Washed Up in Ezogashima

by oh_THAT_Keara

Summary

She sacrificed everything to restore his sanity. He... got her executed.

But you know what? Vulture butt.

The death thing didn't take. You can't keep a good spy (or a better shaman) down. She's headed back to Agency HQ on HIS most expensive horse. So there.

Inside, though, Nerguitani (No Name Girl) feels unsettlingly off-balance... and not just because she's so shockingly new to horseback riding. Surely not shaman's madness already? And if she's not herself, then who is she? Someone who'd face 272 kinds of Hell sooner than be pimped out to a career-length series of highly-placed psychos, apparently.

If only she knew what fond friends she'd made during her short stay in the capital. Or that Great Khan Ögedei has a plan she'd like much better. Or that Ögedei's reckless brother Chagatai has his own --- well --- more of an impulse than a plan, really.

Meanwhile, Greater Mongol's once-more-celebrated general Baiju Noyan, now governor of a plum province, is getting lucky more often than a set of loaded sheep-ankle bones. Yet, somehow, uneasy lies the head that wears the crown... and the other head, too...

Notes

The following fandoms are implicated in the following finished chapters (more will be listed as I post them).
Mongolian history - everywhere
Diriliş: Ertuğrul | Resurrection: Ertugrul - a bit tenuously throughout, but particularly 2, 7
アグレッシブ烈子 | Aggressive Retsuko | Aggretsuko (Anime): 11, 12, 14, 16, 17
No Name Girl awoke under the eternal blue sky, bright sunlight stabbing through the gaps between her eyelashes.

Too bright. And it was too windy. And there was a distinct lack of pillows and carpets between her bare back and the scrubby grass. As a matter of fact, the only thing unchanged from when she’d gone to sleep was a certain absence of clothing.

She’d gone to sleep indoors --- yes, that was the right word; it had been a beautiful big solid ger with multiple layers of wall and real doors. *What did the Turkmen in warmer Anatolia call the insides of their lightweight tents?* she wondered hazily. “*Inflaps?*”

_No, no, come back, No Name Girl,* she commanded herself. *Something important happened. You need to focus and figure out what it is.*

There had been a game. A vast, noisy one that went on forever. And a party of more or less the same sort.

A wedding?

Possibly her wedding?

Her head began to pound as loud as thunder. She couldn’t look too closely at that one. Not yet.

And she’d fallen asleep at some point inhaling the scents of incense and perfume. In a pile of warm, beautiful pillows and rugs. Silk and fine wool… and wolf skins…

*The Yasa laws of Greater Mongol reserve wolf skins for the use of the Altan Urag, the Golden Family...*

She let her head turn very slowly to the side. The light became less blinding. She opened her eyes just the merest crack.

The steppe was empty of any human soul, living or dead. But all around her lay the picked-over scraps of a great feast… and also the kind of random detritus people drop in the course of a hasty departure. Maybe someone had dropped something she could wear? But that would have to wait: There were still wolf skins nearby, but the original owners weren’t done with them yet.

She could see ten big gray wolves just in this random direction, nosing expertly through the food scraps. Formidable hunters, to be sure, but not too proud for a free meal when nobody who mattered was looking.

Had they noticed her? If so, it wasn’t obvious. Maybe they’d fill up on the acres of leftovers and go away.

_Yeah.*

_Maybe.*

She probably shouldn’t move for a while. They couldn’t see the heat she gave off, thank Tengri, but she couldn’t do much about her scent…

From behind her, an exhalation of nearby breath moistened her cheek. She stopped breathing.
Some sniffing, some drooling… then jaws closing on her outer ear.
Meanwhile, back at the… Marching Mongol Army

The Black Bitey, Baiju Noyan’s Stygian Arab show-off stallion, was getting fractious. He wasn’t a horse that enjoyed being part of a formation or being restricted to a supply-wagon pace. With the merest flex of an ankle, Baiju signaled him to break off and head back to the idle herd. The Sweet Georgian Brown, Baiju’s practical mount and the herd’s lead mare, smelled them coming and ambled over. Tangut, Baiju’s second, also appeared, ready to help with the transition.

Baiju surveyed the herd critically. “Any sign of The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch?” The uncanny white Azerdeli was, in economic terms, the prize of the herd. Only Sultans could afford them; in fact, Baiju had acquired his from a Sultan he defeated. They were beautiful, intelligent, and blazingly fast. They were also excruciatingly uncomfortable to ride --- assuming one got that far. It was well known, albeit only to a few, that every Azerdeli ever born hated humans in general and self-important men most of all. The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch didn’t miss its old master a bit, but on the other hand, it held a special grudge against the Noyan for being temporarily possessed by a djinn powerful enough to bully it mercilessly. As a result, Baiju began to wonder that his paranoid-peripheral vision hadn’t picked up the image of a skulking or lurking Azerdeli for a while.

Tangut shook his head. “Last I saw, he took off to follow the Agent’s wagon to the Kayis obasi.” He hated reminding the Noyan of an event that seemed to bother him, but those were the facts.

Instead of lashing out with a sword or dagger, though, Baiju only let out an inflectionless “Hm.”

Orang, the Dargas’ gofer who was helping escort the horses, piped up, “That horse sure did like her.”

Tangut pinched the bridge of his nose in chagrin. “I doubt the Kayis could even get near it,” he hurriedly took over the conversation. “It might catch up with us soon.”

“Made sure she knew about it, too,” said Orang almost under his breath, “before it was too late.”

Baiju froze.

Tangut froze.

The Sweet Georgian Brown let out a whicker that roughly translated as (Oh, for Tengri’s sake!) and, without waiting for instruction, bore the Noyan swiftly away.
Talking Animal (Of Course, Of Course)

The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch had a true name: Summer Cloud Sultan. He knew it. His mother knew it. And he’d told it to his Burden, the human he’d decided to carry voluntarily.

His Burden’s name was Khenbish’s Nerguitani. It translated as “Nobody’s daughter, No Name Girl.” So technically she didn’t have a name. She’d explained to Summer Cloud Sultan that she and her parents were shamans, who were often given “nameless names” to hide them from evil spirits. He’d asked her if that didn’t cause problems for good spirits who came looking for them. She had a good laugh about that. Apparently, blessings didn’t go to the trouble to seek shamans out very often, which was only one of the reasons such people had to be forcibly drafted by the spirits. No one in their right mind would volunteer.

Still, it must have its rewards. For instance, he’d seen the young Mongolian woman change the weather a couple of times. He wished she would do that now. So far, the entire day had been given over to a soggy drizzle intent on making as much mud as possible out of the Yam road back to the Home Steppes. The desultory dripping didn’t quite drown out Nergui’s intermittent sniffs and stifled sobs. Was the weather matching her mood somehow?

(I don’t know everything about your kind,) he finally ventured, (but I would think you’d be happy now). Though Summer Cloud Sultan couldn’t speak human words aloud like his storied ancestor Eid Efendi, he could project them telepathically. (We’re not Baiju Noyan’s toys anymore. You exorcized that Djinn out of him so he’s marginally less monstrous. You died for your country --- without, I must add, taking any horses with you --- so they shouldn’t make you do it again. You were brought back to the same life, which doesn’t happen to everyone. And now you’re going home. On a truly remarkable horse. Yet here you are, leaking tears and snot into my mane.)

“I don’t know why I’m this way,” she admitted aloud, wiping her face with the back of a sleeve. “This isn’t me. At least, not the ‘me’ I know.”

That was welcome news to Summer Cloud Sultan; the Burden he’d undertaken to carry had been cheerful, friendly, and resilient, much more given to singing than sniveling. She still had the marvelously round, firm, cushiony seat that felt so nice on his back, though. Her riding was steadily improving too, although that wasn’t saying much; she’d never been on a horse before a moon or two ago.

“I’ll try some more energy exercises,” she resolved, “but I’ll wait till we stop.” For a wonder, she actually cared that some of the invisible things she did made him feel like his spine had turned into a giant centipede if he was too close to her. “Maybe I’m having some complications from the death-and-resurrection thing. I hope I don’t have to start eating human brains or anything.”

(Probably takes a lot of those to make a meal. Most of them are very small and some are missing entirely.)

When they pulled up at the way-station, the stablemaster paused his shoveling and let out a whistle. “Dang me!” he grinned appreciatively. “Where’d you get that beauty?”

(Anatolia,) the horse answered. (But there aren’t many left.)

The look on the latent Horse Listener’s face was priceless.
“Nokhoi khor!” Nergui called out politely at the door of the waystation reception ger. This was still a largely Muslim part of the Silk Road, so dogs might not be allowed inside. But the Yam network waystations were a Greater Mongol civil service operation, so then again they might.

Receiving no answer, she stepped over (not on) the threshold and found there was a dog inside, just no one to hold it. The Bankhar was of the short-haired variety found in warmer climates, all black, and medium-sized (meaning you couldn’t quite ride it in a pinch if your horse got tired). It didn’t seem too concerned about her, ambling over unhurriedly with a slow, relaxed tail-wag. She held out her paiza, the Imperial identification badge that entitled her to use government facilities, so the dog could sniff that instead of part of her body. Having recently found out about Dogmen the hard way, she’d resolved to start holding all unknown purported canines to a higher standard of etiquette.

The stableman had invited her to help herself to suutei tsai if no one was in, so she walked clockwise around the ger until she found the teapot, pausing only to poke the hanging milk-sack a few times with the provided stick. Mongolians always walked clockwise around gers. It made one mindful of Tengri. According to some acquaintances from points east, it kept the feng shui combed free of tangles. And, as a special bonus, it allowed an astounding number of people to share a surprisingly small space without bumping into each other.

She plunged the utility ladle (not to be confused with the ceremonial ladle) into the bottom of the pot to see what the surprise was. Surprises, as some children’s parents called them, could transform suutei tsai from a hot, creamy, salty restorative beverage into a meal in itself. Most often it would be millet or some other grain, toasted and cooked until tender with the tea leaves as a seasoning herb. But this time: jackpot! Dumplings.

Maybe it was time for the waystation staff to eat. She’d just take a couple…In her emotionally brittle state, the unexpected extra kindness hit her like ice water on a hot clay pot. She felt her eyes puddle up again.

“I guess Yesu isn’t back yet,” commented the stableman as he walked in a little later. “I’m Boldo, by the way.”

“Nergui,” she responded cordially. Only moments ago she’d been scrubbing the tear-tracks from her cheeks with the cuff of her official jacket in a desperate bid for presentability. Her mom had always drummed into her that she was an appallingly ugly crier. Now the world seemed like a better place altogether. Amazing what a dumpling and a dry seat in front of a warm fire could do.


“Wow, I must be popular,” she quipped as Boldo rummaged in the writing chest.

“Yes, there was a pidge,” he said, holding out a tiny scroll suitable for attaching to a pigeon’s leg. “and this,” trying in vain to seem less interested than he was as he handed over a messenger’s full-size scroll case covered in immaculate beige deer hide as soft as a baby’s behind. She decided she’d tell him what it said as long as she didn’t have to kill him afterward, and silently thanked Tengri that someone else had dealt with the pigeon. Birds. Still not part of her skill set.
The pidge was from Chagaanirvys Darga, her boss in the capital. “Received your request for medical leave. Sorry you’re not well, but WPP asks about you so don’t minge about. Get back here ASAP. We’ll take care of you.”

**WPP? Oh. World Peace Palace. That’s right, I bet Tori wants Borte’s pendant back. I wonder if the Khagan knew it was gone?**

Nergui had only been in Kara Koram for a couple days, getting processed into the agency, when she met a dazzingly dressed lady who introduced herself as “Tori” and needed help with some broken feathers on her ridiculously tall hat. Nergui, a former traveling country healer who always had a song in her heart and a sharp sewing needle hidden in her hair, had been glad to oblige. “Tori” turned out to be Empress Toregene, the Great Khan’s primary wife. What’s more, when Tori had learned about Nergui’s mission to Anatolia, she lent Nergui her late mother-in-law’s favorite everyday pendant. The hope had been that such a visible reminder of Palace favor would discourage Baiju Noyan from killing the rookie Agent in one of his random fits of violent pique.

It worked… until it didn’t.

To be absolutely fair, it was within the realm of possibility that the Noyan hadn’t intended her death. He’d simply gotten carried away with trying to stop her from trying to save his life by marrying one of his least-respected enemies. When slandering her as a slut backfired (her teenage suitor had no experience himself but by damn he wanted some) Baiju reasoned that the Turkmen would never marry one of their favorite sons to a spy and weapons smuggler. He’d been right about that. He found out the hard way, and Nergui found out the even harder way, that they executed such undesirables on sight.

Then again, she’d been sent to stop Baiju from getting carried away so much. Before she arrived, it appeared that his boots only rarely touched the ground.

**Great. So either he lost his cool, meaning I botched my mission, or I succeeded in cooling off his head and he had me killed on purpose.**

She shook her head, trying to clear it. These didn’t sound anything like her normal thoughts. As a rule, when life gave her horseshit, she dried it out and set it on fire. Perhaps she needed a distraction --- but look, there was one in her hand, in the form of that fancy-looking scroll.

Wow. The niceness of the scroll case was continued in the heavy ivory paper and meticulous, but not overly curlicued, calligraphy.

“To Khenbish’s Nerguitani,” she read aloud, “You will be honored to attend the Kashgar vs. Kabul *buzkashi* match as a guest of Chagatai Khan ---”

Boldo gasped. “Oh. My. Tengri. Are you kidding me?”

The Great Khan’s older brother Chagatai ruled the land she was traveling through. His Khanate had come with some ready-built cities, each of which could have offered him a palace full of seasoned back-stabbing courtiers, but he preferred the nomadic life. A populace made aware that the Khan could set up camp in any of its backyards the day after tomorrow was a populace that stayed on its toes. Chagatai had also overseen the building of the roads and way stations of the Yam rapid-communication network, thus becoming a living patron saint to all its employees.

That much Nergui knew. But -
“What’s *buzkashi*?” she asked.

Boldo looked at her as if she must be as thick as two short planks over a long-drop latrine. “*Buzkashi!* You know! *Kök Börü! Kupkari! Ulak tartysh!*”

The small crease between her brows persisted. Her flatly quizzical gaze was not washed by a wave of comprehension.

“Dead Goat Polo,” Boldo tried finally.

“Ohhh. Right.” Some of her dad’s friends could go on and on about Dead Goat Polo matches they’d seen. Small wonder, when the matches themselves could go on for days. It was said that of all the physical pleasures he pursued --- and he pursued *all* of them --- Chagatai Khan loved sports the most, and Dead Goat Polo most of all. “So this Kashgar vs. Kabul match ---”

“Is only the *best one of the year!* They’re bitter rivals. There’s enough money wagered to extend the Great Wall all the way to Bukhara. And guaranteed fatalities!”

“Report to the Girl Guards HQ, Almaliq, the day after the waxing half-moon ---”

“That’ll be the day after tomorrow. Easy, peasy, *salwar kameezy.* It’s not that far.”

Well, shoot, Nergui thought, *it sounds like something to write home about, but I can’t actually go, can I? The Darga’s pidge said to get back to KK soonest. I’d planned to be all the way to Behbalik, maybe past there, the day after tomorrow. If I “minge about,” as she puts it, in Almaliq for even one extra day… and from what I’ve heard, one might not be enough…*

“It says it’s from ‘Kafur al-Khadim, Court Eunuch, Journeyman Secretary,’” she said tentatively.

“Oh yeah, those guys do all the Khan’s official writing.”

“But there’s no Khan’s stamp at the bottom. So, at least following KK’s system, this wouldn’t have the force of an order.”

“You --- you're not thinking of *refusing*?”

“Oh, no, not *refusing,*” she reassured Boldo. Reputedly, of all the words in any of the languages of Greater Mongol, “no” was Chagatai’s least favorite. “Just… postponing, perhaps.”

*Great. A perfectly well-meaning, out-of-the-blue invitation to a popular event gets me stuck between the musk-ox and the mire. So… how to wiggle out gracefully?*

Nergui searched her memory for what she knew about eunuchs. They weren’t really a ‘thing’ in the Home Steppes. Human castration was either a regrettable accident or an act of summary revenge, not a career choice. Yet it seemed as if many of the royal courts to the east, south, and west had run on Eunuchs’ operating systems for centuries. *Etiquette,* she remembered. *They’re very big on propriety.*

She penned a respectful thank-you, settling on ‘Dear Secretary’ after discarding both ‘Sir’ and ‘Madam.’ Wishing sincerely but not too floridly that she could visit at another time. It all sounded wonderful but she was under orders, blah blah, couldn’t be helped. After some thought, she rummaged in her luggage and produced her only mementos of Anatolia that hadn’t been destroyed with her wagon, a set of beautifully carved wooden spoons she’d picked up on her hurried way out. As a regret-gift, they were the best she could do, but they were very nice and not necessarily easy to find around here.
That should do it. She hoped. After all, Chagatai had probably just instructed some small army of secretaries to invite any civil servants they discovered passing through. Maybe tens of people. Maybe hundreds. After all, who was she, a rookie spy from the greener parts of the Altai, one who was feeling particularly scruffy at the moment, to individually snag a Khan’s attention? Her parents and brothers had a certain measure of fame, but she was just Nobody’s daughter, No Name Girl.
Beleaguered Boss

Contents of pigeon-borne messages between Great Khan Ogedei and his older but subordinate brother Chagatai Khan over the past week:

Hey Oggy,

You know that shamanic spy chick with the magical healing hoo-hah that you snuck past me into Anatolia a month or two ago? The one who was supposed to bang the sanity back into B-man. If she’s still alive can I borrow her?

Your loyal good sport of a brother,

Tai

Dear Tai,

Really wish I could say yes. Unfortunately, the Agent in question was drowned by Turkmen shortly after completing her mission.

Sorry to disappoint,

Oggy

Dear Oggy,

Heard a rumor that the shamanic spy lady got a resurrection. On her way back can she give me one too? Every normal woman I bang just makes me crazier lately.

Tai

Dear Tai,

Perhaps you can visit her here in a few months if she agrees. She’s been through a lot and needs to be seen by experts here in KK before being assigned anywhere else. We don’t want to lose someone at her level to shaman’s madness too early by exposing her to extended unnecessary roughness. I intend to see to her recovery personally.

I’m sure you remember: When we lived with Dad, everything you borrowed from me came back stretched all out of shape. It was bad enough when it was just my sweaters.

Oggy

Dear Oggy,

That’s not fair. I’ll be really careful.
Tai

Tai!

NO.

(No signature, just the Khagan’s seal)
Demoted Memories

Woodsmoke. Old leather and battle sweat with a trace of newer blood. Broad shoulders and rangy, hard-muscled frame decorated with scars. A curtain of blue-black hair falling straight and smooth as water. Long-fingered, sword-callused hands roaming over her as if exploring a new country...

Nergui awoke, focusing on the ceiling of the way-station guest ger while she let her heartbeat and breathing return to normal of their own accord.

Vai, vai, vai, as the Turkmen might say. Ain’t this some shit?

Was that why she was so off-balance? Had she gotten attached to her target despite herself? Was she lonely now that they’d parted, probably forever?

Don’t tell me I actually miss that sick puppy....?

It has to be fallout from the resurrection. At least the biggest part does. Most people get more of a break between leaving this world and coming back to it. Plus they come back in a new body and, if they’re lucky, no memories. I didn’t have those luxuries. Stands to reason I feel ragged and my sleeping brain wanders everywhere.

After all, it had been vital to her mission that she concentrate on his --- well, “virtues” wouldn’t really be the word, would it? Because the threshold question was: are there enough redeeming qualities to be worth redeeming?

His quick and nimble mind. His hyper-awareness of everything around him. The rough, gratuitously messy manners he sometimes affected when he wanted to be underestimated; even that first night, when he led her to his tent by part of her hair wrapped around his fist, he’d held it with a casual looseness that seemed to say “Play along; let’s give ’em what they expect to see.” His air of absolute confidence and command, even when sharpening a knife or studying a map.

On the battlefield he was incandescent. He seemed surrounded by a halo of flashing steel tinged by occasional showers of blood droplets.

And if he often seemed to go out of his way to embarrass her publicly or challenge her privately, it had been her assignment to investigate, analyze, and manipulate him. That’d bother most people, never mind a conscious apex predator like him.

So if --- and she insisted on “if” --- she did miss him, it wasn’t completely unreasonable. It was all sand in the wind now. The crystally kind that glitters in the air but scratches four colors of hell out of any exposed skin. Let it fade with time. Better still, cover it up with some new memories.

That Dead Goat Polo game sounded diverting, she thought as she wrapped herself up and padded quietly out of the ger. Wish I could go.

Even in the solitude of her mind, a prudent shaman should always be careful what she wishes for.
Her business attended to, Nergui continued walking clockwise around the waystation ger to get back to the entrance and so back to bed. She kept walking. And walking. Then she stopped and looked around suspiciously.

*Granted, I’m tired as a camel’s toe after a five hour hump, but this ‘ckin’ ger Had A Door. Otherwise how did I get out?*

She looked up. The sky didn’t look quite right. Like it had been cut into pieces and stitched back together a different way. What made it most noticeable was that whoever did it hadn’t been picky enough about matching the edges of the Milky Way at the seams.

*Sure, I’ve got time for a game of silly buggers. What else have I got to do?*

She hunkered down, watched the sky twitch intermittently, and waited.

“*Assalamu alaikum, No Name Girl.*”

There was a campfire, On a log across it sat a man all in white: turban, coat, robe, hair, whiskers, eyebrows, and a big smile full of sparkling straight teeth that practically glowed in the dark. He was Sheikh ibn-i Arabi of Andalucia, one of the greatest scholars and holiest men in an Islamic world that was having a particularly good century for scholars and holy men.

“Oh,” Nergui answered so coldly the Northern Lights briefly appeared in the unreal sky. “It’s you.”

The Sheikh hesitated, measuring her mien with his shining black eyes. The Khenbīsh’s Nerguitani he’d met only weeks ago had been cheerful, brave, generous, easygoing and very self-possessed, at least when anyone was looking. This one looked pale, travel-sore, sleep-deprived, and listless. On top of that, unless he missed his guess, she was moderately pissed of at him in particular for some specific reason.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her. “I thought we were friends.”

“So did I,” she answered (the green aurora rippled overhead again). “Right up until you told Hayme Hanım to drown me.” Hayme Hanım, the widow of Suleyman Shah, was acting Bey of the Kayı tribe in Anatolia. Between her and Baiju Noyan, whose life Nergui was trying to improvise some way to save at the time, they’d transformed Hayme’s youngest son Dundar (age seventeen, going on twelve in some respects) from being Nergui’s suitor to acting as her executioner.

“I convinced them not to behead you. Remember?” When she only stared at him with a distinctly underwhelmed expression, he continued: “Drowning is the easiest kind of death to reverse. Which I see someone was kind enough, knowledgeable enough, and quick enough to do for you. On the other hand, I’ve never seen anybody brought back after a beheading. Don’t think I’d want to, either. Ugh.”

“You could have told them to let me go and just never darken their door again. Or maybe put up a ransom for my freedom; everybody knows we Mongols supposedly carry our hearts in our purses. They’d have done anything you advised. You probably could have told them to make me a birthday cake and they would have done it.”

The dervish was already shaking his head: “I didn’t think I could get them to spare you. The tribe was roused up to a pitch only a death could satisfy. If I ran afoul of that their faith might have
faltered… But look at it this way: Now that everyone saw you die, you could make a new start. Live a completely different life.”

“My bosses arranged for my resurrection. They know I’m alive. Anyway, I didn’t mind my life. And yes, I’m back now, but I feel like it really messed me up.”

“Messed you up how?” asked the Sheikh. “Just for the… furtherance of medical science, of course. There isn’t much literature about the complications of resurrection, other than Thomas of Judaea’s monograph on the persistence of stigmata.”

“Well,” Nergui relented, “It’s hard to describe precisely from the inside, but I’ll try.” Her investigative bent won out --- as the oh-so-clever Dervish had surely known it would, she grimaced inwardly --- and she swept her sulking grudge under the carpet for the time being. If her information could help other sufferers (or, now here was an idea, if it reminded the Sheikh of a case that had a cure), it was worth it. She’d never assume he was on her side again, but he was brilliant and good at putting people at their ease; there was no reason they couldn’t still have good talks.

“Ever since I came back,” she began, “I’ve been uneasy inside my skin. Like they put my soul back in the wrong body, or maybe put it in crooked. And everything’s just perceptibly… off. Sometimes things look like rippled reflections of themselves. Sounds have echoes like in a cave, but sometimes the echoes come back as much as an hour later. Smells are too strong and don’t match their sources. Intense emotions keep splashing over me like buckets of cold water, with no warning, but they don’t feel like my emotions.”

The Sheikh leaned forward, furrowing his brow. “Why do you say the emotions don’t feel like they’re yours?”

“Well, for one thing, they’re emotions I didn’t used to have very often. I’m crying so much it even bothers the horse. It’s as though almost every day is the day I found out my dad died. For another thing, I can’t point at anything external and say ‘This is why I feel this way.’ The worst thing that happened all day would be on the order of ‘I was singing while I rode and a bug flew into my mouth.’ Little ordinary things… You know, I’ve seen people get stuck halfway in or halfway out of a spirit possession; it always looks really unpleasant. I wonder if it’s anything like this.”

Ibn-i Arabi thoughtfully twirled a strand of beard. “Do you have the feeling that you’re not alone in your body?”

“Not specifically, no,” she realized. “Actually, I feel more alone in the world than I’ve ever been.” A sob and a sniffle suddenly flew out of her. “See? There it goes again,” she said disconsolately, embarrassed to cry in front of someone she respected but really didn’t trust.

Ibn-i Arabi had traveled widely in his life, all the way from his native Andalucia. He had seen girls and women who wore their tears like jewels, who wept with a quiet dignity that brought out the rescuer in everyone around them. Nergui didn’t appear to be one of those. Instead, her crying face reminded him of a naked mole-rat he’d found asleep in his water-cup one morning near Djibouti.

“Tell me more,” he said, taking care to mask his reaction.

“It’s as though I’m one of those big black crumbly rocks you get near volcanoes, and someone keeps hitting it and pieces keep falling off. Ever since I left my mom’s camp I’ve been alone more than not, and it never bothered me the way I know it does some people. It beat heck out of having someone around who constantly expressed her disappointment in me. I could always find something to learn more about. And anyway, when a shaman craves a conversation there are
always plenty of invisible folk around. When I come into a new place and the local spirits find out I can hear them, they’re like surprised chickens having a fluster-cluck: ‘Get me this’ and ‘Tell living person X that.’ I’ll do them a few good turns if I have time but then I have to shut them out before I go berserk and ether-slap them all. Now they’re staying away, as if something about me is putting them off. I feel lonely. It’s new. And it sucks.”

“Tell me, Nergui: Have you given any more thought to converting to Islam? A near-death experience ----”

“A death experience,” she corrected him. She still wasn’t letting him off that easily.

“All right, dying --- or even the immediate prospect of dying --- causes many people to rethink their belief systems. And an organized support community ---”

And there it is, like a big fish flopped in the middle of the table. “Nope; thanks be to Tengri, I’m still pagan through and through,” she said though a breezy smile that didn’t come easily.

Then a sudden thought struck her. She leaned forward, fixing him with her familiar space-flattening neutral amber stare. “Tell me, Sheikh: Am I still the only non-Muslim you ever met that didn’t immediately convert? Does that bother you? I mean, come on, you must have converted hundreds of people ----”

“Thousands.”

“Thousands, oh. Well then. So what’s one stubborn heathen? Not even a fly-size sip out of a whole pitcher of sharbat. And on top of that, I’m female, which --- “

“Affects your value in the eyes of Allah not one bit. I can show you all the places in the Quran where the Prophet intended men and women to respect one another equally.”

“Really? Wow.” Nergui nodded a few times, surprised and impressed. Then: “So-o-o… how come nobody does it then?”

Ibn-i Arabi shrugged. “Leftover regional customs from pre-Islamic days. If you think women in these countries should be treated better than they are now, you should have seen it before.”

“When we take over, that crap ends. You’ll see.”

“You think so?”

“Why not? In Mongolia, women are full-fledged people. In public and all.”

“Among the Sufis, the dervishes like myself, women are accepted. Some have even risen very high and taught famous men.”

“Too bad there’s not a whole country full of you guys then,” she sighed regretfully. “There isn’t, is there?” He shook his head. “Even if so, I still don’t get the point of separating humans from all the rest of nature, then separating the ‘lower’ aspects of the human from the ‘higher.’ All the Book people do that. We acknowledge that part of us yearns for spirituality, part is caught up in the material, and part wants to destroy everything and start over. And by ‘us’ we mean humans, animals, plants, rocks and invisible things. Because everything under the Eternal Blue Sky has a soul, so we have to be thoughtful about how we treat it.”

The envisioned sky was turning pale. A raucous clamor flapped overhead.
“Looks like the geese are migrating,” the Sheikh observed.

“I take comfort in watching things that know what they’re doing and where they’re going,” Nergui sighed, “especially at times when I don’t.

“Listen: they’re honking. Know why?

“Because they love Tengri.”
Incredibly Obvious Tail

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was daylight when Nergui strode, saddlebag over her shoulder, out to the waystation stable. Summer Cloud Sultan was bored and cranky. Nergui surmised he hadn’t slept well. An apple saved from her breakfast mollified him. She pretended it had been for him all along.

The sun was up. The geese were gone, but the high cirrus clouds made the sky look strewn with white feathers. She noticed she was feeling less shitty. Almost, dare one venture… not shitty.

Ibn-i Arabi’s parting words had been benevolent… she thought. There were cures for what ailed her, but she would not be allowed to use them and shouldn’t try. After a while she was due for a blessing; he only worried that she’d be “too clever to recognize it.” Wise man, or wise guy?

After sidling past a couple of slow caravans, she let the horse have his head on the joyfully empty road. The snowdrop-colored Azerdeli, not built for the simple 2/4 or 4/4 gait rhythms of most normal horses, was happy to shift through 5/8 and 7/8 rhythms of the Azeri, Turkish, and Armenian traditions all the way up to a thundering 9/8 karshilama that would have rattled the teeth right out of Nergui’s head if she hadn’t made a quick study of learning songs in those rhythms and moving accordingly.

Eventually, with the sun descending, they slowed down to take a breather. Nergui patted her horse’s neck affectionately and sang one of the strange songs she seemed to pick up in her sleep.

“...Out on the Silk Road midafternoon
I see sweet Altan in the daytime moon
Altan; Almaty Altan.”

(Bring it home), Summer Cloud Sultan urged. Nergui obligingly belted out to the sky:

“Well I been from Konya to Kara Korum
“Kirin Oula to Kathmandu
“I've driven ev'ry kind of beast that's ever been born
“Kept a bow ready to shoot down a bighorn
“And if you give me: Beads, hides and gold,
“Tell me what you need sold
“I’ll be willin’
“To be movin’…”

But then she straightened in her seat and craned her neck forward. “Oh no no no no…” she protested, “What the Erlik’s going on up there?”

(Don’t ask me), the horse declined. (You’re the predator with both eyes on the front of your head).
“There’s some kind of kerfuffle up by the next waystation. People with weapons milling around in the road.”

A few minutes later. “Well, it’s at least partly official. It’s some of those famous Girl Guards of Chagatai Khan’s. Twigdolls. Like, who with anything better to do would consent to run around this kind of back-of-beyond terrain in a few hand-span scraps of fur-trimmed chainmail?” She snorted derisively. The horse did the same.

Another few minutes of silent pondering. Then: “My Imp _paiza_ shows I’m a national civil servant. Eventually it should convince them to let me get on home where my boss says I have to be. That is, unless it’s one of those kinds of misery that _really_ loves company…” she trailed off.

Two hundred more heartbeats, and then she seemed to reach a decision. “You know what?” she challenged.

(“Camel… butt?”) the horse hazarded.

“Not this time, but good guess. You’ll be fluent in my bizarre patois in no time.” She scratched between his ears with pride. “But how would you feel about a little cross-country run? I don’t know if you’re comfortable in terrain like this.”

(I’ll give it a try. If I don’t like it, though, we’ll have to go through it extra fast.)

“All right then eney, meeny, miney… to the right!” Nergui clung to the saddle and reins with pure _chi_ energy, so that she could loosen her muscles without falling off. At first they kept to a moderate 7/8 run so as not to look as if they were fleeing, just… going somewhere important off the main road.

(The people at the waystation are mounting up.)

“Eh. It might have just been time for them to go. If they clear out we’ll circle back to the road.”

(And… they’re coming after us. Those mostly-naked women ride a lot better than you do)

Nergui sighed. “Everybody rides better than I do. I had a strict taboo that only just got lifted. Other than posing for that picture on Noyan’s Black Bitey, you’re the first horse I ever rode. I will work on improving, I promise.” She knew she should probably go back and see what they wanted, like the responsible civil servant she was. Twigdolls or not, the Girl Guards were Chagatai’s royal militia. Chances were she’d have a mission that took her through here again. Making friends, or at least not making enemies, would be prudent.

But something about this land, this air… made her feel reckless.

“Given everything, can you still outrun them?”

Summer Cloud Sultan let out a disdainful snort. (Does Sultan Ale-ad-din rub his magic lamp?) A brief spate of karshilama gallop and… suddenly Nergui found herself believing a horse could fly.

“Oh… my… Tengri!” she shouted, her words snatched away by the wind. “Bless your sire and dam! Are your feet even touching the ground?” It felt like sledding through fresh snow on an undulating velvet cushion. Exhilarating. Even a little… provocative.

(Does a one-legged duck swim in circles? You’re finally experiencing the speed we Azerdeli were intended to run; that’s the difference.)
“Wow! I could get used to this. What about the pursuit?”

(Long gone. Shall I slow back down so you can look for a campsite?)

She patted the side of his neck. “Eventually, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes

References
Lured Into a Trap

Nergui awoke at sunup after sleeping rough. After making sure no snakes or other irritable creatures had cuddled up to share her warmth in the night, she sat up, took a sip of water, then a sip of airag to banish any noxious miasmas absorbed by the water. As she scrubbed her teeth, she looked around with interest.

Nothing but trackless steppe surrounded her. She recognized no landmarks. She was well off the edge of all her internal maps. She might as well be somewhere outside Fort Bhumfuq in Egypt, except she’d heard that was a lot sandier. She only had an inkling of where she was, where the road was, and where KK was because she’d kept her eyes open long enough to check the stars the night before.

Nor was there any sign of life, other than a family of hares that started from a thicket when Summer Cloud Sultan leaned down to browse on the leaves. She reached for her bow, then decided she hadn’t been quick enough.

“If we go that direction, we should come across the road again right before it crosses into Ogedei’s land,” she explained to the horse after brushing him off, checking his hooves, and situating the saddle and bridle. “Up for another run, my friend?”

(Does the bird who picks flies off your back in the morning shit them back out on you in the afternoon?)

“Ohhh… do I take that as a yes?”

Nergui’s only regret was that at the Azerdeli’s optimal speed --- which was very, very fast --- her eyes watered so much that it was hard to really take in the scenery. She got a blurry impression of a few small camps dotting the middle distance here and there, but no signs of roads or towns. Once they shot right through the middle of a loose herd of cattle, but were far past them before even the widest-awake could utter a moo of protest. Their dust cloud didn’t even begin rising for about fifty yards behind them.

(I smell apples.) Summer Cloud Sultan’s thought-voice was laden with portent. Well, of course it was. Anything remotely horse-shaped was fond of apples.

“Let’s go find them.”

They were more bushes than trees, and the apples were tiny and yellow, but juicy and refreshing. Nergui ate a cautious few and put some in her bag for later as the beautiful horse had his fill.

Wow, this is my second day in a row of no crying. Maybe I’m getting back to normal.

An hour or two after resuming their journey, an odd little rectangular structure hove into view. A person’s head was visible through a hole in the middle. Nergui had heard about these but never seen one: a portable prison called a “jail-in-the-box.” Originally a Chinese invention, it was a convenient way to imprison criminals where towns were few and far between. A prisoner would be locked into a box with a head-sized hole. For the duration of the sentence, it was the responsibility of the prisoner’s family, friends, and other well-wishers to supply food and water. Its location was at the discretion of the judge; boxes for those who “really just needed to learn a lesson” were situated within sight of their clans’ camps or beside a major road, while those who really got on the judge’s wrong side were deposited in the back of beyond and their location was not publicized.
Nergui slowed her mount and looked around. The scenery was pleasant and the box got the shade of a tree for part of the day, but she couldn’t see any human structures nearby.

*Pretty place to die,* the thought came unbidden, making her slightly nauseous.

“Let’s go see,” she said brusquely.

*(Are you sure?)*

“Yes,” though really she wasn’t.

As they approached within shouting distance, the prisoner called out. “Oh my Tengri! Nergui! Is that you?”

Nergui was aghast. The voice was familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

“It’s me, Tsolmaa? From Medicine Needles class? In Xingqing?”

“Tsolmaa?” A picture crossed Nergui’s mind of a perky, cheerful fourteen-year-old from the shores of Lake Uvs who wanted to become a midwife. As two of only a handful of Mongol students passive-aggressively resented by the Western Xia locals, they’d been bound to bond.

Nergui remembered Tsolmaa as a sweet, earnest, but seldom-focused goofball who might have done better if she’d come a year or two later, or found a stretch-to-fit apprenticeship instead of a keep-up-or-drop-dead formal classroom. But a criminal? Surely not? Whose bad side could she have well-meaningly blundered onto?

“Tsolmaa, what in all of Erlik’s hells?” Nergui started in before Summer Cloud Sultan had even come to a full stop. Two teenage classmates, and now one was riding around on an Azerdeli and the other was locked in a jail-in-the-box! *Well, so much for the prospect of a whole day without crying.*

“Long story,” Tsolmaa sighed. Then she started giggling in spite of herself. “Nergui, don’t start crying! You look like one of the lake monsters from Grandma’s scary stories.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Nergui jibed, sniffling. This was weird, but as a shaman Nergui was used to weird. Weird things happened to her every day. Weird was her normal. But just happening to meet an old friend while taking a shortcut through such unfamiliar territory?

Suppressing suspicions that refused to take any coherent shape, Nergui rummaged in her bag. “Have some water and airag… and here are some fresh apples… and saddle jerky… and some firestriker cheese, but I wouldn’t advise trying to burn your way out of there.” Firestriker cheese, a Greater Mongol military staple, might just have been the most durable dairy product in the world. There were said to be curds a hundred years old that were still just as edible as the day they were made… which, taking each of the words at its face value and reading nothing more into it, was probably true. Its properties had been discovered by someone who tried slicing one apart with a steel saw after wrecking the edge of his dagger on it. Sparks had flown everywhere and burnt down his tent, but soon Mongols everywhere knew they would never have to buy a piece of flint again.

Nergui though she heard hoofbeats, but too far off in the distance to worry much about. But Tsolmaa suddenly grimaced in consternation. “Sorry, Nergui,” she blurted out, blushing and dropping her eyes.

Nergui barked an incredulous laugh. “For what?” *Honestly, if this is about one of my hair ornaments she borrowed back then -*
“Yoink!” said a powerful male voice. Nergui tried to gasp as she was hauled into the air by the back of her jacket collar, but the enormous fist had gathered so much of the material that she couldn’t breathe until she was effortlessly plopped down on a horse’s saddle, a thick forearm wrapped around her ribcage with another giant hand landing negligently (but not accidentally, she suspected) on her opposite breast with the horse’s reins looped around the pinky finger, and the collar was finally released to slacken.

“Thank you, Tsolmaa, here’s the key,” he said with an audible grin, tossing the object with unerring accuracy. “And a little extra just for you,” he continued, flinging a small, jingling deer-hide purse after it as they continued to gallop away.

“Now: Greetings, Khenbish’s Nerguitani,” the voice went on with good-natured irony. “I’m Chagatai Khan. And you, by ancient right of capture, are the newest Mrs. Chagatai Khan.”
“No Name Girl. I can’t have you wandering around without a name,” Chagatai Khan declared. “I’ll call you… let’s see…” Absent-mindedly he switched the reins to his other hand and put the first one back. Exactly where it had been. “Little Rabbit!” he exclaimed at last. “Because you were so hard to catch, but now you’re so-o-o soft to hold.”

When Nergui remained silent, Chagatai continued: “I rename a lot of my wives. Makes their names easier to remember. Sometimes easier to pronounce, too.”

“So how many other Mrs. Chagatais are there?” Nergui asked.

“Oh, four, let’s see… five hundred… Who can keep track? But as long as I remember all the faces, names, and birthdays, I don’t feel like it’s too many.”

Way to make me feel special on my wedding day, she thought. But on the other hand, if I don’t like him, my turn with him should only come up every year or two.

She sighed and leaned her head against what felt like the lower end of his sternum. He was warm and smelled good. Mostly rich black earth and air-after-lightning, with an elusive hint of wild fruit trees. Ogedei smelled nice too, in a different way. Maybe it’s one more of Tengri’s special gifts to the Borjigins.

“Hey.” His finger and thumb unerringly found her nipple through three layers of clothing and gave it a surprisingly gentle squeeze. “Still with me? Did you faint? Some of them do.”

“Nope. Still here.”

"Aren’t you going to squirm and scream and try to escape?"

"Meh. Probably not. Why? Do you need me to? I’m not familiar with bridenapping protocol." Because, for one thing, it isn’t supposed to happen anymore...

“You’re not being sneaky, are you? I’ve never been much for sneaking. First you turned down my invitation. Instead you sent me spoons! I should spank you with those spoons.” He didn’t sound angry, just bemused. “Then my Girl Guards were supposed to bring you in all friendly-like, and you ran them all over half the Khanate on that horse of yours.”

“I’m sorry. I just misread things. I wanted to accept the invitation, but I had orders from my Darga to get back to KK immediately, something about the Palace. Then when the Girl Guards chased me, I thought they were stopping everybody on the road for something that had nothing to do with me, but would still slow me down and ruffle all kinds of Agency feathers. I never imagined that you would take this kind of interest in me personally.”

His thumb on her nipple made thoughtful little circles. “You personally, Little Rabbit, brought my old friend B-Man back from the bottomless ichor-pits of a Hell spawned inside his head. Everyone expected one or both of you to end up dead, but somehow you both walked away. Why wouldn’t I be interested? And if I’d known you came with that horse, I’d have picked you up back in Anatolia, even if I had to miss a playoff game. Don’t worry about the horse, by the way. I sent a crew to catch it.”
Oh, may Tengri help them with that…. Forgive me, Khan, but The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch” --- here she used the Mongol-style description rather than the secret true name --- “really isn’t a normal horse. I’m sure your crew has excellent skills, but in the unlikely event they can’t catch him, he might follow me by himself anyway.” Maybe. Or not. She really had no idea. “But would you tell me about your horse, Khan?” She assumed the behemoth beneath them was a horse because a musk-ox would have had horns. “How did it sound so far away when it came so close to me? Some kind of spell?”

Chagatai laughed like a man who could always make as much noise as he wanted to. “Not everything is woo-woo, young shaman,” he said. “You must have seen horses with shoes in the West? The Giant Shaggy Roan has learned to run in special slippers that muffle the sound. Horses don’t like losing the feel of the ground, so they have to be trained to get used to it. This one is part of my effort to bring back the old Aranjagaan breed. The originals were said to be half-divine. Ours do seem to get smarter and braver with every generation.”

“I bet a whole troop of those surprise the shit out of the enemy.”

"That they do, Little Rabbit, that they do…. I just can’t get over it: You still don’t seem as upset as you might be. Does your shamanic training make you especially serene?"

"No, but my civil-service experience tells me when I’m in way over my pay-grade. As an Imp --- an Imperial agent --- I can risk a minor beef with local law enforcement like yesterday. That kind of copper-ante stuff happens all the time. But arguing with Khans? Forget about it. If my bosses get mad now, they can take it up with whomever.”

“I asked little Oggy first, of course. Pidged the Palace a few days ago.”

So Great Khan Ogedei had just tossed her to his rough-and-tumble brother like a doggie treat, and this was how she found out? He’d acted so considerate toward her before. Perhaps she’d lost all value now that she was Unsealed? That utterly-deserted-by-everyone feeling closed in on Nergui again. “Ah. Well, then,” was all her suddenly-dry mouth would say.

Chagatai forced his heartbeat and breathing to remain steady while he waited for her next question. When none was forthcoming, he relaxed. Bughra’s blue bollocks, he concluded, she really is young… “And you won’t even lecture me about bridenapping being illegal under the Yasa?” He changed the subject, not giving her time to start wondering about anything.

“You mean, as mandated by your father, Genghis the Great and Wise, may he ride forever in the sky? Because of what happened to your mother the year before your brother Jochi was born? Why would I, when you already know?”

“Well… for me, the Yasa is more a set of guidelines, really.”

Guidelines with a lot of death penalties for the rest of us, she thought but didn’t say.

“I’ve heard there isn’t a true sentence in any language that begins ‘Chagatai the Inevitable would never.’”

Growing up as a Sealed One, she’d been discouraged from thinking about the male of the species any more than was necessary to avoid bumping into them. As a result, she’d never envisioned her wedding day. However this one turned out, she wouldn’t be plagued by pesky comparisons. And the second most powerful man on the continent probably was a pretty good catch for a country doctor and rookie intelligence agent.
Maybe the Khagan meant him to be my doggie treat. Accurate or not, thinking of it that way makes me feel a lot better. I can also stop dreading the thought of my mom will picking out a husband for me, she reflected.

So many adventure stories ended with weddings.

Looked at another way, when you got to the wedding, it meant the adventure was over.

She’d be surprised, though, if life with Chagatai and his multitude of co-wives turned out to be dull.

“Pardon me, Khan,” she humbly inquired, “Would you like me to hold onto that scroll-case for you?”

“Scroll-case?”

“The one in your belt. It keeps poking me under the shoulder-blade.” Ow. I could swear it’s gotten bigger and lumpier since the ride started.

Chagatai leaned down until his whiskers brushed Nergui’s ear and she could hear the rakish grin in his voice. “That’s no scroll case, little one, but you’re welcome to hold onto it anyway.”

Chapter End Notes

From here, their conversation entered territory that was not safe for work, non-adults, sensitive constitutions, or pure minds. You can read it in Chapter 9 of _No Name Girl's Scrubbed Scrolls_ if you're interested and of legal age... or skip it and not miss any vital plot points.
“Cha-ga-tai! Cha-ga-tai!” people started shouting as the enormous horse walked out of a narrow canyon into a vast basin of what might have been grass before the arrival of all the horses, yaks, sheep, goats, camels, dogs, wagons, tents, stalls, and more people than Nergui had ever seen (or hoped to see) in one place.

Nergui, who had been almost dozing off in the quiet canyon, felt muscles move against her back as her giant captor waved to the adoring crowd. People surged toward them, holding forth in a dozen different languages.

“Cha-ga-tai! Cha-ga-tai!” More and more people heard and joined the chant. The people around them pressed in, trying to touch or kiss the hemline of the Khan’s robe. Nergui, recoiling from an unknown tongue sliming across her calf above her boot, drew her knees up against her chest. Besides putting her feet out of reach of (judging by the smell that several conflicting incense fugs couldn’t quite overpower) the Great Unwashed, it might also hide the Khan’s other hand which had been clamped, not painfully but quite firmly, over her breast for the entire ride.

“You all right, Little Rabbit?” he asked, noticing her sudden full-body clench.

“Could I possibly ask you to move your hand?” she wheedled without much hope.

“Of course! How should I move it: up and down or back and forth?” She let her head fall limply back against him as he guffawed heartily. Maybe he marries new wives when it’s less trouble than learning new jokes.

Suddenly the press of the crowd around them subsided. They were preceded, followed, and surrounded by spear-wielding Girl Guards holding the over-eager admirers back. Although they were dressed in the iconic sparse scraps of chainmail and fur, the mostly-male throng was giving way for them. Storytellers always described the Girl Guards as nubile, doe-eyed specimens, but these were apparent exceptions. The leaders were graying, scarred, and clearly not in the mood for any nonsense. Some of the bigger troops looked capable of sucker-punching a water buffalo. The minority of coltish striplings were scattered among their scarier sisters, practicing their glares and scowls.

A skinny boy of about twelve hopped and waved just outside the circle of spear-points, appearing to focus on Nergui rather than Chagatai. “Goose Girl! Hey, look, it’s Goose Girl!” he shrilled. Her brows came together for a moment, searching for anything that resembled meaning. Finding none, she treated her apparently mistaken young admirer to an elaborate shrug as they went past.

“CHA-GA-TAI! CHA-GA-TAI!”

There didn’t seem to be anyone in the basin that wasn’t chanting as Chagatai steered the horse toward a shallow upward-sloping pitch leading to one end of a natural rock terrace jutting out from a sheer cliff. An enormous, luxurious ger stood there on a head-high wheeled platform. Thirty horses were tied up to one hitch-line, twenty yaks to another. People in court clothing, military armor, well-kept work clothes, and Girl Guard outfits bustled everywhere. Smoke was already rising from cook-fires indoors and out.

“I’ve seen World Peace Palace. It’s very nice,” the Khan said into Nergui’s ear, pitching his voice to be heard over the mind-numbing din. “But this is more… me. If the weather’s bad, I just move the capital to where it’s better.”
Reaching the front of the huge ger, Chagatai dismounted and held his hands out for the crowd, whose chant dissolved into a wordless roar from tens of thousands of throats. He plucked Nergui out of the saddle, his hands nearly encircling her waist, and held her up to his eye level. "Here we are, Little Rabbit. Give your Big Man some jaggery," he prompted affably.

Nergui had been contemplating how to medically describe the intoxication-like effects of prolonged immersion in very loud noise. "Some… what?" she surrendered, baffled.

He looked more closely into her eyes and decided: "Ah - you’re gone, aren’t you? We’ll soon have you back with us so you can try some jaggery. It’s something sweet, my girl of the lonesome Home Steppes, something very sweet." Still holding her off the ground, he gave her a deep soul kiss that felt like it thoroughly rinsed out the inside of her skull.

When he lowered her back to the ground she kept a grip on his wrists in case her legs wouldn’t hold her and got her first good look at him. Shaggy and craggy, but in a good way, she decided.

On him, the striking red-gold-black hair of the Borjigins was thick, wavy, and lightly frosted with silver; it blazed in the slanting late-afternoon light. The large bones of his face looked like they could take a battering, and that they had on several occasions. A blade scar ran diagonally through one of the heavy eyebrows. His hair was collar-length and his beard about three inches long and neither looked recently trimmed, but on him it worked to have the ends curl this way and that. His thundercloud-gray eyes were presently good-humored and indulgent, but something about the lines around them hinted at a flat-and-merciless option that was always within reach.

"Where’s Red Panda?" he called over his shoulder, looking around.

"Here, Tai-denka," said a voice at his side.

Chagatai shook his head. "How do you always do that? This is Little Rabbit, the new wife. I bridenapped her several hours ago. Now she looks like she’s been ridden hard and put away wet, and I’m not even planning to do that until after the game. Set her up with a dress and a ring and all that; you know the drill. Thanks, dear; that’s my Mrs. Congeniality!"

Nergui wasn’t tall even for a Mongolian, but Red Panda was a full head shorter and quite streamlined. Red Panda bowed, so Nergui bowed back and close to the same way as she could manage. Nergui suppressed the scandalized urge to demand "How the hell old are you?" and instead offered, "I also go by ‘Nergui.’"

"This one is pleased to meet you, Nergui-san. This one also goes by ‘Retsuko’. Welcome to the Wives of Chagatai. Please come in. Would you like tea?" Her voice was like delicate silver chimes rung by a playful breeze.

Actually, what I’d really like is half a bottle of vodka, but ---. “I’d love some, thank you very much.” The inside of the enormous tent was sumptuous with embroidered hanging partitions and carved, lacquered fittings. Red Panda filled and proffered what seemed to Nergui a laughably small cup; certainly too small to need holding in both hands. Nergui was so thirsty she plucked it away with a grateful smile and knocked it back before fully noticing how much steam was coming out. The liquid wasn’t just drinking-hot; it was scalding! Blistering! Was this some kind of cruel new-wife hazing? In acute pain but determined to do Mongolia proud, she compressed her scream into a growl and wrestled the growl, two falls out of three, into a prolonged throat-clearing.

"Whoops! Too late! I see she got you," said another voice from the doorway. Not only the accent, but the depth of apathy behind the concerned-sounding words identified the speaker as a Khongi --
- one of the legendary consorts from Khongirad, trained from birth to please royalty or, if unusually imperfect, at least nobility. “‘Little Rabbit.’ Hm. Not what I pictured. But I suppose having a magical healing hoo-ha makes up for a lot.”

*Oh, go bite a pinecone,* Nergui felt like saying, but was still panting to soothe her scorched palate. She’d met a retired Khongi back at Dower House Five. They didn’t get more sympathetic with age.

“There you are!” burst in a bald, beardless man in an dizzyingly patterned brocade robe. “Is that the bride? Why is she still covered with road dust? You can give her the Nihon Tea Torture later. Right now she needs hot water on the outside of her body. I can’t say this enough: first you bathe them, then you bring them. The tub’s all ready out back. Scoot! Scoot!”

“Yes, Kafur-sama, right away.” Red Panda snapped to attention. “Blue Heron-san, would it be all right if I asked you to measure her first? Then I can send for the ring and the dress while she soaks.”

The hairless man was shouting again. “Chang-er? Chang-er! Is the ink on that paperwork dry yet?”

“Paperwork. Pfui,” the Khongi sneered under her breath.

“I heard that, Blue Heron,” Kafur snapped. “One day you stubborn Mongols will learn: if it wasn’t written down, it didn’t happen! If, in a few scant centuries, people know nothing about your Empire except what they imagine or what your enemies wrote down, it’ll be no fault of mine.” And he bustled away.

“Oh, who listens to someone who cut his junk off on purpose?” Blue Heron produced a ball of string and motioned to Nergui, “All right, off with it. Everything off.” A chilly draft presented itself as Blue Heron measured Nergui’s every bodily dimension, including her ring finger. Then Red Panda presented her with a towel and led her away.

The air out behind the ger was cooling with the approaching sunset. The bathwater was still a bit too hot, but Nergui drew the heat through her body, drawing on the affinity with copper she’d developed while earning her set of copper shaman’s mirrors. As long as a temperature difference wasn’t as extreme and surprising as the tea had been, she could manage. The water had fragrant oils and bubbly soap. “I’ll wash your hair so we can get done faster,” Red Panda offered.

“You really are nice,” Nergui’s voice broke a little. Any little kindness after a long difficult time always got to her.

“It’s because I come from Nihon, where the sun rises, out past the Eastern Sea,” she explained. “It’s the most well-mannered nation on earth.”

“Mmm, sounds fantastic.”

“Everyone there is nice all the time.”

“Wow.” Nergui relaxed under the bubbles and lost herself in the view. Between the cliff wall and the ger wall, a narrow but breathtaking vista of meadows and hills and snowy peaks in the distance.

“Because if they’re not,” Red Panda continued in the same soft, sweet voice, “we cut their who-o-ole family’s heads off.”

“Mmm… wait… what?”
“Who’s that?” Nergui asked, gesturing at a nervous-looking young woman sitting across the vanity table from her. Through the hole in the partition, she could see that the vaguely familiar stranger sat in a connecting room very much like the one they were in.

Red Panda smiled and leaned in. Someone who looked exactly like Red Panda did the same thing in the other room. Just as Nergui caught on, she and her counterpart both nodding and smiling gratefully, Blue Heron broke in:

“It’s you, Taiga bunny. That’s a mirror.”

I’d already clued New Girl in. In a way that let her save face, you condescending pig-snout, Red Panda thought as her smile never wavered.

“Wow,” Nergui marveled, ignoring the slight. “I’ve never seen a reflection this bright and flat. Gods, do I really look like such a Bankhar’s breakfast?” Was her skin really so weathered? Her hair so unruly? Her eyebrows so caterpillar-like?

“That’s because it’s HD,” Blue Heron curled her lip. “It takes some getting used to.”

“‘HD’?”

“Han Dynasty. It’s made of polished glass backed with speculum alloy. Lets you see everything, which includes every little flaw.”

“I’ll say. I’m used to looking in water, or the side of a blade, or a smooth piece of stone.” Not her shamanic mirrors; you never knew what would look back at you from one of those things.

“All we Khongirad consorts train with HD mirrors,” Blue Heron said loftily, “but this is one of the only nomad camps in Greater Mongol that has one. They don’t travel well at all. They’re very breakable, and if you do break one it brings seven years of bad luck.”

“Gazar Eej! Sounds like way more trouble than it’s worth.” She wondered if she could put a spell on a more durable reflector to crank up its performance. Then again, she’d never worried much about her appearance before and wasn’t overly keen to start now.

“Welcome to harem life, feral child. In the name of beauty, everything is worth the trouble.”

“Let’s get you ready for the wedding, shall we?” Red Panda twinkled, seeing the first penumbra of serious doubt pass across Nergui’s amber eyes.

“We’ll see what, if anything, we can do with that face and hair,” Blue Heron said in a voice of no hope whatsoever. “Show her... the instruments .”

Red Panda whisked the cover off a tray, exposing a variety of scary-looking metal tools of indeterminate purpose as well as pigments in powder, stick, and liquid form. She could sense that Nergui seriously wanted to run for it and Blue Heron seriously wanted to see Nergui dragged back in, struggling and humiliated, by the Girl Guards.

Not on my watch, bitches, she thought.

“This is all new for you, Little Rabbit, but this part is actually sort of fun,” was what she said out
loud. “I’ll send for some drinks so we can all relax.”

“Not more tea,” Blue Heron chimed in. “Nihonji might be nice people, but their ideas about tea are just weird. No milk, no salt, no millet or dumplings or anything. Just something to make it slightly light green or slightly light brown. Then to hide the fact that it has no flavor they heat it up to the temperature of a branding iron.”

“Ah-hee-hee-hee,” Red Panda giggled cutely, but with just a barely-perceptible harmonic of strain. That monologue gets more amusing every time I hear it… YOU think.

“No, I was thinking we should sample the soma. Make sure it’s all right for the banquet. That would be more… relaxing.”

“Well, aren’t you the hostess with the mostest?” Blue Heron commented with enough irony to attract magnets.

“And aren’t you just as sweet as moles’ asses?” Red Panda gushed.

“It’s pronounced ‘molasses,’ silly.”

I know what I said. Skank.

“Soma? What is that?” Nergui interrupted, seeming not to notice the crossfire. “Will it compromise my focus and perception of reality in any way?”

“That is… kind of what it’s for,” Red Panda explained gently.


Twenty minutes later all three women were smiling and no one had said anything for a while.

Then Kafur bustled in, with Chang-er swept along in his slipstream. “Isn’t she even dressed yet? What have you been doing?”

“Our very best,” Red Panda beamed while thinking Fine until you got here, you red-assed onsen monkey.

“And who told you to use beeswax candle stubs around the mirror?”

“It’s our usual lighting for wedding make-up.”

“Beeswax is for daylight special occasions. This is a torchlight wedding! Tallow replicates the dark red smokey glow. Chang-er, go get tallow stubs and change them out.”

As the young eunuch left, two Girl Guards came in. One was Tsolmaa, who’d been the bait in the Khan’s trap.

“Hi, Nergui,” Tsolmaa greeted her nervously. “I hope you’re not mad at me. Are you? Mad at me?”

“Oh, no,” Nergui assured her somewhat dreamily, taking another sip from a cup made out of some kind of pottery that glittered. “I’m at peace with the whole universe.”

The other Girl Guard gave a hard shove to Nergui’s shoulder, causing the kohl Red Panda was applying to Nergui’s eyelid to streak across her face. “I owe you an ass-kicking,” the newcomer announced accusingly.

Not less of one than I owe you, fitness wench, Red Panda thought.
Nergui blinked slowly, like a *manul* taking a break between naps. Convinced that she’d never met this person before in her life, she settled on “Tell me more.”

“I got demoted because I couldn’t catch you yesterday! I’m the best rider in my *arban*, but you were riding that --- was that thing even a *horse*?”

“Yes,” Nergui said, “and no.” Then, after further attempts at thought, “And maybe.” She settled back and motioned to Red Panda to go ahead and repair the kohl streak. “Three things. One: I apologize. I did not think I would make that much trouble for you. I was just under orders to hurry home. Two…” she looked carefully to make sure she was holding up the right number of fingers, “It wasn’t your fault. My horse even complimented your riding. He’s not exactly normal. By now the Khan’s crew will have also failed to catch him. I can use that to plead your case. Three: If you still want a fight, I’m game. We can schedule something after the honeymoon.”

“Can you fight?”

“Not like a professional. I’ve just had a little on-the-job training. Shouldn’t give you any trouble.”

“Well, I just want you to know I like to fight dirty. Anything goes.”

Only Red Panda was sufficiently socially aware to detect, much less interpret, the series of muted expressions that ran across Nergui’s face like fawns from a forest fire. “Anything…? All right, then... I can do… ‘anything.’”

The two Girl Guards left and Kafur burst back in. “Oh, did you hear about Baiju Noyan?”

Nergui, who had settled back down to blissful stillness, jumped involuntarily. This time it was the lip-rouge that ended up streaked across her face. “Tell me he’s not *here*?!"

“Oh, no. He loves a good bloody buzkashi match --- in fact, he and the Khan used to play each other a lot --- but he’s far too busy. We just got pidged that he took over Nicaea today. Walked into the capital with less than a hundred dead. Once he wipes up Trebizond, he’ll get a province for sure. Provincial governors get more fanny than a six-armed punkah-wallah.”

“Oh. That’s nice for him,” Nergui murmured without inflection as Red Panda gritted her teeth and wet another cleansing cloth.

“Nice for *him*? Nice for *you*. You’re the one who got him back on-form. Some even say better than before, He should put up a statue of you.”

Nergui murmured something under her breath that sounded to Red Panda like “He’d just kill it” before taking another deep drink of soma.

Red Panda quietly left the room. Blue Heron, who’d sipped her soma in silence until then, said a little sloppily “Who left the salt out of *her* tea?”

Chang-Er came in clutching a parchment to his chest. “Will you sign your picture?” he asked shyly.

“My picture? What?”

“This is you, right? You’re Goose Girl.”

“Goose Girl?” That cryptic epithet again. “Let me see that.”
It appeared to be an ink drawing of a woman with an acutely surprised expression. Next to it was written, in Uighur script, “Goose Girl Has an Arban.”

Nergui held it up next to her face and looked in the mirror. She couldn’t conclusively say it wasn’t her… but where had it come from? And why did this kid have it? It certainly wasn’t a bridal portrait.

“Where did you get this?”

“My sister works in Bird Services in the Almalik Yam station. She says all the B.S. interns in KK were putting up copies of it, so she wanted to do it here too.”

Kafur was fussing at her to get into the dress, so she scribbled her signature on the parchment and turned away. She told herself to look into it when she got back to KK. Then it occurred to her to wonder when she was going back to KK. Getting married might make “never” a distinct possibility.

Her lifelong philosophy of “I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it” didn’t seem to have a contingency plan for “what if it’s already on fire?”

At some unknown distance, Nergui only barely heard the singing. It was like none she’d ever heard before; the closest was a pair of very angry leopards fighting.


Inran’na onanī

Inran’na onanī

Anata wa itsutsu no gengo o yomimasuga,

heya o yomu koto wa dekimasen


Kajōna otto

Kajōna otto

Anata wa watashi o tantō matawa kekkonshiki ni iremasu,

Soshite,

Anata wa kekkon suru no o kesshite yamemasen

Itsumo ikutsu ka no kusoatarashī on’nanoko

Kusoatarashī on’nanoko wa tegakari ga nai

In the castle courtyard of Nicaea, a crowd of terrified women wept, wrung their hands, and debated suicide. Five rows of black-armored Mongol soldiers surrounded them, and there were more in the palace and the rest of their city. Many had no idea whether their husbands, fathers, or brothers had survived the battle, but they knew the city had fallen and no help would come from that direction.

They’d all heard stories of the degenerate pagan Mongols and their insanely sadistic general, Baiju Noyan. They knew they were doomed to a fate worse than death (though they’d never actually met anyone with a first-hand basis for comparison. The one person who’d been through both experiences and was still capable of talking about it was at that moment, not quite coincidentally, being dressed for her wedding in the far-off Chagatai Khanate).

A quartet of palace trumpeters, all looking as though they were either about to wet their pants or had already done so, emerged onto the balcony and blew a somewhat scattered fanfare. The Noyan and a lesser officer stepped to the railing and removed their helmets. The officer had an elaborate braided coiffure set off by shaved patches. The Noyan’s long straight hair, whiskers, eyebrows and eyes were the almost iridescent blue-black of liquid pitch, his skin browned by the sun. From so far below it was difficult to estimate his height, but he loomed as only a tall man normally could. He looked out at the huddled, tearful assembly and scowled. It was a frightful scowl, a promise of pain to come.

“You all right, Noyan?” Tangut, the shorter officer, asked without moving his lips.

“Caught a good whack to the helmet from one of the knights’ damned broadswords a couple of hours ago,” his commander replied in the same fashion. “I think it set off a migraine and as far as I know we’re out of bhang tea. Let’s get this over with.”

“For what it’s worth, the Khagan’s going to be really proud of you,” Tangut reassured him. “You hardly killed anybody today.”

“Maybe this stinking headache wouldn’t be so bad if I had.” He had his shaman’s drum, but the thought of beating it in his present condition held no appeal. “Captive women of Nicaea!” he made himself shout.

“Troops!” the Noyan declaimed. “Take a good look. These, and only these, will be your party dates for tonight. I know you’re all excited, but remember that if you break them you won’t be able to...
play with them any more. You’ll pay them their regular rate ---”

There was a suppressed but audible grumbling among the ranks. Less than three months ago the Noyan would have ordered the Dargas to slice the grumblers a new smile. Instead Tangut, barked out "You-just-plundered-their-town-you-unwashed-taints-you-can-afford-it! Be sure to tip if the service is good; you might be stationed here again someday.”

“And, hatuns,” The Noyan went on, “some of our troops may be looking for wives. Their pay is decent, the bonuses can’t be matched anywhere, and we are becoming” --- here he couldn’t suppress a sigh --- “a family-friendly army.” His voice stayed neutral, but his eyebrows independently expressed some skepticism.

"Excuse me?" shouted one of the women who’d tunneled all the way to the back row. "Is it too late to change careers?" At this the ranks broke into good-natured chuckling.

"One last thing!" the Noyan bellowed with what was left of his tolerance. "Any and all nymphomaniacs in the crowd?" He beckoned imperiously. “With me.”

Chapter End Notes

Historical Note: Some mainstream historical sources say the Mongols weren't really a threat to Nicaea until the 1260s and didn't take eastern and central Anatolia until 1255. However, they squished the Seljuks at Kose Dag in 1243 after a campaign that purportedly started in 1241. Since their objective had always been to extend the Silk Road and Mongol jurisdiction to Constantinople, their activities may have started even earlier and approach the timeline in Dirilis: Ertugrul where Noyan shows up sometime in the 1230s.

In the Dirilis:Ertugrul universe, the Mongols found the Turkmen a tough nut to crack, but the Turkmen trounced the Christian knights of the Byzantine Empire every time they met. Given that, Ogedei and Baiju probably would have gone after Nicaea and Trebizond as lower-hanging fruit that would leave the Turkmen's Seljuk state hemmed in on both sides.

Repeat to yourself "It's just historical fantasy, I should really just relax."
“What-up-a-yak’s-ass is going on out there?” Nergui demanded, so surprised and bewildered that she cast her manners to the four winds.

_That’s it! I’ve decided, Red Panda thought. Next life, I’m coming back Mongolian._

The doors of Chagatai’s enormous wheeled ger had been thrown open wide. Drums had thundered for attention. Nergui wondered whether the apparently secular drummers had any clue whether, on shamans’ drums, that same beat would summon Hu Flung-Pu, the fire deities’ immortal Collector of Dried-Dung Fuel.

Clean, fragrant, and only a little drunk, festooned with red-and-gold bridal finery under a sheer and shimmering red silk veil that reached the floor, Nergui’s posture was perfect as she airily descended the stairs from the doorway to the deck. This was partly because if being Chagatai’s bride was to be her lot, she was determined to be a good one, but also partly because her gown was made of a shiny silk so slippery it kept threatening to fall off.

Since it had gotten dark while she’d been getting ready, such gracefulness would not have been possible without the murmured guidance of her train-bearers (except for those of Blue Heron, which Nergui assumed were meant to pitch her headlong down the stairs or land her foot in something repulsive, and therefore ignored).

Chagatai Khan sat on a him-sized divan draped with exotic skins, wearing his dress armor under a royalty-only wolfskin cloak. Six other men in fancy chairs flanked him. His expression was ecstatic. However, he was not watching his bride’s entrance, but looking up at the sky. Between his thighs knelt a dark-skinned young woman with the taut back muscles a dancer, wrapped in colorful cotton that left one shoulder and arm bare, nodding her head repeatedly. Whatever the question had been, her answer was yes. Three other young women stood in a neat line behind her, ready to concur at the first opportunity.

“It’s not what you think,” Kafur whispered hurriedly.

“Really? Because I think my bridegroom is receiving fellatio from another woman right when our wedding is supposed to start.” _This is supposed to be my day, _something whined in Nergui’s head. _Where had that baseless and supremely unhelpful notion come from?_ she thought. Just like every other day, this was everyone’s day. Her day. The Khan’s day too, but he’s been married so many hundreds of times it’s probably no more special to him than laundry day. Her dressers’ day. Her horse’s day, wherever he might be. The buzkashi riders had a claim to the day, too. Since this was a championship match, their claim might be stronger than hers. And it’s those chicken-heads’ day too, whoever they are. Unbidden, her face crumpled behind the veil. Tears stung her eyes while her sinuses prepared to pour forth a river of snot that would dwarf the flooding of the Syr Darya.

Red Panda’s social hypersensitivity picked up on the impending disaster instantly. “No no no no, Little Rabbit! Breathe! Be strong! Don’t wreck my makeup artwork!” she said, making outward gestures of placation while inwardly she roared “KHAAAAAN!”

“It’s the Shiva worshippers,” Kafur whispered urgently. “Shiva the Destroyer is the primary god of masculinity in parts of this Khanate. His temples have a lingam stone, representing Shiva’s
generative organ, as the central focus. Many of the Khan’s subjects consider him an avatar or incarnation of Shiva. They were the same about Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky. You sometimes hear people say their bodies are temples? Well, the Khan’s literally is one. They’re praying to Shiva, through Chagatai. It’s nothing personal at all.”

“And our holy Tengri welcomes all religions under his Eternal Blue Sky,” Blue Heron put in, “so our magnanimous Tai Khan wouldn’t feel right turning them away, even if their timing is a little... tacky.”

Nergui gritted her teeth and took a long, shaky breath. This just… is whatever it is, she told herself. The people who know him better say this has nothing to do with me. Suppose they’re right.

Getting her all bathed and painted gift-wrapped had taken quite a while, she reasoned. He’s Khan, for Tengri’s sake. Why shouldn’t he get a little “lip service” from a devoted subject while he waits? Or maybe he needs soothing because he isn’t immune to wedding jitters even after all the dam practice he’s had. She’d heard it was the one time in the marriage when the man’s feet were colder than the woman’s.

Her eyes stung with her first reaction: humiliation. She screwed them shut to hold in the tears. Yes, it would feel good at the moment to yell or throw something at him. But then what would he do? He’d been jovial and indulgent all day, but he hadn’t gotten to rule this huge land --- a harsh land, full of legendary warriors --- just by throwing the best parties. It stood to reason that he must have other possible moods, other sides to his personality. Insulting him in front of this crowd would probably bring down a wrath she wasn’t up to handling.

Ogedei Khagan, why did you bless this mess? If I wasn’t sworn to obey you until death, We Would Have Words about this. Although, come to think of it, I was killed in Anatolia so technically...

Maybe she could get it to rain; if everybody was soaked, it wouldn’t show if she cried. She didn’t have much control over that skill set in the solid world, though.

She supposed she could try leaving, but after he’d gone to the trouble to bridenap her she doubted she’d get very far, unless...

Summer Cloud Sultan? Are you out there?

Nothing. How long did their link stretch? No telling.

The crowd down there was packed nuts-to-butts for what looked like acres and acres. The Azerdeli wouldn’t have any compunction about “putting the hoof in” on anything animate or inanimate that got in his way. In fact, putting the hoof in was right up there with apples, rubdowns, galloping at top speed, and (probably) mounting mares on the list of his favorite pastimes.

There’d be a lot of maimed bystanders. In a part of the world that’s very, very big on revenge. And then what? Go back to KK and explain this to everybody? All the way up to Great Khan Ogedei? That would just be trading embarrassment now for even more embarrassment later.

No, fight and flight were both shitty ideas. She would lose either way.

Mongols don’t lose. Time to Mongol up.

And do what, exactly?

Well, they’ve made this time to pray to Shiva. Among other things, I’m a visiting cleric. Let’s get out the hymnbooks and see if we can bring the lightning.
Chagatai’s experience with the unnamed Shiva worshipper is described in more detail in Chapter 10 of “No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls.” It’s not essential to the plot, so there’s no penalty for skipping it if it’s not your bowl of tea.

References
"Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan” film directed by Nicholas Meyer
(If you were waiting for that shoe to drop, now it has.)
So determined was Nergui to rise above her initial irritation that she discovered, as the last few lines in a resonated Three Voice died away, that she’d sung herself right out of her body and literally risen above the entire scene. Chagatai Khan, his face flushed and his posture half-melted, had his face upward toward her but wouldn’t have seen her even if his eyes had been open, which they weren’t. Her own body still stood on the platform steps, perfectly still, as much a nucleus of the situation as if her shimmering red veil had been the only object of color in a scene of browns and grays. The other very bright and highly structured aura, belonging to a senior Shiva priestess standing in the wings, displayed mixed emotions much like Nergui’s own: inclined to be annoyed at the upstaging of her protegee, but since Nergui’s performance had in essence been cheering the young acolyte on, she didn’t feel fully entitled to complain.

The crowd had gone silent, at least by buzkashi-match standards. Now they erupted in shouts of “Om Namah! Shiva Shankara!” This was notable because a goodly portion of them were from other religions and wouldn’t have recognized Lord Shiva if he’d set up a sharbat stand outside their encampments.

Abruptly the Khan gathered himself and stood, causing the girl still kneeling in front of him to tumble onto her back like a beetle. The senior priestess seemed inclined to stay where she was, or at least hesitant to act immediately. Nergui’s medical instincts activated instantly; before she knew how she got there, she was back in her body, down the steps, and across the terrace leaving a wake of floundering functionaries. “Kid! Hey! Kiddo. You all right?” At a glance of her second sight, Nergui saw the young acolyte had tried to absorb too much *yang* too quickly. *Erlik,* she thought, *was that because my singing amped him up? Tried to direct it all into the cranial pump, too, no wonder. Better open up another gate.* She turned the patient belly-down, although the small body stayed rolled up in a ball, and pump-slapped her first at the *ta chui* and then at the *chi chung*. The girl coughed a couple of times, then drew in a rasping breath. “That’s good,” Nergui told her. “Inhale, exhale, repeat. Do a hundred Microcosmic Orbits and see me tomorrow afternoon.”

“I can take it from here,” said a dry voice. The stricken girl’s teacher had apparently bestirred herself and come over. “Don’t you have a wedding right now?”

Nergui straightened up and looked around. The two eunuchs were trying to keep her veil from going askew and either exposing her prematurely or tripping her up. The Khan towered nearby, one eyebrow quirked dubiously.

*OOhhh,* she thought acerbically. *Far be it from me to leave my betrothed standing around like a stone turtle waiting for our wedding to start! But she darted up to him, bowed contritely, and said: “Please forgive me, Khan.”*

Chagatai the Inevitable gave her a long, unreadable look. Then he looked over at the acolyte, now upright and walking as her teacher hustled her away. Then his forehead smoothed out and he nodded and took his bride’s hand.
“Friends!” he thundered, and the crowd fell so silent that the horses’ fussing and the fires’ crackling were the loudest audible sounds. “This match is taking place on a most auspicious day! I mark it by marrying a new wife!” He scooped Nergui up and sat her on his shoulder as if she weighed no more than a cat. “This is Keshdim Khenbish’s Nerguitani. She will be known as Little Rabbit. With this ring, I her wed.” He took her hand and slid a ring onto her finger.

It fit perfectly, Nergui noticed, then surmised that he probably kept a whole range of sizes around for whenever the felt like getting married.

“...so all the rest of you, paws off unless I say differently…”

Wait, what?

"And what about you, my dear? Would you like to say a few inspirational words to these brave riders, tell them what brings us here today?"

Huh? Nergui, torn between deciphering that “unless I say differently” and trying to hold her skirt down against the wind, hadn’t seen that one coming. She froze like a mammoth in a glacier.

But then her clerical training kicked in. As her father had taught her, she stalled while pretending not to, giving inspiration a chance to burst forth... if it was going to. She cleared her throat. She took a deep breath. She started speaking very slowly: "Because... we..."

And there it was. The sheep’s-ankle bones thrown by her fate landed in the Sign of Salvation. She suddenly recalled something good that she’d said to Gundogdu Bey one long, rainy night when they’d shared a discreet pot of bhang tea from opposite sides of a caravanserai wall. "Because... we want to be free!” she projected with sudden confidence.

Thunderous applause.

"We want to be free to do what we want!” she shouted after the tumult crested and began to die down.

The pandemonium shot back up to an even higher pitch.

"We want to be free to ride our animals without being hassled by The Man!” An even bigger frenzy of noise, into which she suddenly thought, Oops... Uh-oh. Well, if I wrap it up quick...

"Tengri bless Chagatai’s Khanate! And Tengri bless Greater Mongol!” As she’d expected, that was a winner. repeated and echoed throughout the crowd until they were all chanting, "Tengri bless Chagatai’s Khanate! Tengri bless Greater Mongol!"

Set back on her feet on the terrace again, she looked up at Chagatai with a worried expression.

"Sorry, Khan," she began, turning to him shamefacedly. "That didn't come out quite right. I didn’t think it all the way through ---"

"You call me Tai now, Mrs. Khan," he replied, tracing her jawline with a surprisingly light touch, "and it was perfect."

"But... haven’t you become The Man here?"

“That’s my gift from Tengri, Little Rabbit,” he said, sliding a hand down to her waist and pulling her to him. “I’m not lofty like Josh, may he ride forever in the sky, or smooth like Oggy. But all my rough edges suit this place perfectly. I’m their Khan and they obey me; they’ll bleed and kill and die for me. The settled cities’ leaders are The Man. I mostly leave them to whatever it is they do,
as long as they don’t embezzle too much. Me, with my ger and my herds and my games and my big battered hands always ready to get dirty or bloody? I’m still not The Man and I never will be. I dream that the bold and the bellicose of these lands will still miss me a thousand years from now.” He led her to his ornate divan and sat her on his knee. “But before I get all wrapped up in this match, lift up your veil for me.”

She turned toward him and did so. She had always considered herself okay-looking as long as she didn’t cry. She privately admitted she could look striking on a good day. But she didn’t know, as a scant handful of others did, that in the right sort of light from exactly the right angle she was skull-bashingly beautiful.

She lifted up her veil. And was illuminated by the right sort of light from exactly the right angle.

The Khan looked bewildered at first, as if she hadn’t been the person he expected, Then a slow, approving smile began to grow as he moved his eyes from her hairline to her chin and downward…but then caught on something that sparkled like a fallen star. A blazing red stone inlaid in rock crystal.

“That pendant,” he said, “Where did you...?”

“Tori --- I mean, Empress Toregene --- arranged for me to borrow it to wear on my mission to Anatolia. Her note said it belonged to Empress Bortë, may she ride forever in the sky. That Baiju would recognize it, and maybe the memories would make him behave himself a little better.”

“It must have worked. He’s racking up the conquests again. You’re still here.”

“Only by the grace of the Expedient Resurrection Team. I --- I really don’t want to take this pendant off until I can give it back, because I’m scared stiff of losing it. It won’t be weird, will it? Reminding you of your mom when...”

The Khan laughed and threw the edge of his cloak around her shoulders. “Imagine you worrying about that! Of all the Borjigin brothers, I’m the one with no imagination at all. I don’t mind much; it helps with the fearlessness. I have a whole retinue to worry about what this implies or that suggests. You only need to keep making me smile.” He tapped a fingertip lightly on her nose, lifted her off his lap and sat her down beside him, shrugged out of his cloak, and stood up. “Now, where’s that goat?”

Chapter End Notes

References

“He Shiva Shankara” song by Nina Hagen
"The Wild Angels" film by Roger Corman
Beastly Blood Sport

Buoyed up by deafening cheers, Chagatai Khan swung the buzkashi goat in circles over his head. The goat, deprived of its own head, dressed-out, and soaked in very cold water overnight, was long past objecting.

“Riderrrs,” he bellowed as he flung it over the playing field, “Get! Your! Goat!!!!” The massive crowd’s cheering got even louder. Sand trickled from small crevices in the massif that rose behind the natural terrace where the Khan’s ger stood and all the important people were seated. A few fist-size rocks fell from the edge of the terrace, fifteen feet down to the level of the buzkashi riders’ mêlée.

From the Khan’s massive hide-covered divan, three of the Khan’s wives watched with interest. There was Blue Heron, the Khongirad consort, because everyone who was anyone had at least one Khongi, and Great Khan Ogedei’s big brother was certainly someone. There was Red Panda, the young noblewoman from Nihon across the ocean where everyone was always nice --- or else. And there was Little Rabbit, inexplicably called Goose Girl by certain young people, bridenapped that very morning and solemnized with veil and ring only minutes ago. Chagatai had slid her off his lap and left her wrapped in his luxuriant wolf-skin cloak. Which was fortunate, because otherwise, she could have caught a nasty chill in the scrap of slippery silk they’d given her as a dress.

At first, the knot of riders that converged on the goat seemed to get locked together so tightly that none of them could move. Clouds of dust rose around the perimeter as the horses fought for traction. Riders roared and howled and shrieked, drowning out any crackings of knees and elbows, excitement and anger and pain indistinguishable from each other.

Then another competing uproar approached from one side. Spectators were being shoved and kicked and trampled, which was normal, but by something other than the buzkashi riders and their mounts, which was unusual. The center of this disturbance seemed much smaller than the approved imbroglio, but seemed determined to be more vigorous.

Just as the Khan, intent on the riders’ scrum, turned to see what dared to distract him and his subjects, a blazing white streak broke through the front rows of spectators, rushed downfield, and collided with the deadlocked riders and their horses, scattering them like… well, imagine if there was a game where you aimed something white at a bunch of similar things that were all different colors, and they scattered all over the place, Little Rabbit thought. The white streak resolved into a magnificent riderless horse that burst out of the donnybrook with the scruff of the goat’s neck clenched in its teeth. It ran another fifty yards, then dropped the goat and shook its head.

Inside her brain, Little Rabbit distinctly heard a familiar voice say:

(Pfui! Ew. Why is everybody after this disgusting thing? I don’t get this at all.)

And the horse became a white streak again and burrowed through the spectators toward the exit canyon.

“Blisterring bloody boils on a bear’s bollocks!” Chagatai raged like an ignited barrel of firemix, his face almost purple with choler. He wheeled to face Little Rabbit with a foot-stomp that shook loose more sand from the cliff face. “Woman!” he demanded in a voice that gave no quarter. “Was that your gods-damned horse?”

She’d been laughing irrepressibly at the sight, but seeing the look on the Khan’s face moved her to
repress is as quickly as she could. “Um… maybe?” she hedged. After all, it was debatable (1) whether there might be more than one Azerdeli stallion running loose in the area that, as a descendant of the celebrated talking horse Eid Efendi, formed thoughts as human words, (2) whether his pledge that she would be his “Burden” meant that he, in turn, belonged to her in some sense, and (3) whether Azerdelis, descendants of a wish granted by a Djinn, even qualified, in the strictest sense, as horses.

“And you think this is funny? Do you?”

The Khan had had to trick her into dismounting to catch her. So far, no one had been able to catch Summer Cloud Sultan, aka The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch. By all reports, some of the best racers in the Khanate had been going all round Jelme’s hitching-line after the stubborn stallion, and now here he came and crashed the match! She thought it was chicken-plucking hilarious … but seeing Chagatai’s prodigious knuckles whiten on the handle of his dagger, she quailed. So far this wouldn’t have been anything like the wedding of her dreams, if she’d ever had any wedding dreams. Being beaten or stabbed in front of more people than she’d thought the world could hold would just put the urkh right on the toono.

“…A little bit?” she ventured.

The Khan scowled, it was a pretty good scowl for someone who was only a part-time scowler. His thundercloud-gray eyes glared down, and her unnerving amber eyes gazed guilelessly up, for a heartbeat. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Beneath Chagatai’s shaggy red-gold-black mustache, a corner of his mouth quirked up as he snorted like a bull. “All right,” he conceded graciously, “it was a little bit funny.”

Red Panda abruptly appeared at the Khan’s side without appearing to cross the intervening distance. “Game-runner-sama,” she addressed him. “Will you have that goat brought back? Use one of the backup goats? Or shall they play it where it lies?”

Chagatai the Inevitable’s smile widened. He enjoyed any opportunity to make up his own rules. They seemed to crop up all the time these days, and it never got stale.

“Play it where it lies, Riders!” he shouted out. “Play it where it lies! After it, you misbegotten marmots! After it!”
“Our husband,” said Red Panda as she poured Nergui some more soma, “is the best buzkashi game-runner in all these lands. Some even say the best in history.”

“Oh.” Nergui nodded. “That’s… great.” She continued watching the field below. Horses kicked and bit each other while their riders flailed about in all directions with short whips. And kicked and bit. Each other and the horses. The only thing out there not trying to draw blood from anything around it was the goat, and that might only have been because it wasn’t merely dead, but really most sincerely dead.

“You really don’t get this whole thing, do you?”

Nergui shrugged eloquently, a multisyllabic gesture that kept unfolding. “It’s not really a thing in my part of Greater Mongol. Seems tough on horses. And riders. And the kind of behavior it encourages…” She trailed off, shaking her head, careful of the ornaments holding her hair in unaccustomed loops and swirls. “But please tell me more. I’d like to learn.”

“Well,” Red Panda began, “this is probably the worst-behaved kind of buzkashi, a one-on-everyone free-for-all. There are two teams, but each player competes with their teammates as well as with the opposing players. Very few rules, no goals, no boundaries on the playing field or on player conduct. Top prize goes to whoever can grab the goat and ride all the way into the canyon with it.”

Nergui looked around the small valley. “Is there a way out I can’t see? The spectators look like they’re packed all around the field like hot stones and meat in a bodog. How do they not get under hoof?”

“That’s just it; the winner has to cut through the crowd. And if the spectators don’t look sharp, they get trampled.”

“That’s insane!”

“Yes, it is. And it’s just the way they like it. You’d be amazed at what they pay for a spot in front.”

To Nergui’s shocked silence, Red Panda elaborated, “Any of the fans can cheer, but the ones in the path of the action can pitch in. Sure they’re in harm’s way, but they can also try clearing the path for their team or blocking their opponents. People still talk about the Turfan-Tashkent match of 1182, where a gang of spectators pulled the goat away from the leading rider and ran it to the end zone on foot. Tai’s a purist, though. He’d never allow that.”

“How can he stop it if there aren’t any rules?”

“Oh, well, I guess there might be one rule: The game-runner runs the game. A game-runner has to make all the arrangements for the match. Secure a location, pay all the support staff, furnish all the prizes to attract the best riders. He or, I like to think ‘she,’ has to have serious wealth. Next, the game-runner has to deal with the sovereigns of the riders and the owners of any land used. So, social prestige; the game-runner has to be respected by big-hats outside the game. Finally, his-or-dare-I-say- her word has to be law on the field. There’s a thin line between an exciting match and an ordinary brawl. The game-runner needs enough force of personality to keep everybody on the right side of the line even when tempers catch fire. Respect is good, but fear is even better.”
As they watched, Chagatai Khan paced the edge of the terrace like a frustrated tiger, keeping a predator’s eye on the action and occasionally bellowing encouragements and admonitions.

“I think I’m starting to see,” Nergui ventured. “Tai has all those qualities. He sits on a mountain-sized pile of war spoils and taxes. He holds the power of life and death over everyone in the Khanate. He’s got a personal presence impossible to ignore and the physical strength to back it up.”

“I’ve always thought Enma himself might not match Tai-sama.”

“Who’s Enma?”

“The King of my people’s 272 Hells.”

“Munkh Gok H. Tengri, that’s a lot of hells.” She sighed and looked distracted by something far away that no one else could see. “I once met a king of a hell,” she half-murmured.

“I’m sorry?” Red Panda inquired politely.

“Hm? ...Don’t be,” Nergui answered absently.

The two royal wives sat companionably on a huge divan that could have fit five more of them: Red Panda in several layers of big-sleeved wraparound robes held together by a wide belt in a fancy knot, Nergui almost swallowed by the Khan’s voluminous pelt-trimmed cloak over the skimpy, slippery wedding dress.

“A lot of the wives don’t come to things like this. They stay in their towns or with their nomad camps and take care of Khanate business there until Tai-sama visits or calls for them. I’ll tell you a secret that isn’t that much of a secret: I love this game. My dream is to become a game-runner myself someday. So I go to all the matches. Blue Heron’s a regular too; that’s why I assumed buzkashi was just as popular up north.”

“Princess Birdbeak is a Khongi - a consort from Mongolia’s consort capital, Khongirad. Khongis like whatever they’re told to like. Their intensive training starts when they’re still in their mommy’s tummy and continues for forty days after they die.”

“Training for what?”

“Meeting the companionship needs of some very important player to be named later, whether he likes to eat, ride, canoodle, and show off --- those are enough for a lot of them --- but Khongis are also ready with expertise if their lord suddenly decides he has to start a war, build a boat, or preserve stuffed jerboas and dress them in little costumes.”

“Oh,” Red Panda snorted, then looked quickly around to make sure no one had noticed the indelicacy. “Back In Nihon I went through something similar. Do you know how many different shapes I had to learn to fold paper into? Two hundred. Can you guess how often I even come across a sheet of paper out here?”

Compared to that, Nergui guessed she’d had a pretty low-stress childhood, at least once she’d learned to tune out the constant background whine-and-grind of her mother's disappointment. She and her brothers learned plenty of things as soon as they could; mostly how to do every task in the ger camp from fuel-gathering to storm response to negotiating of livestock sales. When their individual talents emerged --- shamanigans for Nergui and wrestling for Batbolor and Baterdene --- there’d been specialized training. But there had still been plenty of time to scamper around the landscape and play "Pet the Baby Bear and Run" or "Guess What You Just Stepped In." The winters did get so snot-freezing cold that every mammal giving off any body heat became a best
friend and the odds of waking up alive were often less than even... but that happened to everybody, and much too often to be remarkable.

Kafur and Chang-Er approached the divan, looking as though something was on their minds. When Nergui invited them to sit down, though, the two eunuchs paled and shook their heads fearfully. Less than an hour ago they had chivvied her this way and that, getting her ready for the wedding, but now that she wore the ring and the cloak things had obviously changed. The Home Steppes always had been, and still were, a comparatively flat, informal society. You had to obey authorities, but everyone was due a threshold level of respect from everyone else. You didn’t step on anybody’s threshold, for instance. Or touch anybody’s hat unless they said to. Things like eye contact, casual conversation, and road hospitality, though, were as free as the howling wind whether one’s modesty was guarded by vivid brocaded silk or unevenly tanned, questionably dead rodent pelts. That was the Mongolian way. The new territories, though, had been imposing more layers on society than a good Turkish caravanserai cook did on baklava.

“Consort Little Rabbit,” Kafur addressed her while looking at his toes, “we have prepared your marital ointment.” He bowed and proffered, with both hands, an attractive little earthenware jar.

She lifted the lid and sniffed suspiciously. She trusted Kafur not to prank the new girl only marginally more than she did Blue Heron. All the scents she could identify passed muster, but there were a few that she couldn’t. “Does this go… where I think it goes?”

“Yes,” Kafur replied, sounding relieved to be spared. “You can just put some on after every time you tinkle. It’s our secret weapon.”

“What does it do?”

“It promotes liquidity and elasticity, and it helps the skin tolerate tension and friction with much less damage.” He cut his eyes at Chagatai’s back. “I don’t know if you noticed our Khan’s… great blessing…” he hinted delicately.

“The Doloon Burkhan could notice that from their places in the night sky,” she replied drily, “and the North Pole is jealous, I’m sure. I’m glad of a defense, but… could you demonstrate it?”


Kafur took out one of his large loop earrings with a flourish. “Here is my earring, Consort; note its considerable weight. Now I apply the ointment to my lazy apprentice’s earlobe… and put the earring in… now wait and watch.” For a minute or so, nothing happened, Then the earring slowly descended as Chang-er’s earlobe stretched more than an inch over the next minute. “Now look,” Kafur announced. “He’s half a Buddha, just like that.”

“Watching this never gets old,” Red Panda declared with a giggle. Nergui took hold of the earring and wiggled it, then tugged it cautiously, but sensed no flash of pain from Chang-er’s meridians. “Wow,” she admitted, “Impressive.” She wasn’t sure any of her existing recipes could do that.

“And that’s not all,” Kafur continued. “When I relieve the tension --- ” He took back his earring. Over the following minute, Chang-er’s ear shrank back to its original size. Well, that’s all kinds of loads off my mind, Nergui thought with a wordless smile of relief.

“Okay, I’m going to… go tinkle now,” Nergui saluted everyone, shed the cloak, and scurried off past the right side of the tent.

“The Royal Bride goes to tinkle!” Kafur and Chang-Er proclaimed very loudly, making everyone
Erlik’s pendulous uvula! Nergui thought, putting her head down and accelerating. *I hope they’re not going to do that all the time!* Suddenly she found herself face-down on the ground.

“Oops,” said Danava the Girl Guard, none too penitently, as she withdrew her foot from Nergui’s path.

Nergui wiped a smear of blood off her bottom lip, which she’d bitten when she fell. “Are you freaking kidding me?” she demanded, getting up and brushing the dust off her dress. “Lurking outside the latrine to trip people up! What are you, eleven? Anyway, I said I’d talk to Tai when we’ve got a minute uninterrupted. Since it’s our wedding night, I’m pretty sure he’s motivated to make that happen.”

“Oh, so it’s ‘Tai’ now?

“Yes,” Nergui answered, standing her ground but sending no aggressive signals. “It is. He said so. It comes with the ring.” She held up the back of her hand and waggled the relevant finger. “Now what is your true disharmony, troop? I felt bad about what happened to you. I apologized, I said I’d try to fix it, but you’re not even giving me a chance. Is this just pent-up frustration at having to wear a uniform that no one could possibly fight in?”

Now it was Danava’s turn to fall on her face, revealing that her partner Tsolmaa had come up behind her and administered a quick chop to the trapezius. “We learn to fight pretty well in these outfits, truth be told,” she said conversationally. “Ever hear of the Iron Shirt technique? Get good at it and it’s like wearing weightless, breathable full-body armor that doesn’t make your butt look flat. Plus nobody who hasn’t already fought us takes us seriously; that’s an advantage all its own?”

“Yeah,” Nergui nodded, impressed. “The Agency had me learn some Iron Shirt for my last mission. I imagine you really get good if you have to do it all the time.”

“You didn’t hear this from me,” Tsolmaa winked at Nergui, “but any Girl Guard who lasts three years fighting in these skimpy suits can write her own ticket with any militia on the continent. Now go tinkle. I’ll keep this walking case of Last Quarter-Moon Fever out of your hair.”

“There she is,” the Khan grinned in the flickering torchlight when Nergui hurried back, her arms wrapped around her midsection to secure her flighty, treacherous dress. “Come here before you catch a chill,” he said, wrapping his cloak around her again. “And YOU sods,” he turned and roared at the gawking men in the VIP section, “put your chicken-fingering eyeballs back in your heads before I cook them on a skewer and eat them!

“You’ve got to know how to talk to these assholes,” he confided to Nergui in only a marginally softer voice as he walked her casually to the edge of the terrace overlooking the field, where the match appeared to be in a time-out. “The men of these lands --- and the animals, too --- are so full of piss and vinegar they leave stinky puddles everywhere. I don’t know if it’s something in the water, or what. That’s why they invented buzkashi. If they didn’t have that little steam-vent for their havoc, they’d all kill each other. As it is, some of them still die.

“At first Oggy disapproved and tried to make me keep all the matches sub-lethal, since the game-runner can set the limit on the violence. But the more I sidelined the killers and restructured the game and made people wear safety stuff, the more bad-temper murders happened off the field. Oggy and I finally concluded that the local gods would take people one way or another and if we let players die in the game once in a while these riders’ world would keep turning as it should. Dying on the field is an honor, and I set the families up with a generous pension, but most players
get away with broken bones and the occasional rupture.”

“What’s the deal with these guys in the fancy seats?” Nergui asked. “Act like they’ve never seen a woman before.”

“Some might not have. We’ve got places around here where women can’t be seen.”

“They’re not allowed out in public at all?”

“No, I mean they’re really invisible. Look down at that crowd. Mostly men, correct?”

“Ye-e-ess...”

“But here and there you can see a random little breathing space between them. Those aren’t empty spaces. They’re invisible women. Naked invisible women, because they can’t transfer the invisibility to clothes. The men never know how many naked women are standing around, staring at them, at any moment. It makes them crazy. Nothing short of buzkashi can drive that thought from their minds.”

“Wow! The Agency could really use a few invisible operatives.”

“They might already have some. How would you know?”

Chapter End Notes

References

“The Munchkin Land Song” from The Wizard of Oz movie from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
A Party, Also Known as an Orgy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Time had long since melted like one of those smelly, flaccid cheeses reputedly prized by the pale, watery-eyed peoples of the exotic Occident. Chagatai Khan had tried one once, proffered by one of the European visiting artists at World Peace Palace. After that, he understood why his nephew Batu might be a little circumspect about annexing those verdant but benighted lands.

Tai had kept up with everyone else on the soma-drinking, as usual. He would have let half his supporters down if he hadn’t. He irritated the other half as soon as he took a single sip of anything more intoxicating than sharbat, so fuck ‘em if they couldn’t take a joke. They’d be forced to agree that the Khan ran a better buzkashi game intoxicated than anyone else did sober. So there.

The match had gone on for hours, maybe even days. After a certain point, it was impossible to tell. He’d declared the winners of all the various prizes --- individual holding the goat for the longest time, team holding the goat for the longest combined time, best steal, best save, anybody who died (it seemed crass to compare in-game deaths with each other, since it was the game-loving gods who dictated the terms) and of course the grand-prize winner who had carried the goat out of the riders’ scrum, through the violent crowd of spectators, and into the entrance canyon.

There was a huge banquet and reception --- not for the newlyweds, as Blue Heron had pointedly explained to Nergui, since the wedding had been only a brief impromptu sideshow --- but for the team that took the most prizes in the buzkashi match, which after some tallying and arguing turned out to be Kashgar. Among other honors, (such as being served their food and drinks by the losing Kabul team) they would be awarded the cooked meat of the Game Goat for dinner, or breakfast, or whatever meal this would be back in the everyday world. On one hand, the Game Goat was reputed to be the best-tenderized meat in the world (although Red Panda’s wealthiest countrymen, who raised calves in special spas where they soaked in hot springs every day, might have argued). On the other hand, finding all the pieces of the Game Goat after the game could be a challenge.

People were packed in at the tables as tightly as they had been around the playing field. Food-servers balanced on catwalks overhead so they could transport their burdens without struggling through the crowd, lowering serving bowls on ropes and chains. At the head of the head table, Chagatai balanced Nergui on his right thigh. His cloak was still wrapped around her, but now it was more to fend off unwanted touches from passersby than for warmth; the heat of so many bodies was cloying. There was nothing for it but to get even more loaded on any substance on offer.

White flower petals were suddenly floating down around Nergui. She looked up and saw the junior eunuch Chang-er waving down to her from the catwalk. He asked her if she needed anything and she requested bhang tea. What he brought after an indeterminate time was actually much better than what she’d bought from a Hindu Kush trader on her way to Anatolia, and that had been memorably good. Chagatai’s household version was very creamy, spiced with turmeric and nutmeg and laced with wild honey. In no time all hints of headache were gone and she found herself ravenously hungry.

She was mildly surprised, lacking the energy for any stronger reaction, at how good her new husband smelled under the cloak of downy-soft, expertly tanned pelts. She leaned her cheek against the only-slightly-coarse curly hair of his chest --- an expanse so vast and warm she could imagine sleeping on it curled up like a cat on a cushion --- while inhaling notes of cooking meat, fresh milk,
a thunderstorm on the grassland, and here and there elusive hints of exotic spices that must be native to these new lands she looked forward to knowing better. Perhaps he’d managed to wash up after the match, while a couple of maids had her change out of the elusive, slippery red silk dress and into an even slipperier, less-stable-seeming white one “so you’ll be easier to see in the dark.” *Whatever,* Nergui thought, still feeling as though none of this were quite real. His nose dipped frequently into her hair, taking her in just as she did him, his whiskers feeling like a gentle brush.

The Khan’s hand, when lightly resting around her waist, easily spanned the space from the bottom of her ribcage to the top of her hipbone. Either one hand or the other was always on her as he conversed casually with his other guests and confirmed his food and drink preferences with the servers. Those hands moved constantly and appreciatively over the slippery, shiny silk of her dress as if possessed of their own independent volition. Gradually they began to spend more and more time in some rather predictable places. Even as her ungovernable body wriggled shamelessly in response, she felt the strangers’ eyes on her, blushed, and shrank back further under the cloak.

“I’ve heard you’re very brave, Little Rabbit,” he murmured under the cover of nibbling on her earlobe. “Your other… target was always pretty private with his proclivities, wasn’t he? Tonight will be different. I need you to roll with it.”

She stiffened, but only slightly. For some reason, her muscles had gone mushy and her reactions seemed to take forever. “Oh?” She clung to him and looked up, conveying her best impression of a kitten afraid of being dropped. The soothing effect of his stroking fingertips made it a challenge.

“I have recently changed my mind about many things,” he went on, bending his head to hers again to exclude everyone else from their exchange. “In particular, I’ve found a deep respect for women; a respect that many of the men here tonight cannot imagine even on their best drugs.”

Nergui couldn’t help wondering if some extraordinary violence on Red Panda’s part had been involved. “But,” she protested scatteredly, “you’re Khan…”

“Yes,” he squeezed her shoulders affectionately, “I’m Khan. I’m the first ever to gather all these recent mortal enemies together for dinner, drinks, and amiable sport. They have to settle into that before I can start making them change anything else. They’re a rough bunch, you may have noticed.”

Nergui nodded. The smell of dried blood, dirty teeth, and hate-sweat seemed to hang in clouds over some groups of diners. The looks she’d gotten, and pretended not to notice, from many of the men had sent chilly, wet newt-feet of revulsion scurrying in panicky loops around her back. It wasn’t as if they were imagining tearing her clothes off and bedding her; that had been so commonplace in Anatolia that it bored her. Here, though, it was as if they were trying to decide which cuts of her flesh would cook up the tastiest over their fires. If she wasn’t so publicly claimed by their Khan, game-master, an undisputed apex predator, she might be down a long-drop toilet with no ladder in sight;

“After dinner, we’ll put on a show for them,” he said. “It’ll keep them together and behind me despite the fact that Dad and I haven’t held spear-points to their throats for a while now. I won’t really be rough with you, but you should help me make them think I am because that’s what they admire. Can you do that?”

Big, multisyllabic shrug. “I’m a spy. Pragmatism and pretense aren’t a problem.”

He pushed her hair back from her face and kissed her soundly. “Good sport. Thank you. And I will make it up to you.”
The evening wore on. Nergui, drugged and overstimulated to exhaustion with unfamiliar things crowding into every sensory receptor, drifted into hypnagogia. For most people that would mean a state between waking and sleeping where the boundaries between reality and the world of dreams seem to blur. For a shaman of Nergui's caliber, those boundaries can be hard to nail down even on a dull day. The various component souls that made up her consciousness began to peel apart like layers of baklava, which she'd heard earlier that Chagatai Khan had invented. Baklava had many layers; some sweet, some sticky, and some mostly nuts.

Nergui’s astral body stood up on the long table and walked its length, singing a selection that had risen to the surface of the Well of Songs just then:

“An echo of a distant time
Comes willowing across the sand
And everything is green and submarine…”

Normally, Nergui’s perambulating astral body was invisible to everyone except other shamans and the like, but tonight it seemed like about a quarter of the guests could see her. The losing Kabul buzkashi riders waited on the winning team and the head table and seemed to carry out their duties with good grace despite numerous injuries. When Nergui strolled past the grand prize winner, who looked like he’d been rug-rolled and lived to tell about it, he looked up. More precisely, he tried to look up her dress. "You're from somewhere way up north, ain'tcha?" He grinned speculatively, showing off two new-looking gaps between his teeth. "Wanna come down here and keep a champ warm?"

"Shut up, puke-for-brains!" His teammate snarled under his breath, restraining him by a fistful of tunic. "That's the Khan's bride! The new one. Do you want to die a slow, horrible death? Or, worse, get banned from the League?"

“Well, what’s she wandering loose for then? Hasn’t even got her skin on! It’s just indecent.”

“No one knows the where's or whys
Something stirs and something tries
Starts to climb toward the light…”

“Well, the Khan’s given name means ‘Baby,’” said one of the younger men sitting near the head of the table was explaining to someone (maybe Nergui, maybe not), “and just look at him. He’s huge. So we all took similar nicknames. I’m short, so they call me Stretch. Farhad here is really tall, so he’s Shorty. Achmed’s constantly knurd from drinking too much coffee, so he’s Sleepy. Deepak does math and reads five languages, so he’s Dim. And Ashok is bald, so he’s… Baldy. The bald guy is always Baldy. I never met anyone who knew why.” Stretch tilted his head up and addressed one of the dragooned Kabul riders. “Hey! Slave-for-a-day! Where’s that horse blood we ordered?”

“That’s right, we’re all Mongols now, let’s drink some damn horse blood.”

Nergui grimaced. Mongols only drank horse blood in emergencies, when it was either that or die. And they only took as much as they absolutely needed. The horses walked away with a couple of stitches at most.

“That guy from Spain that came to KK? Calls us chupacaballos… That’s a good thing, right?”

On the catwalk above the tables, one of the servers nearly lost his footing. Horse blood sloshed
over the rim of the pail he carried. The thick stream narrowly missed Nergui’s head and splashed on the table, slightly spattering the hem of her dress.

“Careful with that pail, Yevgeny,” his teammate admonished.

“Strangers passing in the street

By chance, two separate glances meet

And I am you and what I see is me…”

The Khan was generous with the horse blood to his guests who needed to prove something but took none himself. Nergui noticed that many dinner guests were beginning to succumb to the backlash from prolonged excitement, intoxication, and the presence of interesting strangers.

"What is a red panda, anyway?" a sumptuously dressed man in a turban was asking Retsuko. "Some kind of a bear?"

"More like a raccoon," she replied. "only a little bit bigger. Orangey red with white muzzles, eyebrows, and sideburns. They have ear tufts, but at the outer base of their ears, not at the tips like some lynx and foxes. And big fluffy orange-and-white tails."

"They sound attractive."

"Oh, they are. And a group of them can skeletonize an elk calf in a few minutes."

“No one crosses there alive

No one speaks and no one tries

No one flies around the sun…”

Nergui found herself walking a little faster as if she feared to be late for something. What she overheard became more and more disjointed.

“I was just telling him, he couldn't get into number two. He was asking why he wasn't coming up on freely after I was yelling and screaming and telling him why he wasn't coming up."

“So buzkashi season is over and now what? Wrestling; we need some big events. I’ll miss the horses. Hey, could guys wrestle on horseback? Or they could have to balance whole their horses wrestle?"

“Well I mean, they're gonna kill ya, so like, if you give ’em a quick sh… short, sharp shock, they won't do it again. Dig it?"

“Those Euro-style horseshoes, they’re a bunch of extra work but they make to hooves a lot louder on hard ground. The enemy hears you gallop in like thunder. How loud can they get…?"

"I certainly was in the right! Haha! I was in the right!"

“And we should call ourselves the Children of Chaos! No, the Descendants of Disorder! No, the Lineage of Lawlessness! No…"

“... one of these days I’m going to cut you into little pieces…”

Nergui turned around in a flash, hackles raised, suddenly primed for a fight. Even though she felt
sure it hadn’t been directed at her, she didn’t like anything about that last thing she’d heard.

She began walking slowly back toward her body, then paused in the middle and held out the translucent shadows of her arms, offering her song to the sky.

“And no one sings me lullabies
And no one makes me close my eyes
And so I throw the windows wide
And call to you across the sky...”

Whom was she addressing? She wondered… Why did she suddenly feel lonely? She was the newest addition to a world-famous family and half the gossipy old hemisphere had to be in attendance.

“I’ve been mad for foockin’ years, absolutely years,” someone out of sight said. “I’ve been over the edge for yonks.”

People at and around the table were getting cozy, grouping up into little clusters of two to ten. See, not even this crowd uses just one big one. There were people in furs… and actual animals? Nergui really didn’t want to know. When she came back to her body, Nergui noticed something very like Retsuko’s description of a red panda jumping off Tai’s other knee, but that probably wasn’t real. Was it?

Settling back into her body, she found it slack yet restless from Tai’s hours of manual ministrations, which she’d eventually given up trying to reciprocate. She opened her eyes and climbed his torso to whisper in his ear.

”Tai.” She took his earlobe between her teeth and laved it with her tongue. ”Tai. Please. Please.”

Exactly what he’d been waiting to hear. She was ready. Deftly he picked her up and slid her to the middle of his lap.

“...Matter of fact, it’s all dark..” someone said far away.

Chapter End Notes

More details, graphic but not critical to the continuing plot of this story, may be read by insensitive adults in Chapter 11 of ”No Name Girl’s Scrubbed Scrolls.”

References:

“Echoes,” “Careful With That Axe, Eugene,” “Us and Them,” “Speak to Me” “One Of These Days,” “Money,” “Eclipse,” and “That Great Gig in the Sky” songs by Pink
Mysterious Watchers

Somewhere, inside a bubble, one tiny speck barely bigger than the tip of a medical needle said: “What are those things?”

The other one said: “I feel like I used to know.”

The swarm of even smaller shapes, mindless and ravening, burst out of the liquid darkness, roaring and lashing a billion whiplike tails. They hurled themselves against the bubble wall as if intent on their own destruction.

“What the clot!?” exclaimed the first speck.

“Are they trying to get in and eat us?” wondered the other.

After a while: “It looks like they can’t get in,” said the first speck.

“Maybe that was why we had to make the wall stronger,” said the second speck.

“Hey!” the first speck cried out to the swarm, emboldened. “Go find your own bubble, losers! We were here first!”

“Yah boo! Sucks to be you!” the other one joined in.

“Is this what the Command means, I wonder? ‘Protect the world until it’s time to leave’?”

“Maybe… I wonder what else is out there.”

“I don’t care! I’m ready for a fight!”

“Me too!”

After another while the swarm dissipated, its components dead, fled, or dying.

“That was easy,” said one of the specks.

“And this is boring,” said the other one.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nergui awoke lying on her side, face to face with her larger-than-life new husband. He appeared asleep but was not snoring, which surprised her a little. She hadn’t expected someone who made Chagatai’s level of noise while awake to let unconsciousness quiet him down. Instead, sleep washed his face of all the conceit and stubbornness and short temper, making the crooked straight and the rough places plain. She lightly stroked his unruly red-black-gold Borjigin hair and laid a gentle palm on his well-whiskered cheek. Chagatai Khan, she whispered voicelessly. My husband. It still didn’t seem real to her.

Someone's legs were wrapped around him, the ankles crossed behind his neck.

After several uncertain, speculative seconds, Nergui finally realized they were her own.

How long ago had she been headed back to Kara Koram, inexplicably out of balance, her future the kind of blank slate that bothered her for some reason now, though it never had before? And now, without warning, the foreseeable future was all sewn up. Marriage to Tai might be many things, but “dull” probably wouldn't be one of them, at least when it was her turn. And, with all those other hundreds of wives, she’d have lots of free time to make her own entertainment.

And look, practically a whole day and night had gone without a single thought of DO NOT FINISH THAT SENTENCE, SELF. I'm warning you -

A slow smile dimpled the boisterous monarch’s craggy, shaggy cheeks. You’re innocent when you dream, she thought. To her shamanic senses, Chagatai glowed with a red light not visible to normal eyes. into it, looking deeper, she saw row upon row of steel blades turned inward like mantis mandibles at rest. If awoken, they would tear through field or forest and leave nothing standing, and rend every soul in his path to scorched rags.

He's hella dangerous.

But then, these days, every man, woman, and child in Greater Mongol is probably either dangerous or dead.

One story went that Chagatai and his brother Jochi, early in the formation stages of Greater Mongol, had disagreed over whether to simply take over a certain town or “make an example” of it by killing all the inhabitants. Josh thought a massacre would send the right message. Tai didn’t see the point. They’d disagreed, then argued, then fought until the insults turned personal. Their father Genghis grew impatient and called in their little brother Ogedei, who made short (though messy) work of the town and returned to his own battlefront.

Now Oggy was Most Diplomatic, Tai was Most Feared, and Josh was Most Deceased. It just goes to show...

Under Chagatai’s wild eyebrows, gray eyes opened and twinkled at her in the dark. “Little Rabbit,” he said. “If you’re awake, let’s take a walk.”

“Not sure I can walk right now,” she answered truthfully. “Can’t even feel my legs.”

“Then just hang on,” he said. Without further fuss he stood up, hands cupped under her behind,
lifting her as if she weighed no more than a… well, a little rabbit, she guessed.

A series of felt tent-flaps brushed over her head until her skin felt the chill of outside air. Feeling her shiver, the Khan wrapped his cloak around them both. The chill suddenly made her remember the evil intent she’d felt before. "There's something really nasty hanging around," she told her husband. "I picked up on it at the banquet."

Tai hesitated --- a mere blink, but Nergui caught it --- then grinned. "You'll have to be more specific. Lots of nasty things hang around big buzkashi games. Lots of nasty things hang around me."

"It was a woo-woo sort of thing," she explained. "Maybe a ghost or an afreet, or a spirit-heavy person. Not a happy or healthy entity, I'll say that much."

“Well, then, you'll have to protect me. Little Rabbit,” he replied unconcernedly.

He carried her easily, wrapped in warmth under the stars. He described wonders of these lands that few outsiders had ever seen. He spoke of his plans to bring his people new opportunities and advantages and to make his Khanate the pride of Greater Mongol. Occasionally the inexorable tides of his blood would force an interruption when he would find a place to set her down or lean her against and satisfy the renewed demands of his flesh. The soma, bhang tea, and possibly other things she didn’t remember were wearing off and Nergui was beginning to feel like a sun-ripened stonefruit that had fallen from a tree on the top of a mountain and bounced off every sharp rock all the way down to a busy road, where it had been run over by multiple ox-drawn wagons going in both directions. Nevertheless, it felt so good at the same time...

“How do you like your new home?” he asked, though she could tell it didn’t really matter what the answer was.

“I’ve never seen anywhere like it,” she responded honestly. “It’s fascinating.”

"You know, Oggy got the boss seat, and Josh got the most land, even if it's mostly frozen," he said, "but I love this place! The people, the land, the animals, the plants. Sometimes I think Tengri made it just for me. And maybe Dad, may he ride forever in the sky, thought so too. Can you tell, with all your woo-woo," he asked her with sudden soft seriousness, "can you tell if this land loves me back?"

Nergui felt a sudden warmth spill out of her heart and flood her with admiring affection for this remarkable leader, this most unusual man. "Yes, Tai," she said in full honesty, "I can tell that it really does." Then her eyes stung and she pressed her face to the red-gold-black curly hair spread across his massive cliff-face of a chest, knowing the tears would take over regardless.

"Hey. Hey." He curled an index finger under her chin and, once he overcame her desire to hide her weeping face, tilted it up toward him. He couldn't completely hide his look of shock when he saw it, but quickly shifted to a good-natured teasing chuckle. "Oh, no! I stole a woman and then somebody stole her from me! And they left me a… a troll or something!"

Nergui laughed too, despite herself, and buried her face again. “Didn’t your intel warn you that I was an ugly crier? Too bad; you’re married to it now. Your best option is to make sure I have no reason to cry.” She gave a long inward sniffle, recovering. “I’m usually not much of a Seer, but I wish you could see what I just saw.”

“Tell me.”
“Both your life and your memory will endure longer than any of your brothers’,” she began, feeling a personal pang at what that might mean for Ogedei even through her enveloping seers’ trance. “A thousand years from now, your people’s descendants, hundreds of miles from the Home Steppes, will count themselves as Mongols and you as their ancestor. Some will forsake Tengri for other gods, or for a belief in no gods, and still revere your memory. One of their languages will even be named after you.”

“Wow. I’m not even a --- word --- guy.”

“That isn’t even all, Chagatai Khan,” she continued in a voice that both was and was not her own. “All over the world, in places we won’t even hear of in this life, men who never heard your name will still want to be you. Their hearts will thrill to blinding speed and thundering sounds and well-forged steel and undying brotherhood.

“You’d like them,” she finished, her voice returning to normal.

“Makes it sound like I’m the fortunate son after all. My nephew Batu’s got the Golden Horde now, that’s Josh’s biggest territory. Before we got there, the locals did nothing but fight each other. Now they can safely build, travel, and trade, but instead they just whine about the ‘Mongol-Tartar yoke’ all the time.”

“Hey... fuck ‘em if they can’t take a yoke,” Nergui suggested.

The Khan was silent for a long moment. Then he began laughing so hard he had to find a rock to sit down on before he dropped her. “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a yoke!’ I have to remember that one. Upon my soul, Khenbish’s Nerguitani,” he surprised her by using her real name. “I like you. I love all my wives, of course, but I don't really like that many of them.”

He opened his cloak, letting the cold outdoor air chill her nipples to startled attention, and raised her chest to his lips. “Am I being good to you?”

“Of course, Khan.” To Nergui, it was the only possible answer.

“Good. Then I’m being who I want to be.”

Here in the shank of the night, the encampment had quieted down considerably but not completely. Lone, shadowy figures could be seen inside tents pissing out and sometimes outside pissing in. Occasionally the Khan was recognized and acknowledged by a salute, a bow, or a dead faint. “I’m going to lead my subjects in learning to understand women,” he resumed after a while, “but I want something in return. I want women to understand...” (he waved his hand expansively) “our kind of men. Lately I’ve been marrying women who might have a chance at it, unlike the Queen and most of my political marriages. What do you think of Blue Heron and Red Panda? Are they up to the job?”

Nergui wasn’t sure exactly where she’d expected this conversation to go, but it wasn’t here. Suddenly she wasn’t a party boy’s new toy anymore, but a pro being asked for advice by a canny statesman. Too many more reality lurches and she might throw up. “They’ve both been trained since childhood to anticipate and meet the needs of men in charge,” Nergui heard herself begin with unexpected coherence. “But most of the class time, I imagine, is spent on the most common types of men who end up in charge. The cold fish, the horndog, the stuffed shirt, the shouter, the peacock, the miser, the wastrel, the pouter...” She found herself looking down at her hands, where her fingers ticked away as she rapidly rattled off the roster... and her internal lodestar reminded her whom she addressed, “And all the many, many types of strong, smart, big-hearted men too, of course,” she broke off with forced brightness. “But a true wild man like you, ” she returned to what
she suspected was his favorite subject, “that’s rare. I would be surprised if the standard consorts’ course in either Khongirad or Nihon went too far into it.

“Blue strikes me as a pretty standard Khongi, but I haven’t known her long and their facades are meant to be unbreachable. She’ll give you the reactions you seem to want, whether she really ‘gets you’ or not. Red’s different. She’s got so much rage and rebellion going on inside that her game-face is held in place with a few strands of braided grass. Let her know that you accept everything about her and you two might turn out to be soulmates.” And Kayra bar the door if they have children, she thought inwardly.

“And what about you?” the Khan asked, shifting her on his lap so she faced him more fully. “You, who stood down Baiju Noyan. Do you think he and I are alike?”

“Hmm… only in that you’re both driven from root chakras that demand constant refueling. Other than that, you scorch where he freezes.”

“‘Refueling,’. You make it sound like work.”

“Isn’t it? When you need that much, doesn’t it all start to seem the same? Does any of it mean anything?”

“That’s,” he said, “what nobody gets. It means everything.”

“...Tell me more.”

“When a woman shares her body, she gives me a new life. It’s the only time I feel like I’m not dying. I know she’s also got a mind and a soul and so on, but the body’s what does the most for me. The more I try to explain, though, the more insulted and pissed off women get. You seem to get something out of it, at least, but I can tell you’re not like me. Do you think there are women like me?”

“I’ve never met any, but... the theories of balance suggest they’re out there. You know what? The retired Khagatuns at Dower House Five probably know. Next time you’re in KK...”

“Even if they do know, it’s not exactly the kind of thing a guy asks his moms,” Tai cut her off, his voice tinged with horror.

“Oh… sorry… forgot about that. They are your moms, aren’t they? Yeah, that would be pretty awkward.”

“Come back over here. Help me get that thought out of my head.”

“See? You do have an imagination.” Grinning, she booped his nose as only someone with a history of nose-booping Siberian tigers would have dared.

“Guess what I’m imagining right now,” he mock-growled, then abruptly fell silent. A wolf’s howl, distant but carrying over the rocky landscape, cut through the clear night.

Chagatai the Inevitable, wild-man of the millennium, sagged and rested his bearded chin on one massive fist, seeming to gaze out past the borders of his beloved Khanate. When he finally spoke, his “Awww, shit” was entirely heartfelt.

“They wouldn’t attack this many people,” Nergui reassured him, yet wondered all the same. In her native Taiga, you could scarcely go out to the pit at night without almost stepping on a wolf, but the locals had dedicated generations’ worth of time and energy demonstrating that some other
source of meat --- any other source of meat --- would be a softer target. But this was a strange land, full of strange things, and anything that could worry Chagatai...

“Let’s go back to the ger and get some sleep,” Tai decided, scooping her up.

“Some more of that ointment, too,” she agreed with a yawn.

Chapter End Notes

References
"Innocent When You Dream" song by Tom Waits
No Name Girl awoke under the eternal blue sky, bright sunlight stabbing through the gaps between her eyelashes.

Too bright. And it was too windy. And there was a distinct lack of pillows and carpets between her bare back and the scrubby grass. As a matter of fact, the only thing unchanged from when she’d gone to sleep was a certain absence of clothing.

She’d gone to sleep indoors --- yes, that was the right word; it had been a beautiful big solid ger with multiple layers of wall and real doors. *What did the Turkmen in warmer Anatolia call the insides of their lightweight tents?* she wondered hazily. *“In flaps?”*

No, no, come back. Think, she commanded herself. *Something important happened. You need to focus and figure out what it is.*

There had been a game. A vast, noisy one that went on forever. And a party of more or less the same sort.

A wedding?

Possibly *her* wedding?

Her head began to pound as loud as an empty barrel bouncing down a rockslide. She couldn’t look too closely at that idea. Not yet.

She remembered falling asleep at some point inhaling the scents of incense and perfume. In a pile of warm, beautiful pillows and rugs. Silk and fine wool… and wolf skins?

*The Yasa laws of Greater Mongol reserve wolf skins for the use of the Altan Urag, the Golden Family*...

She let her head turn very slowly to the side. The light became less blinding. She opened her eyes just the merest crack.

The steppe was empty of any human soul, living or dead. But all around her lay the picked-over scraps of a violent game and a great feast, mixed in with the miscellany people tend to drop during a hasty departure.

Maybe someone had dropped something she could wear? She smelled rain, close by and moving in. But that would have to wait: She could still smell wolf skins nearby, but unlike the royal prerogatives, these wolf skins were still worn by the original owners.

She could see ten big gray wolves just in this random direction, nosing rather fussily through the food scraps. Formidable hunters, to be sure, but not too proud for a free meal when nobody who mattered was looking.

Had they noticed her? If so, it wasn’t obvious. Maybe if she lay still they’d fill up on the acres of easy leftovers and go away.

*Yeah.*

*Maybe.*
From behind her, an exhalation of nearby breath moistened her cheek. She stopped breathing. Some sniffing, some drooling… then jaws closing on her outer ear.

(Hey! That’s mine! I was wearing it. Could you not eat that, please?)

The wolf and all its friends looked up in abrupt unison. Nergui’s interlocutor had let go of her ear, but its sticky drool still dripped onto her face. She sensed a picture being relayed from one wolf mind to another from the direction of the interruption. Finally, the wolf standing over her projected:

(Are you… a horse? )

Somehow, Nergui managed to reflect that the wolf’s incredulous tone was not unreasonable. While a lone wolf might take the long way around a large stallion, a pack was unlikely to be impressed.

(Horse-shaped but… not a normal horse).

(You don’t say?… Well, lucky for you I’m not a ‘normal wolf’ either).

Dogman? Nergui tentatively joined the telepathic conversation.

(Shapeshifter), the wolf corrected her. (This is the Great Khan’s volunteer pack. On the longer, more complicated missions it helps to have a few human minds sprinkled in. Some of the Dogmen do good wolf shapes, but so far they can’t get the scent quite right and the regular troops don’t trust ’em.)

And may I ask…?

(We were tasked with extracting you and doing a little judicious punitive damage. You’re wanted back in KK.)

Nergui looked around at the devastation, the confusion of hoofprints and wheel-tracks, the scattering of forgotten items over more than a square mile. They couldn’t have just pidged?

(The Khagan said to, er, send a stronger message and make sure it was obeyed. You should have seen all those people bhaag out. Like termites when the nest is kicked. Anyway, now we’ll escort you back and keep you safe. And don’t worry, none of us bother horses. It’s part of the agreement).

She sat up and took stock. A few shreds of slippery silk that used to be a wedding dress failed to provide minimal decency, let alone warmth. She still wore Borte’s rock-crystal pendant, thank Tengri; she’d become fond of it, but the sooner she gave it back, the fewer chances she’d lose or break it. The fourth finger of her left hand sported a ring made from a coin stamped with Chagatai’s tamga, his personal insignia. It fit perfectly. Probably keeps a whole range of sizes around, she supposed. Beats being branded.

Also new, and poking coldly into her stomach, was an elaborately worked chain belt that rode low on her hips. Each link was in the form of a goat's skull the size of her palm. Red and blue rose-cut gems glittered from the eye-sockets. The mirror-finish metal was yellow, soft, and as heavy as regret.

When she stood up, its weight pulled the remains of her dress even further out of place. She was also barefoot. I don’t guess anybody found any decent boots lying around? Sandals, even? Her rescuers were silent except for scattered leftover-chomping sounds. Sultan? She sent out further. Could you find your tack and the saddlebags again? The Fork-Tongued Son of a Bitch had crashed the buzkashi field as naked as the day he was foaled. Nothing an opponent could easily grab.
(You can ride barefoot, can’t you?) the shapeshifter suggested.

Nergui took a step and winced. “No,” she demurred. “I don’t think I can. Not the usual way, at least.”

It started to rain.
BANG! BANG! BANG! went the ponderous gates of the State Armory outside Kara Koram at an improbable hour of the night.

“All right! All right already!” yelled Tegshe the relief guard, who had been relieving himself. “Hold your horses!” A frantic shake and two inevitable drips later, he slid open the viewing slot. Far from being at his battle best, he still wasn’t stupid.

There was a horse out there. It put a big rolling eyeball up to the slot, nickered as if satisfied with what it saw, turned around, and ran away into the night.

Well, thought the guard, no stupider now than he’d been before. This is a new one.

“Hey! Zhou!” he whisper-yelled to the wall-top patrol, throwing a small pebble that unfortunately went clear over the wall instead of making the intended attention-getting noise. “What’s the view up there?”

“That was one pretty horse. Long gone, though.”

“Anything else? Like, in front of the gate?”

“I don’t know. There’s a darker patch… like maybe a pile of rags or something, right in front of the door. If it starts burning, don’t run out and stomp on it! That was a prank we used to do back on Qinghai, we’d set a paper bag on fire with poop inside ---”

“Welcome to the Home Steppes, bro. We burn poop every day. Once you’re out of the trees, it’s all there is to burn. Who’s up in the tower tonight?”

“Supposed to be Boris.”

“Holler up at him, see what he sees.”

“Only what Zhou said,” reported a new voice. “Nothing else around. Just that pile of rags or whatever. We could just leave it till morning and look at it in the light.”

“Whoa! It moved!” Zhou blurted. “And something’s shiny --”

“All right, I’m taking a look,” Tegshe sighed. “Cover me, you ball-sacks. I don’t want to regret this.”

“Yeah, well, my ball-sack would ---” Boris shortlsted as Tegshe leaned out of the sally port.

“It’s a woman,” Tegshe interrupted. “Looks local…ish. Not in good shape. Pass the word for whatever medics are awake. I’ll bring her in.”

Wolves howled, far away. Not far enough, in Tegshe’s opinion. ‘Leave it till morning’? Tengri’s toes, Boris. By then she’d have been...

“Medics are on their way,” Zhou reported, sliding down the ladder to ground level.

“She’s warm… more or less… breathing all right and not bleeding, but she’s out like a snuffed oil-lamp. I wonder if she has a paiza,” Tegshe thought aloud. “Or anything to tell us who she is.”
“How many of her clothes do you reckon we should take off to find out?” Boris called down.

"What th' flutterin' feck?” snarled a female voice perfectly tuned for outrage. “Can a colleen not shut 'er eyes for an hour in this saints-forsaken bothy? My rooms are right upstairs, yer daft shitebirds!”

A disarranged haystack of orange-red hair. Pinkish, polka-dotted skin. Eyes the blinding green of spring grass. A dressing-gown and slippers of butter-yellow pillowed wool. Any random citizen of Greater Mongol who had never met Smithereen Darga, the Agency’s Director of Various Incendiary Weapons, or any of her small army of look-alike brothers making themselves useful in various capacities about the capital, might think they confronted an evil spirit (or one of the phantom creatures one sees after drinking evil spirits).

She always looked as if she were on fire, partly because her hair was the color of a sunset through a sandstorm and partly because, while she was working, some spot or other on her special leather coverall was usually smoldering. Wherever the Tang Dynasty’s dubiously medicinal black powder was persuaded to form controlled streams of flame or earth-shattering kabooms, Smithereen’s fine hand contributed to its making. The entire population of the Armory wished they could follow her around wide-eyed all day, just to see what she would do next. All that stopped them was her towering temper. Even the boldest Turks and Pathans took the long way around to dodge her excoriations. When Smithereen raised her voice, the best course of action was to slink away as inconspicuously as possible or, better yet, arrange never to have been there at all.

Which was not to say that she never made friends, or that she ever forgot the ones she made. When she saw the face of the unconscious woman lying in a heap on the floor, she froze in surprised recognition… but only for an instant. “This woman don’t need no stinkin’ paiza, yer shower of unwashed bollocks! This is the war hero who just pulled the Southeast Battle-front's fat out the fire! And a friend of mine. And she's clearly in a bad way. So two of you carry her up to my lodgings, and the rest of you, unless you can make yourself medically useful, piss off!”

A lot of off was still being pissed when a very tall Oguz Turk strode upstream to meet Smithereen and her improvised cohort. “Oh. Hallo, Sun, how’s she cuttin’?” Smithereen almost diffidently greeted Sungurtekin Mergen, the Great Khan’s spymaster for Anatolia. He visited the Armory a few times a week to train and teach the fighting style of the Turkmen Alp warriors, and he and Smithereen had developed the mutual respect of colleagues from different fields who nonetheless Knew Their Shit.

“I... couldn’t help overhearing,” he addressed her dryly. “Is that Khenbish’s Nerguitani?... Ah. Good. Well, not completely good, but...”

“She’s quare knackered for a start. We’re up the stairs to my gaff. Come morning we’ll see what the story is and pidge ‘Q.’”

“I think it’s best if you take care of her and let me take care of letting people know. The Palace is taking an interest. I’ll ride to KK right now.”

“Grand,” she yawned, flapping a hand to signify all the niceties she couldn’t quite vocalize at the moment. “Say howya to that luscious Darga, her what’s always kitted out like a festival doll. This late of an hour, ye might get a butcher’s at what she wears to bed.”

Sun’s stare was carefully blank.

“I know you’re sweet on Gwei-Gwei’s boss. We’re all spies, remember? And I always mark my rivals extra sharp,” Smithereen winked and grinned.
Sun walked away, shaking his head. He’d gotten used to listening to a wide variety of accents; it was a basic survival skill in KK, where everyone came from somewhere else. Smithereen’s homeland, however, was so far away that understanding her was a special challenge. Case in point: Her response to being stared at by anything from a cat to a king was an indignant "Feck ye gawkin’ at, ye eedjit?" One or more bewildered new acquaintances concluded that "Feckyegawkinatchaeedjit" must mean "Hello" in her language. People were strolling around the Armory and half of greater KK nodding and waving, cheerfully calling out "Feckyegawkinatchaeedjit!" to random passersby. Things might have gone very badly if someone had said it to Smithereen, but luckily a couple of her slower-fused brothers heard it first. Once they recovered from their laughing fit enough to breathe normally, they explained and straightened everyone out.

Still, Sun thought. *Had she really said ‘rival’? But she and Chagaanirvys Darga were both women! How would two women even… when neither of them had a…*

Suleyman Shah’s son Sungurtekin might have been blessed with one of the mightiest brains on the continent, but he’d had a bit of a sheltered upbringing.

Meanwhile, up the stairs to Smithereen’s gaff, a medic and her assistant cleaned Nergui up and gave her a once-over, decided there was nothing obvious that needed doing before she woke up, and withdrew. Smithereen covered Nergui first with a wool blanket and then with a soft elk hide, then climbed in beside her. "Fellas kip warmer,” she murmured to herself around another yawn, “but colleens don’t fart the bed.”

The lamp went out. A few minutes later, as if to put the lie to her words, the blankets puffed up, jiggled briefly, then drifted back down around them.
“Smithereen Darga just had me called back,” the night medic explained nervously. “We’d agreed to let her rest for the night and check her when she woke up. But she didn’t wake up, and so far… she won’t. All her external wounds are superficial, just scrapes and bruises. We thought she might have come across some bandits and fought them off somehow, or…”

Borjigin Genghis’s Tolui, the former Khagan Regent, picked up Nergui’s pale, inert left hand and examined the heavy silver ring made from a coin bearing Chagatai’s tamga. “Well. here’s your problem,” he said in a voice so dry it made the medic gulp saliva. “Tai never could take care of nice things.”

Tolui’s brother, Ogedei Khagan, stood beside him with a neutral but very solidly set expression. A stranger might take it as contemplation, perhaps of a decision not yet made. Those who knew him well recognized it as a sharp blade held to the hummingly tight restraining rope of a very large siege engine. “That’ll be all, Doctor,” he said in an uninflected indoor voice that went straight to the medic’s spinal cord and lost no time propelling her out of Smithereen’s apartment.

“Are you getting anything, Lui?” Ogedei asked once they were alone.

Tolui, still holding Nergui’s wedding-ringed hand, put his other hand on top of it and looked down at her. A green aura flared and died around him. “I’m getting memories of a rough trip home; most of her physical pain is from that, though not all.” He paused. The green aura lit up again, its spikes moving as though the light was being tuned. “Mentally, she’s shielded; probably a trained-in precaution. Emotionally, she’s been in serious distress for --- I don’t know, maybe weeks? That’s probably what’s keeping her knocked out. Spiritually, I can’t seem to get a clear picture. It’s as though she’d been attacked… something like a parasite, some kind of compound or colony entity feeding on her nei chi. ”

“Can you banish it?”

Tolui sucked his teeth and shook his head. “I hesitate to try. It’s thoroughly entangled with her on multiple planes. I might be able to get it out, but it might take a lot of her with it.”

“Is she dangerous to be around? Could others be affected?”

“Nnnn… no. I’m not getting that at all. It’s growing, but very slowly. There are places where it’s run into her surface, but it turns around and goes back in rather than trying to break through.”

“Even if Tai didn’t do most of this damage, his obliviousness probably made it worse. What in Tengri’s name was he thinking?”

“That a magical healing hoo-ha makes a good party favor? If he was thinking anything at all.”

“If we lose her…”

“We won’t. She feels strong, just mostly very unhappy right now.”

“I’ve wronged her, Lui,” the Khagan concluded. “I sent her to Baiju and I didn't protect her from Tai…”

“Oggy, don’t start,” Tolui admonished. “It’s great that you feel all this responsibility and have all this empathy for your subjects, but when it starts bogging you down it’s too much.”
"Dad - may he ride forever in the sky - used to say the trick is to never stand still…” Ogedei’s voice sounded far away.

“Tai’s in a position to take full advantage of that,” Lui reminded him, “but we all talked about it, remember? Millions of people have to know where to find us. First, we have to get on maps, and then somebody has to stay put in that spot, and in this generation it’s you and I. So you just concentrate on being Mr. Popular and leave the broody moods to me. I’ve got a lot more practice.”

Ogedei reached out a big war-beaten hand and stroked No Name Girl’s hair delicately, almost pleadingly. “Perhaps if she had some… better experiences?”

After a moment the unconscious woman turned her face toward the caressing hand, inhaled her sovereign’s scent, and sighed deeply, relaxing visibly.

“Like a flower turning toward the sun,” Tolui shook his head again, expressing an envy so long ago drained of malice it couldn’t get a minnow-sized Evil Eye open. “Don’t know how you do it.”

“It’s a Borjigin thing.” As if on cue, the sun ditched its stalking clouds and flooded through the window behind the Great Khan. It hit Nergui at just the right angle, transforming her drawn pallor from sickly to… interesting.

“Say, Lui,” he said, suddenly very still. “As part of your Paperwork Introduction initiative: Can your scribes draw up a quick divorce decree?”

“We can do better,” Tolui grinned indulgently. “Already have a separate stack with Tai’s name filled in. Frequent needs must when Erlik drives.”

“The Palace doctors should have a look at her, but I’m thinking this whole blabbermouth town doesn’t necessarily need to know.”

“You divert attention. I’ll leave her hostess a note and take her through the tunnels.”

“You think of everything, brother.”
“She looks better already,” Tolui commented approvingly.

“I had my maids give her a good warm wash and toweling-down,” Empress Toregene explained. Nergui was still unconscious, lying slack in the arms of one of the larger Palace guards, but her expression was more relaxed than before and a hint of color had come back to her cheeks. Her damp hair had waves that would get lost in the cloud-like thickness once it dried. She was wrapped in a much-too-big tunic that reached past her knees. It was cashmere, dyed a silk-green so deep as to appear bottomless, with simple geometric embroidery.

“What’s that she’s wearing?” Tolui wondered why men’s clothes often looked better when women wore them.

“One of Oggy’s nightshirts he left in my rooms,” Tori replied. “Well, nobody has any clue where her own things are. And my stuff’s all too small. I figured this would be comfortable at least.”

“I found a room that’s out of the regular traffic, just used for storage. Let’s put her in there for now, If she wakes up -”

"When, Lui; when she wakes up."

“Of course, Khagatun,” Tolui bowed elaborately.

“Oh, stop taking the piss,” she chided him without any real annoyance. She’d known the brothers Borjigin since childhood. Josh the snide one, Tai the noisy one, Oggy the nice one, and Lui who kept to himself a lot.

Lui reached for his ring of Palace keys, but the door was already unlocked as usual. After studying the former Jin and still-extant Song cultures, he’d concluded that Mongols were far too relaxed about defense. “But.. we’re always the ones attacking,” said nearly everyone he’d tried to explain it to. When he pulled the door open, a lithe black-and-tan shadow hissed its displeasure and streaked past his legs. “Dammit,” he said, taken slightly off-balance.

“See? If we’d locked it, he’d have been locked in,” Tori said with a note of triumph. “Now, where’s his ---”

{LOO-oo-eee}, came an uncanny snarl from between a pair of haphazardly deposited chests of drawers.

“Shut Up,” he said happily, reaching down into the darkness with what might seem to the casual observer to be a foolhardy bare hand. “You said my name! Can you say it again?” But instead of drawing back the bloody stump implied by the tone of that eerie voice, he seemed to find what he was looking for and his smile widened.

During the previous month, an ambassador of the Khmer Empire had visited from faraway Angkor. Among the gifts for the respected Great Khan was a pair of the famous royal cats of Sukhotai. Black-masked with cerulean blue eyes, they were as clever as monkeys and almost as adroit. No pantry lock could discourage them. Their Thai names had beautiful meanings, but were difficult for non-Thais to pronounce or remember. The cats soon concluded, after various interactions with the Palace staff, that they’d been given new Mongolian names.

Their new names, to which they now obligingly answered when in the mood, were Dammit and
“What’cha been eatin’, little kitty?” Tolui asked in a teasing voice. “Feels like you got fat since I saw you last.”

{NO-o-o}, said a highly unnatural, yet intelligible, voice, and then after a slight hesitation, {LLOO-eee}.

“Oh my Tengri, Lui! Tell me you haven’t taught those beasts to talk. We’ll never hear the end.” Tori admired the creatures’ beauty and grace, but hadn’t embraced them wholeheartedly. At the end of the day she deeply prized her favorite outfits, and most were trimmed with fur, feathers, fleece, dangling beads and tassels, and other temptations to the destructive instincts of bored domestic felines. Dogs were equally susceptible and could do more widespread damage in a shorter time; yet, closed doors and shame were proof against dogs, while such measures only seemed to strengthen housecats’ resolve. “Should they be in here with No Name Girl? Won’t they disturb her?”

“We want her to wake up, right?”

“Good point. Maybe we should put her closer to the construction?”

“Last week a cable snapped and dropped a beam that brought down a finished wall.”

“Or not… Hey, let me try something.” Tori picked up the hem of her purple brocade deel and placed it in Nergui’s hand. Suddenly… nothing happened.

“In traditional European medicine,” she felt obliged to explain. “touching the hem of a king’s robe is supposed to cure subjects’ illnesses.”

“Maybe it doesn’t work with queens,” Lui conjectured. “I heard European queens don’t count for much more than ornamental heir dispensers. And if it doesn’t work with you, my ex-regent self has a fried potato’s chance in a zuud.”

“They also think a prince’s kiss is supposed to wake up an unconscious woman.”

“Well, that I could probably do.” He leaned over Nergui and briefly bumped lips with her. This time… even more nothing happened.

“Reports differ,” said Tori soothingly, not wanting her brother-in-law to lose face. “Some say it has to be a kiss of true love.”

“Won’t work between strangers, then, unless at least one of them’s completely irrational. Does the true love have to be on the kisser’s side or the kissee’s? Or both?”

Tori shrugged, equally bereft of inspiration. “The king thing sounds easier. Oggy should be home soon.”

The two of them left the room, closing the door behind them.

After a few minutes of quiet, Shut Up wriggled awkwardly out of the haphazard maze of stored furniture. To a human, the room would have been dark, but to the cat it was close to daylight. She needed a soft space that was defensible. As she made her way to the bed, anyone watching would have noticed that her usual weightless and frictionless sashay was degraded to a weary, burdened waddle. As she’d been too embarrassed to emerge and show anyone, but Lui had sort of guessed anyway, her abdomen was quite enlarged. And, adding insult to injury, lumpy.
The manifestly unhappy feline struggled to climb onto the bed. Normally, she could leap five times as high without even thinking about it. Oh well, it’d soon be over.

Nergui, still unconscious, had rolled over onto her side and half-curled her body toward the wall. Shut Up scrambled into the nest-like space between the heater-monkey and the wall, and settled in to wait.

It wouldn’t be long now.
Dream Tells You to Wake Up

_Holy steppe-dumplings, it’s good to be out of that body, Nergui reflected. I’ve got to find out what’s wrong with it.

Her consciousness drifted lazily in the Well of Songs. Not in the overbright, densely packed center where they kept the dangerous songs, but in the tranquil outer whorls of lullabies and drinking songs, where nothing was very challenging. She reached into a jar of especially tasty _qi_ she’d collected from a passing cloud and licked a big dollop off her fingers. Had it been from someone or something that had passed near her body in the physical world? _I wouldn’t mind some more of this._ It was as if honey, saffron, and smoked venison had a beautiful, beautiful baby…

_(Frogspea? Is that you over there)?_ came a somewhat hollow version of a once-familiar voice.

_Dad?_ Nergui answered tentatively.

_(Who else gets away with calling you that?)_ chided Khenbish, the former battle-shaman of Temujin—who-became-Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky.

_I’m just surprised. I haven’t heard from you except when I died. I’d get up and hug you but I’m kind of amorphous right now._

_(That’s what I came to tell you about. You need to get back in your body before it gets too tight. You’ve been out longer than you think. It’s starting to worry people. Specifically, people with large and fancy hats)._  

_Sorry, Dad. I guess I lost track of time. I just felt like such guano… Hey, can you see what’s wrong with me?_

_(It’s a bit far off my migration path. Your mother might be a better one to ask. On the other hand, she’s a little peeved at not getting an invitation to your wedding)._  

_I didn’t get one either. She shouldn’t feel singled out. Plus, I don’t know if the wedding really ‘took’._

_(Things will probably get more confusing before they clear, but you still need to Mongol up and get back down there)._  

_Okay, Dad. Understood._

_(Good news is, you can snag more of that qi if you get a move on)._
Embarrassing Damp Sheets

When Shut Up’s water broke, it drenched the blanket and the heater-monkey underneath. She was afraid of losing her defensible living fortress that protected her from all the directions the wall didn’t, but nothing moved.

For once, Shut Up was determined to be as quiet as possible. It was a point of pride with the queens in her Sukothai cat colony. Birthing kittens might hurt enough that you wanted to scream the roof down, but you didn’t. No, you ‘Meezered up and bore down and got through it with no more than a soft peep or two. Extra kudos if you could keep purring the whole time. The vibration relaxed over-tensed muscles, and it was a great first sound for the little ones to hear as they entered the world.

It all went back, Shut Up understood, to the ancient wild, before the royal feline colonies were given their own Palace apartments and whole hereditary families of skilled, attentive hairless-monkey servants. Beyond the embrasured walls of civilization, the steaming jungles of the Khmer Empire were chockablock with other carnivores that considered newborn kittens a delicious snack. Finding good hiding places and enduring labor pains in silence were skills each generation of cats kept as sharp as their lock-picking claws.

She lifted the base of her tail and let the rest of the length hang. She turned around, sat down, stood up, turned around again until she felt the first tiny head crowning. Then she balanced on her lower spine, reached down, and licked the kitten’s head as well as its stretched surroundings. Wiggle, pace, curl, straighten, Purr, purr, purr,

A squeak and a peep from the little one. That was one down. No sooner did Shut Up bite the cord and finish its bath than it latched voraciously onto a nipple. Couldn’t they wait until they were all born? Of course not. Shut Up knew how many nipples she had, and each of the kittens probably knew how many siblings there would be, but the final nipple-to-kitten ratio wouldn’t be determined until the end. Add to that the unshakeable kitten conviction that some nipples were more desirable than others.

Through it all, the heater-monkey lay still and warmed up the wet blanket. Shut Up had to admit: In this boisterous, tactless, often tail-freezing place... this particular monkey verged on acceptable.

Shut Up’s large, sensitive ears swiveled toward the door. Someone was out there. She hoped Dammit stayed wherever he’d run off to for a while. Would he be able to tell these babies weren’t his?
Everything's Better with Kittens

Ogedei Khagan sat on his private bed in his private room on the very top floor of the World Peace Palace. No one else was allowed in this room, not even to clean it. He needed a place where he didn’t have to concern himself with anyone else; where he could converse with his late father Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky, or privately enjoy all manner of bribes and seized contraband, or even pee out the window into the rock garden if he chose. When he wanted to see his wives, he visited their own well-appointed apartments. For other liaisons, there were guest rooms, garden gazebos, tower solaria, and other accommodations limited only by the parties’ imagination. The Great Khan’s imagination probably had limits, but he hadn’t run into them yet. But this room was his alone.

At least, it was supposed to be.

Unbidden and only half-intentional, his hand opened the top nightstand drawer and withdrew a small scroll he could now recognize by feel alone, and unrolled it by the light of an oil lamp.

The artist wielding the ink-brush had been very good. He was, rumor had it, a former Tibetan monastery boy who had become a Darga in the army. Ogedei often wondered what else he could do.

The picture showed a couple astride a tall, proud-looking, but fidgety coal-black stallion. The tension between all three subjects was palpable. The man was a seasoned Mongol warrior with plumbline-straight- blue-black hair and whiskers, wearing a general’s armor and a challenging grin on a face much more accustomed to scowling. With one hand he held a smaller woman casually but securely on the saddle in front of him. Her legs were bare, and her silk tunic clung to the lithe and buoyant contours it covered. Her black hair, except for a few tendrils snatched up by the wind, was pushed behind one ear to display an opened miniature lock, the dainty key still inside, dangling from the earlobe. Her wide-eyed, flush-cheeked, mid-gasp expression, though, was what most arrested the viewer’s imagination: Overall discomfort interrupted by sudden shock, an edge of fear, and a frisson of excitement. One attempted explanation, that she was reacting to the arrangement of the warrior’s other, hidden hand, had led to the work’s famous nickname: Goose Girl.

The original had arrived by pigeon, addressed to the Anatolian spymaster Sungurtekin: the first communication of any kind in months from Baiju Noyan, a formerly excellent general who had lately begun to worry other people besides the enemy. The picture was meant to convey, as impolitely as possible, that the first phase of rookie Intelligence Agent Nerguitani’s mission was complete. Baiju, the man in the picture, had accepted the task of Unsealing Nergui, the woman in the picture, to release an enhanced level of shamanic power for her to use on the rest of the mission. Her previous life as a Sealed One had been so restrictive that she’d never been allowed on a horse before. Her presence in the saddle, as well as the unlocked earring, attested to her change in status.

Baiju had expected the Khagan to see it and be envious; most Sealed Ones were deployed for the metaphysical benefit of the Golden Family, but Ogedei and his brothers had been cheated out of this one. Somehow, though --- and the exact sequence of events had never been clear ---- a large number of copies had been made and pasted to walls all over KK.

Officially, the Great Khan frowned (a surprisingly rare occurrence) on such an egregious leak related to a secret mission. Privately, Ogedei had to admit that the picture, in and of itself, was strangely compelling. Perhaps, in some larger scheme of things known only to the gods, it needed to be seen.
He’d had the posters torn down all over the city, but kept this one in the top drawer of his nightstand for… private contemplation. He wondered what expression he could have put on her face if he’d been the one to take her on her first ride.

Except… what were those punctures, the size of raw millet seeds, in one corner of the parchment?

*Little tooth-marks?* Seriously?

“Dammit!” the Great Khan of Greater Mongol growled to his theoretically empty bedroom.

Dammit the Thai tomcat, asleep in a concealed hollow under the edge of an antelope-hide bedspread, heard his name taken in vain and treated himself to a silent but luxurious stretch and yawn. He felt less than no shame:

1. This was obviously The Boss’s Room.
2. He had not been challenged and beaten by any other tomcat since he’d gotten here. (In fact, Dammit and Shut Up were the Palace’s first housecats. KK’s barn cats, mainly variegated variations of the hardy, thick-coated Tufted Ruffneck landrace, considered the newcomers a different species and therefore ignored them).
3. Therefore, he was The Boss and this was *his* room. Other than the frequency at which the heater-monkey went out, he had no complaints.

From Dammit’s perspective, all was as it should be. Borjigin Genghis’s Ogedei Khagan might have disagreed… until he remembered he didn’t need a picture tonight. Not with the picture’s inspiration under his very roof.

Lighting a lamp, Ogedei padded toward the door. Dammit, sound asleep again under the bedspread, showed no visible reaction.

No Name Girl was still installed in the storage room, on a velvet-padded fainting couch Tori had picked out in Romantown. She lay curled up on her side, facing away from the door, visibly breathing but otherwise motionless. A small patch of shoulder skin, laid bare by the oversized nightshirt’s too-wide neckline, was all that the hand-lamp illuminated from the doorway --- until suddenly a pair of glowing scarlet disks flared out of the glom and an eldritch voice snarled: {nGo-o-O wAY - y - y!} and hissed inhospitably.

Ogedei hadn’t gotten to be Great Khan by being easily rattled. The lamp oil sloshed a little, but he recovered quickly. “Shut Up, it’s only me,” he stage-whispered. “Oggy. The treat guy. Remember?”

{ahg EEE? NOo-o,} Shut Up insisted. {nGO-o-o}, but made no move as further protest against Ogedei’s slow, non-threatening approach (one which would have deeply surprised anyone who had faced him across a battlefield). Breathing deeply but slowly and silently, Ogedei, at last, gained the edge of the couch and carefully perched a royal buttock on the available space. He did smell something odd. “What’s the matter, Shut Up?” he inquired softly, then let out an awed “Oh… my… Tengri.”

Ogedei’s night vision was not quite as good as a cat’s, but it was better than most humans’. He could see the four little pure-white fuzz balls nestled against their mother’s belly, protected by the defensive wall of Nergui’s sleeping body. “Oh! Oh, no wonder! He marveled softly, lying down on the couch and carefully drawing up his long legs.

Behind closed lids, Shut Up rolled her big round cerulean-blue eyes. Even in Sukothai, where an entire government ministry was mostly about cats, it was the same: As soon as a new mother licked
away all the birth slime and her kittens’ fur dried to a white downy fluff, every clumsy troglodyte with an opposable thumb wanted to pick them up, inadvertently ruining the little ones’ all-important early scent attunement. Sometimes irreparably.

Now was way too early. They hadn’t even finished their first meal yet. She opened her mouth to hiss, and even to bite if needs must...

But the heater-monkey who lay curled around the new feline family, with no sign of regaining consciousness, drew a deep, restless breath, rolled part of the way over, and settled against the intruder’s body with a sigh. He was immediately distracted by the sensation and a whiff of her skin covered by his own borrowed cashmere nightshirt. In brighter light, the visuals would have completely arrested his attention, but the dark allowed him to appreciate the potent olfactory blend of a current or potential lover and his own clothing. Nergui’s refreshing ice-and-spruce aura blended strikingly well with Ogedei’s ambience of a sunny spring meadow recently vacated by a lion.

He reached out a hand, but deliberately stopped short of touching Shut Up or her kittens. Shut Up sighed and surrendered to the prolactin buzz that came with nursing. A tendril of hair, with the same pleasing waviness as in the picture, lay across Nergui’s face. He picked it up between a deft forefinger and thumb and swept it behind her ear, letting his fingertips feel its texture all the way to the end.

“Hmmm,” Nergui sighed contentedly, as if she wished she could purr.

Did she realize that new life had come into the world inches from her body? Did she sense the presence of an approving man on her other side? What would she say and do if he managed to wake her up? ”Ogedei, I’m in love with you; please undress me and let’s do the wild thing right now” would be favorite.

He took the hem of his robe and closed one of her hands around it. Nothing. What was up with those European kings? Was it the kind of material their robes were made out of?

It occurred to him that he should have a hand on her waist, he realized. To keep the kittens safe if she started rolling over on them by mistake.

"Mistake," his inner voice echoed as the jaw-dropping concavity under his hand lit up his palm and fingers and sent an electric jolt straight to ---

"Want this," his spinal cord twinged along its entire length. WANT this.

Some obscure muscle memory cued Nergui to lengthen her spine dramatically, pushing back against her visitor with an agreeable little wiggle. Aaargh… no FAIR... And just as he made up his mind to try kissing her (just in case it amplified the healing power of his royalty --- medicinal purposes only, you understand), Shut Up raised her head, craned her neck, and rasped a loud brambly tongue of approval against Nergui’s nose. Shut Up wanted it duly noted that this monkey was… acceptable.

At this demonstration of rather rough love, Nergui’s eyelashes fluttered, her nose wrinkled, and she stirred. “Mmm --- cat,” she murmured, unerringly booping Shut Up’s nose with an index fingertip. Then she rolled her top half onto its back and opened her eyes.

Whatever she might have been expecting to see, it clearly hadn’t been Great Khan Ogedei in a dressing-gown with a hand lamp. She stiffened and emitted a surprised little shriek. This startled the Khagan into a wordless yelp and an involuntary recoil sent him over the edge of the couch and
onto the floor. The kittens woke up and let out a confused, urgent peeping like the hungry baby birds they’d probably eat someday. {OUUUT! OUUUT! OUUUT!} Shut Up howled indignantly, rudely evicted from her self-generated chemical bliss.

As if all that didn’t constitute enough of a chicken-coop flustercluck, the door banged open.

“Are you all right?” Tolui barked.

“Did she wake up?” Tori shrilled.

And just like that the dark, quiet room became the finish line at Naadam. The Great Khan sat where he’d fallen, scant inches from where he longed to be but wouldn’t get anywhere near tonight.

“Look, everyone!” he exclaimed. “Kittens!”
Somewhere, in a vast flooded cavern, something roughly the size and shape of a lentil said “Wowwww! What was that?”

The other one said “I don’t know for sure but maybe… a whole population just left its world. I was talking to them before all those invisible storms and now I can’t feel them. And they said they were scared of leaving.”

“Were they like us?”

“Yes… and no. It sounded like time moved faster for them.”

“You don’t think it’s almost time for us to leave here, do you?”

“No. Our world keeps getting smaller but there’s still plenty of space and we’re not hungry. And we haven’t even had any quakes yet.”

“So I guess we stick to the plan. Defend our world until we have to leave.”

“Ever wonder if we might be doing something wrong? Something that’s messing up the world?”

“You made too much of that new thinking glop. Make something else for a while. As long as we stick to the plan, we’re doing what we’re supposed to. Everything else needs to check itself and not wreck itself.”
The Greater Mongol royals made their way down the hall to their separate quarters.

“I can’t believe how cute those kittens are,” Empress Toregene enthused.

“You seemed to find their parents sort of scary,” Great Khan Ogedei commented.

“I still do. I’m self-conscious enough about being short, and they’re always way up high in the shadows somewhere, staring down with those creepy red eyes.”

“They’re only red in the dark,” Genghis’s Tolui pointed out. “In brighter light they’re a beautiful blue.”

“What changed?” the Great Khan asked his primary wife, the mother of his heirs.

“Well, Momma Kraya is from Sukothai, remember? She told me that any kitten with a bent tail there is a Ring-Bearer, a special companion to the Queen. While she bathes, she puts her rings on their tails, and because of the bend they stay put. That could be handy at the hot springs. I’ve lost a couple pieces of jewelry there. I can’t wait to see those little kittens’ tails.”

They walked a little more.

“I can’t believe how much that poor girl’s been through,” Ogedei sighed.

“We should do something nice for her,” Toregene suggested.

“I think so, too,” Ogedei agreed.

“We could send up some good meat and milk for breakfast,” Tolui proposed. “And have a specialist in to look her over. Then, when she’s ready, she could move into my room.”

"Your room?" Ogedei repeated, cocking an eyebrow.

“Well, you don’t let anyone in yours. And with Sorgha off on another pilgrimage, I could use the company. There’s plenty of room for her to curl up at the foot of the bed. Besides, I thought I heard a mouse in there the other night.”

“How does a mouse… Wait, are you still talking about Shut Up? I meant No Name Girl.”

“Oh... Well, she could probably do with a good breakfast too. And if she can get the mouse out of my room, she’d also be welcome to stay. Instead of dissolving her marriage to Tai, we could record it as one of those Tibetan ones; when a woman marries into a family, she marries all the brothers.” After a short pause where the others seemed lost in thought, he went on, “Cuts down on succession hassles and keeps the estates intact. Seeing how all our kids get along like cats in a sack has kind of given me a new respect.”

“Being one Borjigin’s wife is enough for me,” Toregene attested. “I love you, Oggy, but each of you boys seems pretty high-maintenance in your own way…. Say, I know! Speaking of hot springs, why don’t we give Nergui one of our VIP passes? Have her worked on by one of the masseurs you trained personally? That’ll fix her right up. It always works for me.”

“We should also check whether she needs a place to stay and how many of her belongings got lost between the mission and that… little detour Tai set up. But the hot springs would be a good start.
And for massages,” he murmured, mainly to himself, “I think we can do better.”
Slavery is a Special Kind of Evil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tabriz was a thoroughly agreeable city, pleasingly plump with prosperity. Stately gardens were sprinkled throughout, which might have been how the city motto came to be “Tabriz: Discover the Freshness.”

Bakshish, the merchant, came back from his lunch break and immediately regretted eating anything at all. An aravt of ten lethal-looking Mongol soldiers stood at ease all across his gateway. They, however, might as well have been butterflies in comparison with the man in the premium-quality but well-used black armor who paced between the cages of shackled merchandise, scowling his world-famous scowl.

Bakshish pretended the sudden halt in his advance was caused by a pebble in his sandal, forced his face into the bravest smile he could muster, and walked himself forward with the gait of a doll propelled to a tea party where all the cups were sure to be filled with mud. “Why, it’s Baiju Noyan!” he effused. “Imagine my traveling so far away from your camp in Anatolia and yet seeing you here!”

“It’s Baiju Darughai now. I’ve been appointed governor of this protectorate. ‘For my sins,’” Baiju replied with a nod of unconvincingly feigned self-deprecation.

“Ah,” Bakshish nodded back, bobbing his head like a bird doing an unsuccessful courting dance. “Congratulations. Those fellows get their ashes hauled more often than a plague crematorium.”

“The office presents its share of opportunities,” Baiju admitted, his scowl lifting slightly before dropping back into place like a headsman’s axe.

“May I ask what brings you to see me today?” Bakshish ventured further, while thinking: Please Allah he doesn’t have another job for me. I barely survived spying for him in Anatolia. I knew plenty of people who didn’t survive it.

“You may have heard,” Baiju said lightly as the touch of a raven’s feather, “that I’ve been moving the slave markets to a regulated zone outside the city.”

“Oh… that’s been you then?” Of course it is. Bakshish had traded in Indian spices and Basra pearls before, but had lost so much profit on the spying missions that he’d gone into something with a higher margin and faster turnaround, despite the attendant risks. And he’d had a chance to prepare for something like this, though it was impossible to prepare for meeting Noyan. “It’s a good thing I’m not a slaver, then.”

“Oh?” Baiju did his eyebrow thing and gestured toward the nearest cage. “These people are not for sale, then? Are you perhaps selling the cages and shackles, and you’ve hired them as demonstration models?”

“I do not sell slaves. I rescue humans and find forever-homes for them.”

“That’s… new,” said Baiju, thinking: And here I’d thought, growing up in the Gobi, I’d seen and heard everything a camel’s anus could possibly produce.

“Well, it’s all this warfare, isn’t it?” Bakshish warmed to his topic. “The number of people left
without homes, families or jobs is geysering. Without rescuers like me, they’d starve. I foster them temporarily until I can place them with someone equipped to keep them. The temporary upkeep costs me, which is why I must charge a modest adoption fee for brokering the introductions.”

“And the reason for the… cages and shackles?”

“It’s for their own safety, Darughai. If I let them wander off, they could hurt themselves. Or someone evil might snatch them.”

“I see… Well, as it happens, I am in the market for a long-term bedmate. I do, as you surmise, get more behind than a tortoise chasing down a hare, but I’ve recently developed additional, less usual needs.”

“Well, you Mongols don’t seem to leave very many attractive young women lying around, mind you. I tell people, if you want an extra virgin, better buy some olive oil, eh?” His jovial guffaw was cut short by another eyebrow. “But look around and tell me if you see anything you like.”

Baiju did so. He wasn’t really sure what he was after: someone similar, yet different enough not to bring back memories that might upset him. He didn’t see any ethnic Mongolians; those were illegal enough that he’d be justified in summarily skinning Baksheesh for a mild-weather coat. Most of these looked to have come from the west, and many were so ill-fed that it was hard to tell what shapes would emerge after a few good meals. Then something occurred to him.

“Can any of them… sing?” he asked, turning back toward the merchant.

Immediately a complex high-soprano trill sprang from one of the cages, but was cut off abruptly by a jostle and a hiss of “Dragi, shhh!”

“Interesting,” Baiju said, and meant it. It wasn’t at all like the multi-tonal khoomei of the Home Steppes, but it was beautiful in its own way. “Step forward, singer,” he instructed in his training-field voice.

There was more jostling and remonstrating in the back of the cage until a tiny, bird-boned, very young-looking woman burst to the front with a proud smile. Her hair was so blonde it was almost white. Her eyes were the blue of a desert sky… and just as empty.

“What’s your name… little one?”

“Dragana,” she answered, and dropped a little curtsy as if her parents had encouraged her to sing for visiting relatives in the parlor.

A taller, athletic-looking brunette pushed through the crowd and took the blonde’s arm. “Dragi, stop!” she entreated the smaller woman in a sort of whispered shout. “I’ve heard about him, he’s -- - Mister, take me instead!” Turning toward Baiju, the brunette began singing. Her song was in a lower register; it had less range and fewer rapid flourishes, but had a mesmerizing intensity as if to vibrate every nearby object to pieces.

“Well --- I ---”

“How it is, your gracious: We all sing together,” said a new voice --- soft, blamelessly deferential, but accustomed to listeners’ full attention. A serene raven-haired woman glided, and a fractious-looking redhead shoved, their way to the front of the cage.

“Stop it, you,” the Darughai growled. “I’m only taking ---”
And the four of them broke into song.

Baiju froze. He stared. Eventually he remembered to close his mouth. When they finished the song with a synchronized *yip!* he jumped, as if suddenly and uncomfortably transported over a long distance.

“Dragana, Dilmana, Irina, and Tudora. They’re all from the same village in the Balkans,” Bakshish interjected.

“We are all that’s left of that village,” said the redhead, tossing her hair contemptuously.

“We cried together as babies until we learned to sing,” the blonde recited dreamily.

Baiju was silent for a moment, trying to recall. When he broke the silence, it was to sing in a surprisingly melodious voice.

“Mi no-si-mo ---” he began, and paused.

“Zel-en venchets,” the four women sang back at him in leaf-shaking harmony.

“Dai nam Lado, le-pi Lado.”

Memories flooded back of a battle won, in part by a Tengri shaman’s rendition of that song. It had roused the souls of the enemies’ victims from their swords, eager to join the chorus and take their ectoplasmic vengeance.

Ignoring his stinging eyes, he growled, “As I said, I’m only buying ---”

“Adopting,” Bakshish corrected.

“I’m only adopting… those *four*.” He tossed a heavy, clanking purse at Bakshish’s feet.

Bakshish hesitated. Back in Anatolia, the Noyan had offered gold to merchants and then slit their throats if they took it.

“And I’m confiscating the rest on behalf of the state and conscripting them into civil service,” Baiju finished, “which needs scholars, dung-sweepers, and everything in between. Pick up the purse, clown, and use the money to change your line of work. If you don’t, then I’ll kill you.”

Chapter End Notes

References:

Textart.ru Database of Slogans: Febreze Air Freshener Slogans

“Ladarke” song cycle by Emil Cossetto
Nergui could vaguely remember being someone, not very long ago, who would have been anxious to walk through the streets of the capital, taking in the passing scene. And if people saw her coming out of the Palace, or going into the Agency, fine; they could make of it what they would. Perhaps a hat, or a brooch, or a pterodactyl…

Not today. She really didn’t feel like going anywhere, and the presence of newborn kittens in her bed weighed heavily on the side of staying put. She was only just up to the challenge of being self-heating furniture for the sleek, short-furred felines. Nor did she want to be seen by anybody at all. If she looked anything like she felt, she must resemble a used execution rug. Her always-perfect-looking boss had enough advantages over her already. Chagaanirvys Darga wasn’t bad to work for; just the opposite, really. It was just that anyone in the same room with her always began to suspect their fingernails were dirty or their socks didn’t match.

She fingered the special hot-springs VIP guest token that had appeared on the tray with the morning milk-tea. Should she just pidge in sick to work, then take off? Tempting, but the Agency had eyes, ears, and flapping cake-holes all over this city. Somebody would probably see. She’d have ’splainin’ to do. Not worth it.

So she went to work, but she took the tunnels.

It’s a common phenomenon that the first day back in the office after an extended absence can be unusually challenging. This one would be worse than most.

“Wow! Look who it is!” a total stranger chirped at her when she emerged from the supply closet that concealed the tunnel doorway. “It’s Goose Girl!”

*Goose Girl. Goose Girl,* she thought, *I’ve heard that before, but what ---*

The unknown co-worker was still staring at Nergui, and more were joining her. This nascent mob seemed to expect a meaningful response from her. Unfortunately, precisely what kind of response was anyone’s guess.

“I think you might have me confused with someone else?” she suggested, speaking slowly and politely as if to a very important drunk,

“I don’t think so,” sing-songed her interlocutor. “Tell me this isn’t like looking in a polished sword-blade.” She waved a scrap of rice-paper in Nergui’s face.

*Oh, my Tengri. Oh, for coitus’ sake…*

It had been imperfectly copied and carelessly treated, but she recognized Doldrum Darga’s commemoration of her first ride in Anatolia (and, afterward, her first time on a horse’s back). Only this was just her discomfited face, cut out and enlarged to fill a third of the page, flanked by “Venerate Goose Girl!” in large, insistent letters.

“So is it true you jumped Baiju Noyan's bones to cure him of criminal insanity?”

Nergui reminded herself that she was home now. Everyone she encountered would blurt out
whatever was on their minds. That was the Mongolian Way. “If I told you I’d have to give you a siege-engine-assisted wedgie,” she answered as blithely as she could manage.

“Is it true you brought back an Azerdeli horse?”

“Yes.” Though she wasn’t exactly sure where The Fork Tongued Son of a Bitch was now.

“Are you really married to Chagatai Khan?”

“Yes, no, and maybe,” she replied, turning on her heel and stepping briskly down the hall. The growing gaggle of the inquisitive trailed behind her.

“Is it true you got engaged to one of Suleyman Shah’s sons?”

“No,’ Though it might have saved me some trouble in the long run if that wheeze had been allowed to work.

“Is it true you did the Dance of the Seven Khadaks for Sultan Ale-ad-Din?”

“No.”

“Is it true if someone masturbates on your shoes, you have to grant them three wishes?”

She halted and spun around indignantly. “Ew! NO!!” A couple of guys immediately turned around and fled in awkward, hunched positions.

“Can you really make people’s privates fall off if you get mad at them?”

She thought for only a second. “Yes,” she pronounced loftily. “Yes, I can.”

Chagaanirvys Darga, Nergui’s femme-fatale boss, lounged elegantly at her desk. Sungurtekin Mergen, the tall Turkman with the bird-of-prey manner, leaned on a scroll-rack. Both drank from ceramic teacups, A third one steamed on the front corner of the desk. Chagaanirvys waved at the cup, and at Nergui, and at the visitors’ chair, indicating that she was to take the tea and sit down.

“Well! If it isn’t the face that launched a hundred wolves,” the Darga greeted her. “What are you wearing?”

“Whatever was available to make me not naked,” she sighed. Tolui had thoughtfully loaned her a freshly washed tunic and trousers that might even be his; they were only two or three sizes too big, whereas Ogedei’s nightshirt, albeit infinitely comforting, constantly tried to fall off. “My whole wagon burned to the axles at Kayis obasi, and everything I brought with me ---”

“Got misplaced in the bhaag -out after the buzkashi match,” Chagaanirvys finished for her. “We had some local agents out there looking for it. Wouldn’t want your official jacket and paiza used by someone unauthorized.”

“Nope. You’re right.” She pitied any fool who tried to pass themselves off as a sixty-three-toli shaman in the Khagan’s civil service, though. They were subject to some very tall orders indeed.

“The usual Yasa death penalty for the loss of government property will be waived due to... circumstances.”

“That’s a relief,” Nergui replied, all her supporting joints suddenly turning to mutton broth. She’d been separated from her saddlebag forcibly by someone she wasn’t allowed to fight.
“Nice belt,” said Sungurtekin. “Can I get a look?”

She unhooked it and passed it over. “I was wearing it when the wolf woke me up. Tai probably meant it as a dump-gift.”

Sun gave a low whistle, hefting the belt’s weight. “If this is his typical dump-gift, I hope he dumps me someday.”

Chagaanirvys cleared her finely sculpted throat. Nergui shrugged. “I don’t go anyplace fancy enough to wear it, but maybe I could sell it if I need to buy something...” she chattered to fill the silence.

“Yeah, like a city,” Sun snorted. “I could be wrong, but I’m usually not: This fits the description of a commemorative buzkashi championship belt presented to Chagatai Khan by the Sultan of Delhi in 1225.”

“Ulgen wept,” Nergui said weakly, lowering her face into her hands. “It was probably the first shiny thing the Khan had to hand when the pack showed up. No effing way can I sell that. I should find a way to return it.”

“You’ll want to lay low and wait a while,” the Darga advised. “Let things cool off between the brothers. It was probably their worst disagreement since their dad passed.”

“May he ride forever in the sky,” they all said.

“I’ll be guided by you,” Nergui vowed. “I don’t want ‘started a civil war’ on my achievement scroll.”

“Now. Your next mission…”

“Is there something in the complete opposite direction from Anatolia? Like --- I don’t know --- Sukothai? Anyplace that likes cats that much can’t be all bad. Or maybe Nihon? I’ve heard people are nice there… at least if they know what’s good for them.”

“We’ve had all kinds of requests for you, what with all the publicity.”

“What publicity? This Goose Girl thing? Could either of you explain?”

Chaaganirvys pulled a fat scroll-case from a drawer and extracted a sheaf of papers. “This is a copy of the original drawing Baiju Noyan pidged to Sungurtekin.”

Nergui looked and nodded. She’d seen it while the ink was drying. There she was, looking uncomfortable, and there was Baiju behind her looking unbearably smug, and there was The Black Bitey, Baiju’s special showing-off stallion, underneath them both looking impatient for something to bite.

“This was supposed to be for Sun Mergen’s and the Great Khan’s eyes only. I wasn’t even supposed to see it. Sun would have verbally advised me of the progress in the mission.”

“Oh, Cha-Cha, I wasn’t withholding any important information,” Sun Mergen interrupted in a placating tone. “I was just afraid the... tone... would offend you.”

“And I’ve asked you not to call me that so many times! On the bright side, we can be sure the leak wasn’t from my office. Because leak it did. Copies were pasted on walls all over KK within hours! The Khagan saw them there first before Sun even got to talk to him. He came in with two handfuls
of them he’d torn down himself, and he wasn’t impressed with our security.”

“So we sent people to take them all down right away,” Sun explained.

“... but the next day these showed up.” The Darga held up another sheet from the pile. This one was just of Nergui’s face, and the words “Where is Goose Girl?” There were twice as many of them, and they were everywhere. We offered a small reward for bringing them in, and eventually they seemed to be gone. But then there was this one.” The same face, with the words “Goose Girl Has an Aravt” (squad of ten). “They put these all over the outside walls, even on the Turtles. We wondered for a few days why incoming travelers were talking about Goose Girl after we thought we’d taken everything down. Then --- the day after the buzkashi championship, in fact --- they were all... updated.” She held up a sample where Aravt had been crossed out and “MINGAN” (regiment of 1,000) scribbled below it. “And finally, when those were torn down, they were replaced with these.” The same “Venerate Goose Girl” version she’d been shown in the hall.

Nergui looked almost as uncomfortable now as she did in the picture. “But... why?” she asked the room. “What purpose did it serve?”

“Well, that’s the million- dirham question,” Sun affirmed. “Somebody who didn’t know any better might assume you were a political figure who disappeared somewhere and started building her own army.” In response to her horrified stare, he said, “Luckily, we knew very well who you were and what you were up to, and you’d presented yourself well at the Palace, so nobody who matters took it that way. But now that you’re back, I’ll ask: do you have any enemies who might have done this to discredit you? Anybody ever call you ‘Goose Girl’ before?”

“No,” Nergui answered definitely and immediately. “Any enemies I ever made would just walk up and bludgeon, stab, or choke me. Maybe shoot an arrow out of the dark. But something this drawn-out and elaborate, with no physical threat? I can’t imagine.

“And why would anybody call me ‘Goose Girl’? Birds give me the red-ass. I’ve shot my share of geese for food, but I was never the best or the worst in the hunting party. No, sorry, I’m getting no inspiration.”

“It’s all right, though,” Chagaanirvys reassured her. “We think we can turn your fame to our advantage.”

Does that ‘our’ include me? Nergui thought. Aloud she said, “I’m famous? How is that good? Spies are supposed to blend in and be anonymous. Wouldn’t being famous mean I’m washed up as a spy?”

“No necessarily,” Sun reassured her. “You’re a good candidate for what we’d call an ‘overt operative; someone who draws everyone’s attention while the ‘anonymous blenders’ go about their business unnoticed. We’ve had several inquiries already. In particular, King Shahryar of Sasania would like to join our State. The location would put him in your Chagatai’s Khanate.”

“My’ Chagatai?” Nergui mouthed, rolling her eyes.

“The trouble is, he’s married as many wives as the Khan, but has become a grieving widower just as many times. Perhaps Shahryar’s tastes run to unusually delicate specimens; it’s not clear. What is clear is that the first time Chagatai lends him a wife and doesn’t get her back, there’s going to be the kind of trouble no one needs.”

Nergui’s unhappy prediction about where her bosses were going with this was eclipsed by the abrupt intrusion of another thought. “Now when you say ‘Chagatai lends him a wife ’...”
“Well, you must have known; it’s not exactly a well-kept secret. Chagatai was getting some slings and arrows for hogging all the best wives in the Khanate, so to appease the populace he’s been known to lend them out to selected VIPs in exchange for special favors.”

“Special…” Nergui echoed, trailing off.

“Political, military, economic… whatever appeals at the time. Oh, his three Queens are exempt, of course. But all the others are, as it were, up for grabs.”

Nergui managed to nod her head in understanding, though her throat felt stuffed with ashes. *If I had stayed…* “And this Shahryar character: you expect me to…”

“Fix him,” Chagaanirvys affirmed. “As you fixed our sick puppy of a Noyan.”

“Just to be clear… by canoodling with him? Just like all the women who so coincidentally died?”

“It’s up to you, of course. If you think you can do it by telling him extraordinary bedtime stories, go for it. Whatever works.”

Nergui took a deep breath, “I understand why Baiju needed to be salvaged if at all possible. Even after all I went through, I admit he’s a… rare talent in a growing field of endeavor. But this Shahryar guy? We can’t have much invested in him yet. Why don’t we just kill him? He sounds really killable.”

“Well, that option is always on the table, of course. But we find that if we can leave existing heads of state in place, annexation is smoother. People are reassured by assuming they’re still dealing with the devil they know.”

“So… is this where my career’s going? Canoodling with highly-placed degenerate psychopaths until I get too old or one of them manages to kill me?”

“There are more appealing ways to phrase it but… Yes, pretty much. What’s wrong with that?” Something about the way Chagaanirvys narrowed her limpid eyes warned Nergui they were on dubious ground.

“You’re a specialist in high demand,” Sun put in. “‘The medicine that goes down like a dessert,’ has been said.”

“Sounds like Noyan,” Nergui grimaced.

“Actually, I think that might have been him,” Sun admitted.

“You might not know this, but… not all shamanic Unsealing effects recur. That is, some former Sealed Ones’ hoo-has work healing magic over and over again, but others are one-and-done. We don’t know what kind I have yet.”

“Ah,” Chagaanirvys smiled as if she’d been waiting for this. She reached into the drawer again and removed a pigeon-sized mini-scroll. “Yesulun Khatun writes from First Queen’s Residence, Bukhara: ‘It comes to my attention that one of your Agents, while traversing the Silk Road, married, and subsequently slept with, my husband, Chagatai Khan.’”

Nergui rolled her eyes. *Makes it sound like the whole thing was my idea.*

Chaaganirvys waited for Nergui’s irises to complete their circular excursion, then continued: “‘Ever since then the Khan has been consistently rising before mid-morning, abstaining from
intoxicants until mid-afternoon, actively training with his troops, and taking a keen interest in affairs of state. Please convey my thanks to this Agent, who hasn’t been seen since and whose name no one seems to have caught. I want her to know she is welcome in our Khanate at any time.’

Chaaganirvys gave Nergui a sharp-toothed smile that sent shivers down Sungurtekin’s back. “Busted,” she pronounced.

“That kind of praise from a Khongi is extremely rare,” Sun put in. Chagatai had chosen a pair of Khongirad consorts, who were also sisters graduating at the top of their class, as his first two wives. If he must sire heirs, he reasoned, he might as well make the process as pleasant as possible. While Khongis could be limitless in their gracious patience with their protectors --- and a select few of their protectors’ important friends --- they were famously nasty to everyone else, particularly other women who might displace them. The Queen’s effusive praise gave Nergui the urge to consult a Seer, just to find out if any of the hotter Hells had recently frozen over.

“I get that,” Nergui said slowly, “but… I’ve been experiencing side effects I can’t explain lately, and I was hoping not to have to do another canoodling mission until I get it figured out. I didn’t want to go into this because I hate to whine. At first I thought it was from being resurrected, but now I wonder if I’m leaving too much of my energy on these guys. Parting from them makes me feel all raw and shredded like my skin’s been gone over with a wool-carding brush. As everyone knows, shamans who don’t die early go mad. I want to be useful to our State for a few more decades, but I need a little breathing space to get rid of… whatever this reaction is.”

"Take all the time you need,” the Darga said magnanimously. “After all, sometimes as much as a week or two can go by without some new woman being called to Shahryar’s palace and never being seen again."

And if I needed a passive-aggressive guilt trip, I could go back to my home camp, Nergui thought but didn’t say.

“And you’re definitely not crazy yet,” Sungurtekin pronounced. “Only a sane person would hesitate at the prospect of jumping into a serial killer’s bed. Now, maybe if you were eager to go on more missions...”

Chapter End Notes

References

“Airplane!” movie written and directed by Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker

“I Love Lucy” TV show written by Jess Oppenheimer (Seasons 1–5), Madelyn Davis, Bob Carroll Jr., Bob Schiller (Seasons 5–6), and Bob Weiskopf (Seasons 5–6)

“The A-Team” TV show created by Frank Lupo and Stephen J. Cannell


“Catch-22” book by Joseph Heller
Half an empire away, Baiju Noyan flopped back on his sizeable provincial-gubernatorial bed (not the half-acre bed of his dreams yet, but a step in the right direction) like a somewhat gob-smacked but euphoric starfish. His expression of wonder retained no trace of his signature scowl.

“What did we tell you, batko?” teased Dilmana the saucy one, booping the most feared man in five countries playfully on the nose. “We do everything better in concert.”

“I’ve had… thousands of women…” he confessed dreamily, “but always… one at a time.”

“Maybe to keep them from running away?” suggested Irina the artless one. “But you bought us, batko. You own us now. Until you free us or sell us, we’re not going anywhere.”

“Good!” crowed Dragana the fanciful one, bouncing up and down. “Because I like this bed! Much better than haystacks!”

“What’s this… ‘batko’ word you keep calling me?” Baiju’s scowl showed signs of returning as doubt crept into his voice.

“Is respectful, And affectionate,” explained Tudora the patient one. “Like ‘father’ but not family-father. Larger. Like you might say… ‘Big Daddy.’”

“Oh! Oh! Let’s take another bath and sing more songs!” Dragana the soprano suggested, still bouncing.

“Batko has a nice voice,” Dilmana the mezzo said slyly, “in spite of, he sounds like Turk.”

“What’s wrong with Turks?” Baiju demanded. “My mother was a Turk. She taught me to sing. My father was a Mongol, but all he ever did was shout.”

“No insult to your mother, batko,” Tudora the contralto reassured him. “It’s just that where we come from, Turks make so much war.”

“Not Mongols, though,” Irina the alto clarified. “There aren’t any Mongols there.”

_Oh, no? Give us another few months_, Baiju thought but didn’t say aloud. “Well, pillows,” he told the four former Balkan farm-girls, “I’m quite pleased with my purchase so far. But now it’s time to work on the reason I bought you. Those needs and practices of mine that must be kept… absolutely secret.”

“Oh! Secrets are fun!” Dragana bubbled, clapping her hands. The other three women, though, fell silent and sober, exchanging wary glances.

The Noyan rose and crossed the bedroom to open the doors of a large armoire. “To that end, I’ve procured certain… properties… for us to use.” Gentle Tudora, sensible Irina, and even bold Dilmana edged backward apprehensively.

When he turned back to the women on the bed, he was holding four bouquets of roses and four boxes tied with colorful ribbon bows. “Each of you is to take one,” he declared in a voice that would brook no dissent. “We’ll --- he paused for an involuntary grimace --- ‘hold hands and have a walk in the garden a little later, but first,’” as he visibly steeled himself “each of you will tell me about your day.”
Khaldun Rashaan Mönkh (Hot Springs Eternal) was not labeled, or even marked, on publicly accessible maps of KK and environs. Nergui knew this because she’d checked. It gave her an excuse to get a new map.

What you had to do, was: You had to take the morning camel train headed for Mondagovi, riding on the very last camel. To the footstool-duty person who helps you up, you discreetly say “Does the next caravanserai serve anything besides mutton?” They will reply “It’s strictly BYOB: Bring Your Own Bodog.” Tip them whatever you think is fair. If they agree that it’s fair, they will take out a distinctive handkerchief and blow their nose. When the train passes the trace that goes to the hot springs, the attendant will drop that same handkerchief. Look out for it and turn when you see it. Then just keep going even if it seems like you’re lost. The trace may disappear periodically, but sometimes you can pick it back up by lying down prone and looking at the sun’s reflection off the sand grains.

Besides the disappearing-trace vicissitude, Nergui noticed that the sides of the trace were peppered with discouraging-looking human skeletons. However, to a critical and medically-trained eye, the bones in each one were not all from the same species, let alone the same person. Wherever they’d all died, it wasn’t where they lay; someone had collected them elsewhere and staged them here.

Just when it looked like she’d already passed the place where the legendary King Gesar lost his shoes and her tailbone was ready to secede from the rest of her spine, a hidden valley opened up ahead and revealed her destination.

It struck her as an otherworldly place. To someone like her who’d spent significant time in other worlds, this was saying something. A forest of rock towers reached for the sky in the midst of an otherwise gently rolling landscape. Slabs of rock and awnings of wood provided shade between them. Puffs of pure-white water vapor emanated from the various openings. A modest woodland wrapped itself around the rock formation like a baby’s bib, the thriving trees attesting to the wholesomeness of the water.

The camel had been here before. It took off toward the trees as though its tail were on fire. As far as it was concerned, its burden could hang on, fall off, or ascend to the sky with a troupe of dancing djinn. Nergui clung like a tick and vocalized to distribute the pain over more of her body so it would be less intensely concentrated in that one spot.

The landscape may have been gently rolling, but Nergui’s descent at the corral was not. “No, in fact, I haven’t gotten down off a lot of camels, she muttered half-aloud. “I usually get down off of geese.” The camel was already ears-deep in a food bucket; the rest of the world could be on fire for all it cared. She wandered into the misty shade and found a beautifully carpeted reception area illuminated by hanging lamps. Leafy plants grew in attractively glazed pots; Nergui’s senses picked up their contented, thirsty slurping of water from the air and soil. A subtle scent of ylang-ylang and oak-moss drifted from an incense burner.

A host sat at a teak desk. Like many civilian receptionists, he was dressed and groomed far above his probable pay grade. Nergui always wondered how they managed. She quickly produced the VIP paiza before he could send her away with a flea in her ear for being scruffy.

“Welcome, fortunate guest of the thrice-blessed Borjigins,” he said smoothly. Or perhaps ‘she’? Nergui wondered at the resonant counter-tenor. “I’m Torgonshaakhai of Khongirad, an acolyte of the Fog Temple. I’ll be your guide while you’re here. Would you like some iced tea, now that
you’re off the parched and dusty road?”

“Yes, please. Thank you. I’m pleased to meet you.” She had as many questions as there were poppy seeds in a poppy-seed cake, but she wasn’t inclined to blurt them out immediately. To begin with, she knew what ice was and she knew what tea was, but…?

It was delicious; milkless and saltless like Red Panda’s hot tea, but not painful like hers because instead of being scalding hot it was icy cold. Along with some kind of fruit there was ice floating in it too.

“Up at the top of the pinnacles, ice forms in rock crevices almost every night,” Torgonshaakhai conversed.”After our morning service, we carry it down to our deep cellar, where it lasts most of the day.”

“I knew someone that grew up in the Gobi licking ice out of rock crevices,” Nergui replied casually, then realized that had been Baiju Noyan, then winced as her spine and hips seemed to wrench themselves with a sudden lash of pain… though not all pain…

“Oh dear, you did have a rough ride,” the guide commiserated. She gave him her questioning look: the one that gave many targets the impression that their world was flattening from front to back.

Torgonshaakhai looked back at her just as blankly and quizzically.

In a moment something occurred to Nergui that made her break the eye-lock and look gratefully at the ceiling. “On the camel.”

“Of course, on the camel. What did you think I meant?”

“Don’t mind me. I must just really need this.”

“They say satisfaction extracts the truth as effectively as deprivation.”

“Wouldn’t know. Not my department, and I hope it’ll never be.”

“Shall I describe our healing procedures?” he asked as they walked down a cool tunnel lit by lamps in crystal-paned niches,

“Please do, gracious host.”

“I would suggest the gentlest of purifications and realignments. No discomfort will last more than a moment.”

“If your standards of discomfort are close to mine, I agree.”

“Would you like the No Distractions accessories?”

“What are those?” Despite the attendant’s melted-butter voice, Nergui’s professional suspicions instantly raised a snub-nosed head and tasted the air.

“A blindfold, ear shells, and a silk sheet. You can remove them at any time”

She paused to use her extra senses to scan the vicinity. No lurking nasties were revealed. She didn’t completely trust her instincts lately, but what the hells. She’d heard of the Fog Temple and none of it had been bad. “I already feel like I’ve got the whole place to myself.”

“Slow day. Gibbous moon phase.”
She made up her mind. “Yes. Yes, Torgonshaakha of Khongirad, I place myself in your capable hands.” She stretched out face-down on the padded slab and felt the sheet waft lazily down over her.

“Do you have any restrictions on healing touch? Someone who claims your heart, for example?”

“My soul belongs to Tengri.” she murmured, already drifting off into a trance, “and everything else is the Khagan’s.”

*Well, that’s handy,* Ogedei Khagan thought as he rubbed fragrant oil between his palms outside the doorway.
When Ogedei opened his senses to qi patterns, Nergui’s back reminded him of a burning city.

On the conquest road with his father and brothers, he’d seen enough burning cities to become something of an expert. There were different ways of doing it, depending on the result you were after. You paid attention to the weather, especially the prevailing winds, and lay low until a good day came. You’d send your torch-bearers after certain types of targets in a certain order. You could arrange it to trap everyone or to give them enough warning to escape. Provide a blistering blaze full of dancing nightmares, or start with a cloud of thick smoke that let sleepers vacate their bodies quietly before the flames took hold, never realizing what was happening to their homes.

Nergui’s energy didn’t look as if it had been razed according to any kind of plan. Ogedei had seen this kind of result when townsfolk had lit out ahead of the advancing army and tried not to leave anything useful behind. Every home, shop, storehouse, and other structure had the earnest but roughshod attention of a different and inexpert arsonist. Nergui’s qi had hot and cold spots that showed up to him as intermittent blazes and charcoal smears. Meridians were blinking and interrupted. Most of her lower back was shadowed as if the energy there had been looted by some intruder. He’d seen this before in people, especially women, who had overstretched their resilience.

He began without touching her skin, instead passing his hands through the air four inches above her surface, collecting and shaking off the static charges that jumped to his palm with a campfire ember’s sting. In time there were no more snaps and zaps, just a smooth warmth that pushed back gently and reacted when he changed direction. Her breathing had slowed and deepened. Other than breathing, her physical body was perfectly still. Her energy body still blinked out intermittently, but less often than it had before; parts of it still struggled against twists and knots. While the angle of the sun through the skylight followed its accustomed promenade, he patiently continued to smooth out her aura, letting his hands travel closer and closer until he touched her shoulder blades with the fragrant oil.

He took his time and gave it his entire attention. He could run a fingertip down one of her meridians and hear a buzzing hum, like a damaged singing bowl. He worked patiently until he could produce a single clear note, then moved on to the next one, and then the next. When he started work on her lower spine a sudden sensation of being bitten made him pull back, although he managed to do so smoothly so as not to break her relaxation. He half-expected to see blood on his fingers, but there was none, and when he cautiously returned to the lower back nothing more happened.

Ogedei’s interest in counteracting human suffering began in childhood. His older brothers Jochi and Chagatai were preparing for careers in warfare by squabbling from the white thread of early-bright to the red thread of early-black... during the weeks when they didn’t wrangle all night after bickering all day. They’d fight, and bite, and fight and fight and bite. Fight, fight, fight. Bite, bite bite. “Oggy,” his mother Borte would sigh in frustration, “if you can simmer those two down, or at least get them to fight somewhere else, I’ll be grateful. There might even be a shoe-sole cake in it for you.” So small Ogedei became peacemaker, tie-breaker, and referee for his brothers, who realized his usefulness and saw no point in antagonizing him. The system became stable and fairly predictable. Then along came Tolui.
Temujin’s Tolui was not the sort of baby brother that constantly tagged after his elders, pestering them to include him in their plans. Josh and Tai would not have taken well to that. Instead, he was the only kind of baby brother that actually irritated them more: the kind with absolutely no interest in them or their activities.

Josh and Tai decided Lui was “runty” and “needed toughening up.” In fact, he simply took after Borte, neat and compact, while the other three were tall Temujin’s spit and image: Josh rangy, Tai hulking, and Oggy strapping. Also, Lui could spend an hour looking at a horse’s ear, the moon, a lizard, an interesting rock, and eventually what he seemed to have been waiting for: a scroll, practically any scroll. Josh and Tai felt this was odd and probably unhealthy, and even Oggy couldn’t convince them to leave Lui alone, though distracting them with something to argue about often worked. To Oggy’s surprise, though, Lui didn’t want to be defended. Instead, he took his brothers’ bullying with an abstracted equanimity, as if they too were specimens he wanted to study.

Lui accepted Oggy’s ministrations, though, to the thousands of small wounds his study of bullies would cost him. Bit by bit Ogedei picked up whatever medical knowledge he needed to take care of his brother, which would later prove useful on the battlefield where sometimes there weren’t enough medics and shamans to go around. For Tolui’s part, he was utterly devoted to Ogedei and solemnly promised to help him if he ever needed it. During the year of the Kurultai that transferred the Great Khanate from Tolui’s regency to Ogedei’s rulership, Tolui had stepped up in a very big but necessarily secret way.

As a high-level shaman, this No Name Girl would be able to figure out what Oggy and Lui needed now in order to dodge the many curses flying towards them from the annexed and to-be-annexed lands. As a spy, she was trained in discretion. And if she was bonded to the Borjigins by a legal family tie, they could freely tell her everything ...

He couldn’t forget the roomful of extreme love that had surrounded them that night at the Palace. It couldn’t all have just been kitten magic, although kitten magic was a force to be reckoned with. Someone who could, without waking up, generate enough reassurance and comfort to be a doula to a high-strung Royal Thai cat shouldn’t be dispatched all over the State and its current or future protectorates to have more of this kind of damage done. Pimping her out to the elite and abusive would only add a new meaning to the phrase “laid waste.”

She should regain her health, he decided, and stay within his reach in case he needed spiritual healing. Even in her current overstressed state, she had a beautiful soul. Admittedly, her rear end wasn’t bad either. She should experience kindness, compassion, love; even motherhood if she were so inclined. He could offer her all of that. But he had to be careful. As he’d told a chronicler who’d interviewed him in his twenties, his biggest turn-off was “unwillingness” and it had always made things tricky. Besides the other men around him thinking he might be a little bit daft, he had to approach women circuitously so they wouldn’t consent merely for the sake of national loyalty or hierarchical obedience.

And some third party was bound to have a beef. Though he’d fought it as hard as he’d fought any enemy in the field, royal courts were a haven for zero-sum gameplayers. Every breath anyone took was of air someone else thought they deserved more. But what was the point of being Great Khan of Greater Mongol if he had to get consensus on every gods’ damn thing? The succession was all set; one new wife at this late date wouldn’t upset the ammo cart. Nergui, still deep in trance, emitted a distant, plaintive whimper. Ogedei realized his breath had quickened and his teeth had clenched. Was it her nearness that brought out his all-but-dormant selfish side, or was it rebelling on its own against its peacetime suppression?
We are what we want, he realized at length. That's the Mongolian way.

Chapter End Notes

References

“The Itchy and Scratchy Show”-within-a-show theme from “The Simpsons” TV show by Matt Groening
Even over the sonic fog of the waterfall, Nergui could hear the ripples on the water’s surface babble and chuckle past her ears as her masseur swept her body gracefully to and fro across a mild current of water that was warm, soft, buoyant, and minerally-smelling in a good way. His strongly built arms supported her under the shoulders and knees and sailed her around like a child’s toy boat.

She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so safe and cared-for. With her ordinary tactile sense, she could feel a strong heartbeat pulsing from the broad chest through the muscular arms around her. To her augmented senses, the heart-energy buffeting against her was like nothing she’d ever experienced. Like a blast from a furnace, except that it invigorated instead of destroying; a friendly fire. Meanwhile, each beat of her own heart sent a delicious pulse down the length of her vagus nerve, echoing deep satisfaction from the inner walls of her ribcage. Let her fingertips might get as pink and wrinkled as dried goji berries; she never wanted it to end. How much time did the ninety-nine sky spirits spend floating around up there just like this?

He spoke then, but with such smooth modulation that it didn’t startle her.

“We’re the only ones in this cavern. Even if we weren’t, only I can hear your indoor voice over the waterfall. And I am sworn to keep your secrets.”

Nergui surreptitiously nipped the inside of her own cheek to keep from breaking the mood by snorting at the thought: Well, that’s a good thing. I wouldn’t want any “authority figures” listening in, and that’s for sure as horse manure.

“So if you feel anything inside that needs to get out as words, or even just vocal sounds, now is when they’ll do the most good.”

She took several deep breaths. “I ---” she began, then sighed and trailed off.

“They ---” she tried, then “Something ---” Then, without warning, she burst into tears.

Even in the dimly lit cavern with her blindfold still on (she’d declined all offers to remove it because she “was enjoying the inside show”), No Name Girl’s crying face was a sobering sight to Ogedei, whom, truth to tell, had never been overly keen on sobriety. Her nose reddened. Her features warped and puckered. Various unattractive liquids began leaking out of her various face-holes. A sound like the attempted cross-threading of two rusty pipes emanated from somewhere in the back of her throat. Whoa, he thought, going a shade paler as he tried not to recoil too tangibly. Note to self: Never make her cry.

The keening and wailing wandered over an eldritch scale of pitches and harmonies of Two Voice and Three Voice that were highly evocative, which is to say, disturbing. Finally, she seemed to return to her earthly self.

"I just don't know what's wrong with me," she choked out. "All of a sudden I'm sad about everything and afraid of everybody. And my shamanics are a shambles. I hate being this way." She broke down into sobbing again, then mastered herself, though it was painful to watch.

“I want to be brave and loyal,” she sniffled. “I want to be someone who does whatever our State needs done. I don’t want to be cowardly or childish or, Tengri forbid, useless. But the Agency wants me to go around giving all the worst villains happy endings. Indefinitely. I don’t look down
on people who do that kind of work, and I don’t feel like I’ve got a good reason to be this revolted by the idea, but I am anyway.

“They confirmed it when I got back, but I suspected even on the way home. Getting bridenedapped on the way felt more like a rescue than a violation. Tai would be demanding, for sure, but at least I’d only have to adjust to him. Or so I thought, anyway. I also thought that whole arrangement was by your instigation, or at least with your consent. Neither was true, of course, and I wonder why I bother thinking anymore since I’m just so wrong. Listen to me, I sound so whiny! I didn’t used to be whiny.

“I haven’t had time to seek treatment or do any full-on rituals for myself, but I’ve prayed on it a lot. I’ve had to give up on trying to reason my way through it; like, ‘What if I had magical healing blood? Would that be better or worse? At least I could go around telling people to bite me. Or what about tears? People would profit by keeping me miserable.’ It doesn’t help.” Her voice broke. "Maybe I need to make peace with selling myself now so I can buy myself back later," she said almost normally, then resumed sobbing. "Because now is the time in my life when I have something to sell."

He wondered who had brought this intelligent, honest, promising citizen to such a bleak, hopeless frame of mind. He had half a mind to start kicking forks until he found out.

The strong arms set her gently on her feet in chest-deep water. He leaned his forehead against hers, drew her heart against his own, and smoothed a wing of her dripping hair indulgently down her shapely back. “If that’s not the life you want,” he said in a quiet version of his Ruling Voice, “then it’s not the life I want for you. And I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen."

The brow chakra is the seat of dreams and visions. Their sudden connection shocked them both, opening a huge vaulted soul-space of floating worlds and blazing lights and all manner of vessels traveling between them. They watched silently for a time that was difficult to measure. *This one dreams as far and wide as I do*, each of them thought. *Together, where might we go?*

Finally, a little regretfully, he spoke again. “Well then, estimable Cat-Doula? Aren’t you going to ask me how a mere hot-spring temple priest can presume to change your external world?”

“I never underestimate the influence that can be exerted by a bodyworker,” she said as he felt her shrug one of her complicated shrugs that conveyed both nothing and everything. “Especially at a high-end place like this. You must have the ears of all the deciders. And, if they prove stubborn, you have their other body parts too,”


“The hands. The guide’s hands had this… amazing, very unusual texture.”

“They spend an hour a day punching sandbags. And they do a special moisture treatment so calluses don’t build up.”

“And yours don’t. Not that they’re rough or anything, and your moves might be better than theirs, but I could still pick up the memories of battle. Smoothed-over scars. Plus, you left your archer’s thumb-ring on.”

“Did I?” He looked at his hand and saw the heavy silver ring, now dark with a patina from soaking in the mineral-laden spring. “Damn me,” he laughed it off. “That’s a turnip-wagon mistake. I guess I’m out of practice.”
“You don’t often come out here and impersonate a masseur for people you wonder about?”

“Not for a long time,” he realized. And, unlike those past occasions, he hadn’t thought of this one as a lark. He’d sent her on what could easily have been a suicide mission. Improbably, she’d both survived and succeeded. Why shouldn’t he clear his appointment scroll until he made her love her Mongolian life again?

“And you have way too much responsibility to spend time pounding sand every day.”

“Yes, I’ve got subordinates to pound sand for me now. So what kind of life would appeal to you?”

“Well…” she hesitated as if she feared that speaking of mundane matters would disrupt her enjoyable trance, “Before I got called up to service, I studied conventional shamanic healing, but I also sought out all the alternative-medicine teachers I could find. I paid my way by practicing in the villages. Lately, the shadow of shaman’s madness has wrapped itself around me like a scarf. With my varied training and all the experts I’ve met, I’m in an exceptional position to figure out how to prevent it, cure it, or at least mitigate it. If I could do that, shamans could stay in touch with the living world longer. All the other healers who don’t go mad will have a longer time to work on cures for other ills, so everyone would benefit. Eventually, shamans might even be able to lead less restricted lives.” Oops, she probably shouldn’t have brought that up. “But it all goes down the long-drop if I’m driven to my breaking point too early, which I think is why I’m fighting this other career path,” she returned to her main point hopefully.

But: “Less restricted? Restricted how?” Golden Ogedei asked her, his voice a little tight. She couldn’t know, could she? Then again, once you got sixty-three toli, what couldn’t you know?

“Well…” she stalled again, regretfully feeling her muscles begin to tense up again. It’s well known, at least to those who know it well, that no shaman can ever be Khan, but there’s no way I’m going there right now. Neither Oggy nor Tai was a shaman, she would have bet a whole pitcher of airag. All the Borjigin brothers had their father Genghis’s exceptional magnetism, albeit less of it. Maybe only a certain amount of that energy could be in the living world at one time. Still, there was something else here, though not a risky amount of it.

When shamans went through their initiatory ordeals, they were euphemistically said to be “touched” by the spirits. Among themselves, they mostly agreed it was more like being “coshed over the head in an alley” by the spirits. Ogedei hadn’t been touched, but it sometimes seemed like the spirits stopped and waved at him from not too far away. It was one of the things about him that piqued her interest, although there was a lot of other stuff too.

Remembering he was sitting there expecting a response, she said offhandedly, “Oh, you know; there are a lot of fields where they’re allowed to be advisors, but not principals. Everyone’s afraid of the day they break off in mid-sentence, start flapping their arms, and fly away with the cranes.”

“I see.” He’d sensed no hesitation, as might occur while thinking of a less controversial example. “And what other things would you like in your life?”

“Traveling around to different places. Helping people wherever I am, but moving on before wearing out my welcome. Enjoying a city sometimes and the country other times, but not getting stuck in either for too long.”

“I often wish I could get away with that, the way Tai does. Dad said, though, you’ve got to have a city for all the visitors. Dignitaries need to know where they can find their opposite numbers. And you can’t just move into an established one in the annexed lands; it would open up a whole can of Death Worms. Not the least of which is that Mongols do best in Mongolia. And he was right about
“May he ride forever in the sky,” Nergui recited, happy to have changed the subject away from herself.

“Do you think Mongolians can warm up to a permanent city?”

“Definitely. A lot of them already have. My boss never wants to see a live sheep again. Speaking of warming up, if there’s some way to accommodate nomad camps that need to get out of a zuud in the winter, you’ll probably get a bunch of their kids to stay.”

The Khagan nodded thoughtfully. The zuuds, multi-day stretches of extreme winter weather, killed hundreds of families and thousands of head of livestock so often they were classified into white, black, iron, cold, and combined; any given year might bring at least one sort. “Some walls to keep out the godsdamn wind would probably go a long way.” He turned back to her and placed his palms on her upper arms. The sun chose that moment to beam in through one of the natural skylights and dramatically illuminate Ogedei’s gold-red-black hair and Nergui’s amber irises. “But let’s not talk about matters of state right now. It’ll undo all the relaxation we’ve been working on.”

“We’d probably have to start all over,” Nergui grinned impishly. “Wouldn’t that be terrible?”

He wondered how much of his thoughts she could pick up. He imagined, as vividly as possible, the two of them frolicking between expertly tanned royal wolf-skins by a pit of fragrant embers next to a sweet-water stream under a sky with more stars than blank space in the blessed Orkhon Valley. He smiled as he saw her eyes darken, her cheekbones and lips pinken, and her breath deepen. There, he thought. I’ll hold this image until, ideally, she looks up and says “Khagan?” Then I’ll put two fingers to her lips and whisper “Ogedei,” and I’ll tip her head back and steal --- no, much subtler, pickpocket a kiss; it’ll only be a brush of my lips over hers as light and fleeting as a feathered wingtip splitting the air. Mmm… sublime, just as I expected. Then I’ll whisper "I'm just a nice boy you've been looking at. I've been looking at you too. And now we have a little time with nobody else looking..." By that point, every nerve in our bodies will be almost unbearably aware of the other's nearness. She might take an apprehensive breath and murmur something like "Ogedei-- I --. And then she'll suddenly throw her arms around me and we'll kiss passionately for about a week until I sense she wants to get on with it, and then, and then, and then...

“No, I can’t do this,” he said suddenly, holding her by the shoulders and backing a step away from her.

What? was all Nergui could think after a similar script running through her mind was so rudely interrupted. “You probably can,” she made herself tease him lightly, landing a playful fingertip on his breastbone. “In fact, word on the street seems to be ‘oh boy, can he ever.’”

"I won't... exploit you," he insisted a bit raggedly. “You deserve better than a standard playbook seduction.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever had one before.” Unless that time Baiju Noyan had shown her he could act gallantly…? Even knowing the whole time that it was only an act, it had been fun.

“You are a brave and generous woman,” Ogedei persisted, “and I won't dishonor you the way those other men did.”

“You mean your best friend. And your brother,” she said, not looking at him.

“Yes, I mean like them. I went through war, peace, and puberty with them. They’re as close to me
as my own skin. I know what thoughtless, twisted bastards they can be sometimes. I can’t reinforce your perception that all men are like them by just… taking you on the spur of the moment like this, with no more consideration than crushing a mint leaf into a glass of kumyss.” He let go of her so abruptly she sank spluttered, and had to regain her equilibrium. The bubbles in the hot spring fanned her floating hair out gracefully and buoyed up the roundnesses that tempted him to change his mind.

"You know..." she began with a tentative deference he’d never seen in her before, but which probably served her well when negotiating with tigers. "What if you… just exploited me a little bit? " I would dissolve in him like strained honey in hot water, she thought. What does a fire feel for the insect that joyfully flies to its own negation? And when the fire moves on, is anything left? But didn’t Doldrum say the one job of the living is to shed the sense of a 'self'? If it would be a spiritual elevation, why am I uneasy with it?

Golden Ogedei. She clearly adored him as her Great Khan, as the mortal hand of Tengri, as a microcosm of their beautiful land. That, as nice as it would be, wasn’t the way he wanted her. She should share enough time and space with him to know and value him simply as her man, the way Borakchin had when he was an untried stripling. Gods, he hadn’t thought about Borakchin in years...

“I… think I’ve got some better ideas,” he replied, sounding more sure of himself now. “Give me just a couple of weeks to get a plan together. When it works out? Khagan’s honor: we two will celebrate.”

There. Good one, Oggy, he congratulated himself. I suppose growing up with a hundred moms taught me a little bit about women.
Didn’t See That Coming

"Oggy! How could you!" Empress Toregene raged. "Don't you understand women at all?"

With reflexes honed on battlefields from the Amur to the Amu Darya, the Great Khan of Greater Mongol ducked a colorful, glittering object as it streaked through the air from the Empress’s righteous hand of retribution. It hit the wall behind him with an expensive-sounding shatter.

The popular, magnanimous, eloquent son of Genghis was most atypically at a loss. "Tori, please. Where is this coming from? I was thinking of your happiness. A little bit, anyway. You told me you liked Nergui and you hoped to spend more time with her when she got back to the capital."

"As my friend! Not as one more skank trying to take my place the second I turn my back!"

"Tori, you know no one could ever take your place. Because you'd eat them alive and floss your teeth with their veins. "You're the Empress. Your sons and their sons are first in the succession."

Don’t pause for breath; this is no time to let her pounce on the designated-heir issue. “You never seemed to worry about the skanks --- I mean, the other wives and mistresses --- before. I didn’t think it would be a problem. I’ve been pretty moderate in that regard, I think." Certainly compared to Tai I have been. "The harem quarters are still half-empty."

“I would call them half-full,” his wife sneered venomously. “Anyway, I never took any of the others seriously. Gorgeous empty-headed dolls. Well-bred wallflowers. Faceless political gamepieces. Nothing like her! Magical healing hoo-ha aside --- though how could anyone ever compete with that? --- she’s smart, insightful, and even charismatic when she thinks to turn it on. A friend like that is a prize, but a rival like that…? And just to put the wax seal on it, sixty-three turtle-fucking toli! If a shaman that shiny wanted me out of the way, she could probably kill me off from a hundred miles away by brushing her hair to a secret rhythm or something. I’d never get a good night’s sleep again."

“You really think she’d want to be Empress that badly?”

“Anybody would if they thought they actually had a shot at it. Except maybe you!"

"You’re right, Tori, you’re absolutely right. I don’t want to be Empress.” To stop an argument from escalating, find something to honestly agree with. “I was just thinking that as our healer, she’d need to know family secrets. So if I married her into the Borjigins, she’d be family and we could all confide in her completely."

“Okay then, but does it have to be you? She’s married to Tai already; she can just be his wife-in-the-Capital. Or how about Guyuk? If No Name Girl fucked the crazy out of Baiju Noyan, she can probably implant a personality and a spine in the Crown Prince somehow, don’t you think?"

She probably could, but wasn’t that the same kind of life everyone else was trying to urga her into? And Tai’s spontaneous bridgenapping had flouted both the Yasa and the Great Khan’s specific order. Ogedei couldn’t be seen to let that slide. Besides, he wanted to personally… but that was a card best kept face-down for now. “What if she doesn’t live in the Palace?” he tried. “Or even in KK. She could manage the Kurultai Center at Lake Khovsgol. Or the base camp for the Winter Hunt in the Orkhon Valley. Or that… ‘Xan-du’ place Lui took his family last summer and can’t stop raving about. It would make sense to have an intelligence agent in that position. All kinds of
under-the-table deals get made at those places.”

“Well, then I’d never get to see her socially,” the Empress quibbled mournfully. “And every time you went out of town I’d suspect you of making an excuse to meet her! Do you know what I wish? I wish you would’ve just snuck around behind my back and had a secret fling that I’d never find out about. Don’t ---” she raised her hand to forestall whatever her husband was going to say ---- “It’s too late to do that now, so don’t even think about it. But no! You just have to try to do right by everybody, don’t you? You can’t help being open and honest about your feelings all the gods-damn time! With your wife! What kind of husband does that?”

Ogedei, not having a good answer at hand, fell silent for a long moment. Then, "Please, Tori," he entreated in a completely unaccustomed tone that the Great Khatun found highly disturbing, "just let me have this, once in a while, and I won’t ask you for anything more. I’ll never want anything more. Please."

Tori gasped, her face going pale. "You'll never want anything more? Munkh G. Tengri, Oggy, now you're really scaring me. We all want. Therefore we're Mongols. If the Great Khan stops wanting anything, the people will follow suit. If none of us want anything, who will we be then?"
Although the prevailing winds in Tabriz blow primarily from east to west, things there can still sometimes go south in a hurry.

Dragana cowered by the antique garderobe, her fair skin so blanched the purple veins showed through, her Alice-blue eyes as big as robins’ eggs. She clutched a folded yellow blanket decorated with small black, white, gold and silver squares scattered like windblown cherry-blossom petals. She’d found it while putting away some freshly washed sheets and thought it was pretty.

Baiju Noyan’s face was a snarl of rage. His scowl was deep enough to break a horse’s leg. His Stygian black eyes promised profligate bloodshed. His right hand, only empty because none of his blades were handy was raised to deliver a shattering blow.

Dilmana stood in front of Dragana, facing down Baiju with an expression that dared him to find out if the rumors about redheads’ explosive tempers were true. Both her flashing green eyes and her gravity-defying breasts were fixed on the maddened provincial governor... which some small, same fragment of him thought was kind of unfair.

Irina stood behind Baiju. She’d caught the underside of his elbow and upper arm at the high point of his wind-up, pulled them back further than he’d intended, and planted herself like an oak tree where his center of gravity was supposed to be. The small, sane fragment grew a little bigger and bolder, commenting that the girls’ fighting lessons seemed to be going well.

Tudora stood behind Baiju’s other shoulder, resting her warm, relaxed hands on his bowstring-taut shoulder muscles. In the sudden electric silence that had burst like firemix in the sunny bedroom, she was the only one who spoke. Quietly. Lovingly. In that contralto voice that could massage his feet through the wooden floor.

“Now, batko, remember what we said the villagers used to call Dragi? ‘Our little angel who flew headfirst into a wall.’ She’ll be innocent all her life, poor thing. That’s why we got you to buy all of us together, so we could keep looking out for her.

“You’re very angry about what she did and you’re a strong, trained warrior. So maybe you’ll hit her anyhow, though we do our best to stop it, we promise you! But Dragi won’t connect an act with a reason. Hitting her won’t teach her anything except to be afraid of you all the time forever. Her father would witness to that if he had lived. And you want to be stronger, remember? Controlling your anger takes strength. If you give in to it after all your work with us, what will you think of you?”

Baiju breathed percussively in and out of his nose. Eventually, his muscles began to relax and his breathing normalized and he allowed Irina and Tudora to walk him over to the bed and sit him down between them.

“Dragi, dyevoychicha! ’Tudora called out. Only a well-trained ear would be able to pick up the nearly imperceptible shadow of strain in her voice. ‘Put the blanket back in the cupboard and run down to the cellar, will you? Bring something cold we can all drink. Dil, how about the onyx goblets?’"
“The ones that are really hard to break,” Dilmana muttered under her breath.

Baiju rose abruptly from the massive gubernatorial bed, triggering gasps from the women. But he merely strode out to the balcony, ignoring them and closing the double doors behind him. He leaned on the rail and looked out over his adopted town and country. Today the mountains reminded him of the folds and hummocks of an unmade bed. He scowled again, but his heart wasn’t in it. The storm winds had left his sails and now he was high and dry.

He had been progressing. Days were starting to go by when he scarcely thought about… the Agent. Didn’t wish she could come to his enormous new house, with the balconies and gardens and fireplaces and solaria and, of course, the huge bed. Didn’t wonder what she would think of everything new that he saw. Would she approve of his new favorites and how well he was learning to treat them?

He replayed the last ten minutes in hid mind and sighed. Maybe not today.

Only a few inconsequential white clouds wandered across the Eternal Blue Sky of Tengri. Did the Agent ride across that sky now? Did she gallop beside her father and Teb Tengri in the train of blessed Genghis? Or had she already been born again, a fractious infant howling to be fed?

He sincerely doubted that she’d shed all vestiges of herself and ventured into the Nine Voids Beyond. She might have collected enough toli to give it a try, but she’d been vibrant in life, wholly disinclined to asceticism. No, she would want to experience the various nearby worlds for a while. If he paid enough attention, he might find her again. He could explain…

He was aware of the door opening behind him but did not turn around. When a few moments went by and nothing else happened, he turned and went inside.

“Well, it sure is pink, whatever it is,” Dilmana sounded a little nonplussed as she poured out the wine.

“It wanted to come,” Dragana asserted, her smile beginning to return. She watched her… sister? Cousin? Friend? Had he ever asked?... arrange the refreshment tray. She didn’t look at him.

“Thank you, Dragana,” he said, earning thankful smiles from his other favorites.

“Oh, you’re welcome, batko,” she answered, without a trace of resentment. Or much of anything else.

He and his “Balkan chorus,” as the mansion’s staff called them, sat around a small marble-inlaid table with their goblets. The wine turned out to be so sweet he spluttered a little. “Strawberries,” he guessed gamely. “Well, maybe mostly strawberries.” The women chuckled, only a little tentatively.

“Who was she, batko?” Tudora asked in a casual tone that, though he hid it as well as he could, always caused him mild dread.

“She who?” he deflected rather ineffectively, immediately taking --- and just as immediately regretting --- another swallow of too-sweet wine.

“The one who slept with the yellow blanket,” Dragana answered, with visible mental effort.

“The one you miss so much it hurts,” added Dilmana.

“The one it’s taking all four of us to replace,” Irina contributed dryly.
“Your true love?” Tudora suggested gently.

“She was… supposed to find out, among other things, whether I could love. But she never told me before…”

The women let the silence unwind like a skein of yarn.

“Before she died,” Baiju said finally, very quickly as if snapping the shaft of an arrow that had gotten past his armor. “She died… and I might have been… partly responsible,” he confessed.

“I don’t think it’s fair when people die and then never talk to us again,” Dragana told the tabletop.

“Too bad there’s no way for us to visit them,” Irina patted Dragi’s hand, trying to console her.

Baiju, however, felt electrified by the seemingly innocuous words. His hand shook, the goblet’s sticky contents sloshing. “Say,” he began in a carefully casual tone. “You girls all lived on farms, didn’t you?

“Are any of you any good with a shovel?”

Chapter End Notes

References

In Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels, the character Nanny Ogg makes an alcoholic beverage called scumble (aka "suicider") from "apples... well, mainly apples."
Nergui saw the Kara Koram gate and its Turtle approaching as she rode the camel train back from Hot Springs Eternal. For the first time she could remember (since childhood summers when she and her brothers would lie on a blanket in the bottom of Dad’s fishing skiff and play What Does That Cloud Look Like), she was completely relaxed. So relaxed that her speaking voice had dropped an octave. If, as everyone said, Great Khan Ogedei had a knack with people, she was definitely one of those people. She’d gone into Hot Springs Eternal as an Ogedei fangirl and come out a confirmed-4-life Ogedei fangirl. So what if she was one of immeasurably many? She'd fill her idle time with productive work for their State until her turn came around. And then they would bathe in each other’s light, and share everything they’d learned since their last rendezvous, and she would love Ogedei, come hells or no water, until her life's natural end.

They couldn't have discussed anything openly at that point, of course. Great Khan Ogedei famously wanted no one in his retinue, least of all in the harem, who didn't genuinely want to be there. The bafflement of his relatives and near-peers had eventually run its course. Now they shrugged and accepted that he was "funny that way." It still meant he had to approach most prospects very discreetly because as soon as he issued an actual invitation, they would be duty-bound to accept.

This was not even an issue for Nergui, who would gladly subsist for the rest of her life on boiled, unseasoned Death Worm sphincters for her Khagan's sake. Although she had to admit: if that was what it finally came down to, she hoped there'd at least be a good reason.

She picked another morsel of their warm-water conversation and replayed it:

"So, your harem or whatever: Do you loan them out the way Tai does?” The more familiar she was becoming with the ways of royalty and nobility, the less she wanted to take for granted.

"Only if they ask me to."

"If they… can you tell me more?"

"Well, so many of my marriages are political. The brides’ parents drop them off at my threshold willy-nilly, convincing themselves that their daughters’ hearts are blank scrolls. If it matters to them, they hide it well. On the other hand, I have to live with their daughter now and it matters to me. I’ve arranged for more than one old flame, hometown sweetheart or miscellaneous person-of-interest to have occasional business with the government. And sometimes the weather turns bad or negotiations hang up; can’t be helped. So we put him up overnight in one of the guest apartments inside these walls. Then I find an excuse to stay out of the hallways till breakfast.

“It’s easiest to control that way; if I forced them to sneak around behind my back, they might get caught by somebody who doesn’t work for me.”

"So, then, just as a for-instance, if Baiju came to visit and asked for me, Tai would probably just hand me over, but you wouldn’t?"

"That’s probably correct."

"But if I asked for him, you’d allow it?"

Golden Ogedei laughed loudly and long. Perhaps just a little more so than he absolutely had to. “If you wanted --- to see Baiju again?” he’d finally gasped out, and then collapsed into hearty guffaws
for another few minutes. “Oh, I’m sorry, sweet Cat-Doula, it’s just so… but then your only other experience was Tai, wasn’t it? I’ve got other bones to pick with him before he’s even allowed to view you, from a distance, through a tiny peephole, in a solid wall…”

She’d put her head back down against her sovereign’s solid chest (he was not one of those men whose muscles came off with their armor) as steam rose from the water all around them. “Tai did his best to treat me well while I was there,” she murmured as offhandedly as she could, “And Baiju… had his moments. I grew accustomed to his morning scowl.”

“Gamla Stan syndrome,” Ogedei pronounced sagely. She could feel him nodding his head. “Captors and captives falling in love. Gamla Stan is a city in the far northwest, almost to the Other Ocean. They say it was founded and populated by captor-captive couples. But you won’t turn out like them. We’re going to get you some healthier experiences.”

Baiju didn’t abduct me, a nagging little reflection glinted in the back of her mind. He was my assignment. The target of my mission. So if it was Gamla Stan, who’d been captor and who’d been captive?

Walking out of the shadow of the gate, she inhaled the city bouquet of smoke, fresh wood, and mixed organic fug. Staying here for a few years, watching things change every day… wouldn’t be boring. But for the rest of her life…?

With Ogedei, the Wild Flower Fairy voice in her head reminded her. Oh, that tipped the balance all right. But then: When he frees up time to see you, riposted the Erlik’s Advocate voice. Or was that even the same opposing voice as before? Hard to tell. It wasn't wrong, though; the Great Khan had a bunch of higher-ranking wives and a flock of kids and half a continent to look after before he could visit her. She’d probably spend more time with the co-wives and the kids than with him… what might that be like? Probably okay, the WFF voice reassured her. They’ll all be used to occasional new additions by now. Besides, Tori’s the most senior and you two get along ---

Someone in No Name Girl’s head happened to be looking around instead of blabbering. He, she, or it activated the knee-buckle, duck, and cover sequence soon enough that the leather lash whistling in at eye height kept going into empty air. As she dropped, her eyes registered Purple.


Iron Shirt. Iron Shirt. Nergui yanked hurriedly at her aura, trying to get a Tao metal-energy layer between her skin and the violent world. Why the mosquitoes isn’t it working? It was more of a Glue Shirt; it let her feel the whip-strokes but damped the smack! down to a whump and made the lash harder to pull back for the next stroke, which she guessed was better than nothing. The whip, she noted, was a high-end rendition of a standard, short Mongolian riding crop that any avid horsewoman would always have close to hand. Mongols generally disapproved of hurting horses. To that end, the whips were short and flexible, capable of getting a stubborn beast’s attention with a loud snap and a moderate sting that didn’t break the skin. Horses’ skin, anyway. Though human skin was quite a bit more sensitive, this whip was unlikely to flay the shirt (and the underlying skin) off her back unless plied with uncommon enthusiasm for several hours. It would leave painfully vivid bruises, though, and might draw enough blood to threaten the shirt’s wearability. But fairly soon the strokes slowed and paused.

“I’m bored!” Tori eventually proclaimed to the world at large. “And my arm is getting tired! But I’m still really ---- pissed --- off!” She punctuated the last three words with kicks into Nergui’s ribs. Nergui redoubled her Iron Shirt efforts; one fractured rib could ruin even a Mongol’s whole day.
However, the Empress had never spent hours every day kicking anything, so those muscles tired easily. After a while, she screeched in frustration. "Are you just going to keep making me hurt my foot? There must be a death penalty somewhere in the Yasa for that. Why in your grandma’s locked box of dildos won't you fight back? You know how to fight, I assume."

"I do, a little," Nergui admitted, “but since you're Empress and I'm... not, we should go book a ring with a referee and make it an official duel. Or..." Nergui let the relative silence roll out like the majestic grassland.

"Or what, not-the-Empress?" Tori prodded derisively after several seconds.

*One way to win in a fight is to do the unexpected.* "Orrrr... we could go someplace and get shockingly brunch-drunk instead," No Name Girl suggested, selling it as expressively as she could.
Drowning Our Romantic Sorrows

Nergui had hardly congratulated herself for outlasting the beating before the next challenge reared its head: Where do you take an Empress to get drunk at midmorning?

Not the freaking Palace, though Nergui longed to see the kittens. Emperors and their brothers wandered around that place. Being confronted with the bone of their contention at the wrong stage of the process might inspire the two women to pull it apart and make a wish.

Not the Eyrie, the ironically named Agency-sponsored sub-basement “deaf bar” frequented by Nergui’s co-workers. Although they were all on the same side and all the interior design was anti-snooping, the presence of a royal would be noticed and could put a damper on the confidences exchanged.

And not any place open to the public, either, because the spectators who’d gathered to watch the fight were showing every sign of following them to see what they did next. KK was too new, with too many recent arrivals from rural or nomadic backgrounds, to be one of those cities where every citizen separated him- or herself emotionally from every other and conducted business through a tiny window in a thick social shield-wall. In such a place, the two women could have had their fight, perhaps even killed each other, without any apparent notice from passersby. Not here.

“Are they going to start fighting again, do you think?” asked a member of the audience in a very outdoor voice. “My break is almost over.”

“Why didn’t that one lady do anything?” another wondered aloud. ”Her blouse looks like trash now.”

“Cause she didn’t want to get her head cut off, dum-dum.”

“Maybe she had too much respect to mess up that purple dress. That’s one hell of a dress.”

Even among the often bizarre sights of KK, they were an attention-grabbing pair. The Empress red-faced in her somewhat disheveled finery, a former Naadam champion carrying a racing whip but nowhere near a horse. The inspiration for the Goose Girl posters walking with the forced gait of one working to ignore pain, covered in road dust and leaking small amounts of blood in various places.

The joke’s on Tori, Nergui thought; this is the shirt Tolui lent me.

Suddenly the solution seemed obvious. If you need a place where the presence of an Emperor’s consort won’t cause a stir, a place full of other Emperors’ consorts is perfect. “Let’s go to Dower House 5,” Nergui asided to Toregene, covering her mouth and trying to avoid moving her lips. The Empress nodded.

“Where are they going now?” said a bystander.

“Probably to fix their hair. It looks like weasels mated on their heads!” said another.

“Maybe they’ll schedule a duel. I’ll keep following them; maybe I can find bettors.”

After Genghis Khagan had departed the world of flesh to ride forever in the sky, Ogedei had given each of the widows her own choice of where she wanted to live, and how, and with whom. Those who delighted in gathering and trading knowledge --- the more complex and abstract, the tastier ---
clubbed together to commission Dower House 5, a spacious light-filled three stories above a ground floor of cosmopolitan shops and restaurants. Its luxuriously large windows overlooked the city center. Its formidable residents, so it was said, overlooked nothing.

Nergui had first visited Dower House 5 while still Sealed; the ladies had offered to fill in certain blanks in her education before her mission to Anatolia. Then, the sexually-themed fixtures and furnishings had intimidated her a little. Now, not so much. Without hesitation she raised the door-knocker handle, which lifted the nipples off a pair of breast-shaped bells, intending to smack it down smartly a couple of times and call out “Nokhoi khor” (“Hold the dog,” a traditional ger-camp greeting) for extra politeness --- but before she could, the door swung inward. “Get in here, you two hellcats!” stage-whispered Tabanodval of Khongirad with a fussy little wave of her frightening fingernails. “And as for you looky-loos,” she projected her stage voice all the way to the back of the following crowd, “You can’t use our loo, so go look at something else!” Fearing further (and probably more personalized) verbal abuse from the renowned Sarcast credited with mentoring the famously caustic Jochi Khan, the flock slowly and sulkily dispersed.

As they were hustled inside, the shaman and the Empress exchanged their first sympathetic glance of the day. Normally the imperious imperial widows, especially Tabby, wouldn’t be caught dead opening the door themselves. Their hostesses already knew about their morning’s activities (of course they did) and were irrepressibly anxious to know more about it.

Oh well, thought Nergui, ever pragmatic; it saves some explaining.

The ladies of Dower House 5 had mustered their servants to set up refreshments in a central solarium well away from prying eyes. So many large plants graced the space that it felt like the ground floor. There were regular chairs, benches, and a couple of fainting couches (not that these formidable women ever fainted unless there was some advantage in it), but the two combatants were directed to a pair of contraptions that resembled bookcases designed for a reality with extra dimensions. Instead of books, though, the offset and variously tilted shelves held oddly shaped pillows. Joon, the imported Goryeo flower boy Nergui had met before, showed them how to thread their bodies into the structures so than their shins, buttocks, elbows, chests, and foreheads rested on the various cushions. Nergui was surprised at how comfortable she was once she got settled, though she wasn’t sure exactly how she’d get out.

In front of each of them was a big, green, roughly egg-shaped object with a bamboo straw stuck in it. “Drink up, ladies,” Kraya the doll-like Thai concubine urged. “Normally I advise not trusting any drink served in a coconut, but needs must when forest-demons drive. This is not what the swells drink at the Royal Thai palace. This is what my country uncles drink when they want to wake up in an irrigation ditch.”

“While you’re getting started, Kaushiki and I will assess the damage,” Ai Fan pronounced. They each gently lifted a combatant’s shirt to expose her back.

“Oh my goodness. You’ve been beaten rather severely,” Kaushiki told Nergui. Nergui was tempted to reply something like “No? You don’t say so?” or “I wonder when that happened.” This was a testimonial to the better mood she was in, and by extension how fast Kraya’s coconut concoction went to work. “I think I’ve got a poultice that will be good for that.”

“What’s it made out of?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Rose petals, sugar, a little frankincense. Coconut oil.”

Nergui wouldn’t be tactless and ask if it would help. It probably wouldn’t hurt, and a good smell was nothing to sneeze at.
“Overworking your muscles, I see,” Ai Fan commented in re: Toregene. “Next time you’re going to put a major hurt on somebody, you might try warming up first on a hay-bale or something. Dragon Lotion will take care of it.” Ai Fan had no sooner started than Tori made a face. Dragon Lotion didn’t smell bad per se, it just smelled a lot.

“We’ll leave you alone for a little while,” Kaushiki told them, “and come back later.” Everyone bustled out as silently as they’d busted in, leaving Tori and Nergui alone.

For a while the women sipped in thoughtful silence. Though they were leaning slightly forward in their UFOs (Unidentified Furnishing Objects), they could see each other’s faces by looking up. Each of them did so until their necks started getting sore, then gave it a rest.

At length, the Empress inquired, “How’d you get a black eye? I only hit you on the back and sides.”

“A funny thing happened on my way to the roadbed,” Nergui sighed.

A few more minutes passed as the level of liquid in the strangely organic containers got steadily lower.

“How’s Shut Up?” Nergui asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Tori grumbled.

“I mean the cat, How are the kittens?”

“One of their tails is bent funny.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe it can be corrected since they’re still so young.”

“No, it’s a good thing. The ones with crooked tails are reserved for the Queen. I’m supposed to put my rings on their tails while I take a bath.”

“Wow. That’s new to me.”

Another silence that stretched out like a slowly forming icicle.

“Why don’t we loosen up with a drinking game?” Nergui finally piped up. “How about ‘I Never’? I’ll start. I never… canoodled with a Great Khan.” Just a big one that was pretty good.

Several of the Dower House 5 residents were listening at the door. All the doors in the house had been selected for acoustic quality. “Lucky we didn’t go back in yet,” Chimeg giggled. “She would’ve just wiped us all out with that one.”

Tori started to bend down to drink, then hesitated. “Sure about that?” she challenged.

Nergui locked her amber eyes with the Empress’s slightly tear-misted ones and said, “Sword-hand to the Blue, Khagatun. We never even Frankish-kissed. He said he didn’t want to traumatize me any further after Baiju and Chagatai.” She hoped her frustration didn’t show in her voice, but Tori was bound to read some into it anyway so it probably didn’t matter.

Tori blew out a long breath, the alcohol-laden vapor causing the nearest candle to flare up momentarily. “I wanted to disbelieve you, but that last part… sounds just like him.”

“I know!” Nergui sizzled with a thin bright edge of injured pride. “I couldn’t make this stuff up. And you also need to hear me say this: If it’s going to screw up anything important like your
family or the state, then we just... won’t.” That pledge cost Nergui more than she expected, but it was the only way she could imagine to defuse the situation.

“But you have feelings for him,” Toregene accused.

“Yes, I do,” No Name Girl admitted. “I’m crazy about him. But so what? You can’t choose which feelings drop out of the sky on you, no more than you get to choose which bird shits on you.”

"Oh no you're not comparing my husband's feelings with birdshit?"

"No, I'd never,” Nergui deflected, silently beseeching Tengri to preserve her patience. “I'm comparing my own feelings to birdshit. I can’t even be sure they’re really my feelings. I could be intermittently possessed, Maybe some goddess wants to wear me and canoodle with some god who’s wearing him. Stranger things happen on land... but ever since my resurrection back in Anatolia I've been extra moody and squirrely. I hope to hell it’s not shaman's madness already, but..."

“I Never,” Tori broke in, "had any feelings that I just... ignored!"

Nergui took her penalty drink without hesitation. Tori had probably never had a feeling that didn’t work her like a shadow-puppet before she even knew it was there. “Got me,” she conceded.

“Is that part of your shamanic discipline or what?”

“Could be. Could be,” she hedged, continuing to sip. It was also part of her childhood cultivation of Not Giving Mom The Satisfaction. “But since I died everything’s been a mess. I get the impression, for instance, that at least some folk think I should be more upset about what Tai did. But it didn’t feel like a big deal then and it still doesn’t.”

"Borjigin Blindspot!” issued a loud whisper through a crack between the double doors. Nergui snorted and dissolved into giggles. She thought Tori, making similar noises, was also laughing at the situation, but when she looked up she saw the Empress’s eyes were brimming with tears.

“Oh, my Tengri, of course!” Tori sobbed. “It wasn’t your fault! You’re from too far away to know about it, and I’m so used to it I forgot.”

“Why? What’s a Borjigin Blindspot? I think my dad used that phrase once or twice, but he’d become so obsessed with fishing by that time that I probably assumed it was some kind of fancy lure.”

“It’s --- kind of an extra-strong charisma,” Tori explained once she caught her breath. “There’s just something about that family that makes people want to follow and serve them. No matter what they do, it’s hard to get mad at them and almost impossible to stay that way. Genghis, may he ride forever in the sky, had a mountain of it, but it seemed to get divided up among the sons. Oggy got the lion’s share and gets along with everybody; that’s why he’s Great Khan. It never affected me much, maybe because we saw each other a lot growing up. Maybe that’s why he married me. Of course, nobody knows what happened with the grandkids. Batu’s definitely got it but the rest of them…” she shivered all over like a horse shaking off sweat.

“I did sense, with Tai, that there was something extra going on, but it wasn’t like anything I’ve run into before. And everybody in the place was equally buzzed on it. Lately my intuition’s been half-dead and I get all these random strong emotions drowning out everything else.”

“Well, that has to be it, then. And maybe you’ve got something like it that attracts them back.”
Nergui dismissively blew a stray hair away from her face. “Pff. I’d be very surprised.”

“Then how come you’re such a hot topic? Goose Girl?”

“Because word went around, true or not, that I have a magical healing hoo-ha, and now everybody wants to try it out. Do you think it might even be a political strategy on the Borjigin brothers’ part? I got famous in a new weird way, but if they claim me then it will have always been about them somehow?”

Tori got to the bottom of her drink and made thoughtful bubbling noises. “You’re making way too much sense,” she frowned daintily. “It’s why I should want you around, and also why I don’t. I want the woman who fixes my hats and makes friends with my cats and keeps up with my drinking and might even teach me some new swears. Not the one who gets recognized in the street by more people than me. Not the one who can think her way through plots thicker than February ice with twists complex enough to break a snake’s back. And certainly not the one who makes that very important man’s eyes go opaque like fried eggs at the mention of her name. That’s a horrible sign, a harbinger of multi-month disappearances our State can ill afford.”

"I think you’re overestimating both my feminine allure and my powers of manipulation. Still, when you put it that way it scares me too.” She poked desultorily at the coconut and found the meat inside tender and yielding, like a milk custard. She dug at it with the little spoon whose purpose she’d been wondering about and sampled the translucent fruit-flesh. “Mmm,” she nodded, gesturing with the spoon. “There’s stuff to dig out when you run out of juice.” After chewing she swallowed and said earnestly, “I could never replace you as Empress, and I’d never try. Too much fuss. My personal fuss-budget’s too meager to cover it. I’d be fine with an obscure, neglected corner of the Palace because it’s still a freakin’ Palace. And, should I ever have children, I wouldn’t want them in the line of succession, no matter how pissed off it got them. I’ve seen the upcoming generation of Khans. No offense ---”

“None taken,” Tori nodded, raising a fresh coconut in an unspoken toast. Nergui looked down and found a fresh coconut in front of her too. When had that gotten there? She’d heard that in the Lands with Sticks Up Their Butts, as she privately called some of the urbanized annexations, the very best servants were invisible. Had Dower House 5 hired one of the invisible women of Kabul?

"...But those kids’ first Kurultai without their parents will be a freakin' meat grinder. They might as well just paint big targets on their backs and be done with it.”

“You’re not wrong,” Tori ruefully admitted.

"All I planned on being was another addition to the Palace’s shamanic staff, taking care of cats and hats and whatever. Trying to keep all the curses and evil Eyes off you guys. A nice job doing useful things in a beautiful and exciting place. An occasional visit with an accomplished lover would be dried orange peel in the tea.” Nergui sipped her own fresh coconut only a little gloomily. “Now the hedgehog’s so far down the snake hole that backing out isn’t an option. I feel like anything I do to fix things would just make them worse. Maybe I should just get out of KK for a while. Out of sight, out of mind. Just not back to Anatolia. In fact, what’s in the opposite direction from Anatolia?” She waved her hand vaguely.


“Nihon?” Nergui perked up. “One of Tai’s other wives was from there. She said the people are
very nice.” What else had Retsuko said? Nergui’s memory was hazy. No surprise.

“I know we send exploration boats out there,” Tori mused, looking into the middle distance.

“Perfect! They might need somebody to snoop around and report, do you think?”

“Maybe. Those ships are so big I heard they take all kinds of people besides sailors. Navigators, cooks, carpenters, sailmakers, doctors...”

“I could be one of the doctors. Even if my shamanigans are messed up I know lots of physical medicine.”

“We’re only a quarter-mile from the new Admiralty Office,” Tori suggested, warming to the idea. “We should go see.”

“Keep those shipments of coconuts coming, Kraya,” Ai Fan whispered outside the door.

“You see why I missed them,” Kraya whispered back.

“I still don’t get how Tori could put such a beating,” Kaushiki murmured, “on a woman who’s...”

“Shush,” Meg warned. “It’s not our business.”

Tabby frowned in bafflement and tugged at her ear as though to clear it. “I can’t have just heard you right, Meg. You said it’s what our what?”
Dead Person Conversation

Are you there, Dad? It’s me, Oggy.

[What do you want, numb-nuts? Dad went to see a demon about a hellhound; Orion’s taking us hunting.]

Ogedei shut his eyes and ground his teeth at the unwelcome and still-familiar voice. Josh? Is that you?

[Well it ain’t the Rabbit in the Moon... How come you contact Dad but not me, snot-nose? You could benefit from my too-soon-extinguished brilliance.]

How much do you think I miss being called “snot-nose” and “numb-nuts,” Big Bro?

[I could have told you to send an escort for that girl with the magic hoo-ha. And then bring her home north through Batu’s Horde, avoid Tai’s Khanate completely.]

There wasn’t time. The situation in Anatolia cracked up too quickly. I hoped Tai would be focused on the buzkashi playoffs. Anyway, you’ve always been great at placing blame for damage that’s already done.

[Ah, but I know our Tai much better than you do. He’s more complicated than he seems. If multiple ideas make it into his head, he can juggle agendas with the best. Say, you’re not draining the Death Worm right now, are you?]

No. (By that time he’d finished).

[Smothing a Scarab? Mangling the Marmot?]

No!

[Making the Sign of the Three-Tailed Scorpion?]

What does that even mean?

(Ah! Oggy! Nice to hear from you, son. Is everything all right?)

Just doing a little all-purpose ancestor reverence... Mostly... In fact, I could use a little advice. I’m leaning toward adding Khenbish’s Nerguitani to the household.

[Why?] Jochi broke in. [She doesn’t rule any land we need to add or pacify. Just sample the magic hoo-ha and give her something shiny to remember you by. You don’t have to marry her just because Tai did. Tai marries everybody.]

Genghis the Great and Wise gave a mildly pained sigh. Ogedei imagined him pinching the bridge of his nose as he often had when his sons had gotten up it. (Josh, I believe the current Khagan was asking me, thank you.)

I thought it could affirm the meritocracy in a way everybody understands. Her parents are Mergens who’ve done outstanding service to the State. Also, some of the curses getting flung at us are testing the Palace shamans’ limits. One of these days something’s going to get through. If I have a skillful healer beside me who can take all the family secrets into account ---
(This all sounds reasonable, son... but something tells me your head is justifying something your heart instigated.)

{More like your --- } Jochi couldn’t resist inserting before an inaudible but tangible pop, as of a ghost backhanding another ghost upside the head, scattered a handful of stardust that briefly flared aflame yet felt as cool as morning mist on the skin of the living.

(I always prized her father,) Genghis continued as though nothing had interrupted. (A shrewd battle-shaman and a good companion. His daughter would have been wasted on Tai, but I think she’d be good for you. And vice versa. That said, though...)

The pause drew out.

When I mentioned it to Tori, she freaked, Ogedei confessed. I wasn’t expecting that. They were becoming friends.

(Women are famous for reacting unexpectedly, but sometimes it turns out there’s a good cause. Tori’s high-strung, to put it mildly, but she’s secure in her own position. My ectoplasmic instinct is that your path to the wedding ovoo isn’t clear. Some powerful forces are already in motion. The elemental kind that won’t be turned by words or swords. Best thing is to watch them play out from a safe distance and then see where things land.)

Aaah, shit-too-wet-to-burn. I’ve been blaming myself for not acting immediately.

(Don’t take it hard, son. I’m sure you’ve got more urgent things to think about than how to persuade even a smallish raptor to thrive in a songbird’s cage.)

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