

KAISHA

As we crested the hill and beheld the boundless steppe before us, she let out a cry and spurred her horse into a gallop. The other children lagged behind the first moment in shock, then fell farther and farther back. I clutched my horse's mane and screwed my eyes shut, wishing only to keep pace, knowing even then that the avalanche of hoofbeats were in truth my thundering heartbeats. I looked up and saw her ahead, just out of arm's reach. She was howling her laughter, hair flaming behind her, green eyes flashing imperious. She looked neither left nor right, nor truly ahead, but somewhere beyond the dying sun.

Chapter 1

Kaisha and I were the only newborns to survive the winter of my birth – one so cold, it killed off a full fifth of the horses. My father implied he had named me in their honour; that my name meant “steeds” in a foreign tongue. It was to be some time before I discovered his little joke.

My parents were Uyghur slaves: man- and maid-servant to Blacktooth and his wife, as befitted a chieftain of 200 warriors. They had arrived with him upon his return from campaigning one summer, but none of the men who returned with them could give me any explanation as to why – my parents had simply accompanied Blacktooth into camp one day.

My father was rather small and thin, as I would come to be, and handsome in his absent-minded sort of way. His eyes were always open quite wide; when we spoke, I would wonder how he could stare for so long without getting them dry, and count the seconds until he blinked. He would always make everything he could into a question, even when anyone else would simply state it outright:

“Is that not the setting sun? Does this not indicate that you should run along and help your mother, hm?”

Father, Mother told me to ask you if you had finished making that flint knife for skinning rabbits.

“My son, how would you balance — I ask, how would you, in my place, balance on the one hand your not inconsiderable nor unimportant familial duties and on the other those tasks with which your sovereign lord and protector has solemnly charged you, while in each case endeavouring to maintain the quality and workmanship each undertaking merits despite the strictures of urgency both masters to which you are bound insist on imposing?”

Very well, Father, I’ll tell her you’ll do it tomorrow.

Partly as a result of this pet eccentricity, and certainly as a result of whatever hidden madness drove it, I have to this day not conclusively determined what exactly he did before living with the tribe. I can only assume he must have been a merchant, or some sort of traveling scribe.

When he followed Blacktooth on his rounds, they resembled nothing so much as a grizzled wolf with a faithful raccoon companion who would flit from side to side, endlessly distracted by obscure details, while the wolf continued on its loping way, confident in the knowledge that seconds later, the raccoon would notice it had been left alone and hurriedly scamper back.

On days when the chieftain was otherwise occupied – scouting ahead, or hunting wolves – he might send my father off on Truth — his squat, stolid donkey — with a message to one herder or another. On these occasions, I would be the one to scamper squealing at the donkey’s plodding hoofs.

My father remains to this day the only man I have ever known to insult a blooded warrior of the steppes to his face and walk away with all his teeth intact.

Upon discovering even a token oversight in one of his elaborate plans for animal husbandry or livestock diet, he would fly into apoplexy: flailing his arms, driving his finger into chests, and shouting curses of such virulence they would have earned anyone else a dagger in the eye for their trouble – though they were so imaginatively convoluted they quickly became the stuff of legend, remembered fondly and pieced together over campfires for months if not years afterward.

On one memorable occasion, even my father stepped too far when he slapped Rattle's father, Bull, flush in the face. That was the moment I first felt true dread, as the anger slowly rose in the huge man. Then, without warning, my father's fury crested and he flung himself to the ground, to all appearances racked by sobs. Confusion replaced rage on Bull's scarred face, until he found himself squatting beside the heaving figure at his feet, awkwardly trying to console him.

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My mother smiled often and well – it lit up a broad face which I could not recognize when she frowned. She was always telling me stories; my favourites were those of my distant ancestor Surtat, grandmother to my grandmother's own grandmother, whom I worshipped then, and still cherish now. What follows is just one of many.

One day, Surtat returned from tending her hilly fields of yams and onions to find a manul cat asleep on her bed. She was very tired and attempted to shove the manul off her coverings, that she might sleep herself. But the cat turned upon her the eyes of a human, round and blue, and said "As you have disturbed my rest, neither shall you rest until you answer me this riddle. Tell me, Surtat the Fair, Surtat the Crone-to-Be: whither do heroes go, once their deeds have been done?"

Surtat scoffed, and said, "Like everyone else, they must go find something that passes for a privy and squat down, every day, just like the rest of us, deed or no deed."

The cat simply stared at her with its human eyes, then curled up and fell asleep.

A year passed – the cat had remained where it was, neither eating nor drinking, on her bed. Surtat had not slept. She prodded the cat awake, and it turned to regard her with its human eyes of midnight black.

Surtat frowned at the manul and said, "Like everyone else, they must go find something that passes for a grave and lie down, one day, just like the rest of us, deed or no deed."

The cat regarded her with its old, old eyes, then curled up and fell asleep.

Ten years passed. Surtat had left her few fields and met the Moon, and borne him a daughter, and had met the Sun, and borne her a son, and had returned to the village at the base of her mountain. In all this time, she had not slept. She walked up to the hut which held the bed which once was hers and roused the cat. It turned to regard her with green eyes.

Surtat smiled and said, “Like mothers, heroes die and live no more, and go into the stories their children tell, and live on in their hearts. In this, they are much like love – passed on.”

The cat regarded her long, unblinking. Then it curled up, and its chest gently rose and fell.

Surtat never slept again. Until the end, perhaps, when she went to the place where heroes go, when their deeds have been done.

I remember being deeply distressed by this story, which I expressed then through anger and tears.

Kaisha merely laughed.

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My mother’s duties essentially consisted of attending to the domestic needs of the chieftain’s household before those of her own. Blacktooth’s first wife had been ill for many years, rarely leaving the bundle of furs in the corner of her ger in my lifetime. My mother tended to her, but spent almost every hour of the day with Blacktooth’s second wife, whom we affectionately referred to as Tigerlily.

She was an almost inconceivably beautiful woman, with lustrous, darkly red hair and eyes so light a shade of greenish-brown that they appeared to be golden. She was very young, but determined and resourceful from the beginning. My parents aside, she was the only foreigner in the tribe, and the main focus of their ire whenever they had need of one. Life was never easy on the steppe, and as it grew ever harder for them, they knew that she was in part the cause. With the passing years has come forgiveness for this. But at the time, I do not think I ever realized just how many of my troubles stemmed from this – for what they could not do to her, they would wish upon my parents; and what they would wish upon my parents, their children would do to me.

If she and my mother had ever resembled a mistress and servant, this had evidently ceased by the time I was old enough to form memories. They seemed like nothing so much as an older and younger sister; I suppose having gone through pregnancy and childbirth together must have bound them to one another in some profound way which mothers will say is inscrutable to one such as me.

I suppose it is partly because of Tigerlily’s uneasy relationship with the other women, but the two of them did everything together – washing gear and clothes in a stream, weaving and knitting and mending by the hearth during the colder months, plaiting each others’ hair and gossiping like little girls. My first memories are of playing at their feet with Kaisha while they lay talking — of clumsily helping them fold clothing and hides, or crying into their lap while Kaisha glared balefully somewhere behind me. It is possible that, in later years, my perception of her began to pale, as if there was not room in me for anyone but Kaisha. But very early on, I was extremely attached to Tigerlily, with all the impossible passion of a little boy who is liable to see in a grown woman the solution and fulfilment to all the problems and desires whose outlines he will only be able to intuit once he has gained the ability to act on them, and thus lost the innocence which might permit him to succeed. I must have been, or else the following episode makes little sense.

I would have been minuscule at this point, surely not more than three years of age. Blacktooth was entertaining an old comrade in arms, who visited a number of times during my childhood.

His name was Jelme, and he was considerably younger than our chieftain, but they had evidently saved each other's life on more than one occasion, for they greeted one another as blood brothers.

He had an upright and noble look – his cheekbones high, and widely spaced – but somehow you could still see in him the slightly chubby, good-natured child he used to be. He was invariably smiling widely whenever you glanced his way, or listening to someone intently and with interest. He played with Kaisha with a childlike glee few adults could feel, or even feign.

Jelme always visited us with a small retinue, and they were all crowded into Blacktooth's ger one afternoon. We had long since taken the midday meal, after which there was drinking. I think it might have been summer, because there was a baking, lazy form of heat inside the ger. My father had fallen asleep on the lap of Dhunan, Jelme's most fearsome bodyguard. He was not a very large man, and I had never seen him unsheathe a weapon, but he had a sinuous, smooth form of movement, and the most remarkably pale eyes. Even the most brutal and blustering of Blacktooth's warriors avoided him in a way that screamed their fear; in fact, I had never seen anyone apart from Jelme ever address the man directly. And yet he sat there very still for a long time in what looked like a fairly uncomfortable position, so as not to wake my father.

I remember I grew bored, or tired, or energetic, and tottered my way outside.

Tigerlily was standing under the caress of sun and breeze, which together conspired to unbind her hair and loosen the ties of her clothes. She was talking with Jelme.

Now, I should make perfectly clear that there was no question of anything untoward in all this. The two truly were merely talking, in perfectly public view, and with a respectful distance between them.

But there was something in the ease and comfort and joy she exhibited, the looseness of posture and genuineness of smile, which she never displayed with the more dour and sour Blacktooth, who surely represented no girl's idea of romance. And for some reason, this piqued in me the height of jealousy and outrage, in totally inverse proportion to my age and size and understanding of the workings of humanity. I was utterly consumed with childish fury and all the irrational possessiveness of an unrealizable urge.

I know I stumbled gamely over and began striking at the shins of someone, but cannot recall if it was him or her.

Tigerlily picked me up, and held me to her, and rocked and shushed me back and forth. All the while, she and Jelme laughed merrily at my antics over my head, as if anything that could happen to them now were but a private joke.

Of course, looking back, this was perfectly natural. I was a child throwing a tantrum for no reason even I could fully understand. But at the time this only incensed me further. Yet the harder I cried, the more amusing they found it, and the closer they drew, over a shared absurdity they could define themselves against. Everything I did to drive them apart ended up only bringing them together.

I was seized by a feeling of utter powerlessness, comprehending at last my complete inability to wrest her from him, no matter what I did... and I saw myself already then as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

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And then, of course, there was Kaisha. She was the first child her mother bore, and the only one that did not arrive too stunted to draw breath.

She had her mother's hair, as well as her full lips, though her eyes shone with a green ferocity all her own – bright like the first shoots through snow, so crisp and sharp you never doubted she could cut you with a stare. Our mothers' constant companionship meant we were raised closer even than a brother and sister. In truth, I cannot remember having spent a waking hour without her until the Spring I started my apprenticeship to my father, such as it was.

From a very young age, she took to wearing the garb of a boy of the steppes – cured leather trousers and a roughspun shirt, laced at the neck with a hempen strip. What this meant in practice was that she wore my clothing. Back then, I only owned one set, so I began to wear my father's old robes, which my mother cut down to size. I became so accustomed to them that I wore them even in the winter months, with trousers underneath. Eventually, Tigerlily despaired of trying to get her daughter into a dress, and began making her her own set of clothes, including a fine leather vest she wore always, often without a shirt. My father found the sight of us hysterically funny many years after everyone else had grown accustomed to the arrangement, and would often refer to Kaisha as “your husband” and to me as “the chieftain's wife” — which was made all the more infuriating by the fact he himself wore the same Uyghur robes I did. Kaisha would giggle and play along by kissing me and telling me to cook her dinner, which only deepened my sulk.

When she was barely out of the cradle, she began to drag around children twice her age by the hair when she grew frustrated with their incomprehension. Thus, my father began to call her Kaisha – and it stuck.

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True to her name, as soon as she was old enough to run around and shout, she began to assemble followers – the children of the chieftain's most trusted warriors, who rode with us nearly always. There is no real need to remember them all, however. I am not altogether certain even I do.

There was Spit, Furnape's son, who was older and hairier than the rest of us.

Muddy and Upward were twins, and used to enjoy finishing each other's sentences.

Frog was very funny, and had a lazy eye he would let wander after he had made a joke.

Rattle got his name from a strange item bought from some caravan we had bartered with, or raided – a jingling wooden ball with an elongated handle. Citing the fact that it was roughly similar in size to a bull's testicle, with long, straight appendage attached, my father insisted it gave its owner certain superhuman qualities I was too young to comprehend the nature of at the time. Rattle's father – a simple, kind, and hulking herder

– gave it as a toy to his youngest son, for whom it became more of a sacred relic; he once bit my father when the ludicrous man tried to borrow it.

Sandal was a girl, and the most inexplicably patient person I have ever known. At times, it seemed she only followed us to be ridiculed by the older boys. Little Flick, however, was clever where her older sister was kind, and clear-eyed where her sister's vision would be obscured by tears.

Wailer used to hide among the cattle every night to avoid going to bed, before one bit him on the head, leaving him a bald patch and a lifelong, terrified hatred of the creatures – one so strong, indeed, that it seemed to have consumed his entire capacity for those emotions, as I have never seen him show the least sign of fear, or indeed surprise, at anything else again. Even as a grown man, if he was anywhere closer than ten paces to a cow, his jaw would bunch up, his hand would cling white-knuckled to the hilt of his sword, and a crazed look would cloud his eyes. He did not make a very good herder.

Ribs I liked before a fever took him, but Rabies had a death wish from birth, and no one was too surprised when he got himself trampled by a horse which had slipped its tether.

I cannot remember this myself, but I have been told that on the day I was first taught to write my name, I emerged from the tent with ink-stained hands. Thereafter, I was known as Black Fingers, which came to be shortened to Fingers in time.

To Kaisha, I was simply Fin.

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We used to range far from the camp together. Once over a hillock and out of sight of the tents and herds of our tribe, the emptiness of the steppe had a way of convincing me that there was no one in the world but the two of us. Even though I knew that our friends and families were mere minutes away, there were times when I did not quite believe it – times when I was surprised to walk back and find that the chatter of humans and whinnying of horses had not merely been some daydream born of the sound of the wind and stirring grasses.

For we would not speak much on the steppe, less and less the farther we walked, till we would stop and turn back in silent concert. Upon returning at the end of a day, Kaisha could be as animated as ever, and tell her mother of what we had done or discovered, but I would often remain silent until the next day, as if still bound by the rules of our own, personal world, where nothing existed except her presence – not even my own.

I have been known to be difficult and taciturn in the mornings, for, when not plagued by nightmares, I dream often of that world, and must grow accustomed to this one anew each time I wake.

There is, perhaps, some measure of irony to the fact that it was on one such journey into the steppe that I was first introduced to the reality of all the powerful illusions we have unthinkingly scrawled over that clean and perfect canvas.

Having come into awareness of their reality, one must try to understand them. Or so I found myself compelled to think. Perhaps that was my fundamental error. Perhaps I should have let whatever understanding might come settle on me of its own accord, and not chase it, at the cost of every innocence. Or perhaps it was simply that the complete

truth came so soon after my first experience of ignorance that I could not fully accept it – the chase ended too soon, and I would spend an eternity retracing steps that would never lead to any other summit.

At any rate, for many years, I would believe that my childhood ended on that day, and mourn the fact it came so soon.

It was just warm enough for the snow to have melted in places, and the ground to have lost some of its stiffness. There was little wind beneath the slate-grey sky, and the frozen grass crunched weakly under our boots as we set off.

I was feeling unusually excited that day, as I recall. I would tell Kaisha the names and properties of the various plants which sent out grey-green shoots as we walked by, and she would tell me why they had come into the world, and where they would be going next, and why I did not need to cry for them. Occasionally she would whistle, or sing, and I would listen.

I had just begun to forget how to speak at all when we caught sight of a plume of dust rising over a nearby hill. We were in a fairly spare area of grassland, and there was nowhere obvious to hide before three mounted figures became visible, coming over the summit at a trot. We had not been expecting riders from that direction, so I looked at them with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. They seemed to be looking at us too, pointing their fingers and discussing something we could not hear at this distance.

I'll never know exactly how it happened. Was I merely frightened at the sight of unfamiliar men – such a rare occurrence on the steppe – that I let my imagination run wild, causing Kaisha to attempt to protect me? Or had she already sensed their intent aright, and I reacted to the steely sense of purpose in her – like an arrow loosed into flight – which I would grow so accustomed to, but had never seen before?

The next thing I knew, she had clasped my hand in hers, and we were running away from them as fast as we could. They hollered after us, and gave chase. They were on horseback, and grew closer with every shuddering breath, and yet the moment also seemed to slow and stretch into an looping nightmare of faltering steps and the fingers of annihilation grasping at the small hairs of your neck.

Then Kaisha abruptly changed directions, yanking me sideways and towards a rocky outcrop. We scrambled up the scree, pebbles skittling down behind us, their tapping echoes soon followed by the sound of the men dismounting.

She spared a second to glance at them, before fixing her gaze on a thin, horizontal crevice between two rocks. I thought I would never fit, but she shoved and stamped at me until I just scraped in, the edges of it leaving gashes across my clothes and skin. The space inside did not widen much, but I could not feel the end of it, even with feet outstretched, which allowed me to imagine that any of my fears lurked in there.

Kaisha followed me in immediately, a single moment before the men arrived and crouched down to look at us inside. She hissed and barked at them, and would not listen to their soft entreaties. Eventually, one of them grew frustrated and waved a knife into the space to threaten us. She twisted his finger until he let go of it, and used it to slash at them whenever they grew close to the entrance.

They feigned retreat more than once. At one point, what must have been an hour's stretch of silence was finally punctuated with a sneeze and muffled cursing.

Throughout, I remained in that crevice, silent and still, pressed between rough rock below me and above, with barely enough room for my chest to expand in inhalation. The frigid stone sapped the warmth from me, and as the sun began to set, we were cast into a complete darkness. It was a place of perfect terror. It took the panic I came in with and purified it, distilled it, honed it to a needle's point with which to pierce my whole existence.

And then Kaisha found a way to turn to me, to hold me and enfold me with her warmth. She called me Fin until I came back to myself, and kissed me until my sobs subsided. I settled my face into that warm space between her neck and collarbone, and she tilted to rest her cheek on my head, and whispered softly into my ear.

I cried out my confusion at why anyone would want to harm her. How could the world even allow the possibility of it? Her voice grew ever softer as she explained. And then, in one long moment, she told me everything that she intended. And who could fear death by suffocation after that?

I dreamt aloud to her in the time that remained. We crawled further into the arteries of rock until they opened out into a cavern. There were fangs growing from the ground and dripping from the ceiling, but they had a glint of familiarity to them in the firelight. Its walls were covered by hundreds upon hundreds of human hands. They were painted on, I realized, outlined in ochre against the sandy stone – children's hands, and the hands of their parents. The flickering light only illuminated a patch of the wall, which made it seem as if they continued on forever – thousands, hundreds of thousands, stretching endlessly, generation by generation, without beginning and with no end but me.

This was the first time I came face to face with the concept of eternity, and I recoiled from it in horror.

Kaisha seemed to want me to lay my own hand on the wall, and join them, but I shook my head furiously, and protested with characteristic illogic: "I cannot place my hand here. I am not dead, like these people, and thus have no paint!"

She overcame my resistance with caresses, and took out the knife she had taken from the man outside. Laying it on the meat of my left palm, she cut a gash into it, just below the fingers. I cried out in pain, but quieted when, without a moment's hesitation, she slashed an identical cut upon her own hand. She watched, impassive, as our blood welled up and started to drip upon the floor.

She brought me to the wall, where she pressed my open hand hard against it. When she drew it away, the imprint glistened blackly, and drops of it trickled down to form the all-seeing word. I sometimes think I could have phased through the world as a senseless, happy ghost if she had not consigned me to its history in this way.

When she reached to lay her own mark beside mine, however, the landscape had shifted, and before us stretched a painting of a monstrous tiger, all teeth and claws and muscle, breathing fire from the furnace of its innards. She reached up with her bloody hand and drew another stripe upon its back, which gleamed red in the midst of its faded charcoal shadows.

The men had left by the time I awoke, shivering in her embrace. At some point, she had undone our mittens, and she clasped my fingers in her naked hand, which remained impossibly hot.

She helped pull me out, and we began to walk back in what could possibly have been the direction of our tribe.

At some point, we saw lanterns in the distance, and recognised the voices of Blacktooth's herders. I cannot imagine we shouted out to them, but they found us anyway, looking down at us in shocked silence until their chieftain rode up.

Shadows were riddled across his wrinkles and his scars, and his rotted canine looked like a hole into the moonless, starless night.

“Why were you not home by sundown? Where have you been?”

“Out on the steppe. Playing with Fin.”

Blacktooth dismounted from his horse as she spoke, the agonising deliberateness in his motions making clear he was barely repressing a berserk rage.

“We were in a cave under a rock, father, and Fin saw a wall with all the hand prints of everyone ever on it. I told him he should write about it; that way he'll remember, and he can tell other people about it. Maybe he can read it to you later, cus he'll be too shy to just tell you. And then—”

She continued talking, blithely unconcerned, up until Blacktooth cut her off. But she tilted her head at an angle, so that she was already pulling back when he struck her across the face. She pulled herself up off the floor, wiping at a corner of her mouth.

“And there was a tiger there, as large as the world, and it had fire and metal in its belly, and...”

It took her a little longer to pick herself up this time. The herders looked at each other nervously, but none of them spoke up.

“It's true, father. Fin saw it. He may not always be strong, but he always looks at things straight. And Fin never lies.”

He punched her full in the face then, and her head snapped back as she fell. I stepped between them — though this was a long time ago, and I cannot remember if I did it to shield her from further harm, or him.

From behind me, I heard the voice of a little girl speaking in measured, if muffled, tones.

“You will never hit me again, old man.”

It was one of the herders who noticed it first. He pointed at her, perhaps merely to distract his chieftain, not knowing what it implied.

“Wait, Blacktooth... where did Kaisha get that knife?”

It was distinctive, and clearly did not belong to anyone in our tribe. Its handle was carved from bone, a cross-stitched pattern visible through her fingers where she held it in her palm, and its blade was long, with a divot running through it where it rested flat along the inside of her forearm.

The herders were all around us then, asking us where she had gotten it, and examining the raw flesh where her clothing had been shredded and torn. It was only then, as they shined their lanterns on us from up close, that I could see her clearly. I ashamed to say that I recoiled at what I saw.

Her face was already starting to swell beneath the blood, and the places where the skin had been scraped off by the rock. She saw the terror in my eyes, and smiled a red ruin of a smile, with gaps where her teeth had been knocked out. Blood welled from her mouth and dribbled down her chin.

Or perhaps it is not the terror she saw, but the fascination; and perhaps the smile was a reward, and not merely a pleasure in my pain.

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Tigerlily washed her only daughter outside her ger, then wrapped her in her sleeping furs and fed her a watered vegetable stew while my father tended to her wounds.

When he came to me to clean out and stitch the cut on my left hand, he stared at me for a long, unblinking moment with his eyebrow raised, but in the end simply chuckled to himself, and said nothing.

He spent the next few hours in discussion with Blacktooth and a handful of his most trusted retainers. They had to switch constantly between talking the chieftain down from rushing out to wreak bloody murder across all the neighbouring tribes in retaliation, and in the next moment, having to convince him that it had in fact been an attempted kidnapping, and not simply some tale I had concocted to serve as an excuse for her.

When they finally left, he wisely retired to a corner far from where he usually lay with his wife – I do not doubt she would have slit his throat if he had tried to touch her that night. My mother had stayed with her from the moment we walked in, and might not have left if my father had not gently guided her out. She motioned for me to follow, but I shook my head.

Kaisha looked up at me with the eye which was not swelled shut. I still could not discern any emotion there, and only a little pain. I crawled into her sleeping furs beside her, and managed not to cry, for a time.

A few days later, when Tigerlily finally relented and let her leave the ger again, Blacktooth made a gift of a horse to his daughter. I went with them to where the chieftain's herds were grazing. He gave Kaisha her pick of the young horses, and pointed out that most herders preferred to ride mares. Thus, of course, she insisted on taking a foal – a spirited colt with a dark mane – much to her father's amusement.

He spent the rest of the day showing her how to saddle and bridle it, leading her by the reins at a walk until she tired of the pace and kicked wildly at the beast's rump, landing flat on her back seconds later to the boom of her father's laughter.

And so Kaisha was given her first mount. She was the only girl in the camp to have one of her own, of course, but she was well loved by all her father's men, and it seemed the herders shared his amusement at the mannish antics of his fierce young daughter. At first, the horse was seen as the belated reparation of a guilty father, and they laughed indulgently as she raced by, struggling to keep her seat. With time, she no longer struggled, and no one came to regard as strange the sight of her racing through camp.

How I came to hate that innocent and unsuspecting creature.

Before, I had been the only boy of my age in the camp who did not have his own horse, for my parents were no herders. But back then, when the other boys would go off to race or play their games on horseback, I would be with Kaisha. That was my place in the world, and it was an honoured place, at that. True, my parents had still been slaves then, but children, like grown men, do not pay half so much attention to the names of things as some would have us think. Indeed, there are lands in the mountainous region west of Khwarezm where the ruler holds the humble title of "Servant of All", yet visits worse depredations upon his subjects than the great Slaver Khan of Khiva would dream of inflicting upon his chattel.

No, things are not determined by the names we call them, but by the daily facts of life which constitute their use. As such, though I was a "son of slaves" before, all it meant was that I was a boy who did not ride horses, a boy who played with Kaisha instead. After she was given her horse, however, I was a boy who did not ride horses, who stayed in a tent all day and became pale and weak, and whom the other children mocked. Thus did the name "son of slaves" change in meaning to fit two quite different boys.

Soon, I was left out of the games of the other children, almost all of which were now played on horseback. Those who were not born on the steppe, cannot understand what it means to be without a horse. Kaisha later said to me, "A warrior without a horse is like a bird without wings." As well say, "A boy without a horse is like a boy without legs." I was a cripple, despised as was the Halfwit. I was left in the mud to look up longingly at my betters, who were so far above me they might as well have been straddling the stars.

Early on, I begged and pleaded with my father to lend me his donkey, but when he finally relented, I cut such a pathetic figure on the braying little sow – kicking furiously at her sides in a vain attempt to get her to move – that the other boys mocked me all the more, and shoved me off my saddle and back into the mud. Belatedly, they took to mocking the cut of my Uyghur robes, often tripping me up by stepping on the trailing hem.

In truth, it was only rarely that they would beat me in earnest, or chase me off without the tacit expectation that I should return soon after. For the most part, they would let me linger at their fringes, so that they may have someone to more casually torture when they grew bored with other pastimes.

Of course, all this they would not dare do in front of Kaisha. They would wait until she rode out onto the steppe — for a part of every day, from the very beginning, she always spent alone — and like a man condemned, I would eventually go to them, lest I be driven mad by loneliness during the hours of her absence.

I had come to discover that elementary truth which any child knows: that having someone there to hurt you is much better than being alone, for hatred is preferable to indifference, and pain far more tolerable than silence.

Only Kaisha treated me no differently. To her, I was still Fin, instead of a new string of taunting names Frog came up me with. She would still burst smiling into my tent, take me by the hand while I clutched my breakfast in the other, and lead me out. Then, after a while, she would leap onto her horse and leave me, for I could not follow.

And yet, they could. Every last boy old enough to wipe himself would clamber up one of his father's old mares and ride off in her wake, while I stayed in the camp with the girls and the infants. She would range farther afield than I ever could on foot, having adventures I would only be told of in excited tones by the dinner fire – and instead of me by her side, she was surrounded by these maggots, these curs, stupid and lice-infested and unworthy of her.

I have had many years and many nights to relive the shadows of this time. Thus, it has long since occurred to me that, perhaps, it was not they who first cast me aside. Perhaps they merely reacted to the hatred they could see in my eyes.

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It was at this time that I started to learn from my father in earnest. He never sat me down and explained gravely that I was now to be a student. Rather, I began to spend more and more time in our ger, because nothing else was left me during the days.

I had learnt the curling Uyghur script by then, which my father had personally adapted to be able to faithfully transcribe the tongues of the steppe. But no sooner had I mastered the calligraphy to my father's satisfaction that he began to teach me to read and write in Arabic and the strange, infinite characters of the great Eastern Dynasties, which fascinate and incense me to this day in equal measure. It was also then that I realized all those strange words my father had peppered his phrases with were not simply obscure variations on the steppe tongue, but completely different languages, sowing seeds for the day my apprenticeship began.

This was all the work of years, but even at the beginning, there were days when he would speak nothing but Persian, just to spite me – or in his words, “teach me”. At times, he would begin: “the Taichud clan speaks the steppe tongue thus”, or “the Jalayir clan speaks the steppe tongue thus”, and then proceed to speak the rest of the day in queer inflections – though how he himself had come to learn them, I will never know.

He taught me Arabic mostly by copying, memorizing and reciting treatises on geometry and algebra, on astronomy and logic, on physics and geography. But at the end of every day, he would allow me time to memorize poetry as well, and verses from the Koran. Quite early on, I came across my name in the scriptures. I had been told it meant “steeds”, but that would have made the verse mean “God is the horses of those who plan.” When I read it out as such, my father rolled on the floor in laughter.

My father would intersperse his idle gossip with soliloquies on God. At first, I thought the word meant “Sky”, but that did not seem to make sense. When I finally asked him outright what it meant, he said,

“You ask this of me, my son, I who know nothing of these matters? Oh, what have I done to deserve so cruel a seed of future progeny? Well, my prepubescent pedant, I ask you this, in turn: must not all things have a creator?”

“No.”

“And why not?”

“I have seen things which were created by other things, and I have seen things which were not. This book was created by a man. And that man was created by a mother and a father. But this pebble which was stuck between my toes. That was made by no one.”

“Ah, was it not? Was it not fashioned from a larger rock by wind and water?”

“As well say this book was fashioned by a pen, then. Is God a pen? Or the one to wield the pen? A creator is one who uses tools to create – a creator is not the tools themselves. And I have seen no one wield the wind or water, Father. So there are things I have seen which have a creator, and things I have seen which do not. How can I know that the world is a thing which was created, or a thing which was not?”

“Would you not know it much as you have known the book was created – if you have come to taste the mind of the man who wrote the page?”

“But I have not tasted God.”

“Have you not? Are you so certain? You are fond of this steppe, are you not? Do you not walk for hours upon its open, empty expanse with your playmate and husband? Tell me, do you speak much when you walk upon the steppe?”

“No, Father.”

“You walk in silence, then? Do you think to yourself, then? What thoughts occupy you as you walk across the steppe?”

“Often, none, Father.”

“You walk in silence within as without, then? In this state of silence, of emptiness... do you feel yourself as receptive as the steppe itself? As a bowl freshly cleaned and wiped, held out in expectation of soup?”

“Yes, Father.”

“And when you have thus emptied yourself of all things, and become as open as the steppe, as empty as a bowl held out in expectation of soup... when all else has disappeared, even your sense of self... is it truly only emptiness that lies there? Or do you not then feel... a presence?”

“I do, Father.”

“And what do you name this presence, my son? What do you name the presence in the emptiness, in the boundless steppe, in the barren desert?”

“Well... Kaisha. She always walks beside me — or just ahead.”

“Mm, mm. Mm. Mmm. Hmm. Ah. Hm. But, well, is it not just so with God, my son?”

“I do not know what you mean to imply, father.”

“Even when you eliminate everything, including yourself... the fact that even then there still is something you cannot doubt, questions which compel you, duties you cannot ignore, calls you can never deny — does that not speak to you of a divinity? The fact that, even when you know that the world is an illusion dreamt by a non-entity, you cannot but respond to the cries of a child, or cry when your own child responds before you... the fact that even in unending absurdity, out of nowhere, meaning emerges — is this all not a sort of creation of something from nothing, the birth of a whole world?”

It was as if he had only ever looked at me with one eye, and allowed the other to wander, but now looked at me with both.

“This sounds like mere sophistry and mysticism to me, father. You stretch the term of ‘God’ to meaninglessness.”

Or perhaps, it was that he was looking at a point beyond me.

“If you say that it is so, my son, then who am I to contradict you?”

The tears in his eyes were less of disappointment than relief, and if I could have heard the whole of his murmuring, I suspect this might have been the first time I caught him making a statement...

“...know... my son... ...wonder if the only thing that keeps us all from a final immolation is the blissful obliviousness of prophets...”

Such were my days with him.

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My father was not only manservant to Blacktooth – he was at the same time craftsman, scribe, and chief advisor. But more than anything else, perhaps, he impressed upon me that his central skill, most crucial role, and greatest personal contribution to the knowledge of humanity was as a physician. In this, as ever, he lied, but it would be years before he would reveal to me the full extent of his records.

From that point on, he made me watch every time he healed the sick. This was, indeed, the only reason I have been able to witness what I have witnessed with open eyes. Before my first set of teeth had even begun to fall, the human body held no more horrors for me.

And so, I was taught to set a splint, to sever a limb, to disembowel an animal for the gut to stitch a wound, or to burn it shut, as need be; to dissect a corpse and do the same upon the living; to wait and watch and once more wait while a child’s life was burned away by fever.

He made me commit to memory the preparation of the 800 simple substances and 650 compound drugs of the *Canon of Medicine*, of course, but that was just the start. He seemed to view Ibn Sina with a mix of rampant jealousy and snide contempt, and never

tired of pointing out how the great man had never thought to take his supposedly simple substances and break them down into – purely theoretical, I might add – component parts of their own. And so I was tasked with memorizing those; he seemed to change the nature of them by the day.

But I learnt also his other crafts. How to boil and work leather, how to make and fit a saddle and distil pitch, how to treat iron that it would not rust and fashion hilts of bone and wood. While I was at it, my mother even taught me how to cook and launder.

My father also kept lists obsessively: of every horse and every sheep and every man and woman and child in the tribe, with their seasons of birth and death; of every item of gold and silver in Blacktooth's chest of plunder, each one precisely weighed, and the exact proportion of precious metal calculated; of every manner of herb we had in our store, for healing or for cooking, in precise amounts. He made me keep my own, and cross-checked them against his.

Finally, I began to pursuing my own studies. I attempted, as best I could, to carry these out in secret – but the mere presence of such a richness of dynastic chronicles squirrelled away in my father's bric-a-brac suggests I was over a lifetime too late for that. Thucydides was ever the touchstone – the first chronicler who seemed interested not just in the phenomena but the principles of history, and a man from whom I caught the scent of honesty, cleanliness, and clarity. Most influential and mysterious of all, however, was a text by an anonymous scholar of Tunis – a prolegomena to an attempted universal history known as *The Book of Lessons*. Until this very day, I have been unable to find any record of this larger work, nor any information about the man who composed it, but it was from this foothold that I was able to leap into whatever understanding of the habits of humanity I have been able to attain.

While I did all this, Kaisha learned how to ride.

And every day I ground my teeth at the injustice of it, and prayed to God and Ibn Sina and whomever else would listen that I could leave the tent behind to be beside her.

She also learnt to fight. From the day she was given her horse, she had pestered our warriors to teach her. Each time, she would be sent off on some new chore, so to begin with, she practiced with me or the other boys, using sticks instead of blunted iron. Soon, neither they nor I would dare to “practice” with her again, for fear of permanent damage. So she began to pester the herders.

Eventually, Ruddy gave in, and began to spar with her when he had the time. This seemed to work for a month or two. However, during one session, Kaisha slashed open an artery in his neck – and this with practice swords – so that the poor man nearly bled out, before my father managed to staunch the wound.

Blacktooth took charge of her training the next day.

From the beginning, she used the full-sized swords, made to adult proportions. It was a fascinating development. Certainly, it made her strong, but what's more, she began to develop her own style to cope with its weight. To avoid having to lift it anew with each strike, she began to conserve the blade's momentum by turning the end of each movement into the beginning of another. This meant she began to slash a great deal more than stab or cut; but what's more, it meant that her fighting style soon began to resemble more a dance than a martial struggle. She would spin and swirl, constantly in

motion to keep the blade from stalling, with strokes aimed purposefully wide until she struck like a viper for a killing blow. It was truly beautiful, and soon enough, I was not the only one to sit and watch her practice. A unique, peculiar style, and one she preserved long after she had grown strong enough to dispense with it. Indeed, even when she grew older and stronger, she was ever pestering my father to find or fashion wider and larger swords, rather than let herself catch up to them in size. There might have been swordsmen who were her better – not many, but some – but no one could make a show of it like she did; and in the situations she would thrust herself into, winning in spectacular fashion is every bit as vital as surviving.

She also began to occasionally spend time with her father's first wife. The woman lived in a small, dark tent pitched beside the one Blacktooth shared with Tigerlily. I cannot recall when or if I heard this, but I was under the impression that Tigerlily had feared the woman's affliction might infect Kaisha, after her second babe was born almost already wasted away. The chieftain's was a large tent, perhaps a full five paces across as a man walks, but I cannot see how Tigerlily would have managed to live and love in it, with that black, hateful creature lurking in a corner.

She had been aged beyond her years, her face pallid and blighted, her eyes sunk in deep pits, hands thin and wrinkled as frozen twigs. She had a sour smell and a sourer tongue. She called me crueller names than the other boys had the words to think of, and the looks she would throw me whenever I drew near were purest venom.

Kaisha did not seem to mind her, however. She would squat by her sleeping furs and listen to the woman's ravaged, rattling voice. I could not bring myself to bear her presence often, but when I did, I do not remember hearing Kaisha speak a word, and the harpy never once asked her a question. She simply rasped on, her voice a straining whisper in the reeds, eyes affixed on the ceiling, managing three or four words at a time before pausing to rake in a breath. What words I could make out repulsed me even more than the voice in which she said them. And Kaisha would just crouch there, perhaps chewing on a thumbnail – face impassive, almost bored.

Once – years later, after the ailment which had stolen the woman's youth and beauty must finally have claimed her life – I stood at the edge of a forest pond while Kaisha bathed. It was a moonless night, and the trees grew right up to the edge of the water, so all but the very centre of the pool was shrouded in complete blackness. My torch had gone out, and Kaisha had bid I not rekindle it.

I had spent my life on the steppe beneath the light of an open sky, and in military camps lit through the night with braziers and torches, and so was unaccustomed to such darkness. The last I had witnessed its like was in the crevice that day, and I began to feel stirrings of that time, like the ripples in the pool which still lapped against its bank, though Kaisha had leapt in long minutes before. It was not fear, for I was a grown man and a hundred times a killer, but there was a certain discomfort nonetheless.

There was only a small space between the overlapping canopies of the trees through which starlight came down onto the centre of the pool, occasionally obscured by passing clouds. I could not even see the other side, save for the ivory-white roots of one of the trees, which stretched into the water like the gnarled fingers of a hand long dead. And yet, in the midst all this darkness, I could see Kaisha clearly, floating on her back in the centre of the pool, her naked skin bright against the black – but it was a life-filled lightness, a pallor of brown and pink, not the deathly white of the deathlike tree.

It was precisely thus that she looked to me then, crouched in the shadows of the tent with that hateful fragment of a woman, untainted by the gloom, alive in a little world of death, as poison wafted like a mist around her ears.

One day, after Kaisha emerged from the tent after having spoken to her for an hour, we walked a short way from the camp and sat down on a gentle rise, looking up at the white streaks on the deeply azure sky. I asked of what the hag spoke to her during their hours together.

She shrugged. “She repeats herself a lot. I think I’ve heard everything she wants to say – there hasn’t been anything new the last couple of times.”

“Yes, but what *does* she say?”

“You wouldn’t like it, Fin.”

I set my jaw. “Tell me.”

She looked at me then, intently, so that I had to avert my gaze.

And she told me of the dark, and the depths, and the unstirred waters.

The world, said the crone, was as a leaf floating on a windless lake. It is but the thinnest of barriers: above it, the endless expanse of sky; beneath it, unfathomed darkness, and the cold.

And there are creatures who slumber in the deep, whose teeth dwarf mountains. And Life is subtle evil — humanity most of all — for it moves upon the gentle balance of the world, and risks upsetting it. For if we step too recklessly upon the ground, the earth would tip, and soon be drowned — and the Sky and the deepest Water would meet, and war. Thus are all walkers cursed, and thus is dreamless unmotion to be praised.

I listened with a sick kind of fascination, but when Kaisha began to speak of Illness and the seeping rot, I was overcome with nausea, and bid her stop. This brought out of her a grin, but I do not believe I lie if I say it seemed distracted — a half-measure which puzzled me for days.

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And so passed the next few years. I would play alone with Kaisha for a couple of hours every day, then retreat into the tent to read and write and tinker with my father until the sun set and the herders came home.

Often, we would take our evening meal in Blacktooth’s great ger. My mother and Tigerlily prepared dinner while the chieftain and my father discussed the weather and the horses and the flocks with whichever herder had been accorded the honour of eating in the place my family was welcome any night – a fact I took no small pride in.

Kaisha and I would huddle together in the corner. I’d tell her something of what I’d learnt that day, and she would tell me what it was to fly across the steppe on horseback and show off her latest bruises, explaining the precise manner in which she had gotten each one, and how no sword would ever touch her in the same spot ever again. And more often than not, we would fall asleep together, in our corner.

Our mothers would laugh, and leave us to it, and we would doze on and off again through the night, and whisper half-dreamed stories, and nibble at each other to stifle our giggles.

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It was on a clear and placid day of late Spring that the tremors of the attempted kidnapping were felt again. Kaisha's second set of teeth had already grown in to fill the gaps that Blacktooth's fist had left, and she was starting to display the same uncanny beauty as her mother. Jelme had come to visit at the time of year which should have been most busy for him; this alone made me suspect that something was awry.

The chieftain and his trusted men sat drinking airag, my father flittering around their conversation. Kaisha sat ramrod straight with her eyes closed, not seeming to be listening. I collected cups and eavesdropped on their conversation.

The basic complaints were clear. For years now, the tribe had had its territory encroached on, and its nights disturbed by constant thieving. We were a relatively small confederation of families, with an outmoded contribution to the yearly raids on other clans and the long-running feud with the Kereit. This prestige went some way to safeguarding our hold on our famously fertile pastures, and the flocks which grew more numerous and healthy every year, in part due to my father's stewardship. But Blacktooth's stubborn isolationism – his absolute refusal to even meet other leaders, let alone forge alliances – had worn out the worth of that advantage. We now found ourselves surrounded by neighbours who coveted our land and holdings, were jealous of our fame and insulted by our aloofness, and held back only out of fear of the current Naiman Khan, who had imposed internal order between the factions since he had seized power.

The kidnapping was a warning Blacktooth had not heeded; there had been others since, but it had not been Blacktooth's inner circle who had borne the brunt of them. Now, though, he would be forced to act. Grudgingly, after hours of grumbling on his part and patient insistence from everyone else, he finally acceded to their request.

This year, we would go to the Nadaam festival – the largest yearly gathering of the Naiman clan.

I had real trouble sleeping that night, for the first time. I knew that things would change; that a world I did not want to face was about to drag us in.

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I think it was the prospect of such a momentous and unprecedented event which got the children so worked up. None of them had ever visited another tribe, let alone such a monumental gathering — one which the majority of the Naiman tribes would be attending. They had no frame of reference for it, besides the rumours of great feasts and epic contests which the adults swapped between each other, and had even the grimmest of them unable to repress their impish grins. In retrospect, it is no wonder if they acted with a little excess: they had to channel the anticipation and the fear somehow.

We had struck camp for the evening, and they knew we were just another day or two from arriving. It was unseasonably cool, and the wind carried a crisp edge. I remember it had rained heavily the night before, and the ground still squelched beneath my boots and

kept trying to pull them off – for they were new, and slightly overlarge – as I walked to join the other boys at their play.

I walked up to where they were congregated, playing some loosely defined game centred around tossing stones into a small circle. All the usual crowd were there: the twins, Muddy and Upwards; wide-mouthed little Frog; Spit, the oldest and most stupid; Rattle, jingling with each step; Wailer, still bandaged on the head, and already showing signs of having been irrevocably changed; even the Half-wit played along after a fashion, tossing pebbles into the air and dodging them when they came down, not always with success. There were a few younger children there as well, whom we did not have names for yet. And there was Sandal, of course.

I sat off to one side, and watched them, and pretended not to. I often wonder if things might have turned out differently had I simply and open-heartedly tried to join in, rather than preempting rejection, turning to them with a half-flinch. It would have been painful at first, yes, but perhaps less so in the long run. At any rate: by this point the pattern had been set, and we could all only play our parts.

It began when some of the boys — the ones who were losing the game — just so happened to also lose interest in the outcome, and peeled off from the rest to turn their attentions to me. They began with taunting. They called me names, and I sullenly called them names back. They threw a stone or three, and I covered my head, and pretended it didn't hurt.

Sandal tried to stop them. She stood in front of me, and said it was wrong to say such things, and to throw stones at people. They jeered at her, and mocked her like they always did. But she just laughed bashfully along, and said no ill-tempered words in return. And so they stopped, just like they always did. Unlike me, she did not have that spite and ugly pride I had developed even then, and they must have loved her for that. They would feel bad after mocking her, and so would turn to me with the added edge of formless guilt. Then they would feel better, cleansed, for they knew I was a more deserving target.

It was at this point that Frog started to speak, and they quietened down, to listen, nod, and laugh.

Frog was the worst. He was clever, and he said things which were true.

He said that my parents were slaves, not free people — they had no livestock of their own, and were forbidden from riding horses. He said that my parents nevertheless chose to have a child, who they knew would be a slave like them, and not free. He said this meant they hated me before I was even born — for if they had loved me, they would not have allowed me to exist. I could not be sure that he was wrong.

He said that, even though they were so low, my family still relied like children on their betters. They ate food Blacktooth provided for them, from flocks which he tended, and which they had not touched. He said that while he and his parents worked, my parents and I stayed warm in our ger, and played games with words and ink drawings, and defiled corpses. He said that we were leeches sucking the blood of hard-working people. This was even harder to refute.

He said that I was not good enough to be Kaisha's favourite. He said everyone laughed at how she would always have to wait for me, and carry me along when I became too discouraged, and cried. He said I was weak in body and mind. He said she remained with

me not despite of this, but because of it, that she may appear all the braver and more fierce.

Sandal could do nothing to protect me from that. How can you protect someone from their own deepest fears?

As if to prove him right, I began to cry, and that brought the attention of the others onto me.

Spit shouted that he had a new game. He shouted it many times, as if he thought it took the rest as long as he did to understand things. As he shouted it, he came and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, and dragged me along, unresisting, into the centre of the circle they had traced in the mud. He said that they had to toss the stones into the circle like before, only with the added complication that they might bounce off me.

Their interest rekindled, the boys began to throw the stones again, though most did not seem to be seriously trying to get them to stay within the circle.

Sandal screamed at them to stop, and tried to run into the circle with me, but Upwards and Muddy grabbed her and held her down. Upwards rubbed himself rhythmically against her leg, though he was of course too young to realize fully why he did so.

Soon enough, the boys' attention had turned to her. They egged Upwards on as he began to hop up and down on her more frenetically. Muddy took handfuls of mud, and tried to put it in her mouth to stop her protests, knowing that she would not bite him — he had done the same to me many times, and it was through actions like these that he had earned his name. The other boys laughed as she spluttered and coughed.

One of the stones had hit me in the eye, and it hurt so much that I was just glad that they had stopped.

I turned my back to them, and began to limp away.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?”

Frog had noticed me. Spit repeated what he said in a bellow, and came and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck.

“What,” Frog sneered, “aren’t you having fun?”

I didn’t say anything back. I don’t think I even looked him in the eye.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to keep you if you aren’t having fun...”

That seemed to confuse Spit, because he gripped my neck tighter, and I let out a whimper.

“Oh, I know what’s wrong. You didn’t get a chance to throw any rocks, cus you were the one standing in the circle. That’s not very fair, is it? Tell you what. Why don’t you take some of those rocks and throw them at her?” He pointed in the direction where the twins still held down Sandal. “This way, we can call it even, and you can go and do whatever it is you do when Kaisha isn’t there to pull you around.”

“I don’t want to,” I suppose I must have mumbled. “Why can’t I just go, and you guys keep on playing instead?”

Spit hit me.

“What, are you crazy? We wouldn’t hurt a girl like that...” he shouted into my ringing ears.

Frog beamed his agreement. “Exactly,” he said, “There’d be no point if it wasn’t you.”

I shrugged away from Spit, and he let me go. Muddy and Upwards had gotten up and stepped back a few paces; Sandal was on all fours, hawking mud onto the ground.

I picked up and tossed a rock in her direction. I think it bounced a few times, and came to a stop against her calf.

“Not like that. It doesn’t count if you throw them like that.”

I took up another one, and threw it harder. It missed.

“Come on, it doesn’t count if you don’t hit her, either...”

I picked up another one, and finally looked Frog in the eye. He smiled that wide smile of his, and wiggled both his eyebrows tauntingly. I pictured a stone striking him right in between them, and leaving a raw, red mark.

Then I turned, and threw the stone as hard as I could at Sandal. It hit her in the midriff, and she made some kind of yelp, which turned into a coughing fit when the mud slid back down her throat.

I heard Rattle get up, the jingling growing fainter as he walked away.

It was really very clever. They had just about had enough for today, but next time, they could go harder on me. For this would give them another reason to hate me.

I looked at Spit. I can’t remember if he nodded at me to continue, or shook his head that I couldn’t leave. He was still hard from watching Upwards rub up against Sandal. He was older than us, after all.

I picked up another rock, and threw it, not looking to see if it had hit. I took the silence to mean I couldn’t leave yet. There were no more rocks at my feet, so I cast around for one. That was difficult, because I couldn’t see at all out of the one eye, and my vision was obscured by tears in the other.

When I finally straightened with another stone in my hand, the boys were melting away — not exactly running, but nevertheless all but a handful had already made it halfway back to the camp. A few of the very young children still milled about, oblivious. One of them laughed, and kept throwing pebbles at Sandal. Wailer was the only other one who yet sat still, perfectly impassive, with one knee folded beneath him, looking blankly at some point behind me.

I turned to see Kaisha standing there. In the hand dangling at her side, she clutched an earthenware cup, whose contents she had allowed to spill upon the ground. Her eyes

were fixed on me. They did not blink, and did not waver to the right or to the left — their green, the green of mountains, and of the sun in the night sky.

I fell to my knees, and pleaded as I crawled toward her and curled up around her feet. She did not move, and the weight of her gaze still fell upon me. In my desperation, I screwed my eyes shut as I whined incoherently and gnawed at her shins, but still she would not move, and still her eyes looked down at me.

Then Sandal was trying to prise me off her legs, and embrace me as I sobbed. She kept on asking if I was alright, and looking to see where I was hurt, but in the end she could do nothing but try to shush my cries and still my trembling, and tell me everything was alright now, that the other boys had all gone.

And still Kaisha stared down at me, unblinking.

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From that day on, I avoided Sandal as best I could. I would not look her in the eye, and my tongue would swell in my dry mouth whenever I meant to speak to her. It took years of consistent work, but eventually she ceased to try and reach me.

It was not merely that I was ashamed of the wrong I had done her, when I threw those four stones. It was that I could not bear her forgiveness for it. No — I fled from the certainty in her eyes that there had never been anything to forgive.

But that was not the worst of it. I had gone to Kaisha, when I should have gone to her. I hated her, for not hating me for that.

Chapter 2

We rode in to the festival two days later. The scowl had not yet lifted from his face, but I noted that Blacktooth nevertheless went out of his way to lead us to the lakefront over a gentle rise, so that we may get a good view of the valley below us when we crested it. The sight from the modest summit at first perplexed me – for I did not understand what could so clutter the valley floor – then awed me.

Tents were scattered across the entire valley, clumped together by tribe, their herds milling in make-shift corrals. Squinting, I started to make out individual people – hundreds, thousands of them – and my mind reeled. My father later told me there had been perhaps 40,000 men, women and children – nearly half of the population of the entire Naiman clan.

My father's books and mother's stories had told me of cities, but I suppose I never truly believed they could exist until that day.

Between one shore of the lake and a great pavilion erected on a small hill, a wide expanse of a hundred paces had been cleared and cordoned off with ropes. On the flatter ground half a mile down the shoreline, men were erecting some sort of large, wooden contraptions in even rows. And at the centre of it all lay the lake, like the spoke of some great wheel, gleaming in the unclouded sunlight.

The main body of the tribe began to file past us as my father discussed the layout of the tribes and the placement of the latrines, while the wonder in me transformed from chaotic awe to an ordered appreciation.

Tigerlily sat in an open carriage, which slowed to a crawling pace as it reached the summit, so that she drifted by us as if floating, swaying with the breeze as much as with the motion of the cart.

By this point, the frenzied edge to my fascination with her had faded, but still: there is no man or woman who could not look upon that face for hours, watching the emotions spread through it the way one might the colours spreading through the sky at dusk.

There was a joy there, unabashed and acute, like that of a child, but for the note of relief that came with it. There was a tinge of sadness too, a slight drawing in of her wide, round eyes, as if the blinding sheen of the reflected sun on the surface of the lake was too pitiful to look upon untroubled.

And then she was past us, and I could no longer see her expression. At the same moment I realised this pained me, I caught sight of Kaisha riding just behind my own cart, eyes fixed ahead of her. It was only an instant — catching the glint of her red, and a hint of her bearing — before I snapped my gaze away.

I understood now that through Tigerlily, I had been allowed a glimpse at Kaisha's face. It was so like her mother's, in so many ways, but would be animated by altogether different lights — ones which I was not worthy to witness anymore.

Tigerlily looked back at us over her shoulder. She saw me, and her smile smoothed into a warm embrace of affection and of trust. Then her eye shifted over to Kaisha. Her brow furrowed at what she saw there, and her white teeth worried at one soft lip.

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By the time I had helped my parents unload the wagon and set up our ger, Kaisha was already surrounded by Muddy, Upward and Frog, who were trying to pull her away to play without touching her. She nodded along, and then flicked her head around to stare at me. I immediately walked the other way, before she could extend an invitation... or fail to.

In truth, the sun was already drawing close to the horizon, and they would not have played long. Nevertheless, my first day on the shores of the great lake Buun Tsagaan was spent in childish misery.

The following morning I set off on my own, before the rest of the tribe had stirred from their tents. My father was surprised that I did not volunteer to take on some of his morning tasks, but seemed pleased somehow, because he complained louder and in longer sentences than he would when I stayed to help.

Sandal was walking past when I went outside. She had clearly just gotten back from checking on the horses — doubtless because she had been worried about how they would acclimatize to such unusually crowded conditions, rather than out of fear of theft.

This was before she had given up on trying to talk to me, so her eyes widened in surprise when she saw me emerge from the ger, and her mouth opened as if to say something. Both closed slightly, with hesitation and hurt.

I turned around and walked out of camp as quickly as I could.

I went to the lakeside first, where I waded in the shallows and gripped pebbles with my toes and enjoyed the feeling of my feet sinking slightly into the peaty soil. It dawned, and the place took on a misty shimmer. A flock of angular, spindly-legged white birds with a little plume of grey feathers dangling back from their heads were set to flight by the sheer weight of the openness above them. I stood silently and waited till the water stilled so I could look at the little fishes swimming through the undulating reeds and around my shivering legs.

Meanwhile, Sandal sat on the shore, her legs folded politely beneath her and her skirts folded carefully above them. She tried to keep an impossible balance between supportiveness and unobtrusiveness, in a manner even I will not try to claim was anything but endearing.

Thankfully, the day grew rapidly warmer when I began walking once more through the camp, drawing people out of gers which stood more tightly packed together than they would ever be on the open steppe, with sizeable gaps left only in the spaces between different tribes. These gaps became makeshift roads (a concept I would not truly grasp for a number of years, but had already started to theorize now), which soon began to throng with people. Young men in a hurry to be somewhere would grow tired of the sedate pace of people unused to crowded, two-way traffic, and would cut through the gers until they bowled over someone's child and got shouted at.

For me, though, the viscous flow was precisely the attraction. I reveled in the experience. There was such an uncanny fascination to seeing nothing but unfamiliar faces, so similar and yet somehow so different from those I had spent my entire life around. Occasionally, of course, there would be someone wholly distinctive, with a bulbous, reddened nose or a particularly amusing facial scar. But the rest were just as interesting — indeed, more so. They had perfectly normal eyes, with normal mouths, and normal skin and ordinary limbs... and yet, it all came together into something quite alien. This was only reinforced by the way it would jump out at you: when you first noticed them, you would always be seized with the impression that they were someone you knew, only to be jarred by the force of sudden unrecognition.

But mostly, I enjoyed the anonymity which it afforded me. Standing in the shadow of uncaring strangers, it was as if I was not there, and was nobody at all. Behind that veil, I could observe the world, unsolicited and unmolested. I found great consolation in that.

At some point, Sandal lost me in the crowds, or turned away.

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I dreamt that night of all the people I had seen during the day, in an inconsistent swirl even more frantic than the one I had navigated while waking.

It was only in this deferred fashion that I realised the women who had stood around in groups at a distance to the major tribes, and had gone one by one into their makeshift tents with different men, were prostitutes, whom I had read about in the Koran.

They had been kind to me, and given me some food when I was hungry, but in my dream I was frightened of them, thinking that Kaisha might leave me there to entertain men myself. I would be all alone in a tent with their frightening bodies, and they would become increasingly bored and angry at my recitation of botanical treatises and monarchic genealogies, which I had no choice but to do, since I could not sing.

I was woken by my father, who asked me impatiently how long it would take me to come back from the lake this morning, considering that I had to bathe twice.

When I returned — confused, but clean — he handed me one of his finest robes. He had not simply sheared off the end of the sleeves, as he usually might. This time, he had fully re-tailored the thing, narrowing the shoulders to half their breadth, and sewing the sleeves neatly back in careful folds. It was dyed a rich, woodish red, with simple (but to my eyes elegant) embroidery on each side of the neckline.

Then he asked, in a roundabout series of questions, whether I knew how to comport myself in front of a Khan. When I did not respond, and merely continued staring at the ground, he nodded, satisfied with my answer.

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Blacktooth had dressed in full military gear: chainmail hauberk, greaves, gauntlets, helmet — but no blade. Tigerlily was dressed in uncharacteristically conservative fashion, with many layers of light fabrics draped around her and a head garment which covered most of her face. Unfortunately, the facial covering was a lustrous gold which did nothing but enhance the glint of the sun in her eyes. But on the whole, I suppose they did succeed in making her a little less obtrusive.

Kaisha, for her part, was wearing a dress. I did not ask how they managed that, and for the first time, felt glad at having to avert my eyes, especially when I felt her glaring at me, as if daring me to look.

The day before, I had almost purposely drifted around the periphery of this camp of camps, quietly desperate to avoid the centre of attention, without ever going so far as to be truly alone. Today, though, we walked straight to that centre. The gers grew more tightly packed, and the flow of people slowed to an ooze, and then a crawl. At this point, I could hear coordinated hooting and shouting and collective intakes of breath. Clearly some kind of dramatic event was taking place, but the crowds were too thick to make out what it was, at least for a nine-year-old child who was as tall as one of seven.

We skirted around the most tightly packed areas and came to the base of a lone hillock. A wide pavilion had been erected at its summit, and a mass of petitioners thronged at its base. We were made to wait there for a time, until Jelme came down to look for us, and explained to the guards that we were his guests. When he mentioned that the man they'd stopped was Blacktooth (for he had not thought to mention it himself; the only introductions he usually had to make were less verbal, and more fatal), a definite air of recognition, and a measure of respect, came over their tightly restrained expressions. They did not check us for concealed weapons.

Once we were walking up the hill, Jelme embraced Blacktooth affectionately, tousled Kaisha's hair, and put an embarrassed Tigerlily at her ease with a few jokes after her daughter had bitten his finger.

The scene opened out before us as we reached the top of the hill.

The first thing we could see were the flocks of birds circling the lake Buun Tsagaan. Then we saw the throngs of people we had skirted earlier — more people than I imagined could exist in the world, all packed together in the space a horse at gallop might cover in ten seconds. At their centre was a cordoned-off section of grass.

The first thing I noticed were the men standing on the perimeter of the field, at very wide, but even, intervals. They wore long, blue robes which shimmered occasionally when the sun caught them just right, despite their rich, dark hue. What struck me in particular was the exaggerated length of their sleeves, which hung down nearly to the floor. Their faces too were completely covered by the black veil which fell to their shoulders from the wide, circular brims of their black hats. They generally held very still, but when they moved, the slow, methodical way in which they did so indicated that they were old.

It was only after staring at them for a full minute that I turned my eye to the two large, shirtless men trying to throw each other to the ground in the middle of the clearing.

I know there is more to it than that, and have since been subjected to long and unwelcome explanations about the technique of grips and trips it employs — but at the time, that's all I saw, so I cannot describe it otherwise.

Everyone else, however, seemed enraptured by it, and very keen that one man or the other should win (even though there is no way each of them could have been a friend or family member).

The only face in the entire tumult which did not seem to register any emotions was one which stared down impassively at the affair from the front of the pavilion to which we were ascending.

It belonged to a man who was tending towards fat, whose hair was tending towards white, and whose eyes — even from this distance — seemed so black within their narrow slits that I might have thought they lacked an iris altogether.

He was draped in a cloak of fine fur, perhaps rabbit or ermine, but had already begun to unlace his shirt at the onset of the summer heat.

Kitbuqa, the Khan of the Naiman clan, had earned a reputation for an unflappable stoicism which bordered on total numbness, and he lived up to it here.

I remember hearing a story about him. He had, they say, been issuing orders in a pitched battle when a dozen enemy riders had peeled off and launched a suicidal charge on his position, seeking to trade their lives for a decisive blow to enemy morale and command structure. He had not retreated, and just watched them as they were picked off one by one. The last of them got close enough to loose an arrow which took Kitbuqa's horse in the eye, felling the beast instantly. Kitbuqa hadn't uttered a sound. He simply tumbled silently to the ground, dusted himself off, sat back down on the corpse of his horse, and continued commanding the battle from there.

His response to the victory in the wrestling bout was to spit out the core of the olive he had been swilling from cheek to cheek, and pick out a new one from the bowl beside him.

Behind him milled what surely must be every Naiman war chief of any note, who smirked and gestured at the combatants and the crowd like owners of men.

One of them in particular stood out. He sat there stewing in full battle armor where the rest contented themselves with looser finery, his face unpleasantly narrow beneath a conical helmet. His features were pinched, and had an unhealthy, waxy texture, seeming to melt off his bony frame in a fashion incongruous for one so thin. I noticed the side of his mouth would twitch each time he looked over to Kitbuqa, though it was impossible to tell whether he was feigning a smile or repressing a frown.

Off to one side but still under the shade of the pavilion sat one of the men in blue and black, holding his body in such a way as to give the impression of separation and disinterest towards the others.

At the back of the pavilion was a small group of servants to the Khan and attendants to the guests, most of them standing under the sun. It was with this group that my father and I remained, while Jelme led an increasingly stiff-backed Blacktooth into the shade.

Our chieftain was first presented to the Khan, then presented his wife and child to him in turn. It was impossible to pick out what was said over the boisterous bragging of the war chiefs before us and the whispered gossip of the attendants around us, but it seemed to pass largely without event, which was deeply reassuring.

Kaisha and Tigerlily came to rejoin us, and Jelme and Blacktooth retreated to where most of the other chieftains stood milling around. What followed was a rather dull hour's politicking. Jelme was clearly in his element — clapping a shoulder here, letting out a free and open laugh there, giving a focused, unwavering listen where it was merited. Blacktooth, meanwhile, seemed to wilt under the attention, speaking much too little, and then suddenly much too much, before retreating back into himself and speaking not at all, refilling his cup constantly in order to have something to do with his mouth.

It was not the most dynamic show in the world, but it was certainly preferable to the wrestling down below.

Kaisha, for her part, seemed excited by the violence at first, but grew bored of it before too long — I think because it never led to any resolution, as the defeated man stood back up, and they were immediately replaced by two fresh, and functionally indistinguishable, combatants. She also watched the chieftains for a time (stopping for much the same reason, I suspect), and fended off the attentions of some of the friendlier attendants with a snarl or a smirk, before turning her attention to me. It had a different tone to it this time, though. It was less stony, and more wry. It felt less like an eagle pecking at a terrified turtle, trying to figure out if it was edible, and more like an eagle who had figured out that it was, but preferred to watch it peek its head in and out of its shell before swiftly retracting it back in. ...or so I surmised, without being able to look over to her myself.

My father took to playing pranks on the other shamans in attendance. They were healers and counsellors and wise men, greatly respected in their tribes, and had been invited to accompany their chieftains in a visit to the Khan. A few spent time trying to impress the wives and daughters of the chieftains with boasts of their powers, but they mostly huddled together among themselves, swapping news and throwing glares at my father. They seemed to view him with a mixture of suspicion and contempt, which soon turned to outrage when he would sneak up behind them and interrupt them loudly when they began to talk of him. He would ask them for advice on questions of medicine and weather prediction, but simply never seemed to understand that they had never heard of Aristotle, and did not even speak Arabic, so his long recitations of the *Physics* and its modern commentaries were just like Greek to them — and I do believe he tried to speak some Greek at one point, too. I almost pitied them, if only because a few looked over to Blacktooth and to me as if they pitied us.

—

Jelme and Blacktooth eventually settled down in a corner with the pale, pinched-face man I had noticed earlier. If one had paid close attention — and I, for one, had nothing else to focus on — one would have noticed that they had seemed to circle around each other the whole time, ever flicking a glance over at what the other party was doing, and slowly spiralling in towards an inevitable meeting.

My father explained to me that his name was Yesügei, and that he was chieftain of the preeminent tribe in our sector of Naiman territory.

When it finally happened, though, it had a distinctly frosty quality. Jelme did virtually all the talking, while the thin man looked down his narrow nose at Blacktooth, out of either suspicion or contempt. Blacktooth's attitude was not dissimilar, but perhaps those who did not know him so well would have difficulty noticing it was out of sheer discomfort. So engrossed was I — and, apparently, Tigerlily — in the subtle interplay between them that I did not notice anything until I saw Blacktooth's face rapidly darken into a sick

shade of puce, and his mouth furiously open and close, as if it were suddenly devoid of moisture.

By that point, Kaisha was already standing in front of the Khan.

I was not the last to register it, however. A hush gradually spread out — starting with the attendants, but soon passing over the chieftains as well, doubtless spurred by some mad thing she had uttered.

Before too long, the place was silent but for the roar of the crowd beneath us, and I could finally pick out what they were saying.

“——suppose it is as good a reason as any. But it makes no matter; this simply is not done.”

“You are the Khan. Do you not decide what is and is not done?”

“Not truly, lass. It is merely the case that people listen to me more than they do to others. And because of that, I can then visit violence upon those who do not listen.”

“Then will people not listen to you if you say that I may ride?”

I looked over to Blacktooth, who was being restrained by Jelme from storming forward, grabbing his child by the hair, and hurling her from the summit of the hill. His breathing was coming in shallow and fast, and sweat was streaming down his brow.

“Probably so. But why, child, would I do that?”

“Is it true that the winner of race is presented with a fine breeding horse from your own herd?”

“That, and a great many other things, yes.”

“Then, how about I present you with the horse I rode if I lose?”

“...and why would I want a losing horse?”

“For the same reason you were already considering saying yes.”

He smiled, at that. Several attendants gasped. My father’s eyes narrowed even further.

“I fear that you do not understand the nature of the event. Your father, I believe, said that this was your first Naadam; if so, then you truly cannot understand it. Of course, you will know that it is grueling and long, under the summer sun. But, you see, over a hundred children race. It is a chaotic scrum, with much shoving between riders and biting between horses. But even if you could weather the storm, there is little chance your horse will. Take Zhuruk here, for example. His sons and his horses have won three of the last five races. His herds are fleet, and his stock is strong, but the reason he wins is because he subjects them to violence and stressful conditions from their earliest days, in preparation for precisely this event.”

A chieftain who must have been Zhuruk could not seem to figure out whether the Khan was presenting him with enough of a compliment to be able to display outward signs of pride.

“Thus, if I permit you to race, I would merely be permitting you to be humiliated or hurt. Indeed, the most likely eventuality is for you to be thrown from your horse and stomped to death by those of the others.”

Kaisha listened impassively, and answered in the same fashion.

“And what does that matter? Would you not be getting what you want either way?”

The Khan’s eyes carried in them undeniable amusement... and his smile, a hint of threat.

He turned back to the wrestling with a shrug.

“Very well. Race, then.”

Kaisha nodded, satisfied. Blacktooth looked like his eyes were going to burst from their sockets.

As the whispers erupted into deafening murmurs, Tigerlily bustled furiously forward to bundle her daughter away as discreetly as possible. This would not have been very discreetly to begin with, but unfortunately her head covering slipped in the rush, so the two cut as dramatic an exit as could be imagined, with their red hair billowing behind them in the wind like the banners of a retreating raiding party mocking their victims by brazenly proclaiming their identity.

It took a few minutes, but things eventually returned to normal. Indeed, in the absence of Kaisha, things usually did. So the chieftains resumed their gossip (which they concealed as bragging), and the attendants resumed their bragging (which they concealed as gossip), if with a few eyebrows still raised and a little nervousness to the laughter.

Blacktooth, however, did not seem to recover. I could see his face, because he was facing away from me and looking down on the ground, but his shoulders were bunched up, and he was visibly shaking. Jelme made excuses for him and took him aside, patting him forcefully on the arm, and trying to reassure and admonish him at the same time. Then my father was at his side, feeling his pulse and smelling his breath before shooting Jelme a meaningful glance.

The chieftain immediately busied himself with excuses and other pleasantries while my father draped Blacktooth’s arm over his shoulder and tried to make it look like it was Blacktooth’s idea.

They made their way out from under the awning. As long as we were within earshot of the grand pavilion, the little man kept up a string of apologies and flinches, as if he were being harshly criticized and trying to scuttle away. As soon as we got some distance down the hill, he straightened immediately, and fished in his satchel for a pellet which Blacktooth swallowed with difficulty but without question.

Jelme jogged down to catch up to us.

“B—Blacktooth! Please, you must calm yourself! It was no great embarrassment — everyone knows it was the ignorance of a child who didn’t know any better. But even if it were, you cannot let it affect you like this. No one will remember this in two days’ time — they’re all too self-centred for that!”

“Indeed, indeed, grand Chieftain Jelme; who can doubt the wisdom of what you say? Who else could be so even-handed, keen-eyed, and silver-tongued? What better way to assuage the ills that plague his soul? I only ask, however... how exactly are your words supposed to help him recover from being poisoned?”

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Jelme immediately found us an empty ger near the base of the hillock, and gestured us hurriedly inside.

No sooner were we within than Blacktooth started to vomit violently upon the floor. The stench was extremely sharp, acidic, and reeked powerfully of alcohol. It occurred to me that whoever had poisoned him was merely saving Blacktooth the trouble of doing it himself in the long run.

What followed was an unpleasantness which any physician soon comes to find routine. Blacktooth would retch and shit, while my father mixed various herbs into a paste and made him choke it down, so that he would retch and shit further. Rather than any sense of disgust, it was the sheer routine of it which gradually wore down the feeling of excitement at being involved in such a dramatic event. Meanwhile, Jelme sat in a corner, as far away as he could get, and had the look on his face of someone wondering what on earth he was doing here.

Eventually, though, the danger passed, and Blacktooth’s bowels settled down. He slumped against the wall of the ger, clearly diminished — his face pale and drawn, lips chapped, eyes already seeming to sink into their sockets, shining with a feverish distance. My father and I finished cleaning up, and Jelme stuck his head back in, wrinkling his nose before mustering the courage to enter. The three of them sat and began to talk, while I boiled water for Blacktooth to be able to sip.

It was very slow, at first, and circular. They did not want to tax Blacktooth too much, so Jelme and my father mostly spoke to each other. It was a very odd dynamic. Jelme was much too polite, and my father far too unhinged, for it to really go anywhere. Blacktooth seemed to find it amusing, though. He wouldn’t laugh, exactly, but he would hack a cough, and the grimace on his face would loosen. So they kept at for his sake, I think.

When he had recovered sufficiently, and could speak a few words with his raspy voice, Jelme attempted to move the conversation forward.

“So, I think it is fair to say that we cannot be certain of the identity of the person who poisoned you.” My father looked like he was going to interject again, but contented himself to merely roll his eyes theatrically and mutter under his breath. “But we do have a good idea about the identity of the only person who can help prevent it — or worse — from happening again.”

Blacktooth struggled to get the words out, either from the rawness of his throat or the distaste they left in his mouth.

“You... mean Ye... sügei.”

“In a word... yes. He is the most powerful chieftain in your region of the steppe. We could either go to half a dozen minor tribes and court their favour individually, until you have enough of a coalition behind you to ensure your security... or we could simply gain the approval of one man.”

“You’re saying... I should make peace offerings... to the man who might have poisoned me.”

“We have no proof that it was him. But even if it was... then, yes. That is what you should do. In fact, that would be all the more reason to do so.”

“I’ll... never understand your... kind.”

“Blacktooth...”

He shook his head.

“No, no... I just mean, people who can talk.” He closed his eyes, and seemed to hold back a wave of nausea. “So, what do... propose... we...”

“...yes. Yes, well... We have to consider—”

Jelme babbled for a time, about the proper procedures and overtures and tone. He seemed... unusually tentative, however, as if something were holding him back from being able to speak freely. His eyes kept flashing to the entrance flap, which was closed but not tightly fastened. With all the innocence of a precocious child who thinks he understands the intrigues of grown men, I thought he might be worried of enemy spies listening in from the other side. So when my father seized on the moment of apparent weakness to bring the conversation back to his harebrained murder mystery deductions, I leapt at the chance to go outside and check.

“This is all very well, all very well... but I still wonder: what herb exactly was it that the culprit used to trouble our noble chieftain? Now, every piece of evidence points to the thesis that it was khori khunchir... but how could I be certain, without a sample of this herb to carry out the experiments necessary to confirm it? But then, who might be able to fetch them for me from my stores, where they have been rigorously filed according to a system in which only he has been trained?”

So I left to go fetch them for him from his stores.

—

There was, of course, no one outside the ger but for the men Jelme had arranged to guard it. Still, that did not prevent me from imagining that these expert spies had simply vanished when I went to look for them, and I went on enjoying the fancy that they now chased me invisibly through the camp.

Now that I was out of the ger and had been given a new task, no matter how minor in the grand scheme, some of the tingling sensation in the fingertips and the back of the skull returned to me. So I dashed between gers and into crowds, only pausing to pretend to hide and let my pursuers pass me, while I actually just caught my breath.

It must have been in that spirit of playful skulduggery that I took the whole store of khori khunchir with me, rather than a sample. I placed it in a small pouch, which I fastened securely and dropped down the front of my robes, so that it formed a little bulge above my belt.

I don't think I had formulated a plan for what to do with it, exactly, but the seeds were doubtless there by then.

—

It was only on the way back that the true gravity of the situation hit me. All the little pieces which had been suspended in the air, as if by an updraft, suddenly dropped to the ground and formed a shape I shuddered to recognize. The off-comments and sideways glances and euphemistic nods were cast in a new, and wholly unforgiving, light.

All at once, I understood the outlines of what I stood to lose. I hurried back even faster than I had fled, only pausing for breath — though this time with great deliberateness and discipline, so that they would not hear me panting as I approached.

—

When my breathing had sufficiently stilled, I drew close to the ger, and nodded at the guards. Thankfully, they merely nodded in return, before turning back to their own conversation. As I came to the tent flap, I pretended to hesitate, and then readjusted my clothes and hair (which had grown disheveled in my rush) as if fussing at my appearance before presenting myself to a tribal chieftain in front of a strict father. Meanwhile, I listened in, and tried not to let my shadow be visible across the threshold.

Blacktooth was talking in a dry rumble.

“—no, Isen Tomur. You do not need to be so careful with me. I'm not some woman, to be coddled and shielded from harsh truths.”

His larynx and oesophagus were so strained that his coughing came out as a high-pitch whine. He continued.

“It's not even the poisoning, really. It's what came before. That feeling of impotence, like when you walk too far into a stream, and can no longer touch the bottom... The way I froze up, wasn't able to even get the words out... The feeling of everyone staring at me like that... That's what was really sickening.”

He belched, and I could smell it even from outside.

“What's worse... is that even she could do it better than me. I'm still furious at the little bitch — I could wring her neck... but... but... even she... a child who has never left the tribe... is better at this than me. Sure, there's the fact she's mad. But the stares don't get to her...”

“Blacktooth, my friend...”

“Oh, shut up. It’s fine. What does it matter, at this point, how I feel about the girl? I already said I’d do whatever you wanted, didn’t I? Just get on with it. What—” His voice caught in his throat. “How... do we have to go about it?”

Jelme started speaking then, spelling out each world-shattering step. I would not for the life of me be able to recall exactly what he said. Even then, I could not recognize them as words — just alien sounds, halfway between a whimper and a scream, whose meaning was by some impossible alchemy made unambiguously, fatally clear.

Perhaps the guards called out to me as I shambled away, but I would not have heard them over the cacophony of it echoing in my ears.

—

I wandered about, for an unclear increment of time, much as I had yesterday — and then again, much not. There was no consolation in it, this time. The anonymity had gone. Instead, everyone was staring at me, fully cognizant of my shame, distressed by the darkness which bubbled up within me in response. I began to see what Blacktooth meant. There is nothing so humiliating as the gaze of strangers on your naked sin.

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I ended up in the centre of Yesügei’s camp. I must surely have asked directions, or overheard them given to someone else, but it seems implausible to me that I could have listened, let alone talked. However it happened, I found myself in the clear space before the chieftain’s ger.

The boy who must have been Yesügei’s eldest son sat outside of it, fiddling at a small block of wood with a little knife — a burly guard to one side and a wizened old slave woman on the other. I recognised him from the Khan’s pavilion earlier that day, in what now seemed someone else’s life. Perhaps it was only because he was younger than the others in attendance, but he had seemed even more impressed with Kaisha’s display than they had.

I say “boy”, but it would probably be more appropriate to call him a young man. The fuzz of moustache was already sprouting on either side of his upper lip, and he had that stretched-out look of the recent adolescent — but unlike his father, you could see this was a merely temporary feature, not a permanent affliction.

I cannot describe just how much I despised him.

There was a very... corporeal quality to it. Perhaps it was because I had never heard him speak — though if I had, I would have despised his voice as well.

Every minute detail of his body was odious to me. His skin would be oily and sticky to the touch; I would have to burn the hand that touched him to be cleansed. He had this putrid, sickly sweet stench, as of a rotten fruit in a long-neglected satchel — though of course I was too far away to smell any such thing. His lips had this utterly disgusting wetness to them; he might as well have laid two slugs upon his teeth. His fingers were long and straight, and flecked with the paint he looked to be using on the little statuette he carved.

I could go on eternally here. Every imperfection was like a gaping wound to my eye... and every lack thereof, a dagger in my heart.

I could not have been concealing any of this very well, and it was probably that which got me caught.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I flinched away from it as others might from a leper. I had been concentrating so intently on that boy's hands, it was no surprise I reacted as if it were his.

It belonged, instead, to a man who gave the impression of being quite tall, primarily because he stood so erect. His smile, though friendly, did not quite reach his eyes, where there was no room for anything beyond a consistent, unobtrusive tiredness.

"Why hello, young boy. What brings you to our camp? Perhaps I can help you."

"No. Sorry. I just got lost."

I was not so far gone into despair that I could not recognise the trouble I had gotten myself into, and feel panic and fear, if only in a distant, deadened way.

I attempted to bow and scuttle off, but the hand came back down on my shoulder with a firmer grip.

"Then perhaps I can give you directions on how to return. Would you mind accompanying me to the ger just there? I could draw you a map."

"No, no, sorry sir, it's fine..."

I tried to shake him off and make a run for it, but it was difficult to break his grip. I thought of reaching for my knife. Then I noticed the... boy looking at us from across the clearing, eyes wide with curiosity. I immediately slackened, and let myself be led into the ger under a calm barrage of questions.

I would not allow him to see me struggle.

—

Yesügei reclined inside with a damp strip of cloth stretched across his eyes, rubbing his temples in a jittery motion. He sat up when he heard us enter.

"What? What's going on, Bo'orchu? What's this?"

"I found this boy lurking outside, sir."

"...and? Why did you bring him here? I have quite enough trouble with my own boy as it is. Did you think I was interested in starting a collection?"

"I believe he is the son of that Uyghur slave of Blacktooth, sir. I think I saw him at the Khan's pavilion earlier today."

Some of the distraction left Yesügei's eyes, and they fixed on me with new focus.

“Really? Then what’s he doing here?”

“I am not sure, sir. I attempted to find out, but could get no clear response. Perhaps the boy is simple.”

“Well... take his knife off him, at least. I know he’s just a boy, but no one should be walking into my ger armed.”

It was the one Kaisha had taken from the kidnappers years before, which I had taken to wearing above my robes in a bid to appear more threatening to my rivals, though I had never pulled it on any of them.

Perhaps I should have been making a greater effort to conceal the pouch which was so obviously nestled in my robe. But it’s equally possible that would have simply served to call attention to it. At any rate, it did not fail to catch his notice. This time, I did struggle, but it was unlikely I could have resisted even if he were my own age, let alone four times that.

Bo’orchu’s eyes widened in alarm when he finally straightened and opened the pouch.

“What? What are you doing? What is that?”

“It... it’s khori khunchir... I think... sir.”

There was a longer pause than I had expected.

“Wwwwhhhhhhaaaaaaaat?”

“It’s... a toxic herb, sir...”

“I know perfectly well what it is, you fool! What’s he doing with it?”

“I.. I don’t know, sir.”

“Is he trying to kill me? Is this an assassination attempt?”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

“Then why’s he carrying around a pouch full of poison?”

“...perhaps it is a message of some kind. His father, they say, is quite mad. Perhaps this is his way of... well...”

“I know perfectly well what way... but why?”

“I don’t know, sir. But, perhaps...”

“Perhaps what? What’s a little boy doing dancing into my ger with a sackful of poison?”

“...perhaps it is a threat, sir...? Perhaps it’s a hint...”

They continued on like this for some time. Eventually they started pestering me with questions again. I took the cue the advisor had given me, however, and acted as if my mind were somewhere else. It was not hard to feign.

After they had come to a kind of impasse, and slumped down on a pair of stools in frustration and exhaustion, I took the initiative to pipe up. I had nothing else to lose, really.

“Umm... sirs? If you don’t need me for anything else, may I go now?”

The question seemed to catch them off guard. They looked at each other, trying to summon the faintest idea of what the correct response would be.

Eventually, Bo’orchu said to me, with a defeated tone:

“I suppose so.”

I nodded my thanks, and turned to go. Before I left, however, I turned back around, and said:

“May I have my poison back, please?”

If I thought they looked confused before, it was nothing compared to how they looked now. Their eyes widened further when they noticed my knife hanging at my hip again. They had laid it on the floor, and I had taken it back when they were busying talking.

“I’m not going to use it on you or anything. I promise.”

The tall man looked even more tired as he dropped the pouch back into my hand.

“Sure, kid. Whatever. Fine.”

Then he called a guard, and I was escorted out of the circle of carts around their tribe.

—

I was more subtle in my visit to Zhuruk’s encampment.

The turmoil had diminished slightly in intensity, to be replaced by a mechanical numbness, which was far more practical. It was, in fact, probably far more practical than the normal swirl of emotions I find myself subjected to, and accounted for a smoothness of action quite uncharacteristic of me then.

Zhuruk had eight sons by at least three different mothers. The Khan did not seem to be lying about the brutal conditions in which they were brought up. Even with a few minutes’ observation, it was clear to see there was a condition of competition between them bordering on open warfare. The eldest of each mother had imposed themselves as leaders of their factions, and the younger were treated as little better than slave boys by them. All eight would be riding in the race.

I approached the youngest of them, a boy whose position in the tribe reminded me powerfully of my own, and offered him the pouch. We did not discuss many specifics; he merely nodded, and I left.

—

The next day, father confined me to our ger as a penance for having lost his entire sample of khori khunchir. It was not because of the dangerousness of the object, nor because I failed to obey his orders by not returning to him immediately. It was not even because of the trouble of replacing it — it was not excessively uncommon, and could be restored with a week's foraging. It was rather because, for a full day, his records had been less than perfectly accurate, for he had not been able to adjust them until I finally slunk home and admitted my mistake.

It was the first time I can recall him having punished me.

It was, at any rate, really just as well he did so. I could not have mustered the will to stand up, let alone leave the ger. So it served as a decent enough excuse for my listlessness, and I clung to it tightly, the way a ragdoll will cling to the earth once it has been dropped and forgotten by a child.

My father, of course, relented within hours. It must have taken great discipline for him to resist as long as he did.

He first came in shouting that he had decreed a new penance: that I was to go outside and play most strenuously, and consume at least two sweetmeats -- all without ever being caught out in a definitive statement. When I did not react, he said he would thrash me very brutally if I did not go, and demonstrated what he would do on his own body, knocking himself off his feet several times. When even that did not get me to smile, he began to beg on his hands and knees, tears streaming down his face, until my mother told him to stop.

It was not until the evening, when the guilt and shame at seeing him so unhappy finally grew strong enough to dent my melancholy, that I finally agreed to leave the tent. This did not, of course, mean that the melancholy went away — nor, indeed, the hurt and resentment I felt towards him. I made no pretence of being anything but miserable, and thus did little to diminish his pain. But in truth, I think by this point he knew he could ask no more of me, as I was then.

Outside, a full banquet was underway.

The traditional practice on the last night of the Naadam festival is for each tribe to light a great ring of fire around which they spend the whole night feasting. Young men circulate among these, and attempt to dance in the centre of each ring with a local girl. The intense heat of the flames provides the excuse for a certain immodesty of dress, and the hooting, jeering supervision of the crowd provides the assurance of a baseline modesty of behaviour.

There are no such assurances when they leave the ring with all the heat of it still clinging to them. Sometimes, the young men are convinced to cut their journey short that night. It is the primary cause of inter-tribal marriages, I have gathered.

Even the most jealous and possessive of fathers casts a forgiving gaze on the proceedings, or at least averts it. This does not mean that this kind of freedom extends past this evening, however. Even the most repressive system knows it must occasionally bend, lest it eventually break.

I had learned long before not to simply pick a spot to sit in and sulk publicly. So I hung about the fringes of the proceedings, visiting the fires of different tribes, always loitering close enough to groups of people that I did not seem alone from afar, but not close enough that they would start to talk to me. The trick was to move between groups constantly, so that no one noticed you were doing this.

It was, of course, a survival mechanism, to not be singled out for bullying by openly displaying your isolation. But it was just as much a token of basic decency, and of respect for the enjoyment of others, which I was able to maintain even then.

Still, no matter how deftly I avoided contact, I could not help but hear the story. It seemed, in fact, that no one spoke of anything else, and the hundreds of fragments I overheard half convinced me I had been standing there myself to witness it.

Kaisha had won the race by a shocking margin. So dominant was her display, at least in the retellings, that I wondered if I should even have bothered giving the poison to the boy. Then again, the fact that it was Zhuruk's youngest son who had come in second was apparently news enough that people were even discussing it in the tribe of the victor, and that was able to make me smile for a few seconds.

Rumours of Kaisha's stand before the Khan the day before had already made her something of a sensation, but the sight of her riding in as the sun bled down to the horizon, painting the whole world a deep red, quickly elevated her to a nearly legendary status. All the chieftains of the clan wanted to meet her, and Jelme held court over the steady stream of them who passed by our fire for that purpose, while Blacktooth sipped water with the look of a drowned dog beside him, and fended off his drunken herders with undisguised envy in his eyes when they tottered up to him and said we should come back every year, each boasting about how we would have a clean sweep when Bull won the wrestling and Fletch beat everyone at the archery.

Kaisha talked to a few of these most powerful men in the steppe, leaving each wide-eyed and jittery thereafter, but did not seem overly interested in her newfound fame. Mostly, she played, and ate, and challenged visiting warriors to drinking bouts, and startled couples who had found an empty ger for shelter by sneaking in and giving the young men whispered advice.

And, of course, she danced in the centre of the ring, which would clear each time she ignored the entry gap and leapt over the flames. She had a lit torch in each hand, and swung them about the way she swung her sword — in a mesmerizing glow of vicious, graceful, perfect arcs. The crowd would silence, then, and the best of them would cry at the beauty of it.

I watched her without any pretense of coyness. I understood then, with perfect clarity, that my previous avoidance of her had been a sham. It was a marvel of self-pity and insidious aggression. It did not arise from a conviction that I am not worthy of her, but rather, from a demand that she approach me herself, and assure me that I am.

That was irrevocably over and done with at this point. I knew that because I could look upon her without blinking now, and still feel little more than the desolation of the grave.

Eventually, the suffering became too much, and I simply had not the energy to continue being among other people. So I slouched down towards the shores of the lake, and picked a spot a little way's off from where a drunken shaman lay in a puddle of his own

vomit to sit and look at the moon's reflection in the ripples which the summer wind stirred up.

—

I must have dozed for some time, because by the time I returned, the sky was already lightening with a pre-dawn glow.

Kaisha was sitting at the entrance to my ger. Her head was leaning lightly against it, and her eyes were closed, but they opened as soon as I rounded the corner and came to a stop.

We looked at each other for a time — she, with a wry grin, as of a father being told a rambling story by his young children, and me... well, I cannot say how I looked, only that it must have resembled a father apologizing to his children, for never having let them be born.

I turned to go away. This time, it was not furtively, or panicked. But this time, Kaisha grabbed me by the arm, and would not let me go.

She led me to a clear space behind Blacktooth's tent. Tethered there was one of the prizes she had received from the Khan, which every chieftain had come to coo at a few hours before, and pet its mane admiringly.

I had no great love for horses, but even I could see she was no ordinary creature. Her coat was pale, a rarity among the steppe species, and glowed a light blue in the last remnants of the moonlight. But the most peculiar thing about her was the way she moved: almost not at all, and even then slowly, deliberately, as if she found useless motion distasteful.

“Congratulations on your victory.” I said, through a dry throat. “She's very pretty. She'll probably make a good breeding mare.”

“Hah! What need do I have for a breeding mare?”

“Why did you go through the trouble of winning her, then?”

“Oh, I don't need her. But you do.”

And she looked back over to me — almost bashful, almost unsure.

She pulled me back to my feet from where I had crumpled onto the floor, and picked up my arm from where it dangled limply at my side. She laid the reins into my palm with one hand while she brushed my tears away with the other.

“There you are, Fin. You have a horse too, now.”

Then she just held me to her while I cried.

— --

The next day, I was helping my father pack his stores into the cart when Jelme came down.

“Ah! Good day, my friend. I trust that you are well? Where is Blacktooth, by the way?”

“Where indeed? Where might a chieftain be, when his tribe are—”

“Alright, well, he so dislikes troubling himself with these details, I might as well just discuss them with you.”

“What details are these?”

“Ah, yes... it’s about the matter we spoke of yesterday, after our visit to the Khan’s pavilion.”

“What details could possibly be more detailed than that?”

It struck me that, for some reason, my father’s broken, rambling form of talk was a little more direct, more business-like, when he spoke with Jelme today. He seemed to twitch less, as if he were just a little bit less mad.

“Well...” Jelme’s eyes flashed over to me with a kindly crinkle. “It might be best if we retired to your ger to discuss them in greater depth.”

“Why bother, when we’re already among trusted co-conspirators here?”

“Oh... but... the boy...?”

“Why do you think he did not return to our council yesterday, if not because he overheard what we discussed?”

“I... I see. It’s no business of mine, but aren’t you worried he’s going to tell her? Wasn’t Blacktooth quite insistent in keeping it from her for a time?”

“If he was going to tell her, would he not have done so already?”

“Well, it’s your own business, and none of mine either way. So... yes. I spoke to Yesügei again this morning. And he...” Jelme paused for a moment, as if struggling with how to phrase something. “Incidentally... forgive me if this sounds odd, or is in any way disrespectful. But did you approach him independently at all? Or... make any sort of threat, even?”

“Why would I have done that? Or, more to the point: how? Who couldn’t use a few more ideas for interesting threats? ...though why do you ask? Did he say I did?”

“No, no, never mind... he just made a few comments which were slightly off, is all. As if he were trying to gauge how much I knew about something, with little hints and odd suggestions. At any rate. The main thing is: it went well. He broadly agreed to all the terms we had discussed. He will make it known you have his protection, which should ensure a stop to any summer raids — at least from fellow Naiman tribes, of course. We’ll organise common war parties with him in the summer, but that can wait until next Spring to be discussed further. Kaisha will be betrothed to his eldest son, and will leave your tribe to marry him as soon as she flowers. We discussed terms of inheritance, in case Blacktooth should not have a son...”

Since my father would apparently be busy with political matters for a time, I went ahead and ducked into the tent to pack some of the more sensitive items which he usually preferred to attend to himself — his surgical equipment and writing tools, for example — though of course I was not foolish enough to touch his records.

Chapter 3

As soon as the tribe was on its way back to our own territory, Kaisha came to find me. She walked bow-legged, arms weighed down by all the equipment for the two horses who followed along behind her, unbridled but placid. She walked me through every step, from the beginning. How to approach the animal, how to greet it, caress it, and know when they are ready to be loaded with the gear, the actual process of which was very simple, now that a rapport had been established.

Once we were actually mounted, however, she quickly fell into her usual place. I was overjoyed simply to let the beautiful mare walk at its own pace, revelling in the basic fact that I was riding. This was enough for Kaisha, however. She finally had the chance to play with me on horseback, and would not let my incompetence stop her. She'd tease me, trot forward, out of reach, and tell me to catch up with her. What else could I do, when she did that? I would try, and start off in fractionally the wrong direction, be too shy to pull the horse by the mouth, and end up quite some distance from her – either that, or on the floor. For the next few days, we crisscrossed through the whole tribe, passing by all of the children, who watched us in silence, watching their parents' herds. My horsemanship went from abysmal, to neutral – essentially acting as little more than a heavier saddle – to barely passable. Thankfully, the mare was the most docile and well-trained I had ever encountered, and I whispered my gratitude for this to her many times.

Once we had reached the open country, and not caught sight of strangers for many miles, the tribe dispersed somewhat, and we had a day's rest. Kaisha rounded up the other children and led us on what would be my first excursion with them.

She led us to rocky terrain – a sun-baked strip of dust and boulders, in the shadow of which could be found snakes. She had asked me to bring a cloak that morning, and used it as a shield, allowing them to pounce at her and be deflected harmlessly off it. When they would coil themselves up and rear again, she would behead them with one clean strike of her blade. I, of course, had no desire whatsoever to expose either the snakes or myself to any harm, and was thus perfectly content to follow after her, collect the corpses in a sack, study them, and simply observe the beauty of her sinuous and lethal motion. The other boys stomped round in groups, and pounded the poor creatures to death with thick tree branches. This made me very unhappy, as much of the meat was splattered on the rocks, and the skins were rendered unusable, making their actions fruitless as well as ugly. Of course, I never really considered saying anything on my own, so I came out of all this no better than they did. And if Kaisha made a fuss about it, they would blame it on my presence, so I did my best to distract her from them, just in case, and this soured my mood immensely on this first outing, which I had so desperately desired to come on for so long. Thankfully, they grew bored of it quickly, and by the time the sun began to set, and the heat coming off the rocks went from scalding to suffuse, it was only Kaisha and I who still clambered through them, the boys already mounted and talking in a sullen circle.

When I pointed this out to her, she went over to ask if they wanted to return. They told her that they did, and she responded that she would first go for a piss, and then climb up to the highest point in the ridge, which she had not done yet. None of them moved to leave, so she said she'd see them shortly, and waited for me to follow her. I thought they'd mock me for it on the ride back, saying I couldn't even leave her alone for that, so I looked down at my feet, and she shrugged and was off.

For a few seconds, I felt the same way I always had when left alone with them. But then I remembered I too had a horse now. I realized I was just a foot in a stirrup away from the greatest public vindication of my life, and so I strutted proudly to the mare and mounted her.

Once there, however, I quickly realized the symbolism of the moment was not enough to outweigh the shame I felt at their stares and stony silence, let alone enough to bridge it. And so, I finally succeeded in yanking the creature from the mouth, and turned it away from them to walk in circles, off to the side. I almost forgot where I was, at that point, so thrilled was I still by the direct experience of riding, until I heard someone call me from behind.

The stick hit me full in the face. I slammed into the ground. I could not breathe, yet felt like retching. The pain was blinding.

When it cleared somewhat, I could just about begin to make out what was being jeered down at me. The twins, Muddy and Upwards, circled around me with their horses, their sentences melding seamlessly together into one long denial of my being.

All that I could bear, and had borne before. But when they took the mare Kaisha had given me by the reins and turned to lead her away, I lost myself in rage.

I pulled my knife out and leapt at them, slashing haphazardly upwards and screaming incoherently. Another blow from behind sent me sprawling once more.

From where I lay on the ground, the world was spinning, and one of their horses reared in panic, blocking out the sun, its hooves pawing the air. Its rider was grinning in sadistic glee, or frowning in terror. I only had time to draw in a breath as my defence.

The horse came down on my right leg, shattering the bone. My shrieks were stifled by the vomit which swelled in my mouth, and I choked. I suppose I must have curled up to protect my leg, for the horse's hooves stomped on my arm, my back, my thigh. Then one fell on my head, and there was silence, which finally caused me to notice that people had been shouting in alarm before then.

—

When I opened my eye, Kaisha was standing above me. I could not see her face, just the red outline of her hair as it was backlit by the sun. I noticed that it did not shine, but burned. She stepped back, and I saw there was a horse behind her. I could not lift my head, and my left eye was not working, so I could not see who was mounted on it.

Whoever it was, Kaisha grabbed his leg, and yanked him out of the saddle. He fell between us, and I discovered he was one of the twins. He put his hands up and started saying something, but Kaisha kicked him in the mouth, and he sprawled back – so close I might have touched him, if I could move. He raised his legs to ward her off, but she slammed her foot into his groin, and straddled him.

She started to punch him in the face. Once. Twice. Thrice. Four times. Five. Alternating hands, sometimes slamming her fist as if swinging a hammer, sometimes punching straight down with her knuckles.

She stopped, and looked at her hands. They were covered in blood, and twitching badly. So she started to use her elbows, slamming them into his skull from every angle until his arms went limp, and he could no longer fend her off.

Calmly, she leaned over and stretched to reach something out of my sight. Returning to her sitting position, she raised a fist-sized rock, and brought it down. Then raised it, and brought it down again. And again. And again.

I heard something crunch.

—

I think I have memories of the ride back. At least, I remember looking down at the ground from the back of a horse, and unbearable pain, and rasping breaths that seemed to suffocate me. I remember being carried into my tent, and my father's face.

-- --

It took me weeks before I was well enough to leave bed, and months before I could walk unaided. The horse had stomped down on the ridge above my left temple, leaving a scar coming out of the hairline on the left side of my forehead. I lost some vision in that eye, and it does not open quite as wide as the other, but I now know I got off lucky. The only serious damage was to the leg, which mostly recovered. Apart from that, I fractured several ribs and my forearm, but they healed fully within two months, and do not greatly pain me today.

I remember with great clarity the first time I walked without a crutch — at least, without one of wood. It was a morning in deep winter, when the world looked like the Sun must see it above the clouds — blue overhead and white beneath. A snowstorm had raged for days, and the gers of the tribe were lost in a landscape of drifts and dunes. The breath of the livestock curled white like the wisps of cloud overhead. It was so bright after the dimness of the tent that it set my eyes to aching, even closed. Although I must have known better, I could not help thinking that it was the snow itself which shone — the snow which covered the earth as if brown and grey and green had never existed, as if there had never been anything but white — and that the sun was a mere mirror dangled aloft, catching its light. It crunched thickly underfoot and whispered off our haunches as we walked slowly through it. My mother had wrapped me in many layers of fur, my legs as thick as two saplings and just as unwieldy, but I shook as the unbearably clean air filled my lungs, and my hand trembled on my cane.

Kaisha was radiant, and fey. She was colour in a world of white and blue — the green of her eyes was impossibly vivid, her hair like blood against the sepulchral bareness of the snow. Her cheeks were flushed, but pale, as if finely powdered, lending her skin a nearly translucent quality. She declared the day warm, removed her woolen cap and shook her hair free. It whipped through the air, back and forth, cascading down behind her — and she started to run, stomping through the deep snow. She turned around to face me and smiled almost innocently when her eyes met mine — almost as if she were any other girl. Then she was running back for me.

I was so stunned I stopped walking, and just waited for her to arrive.

She took my shivering hand in hers, and it was warm, alive. She took my cane in the other, and though I had not truly been leaning on it, I was overcome by the sudden tug of vertigo you feel when the chair you are sitting on is pulled from under you, or the first time you mount a horse – that giddy rush of panic and excitement which Kaisha cast like a shadow upon those who stood behind her. She began pulling me forward, and up when I stumbled. Twinges of pain still ran through my leg and into my back, but most of the discomfort came from disuse – my father had double-splinted my leg up to the thigh, and I had not bent it unsupported for four months.

We ran hand in hand for what seemed like miles in the whiteness, but could not have been a hundred strides. Blood pounded in my ears and my head swam until the dizziness overcame me and I sprawled on the ground yet again – but this time, instead of pulling me up, Kaisha fell giggling atop me. She quieted sometime after we rolled to a stop, and I kept my eyes screwed shut against the nausea and the white intensity of the sunlight.

Then my head was lifted off the snow and laid on something softer. My cap was pulled off; fingers ran delicately through my sweat-soaked hair and caressed my cheek. The blinding light of the sun was blocked, and the ache subsided. Two fingers traced up my face, and I tensed, but relaxed as they drew slow circles around my throbbing temples, traced tenderly along my eyebrows, then carefully massaged my eyes. My lids parted as they drew away, and I saw Kaisha's face above me. Framed by the high morning sun, her features were darkened as if veiled, but I thought I saw her lips draw up.

Her expression, though I could not see it, was... gentle.

I told her, then. How could I not? What could I hope to keep from her by this point, and why would I think there was anything I could do to protect her from it? Although... no. I must have realised by now that I had only done it to protect myself.

She listened, but did not let me babble on repeating myself once I had told it to her twice, simply soothing a hand across my cheek, before letting it slide over my lips to silence me.

—

I learned that it had been Upward whom Kaisha had dragged down in front of me and beaten to death. Apparently, all the children had said that he and I had been playing at the summit of the hill and fallen down the slope. I do not know how Muddy had been convinced to say so, but he had. My father knew better, of course, but said nothing.

The other children still followed her as they always had... only differently, somehow. Before, she had been something like an equal. When she told them to do something, they had complied as if playing at obedience, as if she were merely assuming the role of commander and they of soldiers, while she was in truth a little girl, and they free to disobey. Unlike me, they had not seen her paint another stripe on the back of a tiger, and smile at both ends of the sword. But no, I had known before then.

And now, they knew too. It took them a while to come back, but one by one, they began turning up in the early afternoon, after they had finished their duties and chores, and she would nod and tell them what to prepare. Muddy stayed silent over his brother's death... and indeed everything else. For a year after the event, he barely said a word, and did not play with us once, merely tending his father's flocks and helping his mother with the younger children. Eventually, he began to watch from a distance, partially out of sight,

while Kaisha and the younger children played in camp. One day, he simply followed us when we rode out, and was received without comment.

Slowly, the boys began to joke and laugh again, to poke fun at each other and take pleasure in their play. But they no longer made jokes about Kaisha. They also no longer teased me, nor mistreated me in any way. It was almost like it had been before, when I was the boy who did not tend the herds in the morning, and the boy who played with Kaisha. But now, they never spoke to me except when we rode out together, and even then grudgingly. While I was no longer excluded, neither did they make any effort to include me. Not that it mattered to me, by this point. I was the first to come to Kaisha in the morning and the last to leave her at night. Wherever she went, I went; whatever she did, I was the one to witness it – not they.

The situation held no small measure of irony. I was tolerated by virtue of my proximity to Kaisha – the very same fact that all resented and despised me for. But now, at least, there was a balance and a peace.

She, for her part, remained unchanged. She grew taller and more beautiful, of course, and her ferocity could no longer be confused for feistiness by the adults. But neither did she truly escalate it further, to my mild surprise.

We did not seek out enemy raiders to fight, and contented ourselves with hunting elk and wolves and rabbits. She did not rebel against tribal or familial authority, nor call into question any of their decisions about her life — though they knew to leave her to her devices day-to-day. In a certain sense, it was as if she were holding her breath through these years... or breathing in.

If I were forced to come up with some change, I would say that there might possibly have been a shift in her attitude towards Blacktooth. Not that it had ever been particularly warm, of course. The only person Blacktooth had ever showed overt affection to was Tigerlily — and that, alone at night when he thought we were sleeping. Even then, it was only through a mist of shame and with a trembling touch, in the quietest of voices. Although perhaps you could read care into the way he never actually struck my father, despite having a new reason to do so every day.

At any rate, the bond between him and Kaisha was never anything but tacit and remote. But it seemed to become even more so after this. Naturally, she answered whenever he addressed her directly, and still seemed at least vaguely deferential to him in public. But I do not remember her addressing him again — and even when facing in his direction, which she did seldom, she never seemed to be quite looking at him, as if there were nothing where he stood for her to focus on. But I am possibly reading too much into this, and this was merely the contempt which every growing girl feels for her father, and nothing more.

As for my part, the following years were starkly defined by two intimately related concerns.

The first was a continuation of the course of my independent studies, which were intensified as a result of the rapid deterioration of the external conditions which originally spawned them. In brief, the political situation of our tribe grew ever worse, and the attempt to understand them grew to dominate my thoughts accordingly.

We may start off with the fact that the toll of deaths and severe injuries we sustained from the summer raiding grew year on year. During this period, clashes with the Naiman clan's longstanding enemies to the east – the Kereit – grew to levels unseen since Kitbuqa's early days as Khan. This, indeed, had been all the chieftains at the Naadam festival had spoken about; I would have attended to it more, had I not been so distracted. My deductions led me to the theory that the Kereit were now supported in secret by the Jin Dynasty. This great kingdom had attempted to make incursions into the steppe a few generations ago, and were staunchly repelled, but now seemed to be flexing their muscle in the region once more. This emboldened the Kereit, and the better equipment and more plentiful supplies meant that all the Naiman forces were hard-pressed.

It could not be denied, however, that the problems of our tribe stemmed from more than that. I could not go so far as to say we were betrayed exactly... but our forces always seemed to find themselves where the fighting was thickest. Collusion between our local rivals, if not outright conspiracy, was virtually a certainty.

In addition, after an initial lull, raiding and thieving on our flocks increased substantially. Rare was the month when we did not mourn the murder of a herder.

These factors combined, mutually reinforced each other, and in turn led to defections. The wealthier and more skilled in combat were the first and most likely to go, since they could obtain generous allowances when they switched allegiances. And this, of course, became the second half of a downward cycle – our war potential and ability to defend our flocks deteriorated accordingly.

As a result, the tribe had to retreat farther and farther away from the greenest pastures and into the hinterlands – the most mountainous and desertified terrain. What's more, we had to travel more tightly packed, for protection, which meant the animals had even less room for grazing. My father's countermeasures were creative and nearly miraculous, but our flocks began to thin despite them.

All this constituted my first concern. I was still a child, so I did not hold out much hope that I could do anything to affect it directly. No – my obsession with it was more abstract. I wished to understand the mechanisms whereby these changes occurred – to trace, as exactly as I could, how it all happened. Once that was clear, I could turn to the causes – why were conditions so? What had set them in place. Lastly came the most crucial – what was there that could be done? If we took the whole, shifting mass of steppe tribes as one body, and looked at it from perspective of the physician – where could the incision be made? What would be the right intervention to allow the organism to grow in another direction?

All this would have been a dark enough set of considerations for a child, but I had some modicum at least of the scholar's integrity. Truth could never be ugly, and was to be sought after always. At least with matters such as these, my faith in these principles was never sorely tested.

The real quandary came when one considered how Kaisha fit in to all of this. And it was this line of thinking that was truly the one to cause me trouble. Because it inevitably led to another question: given how Kaisha fitted into all of it, how did I in turn fit into that? Dark were the dreams that threatened to show the answer.

The second major concern, as I said, was intimately related: and that was the betrothal of Kaisha to Yesugei's second son and presumptive heir. This drew ever closer with the

worsening of the conditions I described above. As we grew weaker, this nominal alliance became our only lifeline, making it even more difficult to extricate ourselves from the horrible agreement. The true enemy, however, was the mere passage of time. Every day brought the unthinkable and seemingly inevitable closer. And so, my gloom only grew.

It was under the cloud of such worries that I dragged myself out of my listless stupor one morning. The Spring was already drawing to a close, the days lengthening to better expose our shameful condition. Kaisha had already passed the traditional marriageable age of twelve, and we still had not sent her over to Yesugei's tribe. The relationship had grown ever more tense – and soon, the time for the summer raids would begin. We would barely be able to defend ourselves against any, let alone set off on some ourselves. One way or another, some form of disaster was imminent.

Kaisha was not practising with her sword where I expected, and her horse was not tied up behind her family's ger, so I resolved to enter and ask Tigerlily where she could be.

Blacktooth was sprawled on the far side of the ger, lying propped up on one arm and half clad in his armour, while my father sat in front of him, straight-backed and cross-legged. He turned a glare on me when I ducked in. I looked around the otherwise empty tent and stammered out an apology, trying to back out again, but Blacktooth halted me and bade me sit. I suppose we must have looked quite as similar as a mother duck and her duckling when I settled cross-legged by my father, for Blacktooth hacked out a laugh.

My father seemed slightly put out, but tried bravely to continue without letting on to me what on earth they were talking about.

“Perhaps, sir, perhaps... but could it not also be that subterfuge would be the better option here? When the common swift finds itself hounded by hawks, what does it do? If it cannot peck their eyes out, and fleeing—”

“Oh, shut up already. That's enough for today. Go away. Now.”

My father shot me another annoyed glance before gathering up the two sheets of parchment before him and rising. Since I had so recently been ordered to sit, I hesitated, wondering if I should follow. But before I had come to a decision, my father had left the tent, and I was alone with the tribe's chieftain for perhaps the first time in my life.

The ger was dark without a fire in the hearth, the only light coming through the tent flap, which had been left half-open. The chieftain's craggy face ran with sweat in the close confines, for the day was still warm. I was wondering why he was not sitting outside when he stretched out a hand, grabbed a thick waterskin roughly, and took a couple of gulps. I caught the pungent scent of fermented mare's milk, which mingled with the smell of his sweat and unwashed leathers and the heat of the day to set my head to spinning.

The rotted canine which had given him his name had fallen out many years earlier, but a couple of the teeth that remained him were blackened by infection or combat, and the puncture wound on his cheek gleamed in the half-light. The sound of his breathing filled the tent and struck me as somehow obscene, as if he had been cursing with every inhalation.

During his long silence, I reflected that he had been getting drunk more and more often, and at earlier hours. Or, perhaps, he had always been this way, and had only recently gotten worse at hiding it, or I better at perceiving it.

When he tried to speak, his voice broke, and he took another swig.

“So. Boy.”

He had not asked me a question, so I did not respond.

“How’re...” He coughed. “How’re your... studies going?”

This too was unexpected. “Well. I haven’t had to memorize anything from The Canon of Medicine for months now, which I think means I’m done with it. And my father says my Persian is half-way decent.”

Blacktooth did not seem to understand this either, but he said, “That’s good.”

Then he continued. “I’m going to go meet Yesügei by Buyirugh’s wood, and bring him back to the tribe. Can’t exactly ask him to come and find us where we’re hiding in the hills, after all.”

He spat.

“You know about it, don’t you? The whole... thing, with Kaisha... and his son. Of course you do. You’re just like your bloody father. You pretend to be so clueless that it’s always just safer to assume you know everything.”

He sat up suddenly, which made me jump, but he simply swung his legs out in front of him, placed his elbows on his knees, hung his head and scratched his thinning hair vigorously with the tips of his fingers, then left them there. I could not see his face.

“She hasn’t been leading her little pack out on any excursions lately, has she?”

“No.”

“Do you know why that is?”

I thought about this before answering.

“I suppose there’s nothing more she wants to do. For the moment.” When that did not seem to satisfy him, I added, “But she’s getting restless. Something’s going to happen soon.”

Blacktooth looked up at me for an instant, bloodshot eyes gleaming from beneath tangled strands of hair, before swinging his head back down.

“Sometimes I wish things could have been different. Maybe if I’d never given her that horse. Or maybe if I’d never let her learn to fight. I don’t think Tigerlily has ever forgiven me for that. She has no idea. No bloody clue.” He hocked up phlegm, and spat. “You knew. Or thought you did. Well, I know too, now. Though I suppose it is too late. The one thing I could have done, I could only have known when it was already too late...”

He paused.

“She frightens me, boy. Frightens me more than anything has ever frightened me in my life.”

He did not speak for a long time, after that.

“It’s those eyes. They’re... they’re not human. They’ve never cried. Did you know that? She’s never cried. Not even when I beat her half to death. I don’t think she even so much as groaned. And the more I hit her, the more she frightened me – so I hit her harder. And she just stared at me, with these dull eyes, as if I wasn’t even there...”

“Do you know what I thought in that moment, boy? I thought: I’m in her way. She doesn’t need me anymore, and she’s going to get rid of me. I had my sword ready.” He lifted his hands and stared, transfixed, at his trembling fingers. “They were wrapped around the hilt. So tight I could feel the bones creaking. I was ready to swing, to swing at her if she tried to go for me. If you hadn’t gotten in the way, I know, I know she would’ve done it. And maybe I already wouldn’t have been able to stop her.”

He looked up at me one last time.

“You’d better hope she never decides she doesn’t need you anymore, boy. You’d better pray.”

His eyes held nothing in their pits.

“She will burn you. She will burn you. She is the fire which will consume the world.”

Then he turned over to vomit, and I got up to go find Kaisha. She was strolling back with Tigerlily, and as I walked up to them, she cajoled her mother into letting herself be carried the remaining distance home. She tottered a little bit under Tigerlily’s weight, until she saw me and started snorting and pawing at the ground like a bull. And so Tigerlily gasped and giggled uncontrollably as I played along at running away from being trampled, all the while leading them away from the ger so that Blacktooth would have enough time to bellow for my father to come and clean up after him.

Chapter 4

Blacktooth departed the next day. He took none of his herders with him — which is just as well, as we could barely keep the flocks from falling down ravines in the uplands or wandering into the desert below as it was. He did not go altogether unaccompanied, however.

I had just finished my morning memorizations and recitations, and was just getting ready to start the inspection of the perishable medicine stores, when my father stormed in, seized me by the front of my robes, and flattened his nose against mine. His overlarge, unblinking eyes took up the entire field of my vision. I had never seen him so perturbed.

“Accounts. The... the accounts. You. Yooouuuuuuuuuuu!!! The accooooooooouuuuuuunts! While I’m goooone.”

He paused to take in a long breath.

“If... if... if I find a single — I mean a single — figure out of place... if you forget to log a single entry in a single logbook, I swear on my good left testicle that I will find you, wherever you are hiding, and flay your skin to make my paper, uproot each of your hairs to make my brushes, crush your gallbladder and your spleen to make a rather revolting brownish ink, pluck out your eyeballs so that I may have eyeballs floating pickled in one of my precious glass jars, take your kneecaps so I have some in reserve in case I misplace one of mine, yank out your nails and let them regrow and yank them out again over the course of decades so as to make the most useless scale armour the world has ever seen, slice off your buttocks and fashion the world’s most comfortable cushion for my own, unroll your intestines and wrap them about myself in imitation of a demented caterpillar, then take your brain and eat it in a bid to poison myself to death with the fluids of your rank stupidity in an altogether uncharacteristic and bewildering fit of remorse for having deprived you of so many body parts... but I shall leave you your own testicles so that you can may construct for me grandchildren who will, I pray to all the existent and non-existent gods, be less of a crushing disappointment than you will have turned out to be if you place a single — I say a single — drop of my precious ink wrong on one of my precious, precious, so very valued records!”

He stopped, and took another breath.

“Is that understood?”

This was, incidentally, how I found out he was leaving.

—

He cut a rather odd figure beside Blacktooth as they embarked together on their short journey. The chieftain was on his powerful, rangy mare, his riding lance held impressively aloft, while his servant rode Truth — his squat, stolid, long-suffering donkey — and gesticulated wildly, pointing at every rustling bush to declare he had spotted the enemy lurking behind it in ambush. In that moment, I was overcome with a sense I had seen their figures silhouetted against the sunrise like that before, but they dwindled into the distance until even my father’s squeals faded away, and the feeling passed.

It was the first time I had ever been left in charge of the official records, and it was only now that the true depth of them was revealed to me. They were seemingly endless. Every

possible aspect of the tribe's life was accounted for here — and some impossible aspects, as well.

There were exhaustive medical records for every person and every animal, the one virtually indistinguishable from the other. All of a sudden, my father's tendency to trip and stumble into people who would not otherwise let them examine him, clutching at their wrists or the base of their necks, took on a new significance.

There were logs of location, tracking everywhere the tribe had travelled going back to the year of my birth, all noted according to an arcane system based on magnetic measurements and complex calculations I have not seen used by even the most eminent mathematicians of the day. He called them "infinitesimal", and they were able to determine the rate of change, rather than just the fact of it. He had not taught it to me yet, and so I had to figure them out backwards, going from his results and his starting points to understand his methods.

And then there were the truly odd ones, if the former were not odd enough already. Star charts, and dream diaries, and in-depth studies of Kaisha, based on which mornings she came to fetch me from the ger, for example, or whether or not she killed something that day. These were very clearly the work of a madman, finding meanings and patterns where there were none. I kept them all going on something of a whim.

The layout for each folio was identical, even across a range of different sizes and shapes and materials — mostly sheepskin parchment and the paper he made from dried plants. There would be a rigorous block of tabled figures in the centre of the page, the columns and rows all neatly labelled. Meanwhile, commentaries would swirl around the margins. Notes, cross-references, speculations, theories. Memories, reflections, grudges — he seemed to have noted down every perceived slight visited on him by each member of the tribe, and a considerable number of the animals, as well. He recorded conversations and anecdotes and erotic fantasies, all suggested in an abbreviated short-hand so that they seemed almost to be poems.

Going through the accounts, it was impossible to resist the feeling of some nameless and invisible force being made knowable, if still obscured. The past was written on these pages like the passage of the wind over the desert's shifting sands.

—

If the records had been the only thing entrusted to me, I might have coped. But the sheer weight of how much the tribe entrusted to my father hit me then, as they came up to me for every ailment of their children or their livestock. I am sure that they, in fact, held themselves back, and some of the mothers had a sort of affectionate indulgence in their eyes when they saw me struggling, but even so I found the number of tasks before me overwhelming.

For one, all metalwork more complicated than basic maintenance also fell to me. In fact, I spent half of the first evening figuring out how to forge tent pegs which did not slip out of the ground at the first real tug of the wind. When I confronted her the following morning, Kaisha admitted to having swiped a number of my failed efforts and switched them with ones in perfect condition all around the camp, which resulted in a constant string of curses and shouting through the night. She even made a brave attempt at a penitent look.

More stressful than any one task, however, was the fact of being solely responsible for all of them. There was no one to organise my day for me, to help me prioritise between tasks, or spare me from shouldering the entirety of the guilt when I failed.

And so, on the second day, I brought in help.

It was a desperately bored Kaisha who offered to gather information for me, since all her other playmates were too busy to entertain her. I spent one of the most enjoyable afternoons I can recall sitting comfortably in the shade on a sweltering day, mixing a batch of poultice for bruises and going through the records at my leisure while Kaisha passed round to see me every hour. I had, for perhaps the only time in my life, the unique opportunity to give her orders, revelling in the knowledge that she did not understand how they all fit together. She let me have my pleasure, and only teased me for it once: at the end of the day, when she was just about to go, she told me that she had switched some crucial figures, and ran off before I could get her to tell me which.

But I knew that I could not keep her to my own devices like this forever. Thus, in a minor stroke of genius, I hit upon the idea of sending the younger children off on these errands. I told them that they were my spies, that they should sneak to each herd and observe unseen the number of new births or of older animals slaughtered, and then to make sure to ask the herders themselves to confirm they had counted correctly – but with subtlety, so that they did not know they were being plumbed for information. The herders, who were mostly older children, played along with good grace, and the little ones found great pleasure in having fooled them, as well as competing with each other to be the best informant. The first child I recruited was Sandal's younger sister, Flick. Seeing her scamper about the camp, her jaw set with firm purpose, piqued the interest of the others, who came in groups of two or three until I had a good dozen little agents.

As an additional reward, I allowed them each a pinch of a sweet, powdered substance I had refined myself, and no longer had to keep buried outside the ger, preventing my father from eating it all and making himself sick. The look on the faces of the children when they first tasted it made me doubt myself for the longest moment. In a different life -- in fact, in any other life but this one -- I think I should have liked to do nothing but create sweet things and games and amusing little contraptions for them. And perhaps, if I could, tell them stories. And even, if they would allow me this undeserved and fundamental grace, listen to theirs.

—

A couple of days had passed, and it was mid-afternoon.

I had just sent one of the children off licking the powder from her palm when I caught Kaisha's scent on the air: the sharp, spicy aroma of her sweat mixed in with the richness of cured leathers, though today it was devoid of the metallic tang of blood.

She stepped into the ger and sat across from me, cross-legged, and watched me work. That, in fact, is all she did. Had I been describing someone else, there would be details that I had left out. They might have glanced around the room, or made some word or gesture of greeting, or adjusted their posture at some point, or fidgeted, or become distracted by something, or let out a hint of a discernible thought through their expression. But Kaisha did none of those things. She simply entered the ger, sat across from me, and watched.

I did not mind, but the woman who was with me seemed to. She had not even been speaking of anything embarrassing, in truth, but like I said, the adults of the tribe had been coming to realise that the raw impact of Kaisha's existence was not a game which would phase out with her childhood. The woman hemmed and hawed and looked distinctly uncomfortable, until I repeated to her that the problem was almost certainly the result of her diet, but she should come back to me in a week if she did not feel better after the changes I prescribed.

Kaisha spoke up after the woman left.

"I want to talk with you, Fin," she said.

This struck me as very odd. But I nodded, and set about trying to settle anything that might get in the way of my being able to fulfil that task less than perfectly. I took a tincture off the boil, replaced it with a small cauldron of water, finished noting down the woman's visit in the records, filed them away, cleaned my tools, and made tea with the now boiling water. I poured it into two earthen cups, laid one in front of Kaisha, and sat on a cushion across from her, my legs folded beneath me.

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked.

"Nothing in particular."

"But then, why did you say you wanted to talk with me?"

"Because there are many things in particular which you want to talk about. You should say them now."

It took me a long time to try and collect my thoughts, for this was an odd and unfamiliar experience.

Perhaps I have given the impression that Kaisha and I did not speak much — that everything was already understood between us as if by magic, or at least that there was nothing that could not be exchanged with a pregnant glance. But the truth is that we did speak, sometimes even often. However, we would always speak the way others might sing — purely for the beauty of it, or the amusement to be gained when it is not wholly exquisite — and not because it ultimately mattered whether something was communicated or not.

And at some point during the past few years, I must have convinced myself that my fears and insecurities had been wholly dispelled when she killed Upwards and saved my life. It was only now that I realised they were still there, and was able to confront them. This was evidently not out of any bravery or special self-knowledge, but rather because I had no other choice. After all, she had told me I should say them now.

Even so, I was not so absorbed in thought that I could fail to notice her in the moment. She mostly sat there, as she had before. However, a few minutes in, she picked up the earthen cup I had placed in front of her, and held it in both hands. Bringing it to her face, she closed her eyes, and took in its aroma with a long, slow breath. Some time later, she bent to it, and brushed her lips along the ridge of the cup and through the wisps of steam, which, like me, caressed at her insubstantially. After that, her eyes were open.

Eventually, I spoke.

“You remember that time when you took me out for a walk in the snow, when my leg had mostly healed. When you made me run, and I fell down, but you came back for me, and put my head on your lap, and shielded me from the sun, and touched my face.”

She nodded. I could tell she was not in a bad mood.

“...did I really tell you about the betrothal to Yesügei’s son? I mean, loud enough that you could hear? And without saying that it was some nightmare I had?”

She nodded again.

I took another few minutes to think about how to continue.

“Alright.” I inhaled and exhaled audibly, as one would before picking up a heavy object. “That’s it.”

I liked the way she looked at me when I said that. It resembled the way Tigerlily would look at me when I used to tell her I was in love with her, when I was very small.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I thought back to how I had felt during this time. And just as there was no reason to do so aloud, neither was there any reason not to.

“You see, you never mentioned it again. And that made sense, of course. But you never did anything about it either. I suppose I expected you to... do something to Blacktooth. To argue with him, maybe. Or make him take it all back, somehow. But, you didn’t. And so at first I was a little bit scared that you didn’t mind it. That you had accepted the idea of being the primary wife of the heir to one of the strongest chieftains in the Naiman clan.”

I couldn’t look at Kaisha while I said this, so I looked at the cup I moulded and fired by myself, which she held in her lap, pressed against her abdomen.

“For a while — perhaps a few seconds, over the course of a few weeks — I told myself that it wasn’t really any of my business. That I did not own you, and if that was what you wanted, then I should not interfere.

“After that, I accepted that I was just being silly, and was getting a sick kind of pleasure out of causing myself harm, like picking at a scabrous growth over a wound. So I stopped, and just trusted that you are who you are, and that you will do what you will do.

“So for another while — perhaps a few minutes, over the course of these few years — I felt a little aggrieved that you did not tell me what that was. It was a little bit of childish ill will, like when you know your parents are preparing a surprise gift for you, and you are angry that they will not give it to you now.”

As I spoke, Kaisha put a finger into the cup and stirred it without causing any ripples. When I finished, she took it out, and put it in her mouth. She closed her eyes again, and

swirled her tongue around it, to take in the taste. Then she put the cup back down on the floor, and I wondered if it had been steaming like that before.

“And, so? Do you want to have your gift now? Or can you wait until later?”

“I can wait until whenever.”

Kaisha was going to smile. I don't think she was going to reach over and touch me — push me over, or ruffle my hair — but I think she was going to say something mocking, and give me that bashful, smitten feeling, yet not leave me despite that, and instead lay back and let me look at her.

But there was a horn blowing, announcing unidentified riders coming to the tribe.

And so, instead, she frowned. Her eyes narrowed, and there was a dull, calculating sheen on them. Absentmindedly, almost under her breath, she said:

“...you know... you may actually have to do just that.”

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There was a certain air of resignation in the way that, after staring in the direction the horns were coming from for a few seconds, the tribespeople generally shrugged their shoulders and continued about their daily tasks. It was only Kaisha, Rattle, Wailer, and Frog who drew up in a line beside the half-dozen herders staring nervously down the slope before us and fiddling with the point of the arrows in their undrawn bows.

There were thirty or forty riders snaking their way slowly upwards in single file, so there was no immediate sense of threat, but I was not experienced or insightful enough to be able to pick out the real source of our foreboding. Only Wailer seemed immune to it. Kaisha, for her part, furrowed her brow and ground her teeth, like a wolf worrying at a tough piece of meat. It seems strange to say, but it was in moments like this, when she took on her most explicitly bestial characteristics, that she seemed most human.

She finally spoke up when they were perhaps twenty paces away.

“Where's Blacktooth?”

The riders kept on filing towards us, unperturbed, and it was a reedy voice some of the way down the line which replied.

“That's what I want to know!”

Another voice — calmer, and low: “Sir, please, we don't know if—”

“The blasted idiot doesn't turn up at the meeting place! Keeps us waiting there for a full day! Forces me to come and find this barren hole in the middle of nowhere by myself! And then I'm the one who is supposed to know where he is?!”

“Sir, firstly, we're halfway up a mountain, not down a hole. And secondly, let's first find out what—”

“Shut up Bo’orchu! I don’t want to find out anything! What good ever came of learning something you didn’t know before? Every rock you look under just covers worms.”

The men in front of him fanned out to the left and right, clearing the way for the great chieftain Yesügei to canter up towards us.

“What’s this holding us up? Who are you?”

“It’s your future daughter-in-law, sir.”

“Oh, right, you. Get out of the way.”

I doubt they could hear it, but a growl was building up and barely escaping Kaisha’s throat.

“No, wait. On second thought, get us settled into the chieftains tent, with some refreshments. Then get out of the way.”

She didn’t jump at him and try to tear out his throat. In fact, she barely even seemed to notice him at all. That surprised me, and I wracked my mind to try and figure out what was truly going on. Meanwhile, Kaisha repeated what she had said before.

“Where’s Blacktooth?!”

The venom it carried this time seemed to take Yesügei aback for a moment. Then it brought his contempt out all the stronger.

“Oh, who cares?! You expect me to know exactly what dirty ditch he slunk into? What does it matter, anyway? One ditch is just as good as another for a dying dog.”

“Yesügei!”

The riders parted to reveal Jelme, friend and comrade-in-arms to Blacktooth. His face was paler than I could remember seeing it, and yet somehow also flushed. He gave the impression of a man hurrying to get somewhere he desperately did not want to be, like someone who sprints towards his destination in order to exhaust himself, forcing himself to take time to recover, and thus delaying his arrival. Or perhaps I misinterpreted, and it was just a flush of shame.

He was flanked by only a handful of men, who seemed ill at ease, constantly swivelling their heads left to right and glaring suspiciously at the warriors who surrounded them.

“I know you’re worried and frustrated, but please. You are a chieftain, and must control yourself in front of children and strangers. We are not—”

“Where is Blacktooth?”

Her horse was whinnying and shying, scared. Jelme looked at Kaisha with a furrowed brow and glistening eyes.

“Oh Kaisha, my dear... I’m so sorry. This isn’t something you should have to worry about, and especially not hear about like this. But please don’t jump to conclusions, we don’t know—”

I was close by, and reached over to clutch at her clothes, tightly. She rolled her shoulders, and her horse shied away from me, but she nodded slightly.

A wave of her hand silenced Jelme, and she spoke in a clipped, matter-of-fact tone.

“What do you know? Speak simply.”

He looked around himself, and it was more as a result of Yesügei’s impatience — tapping his fingers on his horse’s head and muttering to himself — that he started to speak.

“Blacktooth did not arrive at the meeting spot at the designated time. We sent out scouts, and they found a... disturbing scene in a copse of trees just a short ride away. There was... a great deal of blood. Much of it would have come from Blacktooth’s horse, but even then... there was a lot. There were arrows embedded in the tree trunks, and the ground in the area was churned. We did not find... any bodies. Well, except for the horse. And we found Blacktooth’s sword.”

It was only then that I noticed he had two hilts in his belt. As he drew one out, I recognised it as Blacktooth’s own. Cracks snaked up the blade to the jagged edge where it had been snapped halfway.

“We left men there, to see if they could find anything else. I would tell you more, and wish it were all of it less worrying news, but I’m afraid that’s all we know.”

It was Yesügei who broke the uneasy silence...

“Finally. Now can we go inside and get some refreshments?”

...with a rather inspiring lack of tact.

—

The way the tribesfolk ignored them seemed to unsettle the visiting warriors, who must have expected anger or fear, but not morose disinterest. They kept a guard as they set up camp beside ours, and the handful of them who accompanied their chieftains as they made their way towards Blacktooth’s ger had mingled expressions of confusion and disgust.

Tigerlily stood outside it, and she was a deathly white even before we arrived. Jelme took her by the arm and guided her gently inside. Yesügei and his counsellor followed, and the men he left outside the entrance had half a mind to stop us entering. They had the decency, or at least the subtlety, not to act as if they held such blatant authority over the tribe.

But theirs was not the only hand which sought to keep us out. I only caught a whiff of rotting flesh in the stagnating breeze before Kaisha reached out for the tent flap and recoiled with a shiver she had never shown when touching ice.

It was clear that this was not a setback which she had foreseen, and she reacted to it with genuine fury.

“I will attend the council in my own ger, hag. Do not think to try and stop me.”

The voice came out halfway between a whisper and a strangled whine. The guards standing beside us did not hear it.

“Hearken to me well, child. This I forbid you. So long as I lie within, you shall not enter this ger, neither shall you cut its walls, nor shall you hear what passes through them. Now begone.”

Kaisha slumped against my shoulder, and I had to prop her up to keep her from falling. Her eyes had drooped nearly shut, and her lip trembled as if revolting at the ugliness of words.

—

I carried her to my father’s work tent and tried to feed her cold tea, but she had recovered enough to push my hand away and spill it.

“Kaisha... what are we going to do about the chieftains? If Blacktooth’s dead, then what’s going to happen to the tribe? Kaisha, please. Just explain to me if there’s anything I can do. And if there isn’t, just speak with me about it, and I won’t try to do anything. Please. I’m worried about the tribe. I don’t see a way out from here. I’m worried about you. If there is no more hope, tell me so, and I can abandon it for good. Kaisha. Kaisha.”

She lifted her head up from where it had been hanging limp against her sternum and glowered at me, finally, half annoyed and half incredulous. Satisfied that she was not badly hurt, I nodded, and stood up.

There was, in truth, not much I could do at this point. There would be preparations for a feast this evening, or a funeral. But if Blacktooth was not in charge, then my father would not be tasked with preparing it, so I would not be involved, and could not ensure I only poisoned the visiting chieftains and their warriors. I could try to spy on the proceedings in the chieftain’s tent anyway — unlike Kaisha, I had not been forbidden, after all — but I would probably be discovered, and not discover much. Besides, we’d find out what they decided on soon enough.

So I fetched a few pails of water from the trickle between rocks that passed for a stream in these uplands. After I had set them to boil, I entered my family’s ger and took out my father’s finest robes. He had always hated them — “What can possibly be uglier than an ugly man — save an ugly man in beautiful clothes?” — and so would be glad to see them go.

I stepped back outside to what was perhaps the most unsettling thing I can remember hearing over the entire course of my disturbed life. Every hair on my body was standing on end as I spun around to find pale-eyed Dhunan emerging from the ger I had just been inside of, crying.

I had not seen him since the Naadam festival, where he would be standing vigilantly behind Jelme one moment, and then gone the next. And I don’t think I had ever heard his voice before at all. It was disconcertingly deep and resonant, coming through his sharp teeth.

He was mid-way through some mocking, sneered apology when I caught my breath enough to hiss out:

“How do you know my name?”

“What else are names for, kid, if not to call you by them?”

There was, of course, no bravery in my blank, wide-eyed stare. It was simply that the situation was too unreal for fear.

“How do you know my name?”

“What... really? Ah, how would I remember how I know it? I suppose I must have heard your father call you by it sometime. On which subject, he—”

“My father would not have used my name where others could hear it.”

He shrugged.

“Must have heard it from your mother, then. She—”

“My mother does not know my name.”

His eyes narrowed at that, and the wryness drained from his face in a flash, leaving only threat.

“Well then, I suppose I must have dreamt it.” He raised an eyebrow. “No, kid. Drop it. Look. I only came to give you this.”

He reached into his belt and pulled out his knife. Around its blade was curled a strip of parchment, which he held up, dropped, and allowed to float to me. It was blood-splattered, and its calligraphy was rushed.

“I found it on the ground near Blacktooth’s horse. Looks like the scratchings your father made on things, so I reckoned you should have it. It’s no use to me, anyway.”

He turned away, and did not still his steps when he looked over his shoulder to say:

“Oh, and kid?”

The writing on the parchment made no sense.

“Be careful with yourself.”

It was just a jumble of numbers and letters, mostly in one line, but with other lines crisscrossing through it. Some figures were backwards, others just looked like scribbles. If it had not so clearly been written by my father’s hand, I would have run after Dhunan, spat at his feet, and handed it back.

“There’s really nothing worth dying for, in this world. But there may be some things to live for. So don’t stop yourself from finding out what they could be.”

Without looking up or saying a word in response, I turned and walked back towards the work tent.

Kaisha let me lead her into the bath, and wash her, and wrap her in a large blanket while I made the necessary adjustments to the robes.

I never did have much interest in the finer points of tailoring; everything I made tended towards the functional and largely anonymous. It is easy to impress when the materials are of high quality, however. The same, unimaginative design becomes something elegantly simple and tastefully minimalist then. And besides, I was cutting it to Kaisha's body, whose contours were more familiar to me than my own. I did not struggle too much with the task.

She was watching me while I worked again. Only this time, there was almost none of the blank, monolithic intensity she had showed earlier that afternoon. It was affectionate, yes — I won't go so far as to lie by omission in not mentioning that. But it was wistful, too. Almost nostalgic. Sometimes I would cover myself with the robe to keep from seeing it.

By the time I held the finished robes to the lamp to examine them and, satisfied, went to lay them neatly at her feet, her expression had changed. Maybe it was because of the muffled sound of my sobs, or maybe something else in the situation had amused her, but there was a mischievous air to her now.

At first, I tried to play along, acting sly and teasing.

“What, you want me to leave the ger while you put it on? I didn't realise you were so sensitive; I will of course oblige the young mistress and take my leave.”

She made a dismissive sound of exaggerated disbelief, and before I could step away, she cut straight to it with:

“Put it on.”

“What? But I'm already wearing—”

“Oh shut up — not on you. Though it'd probably fit you better, to wear clothes fitted for me. I never did learn how to put on a dress. You'll have to do it.”

I could hear the sound of horns and movement outside the ger. It seemed the tribe was already gathering for the open council.

“Alright, Kaisha, we've got to stop playing around. The council's starting, and—”

“Fin...” she drawled, threateningly.

“I... I...”

I sighed.

“Well, get up, then, and take off that blanket.”

She didn't even oblige me with a smirk — just turned her palms upwards in her lap, waiting.

I bent down and pulled her up. She didn't help out any, making me take up her whole weight on my own... but neither did she resist, or slump back to the ground once I had gotten her to her feet. The blanket which had covered her did fall, though.

It felt different now than other times, somehow — different even from when I had washed her an hour before. Maybe it was the way she was looking at me, expectantly. Maybe it was the fear of finally losing her, which was starting to become so overwhelming it made it hard to breathe. Or perhaps it was just the way she was whispering to come on over and touch her, without immediately giggling or pushing me away.

When I eventually steeled myself to pick up the robes and finally put them on her, she started to undo my own. As soon as I tried to wrap the first layer around her shoulders, she was reaching out and slipping the clasp off mine. I stopped, surprised, and she did too, with the same innocent stare.

The sounds of movement around the ger were dying out; most people would already have arrived at the meeting place for the council. I shook my head, picked up the robes from the floor again, and tried to think of the direness of our situation to help me focus on getting her dressed. She did not make it easy. Again, she did not offer any resistance, or take off what I had already put on her. She would let me guide an arm into a sleeve... but with the other, she would be undoing the rope around my waist, and her toes would curl into the hem at my feet, and pull it down and open.

It was only when all three layers were hung around her, and I myself was half-naked, that she started to go at me in earnest. As I tried to fold the layers over each other and fasten them, she pushed herself in close, leaving no space for me to work or avoid her scent. She put her face into the crook of my neck, and inhaled deeply, and rubbed her nose and eyes and cheeks across my chest. When her tongue flicked out to lick me, my whole body jolted, and I fell backwards. She gripped me tight and landed on top of me, laying still and breathing softly into my ear, but not doing anything more. So I kept on trying to dress her, so she would start again.

She pushed herself off me at first, giving me space to continue dressing her, and making me scream in frustration inside. But then she bent down, and began kissing my chest again, sliding her way upwards to my neck, where she ran her tongue up and down to moisten it, spread her jaw wide, and bit down firmly on the front of my throat, constricting my air. My hands slipped on the sash at her waist, and so she stopped, and would not continue until I scrabbled desperately to find it again and tighten it.

She began to match my pace — each time my efforts slowed, hers did too, until she was moving her tongue along my jawline at a glacial pace, her nails digging into my shoulder and my leg with incrementally sharpened pain. The minutes passed, and she reached my ear, which she let her lips explore slowly and soft before questing into it with her tongue, and blowing gently, and holding me down as I shivered uncontrollably.

At the end, she only ran her fingers up and down the sheath of the knife I kept strapped against my leg. She did only that... and whispered into my ear the darkest, sweetest things.

And then, I was done. Try and delay it as I might, she would stop touching me each time I neglected getting her dressed... so eventually, somehow, I tied the last clasp, and had nothing more to do.

She did not get off me immediately, however, as I lay there immobile, exhausted, trembling. She cradled my head to her chest, lips pursed pensively on my forehead, occasionally, absentmindedly letting her tongue slide free to lick at my sweat.

A minute later, she set me back on the floor. Her bottomless green eyes stared into mine. There was both the hazy sensuousness and the razor clarity of fever in them, and a hunger which could birth a world. I had spent my whole life stealing every glance I could at her. And I had never before seen her like this.

“...Kaisha?”

Her voice was indescribable.

“...let’s do it, Fin.”

My heart stopped in my chest. Everything froze around me, and yet also seemed to be falling.

“.....no..... no.... Kaisha... you can’t...”

“We can. We will.”

“They’ll... never let you... they’ll kill you...”

“Then they will die.”

“No... you... you’re not ready... you’re too young...”

I felt her heat as she rubbed up against me. I wondered how the canvas walls did not burst into flame.

“I can feel it... so close that I can touch it... I just have to reach out... and then, I’ll show you, Fin. I’ll take you there. We’ll go together.”

I believed her. But I was still a child. No matter how much I thought I had steeled myself, I was still a little child. And so, I was scared.

I wrapped my arms around her, held on as tightly as I could, and wept.

“Please... please don’t... Kaisha... please... please... don’t. ...not now... I beg you...”

There was silence. Her heart beat like the sun.

Then she sighed out a breath that seemed to last forever, and patted me on the head. I let her go.

-- --

Night had fallen when we went outside, and the camp was more deserted than I had ever seen it. Every last member of the tribe had gathered for the council. The gers somehow stood more desolately than when there were people sleeping inside. I fumbled to tie my robes properly as we walked through them.

There was a shallow, wide depression a short walk from the camp, which sloped very gradually downward until it eventually gave way to a steep cliff's edge. The steppe stretched out beyond it, in bare and puckered undulations, with little forage for the herds between the clumps of desiccated trees.

The tribe sat on the slope of this makeshift amphitheatre — our own Ephesus, without the sea — while the major dignitaries sat facing them over a bonfire, a comfortable ten paces from the edge of the cliff. Yesügei's warriors stood around the outskirts of the crowd, menacingly unassuming. It was not a stretch to think them herders to a flock of ramless ewes.

Kaisha picked her way through the crowd, which rustled as it parted for her, and I followed in her footsteps. There was pity for her, and genuine sorrow... but more than anything, a distinct sense of unease, which roused them slightly from the all-accepting stupor they had allowed themselves to be lulled into. I think this is probably a good thing for a funeral, or an open council.

We reached the front of the crowd and sat down at the centre, directly facing the tribal dignitaries. Yesügei sat on one side of the empty place of honour, with his counsellor sitting ramrod straight behind him, and his son seated to his side. The boy had filled into his lanky frame in the intervening years, and did not look so oily. Behind them both loomed a gargantuan guard — taller than Rattle's father Bull, though even then, not quite as wide.

Jelme was there too. Decorum meant he could not reach over and console the widowed Tigerlily, but an unfamiliar tightness on his brow showed that he desperately wanted to. Cruel, slim Dhunan half-lounged behind him. He did not look over to me, but did smile thinly every time I looked at him.

Finally, on the other side of the place of honour, two tribal elders flanked Blacktooth's first wife, who lay flat on the ground, swaddled in heaps of furs. It was the first time I had seen her outside her ger or covered cart in my lifetime. I could not see her face, and her voice was inaudible even at this short distance, but I could still make out her reedy words.

“So... black bastard... insolent wretch... breaking with traditions... got what was coming to him... not a moment too soon. Commit the funeral rites quickly... so we can decide on leader... who will respect traditions more.”

My mother dabbed at the crone's face, and repeated the words loudly, for the assembled congregation to hear.

“And so, we mourn our beloved chieftain Blacktooth. Let us commemorate his passing.”

“Hah! Hagh! Beloved... Alright. Let... the Lord Ferret whine.”

“As our honoured guest, we invite the great chieftain Yesügei to speak first.”

He was glancing down his nose at my mother with some distaste. I do not think it's because he could hear anything Blacktooth's first wife was saying, but rather, because a mere slave was allowed to run proceedings, even if only in her mistress' name, and grant him, of all people, permission to speak.

“Thank you, venerable widow. Well. What can I say. Blacktooth and I didn’t agree on everything. In fact, we didn’t agree on much. Fine. We didn’t agree on anything at all.” Some laughed.

“He was a stubborn man. An odd, eccentric man. Some might say a stupid and a spiteful and an insane man.”

None were laughing now.

“But. Because we disagreed so much, you can believe me when I say that he was... quite a man. He was... strong. Or else he could not have been so stubborn for so long. He was... free. Or else he could not have shown us just how odd he was. And he was... stupid and spiteful and insane. Which is to say, he was himself. Which is to say, he was courageous. And I, for one, will drink to courage. I’ll drink to him.”

It was a good speech. Yesügei’s son repressed his cringes long enough to see them turn to grudging smiles. Blacktooth did not have a living son, but what he did have snorted in derision by my side.

Yesügei wiped at his lips, and continued.

“In the end, we managed to agree on something after all, and come together one final time. We betrothed his daughter to my son. In doing so, we became family. And family looks out for family. So whatever happens from now on, know this. In honour of Blacktooth’s memory, I won’t allow you to come to any further harm. You can come back off the mountain. You can leave the hinterlands. You may return to my green plains. I promise you that your lives will be easy and long there. You will have as much of anything as you want. You will be nobody’s slaves...”

I saw the crone whisper: “Yes. He is clever... and has little imagination. I will have him be chieftain.”

“...except for the ones who are actually slaves. They’ll... well, they’ll still be slaves.”

His son looked a bit abashed, and his counsellor rolled his eyes. Even Yesügei himself hesitated, trying to figure out whether he should try for a laugh again, or just cut his losses and move on.

Into this unoccupied moment, Kaisha spoke.

Or... she would have done. It is so certain, so obvious that she would have spoken that the only logical thing is to say she did. But somehow, against all reason, no words left her mouth.

“No, child. NO. No. I’ll wrest this from you. I’ll wrench this from your mouth. Listen. Listen. Harken to me well. This I forbid you. So long as I lie in this council, you shall respect the sanctity of the ritual of delegated speech. You shall not address the council unless invited to by the rited speaker, or make plain your meaning through radical gesture or unarticulated sound. And the world will be turned over before I invite you. Now be silent.”

Kaisha snarled, and smoldered, and I caught the scent of ashes in the wind, and smoke tickled at my eyes... but she did not speak.

Instead, Yesügei stumbled to some kind of ending, and when he was done, grudgingly looked back to my mother for guidance. She leaned in to listen to what Blacktooth’s wife

had to say next, but could only hear her rasping struggle for breath. With a dignified expression, she straightened, and called for Jelme to speak next.

He did not move at first. He simply looked down into his lap, and scrunched his eyes so that they shut into slits, and worried his mouth into a twist, as if he had eaten something sour. And once he had held that pose for a short while, just before it started to seem contrived, he stood up. There were tears in his eyes. He spoke.

“Blacktooth... was my friend. My dear friend. He saved my life more times than I can tell. But I could trust him with something more precious than my life. I could trust him with my thoughts. I could trust him with my worries. And I could trust him with... my trust. Trusting people means a lot to me. And I would lose so much, if I were to lose that. But he never failed me. He never let me down. He was a true friend.”

He took a breath, and shuddered. Kaisha bit at her lip until blood trickled down her chin. Her tongue lapped out to lick it clean.

“...but no matter how much he meant to me, he meant even more to others. I cannot be so selfish as to think my pain could ever match theirs. It is not right that I should be able to honour him, and make my peace with his departure, while they remain silent. So, please. Allow me to cede... and may she who was closest to him of all of us speak.”

And with that, he gestured to Tigerlily, and bowed deeply.

Tigerlily started, shock and confusion on her face. She had been staring blankly into the bonfire before them, lost in her own thoughts. And so it was only natural that she fix Jelme with a wide-eyed glare of accusation, for putting her on the spot so suddenly and so publicly. Less predictable — and quite terrifying, in truth, to those who knew enough to notice it — was the wry resignation which followed so soon after.

A murmur made its way through the crowd when Jelme gestured at her. She had been a singular figure of resentment and simple hate since the day she had first ridden in with Blacktooth's raiding party, utterly unexpected and entirely unexplained. She had had no connections to anyone but the Uyghur slave couple who had attended to the chieftain, and as such, was the safest target for any blame or entertaining calumny the tribe wanted to hand out.

But even this public denigration had faded, in some ways, with the years and grinding force of circumstance. As she stood up with her unpracticed grace and unconcerned compassion, I noticed it slowly dawn on them that they had, at some point, ceased to truly hate her.

For nearly every man who had lusted after her was dead, and their widows could now only miss their jealousy as a sign of a happier season. Their rejection of her was a luxury they had long since become unable to afford. And she had only come to collect it back from them now. She had lent it to them as a gift, to accompany them through their tribulations, until the tribe's last day. I think that they were grateful for that too, in this moment. Even the youngest children were soothed to silence when she spoke. I must have been soothed too, for I allowed my mind to wander off into aimless, errant thoughts — though I did, of course, memorise all she said regardless.

“I... I am Blacktooth’s second wife. I have been called Tigerlily. I have been with your tribe for many years now. I have not had the chance to speak to many of you. So let me take this moment to thank you, for having lived beside me all this time.”

My mother had been looking at me whenever she thought she could get around her formal duties.

“Blacktooth... had a whole world inside him. He did not let us look into it often, but I could always see it was there.”

This was, in many ways, a sham funeral. Not a day had passed since the bloody lack of bodies had been discovered, after all.

“He might sit by a fire just like this one, while the children played around it. And their mothers would compliment them, and stoke it, and smile at each other. Meanwhile, Blacktooth would not even seem to be watching. But if anyone came up to him to talk, he would snarl at them, and bark them away. Because if he wouldn’t be watching, he would be listening. And if he wasn’t listening, he would be... simply being there.”

And yet, there was precious little hope my father was alive. Even if Yesügei’s own men hadn’t been the ones to do it — even if the murderer was not standing guard around the council now — my father would have had nowhere to flee but here. He was no outdoorsman, and could not have survived the wilds unaided. So, perhaps he was alive. But that would only mean he would die soon. There were too many enemies on too many sides. I did not want him to suffer. I hoped he was dead now.

To distract myself from this, I reflected on the fact that I finally grew up to tell stories a bit more like Tigerlily did, and not just like my father. His stories never really had people in them. Tigerlily’s had nearly nothing else.

“Because there was the fire burning in the hearth, and the happy cries of the children... and there was that same fire within him, and the children’s laughter was in his heart.”

Instead of distracting herself, like I did, my mother looked to me. But I could not even bear to give her the thin comfort of being able to comfort me.

And so I looked away from her, unable to face my grief, and far less able to face the guilt which followed.

“That fire within him has been snuffed out. Before he ever came around to telling us about it, if only in a whisper, and letting us feel its warmth. It is an irreplaceable loss. It is the loss of a whole world.”

Instead, I looked at Yesügei’s son. I looked at him the way those who have scaled mountains look down a sheer precipice at the distant ground — drunk at the sensation of their stomach turning in on itself, and revelling in the brittleness of their bones. Because that is always less fearsome than whatever lies waiting for them at home, that they had to climb a mountain to escape.

“He was a gentle soul, and it was for that reason that he was gruff. He was a sentimental soul, and so he was silent. He wanted love — a real love, a heartfelt love. And so, he could not ask for it. And so, he pushed others off him. And so, he kept it pure...”

I watched him look at Tigerlily with naked wonder. And then I saw him look at Kaisha... and an urgent, honest desire for her start to bloom. It is not often you get to witness the exact moment someone falls in love. And that is just as well. For it is a burning, wrenching, ripping agony. I tore at my legs with my fingernails until I had a reason for my whimpers.

Tigerlily trailed off. And then she started in again.

“But... perhaps none of this is the right thing to say. Who he was in his heart of hearts might not be any more true than who he was in his acts and mottled skin. His essence might be unhidden from us in plain view. Because... more than a man...”

She gestured at Yesügei.

“...more than a friend...”

She nodded at Jelme.

“...more than a husband or a father or a sweet and solitary soul...”

She clutched her belly, and held her face, and closed her eyes.

“...he was, in truth... your chieftain.”

Her eyes were open, and very calm, and very loving.

“Perhaps we should take him just as he presented himself. For he never opened his mouth, but to speak of you. Of your exploits and your failures and your stories and — most of all — your worries. Of course, he was more than just his position and his role. But why should what one keeps inside be more worthy than what one expends every waking effort for? Why should the quiet moment take precedence over the noisy, crowded years? Why should it be me who speaks of him... I, who tended to him, and cared for him, and knew his love for a few hours every night? Why should it be me who knew him best, rather than those he spent his days with, and spilt sweat and blood with, and thought of always?”

Tigerlily walked towards the crowd, and looked them in the eyes, and drew a kind of loyalty from them even when they averted theirs. I liked the tribespeople more than I ever had before. Especially when they averted theirs.

Finally, she came to a stop in front of Bull — the large, simple, kind-hearted herder, and father of our friend Rattle — who was blubbering inconsolably into his sleeve. Without a word, she reached out and parted his hair out of the way of his tears, and wiped them dry with the back of her fingers when he looked up at her in shock. She smiled at him and, two of her hands on one of his, raised him up to his feet, kissed his corded knuckles, stepped back, and bowed to him.

Kaisha scowled at her brutally when she walked past us to her seat. Tigerlily, her back to the assembled crowd for the first time, looked down at her daughter blankly... and then hinted at a humourless grin, and gave an offhand shrug.

Bull was already speaking, although he did not know it yet.

His futile attempts to hold back his tears and collect himself... collect his futile, scattered, sympathetic self; his awed glances over to Tigerlily, and daunted staring at the crowd; his false starts and truest stutters; his protestations and excuses, made in a booming whisper that carried a hundred paces... all these were part of the performance he didn't even mean to give.

They painted a picture of a humble man of few words, thrust into this situation against his wishes. And in this way, he was the perfect representative for the tribe as a whole. Everyone in attendance swiftly realized this. Eventually, he did too.

“I... I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. Just that... Blacktooth... He was a really good chieftain. That’s... that’s it.”

That was not, after all, it. At any rate, he continued.

“He was... well, Tigerlily said it so much better than I ever could. He really worked hard for us. He was always worrying about us. He never talked about anything else, or did anything else, other than his work. Other than taking care of us. He did so much for us. He... He...”

Bull cried for a while, I think. I was hunched over myself, and my eyes were screwed shut. It felt like my intestines were writhing out of me. I muttered breathless prayers to Kaisha by my side.

“But that’s why... that’s why...”

Like a liar. Like a coward. Like a faithless, prideless wretch. As if I hadn’t said all that to her. As I had not just finished asking her to do the opposite.

“That’s why it’s... just strange to see it end this way. I mean... sorry, but I don’t really understand.”

Kaisha... Kaisha, please...

“He spent his whole life trying to keep things as they were. To keep the tribe independent, like it had been under his dad.”

Kaisha... Oh Kaisha... hold me... Kaisha... please don’t let me become a real slave...

“To keep us from being under any other tribe, who could tell us what to do, or take some of our livestock every calving season, or make us go to war with other tribes around us.”

Kaisha... make everything alright again. Kaisha... Please, please, Kaisha... Save me...

“So even if that meant more fighting... we were at least fighting so we could... decide what the fighting was about.”

Kaisha... don’t... Kaisha... please, please don’t...

“I... I’m sorry. I’m not making much sense. It’s just... sorry... it’s just weird, is all.”

...don’t... don’t let him... don’t let him... have you...

“I don’t know. It’s just... I always thought that... well... Kaisha would maybe... I mean, I know she’s so young. And I know she’s just a girl. But I don’t know... I always thought that maybe she would... be the next chieftain.”

Lost as I was, he looked to her.

“I’m sorry. I can’t talk well. No... I don’t even know what I’m talking about. I don’t know what I think. But I... but... but what about you, Kaisha? What... do you think?”

A log shifted in the fire, sending up a cascade of sparks and a billowing cloud of ash.

Blacktooth’s first wife shrieked and wailed and tried to claw her way up to stop it, drooling and biting at my mother when she restrained her from her fit. But she could do nothing to stop it. The very rites she imbued with such meaning had wriggled from her grasp, and now bound her as with chains.

Kaisha, meanwhile, rose slowly to her feet.

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“Thank you, Bull. I appreciated that. You’re a lot smarter than you think, and you speak much better than people can hear. No, no — don’t stop him. Let him help you down. He needs to check your bandages. You reopened wounds — most of them old, but some fresh enough to bleed.”

I did not look up while I undid the wrappings around his leg, but she must have made a gesture behind me, because the crowd somehow grew even more silent than before. There was not even any wind on this mountain’s edge.

“This is Blacktooth’s funeral, so I will speak of him. There truly is only one thing to say, though. And that is this: Blacktooth was weak. That is all he was.

“Of course, before anything else, he was scared. The reason he kept silent was not because he was quiet and humble and pure. He kept silent because he was frightened of every single person he met. He was frightened they might say something unkind, so he never spoke. He was so very frightened, that the only way he could commune with others was through violence.

“Not because he liked violence, of course. He was terrified of it. He was so very terrified of it that he could not escape it, like a man who is so frightened of water that he dares not swim through it to the bank. He lies to himself and says he likes the wet and cold. And so he drowns.

“And Blacktooth drowned like that too. He drowned because he was weak. Because many, many people are scared. But Blacktooth was too weak to confront that fear. And so he never talked. And so he fought. And so he ran away from people’s faces. And so he died.

“And so, Bull, he is not important. Because he does not exist. He is dead. His opinion, if it ever mattered, certainly does not matter now. What he never had the courage to say, he now no longer has the air to say it with. He has no tongue. He has no hand. He is not here. He never let himself truly be here, and so now that he is dead, he is even less than nothing. What you think he thought should have no influence on anything you decide.

“...but you asked me what I think. And I think that you’re right. Everything they’re saying is strange. All that about green pastures and a free life under someone else’s rule. And that’s because they’re pointing at the ground, and calling it the sky. Because it doesn’t matter what they give you or what they do, if in that same moment, they also take away

your power to decide what they do and give you next. It never really matters what's decided. What matters is always who gets to decide.

“...you can ask Fin to explain this to you later, if you want to understand. He doesn't think he does, but he truly believes you'll listen. Because Fin is a good and an earnest boy.

“So, to answer your question. What do I think you should do? I think you should get up, grab a hold of Yesügei and throw him off this cliff. Then you should turn on his guards. They'll kill a few of you, but you would overwhelm them. Then we would go into the desert. Not skirt it — give ourselves to it. Kill all the livestock but the camels and the goats. Raid the grasslands when we need anything more. Wait. Recover. Train. Then take in the next tribe that is chased here like we were. And then the next. And then move out, and take over the grasslands.”

There was silence after that, for a very long time.

Blacktooth's first wife was not capable of stopping Yesügei from standing up and screaming out his disbelief and discontent. She was too weak, still clutching at her throat and retching. But what she could not do, Kaisha could. It might have been a few minutes, it might have been an hour, but everyone felt she had not yet let them go — that she had only paused. And so, Yesügei was silenced.

The guards stared down at us with maddened eyes which darted back and forth between a woman here and a child there. Their brows were furrowed and streaming with sweat, and they clutched white-knuckled at their weapons, but did not draw them yet.

The crowd of hundreds reacted in a thousand different ways. But they did not let out a sound. And, aching, they did not move.

Tigerlily sat still and looked at Kaisha. She did not play at humble, feminine weakness any more. I only understood now that she had been doing so all along. But it took me to some time to understand the expression that replaced it. She was... not exactly frightened... but neither was she merely resigned. I still loved her enough that it brought me to tears when I finally saw she was well and truly sad.

Kaisha too had a look on her face I don't think I had ever seen before, and knew I would likely never see again. She was... pensive. Untroubled. Unhurried. But still. She stood there in silence, not even looking at the crowd... just thinking. I saw it when she looked at Jelme. I know she saw that he was preparing to defend her. That he would rush over to Yesügei — abase himself at his feet if he had to — and plead and cajole and chivvy away at him until he saved the betrothal. I saw her grind slowly through the cogs of his imagination. I saw how much it cost her — how she, who looked down at all the actions of mankind as at an anthill, folded herself down until she knew the workings of the single ant. I saw her sigh, though only the jackals and the scorpions subjected to the desert storm raging far to the south of us could hear it. I saw what she gave up for it, and felt smaller than I ever felt in my life, and blamed Blacktooth and my father for it, for I knew I could never waste her time asking her to forgive me.

And then she spoke again.

For the first time, Kaisha truly spoke to anyone who was not me. Or perhaps, even here... perhaps especially here... she still only spoke to me.

That is no boast. It is a burden.

I have no memory of anything except her words — and even then, in a wretched, paltry fraction. I do not know where she looked or how she gestured while she said this. I only remember my glimpse of the entire scope of human history as uttered in a small girl's breath.

—

She said:

“You could get every single thing you wanted, if you waited. Perhaps, in truth, it would not come to pass. But, perhaps, it could. I grant you this: that what you want could come to pass. There could be milk and meal aplenty, in time, and no soldiers would come set fire to your gers. There would be warm in winter and cool in summer, and your nights would be lit with the silent residue of sun, and no ill wind would blow trouble through your days. All this could surely come to pass... if you wait, and do naught now.

“Hearken to me and see that generations would drift up like the tide. And like the tide, they would wear at the rocks of your oppression, though they intend it not, though they strive not for it — though the waves know nothing of their farther shore.

“And truly is it that I tell you: you shall be happy. Honestly you shall. I do not deny it. Despise it, I might well. But deny it, I do not.

“However! Your happiness shall not last.

“For the time of reckoning would come. Perhaps not soon. But boundless and unbidden like the tide that bore you there.

“A year, perhaps. Perhaps a decade. Perhaps a myriad of hundred-thousand hours. But not too long, and soon... once all your wants have been accounted for, and all the desires you did not even know you possess have been granted... you shall be made to confront their emptiness, like a slave abased before his master, face ground down and bloody on the stone.

“For who made you your wants, and set for you the limits of your desires? Not you — not you.

“For who set out that your pleasure should be pleasure, and not pain? That evil should you flee from, and warmth and truth and beauty should you seek? Not you. Never you. Not once you.

“And so, I ask: what then? What, when all your wants have been granted, would you make of your wants? You, who did not choose them — you, who did not work and die even to sate them? Where shall you look to, when you seek to set them?

“For I tell you: once your desires have been met, you shall be able to remould them. You will have the luxury. You will have the time. You will be able to make grow a berry that shall make you want that berry, and rear a calf that shall make you desire nothing but that calf. You shall boil these down into a drop of liquid, and with this drop, you will be able to change the fibers of your very soul. For you will truly have plenty — and with that plenty shall come power.

“But you and yours — people who did not choose their fate, but are mere subjects to it — shall have no North to guide you, for you did not even navigate to the ends of the earth yourself. The children of cattle shall have no example set for freedom. Those who did not choose the void — those who did not leap, fierce, into uncertainty — will have no taste of nothingness to bear it when absence itself assaults your senses. You shall be cast adrift in a sea infinite in its before and after, in its sourcelessness and to no end. And you shall drown in it. Surely, surely — surely shall you drown.”

Ah yes.

I remember, now.

Now... she blinked.

And then she spoke again.

“Or... you could seize it now. You could confront the darkness underlying you now. You could wrest the power from your unseen selves, and set out to shape it now. You can do that. You may.

“...it will, of course, go hard on you. Oh, none can know the limits of your pain. Oh, that there would be suffering, and suffering, and death. Oh, but there would be blood, and blood, and blood. Blood from your eyes. Blood from your teeth. Blood from the finest droplets of your soul.

“For you must be broken before you can be remade. This I swear to you. I will crush you. I will crush you. I will make such thin meal of your bones — for they are brittle, and hollow, and yet flightless, you heaven-forsaken wretched of the earth. I will feed you ashes, and only ashes shall you drink, and only ashes shall you breathe, until the memory of air leaves you like the dying’s final sigh. Though if you truly follow me, I will not allow you to forget even with that — I will remind you, so that you may suffer, so that you may groan, though nothing but ash leave your lips. There will be embers in your pores. There will be a grave in your heart.

“For you will suffer far, far more than those who stand against us. For they shall merely be cut down -- their suffering, the suffering of a moment, while you must ever rise to fight again. For I will not suffer you to die — for you will live to suffer.

“But all that will be as nothing for the best amongst you. For I shall withhold from you the full knowledge of the end. Certainty shall never light your way — only the wager of your childhood dreams. Perhaps you will be mere murderers. That shall be your burden. You shall have to break by that. You shall have to follow me... follow me to lose yourselves... lose yourselves to become yourselves.

“All this will be true. I swear it. You must believe this. I will not let you listen further if you do not swear to me that you do.

“...for there is not only darkness, and there is not only pain. You must pass through it first, without an exit. But even there — soon — there will be light. You shall see it. Not only after the struggle has passed. But every moment through it.

“Children shall no longer be subjected to their fathers, and women to their men. There shall be no slaves, and the only orders will be to end all orders. There will not always be much — and there will often be less than there was before — but there will be enough. And always, that which there is shall be shared. None shall be left behind. All shall have their say.

“Others have promised this, so I shall not dwell upon this long. But yes. I grant you. I grant you this. I grant that you will see what truth you may, and that justice will not long be veiled.

“There you are. I shall coddle you no longer. For this I tell you, and I will have this true: Those who come after shall have it easier than you. And others will embrace you with a less cruel, if not a kinder, love.

“To your children, the sweeter fruit. And to my children, the greener tree.

“For this shall not be your greatest reward. Justice is not the boon I speak of. For that fruit might fall down if you wait, in truth. And its seed might be no more uncertain.

“But the fruit I offer would be yours, and truly yours. It may be no more wholesome for it. It shall assuredly be more bitter. But you would be the ones to seize it. And if you do — if you step into tomorrow by your choice... then you will have drunk a drop of nothingness, and perhaps you will not drown in its sea.

“For if you cannot even make the solitary, single choice you have: to resist, to dream, to dare, to leap, to reach, to fight, to overthrow, to struggle, to transcend, even if only into nothingness... then how shall you face the infinite paths that stretch before you once the silent tide chooses it for you?

“But there is more. For those who know, this is the only thing.

“This is no simple leap into the void. For this time, and this time only, the void will reach back. The farther shore will sail to you. The veil will be lifted, and her face shall be terrible, but on you it shall smile. My hand will reach out. And it shall burn your flesh. But it shall hold you. That which is beyond love will love you. That which is without will reach within. The unknowable will know you. For this one moment only, you will not be alone.

I will not tarry long. But I will be with you.

You do not know how much I offer you. And that is good. For if you knew what it means to be without it, your desolation would be my grace’s match.”

I... I remember now. Yes. I remember that, now... she moved.

“And so, I tell you. This is the choice you face.

“First, you may choose to oppose me, or stand aside. It makes no difference which. Either you or another may succeed in killing me. And in doing so, shall earn the chance to wait for that final and unending reckoning which will come in the decrepitude of your sempiternal youth.

“But with this, a warning. If you choose to oppose me or stand aside... but fail to kill me... know that I shall bring that reckoning to you now regardless. The void will stare into your eyes with no kind crinkle. And all the hordes of you will scream in birth.

“But there is another choice.

“You may choose to join me.

“And if you survive that...

“...if you survive... that...”

But she had let go her grip on us now, and so the din was let loose, and so they could not hear.

For while she spoke, she had circled round the fire, and come to the side of Yesügei's son, and lain my knife across his throat, and dragged him up and across to the edge of the cliff, where she now stood, facing toward us from the void, the last echoes of her words still booming off her lips.

Yesügei had leapt to his feet, and was restrained by Jelme, while the guards shouted in fear and started hacking at the crowd, and screams rent through the silence, and Blacktooth's first wife was dying from her wracking cough, and Dhunan chanted under his breath and let the smoke spill from his throat, and I cried out her name in love.

She had let go her grip on all but Yesügei's son. She brought her lips up to his ear, and whispered. And his face went white — so white that I knew he died, though his body should shuffle onward years. And there was untold horror through lips that bloodless trembled. And I knew she had told him what awaited. And I knew she was holding him.

But all the time, she looked at me.

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And then... with nothing more... it was ended.

She let him go.

He fell to the ground. She sauntered off, and Yesügei went to him, while his massive bodyguard tackled her, and struck her with brutal blows, and the crowd surrendered, and all that was said was done.

Chapter 5

I laid out all my surgical implements on a freshly washed cloth. I arranged them in rows, according to their use and size. Scalpels, of varying thickness and curvature. Clamps, for arteries, veins, skin, muscle and fat. Pins. It looked like I had an adequate amount of pins. I resolved, then and there, to make more.

I cleaned each utensil individually. They had been crafted from marginally different proportions of their base metals, depending on what we had to hand when the need for them arose. As such, if you wished to be exactly precise about it, they would each have to be cleaned and oiled by marginally different solutions and unguents. I prepared, in the end, fourteen different variations, each with its own rinsing bowl and scrap of cloth to wipe it dry.

The implements, in truth, were already quite clean. I had packed and repacked them with great care quite recently, and they would not collect dust or rust for months if left unused. For months, they had been largely left unused. I could not so much as practice on a corpse anymore — and there are only so many scalpels you can use on the half-rotted field mice you stumble over on your short, halting, solitary walks.

I had often felt frustration in my life, when my father would set me a problem he had not yet taught me the methods to solve. But they would each be solvable, even if I had to go through his books for weeks to determine how. Except for those that weren't solvable, which he would usually admit to once I demonstrated that in full — a more laborious process, to be sure, but one that would usually resolve itself in time. But this was very different. It is one thing to be frustrated for want of a solution. Now, I was helplessly restless for want of an immediate problem.

I had once felt despair — at first acute, and then a chronic undertone, but in both cases monolithic and unrelenting — during the stretch of time Kaisha had been betrothed to Yesügei's son. And that, of course, was infinitely worse than what I felt now. There was not a single moment in the previous weeks and months when I ever doubted that.

It's simply that my current situation presented its own particular difficulties, for which I had previously only developed delaying mechanisms, but no cure. After all, I had never once been so perfectly and all-encompassingly bored as I was now.

With a sigh, I packed the last of the excessively clean implements, and once again turned to the records. I had spent most of my time with them recently. What books I had left, I had long since memorised. What people I had around me, I had no inclination to try and talk to. What research I could carry out, I knew better than to attempt in the open, for fear of drawing attention I would now be entirely alone in facing.

Besides — what point could there be in anything I found out? I had become utterly uninterested in a world that no longer had Kaisha at its immediate centre. And besides, even were she to somehow find a way to enter my life again... after her words to the tribe, I'm not sure I would ever recover the passionate sense of discovery that had possessed me as a child. For now, I had been given an even firmer vision than before of what landscapes awaited me beyond our comforting, if distant, horizons.

It is perhaps for this reason that I found such consolation in the accounts. You see, there is nothing so beautiful in this world as a well-kept ledger. And I say this because a well-kept ledger is very much not of this world. Its cleanliness and its precision go quite against the disorder and the chaos of the things we claim that it describes. There is a fundamental distance between a group of cows standing in a field — crossing back and forth past and through each other, belching as they low and ruminate — and the space within a row and column into which the symbol “7” has been etched. There is something alien in numbers, and some infinitely retreating, but from the very start detached, mystery in their interrelation. It is perhaps ironic that the more well-kept the ledger, the less it resembles the world that gave it rise, until the most beautiful of them loses all connection to it, phasing out into another plane entire.

And so, I opened up the fourteenth ledger to its twenty-third page, and picked up where I left off.

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Yesügei’s burly bodyguard had beaten Kaisha brutally, which I will not even pretend to dream I could have prevented. In the moments following her final, whispered words, I had been immediately trampled by the surging crowd, and when I could stand up and see clear, he had already stopped, and was dragging her by what hair she had left into the ger that had her own that morning. Jelme stormed in after her, Dhunan following so closely that he never stepped outside his master’s shadow. He had his weapons drawn. It would have been stupid to go on worrying about her at that point; unless I never knew a thing of Jelme and Dhunan, she would come to no further physical harm.

When the shrieking of the crowd died down, we were summarily moved on. They kept us corralled against the cliff edge, allowing groups of us to file out in an exhausted dribble. I did not mind this much. Now that there was no pretense of civility left, everything could be handled much more efficiently. Within an hour, I was back at the small circle of three gers my mother and father and I had lived and worked in all my life. At dawn the next morning, the tribe was halfway down the mountain, migrating back to the open steppe.

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Life on the steppe is a dispersed and lonely thing. Even in a tribe as closely knit as ours, it was only on very rare occasions in my childhood that anywhere near its full complement would be gathered in any one place at any given time: the visit of such an illustrious chieftain as Jelme, or the lead-up to the Naadam.

And it is to this stable and solitary state that we returned. Only this time, the invisible ties of solidarity that used to bind us across days and nights of travel had been definitively shorn.

It started already on the journey over to Yesügei’s territory: the loose caravan of families stretched out until it eventually split into distinct clumps. At the front were Yesügei and Jelme and their key retainers, as well as Tigerlily and Kaisha and my mother. It only took them a day or two to outstrip us. Behind them went the families which had stayed more or less whole — the ones with older children, or even a father with lighter injuries, or an aunt or two to share the burden. It was a week before we started to lose contact with them, as the caravan came across more of Yesügei’s men, who relieved each family of the better portion of their herds — “to help them get across the steppe as quickly as possible, to safety”. At the end, the only ones remaining were the stragglers — the sick and the least whole and most orphaned. Even of this group, I moved slowest of all, always

arriving last at the makeshift circle of gers we set up each night. I was laden through the journey with the tools of the tribe's only artisan — and each morning, I had to tend to the sick. It shames me to say I left a small trail of my family's supplies in caches across the steppe — some books, even. They shall surely confuse any children or jackals that dig them up.

We were left with a nominal and frustrated group of guards, who largely ignored us, and eventually abandoned us entirely. With nowhere else to go, we pressed on towards Yesügei's territory regardless. Even the tribes we passed by on the way turned their noses up at the prospect of our poverty.

By the time we slunk into the loose bounds of Yesügei's lands, the members of what had once been Blacktooth's tribe had long since been resettled. Each remnant had been attached to a small group of families loyal to Yesügei. They were thus separated from their former kin across a stretch of the Naiman steppe only rivalled in expanse by Jelme's dominion, and the herding grounds of the Khan's own clan.

Kaisha, from what I could gather, was still with Yesügei's core group of followers as they roamed about, making his presence known as a reassurance and a threat to all his underlings and rivals.

And we had been, frankly, forgotten. I, with the last dregs of Blacktooth's tribe — four or five of the utmost decrepitude, who did not tarry long before dying anyway — found a group of herders who were too lazy to chase us off, and bemusedly accepted a Uyghur slave boy who said he could not help with herding, but would occasionally make them things or set a bone for food. By a nondescript patch of woodland roughly in the territory's centre, I set in merely to subsist.

I was quite lonely in this time. Necessity had not instilled much fellow-feeling in our accidental group of the dying. Not even nostalgia animated us to any passion, if only towards the past. They stayed with me because they could not get up to go anywhere, and I stayed with them out of offhand duty and empty habit — the same reason for which, incidentally, they stayed alive. I am not lying when I say this. For, like me, none of them were near to anyone they'd ever loved.

And so, the weeks oozed by like we had oozed through the steppe to get here — purposelessly, and slow. There was nothing to differentiate my days, nor separate the hours from each other. I settled into apathy like a feather without wind, stirred only by the tremors of simmering but buried fury which occasionally shook the steppe in the aftermath of Kaisha's footsteps.

But, I repeat: I was not in despair. I was not even unhappy. Not at all. In fact, as strange as it is to say... I was contented.

For she had done it. There was no hint from any of the people who passed by our makeshift encampment — largely by accident — that the betrothal had been reinstated. There was no need for it anymore, after all — the tribe which had so often been a thorn in Yesügei's plans had been swallowed whole, and its flocks already seized. After that, the risk of a wife who might fly off the handle and slit your throat, however beautiful she may be, was never worth it.

Therefore, she would not marry. They had not executed her in revenge at the beginning, and so they should not do so now; surely Jelme had extracted assurances on that point.

As far as Yesügei's honour as her unwilling guardian could ensure, no one else would touch her. My soul was safe. And so, there was no complaint in me. There was even a note of celebration keening out of earshot, quietly but constant, as my life trickled meaninglessly away.

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My reverie was interrupted by another error in the books.

Errors were, of course, impossible. You cannot know the obsessive care my father took with these records. These were the very essence of his being. One small imprecision on my part, and he would fall apart, like a doll with its strings frayed, or a leg with its nerve pinched in the spine. It was categorically unthinkable for him to have committed one by mistake.

And yet, there they were.

Rounding errors; misattributed sources; notes to sections which did not exist. Some of them could theoretically have been due to simple oversight, if they had been written in any other hand. But some were simply mystifying to their core. There were long sums and averages in which one digit would be incorrect. If some error had occurred in these complex calculations, then surely the whole result would be wildly divergent — not simply off by one in the eleventh digit.

This was the only thing that disturbed my apathy during these months. Perhaps it is for this reason I returned to it — for the stimulation of its dissonance.

Because if these ledgers did not stand apart from the world through the beauty of their symmetry and the exactitude of their purpose... then what were they?

That much was always obvious. They were my father. And so followed the inevitable question.

Who... or what... was my father? Had I ever known the slightest thing of the man who was the cause of me? And though it sufficed to know that I was wholly directed towards Kaisha... still, without her presence, the question gnawed at me. If this is what I came from... who, or what, was I?

The first few times I caught sight of this question, I fled it. I would put the records away, bind them tightly, cover them in the cloth wrapping we use to safeguard them in winter. I would force myself to eat, or force myself to try and sleep, reasoning that my reason must be compromised — that I must be half-delirious, that my eyes are over-tired, that I had somehow left myself open for demons to creep in.

It was only during a rare flare-up of acute loneliness — when I had woken from another dream of Kaisha — that I threw myself into it willingly. The records, and their gaps, gave way to intense visual distortions. The lines blurred and reformed into intricate and yet impossible patterns. There was an undeniable scent of regularity to them, and yet the rules which generated them were unplotable and self-shifting. They projected themselves through the page, such that space twisted into itself and outward, until the patterns would find themselves inscribed into the weft of the felt walls around me. I lay there hours, though it might have been days. And in the days, or perhaps the weeks, that followed, there settled on me the strongest sense of dissociation you could have ever heard described. It was as if I floated above myself, four or fourteen steps, and saw my motions

as one might look at those of an insect — passively, divorced, indifferent, far. I had become quite unmoored. There was, for once, no wind, and so I was stalled, and my North Star had been hidden. And so I could do nothing but confront my lack of origin, my sundered tether, and the gaping maw that refused to simply devour me already.

Now, as I sat before the records after having cleaned my surgical implements, the sensation of dissociation was markedly less pronounced. My mind was merely filled with a buzzing drone that drowned out the greater bulk of my lesser sense of self. I was still conscious, and conscious of being me, but all the small and rapid thoughts which normally flit through my shallows had been silenced, leaving room only for awareness of my base condition: that I was there, and unpurposed, and breathing, and seeing but not assessing. And so I looked down at my hands, and saw them trembling, as if they were pages being blown by a light wind. I turned them on their side, and found that they were as flat as paper. Once I noticed this in my hands, I saw it everywhere around me, too. The interior of the ger was one flat surface, of undifferentiated depth, as if it were a crude and detailed painting. I did not wonder at this. It was, I saw, quite right.

It was at that moment when I heard a voice outside my ger.

“Hello? Ah. ...Black— I mean, Fingers? Have I got the right place here? Are you there?”

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Sandal sat across from me, her legs folded underneath her, her hands fussing at the cup of tea I'd made her, her mouth worrying between a smile and a sigh of self-derision, and her gaze somehow unwaveringly held on me, even when she looked with subtle but undisguised concern at the mild squalor of loose papers I never would have allowed to pile around me before.

I did not do much to avoid her attention this time. For one thing, she was now a servant to one of Yesügei's wives, her status far above that of a friendless and forgotten slave boy. I could no more turn her away than find somewhere to escape to, or something to escape for.

But, no. I found I did not even need these excuses anymore. Though the distanced mood that had settled on me lifted slightly with the surprise of seeing her, there was enough of it left to numb me to emotions which had overwhelmed me when I was younger. In such a state, I was better able to shrug to myself, and ask what my guilt towards her mattered either way, by this point. The world had never made much sense, and now its ledger didn't either; why should I act as if my childhood sins were anything more than stories an unseen, painful, and sinister stranger told the gormless newborn I am now?

It was a fatalism which could easily be confused for maturity — a surrender of self that seemed quite like self-mastery. It must have been this that prompted her first words. I had not noticed until then how rudely I had kept my blank silence.

“You look more grown up... Fingers.” She fussed a little at her hair. “I suppose it's funny of me to say that. It hasn't been long since I last saw you.”

“You seem well. Your robes are well-mended at their few fraying tears, and you look to be well fed. They do not mistreat you.”

“Mistreat me? No, no! I am very well.” She looked down. “It’s just... no, I am well, truly. But... I did come to ask you for your help today.”

I relaxed a little. At least this meant she did not simply come to see me. I still did not say anything, however. Perhaps I was hurt she had not simply come to see me.

“It’s... well, it’s the other boys.”

My eye might have twitched, but there was no way to tell, seeing as my face felt so numb.

“What about them?”

“They’re just lost, Blackie. You would see it if you saw them. They look as if they don’t know what they’re doing. As if they’re wandering around blind, even with their eyes open. They don’t know what to do without Kaisha. I’m afraid a few of them will try to do something stupid, just to try and see her. Or some of them might just sit there, and never do anything at all, ever again. It’s really hurts, seeing them like that.”

“Yes, yes. I understand. But what do you want me to do about it?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I came to ask you. You’re the wisest man on the steppe now, Blackie. Now that your father... I... he...”

She stumbled to a halt. I could feel her reaching out to me, even though she never looked up from her tea. In her swirled a poison of unease that could only be dispelled by having me drink from the wellspring of her comfort. Hers was a pond growing stagnant without a stream to flow out into. And I was the rocks damming her up.

I ground my fingertips and palm and knuckles limply against my eyes. How had I ever managed to make it so hard for this girl to help me? There was clearly nothing worse I could have done to her, as far as she was concerned. Every interaction with her had to be mediated through countless, encrusted layers of calcified self-hatred -- and at this moment, nothing in the world seemed so tiring as scrabbling my way through them. Nothing, that is, save trying to peel back and unravel them. There was no other option, then. I would simply have to try and hurry the conversation along, before I collapsed from the exertion.

“Thank you. Yes. Alright. You want me to do... something for them. Find a way to keep them occupied. Hatch some plan through which they might convince themselves they could help Kaisha to retake the tribe and lead them to some virgin and abundant stretch of steppe. Very well. I will do it.”

She did not seem very happy to hear it, at first. This left me very much confused, although I did not show it. She, however, furrowed her brow and bit gently at her finger, not unlike a snow hare or a mole-rat worrying at a tangled root. Finally, she looked back up at me, almost bashful.

“You will?”

“Yes, yes, of course; I said so, didn’t I?” Her muted reaction must have affected me somehow, because surliness had managed to creep into my tone. “I’ll handle it, I’ll handle it — so put it from your mind. You will, most likely, have to find a way to convince them to come here, however. I... do not think I will be able to travel, for the moment.”

For some reason, this seemed to perk her up much more.

“Yes, of course, I understand. You have people you must tend to here.”

I grimaced, but she paid me no mind. Rather, she took me at my word, and spoke no further on the subject. Instead, she started to speak casually of simple things. Of her journey here. Of how she must be leaving soon, or else she would not arrive in time to finish her tasks for the day. Of how hard it had been to find me. Of how good it was that she managed it, in the end.

When I could deflect her unsubtle invitations no longer, I told her that I had recently been reading a few minor treatises on al-Khwarizmi, which elaborated on his methods and applied them to Euclid, drawing a correspondence between geometric shapes and generalized equations, with one long and fairly tedious extrapolation on what this meant for the art of shipbuilding. This was all a lie, of course. My father had long since improved on these treatises in every particular, which made reading the originals about as interesting as hearing the babbling of a child; it had been one of the first books I had buried. But telling her this allowed me to draw interesting shapes upon the ground for her, and explain what a ship is, and what it sailed on. She kept wiping at her eyes as I spoke, and then giggling when that made me pause, to which I would have no other response but to keep on speaking.

Eventually, she did depart, however reluctantly. She kept slipping her foot out of the stirrup each time she made to mount her horse, having suddenly remembered some vital piece of news or gossip she simply had to tell me. I had finally succumbed to my exhaustion at this point, and did not listen, and could not have told you — even ten breaths later — any of what she said, until she spoke the words which woke me from this confused dream that had lasted months.

“Wait. ...what did you say?”

My eyes must have been shining as with fever, and my grip on her upper arm was rather strong.

“What? That Grand Chieftain Yesügei will be spending the winter with us, by the banks of the Kherlen river? Which is odd, now that you mention it. It’s so close to Kereit territo—”

“No. Before that.”

“Blackie... is something wr-...? Oh, you mean that Chieftain Jelme will be paying him a visit? Ah yes, I see! Yes, that will be exciting. I think he may probably be coming to check up on Blacktooth’s old tribe. Do you think so too? If so, that means that the Grand Chieftain will perhaps let more of us group together than he usually does. Maybe we could...”

I immediately became lost in thought in a concentrated way that felt almost new again, by now. When I had agreed to help the other boys, there was no intention of seriously contemplating the issue — but nevertheless, I did not hold back my idling mind from puzzling at it offhandedly. I had lightly traced through the half-formed outlines of plans, which were wispy, insubstantial, sketched in charcoal on a messy slate, like the shadows of cobwebs. In this moment, they snapped into sharp focus — hard, heavy, and clean. Logical consequences followed on from each other like a chain, each link solid, each

detail ready to be filled in with definitive observation. I was suddenly revitalized. The cogs of my mind had been set back on their course.

I breathed in again, and came back to my surroundings. Sandal was still talking, doubtless conjuring up scenarios of heartwarming reunions and the hopeful resolutions we would make.

She had always been a minor mystery to me. I had long wondered how someone could be so demure, and yet so forthright. Now, I found myself many times more confounded at how someone so artlessly naive could at the same time be so seamlessly scheming.

She had no idea what any of this meant. That much was quite obvious. She had no notion of either the politics at stake, nor the personal motivations each player moved to. She did not recognize how the timing and the location of the meeting had been carefully laid out, its message inscribed in its base materiality — by Yesügei's alert adviser, at least, if not the angularly absent-minded chieftain himself. She did not see Jelme as anything but a favoured uncle — as simple and as selfless as she quite rightly believed all men should be. He was, for a certainty, a gentle man, and a kind man, insofar as any steppe chieftain can be gentle and be kind. But she did not see that he was never, first and foremost, a good man, nor even, necessarily, a just one. She did not see that, if Jelme came to us like this — so deep into Yesügei's territory and so far from his own, at such a sensitive and such a crucial time — he would not come for us.

She could not conceive and calculate any of that. And yet... I did not have to lay eyes on any of the other boys to realise that, more than all of them combined, the one she had come here to lift up was me.

I must have laughed at the pathetic irony of it all, and continued tittering to myself thereafter, because she was smiling when she finally lifted herself into the saddle.

—

Rattle was the first to come.

Our encounter was slightly awkward, but not uncomfortable. Just as was the case with all of the others, we had never spoken much as children — having little but Kaisha in common, I suppose — and so had kept a neutral, mutually agreeable distance. But he had never talked that much to anyone else either, and so it did not feel too forced to begin speaking now. He nodded along to my explanations, and did not ask questions, but repeated the basic conclusions back to me in clear and simple terms.

Dealing with Wailer, on the other hand, was indeed uncomfortable, but not unexpected - - the initial shock of his arrival aside. He had somehow sneaked into my ger while I was asleep, but possibly thought waking me would be a step too far into impoliteness. It wasn't until I woke from a passing and preemptive nightmare that I saw him leaning against the wall, his pale face lit by a strip of moonlight from the entrance flap he had left unbuckled at the corner to shift unsteadily with the wind.

After I finished screaming, I filled him in about the basic contours of my plan, with words I had borrowed from Rattle's simplified rephrasing. When he didn't respond, or even so much as nod, I continued on telling him things I thought might be useful for me to have him know. He left just before dawn, leaving me none the wiser as to whether he had listened to a single word I'd said.

There was a stretch of time in which no one but Rattle and Sandal visited me, until finally, near the beginning of autumn, Spit and Frog rode in together.

Frog and I argued bitterly, while Spit glowered menacingly and afraid at all the medical implements and artisan's tools along the walls. I had gained something from these months of isolation, however. Now — after all the avenues of reason had been exhausted, and Frog simply started going back to his first, fatuous objections, simply reordered past the point where he, if not I, could recognize them — I would simply lapse into silence and wait for them to grudgingly come round to asking me what was next.

It did not matter, frankly, whether anything I said was right or wrong, or even possible. What they had come for was inclusion in the same sense of purpose as their peers. And I had the reins to that entirely in my hand. Once I realized that, I was able to calm myself down, and reorientate myself into a new sense of authority. It is perfectly understandable that I displayed little more than the slightest sense of how to wield it, then.

I kept myself in my tent for a few days after they departed, and nearly left the old and infirm tribespeople I tended to, and their collected handful of runty sheep and goats, to die.

It was only in the final weeks of autumn, when our moment was very nearly upon us, that Muddy first appeared before me. He slipped into my ger after Sandal, chivvied in and reassured like the sullen and messy infant he had been when Kaisha had given him his name. He did not look at me — or so I gathered, since I so rarely looked at him — but showed familiarity with my intentions and methods. He must have been kept up to date by Sandal, from afar.

Beyond laying out the basic ideas of my plan, there truly was not much of importance to do before the first days of winter. But I could not simply tell them that. That would only serve to replace their listlessness with restlessness, and they would simply spend their days in a different kind of misery. And so, in order to keep them occupied, I taught them to read and write.

I almost immediately regretted it, but after all the effort I had spent in convincing them to do it in the first place, I could not simply go back on my decision. Otherwise, it would have become clear that I had set them a useless task to fill their days with, or else give the impression that I had no clear idea what I was doing — in either case, the whole charade would be up. And so I pressed on.

Frog, again, made it difficult, and would react to every correction with wicked barbs. Thankfully, he was sharp, and made few of them — and besides, his attacks were ones I could deal with.

Rattle, unfortunately, was more difficult. He had trouble understanding every basic notion. We would spend a day covering what I thought would take a few minutes. Before long, I would respond to every mistake with obvious exasperation and sarcasm, which clearly wounded him, and likely undermined whatever reconciliation had been blooming between us before this misguided quest.

The worst, of course, was Sandal. She was not much slower than Rattle, at the beginning, in all truth. And I kept myself in check like a tightly-corded coil, never allowing anything but the shadow of a frown to slip out of me. But regardless, every time, she responded with such undisguised disappointment in herself that it felt like I had shouted at her.

Her diligence, however, was unrivalled. She must have practiced countless hours in the days and weeks between her visits, and before the month was through, she had started to make significant improvements.

Not long after, the others followed suit. For a time, I complimented myself on being a better teacher than I thought. It was only near the end, when they started to come together more often, in the build-up to the enactment of our plan, that the truth was made clear. She would lean over and help the others during the lesson, with an ease and familiarity that made it obvious she had visited them and done just this many times before. Observing her was humbling. She clearly had a fraction of my ease with the process, and even — indeed, often — made mistakes in her corrections, which the others occasionally pointed out. But she admitted these with such ease, and induced in them such comfort, that they would advance in leaps, where my technically perfect and analytically immaculate approach would have had them shuffle forward a half-step.

There is a vague memory from this period that I remember very distinctly. It is Sandal, leaning over to read what one of the boys had written — I cannot remember which one. She traces the letters with her finger, and mouths the sounds to herself — she never learnt how to read silently. She scrunches up her face, pulls a hair away from her eyes, goes to retrace their writing, and, with the same tone she used to sound out the letters, whispers the words: “You—did—very—very—well”. The boy laughs, and shoves her playfully as she turns away, and makes some falsely modest, falsely mocking joke. Something like: “oh, go on, get away, I don’t need your help”. And she lets the shove carry her to the next boy, with the first one feeling like he had made the decision to move her on, and feeling no lonelier for want of her attention.

An insane and backwards thought entered my mind at that point, with the absurd clarity you might feel in the late stages of a dream: what would have become of the world, if Kaisha had befriended Sandal as a child, and not me?

—

The seven of us sat in my ger: Sandal, Muddy, Spit, Frog, Wailer, Rattle, and me. There were not even seven days left until my plan would be set in motion. The end of autumn was upon us, and the frigid winds could be felt in the pleasure we took at the warmth of my ger. Each boy had long since scouted out and made known to me the supplies they would be able to gather and steal; they each had a final list of them, and for the final time, I tallied up the totals. I would not take any risks here, with winter setting in. If all went well, we would only need enough to last a week; I had made sure to bring enough to last us through the winter. We would have back-up stores for the back-up stores of every crucial supply. Every variable that could be account for had been accounted for. For all the variables that couldn’t, we would have Kaisha.

I breathed those words in as I thought them.

In less than seven days... we would have Kaisha.

On the basis of their reports, I set a final meeting point, from which we would launch our attempt. With the worsening weather, the last few of my patients had finally succumbed. Those whose conditions had made improvements had simply left, one after another, over the previous weeks. Nothing remained to hold me here. I would be setting off tomorrow.

The boys and Sandal filed out. Some of them even thanked me. There was no undertone to it; their words were made pure by a grim decisiveness which left no room for anything but plain and simple speaking. As such, I could only nod in gratefulness, and thank them back.

It occurs to me now that there simply must have been other boys and other girls who followed Kaisha, in those early days of childhood. Other young men and women who even came to my ger over the previous months, and listened to the lies and misdirections I told everyone at the start, and only gradually peeled back as the final moment came. But those who did not turn up on that last day — those who did not show their loyalty to Kaisha, on this, their easiest and final chance — I have simply excised from my memory, and through me, the memory of all mankind. I get the sense that, if I wished to, I could even now cast my thoughts back, and rescue them from the grave of their obscurity. But I will, of course, do no such thing. They will lie dead as they lived -- unknowing and unknown.

As the last of them filed out, I returned one more time towards the records.

There was a system to the errors, I had found. It was still incomplete, and maddeningly obscure, but there could be no doubt that it was there. A coded language, written into the gaps between the numbers, derivable from the very faults of communication. One could note down all the locations of all the errors in a ledger, and form that into a sequence, and apply formula on formula to try and see a pattern. These patterns would, of course, be mutually contradictory. Some of them would undermine themselves. But over time, the skein of them rose up -- skeletal and sacred.

Every day, I would compare them to the slip of paper Dhunan had given me, on the day my father died. There was no way to be sure they fit. But over time, I could feel it coming closer. I could feel my father trying to tell me something. I was just not certain on what foundations, to what end, and why it had to be through this means.

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I traveled for four days alone on scavenged horses and trailed by my three most obedient goats. The rest of the livestock, I had left for the tribespeople who had hosted me, however distantly, this year. Laden down by a fraction of my father's belongings -- the rest of which I had buried and secured as best I could from water damage or scavenging - - I was slow until Rattle traced my meandering trail and took mercy on my weakness. His body was so strong -- he could lift the packs onto the horses' backs without the slightest trouble -- and his heart was straight and steady, able to guide them without resistance, and thread through the undulating steppe with thoughtless ease. Together, we arrived at the meeting site earlier than I'd planned.

The following day, I was able to rest. I sat beside a fire and boiled tea, and the other boys filed in, set up their gers, and sat beside me. When I offered them cups, they received them with both hands, talked amongst themselves, and did not hold back their words, or glance sidelong at me.

We had scouted out the area exactly, and when Yesügei's retinue arrived, they made camp just where I had predicted: an hour's steady trot north of us, in an oxbow of a stream which snaked around a hill with commanding views of the open country to the

east. It was a scenic spot, appropriate for a chieftain's council, and safe from ambush by any Kereit raiders who wished to make one last, unlikely foray before the snows set in.

We rendezvoused with Wailer, who had tracked their group from a distance, and even now observed them night and day. I sent a boy to meet him every two hours, keeping their most trivial movements closely monitored. They did nothing unpredicted.

The news of Jelme's arrival reached us before his men could have finished setting up their camp. At that point, our anticipation reached a fever pitch, and it was difficult to remind the others, and myself, that simply sitting here undiscovered was the best thing we could do.

In the evening, I sent Frog to infiltrate the camp itself. So long as he approached unnoticed, and did not lose his calm, he should be able smoothly mingle in, each side assuming he was with the other. It would not spell disaster if he were discovered -- we had rehearsed three in-depth, mutually consistent alibis, any single one of which would be more convincing than the truth, and there was little prospect of a forceful interrogation. But still. Once he was in, there would be no way for us to find out what was happening, or influence the outcome. Even Rattle was reduced to pacing restlessly.

Late into the night, Frog returned with a note from Sandal.

"You were right. Jelme to marry Tigerlily. Handmadens to go with her, including your mother blackie! So happy. You have not seen her since your father. Must be so hard. All accord with plan, so good, so ready. Everyone drinking now, celebration. Saw Kaisha. Her hair's grown back out again. She is so beautiful. Quiet though. Did not notice me. I am so happy she will be free. My love to you. be brave!"

I shook my head with exasperation. She had failed to even make note of how many soldiers Yesügei or Jelme had with them -- let alone the state of their horses or command structure or nightly guarding patterns -- instead filling her message with all sorts of useless chatter. The other boys were overjoyed with the news, however, and it was useful to have some of their nervousness dissipated and their faith in my methods reinforced. And I had made sure that Frog and Wailer had provided me with their own estimates, so it was no huge setback to miss a second confirmation. When I fell asleep, my dreams faded fitfully into my plans and calculations, leaving gaps and jumps in them not unlike those hidden deep within my father's records. I heard a voice howl through them, and the pocked, notched, mirrored smoothness of the flat of a knife.

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The dawn was barely cresting the horizon, and our packing was nearly completed, when Wailer galloped in. My fury that he had left the chieftain's camps unwatched did not register on him, of course, but when Sandal peaked her head out from behind him and excitedly jumped off his horse, she would not look me in the eye until I offered her my rushed reassurances that I was not angry. After a few false starts, she finally calmed enough to tell us why they had broken protocol and come like this.

"Take a moment. Breathe. Wailer. Was she seen exiting the camp? Is there any chance you were followed?"

The dour youth gave me a fractional shake of the head.

“Very well. Sorry, Sandal. Please continue.”

“It’s Kaisha! Kaisha isn’t going with them! Tigerlily is, going that is, with Jelme. But Kaisha is not. She’ll stay behind, with Yesügei. I had to come and tell you. Otherwise, it would be too late! I don’t know why they’d do this! What do we do, Blackie? You had it all so well planned...”

Her panic was spreading into discomfort in the other boys, and so I could not let her continue.

“Sandal, Sandal, please. It’s fine. There is no great problem. This is well within our expectations. It was always possible they would keep her as a hostage, to keep Jelme in line. He’s made his real affection for Tigerlily quite clear, and would think thrice about crossing Yesügei if it would mean putting her daughter in any danger. I had always planned to send two of us after Yesügei, as you know, to warn us of any unexpected movements or possible betrayals. What we shall do is simply switch our targets. Frog and Muddy will track Jelme, leaving marks for us to follow. The rest of us will follow Yesügei, wait for an opportune moment, and sneak Kaisha out of their camp. They should loosen their night guard with each passing day, as they get further into their territory. We need only wait for them to go. There is no rush now either -- after a night of celebration, they should not break camp for another hour at the least.”

Seeing that the boys had settled down, I lowered my voice, and tried not to sound concerned.

“So please, do not worry. This is only a small complication. We shall handle these matters well. What we must think of now is you. Your exit from the camp should not have been spotted, but your return will be more difficult. Your absence will likely have been noticed, and more of the camp will be awake to see you this time. You will have to--”

“No, Blackie, it’s alright.”

“It is, it is. But you must--”

“I...! I’m sorry, Blackie. I know you will be angry, and I’ll be causing you trouble, but... please! Please let me stay! No, no, please don’t look at me like that. I know this will upset your plans, but this way, you don’t have to figure out how to get me back into the camp. So that might make things easier?”

I was too busy calculating how long I could afford to spend convincing her to find the words with which to do so. She read the obvious denial in my silence.

“I... it won’t make things easier... will it? Maybe... it will make them put their guard up? I’m sorry Blackie, I’m so sorry... but maybe it won’t matter? They’ll think I just ran off with Jelme’s camp. And I’m just a simple handmaiden, one of many, and there’s never that much work for me; they won’t turn back to chase me.”

“Yes, but Sandal. What of your family? With you gone, will Yesügei forget to visit punishment on them? That is possible; he is a deeply absent-minded man. But if he does not, what will befall your mother? And even if he does, what will she do when she hears news of your disappearance? After all she’s suffered, surely this will... do her great harm.”

I had not even thought to try and make her cry, but cry she did.

“I... I know. She will be worried. I know she will... but Flick is with her! Flick will make sure it's all right. You know she will, Blackie. You know how clever she is; she's almost as clever as you! She'll have figured out what we're doing, even though I didn't tell her. Or will tell my mother something like it. She'll tell her I ran off and escaped, and mother will be happy for me. She'll find a way to protect her. I know she will. But if I don't go with you, who will protect you from yourselves? You... I... no, it's all for my sake, really. I'm just being selfish. But still. I love you. I love you all. I want to be with you. I want to see Kaisha. She's had it so hard. She needs someone to be kind to her. I want to hear her words again, to tell her how much I missed her, at least. You can just ignore me, when we get to Jelme's. But please just let me come. I'll even hand myself back to my mistress in the Spring. I'll say I fell in love with a boy -- she will probably not have me executed, only lashed. Just, please. Please let me stay with you...”

I could not bear the stares of the boys, boring into me from each side. And with her looking imploringly at me from the front, I had nowhere to run but backwards.

“Fine. Alright. Fine. Stay. Spit, give her one of your horses. Frog, go back to the camp with Wailer; follow Jelme when he decamps, and Muddy will catch up with you. The rest of you -- continue packing. We'll move out within the hour.”

Through the commotion of whoops and sighs, I heard Wailer make a reedy, choking noise which may well have been laughter.

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We lay in wait at a safe distance, twenty minutes' ride from the chieftains' campsite, in the late hours of the morning. When, at noon, we received notice that Jelme and his retinue had left, Muddy rode off with supplies for him and Frog, and we waited again. Soon after, word arrived of Yesügei's departure. And so, once again we waited. There was little chance of losing the trail of such a large traveling group in the broad daylight; the greater danger by far was being spotted, and making them more wary. And they would be slower than Jelme; the master of a territory will traverse it at a more leisurely pace than any foreign rival, no matter how trusting or self-confident.

It was mid-afternoon when we finally set out, met once again with Wailer, followed the glaring trail they left in their wake, and sent someone to lie low on every hill we passed by, to be sure we would be out of sight. Three days were spent like this, in grinding stupor. All aspects of the plan had been set in motion; there was no more latitude to change them. As such, my mind whirred in place, having no firm object to grasp. I could only grind my teeth in silence, and try to puzzle through what exactly it was about his face that made Spit so very, very ugly.

The third day -- at first, so fine and bracing -- ended with a billowing of clouds and rain and wind. My mental clarity returned as my heartbeat began to quicken. It was now that we would do it. I did not even have to signal to the others. They simply settled into silence with the onset of twilight, and once the horses were tethered more securely than any night before, and with knots that would be more easily undone, none set up a ger or closed their eyes. We wrapped ourselves warmly, and did not light a fire, and listened to the uneven pattering and sliding of the rain over our tarp.

When the night was at its deepest, I finally stood up, leaving Spit with the supplies. Wailer, Rattle, and I led our horses through the rain. Sandal followed. We walked up to a spot one thousand paces away from their camp, and left the horses with Rattle, concealed behind some rocks and trees. From there, Wailer and I crouched, then crawled. Sandal followed.

At two hundred paces we stopped, and whispered. We could see no guards directly in our path; two fires burned at either side of the camp, to our left and to our right, but in such conditions, we could walk past them unnoticed at ten paces.

Sandal proved quite useless in the one regard I had pretended she could be of aid to us. From this distance, she could not pick out which tent would have been Kaisha's. This made, of course, no difference in the end. I pointed out the only one it could have been, if the dozens of reports I had collected on the camp's layout could tell us anything. Wailer didn't even bother nodding. He simply slid across the soft, wet ground. Within ten breaths, he was at the line of gers. We saw him crawl silently past them, only half-visible when he was not entirely concealed under their shadows. Another breath, and he was at Kaisha's tent.

His head swivelled from side to side. There were no guards. No cries of alarm. He scanned the ground, looking for the clues I had told him would confirm Kaisha's presence, or whatever else that half-demonic child could sense or smell. He did not even have to cut the ger open. He simply undid the clasps of the flap, and stepped inside.

I pawed at the mud under my nails, and let my shivers wrack me undisturbed.

The wind gusted madly, and any cries that sounded from within would have been drowned out to nearer ears than ours. My breath hissed and hiccupped inconsistently, and the blood pounded in my ears, and I could not tell you how long it took for two figures to slip out of the ger's entrance and speed through the camp in an unrushed, three-limbed sprint. One paused to scan around them, behind and to either side. The wind lulled. Once again, no cries. Any handmaidens who had been in the ger with her were either still asleep, subdued, or dead. The figure in front stalked straight ahead, towards us. There was no way of telling which direction she was looking. The only thing that mattered was that she moved. Forward. To me. Past me. With me.

I remember only flashes of awareness before we reached the horses huddled behind the trees. We mounted, and galloped off. Rattle remained behind, bow drawn. I did not look back for him, and would only have seen shimmering blackness if I had tried, and yet I knew he followed us at no more than a hundred horse lengths, with all his arrows still in his quiver. He caught up with us almost as soon as we reached Spit and the supplies.

Spit was the only one stupid or, in this one moment, wise enough to forget our purpose there entirely. Even Sandal put her sentiment to one side, lifting the supplies from where they lay ready by each horse. To my much greater shock, even *I* went through the motions of the plan, trying to untie ropes and tie them back again with fingers numb from the cold outside and the heat inside me. Spit, meanwhile, just stared agog at the figure that moved through us the same way she moved through the pounding wind and rain. She would motion through the dark or holler, commanding the five of us as smoothly as she would her own fingers. The hint of jealousy I felt at that lasted only until she gave me her next instruction. She would walk, and the wind would shift in her direction, impelling her along, and the rain would smoothly part for her, as if she had dropped herself delicately through it, like a pebble into a still pond. It beat against her

only seldom -- when she tossed about the heavy packs like bundles of dry grass, or lifted horses into a run -- and then, only to emphasize her movement.

I could not yet quite see her -- my squinted eyes were clouded by the night, my wrung-out heart still unsteadied by its love. But I could see the space around her, and her reflection in whatever constancy we had as mirrors. And the realization struck me, with more force than it ever had before. It was not that she channeled the wholeness of the cosmic will with a greater flow than we did, like a cascade to our trickle. It was, for once, quite clear to me that it was the other way around. Whatever it was that first impelled her, it came before the mere laws of the world. She was the sudden cry in a timeless silence, and the entrance into space from a place outside of it. Precisely how she could exist among us was a mystery I had no ambition to unravel, but it was uncontestable, and my only truth.

We sped into the night mere moments later. Wailer led us in an uneven, winding route through streams and churning mud. We would be nigh on impossible to track.

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We circled back round the way we had come without ever exactly retracing our steps. We slept little, and moved erratically -- dodging around cover, seeking out the difficult terrain, with one rider constantly at our back, complicating our trail -- as the first snows started to set in, and the frost on the sparse grasses refused to clear. Our dread diminished as the cold intensified, until we were so constantly and profoundly happy, it seemed we dreamed. It did not matter if we looked at her, or at each other, or at the ground -- if the wind was shriller in our ear, or if our legs cramped us into a hobble. It was as if our joys were like a stone, and we bowed down with every step to pick one up, only to find our satchels had become bottomless, and there was always room to carry more, until our happiness was a range of mountains. And she ensured we always found we had the strength for it. Long after the sunset, we would walk our horses in the dark. I did not keep the boys from singing songs, for there was little prospect of capture, no consequence to pain, and absolutely nothing left to fear; and because once, I had heard Kaisha whistle.

After five days, we came upon the trail Frog and Muddy had left us.

Two more days, and we found Frog and Muddy themselves.

There was good reason to rejoice at this point.

For one thing, we were almost clear. We would catch up with Jelme, announce ourselves, provide reassurance we were not spotted and, Kaisha excepted, will likely not be missed. We could then claim asylum. He would, at least, let us stay the winter. It was difficult to conceive of Jelme being less accommodating than that.

For another, seeing the tears stream down the faces of these two who had not yet seen Kaisha did something to our own wonder, like old men smiling at the discoveries of children. Had we really looked like that, the first day? Did we still look like that now? What would it be like on the next day, and the next day, and the next, when all had seen her, and there was no longer any new face in which to see surprise? Would there simply be peace, then? Would we forget that rush of liberation? Could there ever be complacency again, after word and deed of Kaisha? In moments like these, I found that I

was not, in fact, my father. For it was shown I did not always fall into delayed and premature abstractions. It was revealed that, fundamentally, I did not care either way.

We camped early that night, and ate well, and even drank liquor. Kaisha did not speak much, but when she did, we all shut up to listen. She did not speak of the previous months, of that I am quite certain. Neither would she have spoken of the task at hand -- completing our flight from Yesügei -- if there was nothing to be gained by it. And I do not think she would have bothered to speak of the future -- we were already so enraptured simply to be with her now. So I can't imagine quite what she could have said; I merely heard her voice -- so clear and present -- and watched the subtle movements of her lips, and the way the firelight played on the crinkles and smoothness around her eyes. That night, she ran her fingers through my hair, and I cried and lost myself in dreams of lying there forever.

It was only really the next morning, as we saddled up to go, that I was finally able to register the repercussions of the reports Frog and Muddy had given to me haphazardly and dazed the night before, and which I had listened to with less than half-attention.

Everything had proceeded exactly as predicted, at first. The retinue had wended its predictable and monotonous way through the steppe, and the only thing that accounted for their dread was their acute fear that we might fail to help Kaisha escape. And then, three days ago, when they came to the campsite Jelme's retinue had abandoned an hour earlier, they found that the trail had branched off into two. One set of tracks was clearly the more numerous, and so they had continued to follow that one, and thought little of it. Perhaps Jelme had sent a small contingent of his men to attend to some task, or else they were proceeding by the shortest route to their families for the winter. Last night, I must have thought something similar.

This morning afforded me no such idle luxury. What we found at the campsite, when we rode in, filled me with an insidious sliver of discomfort, drawn partly from the fact I could not understand it, and partly from the fact of Kaisha's frown.

The trail from the campsite had once more split into two. This time, they seemed to hint at much more even numbers in each group. This made little sense. Why would Jelme split his troops while still well within Yesügei's zone of influence? If he thought he was being tracked, then surely he would know his foe could muster much greater numbers, and split them too? And moving through the open steppe with half his forces could surely do nothing but uselessly expose him to greater dangers if he were not being tracked. And if he thought a smaller group were trying to follow him, it would be much more advantageous to conserve his advantage in numbers -- perhaps even lie in ambush and surround them. The only scenario that would make any sense of this tactic is if he were being tracked by a smaller group which he did not wish to confront, but entirely avoid. A smaller group... like us. But, no. He could have no reason to suspect this, much less to know it. I had been so meticulous in letting no word of this plan out, going so far as to feed my collaborators false information until the last moment. Even *Kaisha* had been successfully kept in the dark. And even if he did know, he had still less reason to go to such great lengths to avoid us. What threat could we possibly pose? Even if he did wish to avoid offending Yesügei by granting us safe haven, why not simply send us back, or even capture and deliver us to Yesügei trussed and bound?

All this posed no immediate danger, and whether it could pose any in the future was as unclear as Jelme's motivations. But this sense of confusion did not sit well with me. It itched and niggled. Thankfully, I had grown used to such discomfort over the course of

this year. Whatever mystery this presented me with was the barest fraction of what waited for me in my father's records.

And so, we proceeded to split up. I sent Wailer, Spit, Frog, and Muddy after one trail, while Kaisha, Rattle, Sandal, and I followed the other. Messages would be ferried back and forth through a pre-determined system, twice a day, so that we could join back together at first notice of Jelme's party.

Thankfully, the tracks did not diverge too sharply, and we were able to maintain our two-pronged formation without fear of losing contact. For this flexibility, however, we sacrificed speed, and the tracks indicated that they had picked up theirs. We did not manage to catch up to either group after two days. On the third, my tingling sense of unease became a shooting pain, pulsing a course between my temples, the ridge of my forehead, and a specific spot behind my eyes which I could not reach by kneading. The tracks before us had branched out once again. It was with real trepidation that we awaited word from the other group. When word came, our trepidation was confirmed. The other tracks had diverged too.

I was, in that moment, forced to make a choice. Remain in indecision, trying to follow through on all tracks through the boundless steppe? Or commit to one, and maintain some hope of catching them?

If Jelme reached the heartland of his power before we caught up to him, that would complicate our mission. He would be hard to find without access to his network of communication, and none of the herders loyal to him would be likely to give a motley group of half-grown children such information, if they had it. Neither would they take us in and feed us from their stocks for what looked set to be a long and hard winter. In the worst case, we could pick an unassuming spot within his sphere of influence, and narrowly survive on our supplies, which had been calculated to provide the bare minimum subsistence for 6 as a last resort; the addition of Sandal meant we would have to turn to theft, or risk illness.

So it would not necessarily spell disaster if we failed to reach him. But still. Reaching him would be best. And there was nowhere else to turn to. Yesügei's influence stretched everywhere to the North, and the only other way for us was to head due East, into the contested lands between our Naiman territory and the Kereit clan.

And so I sent back word for the other group to collapse back onto our course, and picked the track with the clearest signs of cart usage. There was no use trying to think about it further, picking out the probability of a bluff or double-bluff. I no longer had any sound basis on which to speculate about Jelme's intentions. And so there was nothing better for it than a blind guess.

Muddy, Frog, and Spit joined us as planned. Wailer, however, did not come with them, and the other three could tell me nothing as to why -- nothing beyond the fact that he is Wailer, and that his motives are obscure, and his manner uncommunicative. He somehow managed to find us two days later, from the meagre marks we left behind. He had ridden sleepless since breaking from the others, and had finally managed to follow at least one of the tracks through to its end. There, he found a few of Jelme's soldiers making camp. They seemed bored, and their discipline had slackened. They rode few hours in a day, at a lazy pace, and did not bother to set up guards while they slept.

This could mean simply that they were warriors of inferior mettle. The other explanation was that the reasons for splitting up the retinue like this had not been made clear to them, and their motivation suffered. This would mean that even the members of Jelme's inner circle were not party to his thinking. The mystery of it deepened further. Fundamentally, however, this information changed nothing. We had no course left but to go on. We cut out sleep, and raced our burdened horses through the steppe.

The track presented some discomfiting peculiarities. It thinned, at times -- as if their numbers had suddenly halved -- and there were some stretches in which no sign of carts could be seen. Thankfully, though, it did not split again. And, whatever tricks it played on our suspicion, the track did not ever fully disappear. And so we followed it, to the very edge of Yesügei's influence, all the way into a sparse forest.

We passed under the cover of the trees just as the early dusk descended, and so rode into a gloom like that which lies beneath thick foliage. The branches, though, were bare, and seemed to have been frozen; they creaked with echoes of the ice -- a distant, deepened cracking -- without any obvious motion, like a deep river in winter. It felt like their last leaves had just fallen, shaken off by the wind of Jelme's passing, an hour or day or three ago -- we no longer had the time to stop and study the details of the tracks.

The trail was easy to follow, despite the darkness, because the ground was packed thick with these leaves, and the cartwheel tracks split obviously through them, marking a clear road stretching deeper into the forest, past stones and stumps and going on and on... until Dhunan stepped out from beneath the shadow of a tree, and straight into our path.

It took me a long second to register what I was seeing before me, by which point Kaisha had raised her bow, nocked an arrow, narrowed her gaze, and eventually already lowered it. Dhunan's pale eyes glowed in the thickening night, his limbs seeming to fade in and out around those two sharp glints. They were trained on Kaisha -- on her hands, the angle of her shoulders, her feet within her stirrups. As the shouts of the boys behind us died down, and Sandal's worried questions became more clear, he shifted his attention onto me. It was only at this point that I even noticed he was carrying a torch.

"Alright, kid. That's enough, already. Go back."

His eyes flicked back to Kaisha, wary of her weapons, but did not once look at her face.

"I... what? Kai--... Dhunan? What are you doing here? Why?"

"What did I just say, kid? Stop talking. Go back."

"Go back? We can't go back. We've come all this way t--"

"To try and catch up to us. Well, you've caught up. Congratulations. Now go back."

"Wait, wait, please. Just one minute. We are several days' travel from any meaningful destination, and it's night already now. Surely there's no rush. You're probably right; we can't follow you any longer. But perhaps you can pass on a message, or we can exp--"

"I'm not Jelme. And I'm certainly not your father. I'm not here to talk to you. I'm here to ward you off. If you won't be warded off, I'll do something else. And I'll tell you this much: it won't involve much talking."

“Then just let us speak to Jelme. He can’t be far. We won’t stay after; we just need to... alright. Alright, I understand. We can’t talk to him. But... why? What have we done? Is it something to do with offending Yesügei? Would harboring Kaisha mean--”

“I warned you once before, kid. I told you that there’s no point throwing your life away. Keep living. Keep your eyes open. Keep them closed. But do not rush into your death. No... never mind. You’ve grown. I see that now. You won’t do that so readily. But there is more to life than suffering. Do not cut your own eyes out. It’s not too late to turn back. It’s never too late to turn back. Just let it go. And drift.”

The other boys had at first been too shocked, and then too cautious, to truly act on their agitation. They had recovered now. A couple of them had started to shout. I did not look back, but I think one of them -- Wailer or Rattle, surely -- had started to move. I looked at Kaisha. Her expression was grave, but utterly calm, as if watching everything from a great, unscalable height. She had let the bowstring slacken, and merely ran her ungloved thumb along the feather of the arrow’s fletching.

It was so good to have her back again. Anything was fine, so long as I had her back again. Even if everything else failed me. Even if nothing in the world made sense. Even if I was cast adrift in a sea of confusion, and all I had in me was suffering... if I could cleave to her -- see and hear and touch her -- then I wouldn’t mind. She was all I needed. So long as I had her, I wouldn’t mind anything.

My mind had followed the tracks through the boundless steppe of possibilities, and come up wanting. I had no theory, not even a hint, of what was going on. I could not fathom a single possibility for why Jelme would go to such inordinate lengths just to keep us away.

But no matter. I was, as I say, not my father. I was not entirely an obsessive mind. Even if I could not pin down why, I knew enough to see that we had failed. We would, one way or another, have to turn back. Kaisha had not opened her mouth, or spurred her horse on to ride through him. That meant there was no way we could go forward. And so, in the last moments before we left, I let all these trivial, contingent questions fade away, and asked him the only thing I truly wanted to know; the only clue I had to the only mystery that might make a difference.

“...Dhunan. Back then. When you talked to me. How... did you know my name?”

Its aim was good, but Dhunan did not even have to dodge the arrow that whistled past my ear towards him.

He simply let the torch drop, and disappeared into a cloud of smoke.

The fire spread faster than even such dry leaves should allow. As I clung desperately to my horse and tried to hold my breath, I noted that he must have prepared the ground with some inflammatory agent. Arrows went whistling back and forth, though I do not know where the boys thought they were shooting. One by one, our pack horses went down. Kaisha was riding left and right, shielding us from whatever waited ahead, and beating us back out of the forest.

I did not disobey her, and once I orientated myself, was able to ride out of the cover of trees to see all the stars arrayed above us, with only distant, looming clouds on the horizon.

Wailer and Frog were already waiting there. A minute later, Spit and Rattle stumbled out, horseless. It was a long time before Kaisha finally rode out, her horse unhurried, her hair fanning out behind her with the flames which now climbed up the trees, carrying Sandal and Muddy in either arm. She dropped them as she approached us, and I ran down to attend them. She looked south, into the steadily brightening forest, her features clear. She looked north, where we had come from. I could tell she was not thinking, merely allowing us to catch our breath.

Then she dismounted, and started walking east.

Chapter 6

For a time, I did not think of much. I ensured Muddy had not compromised his ability to walk, and splinted his sprained wrist and broken fingers. Thankfully, neither he nor Sandal had been too badly burnt. I believe I exchanged words with them, though no part of me was aware of what they were. I do not think I spent much time looking in the direction of the fire, and whatever memory I had of its heat did not survive that winter.

Instead, I merely caught the scent of all that had once lived in Summer and in Spring, and had not decayed away in Autumn, as it was put to flame before it had the chance to be entombed by Winter. There were only ever flashes of it, when the wind passed by a bush or hive in the moment that it caught flame, and blew to me -- before what made each thing unique took on the qualities of indiscriminate char, and before its smoke could follow through and choke me. In those instants, the myriad forms of life were differentiated by their common will to flourish. The cudweed had its fragrance, which was by no means bitter -- but it was not the scent of woodruff, its cousin, sweet and edible, and so no creature sought it out. But its aroma was its own, and in the breath before its smoke, I knew it. The flowers of the trout lilies had long since fallen away, but their stems still carried a hint of the creek which would have suckled them in ages past, after the seas receded from the mountains. In the breath before they vanished into ash, the ancient waters could be heard to trickle.

This was but the fancy of a few moments; the remnants of a mind not yet fully given over to its shock. After that, it was simply that the forest burned. I was aware of it, quite perfectly. But now, I did not think, hear, or feel.

I had spent such effort thinking and feeling, from so little, though I had listened so much.

Muddy would see a group of riders sweep past the flocks he had been tending, and then ride back that evening, their numbers increased.

Sandal would hear a swirl of rumours: Kaisha was refusing to eat; Kaisha was gorging herself on food; Yesügei second wife was jealous of his fourth; he was cross with the father of the third, and would not honour him with a visit until his anger abated.

Spit would see little and hear less. But perhaps he would inadvertently insult somebody, or struggle with an unsettled stomach that might be running through the tribe he rode with. There would be information for me even there, but I would not hear it, for Spit had been cut off from me by the seedlings of a fear he did not realize was already sprouting.

Frog would be worse, for he would lie in subtle ways, and leave ellisions which would compromise the picture, knowing it would not only obscure his own testimony, but those of the others.

Rattle and Wailer, though, would comfort me with their silence: it would assure me nothing had gone wrong, while foisting no more work upon me.

And so, they would pass along notes that would take days or weeks to reach me, and I would have to reconstruct their journey so as to venture towards their rough date. From all this, I would build a picture of the steppe. I would cautiously infer troop movements, and theorize the intensity of the skirmishing on the Kereit border. Though perhaps the riders Muddy saw had not, in fact, increased their numbers that evening; they could have simply ridden more slowly in diminished light, which might have given that impression. And from what Frog seemed to be implying, the fighting in that direction had been dying

down, if I could be sure of which direction Muddy meant, through his vernacular descriptions and their misspellings. Was Yesügei being lulled into a confident frame of mind by these developments? Or were these same conditions liable to stoke his paranoia? What could each mean for his movements in this next month? The quality of his retinue? Its tribal make-up, and the vastly differing loyalties that would result?

I could not know these things. And yet I found myself compelled to venture an informed guess at each one. There was no question of sparing any effort, no matter how small the possible return, at the prospect of being reunited with Kaisha. And I knew no other way than this.

Thus, I built a map of ruins in my head -- a labyrinthine city of tangled, writhing streets, leading to nowhere and themselves. It was profoundly unclear at any given moment, and yet also forever shifting. No water coursed through its viaducts, and no paint adorned its walls -- for it had fallen in the moments before it had risen, never even having begun to be completed. Its only denizens were ghosts, or less than that -- mere intuitions of possibility, based on fragments of other people's memories. Each could exist at once in twelve locations, and though there was no wisp of soul in them, they chattered ceaselessly, giving voice to each of their conceivable motivations in a cracked monotone. I lived with nothing but these ghosts for months. It would have driven me quite mad, had I not been exposed to the mysteries of my father's records and their much more mature and subtle contradictions.

It was all conjecture upon conjecture upon conjecture, each one necessarily more tenuous than the last. It would only take one link to fail, in each of these long and interconnected chains, for the whole design to fall apart completely. That it overlapped seamlessly with our actions in the world, without the slightest deviation from my projections, until the very final moment was less a consolation than a cruel joke, delivered with the practiced assassin's sense of timing.

All of this, I could bear. It was a gamble I had always reconciled myself to losing. I had never spared the slightest thought for the preservation of my body or my soul. But now, I came to wonder... what had there even been to preserve?

Because through it all... my eyes would see nothing. My ears would hear nothing. My hands would touch nothing, and my tongue taste nothing but the ink stains on my fingers, when I licked at them to turn a page, or bit down on them to still their aching. I would only sit in my ger, scribbling furiously away by lamplight or the ray of sun which filtered through the swaying entrance flap. It was not as if, my projections collapsed, my ruin revealed, I was returned to life as it is, direct and substantial. There was no other life. I had lost myself in my year-long dream, and woke to find that there had never been anything to wake to.

Though even if I had ventured from my ger... even if I had been walking through the motions of a life... what truly would have been the difference? The eye is deaf; the ear unfeeling; the tongue is blind; the fingers grope out into eternal dark. What does any one of them know of the world? Who could trust such gullible companions?

The eye would have you think it is all-seeing. Nothing, however, could be more untrue. Rather, it is like a great bull which, blinkered on both sides, pulls ever forward. It does not know if it treads green fields or sands. And if it did -- what of it? It would not know to stop. It knows not if it helps or hinders. It knows not what is asked of it. It only sees. Stupidly. Endlessly. Even when its lids are closed.

It is like the peddler who, only having one thing to sell, brings it out for all occasions. There is a wedding? Buy my combs. There is a drought? Here are my combs. The mingled herds are lowing? Console them with my combs.

It is like the scribe who has only memorized one text, and repeats it in answer to all questions.

It is like the fire, which knows only how to burn.

The ears, fingers, nose and mouth are also such as this.

The temptation, then, is to think that what they cannot achieve alone may be achieved together. And that is, far and away, the greatest folly of all. For the senses do not convene to find the truth, and then discuss amongst themselves. They are and remain forever ignorant of the other. Instead, it is most faulty of the senses which takes it upon itself to pull them all together. The only one which is everlastingly internal, imprisoned in its own sunless, windless ger in its abandoned corner of the endless steppe.

It is the mind which follows after the senses, picking up their dregs. Like a drunk, it takes them in compulsively, and dreams of nothing else when they are not there. Its belly filled with their impressions, the mind compares and records; it fills in and omits -- all on the testimony of these mute and partial beasts. Even when no one had asked it to. For it is like a peddler with no wife and children but its wares; a scribe who cannot look up from his page. Its world only exists insofar as it invents it. And it never thinks to question why.

For as the eye cannot but see, so the mind cannot but tally. Endless lists, and from them, judgements. And through it all, great pain -- for the mind should stop at pleasure, sated, but it knows not an end, and so continues onward in its perennial unfulfillment.

And then this cripple, this wretch, shouts out its hubris. Its temerity. Its sheer gall at calling itself the arbiter of the world -- its worth, its measure -- the master of all it can conceive. The master? Master of what? An outcast, more like. Blind, deaf, dumb, and limbless, utterly dependent on its senses, who whisper to it an unending stream of their own repeated fantasies, not even aware of the extremes the mind will push these to.

So, truly, my circumstances were of no consequence. Should I trust my eyes more than I trust Muddy? My fingers more than Sandal? Do I trust my bones to hold me up more than I trust Rattle? The air to course through my throat more smoothly than Wailer navigates the steppe?

No. No. It does not matter who told me what. It cannot have been their fault. It was my decision to proceed from what they told me. My toil was my own. My task was one I set. And it was only now that I could set it down. It was only now I stopped for rest.

I did not see. I did not hear. I did not think. I did not feel. Or perhaps better to say that there were no sights, no sounds, no thoughts, nor manifestations either way on the spectrum of emotions. The fire would have raged, but there was nothing there to know it, let alone evaluate, tabulate, react. There was only the aftermath of the realization that all I had ever done -- all these theories, these projections, these conjectures -- had, from the off, been null and void. There had been no ruined city, no labyrinth, no chains. Not even the absence of reflections on a pond unsettled by the wind on a night without a moon. Only misbegotten metaphors, and the strain of trying to hold them all together.

But I was not entirely deluded. I had never had the chance to truly be a fool. I knew what fate awaited me. I knew full well how I would suffer. I did not write my words upon the water thinking they would stay. I did not throw myself into this void thinking I could fly.

I went in with an intent. I stuck through it with a meaning. I had mutilated my mind with a singular sense of purpose. I had only ever had one calling.

And now, it had been answered. The task in front of me was done. And with it, so was I.

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I came back to myself.

The others had collected all they could have thought to collect, and trudged towards where Kaisha stood silhouetted eastwards, only Sandal hanging back to wait for me.

As I looked upon her face, I noted slight stirrings of emotion; a part of me had been rekindled. The smoke billowed around me, stinging my sense of foresight. I shed a single tear.

And then I stood up, and left much of myself behind, beside that burning forest.

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We walked for a week before the cold, and the weight of mere survival, became unbearable.

I spent it watching the landscape unfurl itself from the horizon. It was not difficult to see why so many of those who walked the steppe imagined that it went that way forever, exactly as they imagined they knew it. When I was a young child, I had considered this a great irony -- that these herders thought their pocked and shifting pastures unending, simply because they had never seen the shore of even one sea. But in time, I grew more discerning; and with it, more forgiving. The cicada might think its patch of spruce unending; the man, his steppe; the fish, their depths; the bird, her heavens. Before the expanse of the infinite, and its void, what difference does it make, which petty finitude we begin to imagine it from?

And so, I watched the land roll on impassively, without a thought that we might be traversing it to some purpose, with some specific goal -- and thus, with no need to parcel up its sweep. I did not know if we traveled twenty miles in a day or ten, or if we veered north or south in our journey to the east. The constant sense of our coordinates in relation to any number of landmarks and meetings points I had inferred from my father's maps was no longer hanging over me.

I watched our supplies dwindle in just this way. We had lost horses and their saddle packs in the fire; the need for haste meant we had not set out with carts. And so our meagre, uneven food stores dwindled day by day. Occasionally, something in me would observe inefficiencies in the way the food was parcelled out -- that with a few rough calculations and a strict course of rationing, we could extend them -- for a time while still maintaining the ability to walk. But what would it amount to, in the end? Another day, perhaps? Another half-meal each? It did not seem worth the trouble of harboring the thought, at the time; I let it slip back out into the sea of unconsciousness with the tide.

Mostly, I watched Kaisha. I think most of us did. She would take off her cap and shake her hair out, when the sun was shining, and continue to walk before us.

The food stores ran out with the sudden deepening of winter. We had to kill the first horse. Before they could finish butchering it, it had been covered by a thick layer of snow. It was then, it seemed, that it first occurred to some among us that we might truly die like this.

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The cold was unspeakable. Our breath would turn to crystals in the air, and the winds which would dispel them into dust left burns upon my face before I began to cover up my nose and mouth at every hour. But the cold soon froze even the laboured ache of my lungs. Before long, I stopped reaching up to push the folds of fabric from my eyes.

What peace I had found beside the forest fire, when I had awakened to find myself shut in, failed me now. Looking back, I knew I had taken joy in my indifference to space: the newfound luxury of ignorance of its distances and discrete objects. Now, I found myself untethered too from time. I could not tell the seconds from the hours, the minutes from my shaking steps. It was no liberation -- but rather, an open door to an undivided moment of constant pain, insensitive to the rise and fall of a sun I could not feel.

No herder of the steppe subjects himself to this. In the winter, they live off the meagre bounty they had worked all year to scrounge together. They leave their gers to feed their livestock, and venture further only to chase an animal that had become confused and wandered off. This they did more out of restiveness than need -- a bit of sport to emulate the habits of their Spring and Autumn -- and that, for an hour or two at most. As for me, I would not even set a foot beyond the circle of my family's gers for months, except for Kaisha. Thus, I could not possibly have known what lay in wait outside.

The horses started to die before we would need to butcher them. With each one that fell, we could carry less and less of their meat to stave off our onrushing starvation. There was one we even left untouched where it collapsed, overburdened as we were with the remains of its predecessor, who had died the day before. The last surviving horse, though, was afforded no such dignity.

That horse was the one Kaisha had gifted me at the Naadam. I had wrapped her in a sheet of felt we could have used to cover ourselves at night, but Kaisha had not taken it away, or even looked at it askance, and so the other boys had not dared to comment. Neither had I added anything to her burden, from the day the forest burned. And so, she survived with us until now, silently following alongside me, keeping me upright as I clung to her, and sheltering me from the worst of the wind. Survived, only for this.

The Naiman clan did not name their horses, no more than they named their goats or cows. Perhaps I followed along with them out of unthinking habit, but that is very difficult to believe; I know I pondered the question often. I was never sure if this custom was a sign of callousness, or quite the opposite -- a means of creating distance, to avoid growing too attached. At any rate, I myself had never thought that far ahead with my mare. I had simply not believed I knew her well enough to name her, or that I could trust myself with such a momentous task even when I did. Kaisha herself had left her nameless, after all. Now, I came to know the wisdom of this.

She seemed to sense what was to come, but cantered calmly over at my beckoning. There was no recrimination in her great eyes — only sadness, and a little fear.

I named her Kindness, and slit her throat.

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Starvation returned for us a few days later. Most of us were seriously ill by then, too. I could do nothing about it, at this point. I carried a pouch of medicinal supplies slung on my back, with the rarest herbs and most delicate instruments -- the ones most difficult to reproduce without a specialized forge. It was the only thing I took from the saddlebags on Kindness, aside from the most mysterious and confounding fragments of my father's records, and my most concentrated notes on their patterns. These, I had wrapped around myself, under my clothes, instead of sheepskin; perhaps I had already gone mad, and thought that they could warm me. But everything else had been left behind, scattered across a half-dozen corners of the steppe. There were no alembics, no mortars stacked in succession of their size, the smaller in the larger, and the smaller still in that. Nothing remained that would allow me to attenuate the slightest pain, let alone mend what had been forever broken in us. And even if I could have set up a cauldron and concocted the perfect pills for each of our conditions, they would have made no difference; what we needed was warmth, rest, and consistent food. And so, the kit was merely a temptation to poison myself. I would gnaw at it by night, hoping something dreadful might seep through.

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The first of us to go was Frog, in the end. I cannot fathom why it was not me.

One morning, not so very many days after our last meal, he could not get up. The wind was not so bad, and there were some clouds. The others came up to him, and tried to coax him up, but he just shook his head and waved them off.

It was out of habit, and because Kaisha seemed to expect it, that I knelt down to inspect him. I undid the wrappings around my hand enough to free two fingers, and looked under his eyelids and down his throat. I could not be sure without a proper examination, but it was clear that he was fast succumbing to some petty infection or another, which he no longer had the energy to fight.

I put my hand on my knee to heave myself back up when he gave a sudden jolt and grabbed my forearm. He nodded at my inquiring look, and beckoned me closer; he would not have had the strength to pull me.

I lent in until my face was mere fingers' breadth from his. He was trembling badly, and his breathing was laboured, and liquid escaped the corners of his eyes and mouth, which he kept screwing shut and opening in an odd, gulping twist.

"I hate you."

He took another breath, and spoke again, in a tortured, wet voice.

"I have always hated you.

"I hated the way you talked. I hated the way you didn't talk, and thought that was any better. I hated the way you looked at us. I hated your ugly, broken face.

“I hated the way you looked at Kaisha. I hated the thoughts you thought about her, in your mind. I hated the silly things you said about her, and how you thought there was no one clever enough to prove you wrong.

“And I hated the way she played along with you. I especially hated that. The way she played along, just so you could keep telling yourself those things about her when she wasn’t there.

“Even when I felt bad for you, I hated you. I hated how you muttered to yourself when people hit you. I hated how you thought you were better than them, all the while imagining how you would hurt them, if you could. I hated how you hated us.

“I hated you even when you were kind. I hated you especially when you were kind. I hated how, even when you fed us, you counted out every drop. I hated how your kindness was just another form of cruelty.

“I still hate you. I hope you’re the next one to die. I hope it goes hard on you, and that you have to face it alone. I hope you never get anything you want, and never learn a thing, and don’t live long enough to grow past what you were. I hope the rest abandon you. I hope you know that you deserve it.

“I just want you to know that.

“I could not bear the thought of you existing without knowing that.”

I do not know how much he spoke then, and how much he spoke in nightmare later — only that it makes no difference either way.

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The others had dug a small pit, out of the way of the wind, and filled it with cuttings from a dead tree, which would not light until Kaisha bent over it and blew it into life.

Then she cut the flesh, and dropped it, piece by piece, into the fire.

We each of us retched at it, and cried, and swore not to take another bite, and turned away from each other to hide our shared shame — but every one among us ate of it, in the end. All the boys that followed Kaisha, that is.

Kaisha herself could not console us. She did not eat, that we might each of us have more food to sustain us, without knowing that it was this very act which ailed us. She came to each of us in turn, pressing the cooked flesh into our hand, bidding us to swallow it and live. When she was done, she stood by the firepit, as forlorn as I’ve ever seen her, brows furrowed above sunken eyes. She kept turning about, only to have us shrink away. I saw that she accepted it, and possibly even felt something for us, but ultimately, did not understand. She did us a final kindness and walked off, waiting beyond the next ridge for us to follow when we had reached some bedrock in our wretchedness.

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That night I woke screaming, and struck out at Kaisha as she attempted to stop me shoving my hand down my throat — perhaps fearing I would choke myself, as I very nearly did. When that failed, I threw myself at her feet and begged her to cut me open

and take him out. She tried to calm me down, hold me, caress me, but I shoved her away and fumbled out the knife. She kicked it out of my hands, and knocked me unconscious when I scrambled to get it back.

—

From that point on, I only remember undifferentiated blizzard -- a dusky white, and cold without respite.

As it thickened, Kaisha was the first to leave my field of vision. She lead us from the front, where I could still sense her beckoning.

Then it was Rattle, and Spit behind him.

I could not see beyond ten paces, but I felt Wailer wander by -- to my left, perhaps -- before he too was gone.

And then I could not see five paces, and Muddy had been swallowed by the gale, though I could still make out his footsteps for a time.

There are indistinct flashes of memory of someone walking beside me. Perhaps they propped me up, or perhaps it was simply out of a desire to help them that I did not collapse, for a time. In the end, however, collapse is exactly what I did.

I do not know how long I laid there, for I had not even noticed I had fallen. I thought I was still struggling on, into an endless plain of white, forever.

It is, perhaps, this moment that can explain why, in the years to follow, I was never seriously tempted to take my own life, no matter how bitter the circumstances I was confronted with. This had absolutely nothing to do with a will to live that had been tempered by the ice; I did not continue forward due to any such desire. The only thing I can recall with a surety from those minutes, hours, or days is that the prospect of death had been completely banished from me, with any form of salvation it could offer. Life or death could change nothing of the truth, which was that I stood in some unknowable relation to a blinding absolute, and could only attempt to crawl in its direction. Whether I drew closer or farther would not be affected in any way by my being alive or dead -- so I never again saw much meaning in the distinction.

And then my face was wrenched up from the snow. Kaisha crouched above me, and shook her head. She grabbed two fistfuls of my coat, and dragged me forward.

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Smoke rose in the distance, in that distinctive, even plume that could only signify a bonfire of human make.

The skies had cleared to an unbearable, total blue, and it was Spit and Rattle who carried me roughly up a hill and through the cover of the trees.

They left me on the ground at the summit, propped up against a withered stump. I found I could stay upright, and the world swam less dizzyingly the longer I stayed motionless. When my vision cleared, I could see that the land carved out a bowl before us, at the centre of which lay a frozen lake. A light breeze dusted snow across its surface in circling eddies -- a reflection, perhaps, of the stilled currents beneath.

On the near side of the lake, immediately downhill from where I sat, there stood a single ger, with a few penned animals around it and a tarp pegged tightly over a stash of winter supplies.

Farther along, other gers dotted the icy shoreline in a semi-circle, though my eyes could not yet tell if they were three or ten.

Having reestablished my bearings for the first time after a timeless interval, I noticed that the other boys had all filed through the woods downhill. By allowing myself to pitch and tumble forwards from tree to tree, I made to follow them, my progress slow and bruising. When there was finally no incline to roll down and no obstacle to butt against -- only a flat stretch of fresh snow -- my vision had once again become blurred, and I could not even make out the ger ahead of me, though it could not be more than fifty paces away. And so, I crawled through the tracks my companions had left me through the snow.

I first came across the corpse of a man who had died moments before from a half-dozen puncture wounds, his blood seeping through the snow around him in a pattern not unlike the petals of a poppy. He had been drained so dry that little more than a trickle dripped from the final slash across his neck.

After him, and somewhat to the right, lay another man, whose head had been bashed in, an eye distended clean out of its socket. From there, I could make out the grunts of a third. I lifted myself to one knee.

Kaisha stood perfectly still, her arms crossed and her face gaunt, blood-spattered, and serene. In front of her, Spit kicked at a man who rolled about, howling and trying to cover up his wounds. A fine hat lay discarded on the ground beside him, made entirely from fox fur, with a complete tail hanging from it at the back. The other boys were testing out the weapons they had taken from the dead men; Wailer was already pulling out the pegs to rummage through the supplies.

Gathering my breath, I managed to stand up and shamble to the ger.

The scene within was difficult to make out at first, which was fickle of me: I had spent my life in such dim light, but it had only taken me becoming lost once, out in the open, for my eyes to forget it.

When they did adjust, I saw the contents of the ger were in some disarray -- many objects had been broken, and only roughly swept up into piles to clear up space. There had been a struggle here, and the victor had not been the one who called this home.

Before I could make out any of this, though, I was drawn to the far end of the ger by a desperate whimper -- the kind that only comes when one attempts to consign unbearable pain to utter silence. There, I found a woman curled in on herself, jerking and shivering. I tried to pry her limbs apart, to see what she guarded so fiercely, but they seemed to be rooted in place, like some tangle of metal -- or perhaps it was simply that I was too weak. She loosened her grip herself, eventually, and I saw she had taken a jagged shard of pottery and sliced apart her innards, which spilled out in a black puddle on the ground.

Even if I were in a state of sound health and steady mind, with clean implements to hand, there would have only been a very narrow chance of saving her. But there would have been a chance. I knew I did not have the strength to last through the first third of the procedure, and so I only dabbed at her forehead and whispered her to sleep.

It was only when her last breath left her and I made to rise that I realized I had never once been alone in the room.

A figure slumped against the felt wall of the ger, features covered by long, matted hair which had come chaotically unbraided, and parted only for a single, bloodshot eye. She was staring unwaveringly at the shard which I had extricated from the grasp of a woman who I now saw could only have been her mother.

I crawled over to find her bound, her hands secured behind her back so tightly that her shoulders must have been seized by terrible cramps. She allowed me to undo them, before snatching the potshard away with badly shaking hands. She very patiently sawed at the rope tying her ankles together. I noticed now that they had not been bound tightly, like her hands; rather, the rope had been left wider than shoulder length, though she clearly had not left the ger for some time.

It was that last observation which finally melted me to the point where I was once again brittle enough to snap. And so I cried for a time, while the girl rubbed, unfeeling, at one wrist.

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Kaisha boiled a simple broth for our recovery, and made it known that she would kill us were we to eat anything else. Spit would not have been able to resist the lure of solid food otherwise, even if the others had explained that it would likely have proven fatal to him in his state of advanced starvation.

While I, in my turn, struggled to keep my lips sealed and prevent the broth from dribbling out, distant shouts told us that other men had come to investigate the disappearance of the ones we had beaten and captured. Kaisha went out to greet them -- ostensibly alone. In fact, however, Wailer and Rattle followed her stealthily out of the ger. There was brief conversation, too muffled to make out, followed by a shout, and then a swoosh of arrows.

When I went outside to examine the bodies, I found them pincushioned and still jerking, while one figure fled back to the other side of the frozen lake.

I returned inside and finished my allotted portion of broth, after which Kaisha questioned the man we had originally left alive. I called him Foxtail, on account of his fine hat, and with the setting of the sun, we sent him out to the rest of the camp with our terms.

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As it turned out, the tangle we had stumbled upon did not take long to unravel.

The hills surrounding the central lake formed something of a raised bowl in the centre of a valley protected on three sides by mountains. Within this doubly-sheltered, cloud-grazing depression, a number of families had thought they would be safe for the winter. The group which had pitched their tents on the other side of the lake were all Kereit, and had come together after backing the wrong side in a tussle of tribal succession. The family whose ger we now occupied had been strangers to the larger group -- neither Kereit nor Naiman -- and had possibly been here first.

The thinking from both parties had been sound. They could see for miles outward on the surrounding ridges, while remaining hidden themselves in the central bowl. They had access to good water, and the wind which swirled fiercely through the larger valley of which this was part meant that the smoke from their gers tended to disperse before becoming visible at any real distance.

Nevertheless, they had been discovered a few days before our own arrival. Perhaps they had given themselves away by some mistake, but I think it would have been too optimistic in the first place to suppose that they were the only ones to know of this location. To their misfortune, their visitors ended up being a rag-tag group of desperate and bitter men, unmoored from any ties of comradeship or family, even amongst themselves.

None of them would have chosen this life, I think, but it was clear that some had resisted its pull more than others. The ones who did for the single family on this side of the lake were especially, if not uniquely, brutal -- all except Foxtail, that is, who was merely an abject coward.

Calling them evil would make them seem grander than they were; calling them bestial would be an absurdity before the modesty, reserve, respectfulness and acuity of wolves and bears. Consider, then, the grasshopper. In times of plenty, nothing could be more innocuous. What child hasn't watched it bound about with the safe wonder of a stronger being? And yet, in times of leanness, the grasshopper grows larger, darker, more aggressive. It bands together with others of its kind into a swarm which rolls over the land like deadly mist. They scour it of any life, devouring every green shoot and -- when none remain -- each other.

These men were just the same. That they may have had more complex thoughts is irrelevant. Absent the power, curse, or predilection to take a step back in stillness and sort between them -- to reflect on the sequence of their intentions and emotions, identify the trends, and encourage some instead of others -- they might as well have been pebbles skittering across the tundra with the wind. Their appetites sated, they would have been an outgrowth that swelled gradually off the fat of things, then withered with old age. Hungry, they were a loose element of Nature impelled towards destruction -- a scavenging cancer -- a hand become a blade and aimed at the arm that connected it to the body of humanity. They were deserving of neither disgust nor pity -- simply lucid and careful observation when confronted with them, and offhand ignorance otherwise. Horror too would best be reserved for those of us who know full well what it is we do.

Most of the details of their deeds I gleaned from overheard conversations and unwanted confessions. The rest came from gasps and whimpers in the night, and trembling fingers under an averted gaze come the morning.

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Their former companions, thus, were not made too downhearted by the news of their demise.

After a tense day in which they watched us from across the lake -- and through which we, for our part, passed varyingly between staring back at them in a numb and trance-like guard duty and fits of post-starvation delirium inside the ger -- they finally sent forth Foxtail as an unarmed messenger. Presumably, they thought him expendable -- though

since he had been the only bandit we had come into contact with and left alive, perhaps they thought we had taken a liking to him.

A ceasefire of sorts was reached. Kaisha simply told him at the start that she had no interest in killing them, at which point Foxtail promptly forgot whatever it was he had been sent to say. After a few minutes spent shuttling his gaze between her shoulders and the divots he was dragging into the ground with his restless feet, he had no choice but to return and relay back that single sentiment.

We spent a few days in recovery and silence, before being greeted with a surprise at the fourth dawn.

One of the Kereit families from across the lake had stealthily decamped and moved their ger to our side. It stood at a polite, comfortable distance of a hundred paces from our own. Their intention, however, was unmistakable. They had noted the way we had killed the bandits without repercussion or even real resistance, and so had thought to take shelter under our wing.

I looked at the felt wall of their ger as it rippled in the first wind of the morning, free from any of the frost which would have collected overnight. I followed the meandering footprints the family had left as they set it up in darkness. I saw how several tracks advanced towards our ger and hesitated before turning back on themselves. I inquired of Wailer -- who I knew would have woken up and watched them through the holes he had punctured in our walls and over which I sewed flaps whenever I felt a draft and found a new one -- and could just about begin to see their anguished, whispering expressions from his terse, disinterested descriptions.

As I warmed the morning meal and my companions stirred from sleep, I reminisced aloud about a marmot who had loitered at a distance from the campfire Kaisha and I had once set up on an autumn walk. It jumped back and hid itself whenever I stood and looked at it, but crawled back when I sat. Thinking it was tempted by the smell of food, I tossed it some, and it ran away.

I served Kaisha and sat down to eat. The boys looked at each other and sighed. It was Muddy, in the end, who apparently had the softest heart among us. With a grunt, he stood up and went to greet the Kereit tribespeople.

From then on, they kept largely to themselves, besides bringing us meals in an earthen pot in the evenings, which I would wash and return, with thanks, in the morning. They spoke mostly with Muddy, and Rattle helped them search the woods when one of their few sheep broke loose one night. They made sure to bow low and long to Kaisha whenever they saw her.

Three mornings after they arrived, they were joined by two more families.

That, it appeared, was too much for the bandits, and spelled the end of our fragile and informal truce.

They came over from across the lake -- armed, but with their weapons sheathed. I had been taking a hatchet to the frozen shore, while Kaisha sat upon a rock and occasionally tossed snow at me. On seeing them, she stopped, and did not rise, but simply watched them come. And so Wailer, Spit, and Rattle did not move to stand beside her, but merely paused comfortably in their sundry tasks, as if spontaneously inspired to take a rest.

That already seemed enough to discomfit our new visitors. Their shouts reached us long before they did, but when they saw that we did not react how they expected, their pace faltered and their threats grew more inquiring. In the end, they made for Kaisha, who still did not get up, even when they were close enough to stand in her shadow. They clustered behind one older, rude, and smelly man, whose musty, belch-like breath could reach me even at some distance. It was he who took the lead in hectoring Kaisha.

I must admit that it was Wailer who first definitively sensed the shift of tide. He took his hands off his knives and used them to stifle a wide yawn, in that odd way of his that covers only half his mouth and comes up to his eyes. The smelly man had not even started to repeat himself, and his companions were still guffawing behind him, but Wailer had already seen enough to make him lose interest.

Eventually, none of them could believe that she was silent because she was intimidated, and so they grew furious. One among them drew his sword. Spit and Rattle had paused their chopping of logs some time before, and now recommenced it. Wailer even wandered off. Genuine confusion started to set in.

Perhaps because of this, or perhaps because he had run out of things to say, the smelly man switched tack, and finally got to asking straight out if, then, the Kereit families had come without Kaisha's permission, and if he was therefore to understand that she did not claim ownership or authority over them or their possessions. To this, she finally responded with a nod.

The man took this as a great victory, though some of those behind him still seemed unsure. His gait relaxed into an expansive swagger as he turned and walked towards the families, who had all congregated together, and stood in a packed mass before their gers. Muddy loitered unobtrusively in the midst of them; the younger children shivered behind their older siblings; their mothers stood furthest forward of them all, glaring pure murder at the bandits.

It seemed to be this unbridled ferocity in eyes which had ever before been averted which finally seemed to cement their sense of incipient uncertainty. One by one, the bandits stopped in their tracks and looked back at us. They had not even gotten halfway to the Kereit gers.

They saw Spit flexing his neck from side to side, Rattle spinning his wood axe slowly in his hand. Wailer had even wandered back. All of them were looking at Kaisha -- neither expectantly nor quizzically. Kaisha, meanwhile, looked at the bandits.

I was suddenly overcome with total, paralyzing joy. One moment, all was clear and quiet - - translucent, almost empty. The very next, tears were streaming down my cheeks.

I was just so pleased with them. So pleased. So pleased.

I could have kissed the smelly man who led them, full on his chapped and oozing lips. I wished I could melt into the snow and reform among them, to fall at their feet and press my forehead to their hands and call them blessed.

It was a moment I had been waiting for, almost as long as I could remember.

From the day we had almost been kidnapped -- the day we hid and waited and returned -- I had suspected I was mad. Mad, in the sense of perceiving something fundamentally different from my fellows in humanity. Of course, that ultimately changes nothing -- perhaps we all agree in perceiving something fundamentally different from what truly is. But still. It is an agony for a pack animal to be separated from its group, whether one speaks of us, or of our herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, or even of our rivals for their flesh, the steppe wolves. And this was an agony I could, from now, begin to put to rest.

It was not strictly the first occasion in which I could have done so. The other children of the tribe had, in a sense, offered me the opportunity long before. But as things were, I could not seize it. For one, they were too far from me in spirit; they were, indeed, the last people I wished to have as sole companions in my basic notion of the real. For another, they were much too close; they had also been with Kaisha since their infancy, and had thus perhaps been infected with the selfsame mental malady I potentially suffered from. In both cases, I could not quite bring myself to allow them to alleviate my isolation.

I could well have considered my father a companion. But that would have undermined the whole point of such companionship, because I knew for a certainty that he was utterly without a doubt insane.

Blacktooth, in the end, could be said to have come around to seeing things my way, but for the fact that he was scared. And part of me had great, almost endless sympathy for that, and I could take some comfort in that sympathy. But, ultimately, I could never believe we were quite the same. If one truly understood, one would not fear it; or, at least, such fear would be indistinguishable from rapture.

But now, at last, I had some confirmation. If I was mad, I was, at least, not alone in my madness.

And in that moment, there was great danger, though I could not see it at the time. Perhaps, in being delayed too long for its initial expression, the fullness of my relief was too extreme. And in being so prematurely complete, my relief may have led me to slacken where I should have held firm, and let go where I should have drawn closer -- to retire from the world before I had even sloughed off the last vestiges of childhood.

However, it could not simply have been relief which would eventually make me go lax; for there was also, always, the grief. And so, the acute joy I felt in that moment did not last beyond it. When the bandits had turned back and retreated out of earshot, and I shivered from having stood still too long, it had already started to fade. By the time my thoughts returned to the course they had been on before, it had turned into a memory.

But while it lasted, it was pure to the point of intoxication.

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What I had noticed in that swift moment was quite simple.

The bandits did not know what was going on. A sense of confusion swelled through them like a wave rising with the tide. They had come in expecting something -- perhaps terror, perhaps resistance -- and found nothing remotely of the sort. Even their last foray -- when we had killed the group who had drawn close, to the last man -- was written in a language they could understand. It was merely the swifter and more heartless application of force. This, though, was something altogether alien. Something which did not fit into

any reasons they could conceive of. This, to them, was pure anomaly. A singular exception. An impenetrable void. And so, it engendered in them a unique sense of uncanniness. Of loss of coordinates. Of coming undone at their most basic sense of what was.

But all this had happened before. Kaisha had done this to many people since she first did it to me.

What was new this time -- and what released that overwhelming joy in me -- was that they did not react. Did not seek to impose an order on its absence. They surrendered to their incomprehension -- if not with much grace, then at least without a fuss. They were the first to see the void before them and, rather than paper over it, draw back.

They did not do so out of sense of mortal danger. Not truly. It was less immediately arresting, and yet also more primordial. Ultimately, it was nothing more than a basic sense that they were missing something here. That, since no one was reacting as expected, we must all of us know something they did not.

In this, they were not quite correct.

The villagers had no notion whatsoever of what was going on either, let alone have an assurance that they had the upper hand. They were simply too tired and frustrated after such a long and thoroughgoing insecurity to think anything through clearly -- and in that malleable blankness, had looked to the only other people there to help anchor them, and thus, simply mirrored our attitude by default.

As for the other boys, they had no pretensions whatsoever to understand where they were going, from what origin, and to what purpose. They simply followed along with Kaisha without forethought, let alone a hint of afterthought.

In fact, it was only I within this whole tableau -- a moment frozen in the frost -- who had the slightest notion of the whole: of who thought what, and how they hung together. I was, as far as I am aware, the only one to even attempt it. In fact, it is my unique misfortune to have found no one else in all my years who took on this task with a comparable diligence.

And so -- the bandits driven off by the good grace with which they met their own uncertainty -- I heaved a sigh and set back to it. My axe hacked down onto the ice, and found its echo in the hubbub of the Kereit children and the twisting of the wind.

Chapter 7

All lingering resentments in our sheltered valley had thawed before the lake did.

The bandits had returned soon after, in an attempt to parley or establish hierarchy or maintain control. They succeeded only in integrating themselves.

They thought to have some sort of conference, I think, the first time, but merely found themselves invited to dinner. Once there, they were clearly tempted to raise a stink about the serving order. But they never had the chance to act on it, for it was Kaisha who was served first, and seeing her eat and compliment the cooks was a sight which necessitated their full attention. Their focus on this living reverie was only broken when someone handed them a bowl. By then, they had almost all forgotten what they had been thinking about before. And for those who did remember... well, what was the point of making a scene now? The food would go cold. And so, they lost that chance, unaware that this pattern had already long since been set in motion -- that what they had thought an opportunity to seize back the initiative was nothing of the sort, and that such an opening was unlikely to ever present itself again.

Some were quicker on the uptake than others. The boys had largely recovered from their exposure and near-starvation, and so Kaisha had begun putting them through their paces again -- running, wrestling, archery, riding in formation. For men bored witless by the winter and the inactivity it reinforced, it sufficed merely to stop and watch the largely playful training for a minute before they inevitably joined in. That they still thought to show off by it and was irrelevant from the start, and did not last more than a few days anyway.

Those who trained with us every day soon moved a ger over to our group. By now, all the Kereit tribespeople had already crossed the lake, leaving the other shore quite desolate. The others followed suit soon after, simply for the company. Now that they were near us day and night, they could do nothing to resist the erosion -- no matter how recalcitrant their will to hold on to their habits -- like a boulder by the sea. Even if they kept their distance, they would still be given food at mealtimes, and were never asked to aid in anything. They lived in greater comfort than they had ever been able to coerce their way into, and were surrounded by an increasingly lively and affectionate atmosphere.

And so, with the first shoots of Spring, a unity had been forged in our valley refuge, without any attempt to smooth out differences, or even set up a new identity to cohere around. It had all the effortless grace of nature in it. You see a log fallen over a stream; see the water mosses that adhere to it, and the fishes and the crabs which make its folds their home; see the insects crawling through it; see the line of the horizon as it sits unparalleled beyond; you smell too many things to differentiate them; you hear a trickling and a creaking and nought else. At first it seems a cacophany; it is only with time that you begin to make out its music -- a harmony deeper than our quaint imaginings of chance.

It was such an innocent and such a truly simple thing -- a painting unmarred by the brush -- our mongrel, madcap, miscegenated tribe. You could not have a heart and fail to love it.

Our reserves of food had been depleted, and the livestock that remained were not enough to breed a stable flock by the winter to come. And so Kaisha set up hunting parties, to scour the greater valley which surrounded our hilltop lake. I had, by this point, drawn up quite comprehensive lists of all the edible and medicinal herbs and plants we stood a chance of finding on this corner of the steppe, having interviewed everyone I could in an attempt to discover even one or two new specimens. We would be needing everything we could get. I disseminated this information as quickly as the new hunting parties could take it in.

As soon as they started bringing back provisions, it was time to start rationing. Everything they found was brought to me; I logged it, organized it, made a fresh calculation involving projected rates of intake, and made a recommendation as to what could be consumed that week.

During this time, I set up my own tent, away from the lake, near the treeline. This way, the water would not be contaminated by the filth of the infirm, the air the others breathed would not be punctured with their moans, and my spirit would not have to suffer from the warmth of a community I could never bring myself to feel a seamless part of.

In time, I would erect a ger with its full comforts, and set up a proper pavilion for the sick and injured, and another to house a workshop. But for now, it was only a makeshift thing of leaves and rope and reeds.

It was there that I sat one evening -- the dusk having come early under a thick mantle of cloud -- watching my hand move down uneven scraps of sheepskin. It left a trail of minute, almost indecipherable, figures behind. It seemed, I noted blankly, that I had restarted the records.

Of course, there would always be a need for piecemeal lists and tables, to help keep track of things. And hence the list for foraging. Which led to the list of supplies. And then I found myself calculating birth rates for the livestock; how much the gain or loss of one female would ripple outward and affect the chances of breeding a herd which would remain self-sustaining, considering the risks of plague or theft or war...

It would be important to know these things. It is a matter of life or death to know these things. And so, I began examining each animal, taking every measurement I knew, drawing them all up in exponentially complex, cross-referenced, overlapped and looping rolls of figures... and here we were.

My notes lay in a jumble in a corner of the tent. These were the condensed efforts of my father's life, reflected on the surface of my muddy stream of mind. They represented my best attempt at working out the logic behind the odd errors and striking patterns in my father's old records of Blacktooth's tribe -- now lost irretrievably across the steppe. Despite the pains I took to protect what remained, much of it was smudged and distorted. But... if I could just clean them up a little, just analyze and synthesize a little more... and if I then applied what I found to the new records of Kaisha's new tribe... then, I might begin to see what my father did. Or what he could only grasp towards.

And how else can one react to that thought, other than to numbly regard oneself as from a cold, dark place a thousandfold distance beyond the sun?

It was then that Sandal came in, and asked if she could stay with me in my tent.

What flashed before me in that moment had nothing really to do with the records at all. I discovered that I had harbored... they were not even distinct enough to be called fantasies. They were much more like half-remembered morning dreams which one vaguely intuits when one is, for the first time, reminded of them at the evening meal through a snatch of someone else's conversation. I had, over the past days, somehow conjured in my mind, through simple feeling even more than images, this exact scene, only with Kaisha standing there instead of Sandal. Once she had settled all the affairs people had foisted on her, she would finally find herself free, and come find me. And we would live together, just the two of us within a crowd, like we had done as children.

So ashamed was I at this sudden discovery of an obvious truth that I immediately gave her my approval, without stopping to think of any of the hundred complications which could potentially result.

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That Spring was tough and tense, like the hind leg of a young buck as it sets its feet to flee from a pack of wolves. Looking at the faces of the tribespeople -- the boundaries between bandits and Kereit families were more blurred by the day -- it was clear that none of them had ever felt so much alive. Anyone will find that the burden lightens into wings when they are united to a clear and common purpose. How much more so for people who had never truly experienced it before?

The fare was lean at first. I resisted the temptation to slaughter any of our few livestock and, in fairness to them, this was only met with a few grumbles. This condition of poverty would have been perceived more as a disaster than a detriment by a steppe tribe. However, it soon became our most unique advantage.

Because our herds were so small, they required very little grazing land. As a result, even our little mountainous valley was enough to sustain them. As a result, we did not need to migrate.

The wisdom of this might have seemed questionable, initially -- at least, on open country, we could attempt to flee or disperse upon attack. But we used our familiarity with the land to good effect, identifying and then reinforcing defensible and discreet positions at the valley entrance from which to scout, send messages, or launch surprise attacks. I ensured each was well stocked with arrows and other projectiles, and designed lookout platforms for those brave enough to climb the trees.

With these arrangements in place, we had found a measure of security in a lawless land. Groups like ours came into the valley in search of temporary rest. Many turned back as soon as they saw it occupied. Those that did not had to fight us on prepared ground. We were able to dispatch them without any major losses. With each such altercation, moreover, our flocks grew.

One day -- a long one, as the sun stretched towards the equinox -- a group chose to parley peacefully. Their first impression of us was clear confusion. We were such a motley combination of nations and demeanours -- from timid refugees to banished outlaws -- and we were led by someone barely older than a child... a girl, no less. They were, for their part, all old and grizzled herders, leading old and grizzled goats. Some

among them had gone soft; some had become wise. In either case, they only observed us for a day before choosing to fully throw their lot in with Kaisha.

They were the first of many. For as our herds finally outgrew our mountain valley, and had to be taken out to pasture on the steppe below, so too did word of us spread within the region.

A sharp observer might have noticed from the off. We sent out herds composed of only one species, for ease of movement. Each was guarded by herders with no hangers-on, and armed as heavily as we could manage -- anyone who could not fight remained within the valley. Even those who could not pick up on such oddities were still made aware of our presence over time, for these same herds would not stray far from this mountain valley. A territory was being carved out in the midst of a contested land.

By midsummer, we had more than doubled our numbers, and Naiman and Kereit war bands stopped to investigate as they passed through. Kaisha had made sure to send scouts out with each herd, and with strict orders. Every time an organized threat drew near, they would retreat immediately and through the night if need be, like a reel being wound back in. There were a few tense encounters; at one point, one of our entrenched outposts at the entrance to the valley was overrun, and some of our members captured. I had prepared a number of escape routes through the mountains, and distributed maps with rendezvous points, but an all-out assault did not follow. From that point on, raiding parties would pass over us on their way to old enemies, simply observing from a wary distance and conserving their strength for easier prey.

The autumn brought in a veritable flood of new recruits with sizeable and healthy herds. It was only natural, upon reflection. These would be the first ones targeted on the open steppe; far better to band together for security than to chance it out alone. Wealth brought with it danger, Sandal would often say, and even a flock which spanned the steppe would be no use to you if you were dead.

Every new group passed through me first. I would examine them for illnesses, especially ones which could become contagious. If something could be done to cure them, then I would do it. If not, I would prescribe to them a pleasant and light sedative, which would make their first few days with us ones of relief. That alone -- the mere fact of being looked after, in a place they saw as safe -- was often enough to produce miraculous results. Those who were healthy of body but uncooperative of mind, I would occasionally invent some illness for, as an excuse for the same treatment. In any and all cases, I would then enter them into the records, in exhaustive detail.

After that, I would take their herds aside for the same purpose. During this process, the older children of the valley would be the ones to feed and watch the animals. For the newcomers, this would typically be the first days they had spent without work or responsibility since earliest childhood. After an initial period of confusion and tentative observation, they would join in with whatever the other valley denizens were doing -- singing, dancing, training, talking. When the examination and recording of the herds was completed, I would calculate, and draw up a plan to distribute them as efficiently as possible, balancing current nutritional needs, projected needs, breeding, local geography and grazing, and other such logistics.

At this point, it would be explained to them that, should they wish to remain, their herds would not be returned to them. If they wished to continue herding, they would be assigned to an existing team, or receive a new herd when the numbers grew. Otherwise,

they were welcome to stay within the valley. Food, shelter, medicine, and anything else we could help them with would be provided to them in either case. Should they object, their herds would be returned to them healthier than before, and they could chance it back out on the open steppe. None ended up objecting, and on the occasions when Kaisha was in the valley, back from her roving patrols between the herds, her presence made even this explanation unnecessary.

With the first snows came a new phase. People with few livestock or none were finally driven to us by their total desperation, begging for a scrap or two that might help them see the Spring. They were vagabonds and orphans, the most shameful of outcasts and the most misfortunate and gentle, as well as the feckless and the fools -- the squanderers and short-sighted. To their great shock, they were taken in without question, and given the same offer: sustenance and protection, and work if they wanted it. Most peculiar of all were, perhaps, the deviants. There were a few, coming singly or in pairs, who had been discovered taking other men as lovers, and were driven out or fled from shame. Most were simply unsubtle, unschooled in the polite discretion with which such arrangements are usually handled, but at least one of them had made some kind of stand out of principle. They all stood out from the others by one thing: they were the slowest to fully adapt. Where others relaxed into our company as soon as their confusion passed, these men held back, their hearts holding fast to a secret they were terrified to divulge, and thus unable to truly open. This did diminish over time, but it was only direct interaction with Kaisha which seemed to definitively shake them loose. So total, so brutal, so shattering was her indifference towards anything they might be or do within themselves that they were thrust soul-first into a liberation which no manner of warmth and comradeship could truly bring them to.

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As all the herds in their thousands, and the humans in their hundreds, were brought into the valley for the winter, I could not help but feel a certain satisfaction, and even a faint glimmer of gratitude towards my father's choices. In the end, Kaisha's tribe was not inherited, nor even conquered. There was no indignity of asking, and thus no ritual of chooser and chosen. She was simply, finally, left unobstructed -- and these milling herds and herders were her wake.

As we sleep in the darkness of each day, so too does the world sleep in the cold night of each year. Such rest builds the foundation for what lies ahead. And so I too began my work.

During the year, I had merely been scrabbling to keep up with the pace of things. The records transformed by the day, never holding still long enough to analyse, let alone comprehend. Now I could consolidate, reflect, step back and read the patterns. It was, thus, in this winter that I finally began to walk through the recesses of my father's mind.

He had always been inhabiting another world, as the sighted one does from the blind, and as the student of Euclid does from the uninitiated into geometry. They have access to a world of lines and planes and points, of perfect shapes and the relations they spawn within themselves and between each other -- one every bit as vital as those of pitch and colour. But my father had always been in a different world still.

It is clear to anyone who has attempted it that the world around us cannot be brought to perfect measure by geometries and arithmetic. There is always a gap, a remainder -- something left out, unaccounted for. I had always been wary of this point, and yet it was

into this gap that I fell when the loss of Kaisha left me with no other method to rely on in her recovery. Still, I cannot say I was surprised -- not truly. The name is not the thing itself; the map is not the territory.

And yet, there is a link between them. For someone's goat and sheep, there are two corresponding numbers, and their sum. There are even knowable rules for their rates of change. These are complex, but they are concise; perhaps my father was the only one to know them now, but any scholar could quickly comprehend them in times to come. Just so, hills have their corresponding semi-spheres; the planets, their ovals of orbit; grains of sand, their many-sided polyhedra. Past a certain point, these things diverge; you can follow the road of shapes and numbers all the way into absurdity, and through it, onto mystery.

That is not the path my father took. At least, it is not the only path.

For it turns out that there are complexities in the behaviour of great multiplicities and their large numbers that no pure arithmetic can follow. For al-Khwarizmi as for Euclid, everything converges constantly onto the definite, the singular, the sayable. Only from there can they proceed. Their calculations are precise; their equations will admit one resolution, and no other. But my father saw that the alternative is not mere chaos. Even chance, it seems, has its own rules. One can work on the basis of the probable, the indefinite. One can see the contours of its patterns. The way things clump together, though the path each takes remains invisible. How, when one lays aside the attempt to account for each and every element, and predict and determine all angles on it, one can see the sweep of them, feel the flow of them, note the tune to which they dance and draw apart.

So, there is the world we see around us, and the logic that resembles it. Take the path of this logic, and the world seems a machine -- a whirring of interlocking and discrete parts. But one can also look at it the other way; see the forest and let fade the trees; know the desert and not the grains of sand. And that too has its own logic.

It is this logic my father had made out, and he appended notes like poems and left apparent errors like landmarks at those places in the records which seemed to demonstrate its principles. In this, he was profound, and my quest to follow him, a willing one. His parting gift to me was a language with which to speak an Empire, and suggest it into motion.

But he also did much more. He created puzzles and played games; riddled his notes with hidden messages in a language of symbols which one could only translate with brute force. Side by side with the significant, he would jam in the trivial. He would mix alphabets, for no possible purpose other than to engender unmanageable variations when I attempted to decrypt it. His records were now lost, but I had noted down many examples of his codes. And almost every time, it turned out that the hidden meanings were precisely as ridiculous as the open ones. "Fletch's goats are suspicious; perhaps he is singing them the wrong lullabies" would, decrypted, give "sing all you want; you'll never be as tuneful as Fletch's goats". He thus remained an intractably infuriating little gremlin of a man.

Most disheartening of all was the fact that the message which seemed to underlie all these addendums, and string them all together, was one he had already branded into me at birth. And yet, he seemed to find the need to lead me by the nose through a thousand hours of bewilderment to bring me back to what he had said with a word -- create a

whole body of law for something that could be delivered standing on one foot. But perhaps he did it simply so that I would not feel entirely alone with it; an absentee father spending time with his son in the only way they knew how. I sometimes cry to think of this, and beg Kaisha for a world where the comfort of communion will not have to be so very fleeting; where we no longer simply echo at each other from such lonely distances; when the embrace of our loved ones will not have to wait till death.

I suppose it must be true, then. I loved my father. I love him still. I wish he did not have to leave me how he did. It was so cruel, and came so soon.

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While I dedicated myself to all of this, Kaisha reorganized the tribe. It was a necessity -- we had grown large enough that we needed a system that was at once less piecemeal and less centralized. I could no longer be the lynchpin of all our resources of stock and labour; I had just about held out until now, but it is unlikely I would have managed to cope with another full year of this, especially if our numbers grew again.

And so Kaisha established groups of 10, called arbans, which were to be the central unit of all our activity. They would be trained in warfare and equipped to fight. Each would select a spokesperson, who would be answerable to her. They would then be assigned tasks -- for the moment, that meant each would be responsible for a small herd come Spring. Until then, she drilled them hard. Almost unbelievably hard. In the short, but steadily lengthening, hours between the winter dawn and dusk, she bid them to follow her with a sharpness and exactitude I had never seen from her before. She moved them about the training fields like stones across a board, up and down and back and forth, until it seemed that they reacted to a bark from her subordinates before their lips had closed around it.

When the sky first began to lighten, she would be standing on the frosted, beaten earth, arms crossed and feet apart. She would stand like that until the whole sphere of the sun had set, when she would walk straight to her ger and not emerge until, by the dim grey light of the morning clouds, she could be seen in the same position as the day before. In doing so, she relieved her charges of the all pressure of her presence; they could say, do, think whatever it is they wished in their hours of rest. Indeed, the absence made many of them ache to see her again by the time they set their heads down, hoping to catch an early glimpse of her in dreams -- for she was growing ever more beautiful; enough to blind. I never knew people to spend their nights with such perfected ease as the members of those first arbans.

She also made it known that, when the time came, ten arbans would combine to form a zuun; the ten spokespeople would select one among their number to lead them in turn. Sandal joked that she had only done all this because it would be easier for me to maintain the records this way. I smiled along and demurred, but inwardly, I was gripped tightly by a similar thought.

Within months, our tribe had been entirely reconstituted around them, like tissues to the bones. The arbans made up of the more grizzled and unpleasant sorts were generally left alone, and assigned to scouting duty, or given faster-moving herds in more dangerous areas. The rest, however, would accrete hangers-on, and form what swiftly became new tribes, though they might have met just weeks ago and speak in different dialects. Those arbans which counted mothers among their members coalesced into especially close-knit

units; other families would join and help tend their children while they herded or stood guard.

With this new system in place, we became more flexible, and spread further out across this region of the steppe, which had now openly become a distinct territory. Skirmishes increased in frequency; Kaisha flashed across the land like wildfire; and ever greater crowds of the destitute and rudderless raced to join us, drawn in by the rumours of one winter's mercy.

All this meant our valley was at once more empty and more bustling. The families with young children and the elders past their prime who had constituted a stable society over the previous year had now split up and ventured back onto the steppe with different arbans, leaving only the infirm and decrepit, a flowing stream of messengers who were staying for the night, and one rather special arban. Kaisha had brought veterans past their prime together with sharp-witted and articulate young women she had paid special attention to during the winter. This group trained the new recruits as they came in, formed new arbans from them, and, unexpectedly, gave rise to some of the most tender of the many romances that sprung up from the fresh earth Kaisha had turned over.

These men had led bitter lives for little gain, and had finally given up on seeking to improve their lot -- or even extend it -- when they were unexpectedly made to share it with young women whose souls were forged from no less hard an iron as theirs. Only, these women possessed everything they had lacked -- purpose, integrity, passion, and that absolute joy at the prospect of the present moment which it would be senseless to call hope. The men treated them like diamonds -- precious treasures which are also impossible to tarnish. They gave of themselves with true freedom, holding nothing back in store, and were constantly surprised to see these girls return to them again and again, at first with questions, and then with the sweetest answers our short lives can provide. The handful of children that resulted did not often get the chance to know their parents, and it was without a second thought that I took every pain to ensure for them a splendid and a happy life, and make it known, in subtle ways, that theirs was a birth purer than that of any king.

By the summer, though, all our affairs had settled down. Those who wished to come to us had already come; the rate of refugees slowed to a trickle. And with it, the skirmishes on the steppe, which had been as constant as the rains, dried up almost entirely. If I had given it concerted thought, perhaps I would have been able to work backwards to its causes. I was not exactly wrong in thinking that it would have been a useless effort; these hidden truths would, as it turned out, parade themselves in front of us quite naked soon enough. Much more shameful was that I did not take the increased leisure to reflect upon myself, whether in a concerted way or loosely, and tease out my own strained causes. The records -- a task I thought would keep me quite occupied until the day I died -- were now undeniably delivering diminishing returns. And I could not quite adjust; unbusied, I did not slow, but rather did everything I could to again fritter away my time in increasingly trivial activities -- quite aware that this bespoke a terror of what waited for me in stillness, but too weak to face it yet. Sandal even started to tell me to stop moping and go out for a walk so that my syrup-like and oozing gloom would not clog up her work. But all of this, I know, is natural. For every moment of sudden realization, there are usually months of nervous, dream-like denial from which it derives its force.

It was thus that I found myself -- as the days began to shorten, and their heat prove insufficient to keep a chill from entering the nights -- midway through a surgery that was not, in truth, strictly necessary. Yes, the risks were low, and yes, it should return some

mobility to the joint, but it had been months since the break had healed, and the patient had already moved on.

Rattle walked in, and his rumbling announcement was cut short when Sandal hissed at him to be quiet and stand back. It always amused me how a young woman of such seeming frailty could intimidate even him, who had by now taken on all the strength and steadiness of a mountain. And so, he waited as I finished, washed my hands, and left Sandal to handle the stitching and administer the poultice and medicinal brew. I nodded to him, and was just undoing my robes to change into something less blood-spattered when he finally saw through his message to its end.

"Kaisha said to come."

I had already pushed past him and rushed out at the first word.

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I slowed down once I drew close enough to make out details. That Kaisha's warriors were grievously frustrated would have been obvious from a mile away, as they flexed their shoulders and fanned out behind her glumly.

Kaisha was squatted on her heels, elbow on one knee and cheek propped against a fist, looking up at an unknown man. She seemed genuinely amused. I closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and observed him as I continued shuffling forward.

He was clearly a shaman, but was so young, so slim, and set his feet so firmly. His features were stern, his cheekbones high, his brows defined. And he seemed to be holding his nerve in front of Kaisha. No, that wasn't quite right. He didn't seem to be unnerved at all. It had been some time since I had seen that.

He had about him that expansive self-assurance I would later come to see from the representatives of emperors. But even that was more fragile than they knew; you did not even have to string their master up and drag him naked through the streets before it started to crack, revealing bluster and the typical fear of death. No -- even at this moment, I knew his manner came from something more. He was someone who had seen through the veil of this world, and was no longer subject to its trivial temptations or its troubles.

As I observed him, so too did he turn his head to observe me. His gaze was piercing -- remarkably steady, almost perfectly so, but with just a tinge of lingering madness in the tightness of the minute muscles around the eyes, as is common among those who have gone just a touch too far with herbs. This was enough to calm me down. For just a moment there, he had caused me to doubt myself.

He was, for his part, clearly unimpressed and displeased with what he saw. Gesturing at me with no more than a slight tilt of his chin, he snarled at Kaisha.

"You had me wait... for this?"

Each word was sharp and curt, but one could clearly make out its Kereit tones. I bowed as low as I could manage while still hurrying forward.

"I am extremely sorry; please allow me to extend apologies. I came as soon as I could."

He did not turn to look at me again, but his frown grew fractionally deeper.

I furrowed an eyebrow at Rattle, who shrugged.

"I don't know. He says he's a messenger, but won't say from who. He told Kaisha to follow him alone and she would see. We wanted to shake some sense into him, maybe help him trim those long eyelashes of his, but Kaisha just said to go get you. So I did."

"Aha. I see. Well, there is now no reason for delay. Shall we be off?"

At that, the young shaman showed me the full brunt of his contempt, as if he could not believe I would have the temerity to make him look upon me twice.

I held my hands up in a gesture of helplessness, let out an embarrassed smile, and nodded at Kaisha, who had one hand on the horse she was mounting and snapped her fingers with the other so that one of the warriors would lend me his. With one final sneer, the shaman spun round and loped with even strides in the direction from which he had come.

I truly wanted to speak to Kaisha as our horses trudged along behind him, but his presence would have offset things enough that there would have been no point to it. And so she whistled for me instead. Our horses changed the rhythm of their gait to follow her first, and I am not sure the shaman even noticed it when he did too.

He led us to flat space among boulders which climbed up into cliffs. There were surely elite warriors hidden amongst the rocks, but Wailer would have followed us and tracked ahead. He had not sent a signal, and so I was quite relaxed as we dismounted and stepped past him into the ger.

The air was thick with scented smoke rising out of censers hung from the ceiling, and grew thicker as the shaman closed the flap behind us and set about ladling water onto the glowing coals of three stocky, metal braziers. Enshrouded in the fog was a man who reclined back into his chair in such a way that we could see how his skin sagged over his swollen, stone-like knuckles, but could not make out his face.

The shaman bowed to him, before taking his place behind and to his left.

The voice that rumbled out was old but powerful.

"So you are the girl that lately gave young Yesügei so much trouble. I did not believe the rumours at first -- neither that you did the things you were said to have done, nor that you were to be found in this most inhospitable of lands. But I believe them now."

When Kaisha gave no inkling of a response, the shaman started in as if to reprimand her -- this time with vitriol as well as condescension -- but the Khan raised a hand and stopped him short.

"Hold, Kohochu, hold. I have come here unannounced like this, and incognito; there is no need for much formality."

After saying this, he seemed to sink back into himself, and was silent for a long time. When he spoke again, it was as if we were not there -- that the stuffiness had gotten to

him, and he was mumbling reminiscences to himself. It was, in any case, still a rather sonorous mumble.

"It must be said I miss him now, somehow. Now that it has come to this. All those years, all that strife. A constant thorn in my side. Never letting me rest. Always lying awake, attempting to outwit each other. And yet, precisely for that, he was the man who knew me best. It was... as if... through all the war, and the dead kin upon the valley floor, the two of us stood alone atop two peaks, catching traces of each other's voices in the clashing of the blades."

Kaisha had obviously lost interest beside me. I could not blame her; it was all too clear what he was driving at. Not wishing to make a scene, I hurried out the first appropriate response that sprung to mind.

"Such indeed is often the plight of great men. War leaders most of all, most likely. When all rely on you for guidance and support, who can you yourself look to? The only ones who could be qualified are by that very token your bitterest rivals. You surely must have known a great loneliness."

It has always been a bad habit of mine -- that of the eager pupil -- to add on something more than an acknowledgement; a superfluous follow-up, to prove that I had understood. But perhaps it is not what I said that was presumptuous, but simply that my voice carried no awe at all. I grew up beside Kaisha, and therefore had no chance to learn to act. At any rate, I did not need to see his face to tell that he was miffed. His next words came out as clipped as one would have expected, impatient and displeased.

"...the Naiman Khan lies ill. This time, my bones tell me it is no ploy. He truly faces his end, if slowly. I think he hangs on only out of barest grit. And while the proud wolf breathes his last, the hounds turn into jackals. Yesügei especially makes no secret of his ambition. Some may call this unwise, to expose himself like this. That the first to move becomes the first target. That one should wait for him to attract attention and swoop in for the prize at the end. But I say the others have been cowed by indecision, not caution. Before they rise from their hind quarters, the carcass will have already been licked clean. And Jelme wastes his time with constant talk, and has gone soft besides, spending his time fawning over his latest wife and their new child."

After a pause, he added,

"If events continue on their course, there will be a new Khan among the Naiman within a year."

Another pause, and this time his voice carried a grimness to it. His next words after these would be satisfied and smug, or they would be a threat.

"So, girl. What do you say of this?"

I jumped in once again -- in part, on the off chance that she might actually respond and offend him. In part, it was to move things on as quickly as I could, in case she had not grasped the full implications of what he had just revealed. But, more than anything, it was to distract myself from the same.

"Sir, if I may. Your words are a great boon to us. This one is humbly thankful for them. The truth is that we are trapped in a narrow, if inexact, area between two great powers.

And we have grown too large for it. To remain would be to asphyxiate, even were we to be left entirely unmolested. Furthermore, now that we have united a dispersed region, we present a solid target; no matter how we turn, there will be naked flesh exposed. And we cannot hope to stand against a marshalled army. In short, we are too large to flee in such a tight space, and too small to fight. Thus, this chaos to the west presents an opportunity for escape -- probably the best that we shall get. We can migrate there, and throw our lot behind one of the pretenders. In so doing, we can obtain grazing land from the defeated, should we end up on the winning side. I cannot speak in certainties of what it is we'll do; all this would have to be discussed with, and approved by, others. But the simple facts of power carry a loud voice. I cannot think that any among us could fail to hear them when they are pointed out."

His demeanour changed as I spoke. He started off frustrated, then confused, and then suspicious, before metamorphosing into something quite different -- something which flushed me with such embarrassment, I was truly thankful for the obscuring mists.

He took a long time to reply, his whole body frozen in considered meditation.

"I am... surprised to meet someone who... understands so readily." He finally moved, waving a hand. "Go, boy. We have nothing more to say to each other now. But... we may meet again. At such a time... well. It will depend, then, on the simple facts of power."

While he had fixated on me, the shaman had trained equal attention onto Kaisha. She had once again found this amusing, and eventually glanced sidelong at him, with an expression too casual to be called quizzical.

By the time I bowed and followed Kaisha out of the ger, he was clearly shaking, and the way he turned back toward the Khan portended that, one way or the other, there would not be too many moons before a change came over the Kereit. He had already endeared himself to me with that.

As we rode back, I desperately wished to speak to Kaisha. I wanted it like the drowning man wants air. I could not recall the last time that I had even exchanged words, let alone anything else. I was wasting away from her absence. I knew I would never have a better moment.

But I was too troubled by what we had heard. Of course, I knew how I dug my own pit with this idiocy beyond all idiocies. But I simply could not do it.

Kaisha, meanwhile, was merciful, and held her silence, leaving me to bear my misery in peace, without the further agony of the temptation of her voice. Did this mean she had realized as well? She would know that the fact the Kereit planned to use us as a destabilizing factor, and intended to invade the Naiman in the ensuing chaos, might have induced a moment's hesitation in me, but no more. So if she held back like this, in consideration for me, that meant she probably knew full well -- which only cast me deeper into my turmoil.

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We decamped the next morning, sending messages out to all the arbans, who swelled our procession across the steppe by the day. It was through eyes swimming with tears that I beheld our full assembly. Dizzying, dizzying, as if waking from a dream into a distant

memory of a fantasy one had conjured as a child, and then waking once again to the same thing.

I had seen such a scene for as long as I could remember -- it seemed inevitable, obvious - only to beat such visions down, disperse them, ashamed at the delusions they were. And yet, here it was, so palpably real in the way it went beyond me. There were hundreds here I recognized so well, even from a distance. People I had tended to, others I had simply observed. The rest, I had known only through the records. But every single one of them displayed more of their life to me than I could hold.

To look upon just one of them would be to see a thousand stories: reunions with old friends; advice to someone younger; heated glances through the dust beat up by hooves; old arguments avoided with a new maturity, or rekindled for the fun of it; a lack of tightness around their shoulders, no longer bracing for an attack from behind. But to follow just one of them would be to refract their experience through all the others they encountered, until you found yourself in the maw of a living, breathing thing -- endless interconnections, glowing nodes within nodes of overlapping matrices, meaning on meaning, love on loyalty, all spinning, all together, all inextricably a part of each other... and all of them reflecting Kaisha. Overpowering. A flood. Too much. Sandal took the reins from me for these few days, in virtually every sense, and did not tire of asking me how I of all the people in the world could be so mindlessly sentimental.

It cannot have been pinned down precisely, but a new air enveloped us when it was clear we'd crossed into undisputed Naiman territory. The festival-like energy did not dissipate, but became more concentrated, coiled. We neither sped up nor grew cautious -- just cut a swathe serenely through greener pastures than we'd grown used to. Many of the Naiman herders fled as soon as they saw our dust plume, but we did come across some, and would send an arban making peace signals to go meet them. From this, I was able to confirm that we were heading through a zone in which Yesügei held influence. In fact, we had several encounters with members of Blacktooth's old tribe, now dispersed to tend the herds of the chieftain's cronies. These men and women almost always joined us. But those who had no ties to us, we made no special effort to induce to silence. Our presence was no secret by now, clearly. There was no sense of panic, but a certain coldness had set in nevertheless. That we advanced in the same way we had set out, despite the fact we were now going ever deeper into enemy territory, was frankly a little eerie.

All this changed suddenly. Overnight, in fact. Kaisha sent a message: that I was to be ready to depart at break of dawn. When it came, the tribe split up.

The non-combatants -- the young, the old, and the untrained -- remained as they had been. They slowly roused themselves, cooked food, went to inspect the herds. A few arbans, the newest and least experienced, remained behind to guard and guide them. All the rest -- a few hundred riders in total, with three or four times as many horses -- set off as punctually as Kaisha had prescribed, with Sandal and myself struggling to keep pace in a wagon full of medical supplies.

Within a day, we had covered nearly as much ground as had previously taken us a week. The next day, still aching from the exertion, we covered even more. It was as if the vulnerable members of our tribe behind us were some deadly beast from which we had to desperately flee. The next day was the same. As was the next... until mid-afternoon, when we stopped in the hollow between three steep hills. Arbans milled along their ridges as long as the daylight lasted. By night, a skeletal crew was assigned to keep watch; bonfires were lit at unmanned locations, to make them seem more numerous.

We were all told to eat well, not to scrimp on our supplies. After a few days with not much else but mare milk sprinkled with their blood, it felt like a feast. Kaisha walked among us, then, spending time at every campfire. I, of course, ate in the shadow of the wagon, and from afar, I spotted Flick -- Sandal's sister -- at Kaisha's side. I had thought I'd seen her earlier, but was only certain of it now. She had, after all, spent the time riding at the very front, guiding us through territory that was familiar to her. I finished eating, and crawled into the cart to dream.

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The arbars were slow to mobilize in the morning -- sluggish, even. They packed their sleeping gear methodically, as if each action were the only one they'd do today. The sun was well up by the time they formed ranks and filed up the hill. The night watch -- which I now realized had only been made up of a single arbar -- convened around my wagon, and immediately set down to sleep themselves. Their leader -- a boy more than a man, barely older than me -- said that they were here to guard me, to help with carrying the wounded if we won, and to run interference to help the others escape if we did not. Something in the way he looked at me brought about the suspicion that he had been ordered by Kaisha to keep me here until the battle had concluded. I spent a long moment pondering this, and made no headway with it. This thinking did, however, allow me to wait out their depleted endurance, until they fell into a fitful sleep. Then I made my excuses to Sandal, waved her back, and trudged up the hill alone.

In the middle distance stood Yesügei's camp, already in the process of packing up and pulling back. Below me, our own forces manoeuvred at the bottom of the hill, churning the ground into muck. In between these two, Yesügei's forces arrayed themselves at the top of a long, gradual slope. They sent a few forays out, threatening to flank our position, but these retreated after light skirmishing -- they seemed content to hold position.

It was only now that I grasped the basics of our strategy. If we had hared it over as soon as we entered Naiman territory... first off, we would have arrived altogether unable to fight. But even more crucially, Yesügei would not have had time to call his troops in. He would have refused us open battle and fallen back, harrying us with constant, small-scale raids until he could gather his forces and summarily crush us. In advancing slowly, making no secret of our presence, we had allowed him enough time to field an army. And in rushing at the end, we had arrived before this process was completed. He would not have his full numbers, and hopefully, the command structure would be improvised and loose. His senior commanders would have been entrusted with marshalling forces in different directions, and would even now be leading them here -- which also meant they would not be organizing serious raids on our highly vulnerable train, several days' march from this position.

It was a cunning and bold balancing act -- we would be utterly destroyed if we came too early or too late.

Even with this, though, they outnumbered us nearly three to one. Exact estimates are notoriously difficult in such conditions, but there could well have been more than a thousand men fielded against us.

I was, by now, utterly seized by fear. Everything was teetering on the edge of ruin. Everything -- *everything* -- could in these next moments come to naught, beyond the scope

of any rebuilding or recovery. I could not breathe, let alone count time. I only know that, eventually, Kaisha's forces started to move.

They advanced in a line, making a pass below Yesügei's position to loose their arrows and fall back. These fell as harmless as rain along the slope, not even reaching the hooves of the nearest horse. Then the enemy fired back. Our riders swerved and dodged and ducked behind their bucklers, but a few fell -- some of whom did not crawl back towards us. Their troops had the high ground; their arrows would fly farther, flatter, truer.

Our arbans circled back to where they started, and Kaisha rode back and forth in front of them, shouting something I could not make out from here. With a flourish of her blade, her mount reared, and she led them on another pass. This one was deeper, going some distance up the rise. Our arrows could now hit... but once again, theirs could hit better. We left a score of riders behind on that one, maybe more.

The arbans seemed shaken when they regrouped -- their horses skittish, their ranks slow to reform. Many groups had sustained losses; they had to ride with unfamiliar absences between them. Kaisha did not go forth to rouse them. In fact, I could not see her at all. But they advanced despite that, bowstrings creaking, preparing for another run.

I noticed it no sooner than our enemy did. This third pass began just like the others -- a thin line, swerving in a semi-circle to deliver a volley of arrows. The front of the line came in closer than it had the first time, and then continued forward. It passed the point we had reached on the second, and rode on. It was only now that our forces spun to face directly uphill. The back half of the line caught up with the front, forming a thicker mass, which now charged full-tilt toward the enemy position.

The manoeuvre was extremely difficult, and done at pace. It came out smooth and natural, unlike anything our troops had displayed yet. The enemy's surprise was total.

With a fraction of their numbers, we had trapped them. If they retreated to re-form ranks, they would concede the superior position. If they retreated further than that, they would be fighting in their camp. And so, they held their ground -- but the sudden, almost suicidal spin meant they were caught between loosing their arrows and drawing up to receive our charge. Some took the first option, and some the second. A sprinkling of arrows from different directions passed ineffectually through our troops. Shouts rang from the top of the ridge, and riders milled about -- often bumping into those who had been firing. Most, however, were simply indecisive. And then our front line reached them. The battle had begun in earnest.

At first, we ripped right through them, sowing disorder in their ranks. But then, those chieftains who had first sounded the rallying horn finally got their men into order, and led a counter-charge against us. Our advance slowed, and within minutes, the front lines were a messy melee, both sides tussling over inches. As our momentum slowed, my foreboding returned.

We had reached stalemate with the centre of their army, but their two flanks could now deploy themselves against us. We, by contrast, had no more room to manoeuvre, and no reserves. All our forces had been used in that one gambit... and they had failed to pierce the centre. The only fate that could await them was gradual attrition and encirclement, and then complete defeat.

Perhaps because my despair now was so extreme that I simply could not process it, I continued observing the battle as coldly as I had from the start. And so, I bore witness to the whole cycle of the tide, from its lowest ebb to its final, irresistible crash. I saw it all so clearly, illuminated by the heavenly body that pulled it forward.

The first thing which I noted was that the stalemate in the centre held so firm. I should not have expected this to be the case. They had the advantage of the ground, being able to fight downwards. They were better equipped. They were physically the stronger; we counted many women in our number, and men before and past their prime. And they were simply more skilled in the handling of weapons; one year of constant training could not so easily overcome the experience of years. But as the seconds ground onwards, and our line did not buckle or fall back, I began to discern why.

In that tight melee, individual skill in arms counted for little, and steppe warriors had never been trained to fight in massed ranks. The same proved true for all the other factors. An experienced, powerful, well-equipped fighter, without room to move or retreat, would be rendered helpless by two inferior opponents collaborating to kill him. And our troops were doing exactly that. In every single exchange of the hundreds that I saw, we were always the first to take the initiative, constantly creating localized scenarios of small-scale numerical superiority. We only needed one person to engage their warriors, in any way -- either by meeting them blow for blow, grabbing hold of them to slow them down or incapacitate them, or even simply taking the hit from their weapons and momentarily halting them that way -- before one, two, or three of their comrades rushed in behind to overwhelm him. I saw many of our fighters even dismount, and rush through their ranks, stabbing at every thigh and hip they passed -- four or five or even ten -- before eventually being cut down.

Our flanks were equally curious. To either side of the central crush, our arbans stopped, spun, and fanned out. They showed no desire to engage the enemy; they simply held their positions, taking up space so that none could approach our centre from the sides or from behind. They employed every tactic they could, simply to delay the enemy and prolong the time the centre could attack unharrassed. When the enemy moved to outflank them, they would charge; as soon as the enemy pulled back, so would they. When they found themselves in unwinnable positions, they would fight for every step, throwing themselves forward to win even a second's time.

Every hair on my body stood on end; waves of raw sensation pulsed through me, rough and constant. And slowly, slowly... the enemy began to feel it too.

They had never experienced anything like this before. Never even imagined it. It was impossible, and thus unanswerable.

They did not face a frenzied horde, who would lose themselves in fury and dissipate all their energy with their first charge. Neither did they face an unthinking, unfeeling mob, who advanced as if already dead, numbly effectuating a single order. Both of these could be dealt with. Both of these were, on some level, understandable.

But that was not what stood before them -- what came at them. They faced a totality of individuals united towards a common goal. There was no herd-like, collective will for them to break. One woman would not falter if her comrade fell. The left flank would not flee if the centre caved. Each unit, and each one of its members, would pivot, reassess, and determine what they could do to approach victory. If there was a breach in the line, and you were closest, you would step into it. If the enemy was massing behind the melee,

and no one else was free to move, then you leapt forward to disrupt them. Calmly or furiously. Steadily or quickly. But either way, intractably.

And the enemy took notice. They began, at first, to hesitate, then slow, and then give ground.

Our troops surged forward. Panic was spreading. The field turned into chaos.

And then it happened. Their centre finally split. Their finest troops -- Yesügei's own bodyguards and seasoned veterans -- had been defeated. We had burrowed right through them.

A breach was formed. And through it sped an unmistakable figure. The whole field witnessed as she punched through the enemy's disintegrating line, heading straight up to the highest point of the hill, where Yesügei had, until moments before, been shouting, flailing, pulling out his hair. He did none of these things now -- only turned and fled towards his camp.

Kaisha was followed through this breach by one rider after another, like hounds just loosed from their bonds. They were doubled over on their horses, spurring them on desperately, utterly unmindful of the enemies they had just pushed past. Those who still had their bows brought them up mid-gallop. Yesügei swerved left, swerved right. And then he fell.

Resistance collapsed as he hit the ground; his army, a puppet with his strings cut. Chieftains called back their troops; a space opened up between the lines. Our forces did not advance to fill it. What had previously been a terrifying mass of a thousand warriors split up by tribal faction, and each retreated in different directions. Our army, in turn, seemed to heave a single breath. And then they were regrouping, tattered arbans finding what was left of themselves and then advancing to the summit, to hold position around Kaisha and the man squirming at her horse's hooves.

I stumbled back a few paces, and screamed and screamed to Sandal and the night watch until they saw me. Then I turned again, and tumbled down the hill, my legs unable to carry my weight in my rush to reach the wounded.

I had no equipment on me -- Sandal seemed to take forever with the supplies -- but that could not stop me in my frenzy. I tore my clothes asunder to bind wounds, wailed as I saw each familiar face... but my hands moved calmly, skilfully, proving once more I was nothing but a presumptuous passenger stowed away within myself. When supplies did arrive, they were almost all useless. I tasked the watch with spreading a tarp upon the ground and bringing those I tended here. Only Sandal proved of some use, holding the wounded as I poured alcohol into their wounds, then burned them shut.

I did all this through tears. I cannot tell you how much I loved each person I tended. They were perfect. Utterly pure. They had led perfect lives. They had surpassed themselves, unified their will with those of others. And yet, what was perhaps more, they had unified their will within themselves. They had found something they could dedicate themselves to -- wholly, without reserve. And they had decisively carried it out. In that moment, they were a seamless thread within our world -- proceeding from their deepest, truest impulse to their own decided destination. I loved them to eternity as they died in my arms.

Of course, each one of them were in the records; I swore, then and there, I would compile a book of the dead. But though I would indeed go on to do so, I would never share it. It would mean nothing. Nothing could pierce their anonymity; none could share in their last moments, so full of pride; nothing could be added to souls which had been authors of their own completion.

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As night fell, I could turn to the less urgent cases. It was now I could remove the arrows; cleanse wounds; attend to the fevers which were already started to swell. Messengers came, but I did not listen to them, telling Sandal to handle the distractions. There was a constant stream of comrades and companions; these, I had every sympathy for, but unfortunately, no time. I was the only person standing here who had any sort of mastery of medical procedure; every second was absolutely precious. I sidled away from them, waving them off to others who might help them identify their loved ones or hold them while they mourned. And thus, I worked alone through the night, struggling beyond myself against the downward pent of our existence to pull back years, days, hours, minutes from the void.

With the morning, I had to stop. There were no wounds left for me to suture, and even if there were, my hands were trembling so badly I would only have succeeded in pulling them open. Those who had stood with me through the night were collapsed around me, looking more wretched than the wounded. Even the rags they used to cover their eyes were steeped in blood. There was no chance that I could join them. And so, I climbed up to my frail, unsteady height, and walked up the hill where Yesügei had marshalled his forces this time yesterday.

In the thick of the congealing mass of blood which marked the fiercest area of fighting, I found a corpse that none had even thought to examine for life. I cannot say what it was I recognized about it; even the general shape of him was nigh on indiscernible. And yet I knew that it was Spit even before I turned over his bearded face.

His body was in tatters. He had been trampled, pierced, and slashed on every surface. No one would have had the time to do this when he was down. That meant he had kept getting back up, advancing, receiving wound after wound after wound, and still pressing forward. I found I had nothing to say, nothing to think. No matter how much my father had taught me and how much I had seen since then, I still struggled to even contemplate a world whose scope was so wide that it could contain my childhood experiences of the man who lay dead before, and the way I felt now, looking at his end. If I could not even contemplate how they could both fit in a single world, how much less so could I comprehend them as episodes within my own life? What else could I do, but shake my head, and move along?

My gaze was at my feet, and my awareness must have been fading in and out, so it was almost a surprise to find I had arrived at the chaotic sprawl of Yesügei's former camp. The early morning seemed to be lasting forever. The golden glow to everything was the same it had been at daybreak. Though the camp was edging towards a quiet bustle, it seemed that every passerby was on the day's first errand, and stopped a moment to breathe in the new air, letting their eyes drop, half-lidded, to feel themselves suspended in the light.

I cannot remember what exactly I thought I was looking for. Most likely, I was half-dreaming, rendering my goals both ever-shifting and invisible to the waking mind. What I

do recall is being jolted into frail lucidity by the sight of a familiar figure, though it took me most of his approach to place him. He was tall and upright, and had a slight weariness which only complemented the gravity and poise the years had granted him since I had seen him at the Naadam. He was Bo'orchu -- counsellor and statesman, and Yesügei's right-hand man.

He was flanked by two leaders of arbans, close followers of Kaisha. I wondered if they had always carried the bearing of generals, or if it had simply settled on them after the battle. It was they who saw me first, as I stood there staring at them numbly. One narrowed his eyes, the other faltered in his step. Bo'orchu noticed their hesitation and came to a stop before me. His recognition came more slowly.

"...You...?"

I bowed low -- in part, to cover up at least the sight of me.

"Sir, please forgive me for appearing before you like this. I have only just finished treating the wounded from the battle, and have not yet had the opportunity to change my garb."

"I see. It is of no import. Rather, I thank you for your efforts. You... were the boy with the poison, were you not?"

The boy with the poison indeed.

"Yes, sir. That was indeed me, sir." I thought to make good use of this wakefulness while it lasted, and so I sought out information. "It seems that much has changed since the outcome of the battle. I have, unfortunately, been entirely occupied since that time. Could I ask honoured sir to help enlighten this humble servant of what has occurred since the battle, that I might not speak out of ignorance?"

"Ah. Why, yes. Of course." He cleared his throat, surreptitiously glanced at the two men guarding him, and began explaining in a calm voice. "Yesügei is dead. He was captured during the battle, and was questioned by your chieftain, but... did not prove cooperative. He..."

Noticing the incident caused him some discomfort, I raised my hand in a pacifying gesture. He nodded in thanks, and continued.

"With his demise, we, as his retainers, found ourselves in a conundrum. His son remains alive, but he is a prisoner -- just like she had been, only two years ago. I never could have imagined that the situation could reverse itself like this. When I first met her, I thought her no more than an unusually wilful and precocious child. Even during her captivity, she only seemed exceptional in her reticence and stubbornness. Although, looking at it even now, I struggle to discern what it is that has changed..."

He let out a long sigh, which I mirrored inwardly. It seemed I needn't have bothered inquiring, if it was going to be this predictable.

"At any rate. She granted me a private audience in the evening. By the end of it... I had agreed to follow her. Whether I have damned or saved myself, only time will tell. And that, I am afraid, is about all I can relate to you for certain. I do not know which of my peers made the same choice I did, but I gather that some did. Now, the task becomes to

bring as many of Yesügei's resources and manpower as possible with us. It is to a council to discuss this question that we are headed now."

"I am most grateful for your time and candour." I honestly cannot recall what thought led me to this, but I continued thus. "I beg one more question, before I cease imposing on you in such a shameless fashion."

"Speak."

"Did Kaisha ask Yesügei about the fate of Blacktooth?"

Bo'orchu's brows shot up at this, and he pondered it for a time before settling a rather odd look on me.

"...no. She did not make any mention of that affair."

I nodded, and got caught up in a brief thought. He must have misinterpreted my expression, because he added:

"I... can tell you this, however. I was closer to Yesügei than any other man, and I do not think it hubris to say that I was consulted on any major or... unconventional decisions. I cannot say for a certainty that Yesügei was not behind your father's death. I must also admit that he had planned and executed many such schemes to destabilise your tribe, over the previous years. But I am not aware of any evidence that he was in any way involved on this occasion; and what's more, his surprise at the event seemed, to me, wholly genuine."

This was how poorly I was reading the situation at this time: through his speech, I had been primarily concerned with hiding any signs of condescension in me. On the surface, he was doing me a great favour, I made a point of reminding myself; I had to at least pretend I was appreciative of his superfluous comments.

But he eventually came to an end, and after that, the moments dragged on in silence. It took me some time to switch registers. Had I missed something? Surely they could not be waiting on me? A boy like myself should be left speechless after discussing the topic of his father's murder; it fell to them to move the conversation on, or call it off altogether and finally return to their task.

Then my thoughts went garbled and the world went dark. My exhaustion had caught up with me. I felt myself pitching forward before bending myself back upright and forcing my eyes open. I saw the three of them looking at me uncomfortably. Embarrassed, I scrambled for a conclusion. Perhaps they had been ordered to bring him alone, and were too stupid to adapt on the spot; perhaps we were now important enough to need rules of decorum, and I should thus arrive separately due to our difference in status. I opened my mouth to ask them where the meeting was being held, but before words could come out, my jaw went slack, and all the breath in me was expelled with a whimper.

The fog that had settled on me through the night, and which had only grown a fraction thinner while I wandered through the camp, now dispersed without a single trace. I was suddenly, radically, traumatically awake. Awake, for possibly the first time in many, many years.

I had suddenly realized what was going on. Not just in this moment, but in every one that came before and would come after.

I saw it all in that one instant. Just how misguided I had been. How I had done nothing but go around in circles, chasing epiphany after epiphany, while resolutely refusing to face the simple truth.

For I had had moments like this countless times before. Each time, I thought I had finally broken through, had finally come to my senses. But in reality, each was a clever ruse to distract myself, to come up with a new excuse, and paper over my essential flaws, and change everything under the sun besides the one and only thing that counted.

How many times had this repeated? I'd realize that I was worthless -- or much worse. And so I would collapse, retreat, shrink in. Until I got to thinking that perhaps I was not so worthless after all. If so, I should give this world another go. And then I'd be confronted with my shortcomings; turns out I was a louse from the beginning. And that would go on for some time... until I'd flip back over. But, see, this was the clever bit. Past experience meant I could not accept the story that I was not worthless. I had seen this one before; I would not fall into the same trap. So this time, I did not dare to dream I had any worth; instead, I would throw up my hands and say "even if I am utterly irredeemable, what else is there for it but to try for redemption anyway?" And so it would continue, while I remained conveniently blind to the axis on which it all turned.

I stood before them like this. Utterly unguarded, wan, agog. They began to ask me something, their expressions increasingly concerned.

It was that, I think, that was the trigger. It was that which allowed me to see what I had made every effort to ignore before.

It was the fact that there was no antipathy from them whatsoever. There was no possibility at all that they secretly hated me. That they were jealous, or looked down on me, and that they merely rejected me for that reason. But no -- they bore me no ill will, and thus, there could be no hidden plot here, no layers of deception. That much was clear as day, even to me.

The only thing in their eyes was pity. Perhaps a faint trace of inevitable disgust. And, under that, confusion.

They were not trying to shame me.

They had genuinely never considered that I might join in the meeting. It had still not occurred to them that I might even want to. They seemed to have nothing against the idea, intrinsically. If I asked, they might even try to help. But that was far besides the point.

The point was that they were right.

I closed my mouth, and bowed, and listened with them to the hollow whisper of my voice.

"I am very, very sorry, sirs. It seems my exertions took more of a toll than I realized. I shall retire now, and rest. I wish you well, as regards the weighty matters before you."

With that, I turned and left. They said something as I retreated. I even remember what it was.

That I should take care of myself. That it would benefit no one if I were to neglect my own health.

I remember it because, unlike the last times, I was not thrust into a catatonic stupor. I was not locked into a thought and dead to the world. There was no need for that. It is not like I could forget what I had seen. Once one sees the truth, there is no particular thought or feeling that must be held on to. There is just lucidity. Clarity, where before there was confusion.

And I clearly saw that they were right.

Who was I now to Kaisha, after all? Who was there in the world who would say I was anything more than a particularly herb-addled medicine man who travelled in her train? When had I last spoken to her? When had I last tried to help her? When had I last taken charge of anything in my life?

But, no. None of this concerned me at this moment. The only thing that mattered -- the only words that rang out in my head as I let my feet take me away from the camp -- was one question.

Since when?

Since when had I turned my back on her like this?

How long?

How long had I been on the path that led away from her, and ended with me here?

I had always known it would only get worse as it went on. That innocence is sweet and fleeting. That if there was to be any comfort, any peace, any happiness at all in my life, it would lie somewhere in the past.

But... when? How early did it end? How long, since I have lost it?

Was it merely these past two years, after I grew overconfident in my intellect, oversimplified the world, botched her rescue, and was unable to recover? Or was it before then?

Was it when I first realized a man might lie with her, after the fashion of all flesh? Was it when I noticed that I would unleash every plague, poison every sanctuary, literally unmake the world thread by sacred thread before I would let that happen?

Or was it when I grew fearful that her love for me might be truly all too real? That she might do the unthinkable for my sake? That she might somehow compromise even herself? Just for my pathetic, wretched soul?

Or was it the thought that immediately followed it: that such a thing could not be true? Which caused me more pain?

Or was it before all then?

Was it even there from the beginning?

Had I ever once been honest? Had I ever once been pure? Was it truly possible that I was so ultimately twisted that I took the most blessed life in all existence, and somehow found a way, against all odds, to make it cursed?

It was possible. It was possible. It could indeed be so.

--

The oxen had been unhitched from our cart, and its supplies transported to the medical pavilion, leaving it quite bare under its canvas canopy. Sandal was sleeping in the back corner, and stirred when I entered, but merely rolled around to face away.

If I survived, I would surely sleep again, eventually. But now, the prospect of it seemed more distant than the sea. Out of habit, I sat before my writing block, legs folded under me and spine erect. But there was no paper spread before me, no writing utensils. I let my hands lie in my lap, and looked at the worn wood blankly, not thinking of anything at all.

After some time, someone called for me from outside the cart. Sandal groaned, and covered her head with a blanket. There was a loud creaking, and then the canvas parted, allowing a slash of sunlight to settle across my writing block, along with the silhouette of Flick.

She hesitated on the threshold, and spoke to me from there.

"...Fingers? That... is you, right? Do they still call you by that name?"

She was struggling with this. Struggling very hard. What a truly fine young woman. What an extremely decent human being. So demanding of herself. So slow to judge another.

My silence hit her hard, however, and hardened her somewhat.

"I... alright. I don't know why you've been avoiding me. Why don't want to see me now. But that is your choice. I just have one question. Answer me, and I will leave you alone. What..."

Even now, she hesitated.

"...what happened to my sister?"

And there it was. I shook my head, ever so slightly, and let out a mirthless laugh.

At first glance, one might be tempted by incredulity, take refuge in absurdity. What could possibly be the chances that such a reckoning should come now, of all times? Specifically now, when I was most alone, most empty, most distraught. Now -- after hours and years when I could think of nothing else but what she came for. Now -- in the one moment -- the *one* moment -- when I did not care.

But, of course, that would be such a blinkered response. Of course she would come now. There is no other time when she would come. Before, when I was adrift on the steppe,

she could only come in nightmare. These past few days, she would always have waited. Because, after all, she is a decent person. She would wait for me to be ready, wait for me to come to her. And I did not. Besides, there was the upcoming battle to be considered; all this could be a fatal distraction. "I'll ask if I survive", is what she thought. And then the battle was over, and I was finally busy, and so of course she did not come then. But now, Kaisha was sitting in full council, with the wisest and most influential by her side. They would come to some decision, and this very evening, Flick might be called on to depart. And so, it had to be now. There was no mystery to it, no divine conspiracy or comedy set up to bring me low.

And so, I laughed at how simple it was. How obvious. How perfectly inevitable, and undoubtedly fitting.

She did not take it thus, however. How could she?

"I... I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe it. That you'd be capable of this. She thought the world of you, my sister did. Looked up to you like no one else."

Her faith in me was dying as she spoke. It hung on by one thread.

"I... I take it back. I don't want to know what happened to her. It wouldn't make a difference now. Just... just... tell me. Just tell me why. Why? Why do you call that... that woman... by my sister's name?"

She pointed at the corner of the cart, where Sandal lay, motionless and obscured.

"Are you... are you really so...?" She could not think of a word. "Is that all we mean to you? All that she was? Interchangeable? Will anyone do, so long as they coddle you? So long as they make you feel important?"

A woman's voice came out from underneath the covers, as if from another world entirely. It was flat, yet drawling, and annoyed. She sounded like the only thing which mattered was her disturbed sleep.

"So he lost one sandal on the steppe, and then picked up another. What of it? Don't all men have two feet anyway?"

Flick went silent, then. That was the final blow. She had nothing to say to me now. There was no lower I could fall. And so, she just looked down at me, like vermin in a pit.

And there it was again, crawling across my face. That sad, self-pitying little smile. The most unsightly thing under the heavens. I met her gaze.

Of course, it was horrific. Of course, my suffering was beyond any description. But that was all it was. It did not, in fact, kill me. Shame could not still the heart, as it turns out. Guilt could not lock the breath. I was not, in fact, obliterated. It seems that this was it, and nothing more. This was all it is. A disappointed look on a good person's face.

I was in hell. I was in hell. There was nothing but an endless torment.

And I did not really care.

I was a monster. It was over. It was done.

Flick turned and left. The planks creaked as she jumped off. Darkness returned.

The... woman tossed and turned a little while, before giving it up, sitting straight, and leaning back, letting the covers fall across her shoulders, so that only her black hair hung down across her face.

I nodded at her, and wished her a good morning.

She did not respond for some time.

"...why didn't you tell her that you gallantly took in a stray? A nasty, rat-bitten, broken thing? Nursed it so kindly, ever so patiently, no matter how ungrateful it was, no matter how often it bit the saintly hand that healed it? That one day, by accident, you called it by another's name. That it refused to respond to anything else. That it probably did so to torment you. And to help it drive everyone off, so it could have your stupid, self-defeating sympathy to itself?"

I shook my head, and allowed my eyes to close. She was trying so obviously to console me, and hiding her intent so poorly by pretending she was mocking me. I dearly wanted to cry. From whatever depths there lie in me, I desperately wanted to weep. And yet, nothing would come. And so I spoke instead.

"You may be many things... Sandal. But you were never broken. And you have never been ungrateful -- not once. You are just... a little bitter. And that is natural. It may yet change, in time."

She grimaced at that, and I expected a barrage of dark remarks. But they did not come.

Instead, she leaned forward and cocked her head, looking at me with narrow eyes.

"Something's happened to you. Not just... all this. Something else. Something big. Or else you'd be going berserk now. What is it?"

I looked back down at the blank writing block. I was so very tired.

"...I've told you this before. I won't say it again." She drew in a deep breath, and held back on equivocations. "I won't use it against you. I may even help you out. But just tell me what you're thinking. Explain what's going on. How can you get so self-righteous about being so alone, when you won't tell anyone a thing? It's the worst thing about you. Without a doubt, the worst. Which, as you know, is saying a lot."

She had indeed said that before. Everyone had. That is, the people I could not flee from altogether -- so, in fact, very few.

I had always assumed that they were right. Assumed it, because to dare believe otherwise would be to sign my own conviction, and draw the knife across my neck myself. But I had never been truly convinced; never actually believed, in my heart of hearts, that they were right -- that I truly did hold too many things in, try to bear it all myself when I should instead rely on others. And the honest truth was that I still did not believe so now. I do not think it was hidden hubris, some last remnant of self-justification which this latest -- and, I was quite certain, last -- realization had failed to scour clean, and would in the future drag me back to another round of cataclysmic self-inquiry.

But, well. What could it hurt, to try it now? Now that everything had failed. Now that I truly had nothing to lose.

"You..." I stopped, and reconsidered. She was at least right to say I found this hard. "Sandal. What is your real name? The one you had before we called you this one."

She glared at me, hard. She was taken aback... in fact, hurt.

"I know it carries no fond memories of you. Your parents only made your life difficult, and as for what came after..."

"But, you know, names can be important. Even if one buries them, or even succeeds in forgetting them... they can still have an effect. It can set expectations so rigid and insidious that they come to define the thing itself."

Her gaze had softened, but she still did not reply. And so I took another tack. Or perhaps, got to what I had originally meant to say.

"...my father... had a very odd habit. He would never make a direct statement. At least, never to me. He would always -- always -- find a way to turn it into a question, string it in with another hundred clauses, let it fall into ellipsis. I might have mentioned this before. But... it is not entirely true. There was one exception, and exactly one.

"Throughout my life with him, there were times when his colourful facade would be peeled back. When he would reveal a seriousness which, of course, was always very shocking to me, and was more effective than any reprimand. It usually came when I was letting myself be carried away with intellectualism. When I was being clever, but disingenuous. Or sometimes, simply when I was focusing on the wrong topic, while a more important one remained to be addressed. At those times, he would go quiet, and quite still. And he would ask me one question -- always only this one."

I took a breath.

"Boy -- what is your name?"

I thought I would falter here, or at least stutter, but it came out like a weight being sloughed off.

"My name, you see... is Khayr.

"It means Good, in the tongue he seemed to hold most holy. Goodness itself."

I did not move my head, and yet my gaze wandered off, for a time. She waited patiently, and eventually, I could continue.

"And so, you see, he must have made a statement. At least that one. Even though I could not remember it. Because, you see, he would ask me that question from my earliest days. And each time, I would know the answer to it, before I even knew what it meant. He must have told me as an infant, and done so many times."

Sandal shocked me somewhat when she spoke up now.

"Why... have you never used it?"

"What? Oh. I am not sure how, but I always had the sense that I should keep it secret. When I found out what it meant, of course, I understood. What kind of goodness announces itself like that? What kind of hypocrite would I be?"

"Then... does Kaisha know?"

There it was. That smile again. I looked away to hide it.

"I never told Kaisha about it."

I took a rest. The next part would be difficult.

"But, you see, that did not matter. For very many reasons. But to take just one: when I was very young, I used to worry about what she thought of goodness. Or if it meant anything to her at all. Or if it even made any sense, in light of her. But I soon gave that up. I would never understand her like that; and, in fairness to myself, I have never thought of it again.

"Nevertheless, it is not so easily escaped. Because... how shall I put this. Ah, Sandal. This is hard." I buried my face in my hands, and then brought it back out. "I suppose that I could say that Kaisha has a way of... demanding that you be yourself. That isn't quite right, but... how else can I put it? To stand before her is to be exposed to your core, back to its origins and through to its final expression.

"And so, you see my difficulty. If I felt I must be good... or, regardless of my feelings, if it was true that I was good... then if I was not good, I could not stand before her. It is not a question even of punishment, or judgement. It simply cannot be done.

"You see, Sandal. Whether it is a blessing or a curse, she told me what she was. She not only never hid it. She told me what she was.

"And so, I could not hide in ignorance. The consequences were clear.

"I knew there would come a day when our childhood was over. When she would not merely wait around to play with me. I simply prayed it would not come yet, not yet -- long after it had passed away unnoticed.

"And I knew that, when it came... she could ask terrible things of me. Things of inconceivable horror. Crimes worse than any of her generals could imagine. I could have the blood of millions on my hands.

"And so, I have always been scared. So scared that there was no room for anything else. Until I could feel nothing else than fear.

"And so I have looked away. For so long, I have looked away. Perhaps I have never truly met her gaze."

And now they came. It was too late for shame at it. I could no longer deny it. It is now that the tears came. They streamed down my face, unimpeded, and I spoke only in sobs.

"But... why? Oh God. Why? For what? What have I done? What, by my soul, have I done? How could I have looked away from her... when she is all I ever loved? How could I have run away... when she was all I ever wanted?"

"And she never asked a thing of me. Never once asked a thing. Not something terrible. Not something small. Nothing.

"She has only given to me. Again and once again. Unrelenting. Beyond all justification, all imagination. She has never met me but with grace. Never touched me but to soothe. Never allowed a pebble to block my path, a particle of dust to settle on me. She has been so good to me, so good that I thought everyone lived to rip me from her, and return me to what I deserved."

I continued a long time in this vein -- ran myself down to incoherence. And then I simply wept.

When I was done, I spoke again.

"And so... Sandal... you see... there is so much in a name."

And then I laughed. It came easier, this time. I could even handle the embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. You see now, Flick was right. I asked you a question merely to use you as an excuse to talk about myself. And then I even failed at that. I'll try to be more forthright. I will answer your question.

"What's going on is very simple. Up until yesterday, the Naiman clan was split in three. There were the followers of Yesügei, the followers of Jelme, and everyone else -- the loyalists of the dying Khan, the yes-men of his incompetent sons, and those too scared to pick a side.

"Now Yesügei is gone. We may pick up many of his followers, but by no means all. Even those who do accept us will not be entirely reliable, at least not immediately. And next year, Shikhikutag, the Kereit Khan, will invade our territory in earnest. Perhaps as early as the Spring.

"Therefore, we find ourselves in an impossible situation. We have only months to unite an entire people. We did not chase the stragglers of the battle; hence, our unique attributes and approach are no longer secret. We will never have the element of true surprise until we ourselves evolve, which we do not have time to do. We are outnumbered, unorganized, locked into an ever more rigid stand-off and without path of retreat.

"This admits of three possible outcomes.

In the first, Kaisha finds a way to force it through. At each step, she threads the needle, barely squeezing by, and never faltering.

In the second, we are defeated, and Kaisha survives, to begin anew later and elsewhere.

In both of these two scenarios, many -- perhaps even the majority -- of our number die, to say nothing of our opponents.

In the third possibility, we are defeated, and Kaisha is killed or incapacitated.

"The first two outcomes, I find unacceptable, especially after yesterday. This is a personal view, however. No one can guarantee a sure way of escaping them, and if they come to pass, and I survive, I must learn to live with them.

"The third, however, is not so. Here, the position is absolute. It must be eliminated as a realistic prospect. A course of action where the death of Kaisha is the likely outcome cannot be pursued under any circumstances.

"These are the range of possibilities as things stand. And so, the consequence is obvious. The way things stand must be changed."

Sandal stopped me with a gesture. She was teetering before my eyes, now towards me, now away. I had undone two years of good impressions in the last few minutes. By showing her my heart, and moving so swiftly on to such cold calculation, I had gutted any sympathy anyone could ever have for the soulless shell I am. All for the better. She once again asked me her question.

"Alright. Supposing it is as you say. What will you do?"

I smiled. Even I knew it was genuine.

"What will I do? I'll live. For now. For once, I'll live.

"I have been like the man caught by the canny trader, who will only sell one horse. You can take it or leave it. And so, I have agonized at it. Tortured myself. But neither left it, nor taken the horse.

"But no matter how long I wait, I will never choose to leave it. I can only delay -- throw away my life in an endless procrastination, too frightened of the consequences of my only option.

"I shall delay no longer. I shall never delay again."

I looked within, and saw that is was true. With understanding comes spontaneous action. To know it was to be transformed.

"Sandal. I'll tell you now, and you will see it. I have no desire to free myself of suffering. I will suffer more than I can even conceive of now. I will always suffer to live the life I do.

"I have no wish to be free of doubt. I know it is infinitely more likely that I am mad, than that I am the one man born closest to the truth. The only one who called the truth his friend, and kissed her before he could walk. I will always, always doubt it. This life of mine can surely only be a fever dream.

"The only thing I wish... the only thing I need... is to cease going against my essence. To constantly deny what I am. To tirelessly stunt that which I'll become.

"And so... what am I?"

I laughed.

"Who knows? Who cares? The only thing that matters... the only thing that has ever mattered to me... is Kaisha. I will devote myself to her. Whatever there is to devote. And if damnation follows, so be it."

Sandal was frowning at me. She frowned at me for a long time.

"So that's it. You've finally gone insane."

I shrugged. And I was free.

Final Chapter

I spent the remains of the day attending to the wounded and newly departed. In the evening, Sandal and I washed, reminded each other how to act and talk respectfully without obvious irony, and walked to a ger in the west end of the camp which was watched over by four guards -- two at the entrance and two at the back.

I wrestled with my doubts along the way. Perhaps this notion of a clean break really was another facet of the same illusion. Perhaps the only thing to do, now that I was thinking clearly again, was to go to her immediately and throw myself at her feet. Perhaps to do anything else would truly be to fall into the same pattern of mistakes I'd made before.

I could well be like the prospective renunciant who finally resolves to leave the home life in an unburdened quest for truth, only to say he must first put a few things in order, and so delays until the harvest, then stays the winter in waiting out the snows, before Spring brings the sowing, and, since seeds sown must be reaped, never leaves at all. Or like the lover who has tarried irresponsibly, and then tarries further to find a suitable gift as both recompense and sign of contrition, blind to the fact the debt can only grow in scale while he persists in trying to pay it off. Or, worse still, the boy who feels he must prove himself before he truly becomes a man, and in so thinking cannot be one.

Of course, I could not refute these suspicions whatsoever. And yet, I still felt committed to my course. It is hard to explain why. I think I somehow felt like an indulgent father whose son had been forced to take on burdens much too early, and thus cannot help but allow him one last act of stropish wilfulness. To tell him one last story before bed, allow him to tarry a little while longer, though the sun has already set. Even knowing it will afford him no comfort, will make no restitution for the deprivations he has suffered; may even break him at the final hurdle. Still. How could he bring himself to deny him?

At any rate -- once we arrived at our destination, we were let by without a fuss.

Yesügei's son stood within, arms clasped behind him, looking as restless and caged as it is possible for a man to look while holding perfectly still. His eyes passed over us quickly at first, but they returned and tried to fathom something from me. I bowed.

"My apologies for coming unannounced. I heard Sir sustained wounds in the battle, and being our chief physician, thought to offer to examine them."

He turned to face me, and had come to some kind of conclusion.

"I will allow it."

Saying so, he took a seat upon the ground, pulling his clothes back to reveal relatively light lacerations across his chest and a deeper gouge upon his thigh.

He had grown into himself -- no longer lanky, he boasted neatly corded muscles and broad shoulders. His face was unblemished and settled. He had all the look of a Khan already, and he had the manner too.

"Thank you for seeing to my men. I heard you worked tirelessly and turned none away."

I looked up from the wound on his thigh -- which was in passable condition -- so that I could look back down again more firmly.

"I am honoured at them, but such words are wasted on me. I would have done the same even to men who were not blameless, and so cannot ask for special favour from you."

Sandal rolled her eyes, but I thought I was not doing too badly.

After a stretch of silence, where I cleaned out and re-dressed the wound, he spoke again.

"We have met before."

"Yes, sir, we have. On more than one occasion, but only glancingly each time. I do not expect Sir to recall in detail."

"You are the Uyghur slaveboy who was so close to... *her*."

It was utterly without artifice that I let out a deep sigh and carried the weight of sadness in my voice. I think this was the crucial factor on that night.

"I... indeed. I am the very slaveboy who... was so close to her."

It took him long to say the words, but one could feel them coming from the off.

"You sound... displeased at something."

I demurred twice, and twice he kept up the pursuit, without stepping over the line of apparent indifference. When I finally felt he would push no further, I started to relent.

"I can have no complaints. I am granted perfect freedom to practice my craft. What more could this humble one ask for?"

"Speak freely if you will speak. But out with it already, or guard your silence."

"Yes sir. Of course, sir."

With this, I flinched back, and looked down deeper into my lap, and fidgeted all the more.

And then I felt a hand on my shoulder, and he was looking down at me with furrowed brows.

"I... am sorry. I see it must be difficult for you. I... acknowledge... your pain."

I met his gaze, and his image blurred behind a veil of tears.

"It's... it's true. Really it is. I am content with my position. Truly I am. It's just... it's just... it's difficult to lose something like that. It would have been fine if it had always been so. But... I used to see her every day. We used to play together, talk about everything... and so... to be reduced to this... To... to see her laugh and ride with others, and never spare a glance for... for..."

I sobbed at this point, and did not continue.

Yesügei's son stood with his back to me, so as not to allow my disgrace to be witnessed.

A long time passed, and I had composed myself and apologized profusely before he said:

"Not every leader is like this, Uyghur. Loyalty should go both ways. I am sorry for your lot. And I know that things could have been... different."

Only now did he turn to me, and fix me with those steely eyes.

"Things could be different... still. Have you considered that?"

I had to be careful now. So careful.

"I... I must admit I have, sir. I just want to be out of this. To be free from all this killing, all this chaos. I... my mother, sir. She is handmaiden to Jelme's second wife. I have not seen her since my tribe disbanded. I just want to return to her side..."

When he nodded, I could breathe again.

"I see. Jelme was my father's most desperate rival. Yet none could doubt his honour as a man. In these times of ruin and dissolution, that counts for ever more. Perhaps old rifts can be healed, and new loyalties forged.

"What do you say, Uyghur? Would you go now, to your mother?"

I bowed to him, and tried not to be too swift in making plans for his escape.

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Sandal and I spent the next few hours packing all our supplies for the journey. When that was done, I chewed some herbs to stay awake, afraid that I would not be able to stir quickly enough when the moment came. I needn't have worried. The nausea alone would have served to keep me up.

It was thus in the quietest hour of the night that a messenger came, panicked and apologetic, to announce that Yesügei's heir was gravely ill.

Sandal and I rushed towards his ger to find it a-bustle with important figures of our new grand alliance. This was a picture-perfect fit to one of the two major scenarios I had anticipated, and made things more difficult in one sense, and much easier in another.

I kneeled by his side and began to examine him. His face was a ghoulish, greenish shade of pale, and ugly smears of black and creamy yellow could be seen on his neck and wrists. All this was caused by the two pastes I had left with him that evening, along with a mirror of burnished brass small enough to fit in a palm. These were quite harmless, good for muscle soreness and a skin disease respectively, but lathered on generously, they gave him a truly frightening appearance.

After a few dark noises and some shaking of the head, I sent everyone out of the room. A minute later, I stepped up to the threshold myself, holding the tent flap open while I hissed orders behind me.

"Sandal, run back to the cart and bring me yülug and my mortar and pestle. Hurry." As she flashed by me, I turned urgently to the two guards by the entrance. "One of you, go and fetch three pails of water. As fresh as is feasible, upstream of any concentration of our herds -- but time is of the essence, so do not tarry long."

With that, I went back in, letting the flap fold shut behind me. I sat mostly in silence, occasionally letting out a few pained moans. Yesügei's son, wrapped in a fine furs, had left the ger with Sandal. The guards had just seen half a dozen people file out, and had not counted their number, and thus found nothing odd about the sight -- at least, not while I was distracting them in such a fashion. Eventually, Sandal returned, informed me that all had gone according to plan, and left again. The water was delivered, and I used it to wash my feet. I waited some more time before finally slouching out of the ger, looking tired but quietly satisfied. I told the guards that the situation was now stable, and recommended they let no one in before I came again that afternoon, at risk of the malady spreading. They looked suitably relieved and personally empowered, convinced that they were doing something very important that conveniently kept them from a danger they feared, and put them to no further difficulty. I knew we would be safe for quite some time. I joined Sandal and our illustrious guest at the agreed meeting spot, and for the second time in my life, fled Yesügei's main camp with an imprisoned heir and potential unifier of all the steppe tribes.

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The first day was a terrible slog. I wanted nothing more than to find a pleasant spot under a tree and collapse until I once again could know the luxury of boredom, but had instead to struggle through a tense, life-or-death escape, despite the fact I knew we were very likely not being followed. It becomes very difficult indeed to maintain the pretense in such conditions. But maintain it I did, and when we finally stopped, several hours into the night, I thought at least that the day's exertions would push me over the edge into oblivion; surely now, I would be so depleted that the body would simply be obliged to sink down.

Alas, things did not go this way. No sooner would I close my eyes than a nervous energy coursed through me, and my thoughts would race in the most disparate and useless directions. I will not say that I thought my firm and recent resolution would banish this tendency immediately. But I must admit I was disappointed. What else was in my power to do? Was I truly so very off course with my life that I had to be subjected to this? What did my conscience want from me? What on earth kept me from a single moment's peace? Indignation boiled. Surely my refusal to think of myself as a virtuous man meant that I was not the single most depraved among them. And if I was not the single most depraved, why did I have to suffer as if I were? The most frustrated, blasphemous thoughts ran through me without end. In my defence, I never truly validated them -- only suffered their assault with gritted teeth. But the sheer helpless rage of those moments threatened to pull my whole being, past and present, into despair.

On the second day, things grew worse. Yesügei's son began taking increasing control of our escape route, now that he thought we had put enough distance from our pursuants that he did not need to rely so wholly on my guidance. Through the day, he mused on how it might be wiser to go towards his father's former allies, some of whom he knew would not have switched sides so soon. I had to try to argue him out of it, while also pretending not to notice he was already changing our direction, while also attempting to subtly steer us back on course, while also trying to subtly steer my mind away from its more obvious hallucinations.

When we stopped for the night, I was in a truly deplorable condition. A dying dog would have looked on me with pity. More than anything, I needed time to think. Things were slipping out of my control at an alarming rate, which meant I needed more than ever to be clear-headed, to form a consistent picture of the situation, and assess and weigh alternatives. But I could not hold a consistent intention for more than a few seconds. It was torture. Visions of ecstatic disembowelment, or of sticking a long wire up my nose and stirring it around until my brain ran out like porridge, were my only consolations -- the only way I could even imagine a release.

The next morning, I woke from however many minutes of sleep had finally been tossed at me like pennies to a man stranded in the desert, dying of thirst, to find him already mounted, a rope leading most of the pack horses dangling from his hand.

He told me he was going to his father's allies after all. No semblance of even a pretence at loyalty, faith, or cooperation could be discerned in his eyes. The only reason he had not simply left us in the night was very clearly the wealth of information I could provide him on Kaisha and her troops.

And so, I nodded my head, bowed, and said I would follow the young lord's will.

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We rode in silence until the mid-day meal.

The next thing he knew, he was in a dark space, lit only by two oil lamps, his arms, legs, and neck bound by ropes tied to pegs securely fastened in the stony ground.

I was nearly as surprised as he. Perhaps I had, in my advanced state of fatigue, miscalculated the dose, or perhaps he was simply gifted with natural resilience. Whatever the cause, he had woken much earlier than I expected. Once again, I had to drop everything and rush to meet a situation I knew I was not prepared for. More than ever, in this situation above all others, I could absolutely not let on to that fact. I had to maintain the impression of control. If I failed at that, then I was finished.

After single-mindedly testing the restraints, and finding no way to negotiate himself out of them, he finally settled down and turned his attention back to me. He seemed, more than anything, annoyed, even vaguely disappointed, at my stupidity. How dare I put him through this momentary inconvenience, and waste his time when he had so much to do? What hare-brained, self-aggrandizing delusion had led me to do something so far beyond my lowly station and meagre capacities? Such were his thoughts.

"I hope you know there's no coming back from this. Whatever you think to gain for now, it will end with you being in my power, a tenfold punishment, death, and an example being made of you which will not fade for a hundred years."

I shook my head. I could not say that he was wrong. It was just that I was growing tired of people explaining things to me which I really should have been the one to explain to them.

I placed my knee upon his ankle, took a scalpel, and pried off the smallest toenail on his right foot.

He yelped out in surprise, howled at me with the second, but then went quiet with the third, simply glaring at me, unmoved, for the fourth and the fifth. I saw why he was called the man of iron, despite his youth.

"You surely cannot think such petty tactics will sway me. Out with it, then. What is it you want?"

I wiped and washed the scalpel, put it to one side, and sat back on my heels.

"I do not wish to trade one powerful master for another. Please, come quietly with us to Jelme. He is the most experienced and well-respected chief among the Naiman. We will present ourselves to him and ask for his protection. He will surely give you a high position, and restore to you your father's holdings once he unites the clan. I myself shall reunite with what remains of my family, and likely return to our ancestral lands thereafter. This would be the best solution for everyone. Please just agree to that."

"I see. I will consider it. Now, enough of this charade. Undo these bonds already."

I sighed, reached for a poultice, and applied it carefully over the raw skin of his toes.

The pain must have been white-hot. He let out a sharp wheeze, and then had trouble breathing for some minutes. His eyes were streaming, his nose was running, his face had gone from deathly white to a flushed and patchy red, and his voice -- although he had not been able to cry out -- carried the strain of having screamed.

"This will end. This will end. You need me alive. So, at some point this will end. And then... I'll kill you."

By now, I was undoing the bandages of the leg. The wound had been healing well, despite the past days of hard riding. I had to pry it open slightly before I could apply the irritant to the inside of his leg.

The minutes passed, and he had recovered enough to be able to speak again. I could see his struggle quite clearly. He knew that he should take a step back, engage in some kind of compromise, and figure out a way to trick me. But his hatred would not let him. He would not consent to hide his all-powerful desire to kill me then and there, to rip me limb from limb, to scatter me so widely that no trace of me existed.

And so I had no choice but to continue.

People do not realize that the jaw is a muscle of absurd strength. Still, even it can be disabled simply. I forced a contraption of metal into his mouth which forced it quite wide open, while leaving me room to maneuver my implements. I found a tooth that was already weak, and picked at it until the nerve was exposed. He was so focused on that that he did not try to bite me when I took the contraption out.

The arrogance had gone by now, leaving unvarnished determination.

"I will not break to this. I am made of iron. I will conquer the world. Everyone will bow before me. All that is theirs will be mine. That is my reward. For I... I am the one destined to stop her."

He did make a strong point, and this sense of purpose would provide a chink of light for him to see his way clear through all of this. Of course, that too could be worn down, eventually. I could work my way up from his feet, flaying his skin and applying the irritant to the exposed flesh until it was enough. But I would not take that option. I am not sure how long it would take. And for reasons both external and internal, I felt that time was of the essence. I wanted this over and done with. And so I had to ramp up the pressure I applied.

Without being able to use duration as leverage, the only other option was intensity. And, as far as pain went, there was not really anywhere further to go. And so, I pivoted.

I took my firmest needles and worked on the knuckle of the first finger of his right hand. This was, of course, excruciating in and of itself, but I explained to him that, once the joint had gone limp and loose as this one had, it would attempt to heal, but would succeed only in freezing itself in that position. In either case, it was forever incapacitated. I did the same to a finger on his left hand, and then returned to the right, before using the same needle to puncture one of his eardrums, rendering him deaf on that side.

His left elbow was next, and then the knee. Just like his fingers, it would be loose for a time, unable to take much weight -- and when it finally grew firm, it would never move again.

It was at this point that his words reached me. I realized I had gone into something of a daze, moving mechanically up the range of physical impairment that would not leave much of a visible mark, and he had been asking me to stop for some time. I also realized that, during this phase, I had not struggled to maintain any sort of front. I truly would have just continued calmly at it, possibly forever. And he had noticed that. It was that which had proven decisive.

I sat back on my heels, closed my eyes, and attempted to steady myself.

"You will come with us to Jelme's camp, then?"

"Yes... yes... I will..."

"You will not attempt escape?"

"No... no! No, please, I won't..."

"...alright. I'll let you go now. I'll have to keep your hands bound for a time. At least until we have more time to come to a mutual understanding. And I am sorry for that. But I have no intention of... doing this again."

"Yes...no... yes, not again..."

It was only when I let out a long breath, opened my eyes, and met his that I finally understood.

I had failed. Everything I'd done so far was wrong. I had done the unnameable, for nothing.

Nothing he said in this condition could be trusted, through no fault of his own. It was simply that he no longer had the capacity to do anything except try to end his torment. I

could ask him absolutely anything at all, and before he could even think, his lips would form whatever sounds he supposed I wished to hear. I could torture him for years, extract a thousand different promises, and all of them would evaporate the moment I released him, like the dew before the dawn. There was no duplicity in this, no calculation. It is that the creature before me knew of nothing beyond the present moment, could make no plans past it, no matter how hard it tried.

I had not bent his will to mine. I had simply ruined it. And neither he nor I had any say in what it might do hereafter. He might regain some courage, and attempt to murder me. He might scream and crawl off, even without a chance of escaping. He might simply gibber and cry and waste away. But he would not act the way I wished of him; would not appear before Jelme and act out the role I'd planned. That which stared back at me from its bonds upon the floor was no longer a person I could communicate with; it was a mass of confusion and pain, and its only remaining reaction was to flinch.

And, looking back, I realized that this had been the obvious conclusion from the beginning. What chance was there of him following me to Jelme, exactly as agreed? And if he changed his mind, what was there I could do to dissuade him? From the beginning, there had been nothing. Not "nothing I could do while staying true my name". Simply nothing. I had vastly overestimated what I could do by consenting to destroy myself. It had all been a delusion.

I tried not to let any of these thoughts show on my face. With my back turned, I mixed a new concoction and brought it to his lips.

"Here, drink this. Do not worry. It will alleviate the pain."

He had no faith that this was not some new form of torture. But what else could he do but drink it? He no longer had the ability to resist.

His eyes drooped, and his breathing slowed, and the horrible contortion of his face was eased. He fell first into sleep. And before long, I was alone.

It was now the tremors took me, and I vomited everything I had in me, with no regard to where it fell.

I knew I had resigned myself to this, but had never dreamed it would come so soon, and so perfect.

It was utterly inescapable. Obviously, none would ever hear of this to hold me to account, but that was an irrelevance. Even I would never be able to believe that I had ever really intended to use him as a pawn of steppe politics. I would always suspect that, no matter how subconsciously, I simply wished to take the man who had been betrothed to Kaisha and inflict every degradation I could on him. That was sealed and done for. No other explanation would ever be countenanced. I had finally done it. I had found myself a sin so black, none would ever call me by my name. I would never be at peace. I would never hope for a redemption. I was to be forever condemned.

I lay on the cold floor for a few moments, waiting for the physical symptoms to pass.

And then I sat back up, did my best to clean myself, and called Sandal back in.

She gave the dead man a quick, disinterested glance, before turning a very troubled gaze to me. She seemed to hesitate a while before she spoke.

"...next time... leave this to me."

I smiled, with only a little bravado.

"Oh, there will not be a next time." When she frowned at me, I sighed. "Alright, alright. You win. Don't worry. I will rely on you when I'm next in difficulty. But I honestly don't think we'll need to try torture again. There really is no point to it. Now. Let's clean up and find a comfortable place to camp tonight. I'll need to rest before we reach Jelme's territory."

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I cannot say that I slept well at all, the next few nights. But I must admit, I did sleep better. It had to happen eventually. There was also some form of a release, however horrible its nature. And there was simply the fact that I had nothing more to cause me concrete and immediate concern, now that Yesügei's son was dead, and it was just Sandal and I, alone for many miles around.

For all the times I bemoaned my lack of mental fortitude over those recent sleepless nights, my reaction to the botched torture and eventual murder was far better than I could ever have expected. There were no excuses to be made, but in any case, it had been done. I could only learn from it and continue onward.

It truly did complicate my plans, though. Evidently, the more elaborate, best case scenarios -- where I would frame him for Jelme's murder, inviting further discord among Kaisha's rivals for leadership of the Naiman -- were entirely unfeasible now. But even obtaining a private audience with him was much more difficult this way. It wasn't that I was concerned about getting out alive; it's that nearby bodyguards would make even a sneak attack unlikely to succeed, considering my lack of skill, physique, or experience.

There were still other options. I could go ahead with the basic strategy as before, posing as an informant and waiting for an opportune moment to strike. And I could always just try to poison him outright, even if they might see that one coming.

The more I thought about it, however, the more I leaned towards the riskiest approach. It had what I thought was a decent probability of success, but it was all-or-nothing from the beginning. If it did not go well immediately, then there would be no second chance -- no opportunity to gather information and formulate a new strategem. It's the potential embarrassment of all my efforts amounting to nothing whatsoever which had led me to formulate more flexible, and thus more complex plans from the beginning. Now, though, that factor was fading. I was quite content to have my final moments be filled with shame, and come soon. In fact, it seems my mood had swung the other way entirely. I was sick of these juggling acts, these long chains which could come undone with one weak link. The simple fact was that I was just tired. Perhaps it really all came down to that. My whole life, which had been defined by a desperate drive to go beyond myself, lay in the balance of such unapologetic, naked subjectivity. Considerations of the facts and approximations of others' perspectives quietened to a muttering, and my actions followed merely from a bodily whim. Perhaps that was appropriate.

And so, Sandal and I rode our horses westwards. When we came across herders, we shared what news a fleeing, frightened couple might, and rarely had to ask for directions. When we were growing closer, we found a camp with warriors, who were all too willing to escort us further. To them, I revealed a few small details -- a fairly clean alloy of truth and misdirection which might spool out into convenient rumours. And then, I took the plunge. I told them I had information of a more sensitive nature, and asked to be taken to Dhunan. They put up no resistance to the notion. If anything, they looked at me with relief and disguised sympathy, as if they had felt wary of leading me into a den of wolves, only to find I wished to throw myself into the viper's pit first.

Jelme's main camp sprawled across three hills, and had all the interlocking presence and circulating lifeblood of a small city. Warriors in full gear were positioned to one side, and at the summit of the highest hill, great gers and pavilions were arrayed around each other, housing visiting dignitaries and their entourages. We were stopped by guards at the entrance to the line of gers, and a messenger was sent for Dhunan. He had been gone a minute, and the guards had only just had time to pat us down for hidden weapons beneath our clothes, before I felt a presence slide out of nowhere in particular and pass unnoticed through the soldiers until he stood in their midst and raised his pale, cold, laughing, and uncaring eyes at me.

"Oy. What are you doing here?"

Horses neighed and reared, and the men atop them suppressed their gasps and cleared a space around him. The veteran who had led us these past days trotted forward to begin explaining, but was waved off by Dhunan like a fly being shooed away.

"Alright, alright. Back to your posts. Let's go, boy."

I dismounted and fell in behind him. A soldier came to take the animals from Sandal, but she snarled at him and followed us. I saw him look to Dhunan for confirmation, but he was a fraction too late to see how this elusive, wily man had flicked out a knife into his palm, turned it to see Sandal's reaction on the polished, pearly surface, raised an eyebrow and one corner of his upper lip, then flashed it across his cheek to shave off a few small whiskers and made it disappear again.

He had not seemed to make any adjustment to the way he walked -- his swagger was exactly as smooth as ever -- but people saw him coming and parted before him, allowing Sandal to have it easy with the pack animals, rather than having to shout and shove her way through. We proceeded like this for some time. I wasn't thinking my plan through, but neither did it feel quite like I was simply hesitating. There just came a moment when everything felt right, or inevitable, depending on one's point of view. I did not draw any closer to him, and we passed through an area no less populated than before, but it was now that I directly answered his question.

"I'm here to attempt to kill Jelme, and clear the way for Kaisha to unite the Naiman clan within the year."

He did not show any sign that he had heard this. His face was as blank as a statue's, and he neither slowed nor turned, but the way he held his silence was reaction enough.

"Will you join us, Dhunan? Will you give your loyalty to Kaisha?"

He barked a laugh.

"Hah! I wouldn't dream of it. I told you before, kid. There's nothing in this world worth dying for. And I doubt she sees it the same way. She'd treat my life like any other -- a muscle to carry the bones up the cairn. Which is fine by me in principle, except for the fact I have a special fondness for it."

I had fallen into a black and cold and distant space, where nothing had been known and the world was only starting to be built.

"Hey hey. Don't go making such a scary face! I just said I wouldn't follow her. You, however... well, that's a different matter."

And with that, I was back. The wind carried the scent of animals and cooking fires, and the sky glowed towards the sunset.

"There's one thing I don't get, though," he murmured. "Why expose yourself like that? So suddenly. It isn't like you."

"I knew you had taken direction from at least two people other than Jelme, without his knowledge. Considering who they were, I thought it likely you would be favorable to Kaisha's cause. Though I suppose answering to me makes even more sense. The only thing that held me back was that I hadn't figured out what exactly it is you want. Without that, I could not be sure that your allegiance would be transitive to us. Now, the situation has changed, of course. So I will just ask. What is it you want? I will do my best to facilitate it."

"Heh... you know, boy, it's nothing complicated. I'm just the same as any man. It changes. When things are easy, I want some excitement. When they're dicey, I want safety. Sometimes, I want a woman. When there's a choice, I'd like the food I like." He looked out at the horizon, and the burnished purples, oranges, and deep golds of the clouds. For a moment, it almost seemed he was an ordinary man, just like he said. And in some ways, he was indeed one. Almost. "You know the damndest thing though, kid? People. I honestly don't see the point of them. But I do get lonely if they're not there. At least enough to stick around them, I suppose."

I was surprised when he asked a question a few moments later.

"Oh yeah. What was it your father said there, anyway? On that slip I gave you. With the... letters and things."

I shook my head.

"Nothing, really. No, it's true. Well, first off, I'll never be exactly sure. The cipher's too ambiguous; guesswork has to be involved. But I will say I probably have the basic gist."

"And?"

"And what else would it be? He's only ever said one thing to me. He just reminded me of my name again. Something about being a good boy. I swear, if he's alive, I'll find a way to think of something that would make him squirm."

Dhunan was looking at me with genuine curiosity, as if I'd said something amusing. He chuckled, then he laughed, then he muttered to himself and laughed again.

I resolved that, after today, I would trust him totally. It was very unlikely he would betray me, not unless things took a truly unexpected turn, so this was not too much of a leap. But I just felt I would gain nothing from trying to question his motives. For now, though, I had to play it safe.

"Dhunan. I won't ask this again. But until I'm done with what I came for, I have to know. Supposing you're content to take orders from me... is there someone else whose word you'd follow above mine?"

There it was. That glint in him. Those pointed teeth. Those eyes, like the thinnest sliver of the moon. That balance to the way he held himself, at once supple and coiled. That sense that emanated from him, unforced and now plainly unfurled, that one stood in the presence of a very dangerous man.

He grinned, and pointed a thumb at a ger of midnight blue behind him.

"Well. That depends on what the Boss says."

I took a deep breath, and nodded.

"Alright. Have a talk with Sandal in the meantime. If I die, I recommend you stick with her. And she'll probably be the one you'll hear from, mostly. She's still learning a few things from me, but she's been far better at all this from the start."

She was, of course, glaring daggers at me while I said this. Dhunan cocked his head to the side and squinted at her for a while, before breaking out into a snake's own smile. She frowned even more deeply at that. I left them to it and entered the ger.

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The first thing that came to me on seeing her again was the realization that she was so very young when she had first arrived with Blacktooth and my parents. She stood before me now as a woman in the prime of life, and all that I could think of was the absolute absurdity of things. How could Jelme and the Naiman Khan go about their game of nations, when Tigerlily was among them the whole time? Not locked away in some pure mountain monastery, her legend passed on in hushed whispers, but right there in front of them. How did they not all just fall down and die of shame? How did they not prostrate themselves at least, and laying their whole lives in her hands, beg for her mercy? How did it not even occur to them? Surely they were not blind; they certainly seemed to covet her body enough. Then how? Just how?

With Kaisha, I could almost understand. It was true that there was something too alien about her for comfort, which almost made it necessary to look away. Maybe you needed to be as twisted around as I am to even see it straight. But... Tigerlily? What can you do but laugh at mankind's ignorance? It just radiated from her. It always had -- but now, she was no longer a shy and unsure girl, and did not hide it. If ever there were a single person who did not so much demand respect as inexorably inspire it... if ever there were anyone to turn to for help, for guidance, for anything it pleased them to spare you... then surely it was her.

I stopped a few paces past the entrance, sunk to my knees, and bowed. A shiver went through me when I closed my eyes. It was not even that I saw an image. I simply asked

myself: if this was Tigerlily... then what would it be like with Kaisha when she grew into a full maturity? Every hair on my body stood on end.

I lifted myself to see that she was not surprised, but was still saddened. God knows, the sorrow of it nearly crushed me. I wanted nothing more than to throw myself into her lap, and weep out every memory of pain. I had never wanted anything more than I wanted that, in this moment. It would be the salve to all my wounds, even the ones I carried into this world with my birth. But then again, there was her gentle smile. It softly reminded me that none of that was true. Or rather, that it was only almost true. So very nearly true. But there was a single thing I wanted more. And so, I could not be a child with her again. And so, it seemed she mourned.

"Oh Fin... It will do you no good to hear it, but it makes me so happy to see you once more."

She gazed down at me lovingly, and of course I took the time to simply revel in the moment.

Eventually, her brow furrowed.

"I... I am truly sorry for turning you and the other children away. I do not ask you to forgive me. But understand that if Kaisha had come here, the Naiman would have been shredded asunder. She will not listen to me anymore; she almost never did. And Jelme would have tried to resist. She was too young. We were not ready. It had to wait some time. I only wish I would have thought of you sooner. Of course you'd try to break her out. When I saw Sandal looking so hopeful that day, and Frog loitering about, I knew you'd come. I had no time to do anything else. I could only have Dhunan try to mislead you, turn you back. I thought you'd find some nearby herder to house you for the winter. I knew you would be able to convince them. I never thought you'd go eastwards instead. That was nothing short of brilliant." She frowned. "But you must have suffered so to make it there..."

I had to look down at my lap, and even then, I barely got the words out.

"It's alright. I was fine. But Frog... Frog and... Sandal..... died on the way."

"Oh no. ...no. What have I done? Fin. I am so sorry."

I shook my head.

"It was my fault. I should have thought things through more. Or thought through them less. I... no. Nevermind. It does not matter. All is well. It's just... if I may, please let me ask you one thing. You... would not truly have let her go like that. You know. Let her... and Yesügei's son... You would have stopped it somehow, wouldn't you?"

I felt her sigh.

"We had agreed with Bo'orchu that he would take her and raise her separately, until she was a little older. He would have taken you in, and perhaps some of the other children, so you could have stayed with her. At that point, you could all have had time to find another way. Of course, we did not expect her to act out so soon. We should have told her what we planned. Though she would probably not have consented either way..."

So, what I had feared was true. It genuinely may have been my fault. Not that I'd failed to plan the escape well enough. But that I had been the cause of everything from the beginning.

If I had not asked her to do something, the day of Blacktooth's funeral... if I had not asked her to save me... perhaps it would have all gone differently. We would have had two years of peace to grow into adulthood. Frog and Sandal and many others would still be alive.

Tigerlily was reaching out to me. I screwed my eyes shut and held up a hand to stop her. I could not let her console me. I had already tarried too long.

I finally looked at that which I could not even turn my mind's eye towards since it had been revealed to me that summer.

An infant had been crawling at her feet, his attention fixed on me since I came in. I felt his confusion and his compassion. He wished to come to me, to find what it was that ailed me, to banish my darkness simply by being the light. But he had held back, sensing perhaps for the first time in his life that something was not right. He stood on his two feet now, fists grasping the folds of her dress. His hair was golden red, and his eyes were made of amber.

I had lied to Dhunan, to Yesügei's son -- even to Sandal, in a way. The real reason I had come was this. And because I was not ready to see Kaisha. I needed more time to compose myself for such a moment. That was why I had not gone to her. But the reason I had gone to Jelme's camp instead was only this. I knew full well I could have dealt with the chieftain in some other way. I could have brought others with me -- Wailer, Rattle, even Flick. I could even have sent them and remained behind, if it was only to kill Jelme. But for this, I had to come myself. And I had to come alone. I could not trust another soul with this. I could never, ever burden them with such responsibility.

Tigerlily pulled back from me reluctantly, and rested her hand on the infant's head. They gazed at each other. I was like a drop of muddied water in a desert at noon of the summer solstice.

I pressed my face into the ground, putting all my strength behind it, as if trying to burrow down to where the light blazed not so fiercely.

"Tiger...lily... Tigerlily..... no... you can't... I can't... It is not possible... no... no... there cannot possibly... there cannot be... another..."

She knew I'd come for this. I thought I had done so well to avoid any personal communion -- to put to one side all she had meant to me, and would always mean, but which I would never have the chance to experience again. I thought I had stuck only to objective and important matters -- to mysteries and murders and necessities -- and wasted no time on reminiscences of happiness, or on telling her how much I adored her. But now I saw that she had been subtly indulging me the whole time. While I thought we had been speaking seriously, sober, like adults, she was talking to me as she had used to -- comforting the child, but not confiding in them. She spoke frankly with me now.

"He is not like his sister. He is the rain where she is fire. Worry not -- I know it."

I'd always known I would simply take her at her word and run away. That I would never have the power to eliminate the risk. I had known that from the beginning... but to experience it here made even the foreknowledge seem ridiculous. How could I harm a hair on this child's head when I could not even breathe the air around him? I would burn without a remnant before one part of me drew near.

"But... but if he... oh God... if they... conflict... ...we're doomed."

"It will not come to that. I shall take him from here, this very night. We will go where none will find us. He will grow with no restraints to cripple him. When he walks, all the creatures of land, sky, and sea will dance with him. When he sits, and that which is within him concentrates, it will flow out, and wash the plagues away, and cause the grain of things to ripen. From him will spread unnoticed all the bounty of the world."

"But... but..."

"Feel no remorse, Fin. You do not threaten me into this. I act of my own will."

She gazed off into the distance, as if she stood atop a terrace overlooking the whole stream of time. You must see now that it is no kind of boast when I say I was never overawed when I stood before emperors and kings as a solitary and defenceless emissary.

"There is no shame in inhabiting the human herd, nor in taking part in their struggles. I will not deny my passing through the world. To live among you like this has been my joy, my home, my meaning. I do not regret it. But I am done. I wish no further part of it. And I will not let them touch this child. He shall live free -- and I with him."

The majesty of her expression eased slightly, and she returned to that which we can see around us.

"Your mother makes the preparations as we speak."

She noticed something, and seemed even sadder than she had at the beginning.

"You will not wait to see her?"

"I must go... to Jelme. If I see her before, I won't be able to do it. And after that, I'll have to flee."

I could not tell whether she felt more for her husband's death or for my mother's loneliness, but her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Please tell her... that I am sorry."

"I will tell her that you love her."

The emotion was too much. I had to leave.

Her voice echoed as I turned away.

"Tell Dhunan to take care of you. Do not avoid it. Say it aloud and to his face."

The child she held in her arms with a plaintive tone, as if someone was dangling a toy out of his reach. I pitched forward and fell towards the exit.

"Fin. You go with my blessing. Be well."

Sandal helped me stand. I told Dhunan what she had said. He nodded, no trace of irony or deceit on his face, with a seriousness no command of mine would ever engender. I was happy with that.

We walked to Jelme's tent. It was Sandal who spoke first.

"Just let me kill him. Look at yourself, you can barely even walk. You'd probably fall over, stab yourself, and we'll have to come in for you anyway."

"She's right, boy. I may as well just do it. Don't worry about the fact I used to protect him. It's been a long, long while since my hands were clean."

"No, Dhunan. I will be fine." I thought of looking him in the eye; that that was the way honest people showed their earnestness. I smirked slightly at the thought, and kept my eyes on the ground a few paces before me. "I have already killed a man. No, not in the way I usually mean it. For real, this time. It was... bad. It couldn't really have been worse. So I'll be fine this time."

They looked at each other, concern etched on their faces. Despite everything, I couldn't help but smile. I supposed I would just have to get used to that look.

Sandal waited for us some distance off, and Dhunan walked me the rest of the way. Jelme had certainly not been idle these past years. The tent atop the hill was massive, and guarded by a cordon of more than twenty soldiers, who stood a spear's distance from each other and a good thirty paces from the summit. Their armour was of the highest quality, probably of Tangut make, and intricately engraved in the same pattern. You would never believe he had not even declared himself Khan.

Dhunan pushed me forward for the guards to inspect me. Unlike the ones at the entrance to the camp, these were very thorough; they had clearly been trained. Dhunan joked around with them as they did so, already spinning some kind of tale about me. When they were done, he slapped me hard in the solar plexus, causing me to double over and clutch at my stomach with both hands, and told me to hurry up in and get what I had coming.

I staggered up the hill to murmurs and laughter, and found Jelme, Khan apparent to the Naiman clan, pacing restlessly in the cavernous space.

He was surprised to see me enter, and it took him a moment to place me. It is no wonder. Children change so much with two years of adolescence.

"You? What are you doing here?"

I steadied my breath a moment and opened my mouth, but he had already turned his head wistfully upwards and to the side.

"My word, this summons memories. What were the chances you would appear before me now, of all times? Although, of course, it is quite fitting. To go forward, you must go back."

I grimaced with embarrassment. Did I really sound like this when I spoke to myself? I once again confirmed my gratefulness at having confided in so few.

"You know, boy -- there comes a time in every man's life when he must act. You will see what I mean, one day. When something has to be done, regardless of your feelings, and you have to be the one to do it -- for who else is there? I have always known this day would come. And it finds me prepared."

He paused dramatically.

"But what man possessed of even a shred of conscience would not hesitate before he makes that final leap? If only for moment. If only for a night..."

I shook my head. This would be more difficult than I anticipated, for reasons I had not even considered.

"You will not believe me when I say this -- how could you? But I do not want what they all say is my right to claim. It is not a bounty for me, but a burden. I..."

He droned on like this for quite some time, before coming to the crucial point.

"...but you must be brave enough to face it. Strong enough to shoulder it. Patient enough to bear it. Not just patient... but resolute. Even if you have to make enemies of those you would much sooner protect. Even... when it is the flesh and blood of the one you hold most dear..."

So he did at least remember Kaisha. For a moment there, I was not sure.

"Do not think that I am deaf, boy. I have indeed heard word of her radical steps. Cutting across the boundaries of tribal loyalty, of younger and elder, of man and woman... even of those who have saved for the winter and those who have not. It is all very interesting. Commendable, even. But, you see... how could we impose our will like that on those who look to us for protection? Who do not have the power to resist? We do not have that right."

He shook his head, slowly and sadly.

"But once again. Who am I to say what's right? Well... Khan, it appears. But even then... even then..." A sigh from of us. "But what else can be done? What is there to do but attempt to lead with righteousness? To judge with fairness? To govern with mercy? To attempt to live a life one can be proud of..."

I had found myself stuck on one small point. There was no more hesitation about goodness or murder or what have you -- I am clear of that indignity at least. It was something much more simple. I still found it difficult to kill someone absolutely without warning. To not even give them a second to make their peace. Or, more precisely, to leave them without a single reason for their death. I thought I should at least say something. One word, if nothing more, that he could perhaps consider in the eternity of his afterlife.

And that was just the problem. What on earth could that word be?

The gulf in viewpoints was too wide. I could not close the half of it, even if he gave me the rest of his night of doubting to explain -- let alone a single whispered phrase.

And so we began again. While he said all the above, I found myself thrown into the turmoil he seemed to be enjoying visiting for an evening's vacation.

Because, after all. How could I possibly be in the right? Heavens mercy -- he was the Khan! And I was a sickly and disturbed boy, with no possessions to his name -- and not even a name.

Where would I start? Would I explain from the beginning? Would I say my father trained me in mathematics from my birth? Taught me Arabic, Persian, Old Chinese and half dozen other tongues? This man did not even possess an abstract theory of numbers. What would I tell him of the calculation of infinitesimal quantities? He did not know one verse of the Quran. What good would quoting from it do? I had calculated the circumference of the earth before most children could walk, but how would I even explain the idea of a sphere, let alone tell him that animals across the world walked upside down?

And what the hell was all that anyway? I had never heard one other person speak in Arabic. I had never set foot out of the steppe. What did I know that all these things existed? Perhaps my father was a fantasist. Perhaps my father himself was the fantasy. Perhaps I was entirely, absolutely, hopelessly mad...

But such extravagances aside... what if I just began with Kaisha? What would he say if I explained just that? Would he tell me she was just a charismatic murderer, who had manipulated me and others using a clever combination of carefully curated charity, mass excitement, and lust? Assuming any validity to memory, I had read the histories of a hundred nations -- charted their rise and fall. If Kaisha were just another conqueror, I would not be in this predicament. If I was here, it was because she was something far greater. But... what? How could I tell him, when I could not find the words to tell myself?

If even that was too far off to explain, then what about the close at hand? It was clearer than a true-blue sky that he had no idea I was about to kill him. He had not even considered I might wish to, let alone that I could, or that his guards should fail to stop me. ...and what if he was right? What if I stood here unarmed, and reached forward only to poke him in the belly with a finger, enraged that he would not go down?

It shames me deeply to admit all this. Of course I too have long since grown tired of this incessant indecisiveness. And of course I realized that this was absolutely, positively, imperatively not the moment for such all-encompassing scepticism.

But there just was something about his manner that gave me pause. He was so absolutely sure of his view of the world that I could not help but doubt mine. And the distance between them was so vast that the dissonance in me was worse than ever. The effort of attempting to balance between them threw me into total instability. For a moment, I was frozen. For a moment, I lacked all confidence. For a moment, I put on hold everything I had resolved on, and allowed this petty person before me to make me question the most holy.

And then he began to turn around. He had just talked himself out of his quandary, and was about to begin questioning me about Kaisha and her movements.

I stepped forward and thrust the dagger Dhunan had handed me earlier into his side. He sliced open his own belly with the momentum of his turn. His breath was expelled from him with a wheeze, and he began to pitch towards me. I slid around behind him, pulled the dagger out, and stabbed it into him again and again, until the blood flowed down from him like streams from a mountain.

He fell over and had the strength only to fix his bleary eyes on me. Through the red dribbling from his mouth, I thought I could make out the shape of "how" and "why". I shrugged, and tried to tell him that I just followed his advice, but he was dead before I could get the words out. And so, of course, all that rumination and all that doubt had served no purpose whatsoever.

Ah well. If one cannot change, I suppose one can only remain the same.

Though perhaps there is a third option which I am not aware of. And where there is a third, I have often seen it followed by a fourth.

I counted numbers like that while I washed some of the blood off me. It was now dark outside, and I had very especially selected my robes, which were made of a material that repelled most liquid, and besides was the right colour for fresh bloodstains, so my appearance did not matter much. I did it mostly for the smell.

I looked around the luxurious furnishings and even thought of snatching something -- though it should be no surprise that, in the end, I didn't.

And so I left the tent, and there was Dhunan to wrap an arm around my shoulders and rough up my hair and blather on about something or other until the guards were out of earshot. He motioned Sandal and me onwards, and looked around vigilantly as we made our way through the camp, even though Jelme would have told his guards to keep their distance for his precious night of heroic struggle with himself. In the end, indeed, we were not followed, and as soon as we were on the open steppe, no one stood a chance of tracking us.

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We returned to Yesügei's former heartland, and the same camp we had left behind not long before. The traces of the battle were already fading, like poems writ on water.

I took Sandal to meet with Bo'orchu, who had remained in place to field any messengers who came to discuss steppe politics with Kaisha, while she herself rode out to make it. I explained to him that she could note down any declarations and agreements precisely, for future reference, and help organize our growing army with surer measurements than braided cords. A few weeks of this, and I could leave her to handle any and all political matters, whether open or covert. She was surprised that I would not even oversee the army records, but I knew she would be far better at it. She was extraordinarily intelligent, and did not realize it only because she had only me to compare herself to, with my many years' head start in education. Of course, she did not listen when I told her my assessment. In the latter respect, we were very similar. But the most important factor lay in how we differed: she would not fall prey to my encyclopaedic urge.

The next thing I did was find Flick. I apologized to her succinctly, and told her of the circumstances around her sister's death. But I came quickly to the point, and humbled myself before her, and asked if, despite my previous mistakes -- and most of all, my unreliable personality -- she would learn the craft of medicine from me. I could not even provide properly for one camp, let alone a people. And Sandal would be too busy with other matters to be of much help in this. Thus, I needed to take a new apprentice.

She took all of it in her stride. After considering it for a time, her first question was if I would swear her to secrecy, or if she could teach the methods I knew to others in turn. I laughed, and said she could tell the world, as far as I was concerned. She could train people in their hundreds, and leave squads of them in every city we passed. For that matter, I told her that people often learned better in small groups, and she could think of inviting others to join her from the off -- though I would prefer to entrust her specifically with any major decisions. She said she already had a few girls in mind.

And with that, Dhunan and I set out again. Not to Kaisha -- at least, not at first. We loped across the steppe in a leisurely fashion, if that can be imagined, and I finally indulged the idea that had fascinated me for so long.

There had been great tension in my years with Blacktooth's tribe, and one of its manifestations was the way that I internalized my father's constant and loud denials that he was a shaman. "Can you not even tell the difference between a medicine man and a trained physician?", he would scream at them in Persian.

And I, for my part, was so busy, at first with my studies, and then with the duties that resulted from them, that I was never able to find out who these people were and what they believed. I did so now. I wandered til I found one, and then followed her word to ones nearby, and so accordingly across the Naiman. My intention was genuinely only to ask questions. But before long, I found myself speaking of Kaisha. I held back a bit, of course, not wishing to stoke myself into an unseemly frenzy. But I spoke to them from the heart. And that itself was most enjoyable. The fact it subtly but undeniably influenced her rapid acceptance by the Naiman was a fortuitous and unexpected accident.

...well. Not altogether unexpected. But I was honestly surprised that it worked at all, let alone so well.

I even found Blacktooth's first wife, in a dense and humid forest that must have done her condition no good at all, surrounded by a small tribe of devoted acolytes -- most of them quite elderly themselves.

It is safe to say that she was worse off than ever. It was as if her body were a mountain range, riven with endless crags and canyons, and the spark of her life were just a single beetle crawling through the smallest crevice of it.

It was neither necessary nor advisable to do or say anything. So I just left her there, making sure to tell her followers the nearest landmark to aim for whenever they should desire a change of scenery.

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The winter was drawing close when I finally returned to her. It was not as cold as some I had remembered.

The guards outside her tent were new, and eager to prove their diligence, so they gave me something of a hard time until Rattle came along to calm them down.

I did not enter immediately even then. I had come so far, put myself through so much. The least I could do was savour it.

I closed my eyes, and let my mind wander where it willed.

I saw us riding off together -- at first this evening, just the two of us, simply for the joy of it. I was telling her everything I happened to think of. And I looked upon her without shame, without hiding, without any other desire in the world. Just like I had always told myself I used to, as a child.

And I saw us riding further, later. To one sea, and then the other, with none who could obstruct us on our way.

It was all the idle fantasy of a moment's bated breath. I had no way of knowing any of it would come true.

But I think it was Kaisha herself who once told me, many years before, something to the effect that no god or hierophant can deny someone their dreams. And, of course, that she would have a word with any who would mock me for mine.

I opened my eyes.

I put my hand to the felt walls of the ger, parted them, and walked in.

The interior was crowded with some old faces and many which were new. Few noticed me at first, and those that did all registered confusion.

And in one blessed moment, she looked at me. She sat up from the crude maps strewn on the table. She fixed me with her all of her attention, and I did not flinch. Her eyes held mine. She took a step forward. Her hand reached out.

And then she smiled.