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# THE MONGOLIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

**Alan Smale**

**T**he Chinese army rolled into Ulaanbaatar at dawn on June 19<sup>th</sup>. A column of PLA Type 104 battle tanks swept along the broad and ironically named Peace Avenue, blowing the now-empty Russian Embassy to fragments. Simultaneously, a wave of older Type 99 tanks and Mengshi troop carriers came in from the east, even-handedly lobbing shells into both the Mongolian People's Republican Party and Mongolian Democratic Party buildings as they passed. Joining up in Sukhbaatar Square, they blasted the Government House to rubble, practically vaporizing the bronze statue of Chinggis Khaan.

In the cool and clear of the morning, an anonymous Chinese sharpshooter destroyed the Zaisan Memorial commemorating the history of Mongolian-USSR collaboration with a single shell from a distance of well over a mile. Another shell, intended merely to smash the old statue of Lenin in the park outside the five-star Ulaanbaatar Hotel,

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was not so well aimed. Instead it flew past the statue and exploded in the hotel lobby, starting a firestorm that gutted the hotel and caused 180 civilian deaths.

Tanner could not afford the Ulaanbaatar Hotel, but from his room in the cheaper Khongor Guesthouse the rumble of tanks was unmistakable, and the obliteration of the Russian Embassy shattered all the Guesthouse's east-facing windows. Cowering naked under his bed, Tanner eventually realized he might be better equipped to face the crisis if he got dressed. He crawled across the threadbare carpet to his discarded clothes from the day before and began to pull them on. At the same time he took a swig of warm Diet Coke from an almost empty can, and stuck a cookie in his mouth.

Thus, when four men and a woman kicked in the door of his room, they caught Tanner with his pants only partway on and his mouth too full to cry out.

He might have expected Chinese PLA uniforms, green with red stars, but the men wore plain clothes, and even in the half-light he could tell their features were Khalkh Mongolian rather than Han Chinese. Incongruously, the woman wore jeans and a Dolce & Gabbana T-shirt, with a scarf bundled tightly around her face. They picked him up and carried him out of the Guesthouse just as he was, bundled him into the trunk of a Toyota Land Cruiser, and drove him out of the Mongolian capital at speed.

Beyond the city limits, the roads degenerated into an unpaved hell. Crammed in the stinking trunk and bashed around like a pinball, Tanner threw up twice, as much from terror as from nausea. When the car finally stopped and they hauled him out, he fell to his knees on the gravel desert and retched again.

He held his breath, expecting a bullet to the back of his head at any moment. His heart fluttered, and the desert seemed to tremble. The sun seared his neck. But nothing happened, and he summoned the courage to look up. Above him was only the bowl of the sacred Eternal Blue Sky and the disgusted faces of four unarmed strangers.

The woman had pulled the scarf off her head and draped it about her neck. She was also Mongolian, and quite young. He did not recognize any of them.

Tanner struggled up onto his feet. They were out in the middle of nowhere. A giant featureless desert surrounded him, emptiness stretching away to the horizons.

"I'm American," he said. "I demand you take me to the US Embassy."

"That not happen," said the woman in a lilting, broken English that at any other time might have been endearing.

He frowned. "Am I supposed to know you?"

"No," she said.

"I don't know who you think I am. I'm nobody important. My name's John Tanner."

"I am Khulan," she said.

"What's all this about?"

"I have no idea," she said, with an edge of petulance to her voice. "Enough question. You can ride in back seat from here."

"You don't know?" he said, baffled, but Khulan had already turned away, and the men were pulling at his arms, ushering him back toward the car.

The car radio was on, and the news reporting was mostly in a rather precise English, from a station that Tanner assumed was the BBC World Service.

Two giants had inhaled, and trapped Mongolia between their bellies. After weeks of international tension the Chinese had apparently stormed across the Gobi in a wave of metal and fury, simultaneously occupying the strategic high ground in the Altai mountains and claiming the eastern steppes of what used to be the Dornod and Sukhbataar *aimags*. The Russian bear, less muscular and more cautious, had annexed Lake Hovsgol and the pine-covered taiga forest down to the Selenge river, captured the mountainous western corner of Mongolia for its ally Kazakhstan, and politely indicated its disinclination to advance further.

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Tanner was only half listening. His own problems seemed more immediate. Bumping around in the back seat of the Toyota was almost as uncomfortable as being in the trunk; he was crammed between two of the Mongolian men, with nothing to hold onto, while being driven over terrain so uneven that his bones felt jolted out of their sockets and his head frequently smacked into the roof of the car. His attempts to demand more of Khulan went unanswered. Her attention was solely on the radio and in translating what she heard for the men, who apparently spoke no English at all.

For a man with nothing much to live for, Tanner was surprised to find how little he wanted to die. What did these people want from him? Not money; they'd left his passport, credit cards, and traveler's checks back in his hotel room. Ransom? The idea was laughable. Nobody would chip in even five bucks to get Tanner back. His steadily dysfunctional family talked past each other most of the time, his father permanently remote and half-embarrassed, his mother forever urging him to "shake off" the disasters of his teen years as if they were dandruff. Moving to college hadn't done the trick either; Tanner had felt constantly out of step, isolated from the hopes and fears of his classmates and alienated from his professors. When he spoke from his heart, people rarely understood him. Women sensed something dead in him, and stayed away.

He'd known that he needed something more out of life. He just hadn't been able to figure out what that might be. So when he'd qualified for a semester's exchange-transfer to St. Petersburg State University—a move that, conspicuously, nobody around him had opposed—he had jumped at the chance and then, almost immediately on arrival, dropped out.

Travel had become an end to itself, a life filled with small but critical decisions—where to go, how to get there, what to eat. Every day came with a new set of small, easy-to-manage goals, protecting him from having to face up to any tough truths. Then, it had been easy enough to claim to be searching for something; now, in the sudden searchlight glare afforded by his kidnapping, Tanner at last understood the immense difference between *searching* and merely *looking around*.

After exhausting the charms of St. Petersburg and then Moscow, Tanner had been surprised to learn that the glamorous sounding Trans-Siberian Railway was not prohibitively expensive if he traveled *kupé* class, a.k.a. second or "hard" class. The even cheaper trans-Mongolian route left the main line at Zaudinsky, east of Ulan Ude, and finished up in Beijing. Tanner had broken his journey voluntarily at Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, before the steadily deteriorating relations between the Asian superpowers had grounded the train in Ulaanbaatar.

Too late, Tanner had realized why his ticket had been so cheap. Ironically for a history major, he had failed to stay current with world news.

He'd planned to go to China. Now China had come to him.

The Gobi was a bleak, bone-dry expanse; a desert not of sand but of hard, fine gravel. At this time of year tiny sprouts of scrub grass poked their way out of the rough soil beneath, sparse enough to be almost invisible. In the distance the sun-baked plain shimmered with an almost mirage-like glint of green, the grass only visible at an angle, with massive foreshortening. Low, jagged mountains lined the far horizon.

Tanner's captors had changed into the traditional Mongolian boots and *deels*, long caftans in olive and green that reached down to their knees, and had given Tanner a shirt. They made no further attempt to restrain Tanner, nor did they need to; after their mid-afternoon arrival at the isolated felt-lined *ger*, or yurt, he saw no other signs of humanity between himself and the horizon.

Khulan had cleaned out the back of the Land Cruiser and driven off again without saying another word to him. The men listened amiably when Tanner tried to

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speak to them, nodding with polite incomprehension. They owned a single clunky-looking semi-automatic pistol between them, and took turns sitting with it on a small painted stool outside the *ger* and keeping watch on the desert horizon. During a changing of the guard in late afternoon one of the men offered Tanner the gun and grinned a dentist's nightmare of a grin, perhaps joking that it was his turn to stand sentry over the featureless wasteland. Tanner stared blankly back at him. Tit for tat.

The temperature soared over a hundred degrees. Tanner's world quickly became bounded by the small area of shade beside the *ger*, the jerry-can of brackish water, and the open pit a hundred yards away with low boards propped up around it for minimal privacy. At dusk his stomach finally settled from his ordeal in the Land Cruiser, just in time for the men to serve him a dinner of greasy boiled mutton, hard bread, yoghurt, and lumps of the sour cheese curd that Tanner had thought the Mongolians created just to torment the tourists, but apparently ate themselves after all.

A mere fifteen minutes elapsed between the end of this meal and Tanner's next hasty trip to the stinking boarded pit in the middle of no man's land. Mercifully, night soon fell.

Late in the evening Khulan returned in the Land Cruiser and unloaded, of all things, a small satellite dish. Their hosts produced a battered-looking Russian television from a hand painted cupboard in the *ger*; and they ran a lead out to the car battery to power it.

On the TV screen, Chinese battle tanks paraded past the photogenic Winter Palace of the Bogd Khan in Ulaanbaatar. Crowds of Mongolians greeted their saviors, smiling happily. The camera panned down to a little four-year-old girl in traditional dress waving a red flag. Even with the satellite dish the TV reception was flaky; the picture came and went but the commentator remained, alternating Mongolian and Mandarin. Khulan and the four men watched the screen in silence, their expressions unreadable.

"Tell me," said Tanner.

Khulan looked at him coolly. "Everyone has joyful to greet Chinese liberators," she said, and the oldest of the men spat with precision into a brass cup at his feet.

"So I see."

"Also, Chinese have outlaw Russian writing."

"They've banned Cyrillic?" said Tanner.

"Yah," said Khulan sardonically. "No great loss, that one." Every shop in Ulaanbaatar displayed signs in a crazy mixture of Cyrillic, Mongolian, and English. Yet the Cyrillic was a holdover from the three generations of Soviet influence that had ended with the collapse of Communism in 1990. Khulan's generation favored their own Mongolian script.

"And why am I here?" said Tanner.

A sudden uproar in the *ger* greeted the next pronouncement by the unseen TV commentator. The pictures showed students throwing books and small statues onto a bonfire outside the National University of Mongolia. Tanner jumped. "What now?"

Khulan was on her feet, shouting and gesturing at the TV in Mongolian. She switched to English to say, "Chinese have outlaw *hingis-han*."

"What?"

"Fuck them all, the Chinese," she said, and walked out of the *ger*.

"Genghis Khan," he said. "Your national hero. They're banning any mention of him. I understand."

She stared out into the desert with her back to him, smoking a cigarette. He walked up to stand beside her, but not too close.

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It had grown surprisingly cold. Tanner was shivering. Khulan was not. The cigarette tip glowed in the darkness every time she took a long drag. He waited, gazing at the faint outline of the distant hills against the stars, until eventually she said, "Chinggis. They can outlaw his name. But that will just make everyone mad."

"Look, I need to know why you've . . . kidnapped me," said Tanner. "What am I doing here? I don't even know you. I—"

He ground to a halt. Khulan smoked quietly, showing no signs of wanting to answer. "I'm sorry your country got invaded," he said.

"We need help," she said. "Army is disband. They not strong enough to resist an invasion anyway. We thought that other countries, United Nations . . ." She shrugged. "But just words so far. No help likely for us."

"Nobody is going to start World War Three over Mongolia," said Tanner, then kicked himself for his lack of tact.

Khulan looked at him bitterly. "So, up to just us, then. Mongols helping Mongols." She took another drag. "Great."

"Take me back to Ulaanbaatar," he said. "Maybe I can help you. Claim some kind of diplomatic immunity. . . ."

"Oh, so you are diplomat now?"

"No, but—"

She sighed. "You go back to UB now, they kill you. Foreigners not in embassies given till noon to report. All not reporting, they execute as spies. Russians, Koreans, Americans, British. There is no immunity for you."

"Noon?" His mouth was suddenly dry. "Noon *today*? Jesus Christ, Khulan. You've killed me. I'm dead."

She looked at him oddly. "Maybe you dead anyway."

In Moscow Tanner had amused himself pretending to be a spy, disguised as a tourist. Here in Mongolia he really *was* a tourist, and he'd managed—quite against his will—to masquerade as a spy.

"Fine. Terrific. Thanks a lot."

Khulan turned on him. "Shut up! I risk myself for you! My friends risk themselves! It is not fine!"

Her sudden intensity made Tanner step back; too late he realized that Khulan was close to panic, right on the edge of losing control. And she was the one with the gun and the four henchmen.

He attempted to be calm. Conciliatory. "I didn't ask you to risk anything. So, why? I'm not even—"

"Because my sister!" she snapped, with incomprehensible finality. She took a last ruthless pull at the cigarette, burning it into the filter, then stomped the butt viciously under her heel and strode away.

"What sister?" he shouted, but she disappeared back inside the *ger*, slamming the wooden door.

Tanner looked around. He was completely alone. He walked another thirty feet away from the *ger*. Nobody called him back.

Why would they? He was stranded in the night, deep in desolate and unforgiving terrain, in the most sparsely populated country on Earth, thousands of miles from anyone else who might be willing or able to help him survive. He was obviously free to go wherever he wanted. Then, after he'd walked all night, they'd just drive up, point the gun at him, and load him back into the Toyota.

"Damn it," he said to the distant hills.

By the time Tanner awoke bleary-eyed the next morning, Khulan had gone again.

He could have overpowered her the previous night, he now realized: wrestled her

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to the ground, confiscated the car keys, and driven away, his tires spitting gravel over the damned *ger*. He had not. Hand to hand combat wasn't exactly his forte. And he still wouldn't have known which direction to go in, in this trackless waste. He could run out of gas even closer to the middle of nowhere than he was now, and die of thirst. Or run into the Chinese.

Some spy.

Okay. For now, he would have to kowtow to Mongolian logic. He was completely at their mercy.

So Tanner got up and helped with breakfast as best he could. Mostly he got in the way, but he hoped he was sending the right message: he was willing to cooperate.

In the process, he almost learned their names. The youngest and most openly friendly was Batjargal. The one who gave most of the orders was Chagatai; the oldest, with whom he'd uneasily shared a sleeping pallet last night, appeared to be Chagatai's father and was named Gerel-Huu. The fourth and least friendly of the men grunted his name so abruptly that Tanner had no chance of catching it.

After breakfast the four men went back to their routine of sitting around in the desert, taking it in turns to hold the gun. The air grew hotter and hotter around them. Tanner sat in the shade, gnawing at the inside of his cheek and feeling lost in time.

Midmorning, Chagatai shouted and pointed to a puff of dust on the horizon. The others studied it with care, standing alert and motionless, until with some relief Batjargal said the only word that Tanner was likely to understand: "Khulan."

Springing into action, the men dismantled the *ger* in under ten minutes. First the outer fabric and the felt lining came down, then the wooden latticework inner wall and the door, and finally a complicated substructure of linked poles around a central wooden crown-piece. They piled the pieces neatly and packed up the cooking gear, bedrolls, and other meager effects beside it. A separate pile of the cot-frames and cupboards had been set off to one side, apparently to be abandoned. Tanner did not see the TV or the satellite dish; they must have already left with Khulan.

Then they sat in the desert and waited again, for rather longer than Tanner had anticipated. He had expected the Toyota, or perhaps one of the rugged Russian-made vans that were *de rigueur* in the Gobi, but the distant speck resolved itself into a procession of seven camels, led by a young boy, an old man, and nobody else. Tanner frowned, shook his head and said "Khulan?" to Batjargal, who nodded and repeated "Khulan!" in a tone of great satisfaction before walking off to help load the rolls of felt and bundles of wooden spars onto two of the camels.

The skin was already peeling off Tanner's neck, and the full heat of the day was still ahead of them. "This is a goddamned disaster," he said to nobody in particular.

The camels were stately but aloof. Hitting one of the beasts' forelegs with a stick, they got it to kneel so they could install Tanner on a blanket between its two humps. Then they hit it again. The camel stood with an alarming lurch.

The ground was surprisingly far away. "Water?" said Tanner hopefully.

"Wadder!" said the old man agreeably, and mounted his camel.

The caravan moved off into the heat of the day.

The smooth rocking motion of the camel was comfortable for the first twenty minutes. By then Tanner already hated everything about the beast; its brainless chewing and snorting, the loose, fatty feel of its humps, even the blue scarf around its neck and the wooden spar through its nostrils that the reins attached to. Tugging at the reins had no effect, of course; he was being led in a caravan with Chagatai riding in front of him and the *ger* and the pots and pans and supplies jangling on the two camels immediately behind.

They stopped briefly for a lunch of bread and curd, which Tanner was too dizzy to

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swallow, and all too soon they mounted up again and went on. The sun blazed down out of the cloudless Eternal Blue Sky. They had given Tanner a hat but there were no spare sunglasses, and his afternoon blurred into a bright, scorching, semi-waking, bilious, undulating nightmare.

He came out of his trance at dusk to find himself on the ground, with someone pouring water into his throat. It was the boy, solemn and dark-eyed. Batjargal, Chagatai, Gerel-Huu, and Grunt were reconstructing the *ger* while the older camel-driver lit up the stove and broke out the supplies. Tanner's dizziness endured until he closed his eyes to sleep in the cool smoky *ger*; the low voices of the Mongolians murmuring around him.

And so it went for six more interminable days, as they trekked eastward across the barren expanse of the Gobi.

If Mongolia were laid over the United States it would cover a breadth from New York to Denver. Its sheer size was staggering, and Tanner could never have imagined that he'd be crossing it at a rate of eight miles per day.

Never once did his captors pull out a map, or even scrutinize the sun by day or the stars by night. Occasionally they would stare at the ground, then look thoughtfully around them. As far as navigation was concerned, that seemed to be about it.

The endless, dry sea of the Gobi stretched away from them in all directions. The sun-baked mountains in the distance changed almost imperceptibly. Accustomed to the rapid pace of twenty-first century life, the sheer lack of mental stimulation weighed heavily on Tanner. His mind went on standby for long indefinite periods as the gravel plain passed under the padded and almost silent two-toed feet of his camel. In the relentless desert sun his brain began to fry.

From the depths of his stupor, Tanner was vaguely aware of the buzzing sound for several minutes before he troubled to raise his head. A motorbike was bumping across the desert toward them, an ancient clunker with rusted chrome that moved barely faster than his camel. Riding it was a woman who after a moment of mental dislocation he realized must be Khulan, now with shorter hair and wearing more appropriate desert clothes, a baggy fawn tunic and hat. Several large pouches and a pack were lashed behind her on the seat of the bike. She intercepted the caravan and rode ahead of it for a few moments before the motorbike coughed and gave up the ghost; apparently it had run out of gas then and there. Khulan got off it and kicked it where it lay, and tugged her baggage free. The men did not seem surprised to see her.

Tanner could easily see the faint vehicle track she'd ridden in on. His sensitivity to the desert environment had grown; he was now aware of the criss-crossing thoroughfares and markers that had been invisible to him at the outset. By now, he marveled that he had ever thought the Gobi was featureless.

Tanner's mouth was dry, his voice ragged. "Hey," he said. "Good to see you again." Khulan skewered him with a glare that cut through his chest to his very soul. The caravan continued on, not missing a beat, as she tossed her pouches and what looked like a drum onto one of the spare camels and then pulled herself up onto the other. Her head nodded forward, asleep before they'd gone a dozen yards.

That evening Khulan curled up on her bedding almost as soon as they pitched camp. Angry at being ignored, Tanner advanced upon her, but Grunt blocked his path.

Tanner remonstrated, waving his hands. He was dazed, and his words slurred. Grunt pushed at Tanner's chest, squaring up for a fight, but when Chagatai snapped out a few words in Mongolian, he desisted.

It was an uncomfortable standoff. Tanner turned away in a huff, and sulked till it was time to sleep.

\* \* \*

The camel rocked beneath him. Tanner had made great theological strides during the days of his captivity: he now understood that Hell was not only insanely hot, but constantly in motion. Sisyphus rolling a rock up a hillside through eternity had an easier time of it, because at least Sisyphus was allowed to stand on his own two feet, and there was actually a hill and a rock to make the view tolerable.

Talking of the view . . . Tanner peered forward into the bright Gobi daylight. It had to be a mirage. He put his head on one side and squinted, but the slight figure walking across the desert refused to evaporate.

As he watched, the tall mirage telescoped down into a woman, wearing baggy khaki pants and an "I Heart NY" spangled T-shirt. A big floppy sun hat and giant sunglasses completed the ensemble and obscured her face. Another tourist? An American, even?

As their paths converged, she took off the sunglasses and became Khulan. "Get down," she said curtly to Tanner, as the camels reached her.

Tanner twisted around to stare at the first Khulan, the one who rode a camel further back in the caravan. He straightened again to study the woman standing in the desert before him. "Eh?"

"Get off camel."

Comprehension dawned in his sun-soaked brain. "Ah. That other one, she's your sister."

"Of course," she said impatiently.

"Christ." He felt really dumb. "Well, in that case, good to see *you* again."

Khulan made no reply. Instead she drew a machine pistol out of one of the deep pockets of her khakis and aimed it at him. "Hey!" Tanner shouted, his heart cannoning, soul suddenly icy even in the blistering Gobi heat.

A single terse command in Mongolian brought the men in close around them. "Get down!" she said to Tanner. "Quick, now."

"Damn you, and her too," he said. "Why the hell should I do what any of you tell me?"

She gestured eastward. Plumes of dust rose from four different places near the horizon. "Chinese army patrol. They find you with us, we all die."

"Shit," he said. "Then . . . ?"

Khulan pointed at the cargo-camels. "Get into *ger*. Climb up and hide all quiet, or I shoot you myself, hand you over."

Tanner looked helplessly at the camels. "Hide? How?" Nonetheless he quickly slid to the ground.

One camel carried the crown-piece of the *ger*, its poles and slats and fabric covering, and all their food. The other bore piles of felt topped with the painted wooden door and surrounded by pots and pans and the Mongolians' small packs. Batjargal boosted Tanner up into the latter of these, and he clambered and wormed and wriggled his way into the heart of the felt.

The other men held up the door and the packs while he made a nest. When they let go, the weight almost crushed the breath out of him. Huge felt pads closed around his face. For a long panicky moment Tanner thought it was all over, he'd traveled all this way just to suffocate in the heart of a dismantled yurt, but bracing himself on his elbows he managed to create enough space to suck in a lungful of musty air.

Even through the mass of matted fiber he could hear the roar of engines as the Chinese arrived. The camel lurched, and the sudden stress yanked at Tanner's shoulders. His body heat was rising, and it grew ever harder to push back against the mass of *ger*-wall that oppressed him.

His heart began skipping beats. Dimly, he heard shouts. His camel banged forward onto its knees and someone shoved at the load, almost grabbing Tanner's ankle.



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After that, it went quiet. Tanner grew woozy as he pulled in ever-shallower breaths, and couldn't have said how much time elapsed before the Mongolians pulled the door off, and the other wood, and unwrapped him from his felt shroud.

Daylight exploded around him. They poured water between his lips, and that roused him fully, wide-eyed and spitting.

The column of dust that marked the Chinese armored vehicles raced away toward the north. Tanner stared after them. Even from behind, the trucks' profile seemed familiar and out of place. "Hum-Vees?"

Khulan shook her head. "*Mengshi*. Utility vehicle, all-terrain. Made like your Hummer, but all Chinese."

"Shit. Why can't we travel in one of those?"

She snorted. "Get on camel."

"Khulan . . ." Tanner was all set to dig in his heels, go on strike, demand that she answer at least some of the hundred questions he had stored up for days against the time he might speak with her again, but the tone of her voice and the sight of her hands stopped him in his tracks.

Khulan was shaking like a leaf. The encounter with the Chinese soldiers had terrified her.

Against his will, he felt a burst of sympathy. This woman was hardly a professional criminal. What the hell was going on?

That night they stopped at a campsite that had clearly been previously occupied. Beneath their feet was a circular outline where another *ger* had stood, and in the middle distance was a low stone enclosure, partially covered with a dark wooden roof.

Also nearby was an *ovoo*, a small cairn of rocks and tree branches, though it was days since Tanner had seen a tree. Forming the center of the conical mound was a tent-post wrapped in the blue scarves that denoted the Eternal Blue Sky. The Mongolians circled the *ovoo* reverently, three times clockwise, and Khulan's sister dedicated the campsite by flicking *airag*, fermented mare's milk, to the four cardinal points using a carved milk spoon.

"My twin sister is shaman." Khulan mimed her sister's ceremonial gestures. "You understand *shaman*?"

"Yes, obviously," said Tanner.

"Her name is Dzoldzaya. Later, she dance."

"Well, that's all right," he said dubiously. "I don't care for—"

"Is not for you."

"Oh."

Next came the more pragmatic business of setting up camp, the four men assembling the *ger* while the young boy settled the camels and the older man laid out a blanket and prepared food. By now, Tanner knew the routine. He picked up the spade and went to dig out a latrine at a healthy distance from the camp, as he had the previous nights.

To his surprise, Khulan followed him. "You are all right?"

"What do you care?" he said bitterly, pounding his spade into the tight desert crust.

"I am sorry about the gun. We had to hurry."

"Yeah. Where did you go all this time, anyway?"

"Ulaanbaatar," she said.

"Then how come you were just standing out there in the desert?"

"I flew there. I tell you, my sister is shaman."

She peered at him sidelong and he realized with some surprise that she was trying to joke with him. "Aha. Right."

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"No, not really. I was drop-off, ahead of you. The man who owns truck, he not want you to see him, be able identify him. He is not happy with what I'm doing."

"Well, that makes two of us."

"Shut up," she said, but with no heat in it. "We argue, he and I. We choose different. Maybe his choice is not wrong. I don't know."

Collaborating with the Chinese invaders, perhaps? She seemed unusually doleful about it. "Your boyfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend. I not see him again."

"Okay," he said, suddenly aware that she was relatively clean and spruced up, while he was filthy and crusted in sweat. He'd been wearing the same clothes for a week. "His loss, I guess."

"Yah," said Khulan.

Tanner rested a moment, drank some water, pointed. "Is that for livestock?"

She glanced at the low roofed wall of the enclosure. "Winter quarters. Man from further north moves his goats down here in the autumn."

"Because of the shelter and better grazing here," said Tanner, half-humorously.

"Yes."

He shook his head. "That Chinese patrol. It was following you?"

"I don't know. Maybe coincidence."

"How old are you anyway, Khulan?"

"Mind your own business," she said.

"All right. My own business, then. Why am I here?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Not yet," she said. "Ask me something else."

"Okay. Dig my trench?"

He handed her the spade. To his surprise she took it without comment and dug the latrine a little deeper, piling up the soil so it became the screen. He looked at her tight T-shirt and khakis and wondered if she still had the gun, wondered if he could knock her down, grab it, and figure out the safety catch before she whacked him with the shovel or her shaman sister turned him into a lizard.

And once the deed was done, and he was armed and dangerous? There his cunning plan petered out.

He took another swig of water. "What's happening in Ulaanbaatar? Or anywhere else in the world, for that matter?"

"Bad," she said. "Even before this, Mongolians not like Chinese. Chinese companies would come into Mongolia, bring their own workers in, push us out of our jobs by working cheaper. Now Chinese take over our country and industries, bring in their own bosses and managers and politicians. We make disturbance, but we are peaceful people, not so good at rioting. When the Russians left in 1990, we just ask them politely and away they go. Mongolians don't have experience as fighters, as . . . ?"

"Terrorists," he said, too forcefully, and the word thumped onto the ground and lay between them.

"No," she said. "We are not that."

"Less obvious, from where I'm standing."

She waved the spade and Tanner took a prudent step back. "*They* are the terrorists! What starts now, in UB? I tell you: Mongolian Reeducation! Chinese language, Chinese way is now law. Blaring loudspeakers tell people what to do, how to think. Restaurants renamed, no more Grand Khaan, now all People's Way, Long March Café, bullshit. They put their puppets in charge, go into schools telling our teachers what they can teach. People argue, they disappear."

"Can't your Russian buddies help you?"

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She shrugged. "Broke."

"America? Europe?"

"Big-deal U.N. resolution," she said sourly. "Condemning Chinese aggression and hedge . . . *Heged?*"

"Hegemony."

"Rest of the world busy with own problems." She dug ever more determinedly. "Tanner, listen. They massacred the Koreans, their UB diplomatic staff and workers, students, everyone. The ones who surrender by noon as ordered, who they say they fly home to Korea? They did not fly them home. They marched them into the desert and shot them."

Despite the warmth of the low evening sun, Tanner suddenly felt chilled.

"I'm not lying."

He looked into her eyes, and believed her. He swallowed. "Christ. What about the Americans? British?"

"I don't know," she said. "Fewer of those. Smaller story, maybe."

". . . Okay."

She handed him back the spade. "Unless you have really bad stomach problem, this is deep enough. Now we should drink *airag*."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, we should."

The *ger* was up, looking as fine and solid as it did every night. Outside the front door a fire blazed in their small stove, warming the perennial fare of thick mutton stew.

*Airag* smelled bad and tasted sour, but there was no mistaking the low-pitched alcoholic buzz that permeated Tanner's skull once he'd managed to swallow two glasses of it. Tonight, the first one went down fast.

Seeing the sisters side by side, even Tanner could tell them apart. Both had almond eyes and big cheekbones, but Khulan's complexion was lighter, her sister's skin more weathered and her expression more severe. Khulan was elfin, Dzaya muscular by comparison. Khulan kept her hair in a long braid, held back by a headband; Dzaya's was shoulder-length, in a bowl cut. The shaman looked five years older.

After dinner, Dzaya went into the *ger* and closed the door, and the conversation in Mongolian lapsed. Tanner said to Khulan, "Not close, then."

She looked around. "What isn't?"

"I mean, you and your sister. You've hardly spoken to each other since you arrived."

Khulan grimaced and popped another piece of the rocklike cheese curd into her mouth. "Is difficult. I am angry with her."

"Why?"

"For this." She gestured all around her, then lit a cigarette and looked off at the horizon with that familiar expression that Tanner knew meant she'd said all she intended to.

Night fell. They clustered around the stove as the temperature dropped, now feeding it with wood casually pulled out of the sacred *ovoo*. Tanner took another glass of *airag* and gave up any prospect of figuring out what was holy and what was not, in Mongolian culture.

Chagatai pulled out a drum and began to lay down a low, throbbing pulse. The *morin khuur* was a small boxlike fiddle with just two strings of plaited horsehair, which Gerel-Huu played with its base to the ground like a cello, creating a moody violin sound with the soul of the steppe woven into it. Batjargal sang, his voice a wailing atonal cry. Minutes into the first song he somehow shifted registers and began to sing two notes at once, a bass grating moan from his throat superimposed with a high whistling overtone that seemed to trace the outline of the distant mountains against the sky. It was *hoomei*, Mongolian throat-singing, and the combination was an alien yet hypnotic din that tugged at Tanner's heartstrings.

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And then Dzaya flung wide the door of the *ger* and leaped out at them, a black crow of a woman with tassels awhirl, her face obscured behind a headdress fringed with black knotted cords. Bells and the skins of small animals hung from her shoulders, metal pendants and rounded mirror fragments from her waist.

Her banshee screeches sliced the air. Chagatai stepped up his drumming, speeding his pace to match the ascending fervor of the shaman's dance. The air grew thick with juniper smoke from the fire. Dzaya jumped higher, whirled ever faster.

Tanner lost his grip on time, forgot everything except the hypnotic spectacle of the dance. His predicament, their destination, the enigma of Khulan: briefly none of them mattered, as the past put its arms around him and locked him in its embrace. Civilization seemed pale and remote. The *airag* buzz became a low thudding in his head, painfully out of rhythm with the drumbeat.

All at once, the dance ended. At the final titanic slam of the drum, the shaman tumbled to the ground in front of Tanner, kicking fine gravel over his knees. As she did so, Tanner felt an invisible blow in his chest as if a hammer had struck him from the inside, and he collapsed forward onto the hard ground.

Khulan was there instantly, turning him over onto his back. He felt her fists strike his breast, and then an interminable pause that seemed to stretch into infinity. The night was silent, the men agog, the cold hard stars shining down on him from the deep velvet of the sky. The world waited.

Then his heart began to beat again, once painfully, and then more normally.

As Tanner breathed again, he heard Khulan screaming at her sister in Mongolian. The shaman stood and stalked off into the desert, Khulan's furious words pursuing her into the night.

The fire in the stove had died down and the men had withdrawn into the *ger*; leaving Tanner and Khulan alone. Bitter memories from Tanner's childhood oppressed him, grey and bleak.

"What are you and your crazy sister trying to do? Kill me?"

Khulan blew cigarette smoke into the sky. "She touch your soul. She say she try to strengthen you."

He snorted. "Even you don't believe that."

"I believe it. But it is not right."

Something moved in the desert. They both looked up, and Khulan made a noise in her throat. The shaman was approaching.

"Tell her to get lost," said Tanner. "Really. I don't need any more of her *strengthening*."

Dzaya stopped ten paces away, said something. Khulan sighed. "She want to look at you."

"She can see me just fine from there."

"That's not what she means."

Dzaya advanced. Kneeling before Tanner she touched his forehead and temples, looked under his eyelids, placed her hands gently against his chest. She muttered something in Mongolian.

Khulan cleared her throat. "She say you die once before."

Tanner looked at her open-mouthed. "What?"

"My sister. She say when you were young boy, you died. Yes?"

"I wasn't a *boy*," said Tanner. "I was thirteen. And she has no right to know that. . . ."

"So, it true?"

Small bells jingled as the shaman stood and went into the *ger*. No lights marked the horizon. Uncharacteristically, the night had become overcast; Tanner couldn't quite shake the irrational conviction that the cacophony and terror of the ritual had summoned up the clouds above them.

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He got to his feet and stretched cautiously. His entire body felt like it had been run over by a steamroller, but his chest and heart seemed to be okay now.

"Tanner?" she prompted. "Is it true?"

He looked down at her. Khulan was very pretty, with those broad, fine Asian cheekbones, her slim body and smooth skin, her eyes full of concern. But she was almost certainly playing him. The shaman was, very obviously, the bad cop here. He had to be careful. Whatever was going on with these rituals and tricks, he could never forget he was their prisoner. If this made no sense to him, perhaps it wasn't supposed to.

Equally obviously, Tanner was not completely powerless. He had something they needed.

"It's true," he said. "When I was younger, I died for a while on the operating table. You can have that one for free. But you know what, Khulan? From now on, anything you want from me, you'll have to give me something back in return."

She frowned. "Like what?"

"Like who you really are. Who *she* is, this sister of yours. Where we're headed. Why it was so important to take *me*, of all people, out of Ulaanbaatar. And what this is all about."

"All right," she said, unexpectedly.

"What?"

Khulan reached out. "I promise. Shake on it."

Her hand was cool and smooth and surprisingly firm. Aside from his recent medical emergency it was the first time they'd touched, and the contact brought warmth to Tanner's cheeks.

"But not now," she said. "Tomorrow, by daylight. Now you must rest."

"Khulan—"

"By daylight," Khulan said softly, and if he had any further protest in mind, it evaporated as she squeezed his shoulder and walked away.

Their camels plodded across the desert, side by side. The midmorning sun already seared Tanner's brow. Khulan took a sip of water and said, "This is how Dzaya become *Udgan*—"

"Wait, what?" said Tanner. "*Udgan*?"

"*Udgan* mean like shaman, if woman," said Khulan.

"All right. Go on."

By now there were no mountains in sight, merely the bowl of the sky over the starkness of the land. Dzaya's camel was out half a mile ahead of the pack, then the men rode together in a cluster. The portage camels and those carrying Tanner and Khulan sauntered as slowly as they dared, till they got swatted or clucked at by the old man or the boy.

"Here is how Dzaya become *Udgan*. When we were twelve years old, our elder brother went mad. . . ."

Khulan had grown up in the *ger* suburbs of Ulaanbaatar, a single electric cable running to her family's felt tent, their water carried in by hand. Her father Banyan had a city job at a good wage, but although he could afford the better life, he was not quite prepared to relinquish the traditional dwelling he'd grown up in.

Khulan's eldest brother lost his wits a few days after his eighteenth birthday. For him, the Eternal Blue Sky was suddenly filled with brightly colored fish falling to the earth and dissolving. He would try to flee the *ger* and, restrained, would rave for hours. His mind was not big enough to encompass all he saw, and three weeks after the hallucinations began, he was dead.

Halfway through her seventeenth year, their sister Narantsetseg began to suffer the same visions.

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This time her parents acted immediately. Visits to local Ulaanbaatar medical practitioners being of no avail, they prepared to take Narantsetseg north to their homeland, leaving Khulan and Dzaya behind. The twins, now fifteen, rebelled and demanded an explanation, and it was at that point they learned that their grandmother had been a famed *Udgan* of the Buryat people, up in the taiga forests near the border with Russia.

Before they could leave, Narantsetseg lapsed into a coma. She never regained consciousness.

Their twin daughters were now all the family that remained to them. Banyan and Sumiyaa admitted defeat, packed up, and headed north into the steppe, taking Khulan and Dzaya with them. They arrived in a nameless pine village in the mountains in early summer. Khulan, as the older sister by a few minutes, prepared herself as best she could for whatever might be about to befall her. But it was Dzoldzaya whom the gods touched next.

On her way to the spring to fetch water, a forest blew up out of the steppe in front of her. Multicolored fish swam before her eyes. Ghostly spirits on horseback surrounded her. Dzaya flung her water pail at the apparitions, and collapsed into rigid catatonia before she could flee.

Back in the village, Khulan fell to her knees at exactly the same moment, in reaction to the attack on the *ami*-soul the twins shared. But she had recovered by the time the men carried Dzaya back into the village, stiff as a board.

Khulan nursed her sister night and day. After four weeks, Dzaya regained awareness. The next morning she dressed and left the *ger* without a word.

No one followed her or tried to stand in her way. This was how it worked among the ancient peoples of the steppes. If a potential shaman survived the initial madness, the quest was their next compulsion.

By the time Dzaya returned to her village in mid-autumn to take up her new *Udgan* career, Khulan was long gone. She had packed up and returned to Ulaanbaatar, leaving her parents behind to live out their sunset years in the village of their birth.

Tanner wrinkled his forehead. "You just *abandoned* your sister?"

"She was fine," said Khulan, neutrally. "She had work to do. I had my own life to live."

"You were afraid," he said, slowly. "As the older sister, you'd been scared that you would be the next to suffer madness and die. You didn't want that. And when you were relieved . . ."

"That was not a life I wanted," she said. "*Udgan*? Shaman? Telling men where to move their herds, finding lost things, helping girls with love lives, women raise children? That is no life." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sometimes these things choose you. But I was glad it was her, chosen."

"It must have been terrifying," he said. "The waiting. After seeing both your older siblings—"

"No," said Khulan. "It was fine."

"Right. And when did you next hear from Dzaya, after all that?"

"Not till the Chinese. Not until you." Khulan took out another cigarette. "Something else I did not choose."

"I didn't choose this either," he pointed out.

"No," she said softly. "I know."

They approached a camp of three *gers*, with half a dozen camels peaceably chewing their cud outside and a large satellite dish nearby. "Wadder," said Gerel-Huu.

Tanner had to wait at a distance with the boy while the rest of them went in to barter for water and other supplies; they could not risk his foreign features being

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seen and later reported to the Chinese. After an hour or so the others returned from their negotiations with full waterskins, smelling of snuff, curd, and *airag*, noticeably louder and more cheerful than when they went in.

Soon after, it was lunchtime in the Gobi. Dzaya leaned over and poked Tanner playfully in the ribs, and gabbled something to Khulan. Khulan listened carefully, then turned to Tanner. "She say part of your heart, like a flapper, not work right."

Tanner blanched. "That's her idea of a joke?" He had no idea what a heart valve looked like, but "flapper" was too close for a casual guess. "How does she know that? You hacked into my medical records now?"

"There was no *hack*. She is *Udgan*. Distance and time mean little to *Udgan*. All is one." She paused. "Tanner?"

"I was in Children's Hospital, in Washington DC," he said quietly. "For a month and four operations, two of which I barely squeaked through. The second time, the doctors told me that technically I'd died, and they'd had to revive me with those electric paddles. The crash cart. They restarted my heart."

"Dzaya say, well then, now you die twice, and the second time we didn't need any paddles."

"That's enough," he said, afraid.

Khulan saw his expression, and sobered immediately. "Sorry. *Udgan* humor."

"So, what now?" he said. "Am I healthy, or not healthy? Am I on my last legs?"

Dzaya made a sound that was suspiciously like a raspberry. Tanner looked at Khulan, who said, "You were sick, and it leaves marks on your soul, marks that Dzaya can read. She say that now your heart is healthy like horse. But your souls are in three places."

"My souls what?"

She sighed. "This will take while to explain."

They packed up and got back on the camels. The afternoon sun lacerated Tanner's neck as he listened and tried to keep it all straight.

According to the traditional Mongolian view of the universe, Tanner (along with everyone else) had three souls. His *suld* soul resided in nature, and was connected to Father Heaven through the top of his head, while his *ami* and *suns* souls oscillated up and down the line of his chest, constantly out of phase with each other. The *ami* contained his current-incarnation and ancestral memories, and was connected upward to the World Tree. The *suns* was his collected experience of past lives and extended downward into the World River.

Two of these souls—the ones in his chest—would be reincarnated, waiting respectively in the Tree and River between lifetimes. His *suld* soul, however, would not; once he died it would become an ancestral spirit, living on in the natural world.

Children's souls, Tanner learned, were particularly prone to becoming dislodged. A near-death experience could definitely do it. And in Tanner's case, his souls had never recovered.

"So my *ami* soul was left half in the world above, up the World Tree; my *suns* soul is suspended between this world and the World River below, and my *suld* soul . . . ?"

"That one attached to you only loosely, but still intact."

"Well, thank heaven for small mercies."

As Tanner now understood it, his near-death as an early teenager had left his souls hopelessly tangled. Instead of oscillating, his *ami* and *suns* souls rested immobile in his chest, in permanent contact with the worlds above and below.

Shamans like Dzaya were capable of spirit journeys; they could leave their bodies and fly up the World Tree or down through the River. And Tanner could help her with this. Due to the traumas of his adolescence he was now a permanent gateway, a walking conduit.

## Asimov's

"A gateway," he said. "Half of each soul inside me, and the other half in each location. A foot in each door. Wow." It sounded deep.

"And that's why you have trouble connecting with *this* world," said Khulan.

It was all beginning to make a horrible kind of sense.

Tanner pulled himself together. *Remember, this one's the good cop.* How much of this were they just making up on the fly?

But the more Tanner thought about it, the less he could figure out what they'd have to gain from weaving such a bizarre and elaborate tale out of whole cloth.

"Shamans live outside space and time. Dzaya can travel in either direction, forward and back, wherever she want, but to reach out into *both* planes at the same time, up into the World Tree and down into the World River . . . she needs a stick in the door."

"A stick," he said.

"You're the stick," she said helpfully.

"Yes, yes," said Tanner. "I'm still following this. . . ."

"When invasion of Mongolia began, Dzaya realized she need someone like you. She found you, steered me to you."

"And you . . . acquired me, for her."

"Yah. Something she needs to use you for."

"How did she know where I was?"

Khulan sighed.

"Oh, right, she lives outside of space and time, I forgot."

"Astral travel," said Khulan. "She come and look for someone near me who has what she need. She sense you; you transmit what you are. And she tell me and the boys where to find you."

"How did she communicate this to you?" he said. "Telepathy, through your *ami-soul*?"

"No. She call me on cellphone."

"Oh. You couldn't find someone who has what she needs among your own people?"

"Hospitals here not so good. If you were Mongolian, you probably die as teenager." She let that sink in for a moment. "And anyway, better you not Mongolian. No prior knowledge, no *miscon*?"

"Misconceptions," he said. "And no guilt. On your part, I mean. And no inkling on mine, about what's going to happen."

Khulan looked unhappy.

"Because I might not survive this," he said, and felt his heart skip a beat. Just one.

"You might," Khulan muttered. "It not clear."

Finally, he realized it. She wasn't playing good cop. And she wasn't falling in love with him, a possibility he had briefly entertained. Rather, she pitied him.

Well. She could cut that out.

Tanner forced a laugh. "Okay, then. So if regular people have three souls, but the two of you as twins share one, and two of mine are halved . . . then between us we have seven."

"Um," she said.

"And this is either all crap, or the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"What?" she said, startled.

And to his own surprise, Tanner realized he'd meant it. The excited, wonderstruck child he'd once been had become an unhappy man, blighted by his ailment even once he had recovered from it. Tanner had lost something during those dark days in the hospital, and nothing had ever replaced it.

Losing half his soul seemed as good an analogy as anything.

"Even if it's just a metaphor or whatever, it's how I feel. Not all here. Very finite. And that's why I started traveling in the first place; I was looking for something. Maybe it found me."



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Khulan looked alarmed. "Don't buy in. I mean, this all true, everything I say, but . . ."

"What? 'Don't buy in'? Whose side are you on?"

"The side where I wake up in the morning okay with myself," she said. "I told you why you are here. I not say I liked it. I want lesser of two evils. But I don't know which is lesser, yet."

Never a straight answer. But, oddly, Tanner was getting used to it. "Hey. If your sister is outside time, can't she read the future and tell you what's going to happen?"

"Shamans are not fortune tellers," said Khulan unhappily. "The past is easier."

"Well, it would be."

She looked at him queerly. Somehow they'd reached another impasse, as if they'd been talking about two different things without realizing it.

"I will survive this," he said firmly. "Whatever it is. I promise you."

"Fine," said Khulan. "Do that."

They rode silently for most of the afternoon, Tanner lost inside his thoughts. As the sun approached the horizon Khulan stood up in the saddle, stretching her muscles. "Welcome to Dornogov."

"Eh?"

"We crossed into the next *aimag* now. Next Mongolian province. This morning we were in Dundgov. Now, Dornogov."

The flat plains around Tanner looked identical to those he'd been seeing for . . . how long? "Ah, of course. I should definitely have noticed."

"Smart alec," she said.

"At least this means we're closer to where we're going."

"Nope," said Khulan. "Actually, we're no closer at all."

The *ger* was up. Food was cooking. A brisk wind was kicking up the dust, and the men had installed the stove inside the *ger* instead of outside its door; smoke spilled out of the central hole in the roof.

Once dinner was over, Dzaya began pulling on her ceremonial garb. Tanner eyed the *Udgan*. "She's planning to dance again? Because if she is, I'll be waiting five miles away."

"It's safe. Don't worry."

"Yeah?"

"Yah. And you have to be here."

"I thought you said the rituals weren't for me?"

"I meant, not for your entertainment."

"Well, you just tell her to be careful this time."

They were sitting cross-legged on the floor. Khulan leaned forward and touched his knee. "I will."

Captured within the confines of the *ger* the scent of juniper was even more overwhelming. The drumming got inside Tanner's ears and echoed down through his spine. But Batjargal's singing was quieter, more beautiful, less alien, and Gerel-Huu's *morin khuur* playing was calmer and more delicate. If the previous night had been rock and roll, tonight was a ballad.

And so Tanner was lulled into a half-sleep by the time the shaman's dance tugged at his souls.

Visions spattered before his eyes: a crow, a fir tree. A thing like a broom with black bristles, mounted over a large *ger*; glistening in the dawn.

An army on horseback, galloping across the desert, ready for war.

Tanner toppled onto his side, saliva on his chin, his heart twisting painfully with every drumbeat. Redness flooded his vision and drowned out the complex images.

An arrow of pain pierced him, and he blacked out.

"You promised me. You bitch, you promised. . . ."  
 "It was not me broke promise! Wait here!"

Khulan strode away. Tanner heard the smash of breaking pots, two female voices raised, almost barking at each other in the still of the night. Men's voices raised too, obviously trying to calm the sisters. But Tanner felt no interest in their fight. For all he knew they could just be playacting. And, besides, these could be his last moments on Earth.

He was outside the *ger*, flat on his back in the desert gazing up at the stars. Was this how it would all end? His heart exploding in the space between drumbeats as a crazy nomad shaman leaped above him in a trance, throat-singing and a horsehair fiddle the last sounds he would ever hear?

And after that, the splitting up of his already insubstantial personality into three different souls. Or, perhaps, an eternity of night, with not even the stars for company.

It would take the men an hour to dig Tanner's grave, and no one would ever find it. Nobody back in the real world would ever know what had become of him.

Few would even think to ask. In some very real ways, Tanner really was dead already.

He heard footsteps. Khulan was back. Tanner sat up painfully. His heart still beat twice a second, and too heavily for comfort. But at least it was beating.

"Can you stand?" she said. "Come back inside."

"No."

She draped a blanket over his shoulders, sat down beside him. She held his hand. He felt nothing.

Every day, every night was taking him further and further from the world he knew. Further from reality. Closer to death.

There was a nugget of truth here, if he could only grasp it. Sitting here, with an *Udgan's* sister's hand in his, he gave it a try.

He reached out, cautiously, with his mind. Reality expanded around him. He could almost feel the wetness of the World River, its water thick as blood. Where was he going, which of his souls led this way? He couldn't recall. The name didn't matter anyway, not when he could *feel* it.

No. *Don't buy in*, he thought, and let go of Khulan's hand.

"You guys are killing me," he said. "Deny it."

She lowered her head and said nothing. Tanner felt the world contracting again, confining him. Trapping him.

"All right, then. I'm done with Dzaya. And I'm done with you too. Whatever game this is, you'll have to play it without me."

Khulan reached for a cigarette.

"And for Christ's sake, stop smoking. You reek."

She halted, shocked. "You are unkind man."

"Yeah. But at least I never kidnapped anyone."

She dropped the cigarette onto the ground. "Fuck you, Tanner," she said, very quietly, and left him out there alone.

That was better. Now a man could hear himself think.

Tanner felt dampness on his face, tree bark at his fingertips. He curled in upon himself and was gone.

When the men came outside the next morning, Tanner would not wake up. They dribbled water between his lips and carried him bodily to his camel.

He regained consciousness in the middle of the afternoon, clutching his chest, pain

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written all over his face. Although Khulan rode by his side, he did not really see her. By the time they made camp Tanner was comatose again. They performed no ritual that night.

The next day was the same. In the evening Khulan dragged Dzaya away into the desert, though the sound of their argument echoed clearly back to the men who smoked cigarettes and drank *airag* by the stove.

That night they placed Tanner in the privileged south side of the *ger*. Dzaya arranged herbs around him, and said words over him. Then she went outside and spoke more words to the Eternal Blue Sky, now black and bejeweled with stars.

Tanner finally awoke on the morning of the third day. He stumbled out of the *ger* to find it surrounded by tall slender stone pillars, carved and painted in fanciful swirling patterns of red and ochre. Even more alarming, the camels had disappeared. "Hey," he said. "Hey! Khulan! Batjargal!"

Dzaya appeared in the doorway of the *ger*, blinking owlshly. Tanner gestured at the stones and the otherwise empty desert. She smiled, took up her wooden milk spoon, and went off to drone her morning incantation blessing the four cardinal directions.

"Deer stones," said Khulan, a blanket over her shoulders against the morning cool. "Very old. *Neo-lee* . . . ?"

"Neolithic," he said.

"Yah. Older than old. Nobody know what for." She placed her palm flat against the face of the nearest monument. "Beautiful. Many in Mongolia, in groups like this. Famous."

Tanner saw now that the regular geometric flourishes on the marble monolith were actually a series of twelve stylized deer, leaping into the sky toward a carved sun. But he was more concerned at their sudden lack of transportation. "What about the camels?"

"The men take them away. Horses arrive later."

"The men?" He hurried back to the *ger* door. Sure enough, Batjargal, Chagatai, and the others were gone too. He was stranded in one of the world's most inhospitable landscapes with two women of questionable sanity.

The terrain about them was subtly changed; hillier with sparse grasses underfoot, a herd of goats in the distance tended by a solitary Mongolian. Tanner checked the horizons carefully. What if the Chinese had come upon them in the night? If they showed up now, where could he hide?

"Tanner." Khulan pulled at his elbow until he was facing her. "How you feel? Your heart okay?"

"Sure. What do you mean by 'later,' exactly?"

She shook her head. "Later."

"Great."

The sun was overhead when dust smudged the skyline once more. By then Tanner had stared at the deer stones for so long that their ancient patterns were ingrained on his brain.

Three men arrived, with eight horses between them. They wore longer tunics than he was used to, patterned in brown with bright yellow belts and wide sleeves, held together with clasps rather than buttons. Hard-eyed and craggy-faced, these new guys were the real deal: Buryat horse nomads, Mongolian old-school. His first four captors had been city slickers by contrast.

They dismounted and bowed low to Dzaya, sparing only curious glances for Tanner and Khulan. Khulan nodded to them but made no attempt to speak. Clearly she did not know these new men. Fetching her water bottle and her tiny pack, she chose a piebald horse for herself and waved Tanner toward another with a deep chestnut

coat and bushy black tail. One of the men picked up their bedrolls and Dzaya's drum and shaman bag, and stowed them on a spare horse without a word.

The horses were small but alarmingly spunky. Tanner eyed the steed intended for him. The horse stared him down effortlessly. "What about the *ger*?" he said, stalling.

"We leave it behind," said Khulan. "Travel light, for speed. This is turning point. We head north. From now on, we get closer."

After spending weeks covering a couple of hundred miles, they were suddenly in a hurry? "Closer to what? What about food?"

"The men handle all that. Get on horse."

Tanner tried. It went poorly. Dzaya summoned one of the nomads to lengthen the stirrups and hold the animal steady while Tanner gave it a second shot, this time with more success.

Tanner patted the creature's mane, relieved to be aboard. "What's he called?"

"Our horses, we don't give them names," said Khulan. "Not camels either. Only dogs."

They set off, trotting north. Even though Tanner was lower to the ground than he'd been on the camel, he felt much more precarious, as if he was riding a stick of dynamite. His horse had pegged him as a novice, and it was all Tanner could do to keep it from either enthusiastically cantering into the lead or wandering aside in search of scrub grass to snack on. He was saddle-sore within the hour.

Dzaya rode at the head of the group, and the men continued to treat her with almost obsequious deference. Khulan they ogled openly, and perhaps because of that she rode close by Tanner. He couldn't exactly blame them—Khulan made a nice enough shape, sitting up straight in the saddle—but he sympathized with her obvious unease. After their camel trek, the lack of conversation in the group was striking.

Toward noon they were buzzed by a brace of ROCAF fighter jets, the red stars bright on their fuselages. When the planes swung around again for a second look, the Mongolians cheered and waved red Chinese flags up at them with passably faked enthusiasm. The planes wobbled their wings in salute and continued westward.

Over lunch, the men relayed news from the wider world. Khulan translated for Tanner.

The formerly free nation of Mongolia had been absorbed into the Mongol Autonomous Region, which had previously consisted only of the provinces of Chinese Inner Mongolia. All internal news media were strictly controlled and the internet carefully censored by the Beijing Communications Administration. To all intents and purposes Mongolia was under a military lockdown, and had vanished behind the Great Firewall of China.

Not that anyone was having much difficulty following developments within the new Chinese territory. At least twenty thousand Mongolians had died under Chinese tanks in street protests. Estimates of the numbers of political prisoners in custody varied from a few hundred to several thousand. News was leaking out of torture with electric shock batons, beatings, sleep deprivation, solitary confinement. Two schoolchildren, aged twelve and thirteen, caught daubing "Free Mongolia" slogans on a police station wall had been beaten till hospitalized.

Most Western countries had backed the U.N. resolution condemning the violence and human rights abuses in Mongolia, but no one was proposing diplomatic sanctions, let alone military action. Without continued Chinese investment, the American and Japanese economies would collapse; without America or Japan to lead the charge, no one else was about to stand up to the Chinese dragon. The annexation of Mongolia was a *fait accompli*.

Meanwhile, China was moving quickly in its takeover of Mongolia's mineral wealth. Mongolia had substantial resources—copper, coal, molybdenum, tin—and the Mongol Autonomous Region was already on a fast track to highly developed in-

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dustrial squalor. Western Chinese were being resettled into Mongolia, while entire Mongolian towns were being forced to move into Western China, as part of a regional homogenization program. It was an ugly picture.

Tanner stirred. "Enough. I get it. Tell me what I can do to help."

"You're helping already," said Khulan. "My sister's dances. Your energy."

He paused. "Something else."

"There is no other way you can help, Tanner."

"Because I died once or twice? You're going to have to explain it better than that. I mean, World Tree, and, what . . . ?"

"Is not for your head to understand," said Khulan. "Is for your heart."

"Oh, my heart," he said. "Sure."

Under open skies, Dzaya danced. There was no drumming now, no music or *airag*. This was serious business. Tanner's skin felt hot, accompanied by a coolness in his chest that he couldn't fathom, as if his head and his heart were not quite on speaking terms. But at least tonight there were no mule-kicks to his chest.

The evening was almost anticlimactic. As they arranged the sleeping rolls around the dying fire, Tanner touched Khulan's arm. "Hey."

"What?"

"Tomorrow morning you're going to tell me where we're headed."

"All right," she said. "No problem. Go to sleep."

"We go here," said Khulan, pointing. "Mount Burkhan Khaldun."

Around them the men were eating breakfast. Neither Khulan nor Tanner were hungry. The map crinkled and flapped in Tanner's hands. "And that's what, exactly?"

"Mountain," she said with infinite patience. "Large hill."

"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "But, significance of mountain?"

"Land of Chinggis Khaan. His birthplace, sacred place."

Tanner studied the map more closely. Mount Burkhan Khaldun was not even marked; there was an empty expanse where Khulan was indicating. All he saw was a dotted line delineating the extent of the Khan Khentii Strictly Protected Area, apparently a wildlife protection zone.

"That's east of Ulaanbaatar. I spent weeks baking in the desert just to end up there?"

Khulan nodded. "The Chinese blockaded it for a while. Burkhan Khaldun is holy for Mongolian peoples. Many would try to reach it from Ulaanbaatar. This was best way; come south and then move east, wait for UB to calm down, then head north."

"Do the Chinese still guard the mountain?"

"We not sure."

He paused. "All right. And *why* do we go there?"

"I told you. Chinggis Khaan was born there, went back there often. Buried there. And Chinggis Khaan is heart of Mongolia."

"So what? I mean, with all due respect and everything, it's not like he still lives there."

"To Dzaya, he does. To her all times are one, all distances are one."

"Khulan . . . if all distances were one, it wouldn't matter where we went."

She sighed. "Our mother tell us that Dzaya and me, we're descended from Borte. The Khaan's queen, first queen of Mongolia. And powerful *Udgan*."

"Many Mongolians must be in that line. That's simple arithmetic."

"But for us is direct through the female line, through our mother Sumiyaa and back. For Dzaya, the power comes down that path. It's a connection we can use."

"The power to . . . ?" He raised his eyebrows.

## Asimov's

She pulled out a cigarette, put it away again, then rather rebelliously pulled it out once more and lit it. "The power to move between spaces."

"Khulan, I already said I want to help. But what you tell me has to make sense."

"All right. You hold open the gates for Dzaya. Dzaya then free to use all her own energy for the direction and for the power." She fidgeted. "It is unusual path that she follows. But the only way she can get the help Mongolia needs."

"You mean, help from Genghis Khan?" Tanner laughed. "Sure. And in England, King Arthur will ride again."

"Be quiet," she said levelly. "This is not your land, not your understanding."

"And yet, still you need me."

She looked away, and Tanner had to lean in and strain to hear her next words. "Desperate times call desperate measures."

"But you're not happy about it."

"It may be dangerous. May cause a split in the world. Is not the way we should go. Is not the right path."

"Even in desperate times?"

"Not at that cost," she said.

Khulan had turned away from him, uncomfortable under his stare, but it wasn't her profile he was studying. He was watching her cigarette burn down ever more quickly, as she sucked the essence of it into her lungs.

"I'm not just the stick in the door, am I? I'm the fuel."

She blew smoke away from him.

"Use me," he said. "What you meant was, *use me up*."

Khulan did not even blink.

"Use me up," he said. "Well, that's very nice. Just terrific."

He stood and paced back and forth. The dry grass crackled as he turned. He wondered how much longer his shoes would last under these circumstances. Before he got a hole in his sole. Ha.

Father Heaven stretched above him. Why pick a World Tree as your symbol, when there were no trees to be seen? A World River where there was no running water? Of course, Dzaya came from further north, and much of the Mongolian tradition originated there too.

Tanner felt strangely calm. Was it because, deep down, he just didn't believe it? Or because he didn't care?

But he *did* believe it. Because he believed *her*, Khulan. Either she was the best actress in the history of Asia, or she was deeply and genuinely conflicted about what might happen.

"We'll find a way through this," he said.

She glanced at him, uncomprehending.

"Tell me. Does it *have* to be like that, with me getting 'used up'? Surely there must be some other way?"

"I don't know."

"Let's find one. Tell Dzaya I'll help her."

From where she sat with the men, Dzaya looked sharply across at Khulan. Tanner grinned. "Yeah, I always figured the old witch understood more than she let on. Well, go ahead: ask her what I have to do. Complete cooperation. I mean it."

"Don't mean it," said Khulan, unhappily. "You start this, it will be hard to turn back."

Tanner laughed, a raw and abrasive sound. "Christ, Khulan. Where the hell do you think *back* is, for me? And how would I ever get there? There's more to life, is what you're telling me. Something more important than just me. And it's happening *here*, with you and Dzaya. I want to help. What the hell?"

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"I only try to protect you, Tanner," she said quietly.

"We're beyond that," he said. "Stop trying."

Not that Tanner had great intuition where women were concerned, but suddenly the pieces were falling together in his mind. "Because it's *you* who can't turn back. You're not afraid for *me*. You're afraid for yourself."

"I am afraid for both of us. But, right; if I help, I cannot turn back either. I'm trapped in her world."

"It's the world we're in," he said, practically.

"But is not your brother and sisters who went mad." She blew out air in frustration. "This is not right! Riding about in wild places with my sister and her crazy Buryats? Is not my dream for my life! I want the *real* world, modern world. I am town girl! I had good job there, with telecom company. I want the future. Mongolian future, not Chinese future! Past should stay past!"

"Well, I want a lot of things too," he said. "But it looks like we have very few choices left."

He looked at Khulan, who was looking worriedly at Dzaya. "Right?"

Khulan stood abruptly. "Shut up. Now, time to ride."

Their horses were carrying them north much more quickly than the camels had brought them east. They traveled through true Mongolian steppe country now, grasslands that rolled right over the hills and undulations in their path, never flat, never steep. And as the hills grew more substantial, suddenly there were trees as well, but in a peculiar pattern: the south-facing slopes of the hills were grassy, while the north-facing slopes were forested. It was an addictively odd-looking landscape, but when Tanner asked Khulan, she just shrugged and said "Soil dryness," as if that explained it all.

The land was still almost empty. Mile after mile passed under their horses' hooves without a single indication of a dwelling, let alone a village. After the visual deprivation of the Gobi, Tanner found himself almost dazzled by the terrain and its startling green. It was a landscape out of a dream; remove the Chinese invaders, his saddle-soreness, and the terrible uncertainty about his future, and Tanner could grow content in a countryside like this.

The day went by more easily and comfortably than any he could remember in his strange new life, and then it was evening and they rode over the crest of a hill and down into a valley.

Two *gers* awaited them. From one came a thin trail of smoke out of the central hole. Tanner didn't see anyone, but the site hardly looked unoccupied.

Khulan half smiled, her mouth a thin line. "Famous Mongolian hospitality."

"Do I have to wait out here again?"

"Nope. These are here for us to stay in."

Someone had left a camp for them? "Dzaya and her boys have friends," he observed.

"Yah," said Khulan. "Very many."

And Dzaya's friends must be pretty well-to-do, because the *ger* they ushered Tanner into was easily the most luxurious he'd seen. It was a full twenty feet in diameter, and tall; even when he stood by the wall, Tanner did not have to stoop. And the walls, rather than the plain and undecorated wooden lattice-work that he was accustomed to, were adorned with a variety of items. In the center across from the doorway he saw a small altar with Tengu paintings, blue scarves, and framed photographs of a good-looking Mongolian family. On the right-hand, man's side of the *ger* hung a saddle, a bow and arrows, a *morin khuur* and, rather incongruously to Tan-

ner's eyes, a bright blue and red wrestler's suit. The left-hand, woman's side had fine copper pots and pans, an *airag* bag, a coil of rope and a branding iron, blue scarves, and children's colorful ceremonial *deels* on hangers, a two-sided jacket lined in sheepskin for a boy and one-sided silken jacket for a girl.

The *ger* was so clean and tidy that it felt like a museum. Tanner was afraid to sit his dirty self down on the bed for fear of desecrating it. The others, however, plopped down with sighs of relief, dust rising from their clothing, and one of them pulled some wood from a basket and applied it to the stove in the center, directly under the crown of the *ger*.

Their anonymous benefactors had left them good food: chicken, canned vegetables, things Tanner hadn't seen for weeks. There were many drums and plenty of vodka as well as *airag*. Here, even Khulan sang.

The chants, the drumming, the smoke from the incense and the burning juniper branches and cigarettes, and the vodka in Tanner's system; all conspired to confuse him. The air thickened around him, while at the same time the roof of the *ger* seemed further above his head and the walls receded before his bleary eyes. He was drunk, he realized; terribly drunk, very tired, and almost certainly dehydrated. He needed fresh air, but his limbs seemed soaked in molasses, his feet unaccountably heavy and anchored into the earth. The swaying figure of the *Udgan* shimmered, and Tanner closed his dizzy eyes and waited to swoon.

It didn't happen. A gout of new fire-smoke wafted into his face and displaced the incense. Once it abated, the smell of unwashed bodies around him seemed heavier and even more laden with the aromas of horse sweat and leather. The sounds of singing faded. Cool air flowed across Tanner's chest. Someone must finally have opened the door of the *ger* to get a breeze through.

Tanner's nausea took a step back, and the alcoholic pulse in his temples relented. If the ritual was over, maybe he could persuade someone to pour him a cup of water. He opened an eye.

The *ger* walls no longer surrounded him. Above him was only an Eternal Sky of the deepest blue-black. Obviously he had passed out after all, and they'd dumped him outside. Probably afraid he'd throw up on the fancy rugs in the borrowed *ger*.

He sat up, ready to find Khulan smoking a cigarette in the cool night a few paces away, and instead found himself surrounded by a sea of sleeping men in armor.

Tanner froze. Only his eyes moved. The hand he had pushed himself upright with rested just a few inches from the shoulder of a stocky, impressively muscled Mongol in leather-slatted armor. The warrior's moustache quivered as he exhaled. Behind Tanner sprawled two more soldiers within easy reach, similarly attired, both fast asleep.

Hundreds of campfires dotted the plains around him. Dark figures stretched out on the ground, some lying down, others sleeping hunched over with their heads on their knees. Many clutched their bows even in slumber. Just fifteen feet away a horse lifted its head to look at him. The Mongol warriors and their steeds slept side by side, thousands upon thousands of them.

Tanner must be hallucinating, just as Dzaya had once imagined herself strafed by fish from the skies. He could hear nothing at all, he realized; a sleeping army lay all about him yet he heard not a single snore or whinny, not even a breeze across his ear.

Should he stand and try to tiptoe his way out of here? But the men and horses were so close-packed that he surely wouldn't get far before he accidentally trod on someone, or until one of these terrible warriors awoke of their own accord.

Tanner felt a gentle pressure on his right shoulder. Before he could lose his balance, another weight pressed onto his left. He reached up with his free hand and felt a foot, small toes, but he saw nothing but the night and the army.



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Bare feet upon his shoulders, and now Tanner felt invisible hands tugging at his arm, and an alarming sense of dislocation as his feet seemed to be pulled *into* the earth beneath him. His heart began alternately skipping beats and thumping painfully hard, fighting for release as his whole body stretched and attenuated and the weight pushed down on his shoulders ever harder, the disembodied hands still shoving and pulling at him, and all around him the terrifying silence of the sleeping, heavily armed horde.

Tanner couldn't fathom it. None of these sensations made any *sense*, and his terror turned into panic. He swung his arm and his fist smacked into flesh; he twisted and rolled, mindless of the warriors around him. For they must be an illusion, the herbs of the shaman disarranging his senses for her own purposes, even as the hands and feet that assaulted him were real.

And he surely wasn't wrong, for in the next moment Dzaya fell and sprawled across him. He kicked at something, but it was a stool and not an armored shoulder. The air he breathed was laden with rank female sweat rather than the reek of leather and horse. Sound returned with a screech of curse-laden Mongolian. The sky of his dream had gone, replaced by the ceiling of the *ger* with its sun-like array of poles spreading from the central circular crown.

Furious, Tanner lashed out again and heard a howl as his blow connected. Then one of the Buryats was dragging Dzaya away, while another held Tanner down and Khulan scabbled backward across the floor away from him, sobbing and holding her head, the smoke from the fire swirling around them as she fled out of the *ger*, into the night.

Cigarette smoke spiraled into the sky. Tanner sat down beside Khulan. "What happened? What did you do?"

"I not speak to you."

"Khulan . . ."

"No. No. No. This all wrong."

He hesitated. "Khulan, did your sister and I fight? What did you see?"

"You in a trance," she said. "Dzaya, her hands on your shoulders, trying to lift you up. Then, you hit her."

"That's not what happened."

"Vodka, smoke. You see things."

Tanner breathed deep. The empty steppe stretched away around him in the darkness. How far had he come, that this bleak terrain now defined his normality? "And you don't want to know what *I* saw? Where *I* thought I was?"

"No."

He gave it up. "Fine."

"Is not fine," said Khulan automatically.

"Whatever."

He looked back toward the glow of the *gers*. Khulan had run almost a hundred yards away and then collapsed onto the grass; if she hadn't immediately lit a cigarette, it might have taken Tanner some time to locate her. He had thought that Dzaya might follow them out here, or one of the men, but the doors were closed now, the *gers* misleadingly tranquil.

"You stopped it," he said. "It was all happening. Dzaya was using me to move between worlds." Suddenly he laughed. "I always thought astral travel would feel more like flying. Less like a human pyramid."

"It's all bullshit," she said.

"No, it isn't. It's all real."

She turned on him furiously, crawling on hands and knees toward him with her cigarette jutting in front of her like a weapon. "To you this is exciting! To you this is,

your life means something, adventure now!" Khulan's English was deserting her in her anger, yet her meaning was clear enough.

He leaned toward her, careless of the smoldering cigarette inches from his face. "And to you, what? Let me tell you about *death*, Khulan. *Death*. Being a kid and thinking—knowing!—you're about to die. It's a huge sadness, a desperation . . . I was just a kid, I hadn't done *anything* yet, and it was all slipping away like water going down a plughole. I hadn't *lived*. I guess I shouldn't even have known what I was about to lose. But I did."

"So keep your damned life!" she shouted. "Get away from my sister!"

"We're the same, Khulan. For me it was hospital lights and sad faces, and it broke me. After that, I could never be happy again. For you it was your brother and sister, and madness and the Eternal Blue Sky. That's why you hate all this, because for you *this* is death, and your fear is all you can think about."

"Bullshit!" she said.

For the first time in his adult life, not everything was out of Tanner's control. Quite the reverse, he felt an assurance that bordered on the manic; at last, he was *gaining* command of this crazy situation. He had been forced away from the small daily choices into the larger, more cosmic decisions: Life. Death. Eternity. Loss. Sacrifice.

"There are other worlds!" he shouted. Khulan was sitting upright now, and he had grabbed her hand. She squeezed it almost painfully, still glaring into his eyes. "Other . . . I don't know. Dimensions! There *is* a meaning to all this somewhere!"

He had to help Dzaya. And Khulan had to accept that. For her the spirit path was a leap backward into the limited world of the past, into superstition and fear. It was a dreaded family obligation, a millstone around her neck to be evaded at all costs. But Tanner welcomed those things. They made him feel truly alive.

Khulan wanted to live in the modern world. Tanner already knew he couldn't.

"You don't know anything," she hissed. "So shut up!"

"I know everything I need to," he said, simply.

"You are just rat," she said. "What? *Ration*—?"

"Rationalizing, yes! And you're in denial!"

As a young teenager, Tanner's skin had seemed so soft and fragile against the blazing lights of the ER. Memories of death had haunted him ever since. Now his skin had hardened in the sun. He had bathed in the light from Father Heaven. It was a big sky, and even bigger than he could yet fathom.

"Admit it," he said. "We traveled. *Something happened*."

"You imagined it!" she shouted in his face. "You're crazy!"

She was merely strengthening his conviction. Power surged through him.

Her burning eyes focused upon him, her face only inches away. Perhaps she was the first person who had ever really *seen* him.

And in return, Tanner knew Khulan now; her smiles, her rages, the smell of her sweat. They were no longer merely captor and hostage; they were companions in this, and more than companions.

Khulan cared for *him*. She was afraid for *him*. He knew she did.

He touched her cheek. He almost expected to strike sparks off her but he did not; he could feel the softness of her skin, the firmness of her cheekbone under his thumb. He put his hand behind her head to draw her lips closer.

She dropped the cigarette. In the darkness, he did not see the slap coming. He felt it though, bitter and hard as one of the sour cheese curds the nomads served with dinner. It knocked his head to the right and he lost his balance, sprawling in the grass.

As Khulan stomped away, Tanner bowed his head, and tried not to listen to the blood rushing in his ears.

\* \* \*

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That night Khulan slept with Dzaya in the second *ger*. The next morning she refused to speak to Tanner, refused to even acknowledge his existence.

In contrast, the incident was the making of Tanner as far as the Mongol men were concerned. When he sat down at their early-morning fire, shrugging ruefully and making the signs universally recognized between men the world around, they welcomed him with companionable grins and poured him coffee. When it was time to ride, the youngest of the men spent a little time adjusting Tanner's saddle and stirrups, and even—rather alarmingly—half-slapped the face of Tanner's horse, perhaps admonishing it to behave better in future. When his nameless horse inevitably veered off in search of a snack, the oldest of the men galloped over and forced it back into line with the others. Greatly daring, Tanner dug in his heels and challenged the man to a race over the next few hundred yards. He lost tidily, but once again the sound of cheerful laughter echoed across the steppe.

Soon after, Tanner had the men's names memorized; from youngest to oldest, he was riding with Chudruk, Bauga, and Ivaandjav. Tanner rode alongside Bauga, mimicking his position in the saddle and casual way of holding the reins. Before long, the nomad had taken personal responsibility for improving Tanner's horsemanship, teaching him entirely by example, sign language, and amiable mockery. Tanner's riding skills improved noticeably over the next two days, and despite the additional efforts he was now nowhere near as sore when they dismounted for the evening.

Dzaya and Khulan rode some distance behind and some distance apart, talking rarely, never smiling. It was clear that neither had anticipated this sudden shift in the group's internal politics.

Dzaya's presence increased as the terrain evolved. In the Gobi she had seemed unremarkable. Here, she was essential. Returning to the steppes and forests of northern Mongolia, she was returning to her power. Here, her dances made sense; here she was truly *Udgan*.

Their rituals took place under the stars now. They had left the *morin khuur* behind; now it was just the remorseless beating of the drums and the gravelly *hoomei* wail as Chudruk sang down the hills and the flames from the fire leapt up toward the Eternal Sky. As the shaman capered Tanner felt his heartbeat synchronize with the drumbeat, the twin throbs deafening in his ears. Out in the dark he saw shapes moving just beyond the reach of the flames' light. Creatures with two legs, and creatures with four.

His dreams came faster now, and more vividly; images of a dark army whirling across the steppe under a black spirit banner, lightning fast and incredibly maneuverable. He felt the weight of years, the power of history.

Khulan did not speak to him, and thus nobody else could either, except in the most primitive of sign language. Tanner barely cared. His brief infatuation with her had washed away as speedily as it had grown. He knew the part that adrenaline and hormones had played in his embarrassment, realized how he had misread the situation and failed Khulan and himself. Yet it seemed insignificant against the background of the new energy he felt and his new comfort with the men and the terrain. Tanner would wait patiently, and see where fate led them next.

As the forests around them grew larger and heartier, fate led them inexorably to a tree. And as the visions of the leather-clad horsemen grew stronger and Tanner grew ever tougher, fate led them inexorably to an army of thunder and steel.

Khentii *aimag* was as different from the Gobi as it could possibly be. The region they rode into now was mountainous, craggy, and well-watered. As the days went by and they approached the Onon-Balj confluence in the north of the *aimag*, it was

clear to Tanner that, having spent so long in the bleakest and hottest of deserts, they could now not be far away from the lakes and forests of Siberia.

The tree was scrubby and not tall; it extended a bare twenty-five feet toward the Eternal Blue Sky. Each branch stood alone, sparse of foliage. Scraps of blue scarves dangled from the lower branches. Dzaya, Khulan, and Tanner circled it three times, with varying degrees of reverence.

Dzaya spoke. Grudgingly, Khulan said, "She ask what you see."

"Sad-looking tree," said Tanner. "Presumably stunted by the winds. Blue scarves." They were on higher ground now, starker steppe with rocky outcroppings; a ridge of low mountains rose ahead of them in the middle distance.

Khulan relayed the message. The shaman looked grim. Tanner added, "Oh, and the skull and the old rattle wedged up in the high branches, of course."

Khulan gaped up at the tree, turned her head slowly to look at him. "Tell Dzaya," he said.

A babble of conversation broke out behind him as he stepped forward and placed his palm against the tree just as Khulan had done to the deer stone. The trunk felt wet to the touch, though his palm came away dry.

Dzaya joined him at the tree, placing her hand on its bark next to his. Khulan came closer. "This Dzaya's shaman tree. Where she came when she was mad. This was her quest-place. Here, she came into her power."

"And is that her skull too? So to speak."

"After becoming shaman she get horse, to ride around the villages. She say then, 'This is a good horse, when he dies I will honor him by putting him in this tree.'" Khulan paused. "I cannot see the horse skull. And not the drum either."

"It's a rattle," he said. "And, a favor? Even if I'm a good sacrifice, don't honor me by cutting my head off and putting it in a tree."

"Your humor is bad," said Khulan. "Especially here."

"I meant no disrespect to the tree. What now?"

Dzaya spoke, and Khulan translated. "She say this prove that you are the one she needs, who holds open the doors to higher plane and lower. Here she will walk on your shoulders. It's metaphor. You understand metaphor?"

"It's not a metaphor, Khulan. You know that."

"And she say . . . oh, shit."

"Hey, now. Not in front of the shaman tree." He turned to see where she was looking.

Across the steppe, halfway to the horizon, a column of troop carriers and tanks was racing toward them, their speeding wheels and tracks throwing dust into the skies.

Dzaya was already climbing the tree, trusting her weight to its thin branches. "Uh, be careful," said Tanner.

The rattle was wedged firm. Dzaya had to use both hands to free it. Dropping it down to Tanner, she quickly clambered back to ground level.

It was a gourd, painted black and red. Tanner shook it at Khulan, and it made a thin reedy sound as the seeds within it cascaded over one another. "Yes, yes, of course I see it now," she said impatiently.

The clatter of the rattle had a sudden and intense effect on Tanner, tugging his hands downward as if it were a dowsers' twig. At the same time he received a vision: under the soil flowed a subterranean river, dour and relentless; the very *wateriness* of it alien and threatening to the landscapes they'd spent the past weeks traveling through.

The ground might give way and dump him into the river's chilly flow. He grabbed Khulan's arm, managing not to drop the gourd in the process. "Wow."

"Don't touch me," she snapped.

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Bauga brought forward Dzaya's drum and quickly retreated from the shaman. The babble of the men's consternation rose.

"Guys, be quiet," said Tanner. "Khulan, shut them—"

Dzaya struck the drum in a heavy, thick, immediate rhythm. The earth twisted, and Tanner fell to his knees.

"No!" Khulan ran forward. "Dzaya, no, stop . . ."

With difficulty, Tanner lifted his head to meet her gaze. "It's all right." He shook the rattle, in time with the shaman's beat.

This time he helped Dzaya, instead of fighting her. This time when the *Udgan* stepped up onto Tanner's shoulders, he raised his hand to aid and steady her, and Khulan did not interfere. His *suld* flared in pain as Dzaya put her hand on the crown of his head to stabilize herself; freed from her physical being, she was naked force now, unmediated by skin and bone. Tanner himself felt ridiculously elongated and warped, like a mirage, reaching out of this landscape, this Mongolia, casting ethereal hands down through the loam to the water, up through the blue air to the flaming sun. The World River cascaded over his feet, the branches of the World Tree twined around him, as he stretched to help propel Dzaya in another direction entirely.

The shaman leaped. Her harsh, insistent drumbeat ceased.

"Dzoldzaya!"

Khulan's shriek was more terrified than anything Tanner had yet heard. He glanced up, but Dzaya was not in the tree above him.

"Get her back!" Khulan screamed. "Where is she, find her, get her *back*!"

Tanner looked all around. Dzaya was still gone. Khulan's hands were up at her temples, tearing at her hair. The men stood frozen. Without Dzaya, the group had lost its center.

He scanned the steppe. The column of Chinese armored vehicles was still heading their way, many miles distant but moving fast. Running to his horse, he swung himself up into the saddle in a single motion. He clapped his hands to get their attention. "All right, Bauga, Ivaandjav, Chudruk. We go!" He pointed. "Khulan! Come on!"

The men mounted up. Khulan put her hands on the tree trunk, searched the empty tree with her eyes. She babbled briefly in Mongolian and then switched to English. "What if Dzaya comes back? We can't leave her!"

Tanner still felt the imprint of the shaman's hand on his *suld*. Images of Mongols swirled around him, moving in and out of his view, ghostly in the bright air. Though they seemed ethereal, Tanner trusted the idea that they were truly living men, and nearer than they had been before. All times were becoming one. "Dzaya isn't coming back, Khulan."

"We can't outrun them!" She gestured wildly at the tanks, the Mengshi.

"Well, we certainly won't outrun them standing here, Khulan, let's *go*!"

When she still failed to act, Tanner turned to Bauga. "Gun?" He made a crude pistol shape with his fingers, his thumb the firing pin, and reached out to the nomad. "Come on, Bauga, I know you've got one."

Bauga looked back and forth between Tanner, Khulan, and the Chinese vehicles that bumped over the landscape toward them. Then he reached into the folds of his *deel* and brought out a machine pistol. Tanner grabbed it and pointed it at Khulan. "Get on horse. Now."

Eyes wide, moving as if she were underwater, Khulan stepped away from the tree and reached for her horse's reins.

"All right. Bauga! Burkhan Khaldun?"

"Burkhan Khaldun." The Mongolian pointed, and spurred on his steed. The other four pulled their horses' heads around and galloped after him, toward the waiting hills.

\* \* \*

## Asimov's

They galloped onto the rocky lower slopes of Burkhan Khaldun. *Ovoos* surrounded them, shaman mounds, piles of rocks and branches decorated with blue scarves and prayer flags. These, then, were the lower reaches of the holy place where Chinggis Khaan came to meditate and recharge his energy before going into battle; this was the pilgrimage site for modern-day Mongols, its very existence a threat to Chinese authority.

Tanner couldn't imagine how their horses could be careering so fast over such uneven terrain without a disaster. At any moment a hoof might land in a hole, snapping a horse's leg and flinging its rider through space.

His steed strained, its ears back. Violent shocks traveled up Tanner's spine. If he survived this he'd probably be several inches shorter; perhaps this explained why Mongolians were so compact. He could barely risk twisting his body in the saddle to glance back, but he knew a swath of Chinese vehicles pursued them up the first slopes of the mountain toward the sky. From behind them came the loud stutter of machine-gun fire, the roar of a shell kicking up sod and turf just thirty feet away from them. Mercifully the terrain was so vile that even sitting in the relative comfort of a tank, the Chinese gunners would have to expend some of their efforts just holding on, with little left over for aiming and firing. But the relative advantage the horses had enjoyed on the flat plain was quickly negated by the rising incline. Tanner's horse was already slowing.

Sweat stung Tanner's eyes, but he dared not reach up to wipe it away. His jaw ached from the stress of clenching it so he wouldn't bite his tongue. Another shell slammed into the sacred mountain, spraying him with soil.

"Khulan!" he shouted.

She turned her gaze toward him, her brow furrowed with concentration.

"Can the Mengshi follow us up there? The tanks? Can horses go where they can't?"

"Trucks new!" she shouted back. "Tanks old!"

"Screw their *vintage*. Can we get away from them?"

"On bad ground, horse as fast as tank."

He looked behind him. The Chinese were ever nearer. "Glad you think so!"

Khulan peered back, and her mouth twisted. "Need to find badder ground."

Tanner still held the machine pistol clenched in a white-knuckled grip. He pointed it back over his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The *brrp, brrp* of its firing nearly sent him deaf and the kickback jerked his arm painfully, but the leading Mengshi was so close now that he could hear his bullets ricochet off it. Another peek showed him it was veering off to the side, bouncing as it hit the bumps. A second Mengshi raced up the uneven terrain to his right, its front wheel careering up over the base of an *ovoo* and practically sending it airborne. The tanks were still well behind, guarding the rear with a solid wall of iron but now unable to fire for fear of hitting their own armored vehicles.

Tanner's ears recovered from the din of the machine pistol. From all around came the scream of engines, the whine of their transmissions. Tanner and Khulan's horses jumped a stream, then slowed and swerved to avoid piling straight into a rocky outcrop. The Mengshis had to diverge again to avoid the stream-bed and one of the tank crews took the opportunity to fire; the shell careened by close overhead, rocking the hillside in its detonation. An *ovoo* exploded; stones, fossilized wood, and tatters of blue scarves rained down on them.

For the briefest moment Tanner felt suspended in space, as if he had been thrown from his horse and might crash down onto the harsh ground. Then he felt the horse's flanks between his thighs again, and knew he had been touched, not thrown. And only one person could touch him invisibly, in such a way that he could forget his own body.

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“Dzoldzaya?”

He saw nothing, but felt the shaman’s invisible hand slip into his; the same size as Khulan’s, but with rougher skin, a tauter muscle under her thumb.

With some effort, he steered his horse closer to Khulan’s. “Dzaya is here!”

Panting, driving her horse to gallop even harder, Khulan speared him with a brief glare as if he had lost his mind. Tanner’s heart pounded, shaking his ribcage even as the thunder of the galloping hooves jarred his spine. It skipped a beat and twisted in his chest, but the feeling no longer terrified him. “Khulan! Dzaya is holding my hand right now. I need to hold yours!”

Khulan shook her head.

“We need the soul you share with her! This is going to take all seven of us!”

She eyed him balefully. Her hands tightened on the reins and for a moment Tanner thought she might peel away from him. “It’s not right!”

“It is!” he shouted back over the ever-rising surge of sound from the tanks behind. “It needs to happen! I *want* it to happen!”

“Dzaya,” Khulan spat, in the same tone of voice that she might have used to say “Damn it.” But she freed her right hand from her horse’s reins and reached out to him.

Tanner had to trust to Khulan’s horsemanship, and his own newfound riding skill. He grabbed Khulan’s hand and clutched it tightly, and the three of them rode that way, two seen and one unseen, linked across time and space, bumping uphill over the sacred soil of Mount Burkhan Khaldun.

Dzaya’s voice rang in Tanner’s ears. Her Mongolian words were indecipherable, their tone familiar. The *Udgan* was reciting an incantation, and suddenly it was as if the horses’ hooves clattered along the bark of branches, blue sky beneath them, now running over water, the eternal course of a dark river, now leaping through the air, and never coming to ground. Illusions all, but echoes of connections made, powerful links forged. Tanner’s ears rang with voices. Dzaya was chanting, but her incantations seemed strangely doubled like *hoomei* until Tanner realized that, indeed, two throats were forming the words.

Khulan was chanting too, cueing off Dzaya. Through their links with Tanner, the sisters could hear each other.

At last, Khulan had rejected the modern and abandoned her fear.

By now Tanner recognized the lilt and emphasis of Mongolian speech, the soft roundness of its vowels. The words he heard now from Dzaya and Khulan were different. These were words in some more ancient Turkic precursor tongue, words of the mountain and river, forest and steppe.

Together, the sisters squeezed Tanner’s hands even more tightly. A feeling of intense pain struck him on the crown of his head and at two points buried deep within his chest, at his central connections with his *suld*, *ami*, and *suns* souls. Tanner felt torn and flayed, turned inside out in a twisting convulsion almost too intense to bear. He fell across his horse’s neck as anguish radiated along his limbs down into the steppe, up into the Eternal Blue Sky. Secondary shocks struck the shaman sisters riding beside him. Only the tension of their interconnectedness sustained them, that and the perfect rhythm of their Mongolian horses as they galloped further up the slope toward the sky.

The surge of energy was almost like dying again. And the convulsion was not just in Tanner and the sisters, but in the world itself.

The mountain roared. The earth shivered. Tanner’s horse faltered. Khulan came to a halt by his side, her face sheened with sweat, almost toppling out of her saddle onto the hard ground. But Khulan was not Tanner’s concern right now; even as the screech of gears and engines came from perilously close behind them, he was staring up toward the peak of Mount Burkhan Khaldun.

At first he thought the roiling cloud was an avalanche, the dark shapes careering down the mountain merely an array of freakishly well-aligned boulders. When the truth hit him it seemed like no truth at all, but just another bizarre vision.

On came the avalanche of warriors, as the Mongol horde swept down upon him and over him. The army of the Khaan flowed around them, armored in leather, their teeth exposed in harsh grimaces, each with a tall composite bow in his grasp and a wooden shield at his elbow. The fury of their passing stole the sky and turned the world to dust. Their war-cries rang in Tanner's ears, and the true miracle was that his unnamed, wonderful horse just stood still and panted, its head down against the dust.

Tanner felt a presence at his elbow. There stood Dzoldzaya in full shaman garb, all color and feathers and bells, and Tanner slid off his horse and caught her just as she crumpled. She smelled of dust and horses and slow time.

His arms still around her, he backed her up against his horse's flank as the army continued to pound on past. Khulan dismounted and threw her arms around both of them. A bearded Mongol warrior swerved to avoid them, his leather cheek-guards flapping around his face like a bird. The metal harness jingled. Flecks of foam from his horse's nostrils splattered across Tanner's forehead.

The din of the charging horde lasted for some time.

At last, Khulan released her hold. Tanner looked up. The pall of dust diffused the sunlight, and the ground still trembled to the unfocused rhythm of ten thousand hoofbeats. But the bulk of the Khaan's army had passed, and now only a smattering of stragglers remained, riding furiously to catch up.

Tanner released the sisters and stepped away from the horses. Scattered nearby on the slopes of Burkhan Khaldun stood four more horses similarly immobile, like boats stranded on the tide. Bauga cheered and whooped at the passage of the horde, and Ivaandjav looked as if he'd been hit by a truck, while Chudruk calmly patted his steed's neck as if the ancient army of the Grand Khaan rode over him every day.

From the plains below Tanner heard the continuing roar of battle cries and the clang of metal against metal, but saw only that immense cloud of dust.

"Holy shit," he said.

"Now can I have a cigarette?" said Khulan.

"Yeah," said Tanner. "Sure. Fine. Please do. By all means. Absolutely."

The others rode on, but Tanner walked his horse the rest of the way up Burkhan Khaldun. He felt almost snapped in two, his legs permanently bowed. His knees might never touch again.

They had bridged the gulf between past and present. The door had been opened. Help had come to Mongolia.

Tanner had thought they were trying to protect the soul-land of the Khaan. He realized now that the truth was the exact opposite. Their flight had lured this Chinese armored convoy into Dzaya's trap, a strategy as old as Chingghis Khaan himself.

And Tanner still lived. His heart beat regularly and the blood coursed in his veins, and in time with them he felt a swinging double oscillation in his chest as his two reincarnated souls freely resonated within the sphere of his body. Tanner was complete now. He was a new man, or perhaps just the man he should always have been.

Burkhan Khaldun leveled out to a wide plateau before the final rise to its rocky peaks. On this plateau they found the giant camp of the Khaan.

In the Mongol camp were women young and old, and men old and injured; all wore the *deels* and boots and peaked fur hats they had worn through time immemorial. Round-faced children in colorful woolen tunics with fur collars scampered back and forth between their mothers' cooking pots and the low tables. Amid the *gers* and the



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tents and the wooden carts, Tanner saw no signs of the modern world. Was he in the thirteenth century, or the twenty-first? Perhaps the question was meaningless, the collision between the worlds so intense and complete that either could be true.

Ivaandjav and Chudruk sat shivering by a campfire, their heads in their hands. Bauga stared at a corral of Mongolian horses, their reins and wooden saddles archaic.

Khulan walked over to Tanner. She looked tired and resentful, and much older. "It is broken," she said. "All across Asia, breaks in reality. Lines of force . . ." She trailed off.

"How d'you know?" he said, trying to make light of it. "Your cellphone works here?"

"I am sister of *Udgan*. I know." Her voice was hollow, her eyes haunted.

"You didn't want this. I'm sorry."

"We tore something we can't mend. I hope you're happy. You and my damned sister."

Maybe Tanner was in shock, or maybe he was just still exhilarated. Perhaps he had already accepted the magnitude of what they had done. Or perhaps he just didn't care. Tanner couldn't disentangle it.

"I'm very happy," he said.

She looked so doleful that he went to hug her. She pulled away. "Let me go. I smell bad."

"You don't."

". . . all right." She came into his arms, and held him very tightly.

Over Khulan's shoulder, Tanner could see Dzaya setting up a complicated arrangement of incense, juniper twigs, and a collection of small pastel-daubed pots. A prayer of thanks, or a blessing? A shaman's work was never done. Feeling his gaze, Dzaya turned and caught sight of them, holding each other here at the roof of the world. She paused briefly, then nodded and smiled. Tanner smiled back.

"You'll be all right?" he said to Khulan, but she merely shrugged. It was Dzaya who took his arm and gave him food. Yet even as Tanner bit into the hot leg of mutton and smeared grease over his chin, the *Udgan* was pointing down toward the plains and the army of the Khaan, then toward the west, then at the spare horses in the paddock.

"Yeah, I know," said Tanner. "Give me a moment."

He stuffed more mutton into his cheeks, and some bread and curds into his pockets for later. Bauga was waiting for him at the corral grinning like a crazy man. Good; of all the men, Tanner liked Bauga the best.

He pulled himself onto a fresh horse, took the bow and arrows that Bauga handed up to him.

Khulan had followed him. "So you think you are Mongol now?"

"I just want to help," he said.

The wooden saddle was painful between his thighs. Mongols really rode on these things? Tanner tried not to think of the rawness in his legs, not just now but in his future, when they reached Ulaanbaatar. Perhaps he could forgo the saddle and just use the blanket.

"Wait," said Khulan. "You going to need me." Mounting up, she said something in Mongolian to Bauga, who half-bowed and smiled. To Tanner she added, "Still don't like it."

This was war. Liking it wasn't the point. "It's fine," he said, and with his eyes he challenged her to disagree.

Wordless but jangling, Dzaya the shaman walked past them and chose a horse.

Tanner looked at Dzaya, then at Khulan. Beside him rode Mongolia ancient and modern, past and future. Traditional and hip. Twins under the Eternal Blue Sky.

"Well, off we go then," he said.

They cantered down the hill toward the battlefield.

\* \* \*

Now, all times were one.

In the foothills of Burkhan Khaldun they would come upon a scene of devastation. The past had found its way of dealing with the present.

The Chinese tanks had scattered like cockroaches in the face of the Mongol charge. The horses of the horde had whirled around them, moving too fast for the heavy artillery to draw a bead on. Chinese soldiers had appeared out of the tank turrets, their heads up and out to spray the Mongols with machine-gun fire, their best hope. But the Mongols had explosives, which they had—ironically enough—inherited just recently from the thirteenth century Chinese. The Khaan's soldiers had spiked the guns, jammed the tracks, ripped the PLA apart, taken no prisoners, showed no mercy.

Modern Chinese armaments were intended to fight other armored vehicles and control cities, not warriors on horseback. Tanner would recall that the horse-riding Mujahedin had scored spectacular victories against tanks in Soviet Afghanistan, and also that the ancient Mongol horse archers had made a habit of annihilating armies much larger and better equipped than themselves.

And so Tanner and the others would ride through a field of battle that was empty but for the dead and ruined: the burnt-out tanks, the wrecked Mengshi, and score upon score of massacred Chinese.

Even before the Khaan's army swept into Ulaanbaatar like a divine storm, the Chinese would flee for the borders. Chinggis Khaan's reputation would precede him. The Chinese were smart enough to know when the forces of history were against them.

Banning his name, it turned out, had not been enough. It had only made him mad.

The horde of the Khaan would ride past the *ger* suburbs into Ulaanbaatar. Townspeople would line the streets, cheering. "Everyone has joyful to meet Mongolian liberators," Tanner would say to Khulan, and she would smile wryly.

The twin sisters would ride by his side, flanking and guiding him; almost identical, and yet so different. One, all flesh and blood, wearing sunglasses and incongruous T-shirts that sparkled, the other in full black shaman garb with ribbons and mirrors dangling from her clothes, yet seeming ethereal and almost translucent from her great spirit journey.

Eventually, in the fullness of Time, the new Mongol Empire would spread from Dornod *aimag* in the east to Lake Zaysan in Khazakhstan, and from the shores of Lake Baikal to the far southern reaches of the formerly Chinese Inner Mongolia. The Khaan would rebuild Karakorum, his ancient capital, and consolidate his new Mongolian heartland under a white spirit banner of peace.

And through it all an American would travel with him, serving as envoy and translator, one of the Khaan's chief links with the modern world. He would be a stranger without a past, or at least not a past that anybody claimed.

"Nonetheless, he seems wise," the people would say.

"He has a strong soul," they would murmur.

"And a good heart."

"A Mongolian heart." ○

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