execution was similar to a horse’s bladder being emptied dead-center on an anthill. Before the shockwave dissipated, black-clad Mongol warriors were everywhere: charging in on horse and on foot with weapons drawn, firing arrows, waving torches, howling for blood.

Most of the Turkmen froze or scattered. Those who could were scrambling for weapons rather than running to escape, but confusion reigned nonetheless.

Gundogdu thanked Allah for giving him one of the coolest heads among his fellow Kayis, even though that wasn't saying very much. He didn't need to scramble. He already had a weapon in hand. He’d brought it to behead Noyan, and he would eat a whole pig raw before he let the sonofabitch get away. Again. Unfortunately, his quarry had even quicker reflexes; when Gundogdu’s sword should have introduced itself to Noyan’s throat, said throat was no longer there. Instead, the blade stuck in the edge of the wooden restraint yoke as Noyan tackled his would-be executioner to the ground. Gundogdu rolled them both over, landed on top, and was just about to bring the bottom edge of the yoke to bear on Gundogdu’s windpipe when Dundar, leaping two horse-lengths to his brother’s aid, delivered a flying kick to Noyan’s temple that lifted him free of Gundogdu’s chest before laying him out sideways. Neither brother could immediately press the advantage, though; the air was suddenly full of the flying hooves of Doldrum Darga’s horse. “Pardon me! This is ours,” Doldrum Darga called out in accented but comprehensible Turkish as he leaned down and swept his stunned commander onto the saddle.

"Keep going, Doldrum,” shouted Tangut, riding in tight circles around Dundar and Gundogdu, fending off their sword strokes with whacks of his shield, ”All the way to you-know-where. We’ll take care of the rest.”

A new uproar broke out around the stables when the Alps found them unexpectedly empty. That, however, was nothing compared to the commotion that built gradually as they realized that the horses were, in fact, still in the obasi… underneath the Mongol riders. Shouts broke out here and there, to the effect of “Be careful, you clumsy oafs! Don’t hurt any of the horses! The horse you hurt may be your own!” A Mongol cavalryman was a notoriously difficult target to begin with, but even more so if the horse had to be protected.

An observer paying the kind of attention that’s next to impossible in the middle of a major metalstorm might begin to notice that the battle wasn't all it seemed.

Arrows were flying and people were ducking for cover, but not really getting hit except for their cloaks and robes getting speared and immobilizing them. “Keep pinning these pissweeds down till Tangut gives the signal!” Sweet Ali yelled. “And keep moving! Bu-Tan’s cooking dinner tonight and your mangy asses all better be there!”
Bu-Tan’s detachment cut a swath through the caught-short defenders with a combination of small projectiles and their bare hands. The Turkmen they knocked out would be up again before sundown, but Bu-Tan didn’t need that long. “Follow smells of food / Find the kitchens and larders / You’ve all got your lists!” he exhorted his troops. In a handful of Constantinople minutes, light and sticky Mongol fingers relieved the Kayis obasi of a precisely described range of cooking pots, many beautifully carved wooden spoons and bowls, and every single extant breakfast pastry made for the post-execution festivities.

In the neglected shadows between the backs of tents, a large, determined dog dragged an inert, soggy bundle of rags toward a hastily-dug trench under the obasi perimeter fence.

In a tent with no particular purpose, a tent at the outer edge of the obasi next to the graveyard, a tent conspicuous by its plainness and the startling blend of perfumes it exuded, a member of the Strike Squad re-fastened his armor while his brothers-in-arms counted out the time. A still-handsome middle-aged tribal woman, cheerful despite a certain look of hard mileage, handed him his armored leather cup. He dropped a fistful of silver coins into it and held it back toward her. "Is that about enough, Hanim?” he asked, a little shyly. The not-a-madam scooped out the silver and hefted it. "I’d say so, lad,” she replied. "It's been a business doing pleasure with you. Come back and invade any time."

Fires flared up alarmingly here and there, but always in bare spaces, and they were already fizzling out by the time anyone got to them.

Ertugrul, Bamsi, Dogan, and Turgut came riding to the rescue, sure they’d be welcomed back once they saved the day. However, by that time a fairly uniform blanket of brawl covered the entire camp, made it difficult to choose a direction. They could see surprisingly few Mongols in the roiling riot, and those were mostly moving away from them. Instead, it seemed that every Kayi with a grudge against another one (which meant, more or less, every Kayi over the age of three) was using the turmoil as cover to work it out amongst themselves. Then a teenage boy in Mongol armor and Persian curls, graceful as a deer and with eyes just as soulful, ducked a swing of Turgut’s massive axe blade, thumped Turgut in the center of his chest with an open hand, shouted “Tag! You’re IT, motherfucker!” and bounded effortlessly out of reach and away.

"I’ve heard of this,” said Sheikh ibn-i Arabi next to Ertugrul, arms folded, nodding sagely, as if he’d been standing there the entire time instead of uncannily materializing a mere instant before. “Tangut mentioned it that time he ran away from camp and Dervish and I patched up his wounds. It’s like a prank raid. If it’s done right, nobody dies, but the enemy is mightily humiliated because it demonstrates very clearly that if the raiders wanted them dead, they would be.”

"But we can kill them if we want to, right?” Bamsi inquired.

"Sure, if you can,” ibn-i Arabi replied. “They expect you to try. They have to be very sure you won’t succeed.”

"That’s really unfair,” Dogan complained. “How are we supposed to dedicate our lives to revenge against people who just embarrass us?”

Already some distance away, Baiju Noyan became aware of who he was, where he was, and that he had one rat bugger of a headache.

He turned to look at Doldrum Darga. "Tell me, Darga, that we're not running away.”

"Never, Noyan. We’re making all haste to rendezvous with a messenger carrying new orders from KK.”
"Our Agent was… with me…"

" Didn’t see her, Noyan. But whoever finds her is supposed to bring her. Alive or… not so much."

Chapter End Notes

References

“Iron Horse - Born to Lose” song by Motorhead
Baiju Noyan scowled, but it was mostly for the look of the thing. To make sure everyone knew who was in charge again now that he’d been… what had been the word… extracted? Sounded like something that would involve being squashed and boiled and tumbled around in a bucket. Which was more or less the way he felt at the moment. He thought he should be exultant at once more, with the Eternal Blue blessing, cheating the Turkmen’s death-dealing blades. Leaving them frustrated and humiliated. But, for one thing, his head hurt in a very attention-devouring way where Diaper Baby Dundar-head’s boot had caught him. Hurt like somebody shoved a stag’s antler into his ear. My little Agent will have something in her wagon for it, he tried to console himself, then suddenly felt as if he was falling through the floor of the world. Wagon’s gone. Burnt to the axles. And she --- Now the rest of the world’s floor fractured and broke away after him.

"Excuse me, Noyan?” Doldrum Darga said quietly in his ear, helping him dismount. “Here’s the messenger from KK. The one I was talking about.”

Good lad, this Doldrum. Always discreet, never wastes words, and can handle himself in an ectoplasm storm. The Noyan was mildly surprised at this thought. It was definitely in his head, acting as if it had every right to be there, but where had it come from?

The Noyan sized up the newcomer. Something about the young man immediately nagged at him, like a sore tooth that didn’t presently hurt but lay in wait for any accidental contact to set it off. Treacle-skinned and carrot-haired, he was certainly distinctive-looking, but that wasn’t the thing. Miniature paiza being worn on a leather strap around the neck: unusual, but still not it. No visible cowering but, Baiju reflected ruefully, he himself probably wasn’t looking like much of a King of Hell at the moment.

"Agent Dholi; I report to Sun Mergen," the young man said in a neutral, businesslike tone. He seemed short of breath as if he’d hurried from somewhere. "Message from the Great Khan." The messenger’s copper-colored eyes were respectfully downcast toward the Noyan’s chest... yet something in them implied a speculation on how the heart might be removed.

Baiju warily kept the messenger in his peripheral vision while he read the scroll. "Decamp from Anatolia immediately,” he muttered aloud, letting himself appear to be visualizing compliance with the command. “Take Trebizond and Nicaea while protectorate negotiations with the Konya Sultan proceed..." And that was Oggy’s seal, nice and proper.

Abruptly the Noyan looked up and pinned Agent Dholi’s gaze. He could definitely detect more than a hint of "I'm under orders not to eat you, but don't push it," even as the messenger cocked his head to one side and calmly scratched behind an ear.

And a sense of deja vu...

"Agent Dholi. Have we... met before?” Baiju ventured carefully. "Or perhaps, are our families
"Not... as such to my knowledge, Noyan," Dholi replied a trifle stiffly. Then, as an afterthought that sounded more casual than it was, "Oh, and Sun Mergen told me to emphasize that 'immediately' means today. The Seljuks are prone to change their minds often, and the Turkmen are in such a temper he doesn't believe he can hold them off much longer."

“You don’t say,” the Noyan responded in a toneless, far-away voice. Looking beyond the men in front of him, he could see that his camp was already being efficiently dismantled. Good for Tangut, taking over while I get my bearings, came another unfamiliar thought. Always copes well with changing situations.

Baiju re-focused on the messenger and tried very hard to sound as though he was only merely a little bit mildly curious. "Weren’t the Kayis holding one of your Agency people too? A young woman, I believe? Khenbish’s Nerguitani? Was she also ---” he drew in a deep breath --- “extracted successfully?” Who are you kidding? his own treacherous memory turned on him accusingly. You saw how long she was held under. You saw the bubbles stop. You saw her motionless body tossed aside like a spit-roasted pheasant carcass picked clean.

Agent Dholi was silent for a moment. Discipline kept his expression neutral and deferential, but a deep sadness coalesced in his eyes, and a subtle tension in his neck and shoulders spoke of a killing rage suppressed by sheer force of will. In a very careful voice, he finally said, "Our healers tried to revive her. She wasn't responding."

The two men stared each other down in silence for what felt like days. The Noyan broke eye contact first, surprising himself. He directed a long sigh at the ground. Then it occurred to him that the kind of scouring, scathing emotions Dholi fought to conceal weren’t usually triggered by the death of an unknown professional colleague. "Did you know her, Agent?" he asked without looking up.

Another rather cryptic answer: "Not as such, Noyan. Am I dismissed?"

Baiju Noyan looked at the floor, maintaining his scowl. Finally, he nodded twice and Dholi melted away toward what had been the camp entrance.

In his mind’s ear, he imagined No Name Girl trying again to make sense of his actions: (You were pissed that I tried to save you; what, you didn’t want to share the credit? And you were pissed that I would have married Dundar to do it; you really dislike him and don’t think he should get anything good out of the deal, I suppose. And maybe you were pissed at the thought of annexing the Kayis peacefully when there were still some you really wanted to kill. Instead of assuming you would save me. So you... got me killed. In stories, people who die together often reincarnate together, so it could have been painted as some kind of crude gesture of affection... if you hadn’t been sure from the beginning that you would survive. Nope... nope... nope. I just can’t reconcile to this at all).

Neither could he, the mighty Mongol general whose mind could encompass a battlefield. Much good it did him now. He put his forehead in his hands, then winced at the pain it instantly roused from his wound and thought better of it. What was Dundar-head’s phrase? "Biggest shitheel in the world?" So this is regret, he suddenly realized with the strangely muffled shock of a boulder landing in snow. Bugger all those morons who said he might not be fully human because he’d never felt this.

He felt it now.

And they could have it back.

"It is not the things a man has that make him weak,” he’d always said, “but the things he wishes for.”
Her ghost would probably haunt him, he brooded. He deserved it. And the soul of such a powerful shaman could probably make quite a tangible ghost in this world if it wanted to. If not propitiated by an expert of her own level or higher, she might come down the smoke-hole of his campaign tent every midnight for eighty-one days, to howl and growl and beat him with his own horsewhip till dawn.

Well, he thought, his scowl lifting ever so slightly, that, at least, is something I can look forward to.

Chapter End Notes

References

“Kings of Speed” song by Hawkwind
and away she rides with the best in show

Chapter Notes

Thanks, Big Daddy Roth, for a nation of Rat Finks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gemtsen nosed through the flap and walked into the hastily erected medical tent as if he had every right to be there. "Any luck yet?" he asked.

(Only it couldn’t have been him. Everybody knows dogs don’t talk).

"Slow as moles’ asses, but we're getting a pulse now," reported Chund-Erh, the senior medic from the Expedient Resurrection Team who was presently working the pressure points deep inside the patient’s thumb-webs. “Wouldn’t have thought it possible, the shape she was in.”

"What’d I tell you? Shamans. You just never know.” The big Bankhar let out a soft involuntary whine and licked the hands that hung in the air. They were warm, but artificially so.

Then Nergui spewed out half a lake’s worth of water over her rescuers, inhaled raggedly but with desperate strength into indignant lungs, opened her eyes, and screamed for all she was worth.

"Yeah, well, I knew old Khenbish,” Chund-Erh continued as if he hadn’t just received a sudden soaking. “Looked like he’d blow away in the wind, but tough as petrified wood underneath. Reckoned a little extra time could pay off on his little girl.”

She found herself hanging upside-down, naked, over a lit brazier that seared her face like a Gobi midsummer sun. Needles pierced the soles of her feet in several places. Someone kept beating her on the back as if they were cleaning a very dusty rug. An old man, whose bristly gray head hairs had all apparently migrated to his nostrils and earholes, was apparently trying to make a hole through the webs between her thumbs and forefingers with his bare hands. Next to him, a huge fanged carnivore panted and slobbered. Hoping for scraps carved from her flesh as it roasted?

Wait: was that Gemtsen? Finally? Where the hells had he been when she needed him?

Hells? Wait... Something nagged at her memory, something just out of reach...

Flames! Demons! Torture! Of course!

She was dead, and it looked as if someone in Afterlife Administration had fucked up big-time. Somehow she'd been sent to one of the Muslim or Christian hells, instead of to one of the Upper or Lower Worlds of Tengri where she belonged. *This shit will not flush*, she resolved. *But what’s it going to take to fix it? Ass-kickings? Bribes? Games of sheep-ankle?*

Then she forgot everything and started screaming again when she realized she was watching the familiar dog *transforming into a man*. One who, it turned out, was also familiar.

*Oh, no!* Gemtsen had followed her into the Lands of the Dead. She’d heard that dogs could do that if someone courteously cut the tails off their dead bodies… but she’d left him alive! When and how had he died? And who had cut off his tail? And why was this place turning him into a man? Was it a
reward? Or was it a punishment? This was a Hell, after all...

"She's up!" the white-robed man rumbled triumphantly. "Good job, all. Cut her down so she can recover." More white-robes, some wearing masks, gathered around her. Some kept her hands and hair clear of the brazier while others removed the needles from her feet. Finally, all together, they maneuvered her of the apparatus, sat her down, and handed her a blanket.

"...what... the crystallized crap... happened?" she gasped, clutching the blanket around herself despite the brazier's heat.

Chund-Erh leaned his elbows on her knees and looked up into her face. "You died," he said matter-of-factly. "The Turkmen drowned you. Agent Dholi fetched your body and brought it to us, the healers of the Expedient Resurrection Team. We brought you back to life by the very latest medieval methods. You're welcome."

"I... I died?" she puffed, still struggling for both breath and sensibility. "But now I'm... alive again? Because you all... resurrected me? Are you blowing... smoke up my ass?"

"We do have a woman who specializes in rectal moxibustion, but she couldn't make it today," Chund-Erh explained. "I wish she had. Drowning is usually the easiest death to cancel after the last minute, but there was some kind of sedative in your system slowing things down. We almost gave up."

"From my friends... so I wouldn't... suffer."

"Yes, well, with friends like that you don't need enemas."

"They didn't know you could... resurrect me. I didn't... know either." She gathered her breath for the first important question. "Why am I naked?"

"We have to work fast before your soul completely detaches, so we can't afford to miss any injuries hidden by clothes," one of the masks explained.

"Also, it makes sure there are no metal fasteners or ornaments that could heat up next to your skin," another supplied.

"Fair enough," she nodded, though her feral-looking eyes were still wide with shock. "So then... why is he naked?" The orange-eyebrowed man who had been Gemtsen was wearing a small paiza on a leather neck-strap, but not a stitch else.

"I'm Agent Dholi," he said. "Remember me? I helped train you at the Armory."

"I do. Now that you mention it. I do. But with clothes on, wasn't it? ...Sorry if you're actually dressed and I'm not seeing it. I'm not sure I'm all the way back yet. I'm seeing some strange things. I think I even mistook you for a dog a minute ago. Can you believe it?" She tried for a self-deprecating chuckle to make light of her disorientation as if this kind of thing happened to her all the time, but what came out was a high, nervous giggle that suggested she'd let go of her last tie to normal reality.

"I'm a dogman," Dholi explained matter-of-factly, turning to face her fully while she tried to look everywhere else at once. "I escorted you from KK and watched over you here as a dog ---- Gemtsen the Bankhar --- and now I'm Dholi the man again." One of the medics held out a blanket to Dholi, but he waved it away obliviously.

Nergui shook her head in disbelief. "The spell I did that one night on the way here... I thought it was an unlikely coincidence that I'd meet such a friendly, clever, protective dog just as I set out on a
dangerous and important journey. If you were a shapeshifter or a weredog, the spell was supposed to sense it. What happened? Did you have some kind of countercharm?"

"No," he shrugged. "I'm just a dogman. We're not under curses like werebeasts, and we don't use spells like shapeshifters. We're a natural landrace that can transform at will; no woo-woo at all. Whenever we'd rather have heightened senses than opposable thumbs, or the other way around, we just swap forms. In the less-traveled parts of Chagatai's Khanate, there are whole towns full of us."

Meanwhile and for some moments afterward, Nergui’s mind made the best sense it could out of this new information. As revised premises spawned embarrassing conclusions, Nergui's shock began to give way to high dudgeon.

"I --- I changed in front of you!" she accused Dholi.

"Well," he said, waving a hand to take in his whole body, "now I just changed in front of you. We’re even." Reluctantly, the young dogman finally yielded to nonsensical human custom, accepting a blanket and wrapping it around his waist. "Anyway, Sun Mergen said to tell you to go directly back to KK. I've got another mission, but I'm due to come back and join the Kheshig after that."

"Kheshig. That reminded Nergui of something. Another Kheshig boy to watch out for."

"Baiju --- I mean --- the Noyan?" she inquired haltingly, her voice cracking a little.

Dholi's human face was impassive in a well-schooled way, but his big copper-colored eyes were still doggily expressive. They expressed a quickly-suppressed flash of distaste before settling on...

Sadness? No. not quite.

Pity? Oh my Tengri.

"He's gone," Dholi said, sounding very final.

Flooded with desolation, Nergui inhaled as if she were about to be drowned again, then subsided into coughing. "You mean he ---- you mean they ---- he was so sure he wouldn’t --- did he?"

Dholi's gaze was quizzical for a second or two, then instantly comprehending and breezily dismissive. "Oh! No, he didn’t die. He took his army and left. Probably most of the way to the border by now."

"Without me? Nergui didn’t ask. The answer was as obvious as tripping over a big rock and landing nose-first.

"They're redeployed to Trebizond, followed by Nicaea," Dholi explained. "Sun Mergen's orders were not to let the sun go down on them in Anatolia. He's working out some kind of deal with Sultan Alaeddin and he doesn’t want any Noyan/Ertugrul drama setting fire to it."

"The Noyan didn't... leave any messages for me, did he?" she asked with all the offhandedness she could muster.

"Should he have?" Dholi's affect would have been the same if she'd just asked him how to get an Agency reimbursement for unicorn-horn polish.

"Never mind," she trailed off lamely, looking at the floor. Why on earth would he? He’s sane now. The mission’s over. He’s done with me. Just like all the other women he’s canoodled with. Maybe I took a little longer, but that was all. Besides, I acted like I was done with him by offering to marry

And then she was washed and dried and dressed, watered and fed and breathing a little easier. She'd thanked the Expedient Resurrection Team and gotten their contact information for further professional conversations. Agent Dholi followed her outside as she trod the good solid earth under her still-needly-feeling feet. "Your cart is reduced to one wheel, half an axle, and a pile of splinters and ashes," he told her, "but I can probably find you a cart space with one of the Agency’s merchants. That’s if you don’t mind laying low for a while so the Kayis don’t find out you’re alive."

At that moment, Nergui felt a nudge at the back of her head. Warm air, accompanied by a fine spray of horse snot, blew into her hair. She turned, first surprised, then not surprised, then surprised anew.

Somehow, Summer Cloud Sultan, known to everyone else as The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch, had acquired a beautifully embroidered blanket and an immaculate saddle and bridle trimmed with silver and tassels. The wondrous new-tack smells stirred something in her ancestral memories that was positively intoxicating.

"Thanks, Agent," she told Dholi with a smile, "but I think I'll ride."

Chapter End Notes

References

“A Girl and Her Horse” song by Carbon Leaf

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