

The Princess of Kashgar

A novel by Stan Rice

Author of Forgotten Landscapes

THE PRINCESS OF KASHGAR

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Summary of The Princess of Kashgar

Arzu is a beautiful young artist from a Uyghur village near Kashgar, on the Silk Road. She is accustomed to being admired, especially by Muhemmet, who leads a revolt against the ruling Mongol Empire. The Mongol warriors kidnap Arzu, planning to take her to Xanadu for Kublai Khan. But she and her mandarin lover Tao escape to a secret paradise in the Altai Mountains, the Valley of the Peach Blossoms. They unintentionally corrupt this paradise. Expelled, they go to Xanadu, where Arzu becomes not only Kublai's favorite woman but also his close confidante. Only Arzu can keep the Mongols from destroying Kashgar. The Khan then wants Arzu to go back to Kashgar and assassinate Muhemmet. Still unsure if she wishes to join Muhemmet's rebellion or obey the Khan, she finds Muhemmet and takes a dagger with her into his bedroom. Her assassination attempt fails, and the Mongols slaughter her people. When the Khan dies, Arzu and Tao flee back to the mountain paradise that may or may not accept them.

PROLOGUE

Arzu grasped the handle of the dagger. It hung by a leather strap between her breasts. She could feel the Mongol script carved on it. She watched the door of Muhemmet's bedchamber to see if he was approaching. She pulled the dagger from around her neck, slipping aside her long braids of dark brown hair, and hid the dagger under the edge of one of the bed cushions. Right where she could reach it. That is, if she decided to use it. Even now, she was unsure whether she would.

Arzu looked around at the silk and satin curtains, the jeweled tassels, the soft pillows. She smelled the fragrance coming from the censer on the low table. Muhemmet apparently expected her to be impressed with his wealth—wealth that he did not have when she last saw him. Just two years earlier, Muhemmet was a young man who trained horses. Now he was the leader of Khorgas, a village on the outskirts of Kashgar, where Arzu and Muhemmet had grown up together. Kashgar was a major city on the road between Cathay and the West. Muhemmet now led the Uyghur revolt against the rule of the Great Khan.

Arzu had lived in every situation, from the poverty and dirt of a mountain village to the luxury of the Great Khan. She knew that rich people were seldom as good as poor people in all the ways that counted. Muhemmet's new riches meant nothing to her.

And then she saw it. Just a corner of it, sticking out from the bottom of a pile of blankets. It was the riding blanket that had been, many years before, Arzu's first girlish attempt at embroidery. She had used only running stitches and back stitches, and the lines were crooked. Arzu was embarrassed of it. But back when she was just entering adulthood, before that fateful day when she was abducted, Muhemmet had it under his saddle. At the time, she thought it was because he was proud to be her close friend and, perhaps soon, her husband. But maybe she was as wrong about this as she had been about everything else that she admired about him. Maybe, after all, he was just using her as a way of getting status, just as he was about to use her for pleasure. She got up and carefully pulled the riding blanket from the bottom of the pile and placed it on a nearby table where he could see it.

Arzu turned toward Muhemmet as he entered the chamber. He wore only a light linen robe. He held back the bead strings of the door curtain and stared at her. She wondered if he was waiting for her to bow to him. When it was clear that she would not, he dropped the beads behind him and approached her.

"Well, what are you waiting for? I am ready for you," he told her.

"I am accustomed," she said, "to being greeted with more honor than this." Arzu looked at the low dining table, which had nothing on it. Perhaps Muhemmet could have offered her mint tea and flatbread. It would not compare with the fragrant dark tea and the pastries of Cathay, but it would at least have been a sign of respect for her. "Who do you think you are? The Great Khan showed me more esteem than you do."

"You *were* accustomed," he said. "Not any more. You have come back to your village, now that the Mongols have finished with you. They have chewed you up and spat you out. What am I supposed to do? Praise your beauty?"

"That would be the honest thing to do," said Arzu, who had never been called plain.

"I can see that you are beautiful, by the standards of man. I'm not blind. But that is not what matters to Allah. In His eyes, you are just a whore."

Arzu raised her voice just a little when she said, "You will recall that I was a virgin when I left this village. It was you and the other men who let the Mongols take me."

"We are a conquered people, though perhaps not for much longer," said Muhemmet. "We could not stop the Mongols from taking you. We were lucky that they offered us money for you."

"It was not my choice to go with them."

"But it was your choice to later use your beauty to get privileges from Kublai Khan," Muhemmet said, moving closer to her. "How else could you have become his favorite concubine? He made merry with your body, and now you are impure. When I come into this chamber tomorrow night, Dilnaz will greet me." His wedding to Dilnaz was planned for the next day.

"She is no purer than I am," said Arzu. "The Mongols made merry with her body as well. I saw it."

"It is true," said Muhemmet, "that you are more beautiful than Dilnaz. Indeed, you are *arzu*." Her name meant *desire* in their language.

"I remember when you said you would lay awake at night and wonder if I loved you," said Arzu. "You even said—three times—that you would die for me."

Muhemmet went to a little closet and removed something that hung inside. He showed it to Arzu.

"Here," he said to her. "Remember these?" He held out a pair of leather gloves, exquisitely embroidered with many colors of wool thread.

"Of course, I do," said Arzu. "I made them for you."

"You gave them to me, and I asked for your love. But you left Khorgas and went into Kashgar to sell your fine wares. That is where the rich merchants admired you. That is where the emissaries of the Great Khan found you. Had you accepted my love and stayed home in Khorgas, things would have been very different." He put the gloves back in the closet. "Back then," he said. "you were my innocent beloved. Those days, however, have vanished."

"As have, apparently, the days in which we rode our horses together into the mountains," said Arzu. "You were a poor young man. The beauty of the mountains, the fresh wind, and I were all you needed to be happy."

"I was a rash young man," he said. "But, as of tomorrow, Dilnaz will be my partner in leading the new Uyghur empire. I will be an emperor—a minor one, of course—and she, my empress."

"You are quite sure that I could not be your empress?" Arzu had not planned to say this.

Muhemmet's eyes grew wide. Arzu knew he was looking her over. Then he looked down and shook his head. "I know all about what a good leader Dilnaz is," he said. "As for you, I know nothing except that you can embroider beautifully and that you were the jewel of Kublai Khan's harem. Not only would it be unwise for me to reject her and choose you, but I believe our people would lose confidence in me as their leader if I did such a stupid thing. You have come to join our revolt, and now you cannot leave. But you will play no leadership role in our new empire. Though, perhaps, you can be my secret concubine."

Arzu thought quickly. The partnership option was now impossible. That left only the assassination option. "Very well," said Arzu. "You have made your decision."

Muhemmet let his robe slip to the floor. Arzu started loosening the sash of her plain wool robe. Muhemmet came over to her and slipped her robe from her shoulders. Arzu could see that Muhemmet was excited to be with her. She smiled and lay down on the bed. Months of living in poverty had not diminished the smoothness of her skin. Her eyes were large and dark. Her breasts were not large but, even down to the details of her nipples, were as symmetrical as any sculptor could have made them. Muhemmet descended toward her.

For a moment, as she looked into his handsome face, at his bright eyes and his perfectly trimmed beard, she wondered if she could really kill the man to whom she had meant so much so recently. But when he whispered in her ear, *My delicious little whore,* she let her arm drape over the cushions, and she felt for the dagger.

PART ONE: KASHGAR

Chapter 1

From her earliest childhood, Arzu's father told her how wonderful the Great Khan was.

"We are wealthy, thanks to the Great Khan," Murat explained to her. "He maintains a system of roads. They are really good roads. A horseman can ride five times as far in a day on one of those roads as he could over our little trails. Wagons can travel smoothly, laden with our wares, headed for distant markets. The roads are so smooth that wagons almost never break down or get mired in the mud. Not only that, but the roads stretch far to the east, to Cathay, and far to the west, to kingdoms in what is called Christendom. Both ends of the road decay into blasphemy against Allah. But the blasphemers are rich. They buy things and sell things. And all of the things that they buy and sell go right past Kashgar. There are several different main roads, but to come through the Pamir mountain pass, the roads come together. There is only one road at Kashgar. All of the merchants come to us."

"I would like to travel those roads someday," said Arzu.

"It is not safe for a woman," said Murat, scratching his dark beard that already had a few white hairs in it. The beard, coming around the side of his head, made his face look almost perfectly round.

"Have you ever traveled on one of those roads, Father?"

"No. We make fine leather goods. This takes all of my time. The people who travel the roads are merchants who carry many different kinds of goods. They spend months traveling to Cathay, and months returning. I could not make enough money during such a journey to make up for what I would lose by not staying home and making more wares.

"Why should we go east or west," continued Murat, "when the world comes past the gates of Kashgar? And when the merchants come, they need something to eat and a place to stay. And they have other needs as well."

"Such as what?" asked Arzu.

"Something with which you will never have direct experience," answered her father. "This is part of the reason that I have chosen to stay in our little village rather than to move into the city."

"I already know about the way of a man with a woman," said Arzu. "A little."

"There will be plenty of time for your mother to explain it all to you," said Murat. "This is only your sixteenth year. It is a beautiful thing that a godly man can do with his devoted wife. It is so wonderful! But what the rich merchants sometimes do is ugly, especially when they throw the woman aside and leave."

"But if you ever do travel, father, I will go with you."

"I might be able to protect you if we do," said Murat. "Or not." He got up to put another log on the fire. Trees were scarce in the Uyghur land, and most of them were light wood that burned quickly. Murat saved them for the coldest nights, such as this one. Late spring, Arzu thought, is frequently colder than winter. Murat wore layers of wool-quilted robes, and a thick

fur hat. Uyghur men were supposed to wear ornately-decorated four-sided caps when in public, but on winter days, it was time for fur. Arzu huddled inside of a fur coat.

"I heard," said Arzu, "that the Great Khan killed many thousands of people everywhere his army went. I am good with numbers..."

"You are," said Murat. "This skill will make you a valuable bride someday. A young merchant would esteem your numerical abilities greatly. A horse breeder, not so much."

"You mean, like Muhemmet?"

"Yes, like him. Of course, he is a fine young man. In addition..."

"Yes, Father?"

"I might be saying too much, but I can trust you, Arzu. Muhemmet is becoming something of an important leader among us. This is not necessarily a good thing."

"Explain this to me."

"You will find out in due time."

When she saw that Murat would not tell her anything more about Muhemmet, she said, "I heard that the Great Khan killed so many people that sometimes nobody remained in a village. Miryam's father said that the blood of our people can still be found in the oasis soil and clinging to the sands of the Taklamakan Desert. For each of a thousand people, imagine a thousand in their place. That's the kind of number we are talking about for the Khan's murders. How can such a murderer be a great man?"

"Oh, he was worse than that," said Murat. "His soldiers spilled a lot of blood, but when it came time to execute someone, they would use bloodless methods. He boiled some of his enemies alive. He sometimes had the victim's mouth stuffed with feces until he suffocated. At other times, he had the victim rolled in blankets and trampled by horses."

"That doesn't sound bloodless," said Arzu.

"The blood never touched the ground," said Murat. "But that was Genghis. Not only was he cruel, but he was a blasphemer. He gathered the few survivors after he slaughtered most of the people of a city, and told them that he was the scourge of God. He said that the people must have sinned, for otherwise Allah would not have permitted them to be his victims. Allah, in whom he did not believe. Genghis is now dead. The Great Khan is now his grandson Kublai, who is much more interested in luxury than in war. Kublai's soldiers still wander, conquer, and slaughter, but in places that his grandfather already conquered, we are hardly aware of his existence.

"In addition," continued Murat. "Before the Mongols came, each of our tribes fought the others. There were not many big slaughters, but the total death toll added up. Nowadays, our tribes do not fight one another. We used to be in constant battle with the Kyrgyz, the Uzbeks, the Polovetsians, and the Kazakhs, just to name a few. Now the Great Khan will not permit us to fight. I say to this, Praise Allah, the God of Peace. The Great Khan imposed on us what seemed like an oppressive system of administration—but he left it to us to administer everything. We pay taxes to him. And we have to follow some rules. For example, the Mongols believe that spirits live in flowing water. Therefore, we are not supposed to launder our clothes in streams and rivers. In return for paying taxes and following a few rules, we get peace and wealth."

"I would like to see the world," said Arzu. "That's one of the purposes of a road. It is not just for commerce."

"Why should we want to do that?" her father asked again. "This is the most beautiful place in the world, right here. All around us are the magnificent mountains, their sheer cliffs always covered in snow. And our lake is of the purest blue, a liquid heaven. The countryside all around us..."

"...is mostly grass and little shrubs," Arzu finished his sentence. "I have heard that, both to the east and to the west, there are whole forests of trees. The Koran talks about forests, but I have never seen one. And I have heard that, in far Cathay, they have peach trees with lovely blossoms."

"Peach? What is a peach?" asked Arzu's father.

"Something like an apricot." Arzu had seen dried apricots, from lands not many days' journey to the southwest, but had only heard of peaches.

"Wonderful those trees must be. But do not despise the grasses," said Murat. "Just because they are small does not mean they are not beautiful, just as a small or old person is beautiful in the eyes of Allah."

"I know, father. I have looked at the flowers."

"Besides the beauty that Allah has put in the world around us, we create beauty. And few better than we, eh, my daughter?"

"This is true, father," said Arzu. "You really think we can finish ten pairs of leather gloves tomorrow?"

"Certainly, we can," said Murat. "Beautiful leather on the outside, warm wool on the inside. I can sew them very neatly. And you..."

"I will embroider them," said Arzu.

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"I haven't finished it yet," said Arzu as her father picked up one of the pairs of leather gloves on which she was working. Arzu had not yet sewn the gloves shut, since she needed room to insert the needle from underneath the decorations. But sewing them shut would be a quick and easy task.

"It looks finished to me," said Murat. "Better than finished. The design and the colors are wonderful. What is this pattern supposed to be? It looks like the face of a caracal." Caracals were the wildcats of the mountains.

"It's supposed to represent the mountains."

"Ah, yes, now I see. Anyone who can embroider a design this beautiful, a design that could be either mountain or caracal, is a true artist. That's my daughter! Any man would be proud to have these gloves."

"But I have more things to add to the gloves," said Arzu.

"They are perfect," said Murat. "That is, there is nothing about them that is wrong."

"But there is much that is incomplete," said his daughter.

"We cannot afford to make them more complete," said Murat. "Look how many glass beads you have already sewn in." Arzu had spaced green, amber, and red beads uniformly over her embroidery. "They are expensive. I shall have to charge more for these gloves than Yusup does for his. I think people will still buy ours, but not if they become *too* expensive."

Arzu did not answer. She and her father sat on the porch of their mud brick house that looked south into the mountains. A fresh wind poured down from the blue mountain slopes, and rustled the hood that covered Arzu's head, revealing her long dark braids. She turned her face into the sun. Her squint hid her large brown eyes.

"It is not just the beads that are expensive," continued Murat. "It is also time. During the time that it would take you to make these perfect gloves complete, we could finish yet another pair of gloves," said Murat. "It is spring, but the days are still too short for much work." Murat also looked toward the mountains. "We already work fewer hours than the other artisans," he continued. "We hardly get any work done in the winter, and very little except on the long summer days." Murat did not want to work many hours using only candlelight. Not because candles were in short supply; the little village of Khorgas, just south of Kashgar, had plenty of tallow. "When I was younger, I found that my eyes hurt after doing fine needlework by the light of candles. The next day I could see the mountains, but my vision was blurry. I believe Allah wants me to see the mountains clearly rather than work late into the night to make money. But we must do as much work as we can while the sun shines."

Murat and Arzu heard the sound of horses' hooves approaching from the other side of their house. Arzu stood and smiled, placing her needle and thread on the little table beside her, hiding them under the leather from the wind. Murat saw a young man ride his horse up to the porch and dismount. He led another horse by a rope. He had two bows, a large one and a small one, on his left shoulder, his arm between the bow and the string. He had a quiver of arrows.

"Muhemmet," said Murat, greeting the young man. "It is a fine day."

"It is," said Muhemmet, approaching. His face was angular and handsome. At seventeen years of age, he was trying to grow a beard. "I wonder if Arzu might wish to ride with me up into the mountains, and if you might permit her."

"Have you no work to do?" Murat asked the young man.

"I'm doing it," he answered. "I am training these horses." Muhemmet and his father Erkin raised, trained, and sold horses.

"I would love to go, Father," said Arzu.

"This will take even more time away from our work," Murat told his daughter. "You either go riding, or you spend less time decorating the gloves. Which do you choose?"

Arzu did not have to think long. "I will go with Muhemmet," she said. "I still want to do the finest work that I can on a few of the gloves," she said. "Just some special ones. Even if I have to work by candlelight. For the others, I will work as quickly as I can, and help you make all the gloves you want."

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Muhemmet rode on one horse, Arzu on the other, toward the mountains south of Khorgas. They each had a small saddle on a decorated wool saddlecloth. Each saddlecloth was ornately embroidered with linear designs of many colors. The lines on Muhemmet's cloth were simple stitches that were not quite straight. The cloth was, in fact, Arzu's first attempt at embroidery when she was several years younger. Erkin bought it from Murat as a gesture of friendship. But now Muhemmet used it as a symbol of honor. Everyone in the village knew Arzu made the cloth, and that she was the most beautiful girl in the village.

"You haven't worn out my saddlecloth," Arzu said to him.

"I just use it on special occasions," said Muhemmet.

"What's special about today?"

"I am with you," he answered. "And every day is a beautiful day, in some way or other."

"Most days are winter," said Arzu. "Beautiful the days may be, but we can hardly get out of the house to see them."

"Our horses," said Muhemmet, "spend every day outside. No matter how hot, or how cold. They can dig through a thick layer of snow to get at the dead grass, and that is all they ask of life. Allah has made them to live, and love, outside. It is true that Allah has made us to stay indoors much of the time. But our spirits should be more like those of the horses. Not like those of the donkeys, who plod along and pull heavy carts. How many men pull along carts full of worry and care, until they grow old and die, when they wish they had run like a horse at least once in a while."

"Sounds like my father," said Arzu. "But he is a good man."

"I did not mean to say anything bad about your father," said Muhemmet. "He provides well for his family, and is respected by everyone. What he has is another form of happiness. But, I suspect, you are different."

"I must be," said Arzu. "I left my work behind to ride in the mountains with you."

"I see that you did not wear one of your delicate dresses," said Muhemmet. He wore leather leggings over his loose trousers to protect himself from the scratchy, leafless bushes through which they rode. Arzu wore a thick robe of rough wool cloth.

"No, I did not," she said. "I thought it possible that you would wish me to ride with you today, so I did not wear delicate clothes. Except this scarf that I embroidered."

"It is beautiful," said Muhemmet.

"Of course," said Arzu. "Allah has given me great skill, and it would be dishonest for you to deny it."

"What makes you so good at embroidery?" asked Muhemmet.

"I practice a lot," Arzu smiled. "I have embroidered at least a thousand things since I made that stupid cloth under your saddle."

"Lots of girls practice embroidery," said Muhemmet. "Why can't they produce such beautiful things?"

"It is also a talent Allah has given me," said Arzu. "I do not know why he did this. Besides, I am also observant. I notice things. I notice what it is that makes things beautiful. Like balance and symmetry. I notice little things like those flowers down there right next to the ground."

"Where?"

"Your horse is nearly trampling them."

"I didn't realize any flowers were growing out here."

"That's because you don't look closely at the world around you. The trees and shrubs are still in their winter sleep," said Arzu. "But down in the warmth next to the ground, the flowers are blooming. It is their only chance, before the larger plants open their leaves and cast them into shade."

"Where did you learn that?"

"I observed it myself." Arzu stopped her horse and dismounted. She crouched down and looked closely at a little white flower on a stalk scarcely as long as a finger.

Muhemmet dismounted, put down his bows, and looked at the flower, but not as closely. "Nice," he said, looking into her face.

"There are many kinds of flowers," said Arzu, not looking into his face. "Not just different colors, but different shapes. This one is like a little bowl. Its petals shine like jewels. But some others are purple, and as intricate as the sashes of a curtain. Some of them are big and red."

"I never noticed," said Muhemmet.

"I have embroidered them all into my works," said Arzu, looking up. "They may look like little shapes I invented, but each one of them represents a real flower I have seen."

"Not one of them," said Muhemmet, "is as beautiful as you."

Arzu looked down. "I am still too young to talk of love," she said.

"The time will come. Someday soon every young man in Khorgas will come to seek your hand. Maybe every young man in Kashgar will come to Khorgas looking for the girl of whose beauty they have heard. When this happens, remember me. Remember that I have known you the longest. Remember that I took you into the mountains. Remember that I let you show me the spring flowers."

"I will remember," said Arzu, looking up at him. "Though my father will listen to me, it is ultimately his decision to make. If he is to lose my contribution to his business, it must be to a son-in-law who can provide for me."

"My family will be rich from selling the finest horses this side of Cathay," said Muhemmet, smiling. "And in this, you would be my partner, not a wife kept in the shadows of the tent." Muhemmet's family lived in a round yak-leather yurt. "We will sell my horses and your decorated saddles and blankets."

Muhemmet took Arzu's hand and lifted her to her feet. "Let us mount our horses." He picked up his bows. "I am going to teach you to hunt."

"I very much doubt that I will ever have occasion to hunt," she said, climbing into her saddle.

"You will have no occasion to become an expert hunter," he said as he mounted. "But who knows whether what you learn today might be useful to you at a time and place you cannot now guess."

"It is good that I have no need for you to train me to be an expert hunter," she said. "For you are not one yourself. You are just a boy."

"Almost a man."

"Very well. Almost a man. Show me how to hunt."

They both rode further into the mountains. Arzu, like most Uyghur women, rode horses as well as the men. She started riding when she was a little girl. She rode faster than Muhemmet. She stopped, turned, and looked back at him. Her smile was brilliant. All her teeth were sound and white, something that was rare enough in the world.

Muhemmet stopped beside her, looking for a long minute at her smile. Then he turned to look back downslope. Khorgas lay below them. Kashgar was a big cluster of mud buildings in a cloud of dust, just to the north. All around them, mountains were clad in snow. A deep blue lake merged with the sky. Some snow still lingered in north-facing crevices where the two riders stopped.

"What will you hunt?" asked Arzu.

"Gazelle, of course," answered Muhemmet.

"Where are they?"

"They must be hiding. If we wait, one will emerge, and I can chase it."

They waited. To Arzu, the wait was pleasant. She breathed air that was utterly fresh, unlike the smell of earth and leather and livestock to which she was accustomed in Khorgas.

"Something moved," said Muhemmet. But it was not a gazelle. It was a hare. "Dinner tonight," he said, and rode off toward the animal. He rode fast, whooping like a warrior. He ran his horse toward the hare. Arzu had to admit that Muhemmet was a skillful rider. Whenever the hare changed direction, which was often, Muhemmet followed it. He had an arrow in his short bow and lifted it to shoot, keeping it steady even as the horse galloped. The hare leapt back behind his horse. Muhemmet stood in the short stirrups and turned backward to shoot. The arrow pinned the hare to the ground. He dismounted to pick it up, put it in a pouch, and get back in the saddle.

"Nice gazelle," said Arzu as Muhemmet returned.

"Stew is stew," he said. "Use enough cabbage, and you can't tell that it isn't gazelle. I was going to offer this meat to your mother," said Muhemmet. "But if it is below your dignity, Arzu, I will take it home myself."

Arzu smiled. "I will take it. Say, that was impressive, the way you turned backward to shoot. You didn't have to turn your horse around or even slow it down."

"That's how the Mongols conquered the world," said Muhemmet. "At least, all the world that you or I will ever see. Special tack and stirrups. Their warriors would ride past their enemies, and just when their enemies breathed a sigh of relief, the warriors stood up in their stirrups and turned back to shoot, without even having to slow their horses. The stirrups I have made are not as good as theirs, but they work well enough." Muhemmet looked off into the distance. "Arzu, what would you think of me if I did have to fight as a warrior?" He pulled the reins. His horse rose on its hind legs then went back down.

"You could not win against a Mongol horde."

"Why would I need to do that?" said Muhemmet. "The Mongols are the masters of the flat plains, but if our warriors hide in the mountains, we can out-maneuver them. We can rain down the fury of Allah upon them from the high bluffs."

Muhemmet rode off a little way. He stood in the stirrups and raised up his hands into the air. Arzu thought his shout was a whoop of glory. But it was a howl of pain. His left knee buckled. He was barely able to get his horse stopped and his feet out of the stirrups before he fell to the ground.

Arzu ran up to him and helped him sit up. "What happened?" she asked.

"Some warrior I am going to make," he said. "Or horse trainer, for that matter." Muhemmet looked up at Arzu. "There is something wrong with my left knee, Arzu. Not many people know about it. I hide it pretty well. Sometimes, if I turn my knee the wrong way, it just collapses. I have to wait a few minutes before I can walk again. A crucial few minutes, if it is in the middle of a battle, or even while riding a horse in the mountains. Arzu, you might have to help me get back in the saddle. It is a shame for a man to need a woman to get him into the saddle, but that is what is going to happen."

"But you should not be ashamed to receive help from a friend," said Arzu. "I will get you back home. Here, let me put my arm around you and help you back onto your horse."

*

Arzu worked by candlelight. This night was not as cold as those of the previous week. No wood could be spared, not even sticks from the tamarisks down in the gullies. Even the light of seven candles did not keep Arzu's eyes from getting tired. After working day and night for a week, outside of the time that she worked for him, Arzu produced the most complex embroidery that her father had ever seen. The wool thread designs covered the sleeves, the back of the hand, even the backs of the fingers. One of them had the figure of a gazelle.

Muhemmet looked at the gloves when he visited Arzu and her father.

"This gazelle," said Muhemmet, staring in awe at the gloves. "It does not look like a figure or a portrait. It looks like it is in motion. How did you do that?"

"I watch things, remember?"

"I most certainly remember."

"I know that you will probably never shoot anything larger than a hare..."

"Which was delicious," Arzu's mother Alfiya called from the kitchen.

"...in which case," concluded Arzu, "these gloves will be a record of Muhemmet's failed dreams. But if I embroidered a hare on them instead of a gazelle, Muhemmet might not be inspired to ever hunt anything bigger than a hare to start with."

"I will make myself worthy of you," said Muhemmet to Arzu.

Arzu handed the gloves to him. "These are my gift to you, my friend."

*

"We did not meet our goal," said Murat a week later. "I wanted to have three dozen pairs of gloves, and a dozen hats, ready for the traveling merchants when they came through Kashgar. We had barely more than half that number." He glared at Arzu. "They paid us well. In fact, they paid a lot more for your special gloves than they did for our ordinary ones. But we still came out with less money than we might have otherwise have had. Our needs are met, for now. But there will not be enough for a dowry. Not even if we include the price of the gloves that you gave Muhemmet."

Arzu did not seem disturbed.

"Did you not hear me? My answer to Muhemmet, when he formally comes to call, will have to be no."

"He will wait," said Arzu. "He knows I am worth waiting for. We are still very young."

"He is almost a man, and he cannot wait very long." Murat tried to sound gruff.

"Father," said Arzu, "did you not see the look on his face when he was last here? He is in my hand. He lives for every little compliment I may pay him. He will wait."

"Wait?" asked Murat. "Wait for what? If you do not begin to embroider more of my gloves, we will miss our target next time the merchants come through also, and we still cannot afford a dowry. How will next time be any different from this time?

"Besides," said Murat, "I want grandchildren."

"Perhaps Alim has children," said Arzu. Alim, her elder brother, had left on The Road years earlier and had not returned, nor had he sent any message. Arzu still remembered what he looked like, and the hours, not many but beautiful, that she had spent with him riding in the hills. Perhaps Muhemmet was, to some degree, a substitute for her lost brother.

"I want grandchildren whom I know about," said her father.

"And who knows what might happen during this next year?" asked Arzu. "There are lots of young men in Kashgar."

"And lots of young women," said Murat. "All of them richer than you are."

"Give me a month," said Arzu. "I will continue to work for you, but I will need time to embroider gloves that are my finest work. And hats, too."

"I cannot afford to let you use glass beads," said Murat.

"I do not need them. The beauty of my work will show without glass beads."

"You are right, of course. Very well. A month."

"I will finish my work in two weeks, then during the two remaining weeks I will show them around to the major merchants in Kashgar."

*

At the end of two weeks, Arzu produced a dozen fine works in addition to what she did for her father: gloves, hats, scarves. She even dyed her own wool. She produced not just green wool, with dye from the green rocks high on the mountain, which Muhemmet brought to her; and not just yellow, with dye from the clay underneath the glaciers. But she produced a whole range of intermediate colors. She embroidered them, each line after another that was nearly, but not quite, the same color, producing a color shift that had an almost shimmering effect. It was a pattern that neither the people of Khorgas nor the merchants of Kashgar had ever seen before.

One afternoon about that time, Arzu went to the mountains with Muhemmet again. He seemed distracted. He did not bring his bows. They sat on the ground, a short distance apart from one another.

"I need to know something," he told her.

"What is it?"

"I need to know if you love me."

"I think I do, Muhemmet. But I hardly know any other boys. What should I feel for you, if it is love?"

"I will tell you what I feel for *you*, Arzu. You are everything that I desire. I lay awake at night wondering if you love me. Each day that you are not mine is a day that is lost."

"I never lose sleep, Muhemmet. And I am too busy to worry about having one day more or one day less with you."

Muhemmet turned to her with a serious look on his face. "I would die for you."

Arzu looked at him in surprise. "Your death's no good to me," she said. "And why should anyone have to die for anything?"

"We are exactly where we were a month ago," he said. "You have no dowry. My father would never consent."

"Can't you tell your father that you would work extra to make up for my lack of dowry? If I am that important to you, you might consider doing this."

"This would be an insult to most men," said Muhemmet. "But for you, I will think about it."

"Don't think too long. Very soon, I will go into Kashgar and sell my finest works. And in Kashgar there are many handsome men." Before Muhemmet could speak, Arzu continued. "Don't worry. Men may say sweet things to me, offer me gifts, regale me with sweet almond cakes, and even tea from Cathay. They could offer me the finest silk. But I know how to tell whether a man seriously loves me. I'm not blind, Muhemmet. I know what a good man you are. Just don't try to push me into loving you."

Arzu mounted her horse to return home. Muhemmet continued to sit. Arzu got back down and sat beside him. “Something more is bothering you. Something besides wondering whether I love you.”

Muhemmet picked up a little rock and threw it. “There’s talk,” he said.

“About what?”

“About the Mongols.”

“What about them?” asked Arzu. “My father says that they have made our prosperity possible. Without the peace they have imposed, we would pour our efforts and our genius into fighting rather than into creativity and wealth.”

“One cannot impose peace, to use your words.”

“Sorry. Perhaps I misspoke. Without the *order* they have imposed...”

“Order is the opposite of freedom, Arzu.”

“I do not know, Muhemmet. But order is not the opposite of happiness. Look at the bees, like the ones Masud has. Their combs are strictly ordered and full of honey. Enough for the bees, and enough for us, too. The bees, and we, are both happy. Besides...” Arzu stood and walked around, waving her arms. “There has never been one day in my life, Muhemmet, when the presence or absence of Mongols has made any difference to me. Or my parents. Or your parents. Or you. Am I not correct?”

“The Mongols have been kidnapping women in Samarkand.”

This was new information to Arzu. She held in her surprise and said coolly, “Samarkand? That’s so far away it might as well be in a different world, Muhemmet! Besides, I’ve heard a thing or two myself. The Mongols pay for the women. The Mongols do not kidnap them.”

“Do the families have any choice about what happens to their daughters?”

“I don’t know. It has not happened in Kashgar, that’s all I know. And I very much doubt that the Uzbeks in Samarkand would put up with kidnapping any more than us Uyghurs of Kashgar. It must be by consent. Now, if the Mongols should ever kidnap any of us, *then* maybe we should do something about it.

“Meanwhile, Muhemmet,” continued Arzu, “everything is fine here.” She started to sit.

“There’s talk.”

Arzu stood back up and whirled on him. “You keep saying that. Talk about what?”

“A lot of the men are resentful of Mongol oppression.”

“Of course, they are, Muhemmet. Nobody *likes* it.”

“Except maybe your father.”

Arzu froze. “You might want to find some other way to say that, Muhemmet.”

Muhemmet stood up and faced her. “Arzu, everybody knows that your father is on their side.”

“What side is that?” Arzu said loudly. “The Mongols don’t have a side, nor do we, any more. Also, you make my father sound like some kind of traitor. But there is nothing for him to betray! Really, Muhemmet...” Arzu exhaled loudly and looked at the ground. She started

fingering her braids. “This man, Murat, about whom you say such things, might be your father-in-law someday. I am confused, then, about why you seem to be so interested in me.”

“Because it is you whom I want to marry.”

“And then I will be in your family and will have to look across a chasm of hostility toward my father and mother.”

“Maybe I should not have said anything,” said Muhemmet. “But we would have had this conversation sooner or later.”

“You’re right,” said Arzu. “Sooner is better.”

“The men—not, as yet, including your father—have been meeting,” Muhemmet said more quietly. “You will tell nobody about this.”

“Whom would I tell, Muhemmet? The Mongols? I don’t know any.”

“We are meeting...”

“You meet with them? Maybe you *are* a man rather than a boy, though not necessarily in a good way.”

“Listen to me. We are organizing a defense force. Just in case we need to resist.”

“Why don’t you wait and see if any resistance is needed?”

“By then, it may be too late.” Muhemmet stood and walked away from Arzu a little way, then turned back. He looked like he was lecturing a crowd, not just a confused young woman. “The Mongols not only were but remain bloodthirsty and merciless. They did, and continue to do, whatever they want for any reason or for no reason. They are blasphemers. Allah has put us on the earth to be witnesses of his truth. Allah’s true servants do not seek war. But sometimes war is necessary. It says it, right in the Koran.”

“How do you know?” asked Arzu. “You cannot read Arabic.”

“Timur son of Khoja told me before he died,” said Muhemmet. “He is the one who went to Mecca and returned. And he didn’t just tell me. He told all of the men of Khorgas.”

Arzu approached Muhemmet. “If you try to fight the Mongols, they will annihilate us. How could that be good for us? How could that be good for the people who are supposed to be witnesses for Allah?”

“I told the others I would talk to you about this,” said Muhemmet. “I have done so. I will not stop hoping that you will be, in addition to my partner in life, my partner in the resistance against the Mongols, should it become necessary. Which could be sooner than any of us imagine.”

*

The very first Kashgar merchant to whom Arzu showed her leather gloves and hats and her wool scarf tried, without success, to suppress his enthusiasm.

“You are Murat’s daughter, over in Khorgas? He produces fine leather goods, hats, all the rest. But none this good. I would offer you a very good price for your work.”

When the merchant made his offer, Arzu did quick calculations in her head. “We would still make more money if I continued to produce ordinary gloves and hats for my father. It takes me twice to three times as long to make these as to decorate his. You have not offered me two or three times the price.”

“Let me think about it,” said the merchant. “Meanwhile, did I mention that I have a son about your age?”

*

The next time Arzu brought her finest work to the merchant, he invited her into his sitting room. His house was built of wood, not clay like many other houses in town. His door was painted the kind of blue one usually sees only in the sky. Decorated posts held up his porch ceiling. His windows had parchment panes behind the lathes, very thin and admitting much light. One of the panes, for which Arzu tried to imagine how much he had spent, was of glass. This pane showed the main street of Kashgar and the mountains beyond.

“Arzu,” he said. “Many of us have seen your work. We all agree that it is the finest to be found in any of the Uyghur towns and cities.”

“You said something very like this the last time we talked,” said Arzu. She had started making four-cornered Uyghur caps, with linear patterns of green, white, and black wool thread. The merchant was holding one of them.

“I am now prepared to pay the full price that you desire,” said the merchant. “And if any other merchant in Kashgar offers more, let me know. I regret having to be so unclear in my offer, but that’s the way the business works. If we used the Khan’s paper money with one another the way we do with the merchants of The Road, the prices would be less flexible. But one can use the paper money only to buy things from *them*.”

“I wouldn’t know a good price from a bad one, with paper money,” said Arzu.

“I cannot buy many of your wares at your price. At least not yet.

“Also,” the merchant continued, “I remind you that we Kashgar merchants have certain advantages over those in Khorgas. We can sell our wares directly from our houses. Few buyers, and none of the rich merchants on The Road, go into villages like Khorgas. Your merchants would have to wander the streets to sell your wares, or rent a stall, which is not cheap. I can get your work sold, without the added effort and expense for you. I hope you recognize that this is also worth something.”

“I think I should be very glad to let you buy and sell my works of art,” said Arzu. “I have no reason to doubt your word, but you will understand that I will also talk with some of the other merchants before finalizing a deal. Might I also ask whether you would sell some of my father’s wares as well?”

“They are more ordinary,” said the merchant.

“That is what he means for them to be,” said Arzu.

"His wares compete more directly with ours," said the merchant. "That is why we are unlikely to agree to sell his. Unless you make this a condition for obtaining your work..."

"I do," said Arzu. "Within reason."

"Whose reason?"

"Mine, in consultation with my father."

"You are a wise woman."

*

"You are a wise woman," Muhemmet said when Arzu visited his house the next day. "I thought you were the most wonderful woman in the world..."

"Very little of which you have seen," Muhemmet's mother called from the kitchen.

"I already thought you were wonderful, but each day you surprise me with more reasons to believe it."

"If I am so wise, Muhemmet, why do you insist on going with me into Kashgar? Why would I need your supervision?"

"You might not need supervision so much as protection."

"It is unlikely that I would be in danger in the middle of the day. Everyone knows who I am, and would come to my aid if anything happened to me. Besides, Muhemmet, do you not have your own work to do with the horses?"

"I have no fixed schedule," he said. "I am willing to be of service to you."

"You mean," said Arzu, "that you want everyone in Kashgar, or at least on one or two of the streets of that vast city, to see you with me."

"May I go with you or not?" asked Muhemmet.

"No," said Muhemmet's father Erkin called from the corral. "He is already behind in his work. There is tack to make. When he has caught up on his work, he can go with a girl into the city to help her sell saddle blankets."

*

"So here is the woman with the magic fingers," said a young man with a big smile. He sat on a horse larger and stronger than any that Muhemmet's family bred.

Arzu smiled at him from her horse as she prepared to ride back to Khorgas from Kashgar.

"And who might you be?" demanded Muhemmet, who rose beside Arzu.

"I am Zulfiya," said the man, pushing back his long, light brown hair. "If you lived in Kashgar, you would know who I am." His beard was trimmed neatly.

"And that is not necessarily a good thing," said Muhemmet, stiffening slightly.

"I do not know your name," Zulfiya said to Muhemmet. "But you have made a good point. I am the silk merchant."

"The only one?" asked Arzu, with a sly look in her eyes.

"No, not by any means," said Zulfiya, smiling bigger. "But I have the most connections with the merchants of The Road. I can get the most, and the best, silk. Certain parties might want to have some of my silk to use in making their own wares. A woman who makes such beautiful embroidered wool vests can certainly make good silk vests." Arzu had just made her first vest.

"Word may be getting around about me," said Arzu, "but I am not rich, nor is my father."

"Your credit is good with me," said Zulfiya. "What vests you could make! And wear. Any vest would look good on you. And you deserve to wear the finest silk."

"We were just heading back to Khorgas," said Muhemmet.

"The beautiful lady here does not seem to be in as much of a hurry as you are," said Zulfiya. His leather vest was ornately, but not beautifully, decorated. His tailor, Arzu noted, had more enthusiasm than talent.

"As you can imagine, her time is valuable," said Muhemmet.

"All the more reason," said Zulfiya, "for her to check out my silks. Arzu, daughter of Murat, may I have the pleasure of showing them to you?"

"Yes, please," said Arzu. "But first I must ask what sort of price we are talking about."

Arzu could see that Zulfiya was thinking about what to say next. He thought just a little bit too long. Arzu figured he was probably lying when he named a price for his silk that was certainly too low.

"I have heard of you," Arzu said to Zulfiya. "You have a name among merchants in Kashgar. But at the price you mentioned, you cannot long remain in business."

"It is true," said Zulfiya, "that this price is low. But once our products—not just vests, but entire robes, pants, all the rest—are well known, I will get my investment back and more. Silk thread of many colors, embroidered onto silk of many other colors. You see, my lovely lady, it is *you* in whom I am investing. Your magic fingers."

"You are welcome to call upon her father sometime," said Muhemmet. "As I frequently do. You know his name."

"Who is this man?" Zulfiya asked Arzu.

"Why are you asking me?" Arzu answered.

"I am Muhemmet, son or Erkin."

"I do not recognize those names."

"This is hardly surprising," said Muhemmet. "I am not in your line of work. But if you are lucky, the horse on which you are riding might be one of the ones we bred and trained."

"Not this one," smiled Zulfiya. "Not unless you supply beasts to Cambulac. That is where I acquired this noble steed."

"You have been to Cambulac!" said Arzu.

"Once," said Zulfiya. "What am amazing journey. Cambulac is beyond description. But it was a long journey, and not very profitable in the end."

"This is what my father has told me," said Arzu. "It is more profitable to just stay home."

"He is a wise man," said Zulfiya. "But you wish to travel, I'll bet."

"There is plenty of time for me to think about that later," said Arzu.

"This is true, for one as young as you," said Zulfiya. "But in the event that you are interested in traveling the road, I can give you all the advice you need. And even some introductions." He spoke more quietly, and directly to Arzu. "You will need a *paiza* from the Khan's administration to travel The Road. I can recommend you for one."

"You may talk to her father about it," said Muhemmet.

"I am speaking to this lovely lady," said Zulfiya, shooting a glance at Muhemmet.

"You may talk to my father about it," said Arzu.

Muhemmet accompanied Arzu home and left. Arzu told her father about the silk merchant. Murat said, "Your fame is spreading. This can only be good."

*

Arzu took another half dozen of her embroidered items to the merchant in Kashgar. She noticed that he wore one of her caps as he sat at his table underneath his porch canopy.

He looked deeply into Arzu's big dark eyes, and said, "I have to be honest with you. I mean, completely honest. On previous meetings, I said nothing incorrect to you, about selling things to the merchants on The Road. But I left something out, which I should have told you. Can you keep a secret?"

"It depends on what it is," said Arzu.

"Nothing illegal or immoral, in the eyes of Allah or man."

"Very well."

The merchant cleared his throat and spoke softly. "You may not have heard that men from the court of the Great Khan are coming to Kashgar."

"There are always inspectors from the court of the Khan," said Arzu. "What is special this time?"

"This is no routine inspection," said the merchant. "These are emissaries, who are being sent by the specific command of the Khan himself."

Arzu jumped up. "Really! When is this?" she shouted.

"Nobody is sure," said the merchant. "And keep your voice down. When the emissaries are on their way, we will know quickly. They will send messengers along the Road from Cambulac. We will not have much warning. My guess is, this will happen within a week."

"This is a secret that only the Kashgar merchants knew about?"

"As far as I am aware," said the merchant.

"It's funny that Zulfiya didn't mention it," said Arzu.

"You know Zulfiya?" asked the merchant.

"He made sure that I did. I take it that this is not an entirely good thing."

"You didn't make any deals with him?"

"No, not yet."

"Let me guess. He made you feel very special."

"I am."

"Of course. He was very friendly, yet did not let you into his confidence about the Khan's emissaries, about which he knows. That is typical of him. You are wise to stay away from him."

"That should be easy enough to do," said Arzu. "I have as many excuses for meeting or staying away from someone as a mountain has snowbanks."

"He is young for a merchant, but is old enough to have much experience in the world."

"I do not consider that to necessarily be a bad thing."

"Of itself, it is not," said the merchant. "But you are not the first woman to whom he has spoken sweetly. Did he offer you credit? I'll take that as a yes. You did not accept it, I assume."

"No, I did not."

"You can trust me, Arzu." said the merchant. "I am a married man and have no hidden motives."

"One statement does not follow the other," said Arzu. "But I believe you."

The merchant looked at her as if he realized that Arzu was even wiser than he had guessed.

"What do the emissaries want?" she asked.

"You mean, besides checking up on us? They already know we pay our taxes. Maybe they just want to make sure we are not washing any laundry in streams."

"It wouldn't take special emissaries from the Khan for that," said Arzu.

"They may want to buy things for the Great Khan," said the merchant. "Things that are much, much better than what the merchants usually bring to them."

"You mean, they want to buy things like gloves and hats," said Arzu.

"Only the best," repeated the merchant.

"Silks?" asked Arzu, thinking of Zulfiya.

"They already have plenty of silks. Those are Cathay's main export."

"I will be ready," said Arzu.

Chapter 2

"Oh, really? How nice!" Arzu said quietly.

Her father must have expected her to be more enthusiastic when he told her that emissaries from the court of the Great Khan would visit Kashgar. He looked around her room. The one item of fine clothing that she kept for herself, her embroidered scarf, was already lying on her low table. Her finest robes, though plain, hung from a hook by the window.

"You seem to have been expecting this news," said Murat.

"You said we should always be ready for rich merchants to come along The Road," Arzu said.

"You seem to have known it would be tomorrow."

"How is that possible?" said Arzu. "And what difference does it make? They have come here to purchase our fine wares."

"Let us hope this is the only reason," said Murat.

"We will get some of their money," said Arzu. "My gloves and hats are worth what the Khan's emissaries will pay. Of course, they will pay for the items I decorated for you, as well."

Murat smiled. "And what may be worth more is that they will probably write down our names—or maybe just your name—on one of those lists they keep. They always bring a scribe with them to keep track of expenses and the names of contacts. They might, upon a later visit, specifically seek us out.

"I do not know which I like better—money or barter," continued Murat. "The Mongol emissaries come with money. They say, I will give you thus-and-such a price for your wares. Take it or leave it. But in bartering, you can stir up dreams. On the other hand, when you barter, you part with something of known value in return for something you can only guess that you might find useful. And, gold is gold. As long as the Mongol Empire stays stable, their paper money is all right too."

The sound of horses came from outside Arzu's window. Murat looked out. "It is Muhemmet," he said. He looked at Arzu and said, "You were expecting him, too."

"He is taking me into the mountains," said Arzu.

"You have gone with him into the mountains, what is it, four times?"

"Just three. Well, maybe four."

"What do you do there? I do not imply that you do anything improper, my daughter."

"It is a beautiful place," said Arzu. "And sometimes he shoots a hare. He says he is going to shoot a gazelle. I do not expect he will, but just in case he does, I want to be there to see it."

"So, it is always the same thing that you do?"

"Yes and no, Father. Each time we go, the springtime has advanced a little more. There is always something new to see."

"Be ready to leave for Kashgar early in the morning," said her father as he left. "And don't forget the feast tonight. It is at Erkin's tent."

*

As soon as the word of the Khan's entourage arrived at the village, the people of Khorgas threw together a feast. Several of the wealthier men slaughtered and hung sheep and goats, and the women quickly carved up the finest cuts of meat to broil. They put all of the bones, gristles, and lesser cuts into pots to boil slowly for later. There was plenty of meat. There was also dried cherries from the orchards to the west, beans, and flatbread. Koumiss flowed like the river.

All of the men, and many of the women, including Arzu, wore four-cornered hats. The other women, usually the less wealthy ones, tied their hair in plain wool scarves.

The families sat on the floor of Erkin's yurt according to their wealth and status. The richest man was Mehmut, who sold salt. The saline springs were on his land. His workers transported barrels of brine in donkey carts and poured them into shallow vats of fired clay, open to the sky. The water evaporated, leaving salt slush. Between rains, the men gathered the slush and brought it to a tent cover with open sides, where fires heated the slush and produced salt. The light brown salt, with some dirt in it, was the cheapest. White salt was more valuable. The best of all was the red salt, which sold for the highest price. Mehmut gave his salt away to everyone who needed it in Khorgas, but sold it dearly to the people of Kashgar and the merchants of The Road. His family was one of three in the inner circle. Arzu's family, and Muhemmet's, were in the second ring, along with about a dozen other families. The poorer families mostly sat outside, but were not the less raucous in their pleasure.

At first, all of the women helped prepare the food. This was where Arzu encountered Dilnaz, a young woman her age from a not-quite-poor family. Dilnaz was pretty, despite her round face and flat nose. She had never liked Arzu, resenting her greater beauty even when they were children. Dilnaz was busy preparing pastries. The women had saved back the anise seeds and honey to make pastries for a feast like this one.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Arzu asked Dilnaz.

"You? Help me? I was expecting you to tell *me* what to do." Dilnaz looked away.

"I may be the best embroiderer in the village," said Arzu. "But you are much better..."

"You can't be nice even when you're being nice, can you?" Dilnaz shot a glance at her briefly.

"I meant that you are a much better cook than I am. Those pastries you can make!"

Dilnaz stopped her work and spoke directly to Arzu. "Everybody knows that Muhemmet has his eye on you. And you, you can't even treat him nicely. You treat him like a trifle. Well, maybe that is one of the things he likes about you.

"And, for a dowry," continued Dilnaz. "If my family was not so poor, I might have nicer clothes. And young men like Muhemmet might notice me."

Having nothing to say to this, Arzu said, "I came to offer my help. Tonight, allow me to be your servant."

"Servant? That day will never come." Then Dilnaz thought for a moment and said, "Actually, there is something you can do. You can take this pot of beans and ladle them out to the people."

"Amannisa is already doing that," said Arzu.

"Amannisa is serving the rich people inside the tent," Dilnaz said angrily. She wiped flour from her hands and adjusted her scarf, which was undecorated. "You can serve the families who are outside, starting with mine."

"I will," said Arzu, who took the pot of beans and went out the back door, around to the poor families. She thought that perhaps Dilnaz intended to humble her. But if so, it appeared to Arzu that it did not work. As she doled out beans to each plate among the poor, whose robes were dirty and hems muddy, Arzu saw smiles on their faces and thought she saw looks of esteem in their eyes. Arzu wondered why some people, like her, had consistent good fortune, and others, like Dilnaz, seemed fated to be ordinary. Not downtrodden; surely, Dilnaz would make a fine wife for a good man. She shook this thought from her head as she continued serving the people who would always be less fortunate than she. When she finished, she returned the pot to the kitchen, and sat with her family on the floor of the yurt.

Three men from the village had lutes. Uyghur lutes had bulbous bases and thin necks. But aside from this, there was a great variety of shapes. The sound boards were of the finest wood—imported, not from the local poplars—and inlaid with wood designs. Erkin had a rawap, a lute with ram's-horn decorations protruding left and right from the base. Hoshur had a lute that was intricately painted with the same kinds of decorations that the women used in embroidery. Möminjan had a four-stringed dutar. All three of the musicians had fine voices, but only Hoshur had mastered the intricate wavers of the musical lines, which reached down from the depths of human desire upward toward the inaccessible heavens. Inaccessible, but not unapproachable: Hoshur had climbed the mountains, to be as close to Heaven as possible, and claimed to have received one of his songs from Allah Himself. He sang,

Allah dwells in the highest heavens
In scenes of glory and thrills of pleasure
That no man can know...

Women passed around baskets of pastries, warm under their cloths. Other women brought out mint tea in metal teapots with intricate carvings all over the handles, bodies, and bases.

But Allah has given to mankind
To women and to men
The greatest pleasure that he could share...

The women started pouring tea into small metal cups on metal trays.

For how could mankind tolerate
His lot of suffering
Were it not for the pleasure of love!

Muhemmet and Arzu were seated with their families. The inside of the yurt was warm from the fires of the hearth and the hearts of the people. Though Arzu kept a hood over her head, she had thrown back her robe. Her long dark braids fell down over her decorated vest. One braid meandered to the left, the other to the right, framing the breasts that showed only too clearly that Arzu was no longer a girl.

My love, my love, all that I have gained
From the hard work of my hands and my mind
Are for you...

When the women brought in the trays of tea, Muhemmet got up and took one of the cups of tea. He brought it over to Arzu, knelt, and offered the cup to her. Arzu did not move, and her face betrayed no emotion. Other young men got up to take cups of tea to one or another of the young women.

As Hoshur's voice rose high and held out a long note, wavering with intricate tones, Arzu reached out and took Muhemmet's cup.

*

The women got up to return to their homes. That's what Arzu was about to do, when she noticed that the men stayed behind. Muhemmet and some of the boys his age stayed also, in the shadows in the back of the yurt. Arzu got the feeling that something important was about to happen, though no one had told her. She was going to ask Muhemmet about it but she decided to just stay and watch. She was seldom inconspicuous, but she kept going out through the tent door, then back in through the kitchen. When she hid behind one of the curtains, to watch and listen, probably everyone had seen her go out the door and assumed that he had gone home with her mother, who carried baskets of leftover food as she left.

Though there was no announcement, the men began to gather around Erkin, who sat on a slightly elevated place on the ground. Murat and other men sat nearby. Hoshur was quietly playing on his lute. When he stopped, all the men looked at Erkin.

Erkin looked at his teacup, sipped, and spoke quietly. "I am honored to have you as my guests. And I want to thank all of you for contributing to our feast. Tomorrow is a big day."

The other men did not say anything or make the slightest movement. Arzu knew that they were waiting for Erkin to say something they did not already know.

Erkin continued. “Mongol spies must already be nearby,” he said. “They are perhaps no longer in our village, or even in Kashgar. Perhaps they are now in a post-house on The Road. They know that we have had this feast. They have heard our voices of laughter. The scribe that always comes here—the tall man from Cathay, one of the few among them who speaks our language—has probably already written this down. And it is good that they believe our thoughts are all joyful ones as we anticipate their arrival.”

Arzu was puzzled. Having heard nothing to the contrary other than what Muhemmet told her, she assumed the arrival of the emissaries was mostly a good thing.

Erkin said, “The Mongols will take whatever they want. And we will surround them in a spirit of celebration as they do so. Let them think we have nothing but goodwill toward them.”

Murat said, “They pay for whatever they take.”

Erkin responded, “They take things we would rather they did not take, even if they pay for them.”

The men mumbled assent.

“What have they ever taken that was such a great loss to us?” asked Murat.

“Nothing much, yet,” said Erkin. “But we must be ready. We must all be watchful, and share information with one another. We must be ready to act quickly, and act together, if it becomes necessary.”

“Which it will not,” said Murat. “They know that their greatest profit, their greatest happiness, comes from peace. For them to incite us to violence would be stupid. They are not stupid.”

“They are not stupid,” said Erkin, “but as the Koran tells us, there are some men who reject the truth and have evil in their hearts. Evil, not just profit, stirs them.

“As some of you already know, Mongol warriors have taken many women from Samarkand for themselves. The Uzbeks—not just the ones in Samarkand—are extremely angry. The Mongol warriors are watching them very closely.”

“All the more reason,” said Murat, “that we should not expect them to take any of our women.” Everyone looked at Arzu’s father. “Would they want to have us, as well as the Uzbeks, angry at them? Perhaps they already took all of the women they wanted from Samarkand.”

“One can only hope you are correct,” said Erkin. “This would, as you indicate, make sense. But the Mongols, however predictable they usually are, can strike out in passion at any moment. This is why we remain watchful. May Allah grant that we will not have to take any action.”

Arzu was dumbfounded. She now saw all the men in a different light. She imagined them now as warriors. Except for her own father, who just shook his head in disbelief.

“If they insult us...” began Erkin.

“We will attack them!” shouted Muhemmet from the shadows. He stalked up to stand beside his father.

“Tell your son that he is too young to participate in this discussion,” said Murat.

"He is not too young," said Erkin. "He is almost a man. And he has many friends. They are our future. They have been training with arms."

Arzu almost gasped. Training with arms? Is that what Muhemmet was doing when he turned around in his stirrups and shot the hare?

"Our future is commercial, not military," said Murat.

"It is both," said Erkin.

"The military aspect of our future is one that invites swift and complete destruction at the hands of the warriors. Again, that is. The way it did many years ago," Murat reminded them.

"We will not face them on a field of battle," said Erkin. "But there are other ways to fight."

"They do not need a field of battle in order to slaughter us," said Murat, his voice becoming more tense. "That is, if we oppose them."

"Which is why," said Erkin, "we will not attack them right away, if we decide to attack. They will do whatever they want, and they will see us *not* respond. That tall scribe will write down his observations of how calmly we take whatever they mete out to us. Perhaps they have grown lazy and confident. Three generations of having the world obey them can do that to any society. When we attack—once again, only if necessary—they won't know what has happened until it is too late.

"And there is another matter," said Erkin. "Many of us are getting advanced in years. But my son and his friends are right at the age to be warriors. Perhaps the Mongols want to force our young men into the ranks of their soldiers."

"They must be crazy if they think our young men would fight against their own people," said Murat.

"Of course, that would be crazy." Muhemmet spoke quietly but firmly. "But they have wars on other frontiers. They might want us to fight against the peoples in the far south of Cathay. But those people have as much right to their freedom as we do to ours. We will be warriors, all right, but not theirs. Now, who is with us?"

"We are all with you," said Hoshur.

"All?" asked Erkin.

"Yes, all," said Murat.

*

Before Arzu went to her room, that night, her father stopped her in the little hallway.

"Arzu," he said. "We must reconsider whether you should go to Kashgar tomorrow."

"I heard everything at the meeting, Father," she said.

"What?"

"I was behind a curtain, listening."

"Then, my child, you know the dangers."

"I do. But I also know that all the men of Khorgas are watchful and that I am safe."

"We are prepared to respond in the event of danger," said Murat. "But we cannot necessarily prevent the danger from happening in the first place."

"I don't understand, Father."

"Arzu, please try to understand. Your skill is legendary."

"I know."

"And so is your beauty."

"I know."

"I suspect that, even at this very moment, the Mongols are planning to abduct you."

"Why? As you yourself said at the meeting, they already have a bunch of women from Samarkand for the soldiers. Why would they want one more woman?"

"I understand that they are always on the lookout for beautiful women to take to Cambulac. To the Great Khan."

"Let them look," said Arzu. "Let them see me. But I can vanish into the crowd just as easily as I can stand out from it. And that is where your protection, and the protection of all the people of Khorgas—and many in Kashgar, too—will be useful."

"I think the risk is too great," said Murat.

"But, Father," said Arzu, with tears in her eyes. She almost never cried. "I have been preparing for this day for a long time. I am going, whether you allow me or not."

"What did you say?" Murat asked his daughter.

"You heard me," said Arzu. "I am the daughter you raised to think for herself. A woman who is never at a loss. When I go with you to Kashgar tomorrow, you and I will not be alone. I will be ready to flee on horseback with a man who knows the back streets very well."

"You mean, Muhemmet."

"Of course. He would be honored to take care of me. Believe me, Father, I would not dream of going without both of you. But with you, I am safe.

"And, Father, once the emissaries of the Great Khan take notice of our work, our fortune will be assured."

Chapter 3

That night, by candlelight, Arzu bathed herself in her room. The water in the basin was very cold, but the tallow soap foamed well on her skin and in her hair. She cleansed away the scent of meat and smoke. She stood in the basin and poured water to rinse herself. In the morning, she combed and braided her hair, weaving yellow, white, purple, and red flowers among the tresses. She smiled at her reflection in the brass mirror as the morning light poured in her open window.

When Arzu emerged from her room and saw her parents, they immediately noticed her scent.

"What is this? Our daughter has found a delicious ointment somewhere," said Murat.

"No, Father. I just rubbed myself with one of the wildflowers Muhemmet and I picked yesterday."

"Yes. It has a wonderful mint smell. It smells like the mutton that we are unlikely to afford any time soon." It looked to Arzu as if he was calculating the cost of the goat meat that he contributed to the feast.

When Arzu joined her parents at their well-laden donkey, she wore her vest, her good scarf, and one of her hats. She carried a leather bag full of her hats and gloves. Her teeth were very white.

"You used the charcoal on your teeth," said Alfiya.

"And rinsed my mouth very well," she said. "Black teeth are worse than amber teeth."

"Where did you get the flowers for your hair?" asked Murat. "On the mountain, I know, but that was yesterday. They are still fresh."

"I kept them between wet cloths," said Arzu.

"You are already the prettiest girl in Khorgas," said Murat. "And we may discover that you are more beautiful than any of the girls in Kashgar as well. Why should anyone think that Kashgar girls would be more beautiful than ours?"

"It might just be the way things happen," said Arzu. "There are more girls, therefore more pretty girls, in Kashgar than in Khorgas."

"Nothing ever just happens," said Murat. "Even the roll of a die. It all comes from the hand of Allah. You were born for a reason. You do not believe this?"

"How should I know?" answered his daughter. "Whatever happens, even if we cannot now imagine it, you will say it is, somehow or other, from the hand of Allah."

Her father busied himself with further preparations. "We will talk of this later," he said.

*

As Murat and Arzu walked through the streets of Kashgar, alongside their donkey, heads turned to see the beautiful young lady. And when they did, they also saw Muhemmet, who rode his horse alongside. Everyone saw Arzu smiling at Muhemmet. Everyone saw her climb up and get on his horse in front of him.

"Here is our stall," said Murat, stopping the donkey. "I had to pay dearly for it. But it is worth it. The merchants who can simply set up their tables outside their houses are so fortunate. I am glad, Arzu, that you got some of them to sell my wares."

"There are so many merchants from The Road here," said Arzu. "Is the Khan's band of emissaries so large?"

"No," answered Murat. "I think there are only a couple of emissaries. Many merchants have come along with them on The Road."

"We will go look for the Khan's men," said Muhemmet.

Muhemmet took Arzu all around Kashgar on his horse. He rode as fast as he could, and skillfully maneuvered away from pedestrians and other horsemen. Kashgar was much nicer than Khorgas. Instead of mud bricks and bare wood, many of the houses had painted wood shutters. The families of the Kashgar merchants watched the crowds in the street from balconies framed by delicately-carved wooden barriers.

"Who is that man?" asked Arzu, pointing to a tall man on a horse. He wore an embroidered silk vest. "He must be rich. His eyes look like those of the Mongols. But his face is long, not round. And he is taller than a Mongol."

"Maybe he is the scribe from Cathay that everyone has been talking about," said Muhemmet.

"My, he is handsome," said Arzu. She looked off to the side at the tall man. The man's horse even seemed larger than all the others. "I see that he is holding a reed in his right hand, and what looks like a parchment in his left."

"It isn't parchment," said Muhemmet. "It is paper."

"How is paper different from parchment?"

"The people of Cathay make paper from inside the bark of a kind of tree. I don't know which kind. It doesn't grow here."

"That's not saying much," said Arzu. "Very few trees grow here. But in Cathay, I have heard, there are many kinds of trees. Including something called peaches, with beautiful flowers as well as delicious fruits."

Muhemmet said, "That sounds like a legend to me. But the Koran talks about walled gardens with fruit trees. So they must be somewhere."

Arzu looked again at the scribe. "The man just dipped his reed into a little bottle of ink held by another man, who appears to be his servant. He is writing something on the paper."

"I'll bet he is counting up the number of houses, market stalls, fields, that sort of thing," said Muhemmet. "He will probably report all of this back to the Khan. I bet the Khan wants to know how rich we are."

"He already knows we pay our taxes," said Arzu.

"But he does not know, unless he gets this updated information, whether we pay *enough* taxes.

"And he wants to know how many people and how many horses we have," Muhemmet continued. "In case he needs to draft our men as soldiers or take our horses for war. It is peaceful here, but the Khan has wars going on in other places."

Arzu thought about telling him that she heard the men talk about this at the meeting, but decided to wait and, perhaps, tell him later.

They had wandered back to nearly where they had started. It was there that they saw the Khan's emissaries. Seated on strong horses, the wrinkled, round men wore gold-braided robes, and their fur hats were festooned with silk. Their moustaches hung far down past their chins and were tied with little silk ribbons. Banners waved from poles. But the men themselves were rather dull. Their eyes were barely open, it seemed to Arzu. She had seen Mongols before, but was surprised every time when she saw the folds of skin around their eyes. The men did not smile. They looked down at paper lists as they bought items that the bursar back in Cambulac must have approved. They gave pieces of paper to the merchants.

"So, that is what paper money looks like," said Arzu.

"The Great Khan wants to have the same kind of money in all the parts of his empire," said Muhemmet. "We haven't seen much of it here, yet. My father has gotten some paper money by selling his horses."

"My father has never used paper money," said Arzu.

"He might, starting today. If he is lucky."

"But we have gold coins," said Arzu. "Why not just use the same kind of gold coins throughout the empire?"

"Too heavy," said Muhemmet. "Haven't you heard the story about the two merchants?"

"Which story?"

"This one. One merchant," began Muhemmet, "had a chest of gold, and he carried it on his shoulder as he went along the road toward home. It took him all day to go from one village to the next. The next day, his arms hurt. There was an ice storm, and he slipped. He spilled his coins. He picked them all up and put them back in the chest. Then he came to a part of the road that had flooded. He squished through the mud. When he slipped, and the coins fell in the mud. He dug through the mud and found every one of those coins. Took him two days. On the last stretch of his trip home, he had to go up a steep road. He made a rope into a sort of yoke and tied its two ends to the chest. He crawled and dragged the chest. An ice storm made the road slick, which made it easier to drag the chest, but then he slipped back down the road to the bottom of the hill. The chest slipped faster, hit a rock, and all the coins fell into a river gorge. The chest was broken into pieces. But he was a determined man, and started to climb down into the gorge.

"Right then, an athletic young man came running past him, with a small bag.

"'What is in the bag?" asked the merchant.

"'All of my money," said the athlete. 'I sold all of my goods in return for the paper money of the Great Khan.' He reached the top of the hill in just a few minutes.

"The merchant who had lost his coins looked down in the gorge, saw the little flashes of gold, and then threw himself from the cliff to his death."

"I've never heard that story," said Arzu. "How old is it?"

"About ten minutes," said Muhemmet, smiling.

Arzu poked her elbow into his ribs and laughed. She began to think that, maybe, she did love him. Handsome, yes; a good horseman, yes; a good worker, yes; rich, about the same as she; good in bed, no way to know, as if it would make any difference. But he was a pleasant companion. She thought about her parents, who no longer seemed ardent in their love, but still laughed with one another occasionally. This, she decided, was what she wanted: a long marriage, even if it is an uneventful one. And why not with Muhemmet as a husband?

The Mongol soldiers pushed people away from the emissaries. When Arzu jumped down from Muhemmet's horse and walked up to the soldiers, carrying her leather bag, they looked at her in amazement. She passed them before they could stop her. She stood directly in front of the emissaries.

Arzu set her bag in the street and began to remove items from it. She smiled brilliantly as she held up caps and gloves. She heard the crowd gasp at each of the beautiful items. The emissaries continued to frown as they watched her.

Then one of the emissaries reached down and slipped one of the flowers out of Arzu's braids. It was the first time Arzu had seen him smile. Then he dropped the flower and grabbed Arzu's chin. He moved it roughly back and forth and looked at her teeth. He said something to one of the soldiers, who approached Arzu. He sniffed her breath and nodded to the emissary whose smile had now vanished. Two soldiers grabbed Arzu's arms, while another picked up the gloves and hats she had spilled. The soldiers took Arzu to a riderless horse and pushed her up on it. She stumbled in shock. She started to yell at them, but the look in their eyes told her that this would be a dangerous thing to do.

Muhemmet screamed at the soldiers. Both emissaries looked up at him, still expressionless. "You cannot take her!" he said. "You came here to trade, not to plunder..."

One of the Mongol soldiers said, in broken Uyghur, "Are you her brother? If so, tell your father to come and see us. We will pay him well. We do not plunder."

"Release her, right now!" screamed Muhemmet. "She came here to sell, not to be sold!"

The soldier spoke directly into Muhemmet's face. "We have orders to bring back beautiful young women. We will take her to Cambulac. Directly to Xanadu. Do you understand? Xanadu! What are you, an idiot? Any woman would be glad to go there. Xanadu! Any family would be glad to receive money from the Great Khan, for as long as the girl stays. And for the rest of her life after she leaves. You act like a victim, but this is an honor!"

"Release her..."

"Have you any idea, little boy, how many places we have visited without finding a single woman with such beauty? She is from Kashgar?"

"No, my lord," said Murat, running up. "She is from Khorgas."

"A little village nearby, I take it?"

"A fine little village, my lord," said Murat. "But I beg you to not take my daughter."

"The scribe will write down your name. Your daughter will be treated very well. I wish my own daughter would have this good luck. And for a stinking Uyghur to receive such an honor!" The soldier started to reach for his sword, but the scribe, the tall man from Cathay, rode up. He spoke to the soldier in Mongolian. The soldier stepped back.

"Your name?" asked the scribe in Uyghur.

Murat kept demanding the return of his daughter. The scribe ignored him. When Murat told him his name and occupation, the scribe wrote it down. The scribe looked back at the attendants who carried the box of money. He said something to them in Mongolian. They pulled out a thick pad of bills. The scribe counted it quickly, noted the amount on his paper, then handed the money to Murat.

"Throw down that accursed, filthy money!" someone said on Murat's right.

"Your daughter has been blessed," said another person on his left.

Murat looked from one to the other. They almost looked like jinns rather than men.

Meanwhile, soldiers with padded armor led the horse on which Arzu rode away from her father and Muhemmet. Their spears formed a rectangle around the horse. Arzu tried to say something, but her voice failed her. Tears streamed down her face and dripped onto her beautifully embroidered vest. She looked back, turning almost as far as a Mongol warrior would turn, and looked at her father and at Muhemmet.

Muhemmet screamed out, "You cannot take her. She is my wife!"

The soldiers, the emissaries, and the scribe all stopped and looked at Muhemmet. Only the scribe understood him, but he told the others what had been said. Then they told the scribe what to say.

"This might make a difference," the scribe said. "Or not. Remember that our gods are not your God. Maybe our gods do not recognize your marriage." Unlike the soldier who had talked to Muhemmet previously, the scribe spoke perfect Uyghur. "It should be easy enough for us to check your official records to verify the marriage. We demand to see those records right now. Is there no leader of your mosque? Bring him to me. If this young man is lying to me, he will be executed!"

"Don't bother," Arzu called out. "I am not his wife. Please spare him."

"She has agreed to marry me!" yelled Muhemmet.

The scribe looked to Arzu, who nodded her head. *Yes*.

"Well," said the scribe. "A better offer has come along." He turned to leave.

"I will die for her!" Muhemmet tried his last ploy. He started to rush at the soldiers.

The soldier who knew a little bit of Uyghur turned on Muhemmet and drew his sword. “You mean, right now?” When Muhemmet stopped cold, the soldier added, “You don’t even have a sword or a spear. So, you want to fight? You will make no more difference to us than a fly makes to a stallion.”

Muhemmet dodged the soldier and ran up close enough to speak to Arzu, even though the soldiers who surrounded her blocked his way. “I will die for you,” he repeated.

As the soldiers shoved Muhemmet down into the mud, Arzu said, “Muhemmet, please live. Your death’s no good to me. If, as you believe, Allah wills, then I will return to you.”

As the soldiers and the scribe led Arzu away, she heard Muhemmet scream, “Mongol blood will be spilled for this!”

The scribe stopped the soldiers, then rode his horse back to Muhemmet, whose father had pulled him up from the mud.

“We are prepared to take this threat seriously,” said the scribe. “And to deal with it right now.”

“He lost his temper,” said Murat. “He is still just a boy. Please forget what he said.”

The scribe said, “We will ignore what he said, but we will not forget it,” he called back to Muhemmet and his father as he rode ahead to rejoin the emissaries.

Chapter 4

"Is anything missing?" asked a Mongol attendant. He had opened a chest into which Murat had placed Arzu's belongings back in Kashgar.

Arzu looked up at him as she sat on a blanket on the ground. "What difference will it make? I am as good as dead."

The attendant could not understand anything Arzu said except the word *dead*. He walked away and returned with the tall scribe.

"I am a busy man," the scribe said to Arzu. "This had better be worth my while."

"Why don't you just kill me right now?" she said, not looking into his eyes.

"That's what you women all say when we first take you," said the scribe. "But then you start to enjoy the fine clothes that we give you. Not silk, of course. We will be traveling on a dusty road. The silk comes later, as does the gold and silver. And you will start to enjoy the fact that you will be riding on a fine horse, better than anyone else's. And the food—much better than the stale bread and dried yak meat the soldiers eat. The finest koumiss, not the dregs. And you will notice with how much respect all of us, even I, even the emissaries, will treat you. More than you got back home, I'll bet. It takes some women a week to adjust. Some, three days. You, I bet, will adjust in a day, two at most. You look like a woman who knows her worth. At least, you should." He stopped, and walked around to look at Arzu from all angles. Arzu still did not look up.

*

Arzu sat outside the skin tent in which the captive women of Kashgar and Samarkand were kept. Rather than feeling terror or mourning the loss of her family—or of Muhemmet, whose offer of marriage was certainly meaningless now—she just felt numb. She even felt a little stirring of hope. She knew she was beautiful and would probably have opportunities that other captive women would not. She did not miss the mountains of home, for other mountains glowed all around her, the snow soft pink in the sunset.

Then Arzu saw Dilnaz approaching the door of the tent. Dilnaz hesitated, but then resumed walking toward her. When she was within speaking distance, Dilnaz stopped. "Well, at least," she said, "we are now equals. Both of us are captives of the Mongols. What do you think of that, my beautiful Arzu?"

"I have not thought about it yet," said Arzu. "Are we the only ones here from Khorgas?"

"I think so. The others are from Kashgar itself.

"We have both lost everything, Arzu. Maybe, come to think of it, you have lost more than I. No man showed any interest in me back in Khorgas. You, however, have lost Muhemmet. Did you have an understanding with him?"

"We had never spoken to one another about any commitment. We exchanged only a few words, just as I was being led away."

"Well, at last, after your lifetime of privilege, you are as desolate as I am. You always seemed like a princess. I always wanted to see you humbled a little bit. But it is of no comfort to me right now. We are both strangers. You see, from what I have heard, many of the women here—you can hear their voices now—have already formed groups, and they watch out for one another. Some of them—about twenty, I think—are from Samarkand. They have been on the Road much longer than we have. You can bet that they will get things their way. We, Arzu, will be left out."

"Unless we become friends," said Arzu.

"That is not likely to happen," said Dilnaz. "Allies, maybe. At least you and I can agree to not be enemies."

*

"Outside of the camp," the scribe told Arzu, "the guards have blocked off a special area near a pond for all of you women to relieve and to wash yourselves. We have some of your fine Uyghur tallow soap. And we have fine powder and lotions. Here, follow this soldier, and he will lead you to the place where you wash."

"How many women are there?" asked Arzu.

"About fifty," said the scribe.

"And the soldiers will oversee us as we bathe?"

"Their backs will be turned. And you will be attended by a man whose interest in women is a distant memory."

"What makes you think the soldiers will not watch us?"

"I share your low opinion of the politeness of Mongols," said the scribe. "If you tell anybody I said that, I will deny it. Of course, I am just about the only person here who can translate what you say for them. But none of the soldiers will dare to look at the women, because others will report him to their commander. They are always looking for a chance to put down a competitor for promotion. Besides, the soldiers will be adequately rewarded."

"How is that to happen?"

"You ask many questions," said the scribe. "I like that. But you will see. Meanwhile, just follow this soldier."

*

"The women look much better by the light of torches than by the light of the sun." The scribe translated what one of the Khan's emissaries said for the Uyghur and Uzbek women, in their respective languages, as the women sat together on the ground. Then the scribe said to them, "I don't think that is true, but that is what he said." The scribe looked over at Arzu. The

light of the torches danced in her eyes. She did not blink. She had no expression on her face. Other women glanced around nervously, or closed their eyes and mumbled prayers, or wept. But Arzu's gaze was absolutely steady.

The other emissary approached the women. The scribe translated his words. "Stand up, he says." They did. "Line up, from over here," the emissary pointed to his left, "to over here," as the man pointed to his right. "And stand up straight!"

The emissaries walked along the line of women a couple of times and talked together. As they walked, they pointed to one woman or another, and had her drawn out from the line. They checked the women's teeth and sniffed their breath for any whiff of disease. When they got to Arzu, they recognized her, and smiled. They chatted, and asked the scribe something. He answered. They pulled Arzu out of line and told her to stand alone by the torch. As the emissaries continued to talk, the scribe went over to Arzu and told her, "They remember your great beauty. They also remember your skill at embroidery. They haven't quite made up their minds about all the women, but they are sure about you. You are headed to Xanadu.

"But the emissaries can change their minds for any reason or for no reason. Some of the women who are chosen tonight will go with you to Xanadu. Some of them may not."

"The others?" asked Arzu. "The ones not chosen? What will happen to them?"

"The others will not go to Xanadu."

"That doesn't answer my question."

The scribe looked at her without amusement. "You are a little inquisitive, you know."

"That doesn't answer my question, *my lord*. How's that?"

The scribe smiled broadly. It was the first time Arzu had seen him do that. He said, "You have a defiant look on your face. One would expect you to be sad or frightened."

"The time may come when my face will show sadness or fear, or even despair," said Arzu. "That time is not yet. By the way, what was it that you said to the emissaries about me that made them smile?"

"You mean, besides your legendary beauty?"

"Famous, but not yet legendary," said Arzu. "I might have to die for it to be legendary. I'm not ready to do that."

"And besides your artistic skills?"

"Besides that."

"I said you came from a rich and refined family."

"That's a lie, you know."

"Not only that, but I put it in writing. I wrote on my papers that you come from a rich and refined family. Should I tell them that I lied about you?"

"No. And I have a feeling that this is not the last time you are going to lie on my behalf."

The scribe twisted his face into a reluctant smile. "You are probably right about that."

The emissaries led the small group of chosen women toward the scribe. He then told them, in Uzbek, but which Arzu understood a little, that they would go to Xanadu. Their relief was audible. Then the scribe walked over to the unchosen women. Dilnaz was in that group. He

told them to follow the soldier. The soldier escorted them toward the warrior encampment. Shouts of glee began to arise from the warriors, who lined up quickly near little blankets that were thrown on the ground. The women began to shout, and some of them started to run, only to be stopped by guards who brandished their swords. The scribe walked over and told them, in his calmest voice, to remove their clothes and lay down on the blankets. Some of the women did so immediately, while others fought against the guards with their fists, until the guards stripped their robes from them and threw the women onto the blankets. In the end, it was all the same: Arzu heard the wails of the women rise into the night air and float away with the sparks from the flames.

The scribe walked back to Arzu and asked her, "Do you want to see what happens to them?"

"No, I don't want to see it, but I think I should," said Arzu. They walked together around to the edge of the level area where the warriors raped the women. Some of the women closed their eyes and made themselves as unresponsive as possible. Some of them screamed at the warriors, which only made the warriors happier. Some of the women invited the warriors. If they thought this would buy them some mercy, it didn't work.

"What is that word some of the women are screaming?" asked the scribe.

"I thought you knew our languages," said Arzu.

"Only when the words are clearly spoken," said the scribe.

"The women are calling them pigs."

"I assume that, to you, this is intended as a curse."

"Of course! What else could it be?"

"In Cathay, we eat the flesh of pigs, and we really, really like it. The word the women are using. It is not your usual word for pig in Uyghur…" He said *chwishqa*. "Nor is it the usual *chochqa* in Uzbek."

"No, it is not," said Arzu. She continued, "What will happen to the women? I assume they will be killed when the warriors are finished with them."

"Of course not," said the scribe. "We have a long journey. We need to use the same women over and over. Other women will join us, which means that some of these women will get thrown out of the camp. Any woman who becomes pregnant will be evicted. But the women will not be killed. The women sometimes starve, or die in the cold, when evicted. Sometimes they find a welcoming city or village."

"I am a virgin," said Arzu.

"As are the other Uyghur women?"

"I wouldn't know. Is there any such thing as a virgin Mongol woman?"

"I won't tell anybody you said that. Arzu...that is your name?...I shouldn't be talking with you. I'm not supposed to be playing favorites here."

"Too late," said Arzu. "You have already written lies, for my benefit, on your papers. Where will this end?"

"I don't know," said the scribe. "I will watch over you and protect you. And you may call for me at any time."

"What is your name?"

"You won't pronounce it right. It is Tao Zhi-Ji. I just go by my surname, Tao. It's not like I am going to get confused with anybody else around here."

"Does your name mean anything?"

"You mean, the way your name means *desire*?" When Arzu said nothing, Tao continued, "It means peach tree."

"How nice," Arzu said without enthusiasm.

"Didn't the other boys make fun of me for *that* when I was growing up," said Tao.

Arzu smiled, just slightly.

Tao said, "Now, try saying my name."

"Dao," said Arzu.

"The way you said it, it means robber. If you pronounce it just a little differently..." He said *dao* in a way that sounded the same to Arzu. "...it means way, or path. The contemplative way of life taught over a thousand years ago by Kong Fuzi. But I am *Tao*."

"I'll try to get it right," said Arzu, smiling slightly more.

"I have a message from your father," Tao said.

Arzu lost her smile and stared at him. "You only just now tell me?"

"I saw him just before the caravan started. He wept passionately about us taking you captive. But he told me to tell you that, perhaps, it is for this that you were born."

"I don't understand," said Arzu.

"Nor do I. But my guess is, he thinks that your story, painful as it is now, will have a good ending. Or, if not good, at least an important ending. After all, your fate is already different from that of the other women, even the others destined for the Great Khan. You already have me to watch out for you." He spoke more closely to her ear. "You owe me something for telling you this."

"Not what you think I owe you," Arzu said.

*

At first, Arzu tried to keep herself from thinking about her lost home by looking at the mountains and the plains. She tried to tell herself how beautiful they were. But a cold north wind bore down on them, bringing a late spring snowstorm, and she preferred to huddle inside of her thick robes and behind her scarf. She was accustomed to riding a horse as she grew up, but quickly and briefly. A long day of slow travel in this caravan started to make her sick. The only thing she did for diversion was to frequently find a place to go into the bushes, and then ride to catch back up with the caravan. At those times, she could pretend she was riding a horse fast with Muhemmet.

The caravan stopped at Aksu. It reminded her of Kashgar, but without any familiarity to it. The emissaries, merchants, and Tao were very busy, but Arzu had no interest in what was going on. Until, that is, she saw some more women being led out of the city by the Mongol soldiers. It was cold, and all of the robed women looked alike. The soldiers led them to the tent that housed the women that the soldiers used.

At the same time, soldiers led some of the women, who had just now been ejected from the caravan, to the city gate. The soldiers lined up all the women. As the emissaries followed, a soldier pulled away the scarf of each woman so that the emissaries could nod their approval or disapproval. This time, most of the women went to the soldiers. Only two of them were led to the tent that Arzu shared with the other chosen women.

Arzu did not notice Tao until he approached from behind and stopped his horse right beside hers.

Inside the city gate, men stood and watched. When one of the men would raise his hand, a woman would be allowed to enter. In this way, almost all of the women were claimed by men inside of Aksu. When no more men raised their hands, the guards closed the gate. There was one woman left outside. She fell to her hands and knees and wept. Her hood slipped from her head.

"I know her," Arzu said to Tao. "She is from my village. Her name is Dilnaz. Is there nothing we can do for her?"

"No," said Tao. "I have no authority to do anything for her."

"I know her father. He is an honest and good man. He would die of heartbreak if he knew what is happening to his daughter."

"He will never know about this," said Tao, looking ahead. Then he turned to face Arzu. "You seem to care about her. I would advise that you get rid of that feeling. This will not be the last time you see someone suffer."

"I don't know what I feel," said Arzu. "It's just that I wish I had been kinder to Dilnaz when we were back in Khorgas."

*

When the caravan arrived at Kucha, yet another city on dry plains at the base of magnificent mountains, Arzu was so sick at heart that she did not even leave the chosen women's tent except when necessary.

As Arzu sat alone in the tent, an older woman approached her. She was Mongolian. She spoke enough Uyghur for Arzu to understand, but Arzu did not catch her name. She was in charge of the welfare of the Khan's women.

"Do you have any questions?" asked the woman.

"Questions? About what?" said Arzu.

"About what you will be doing when you reach Xanadu."

"I suppose I will find out when I get there."

"But you must be ready if the Great Khan should call on you."

"To do what?"

"You don't know?" The woman pushed back Arzu's hood and looked into her face. "No, you apparently don't. Didn't your mother tell you what to expect from men?"

"She was going to, but then I got captured."

The woman began to explain everything to Arzu. She had to use crude sign language part of the time. Arzu became more and more alarmed.

He puts what? Into where?

You'll love it, unless you don't, in which case you'll not say anything.

*

As the caravan approached Ürümqi, the weather became warmer. Springtime had fully arrived. The air was clear. The white and blue mountains in the distance seemed closer than they undoubtedly were. The Khan's women bathed in the cold water of the river. They washed their clothes, but not in the river. Some of the merchants bathed also, in another place, with the women for whom they paid the Mongols. The Mongol warriors never bathed.

Arzu, now freshly bathed and in clean clothes, felt good. She walked around and breathed deeply. She saw a whole bunch of trees, all covered with white flowers. She jumped on her horse and rode toward them. Tao sat at the base of one of the trees, looking off toward the mountains. He turned to watch her approach.

"Tao! What are these trees?"

"They are almond trees," he said. "You've never seen one?"

"We eat almonds, but we import them from other places. The Tajik people raise them at the base of the Pamir Mountains.

"So, this is a forest?" continued Arzu, sitting down beside Tao.

"It is an orchard. Men plant orchards, a whole bunch of trees of just one kind. A forest grows by itself, and has lots of kinds of trees."

Tao was holding a small board, to which a piece of paper was affixed.

"What are you doing?" Arzu asked him.

"I am drawing the city walls and the mountains," he said. "They are in the background. The almond branches are in the foreground."

"Foreground? Background?" asked Arzu. "I've heard the terms, but never thought about them. When I embroider, everything in the picture is at the same level. It is flat: left, right; up, down. I can embroider a scene that looks as if it is in motion. But I never really thought much about near and far being in the same picture. You are doing a very fine job, Tao. The image looks like what is really there. I feel as if I am in the picture. What are you drawing with?"

"It is a small piece of charcoal," said Tao.

"I've never touched paper," said Arzu. "Parchment, yes, but not paper."

"Please," said Tao, holding the paper toward her. She felt it. It was much smoother than the hard, brittle parchment.

"How do you make it?"

"We take the inner bark of a mulberry tree," Tao answered. He used the Chinese word *chu*. "It is a tree for which you do not have a word. We take the inner bark and grind it up in water until it forms a slush."

"Muhemmet mentioned something about this. The mash of chu bark is like the slush from which we make salt," said Arzu.

"Very good salt," added Tao. "One of the most valuable items on this caravan. Only the women headed to Xanadu are more valuable than the salt."

"You *would* have to remind me about Xanadu."

"Sorry. Once we have the mulberry bark slush, suspended in water, we pour it over a sheet of silk that is held fast inside a wooden frame. The water drips through the silk, leaving the bark material behind. When it dries, it is paper."

"That must ruin the silk."

"It makes the silk useless for other purposes, but we use the silk over and over again to make more paper. Of course, to hold the paper together, we have to use a sticky material."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. It is a trade secret, and I am not of that trade. Mulberries are very useful trees. You can also get delicious fruits from them. Not the same kind of mulberry as you get paper from, but a similar kind, the *sang*. The fruit juice, when concentrated, has a beautiful scent that we use in soap. I imagine that, when you are in Xanadu, mulberry soap is one of the luxuries you will have."

"You *would* have to remind me about Xanadu," huffed Arzu. Then she smiled slightly. "Mulberries must be wonderful trees. Big and magnificent, I suppose?"

"No, Arzu. They are actually not very large. But so useful! We feed their leaves to the silkworms."

"I know silk, and I know worm, but...what did you say?"

"They are caterpillars. Caterpillars eat the leaves. Then they stop growing, and enter a resting phase. They surround themselves with a cocoon. You know this?"

"I have seen it."

"Then it hatches out into a butterfly. Well, the silkworm spins its cocoon with silk. We have to unwind a very long strand of silk from each cocoon, before the butterfly tears its way out. That's where silk thread comes from."

"I've never heard that. How interesting, Tao. Tao, what is that look on your face?" She looked at Tao, seeing what she could only interpret as alarm. Extreme alarm.

"Oh, Arzu, I just did a very bad thing. I wasn't even thinking. It is such a joy to talk with you that I forgot what I was doing. What I just told you—forget about it. You aren't supposed to know. It is a secret. If anybody found out where silk comes from, Cathay would have nothing to pay for all the things we import from the merchants. I...I could be executed if it were known that I told you where silk comes from." He turned, put down his charcoal and paper, grabbed Arzu's shoulders, and shook them. "Swear to me that you will tell no one what I said."

"I will tell no one. I think now that I have repaid you for your previous kindness to me."

"You have, Arzu. You owe me nothing. We are now equals." He released her and sat back down.

"Equals? I am the captive," said Arzu.

"And I have no value to the Great Khan aside from the services that I provide him. Am I any less a captive than you?"

"You must be a man of great learning. This is a kind of freedom that I do not have. It means you are a man who can weave arguments the way a spider weaves a web, or a silkworm weaves a cocoon, if you should ever need to."

"I am a man of learning, Arzu. In Cathay, I am what is known as a mandarin."

"What is that?"

"As you get to know me better, you will figure it out."

Arzu looked at the drawing again. "What are those marks along the side?"

"That is the kind of writing we use in Cathay." He smiled.

"It is much more complex than our writing," said Arzu.

"You can read and write?" asked Tao.

"A little, in Uyghur. Not in Mongolian. Why is the writing in Cathay so complex?"

"Because it does not represent sounds, as in your writing. Each character is a picture. See? I have mountains in this drawing. And in my written description along the side, here is the character for *mountain*. It looks like a mountain. Three peaks, the tallest one in the middle."

"I see. In some ways, the drawing you made is more beautiful than the actual scene."

"It is idealized. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do it all the time with my embroidered pictures," said Arzu. She pulled back her shawl, and showed him her vest, which she wore that day beneath her plain robe for the first time.

"Yes, I do," said Tao. "What I am seeing is very beautiful." Arzu could tell he was looking straight at her bosom. She closed her robe.

They both lay back on the fresh spring grass and looked into the abundant flowers overhead. Bees flew from one flower to another, digging inside.

"They are gathering nectar, from which they make honey," said Arzu. "I suppose you mandarins know all about that."

"*I* do," said Tao. "But you would be surprised at the things the other mandarins do not know. They study the old writings, and just repeat them. They hardly look up from their books." Tao propped himself up on his elbow and looked at Arzu's reclining form. "Ask them where honey comes from, and they think it comes from jars. A lot of our mandarin scholarship is of little practical use. Poetry, philosophy. The history of Cathay is useful to know. But I have gotten to the station in life I now occupy by studying languages other than the language of northern Cathay, and by studying the history of other places."

"Like Kashgar?" asked Arzu. "I'll bet you know more about the history of Kashgar than I do."

Tao looked up dreamily. “Not all of the philosophy of the Mandarins is useless. There was a philosopher named Teng Mu. He might still be alive, I don’t know. He looked at the earth, and into heaven, and said that there was no reason to believe that ours is the only earth and heaven. There may be countless others.”

“That is the kind of idea that might get you into big trouble back where I come from,” said Arzu. “That is, if you went around talking about it.”

“Why would I do that?” Tao said. “It is just my own secret, happy thought.” He grinned like a boy. “When I was a child, I loved the time in the spring when the orange trees blossomed.” He had to use the Chinese word *chengzi*. “The fruit is wonderful. A lot of orange trees grow in Xanadu.”

“You *would* have to remind me about Xanadu.”

“But the flowers also have a wonderful scent and taste. In the middle of the flower, there is a tiny cup filled with nectar. As a little kid, I went around drinking the nectar.” He propped himself against a tree trunk. “That time is now just a dream. There are so many things about which I can now only dream.”

“What are you dreaming about now?” asked Arzu. “Besides me.”

“I am sorry if I am being too familiar with you.”

“I am beautiful. No use denying it. I just hope that you do not go crazy about me, the way Muhemmet did.”

“You mean, the young man who said he would die for you?”

“Yes. Loving me can be dangerous, it seems.”

“I am dreaming about those mountains.” He pointed north.

“What about them? I have been in the mountains behind our village many times. They are beautiful, but they are just rocks and little plants. And game, of course. You could make a pilgrimage to them, the way one of our musicians climbed up to the top of one of them, and find that mountains are not such a pleasant place to be.”

“But these mountains, the Mountains of Altai, are different. Somewhere, hidden in them, is a land of dreams. Where the people all live in peace and are happy.”

“You have such an imagination, Tao.”

“I have been there.”

Arzu sat up and looked at him. “You expect me to believe that?”

“I wish I could go back there. But the Khan would not release me from his service. I know too much about his empire. See, I am a captive. Otherwise I would go back to *Taohua Yuan Ji,* the Valley of the Peach Blossoms. I know the way to get there.”

They heard a voice calling them from the caravansary. Arzu picked up Tao’s drawing and handed it back to him. He opened his leather pouch to put it back in. As he did so, Arzu looked inside. She saw one of his other drawings. She grabbed his arm and shook it.

“That other drawing,” she said. “You have drawn me.”

Tao put down the drawing of the mountain and slipped out the drawing of Arzu. “Yes, I have.”

"It...it is a fine drawing," she said. She looked harshly at him. "You've been watching me."

"Many times, Arzu. From many angles. That's how I could draw you so realistically."

"Realistically? No. It is, like your drawing of the mountains, better than reality."

"That is not true," said Tao. "I have, as I said, watched you many times. I have looked closely for flaws or imperfections. I have seen none."

Arzu looked away. "In our religion, we do not believe in making images of people. And it is for precisely this reason! Once you draw someone, you idealize the person, and then, if only in a slight measure, worship the person. That is what you are doing with me, and I am not sure I feel comfortable with it."

The voice called again.

"I might as well tell you," said Tao. "I love you, Arzu."

Arzu looked closely into his face for the first time. She had to admit he was a handsome man, with all of the good and none of the bad facial qualities of the Mongols. He was nice. He was wise. And he had power. She decided to wait and see if, perhaps, he could be useful to her. She also felt just a little bit of what she had previously felt for Muhemmet.

"There is nothing we can do about your love," said Arzu.

"There might be," said Tao. "I need to tell you something. And I am risking my life by telling you about it."

"Risking your life? Again? How many lives do you have to risk?"

"I'm not sure," said Tao. "We have just a few moments." They still heard the voice calling. "Please listen carefully. I have been thinking about leaving my post, becoming a fugitive, and going to Taohua Yuan Ji, the Valley of the Peach Blossoms. I want you to come with me."

"I need to think about this," said Arzu. "My life would be at risk also."

"The only way to get there is to go straight north from Ürümqi, which is where we are right now. The caravan will leave soon. If we leave for the Land of the Peach Blossoms, we must do so tomorrow night."

"This land that I am still not convinced even exists, Tao. I will not risk my life on nothing more than your assertion."

"Very well. You will not have to risk your life. We can pretend that I have kidnapped you. If we get caught, you will be safe. I will be the one who will be executed."

A Mongol guard rode over to them and said something that Tao understood. He said to Arzu, "He wishes to accompany us back to the caravan. I will look for you tomorrow to receive your answer to my request." He gathered his drawings and charcoal, put them in the pouch, and mounted his horse.

Chapter 5

"Have you thought about my proposal?" Tao asked Arzu when he found her the next afternoon.

"Of little else," said Arzu. "It's not like I have much to do other than sitting outside the tent, walking along the river, or looking at the almond blossoms." When Tao started to speak, Arzu interrupted him. "If I must answer you right now, Tao, the answer is no. Remember, it has only been a few days since I was captured. My life has been turned upside down. I am a stranger in the land through which we are passing and to which we are going. I am a stranger to the other women, now that Dilnaz has been lost. And you. You are a man of great power and learning. Yet you say you are willing to flee and leave all of it behind. And to take me with you. Forgive me for having a hard time believing you. How am I supposed to believe you when you tell me about a land of wealth and luxury..."

"I did not say this," said Tao. "It is a land of peace and health, but not wealth and luxury. You and I would live, as loving partners, in conditions which, back in your home village or mine, would be considered poverty. But in Taohua Yuan Ji, the Valley of the Peach Blossoms, everybody dresses and lives the same, so poverty is no shame."

"Well," said Arzu. "Now I am listening to you. This no longer sounds like a fantasy. Would we ever be able to leave that place?"

"I don't think so," said Tao. "I did leave it once, but I was not at that time a fugitive from the Khan. Perhaps many years from now, people down here in the dirty Mongol world will have forgotten us, and we can come back here. But I do not think we would want to."

"How long will it take for us to get to this land whose name I cannot pronounce?"

"Two days. Maybe more. There will be many hardships and dangers."

Arzu looked down, sighed, and began to quietly cry. "I am sorry, Tao, more than I have words to express." She knew that if she looked into Tao's face she would begin to weep openly. "I would rather bear the burdens that I have, which offer me at least some chance of survival, than to flee on a journey on which I might die.

"That is," she added, "unless something happens that changes my prospects."

"I will be ready to flee," said Tao. "I will pack extra blankets and robes for you. And food and water. I will bring my leather pouch of writings and drawings. Do you have anything to bring?"

"Since I never know from one moment to another what might happen," said Arzu, "I keep my bag packed. I have an embroidered cap and a scarf from back in Kashgar. I took all of my sewing materials out of that chest you had them deliver to me and put it in my bag."

"If you decide to join me," said Tao, "I will leave at nightfall. I will leave a horse tied up outside of my tent to make it look as if I am there. My own horse, packed, will be at a different location. With any luck, nobody will know I have left until dawn, when they find my tent empty. And I will have a horse for you, also."

"But the women will know that I have left," said Arzu.

"Not if the Mongolian woman in charge tells them that your company has been requested by an important person in the caravan," said Tao. "And so long as no one notices your bag is missing."

"Where do I meet you?"

"I will hide in a tamarisk grove, where I can see you approach my tent. Then I will come for you."

"You have this all planned out, haven't you, Tao?"

"The worst tragedy would be if I were unprepared, and then you came to me."

*

After the chosen women ate supper inside the tent, the Uzbek women from Samarkand seemed strangely quiet. They watched Arzu. Whenever she looked up, they looked away from her. They had applied a little bit of makeup. Their eyebrows were dark and a black line connected the brows across the top of the nose, in Uzbek fashion. Arzu knew that something was about to happen. The night was at last completely dark and Arzu smoothed out her blankets on the mattresses. The Samarkand women did not put out their blankets.

Arzu went to them and asked them what was going on.

"As if we would tell you!" said one of them in Uzbek. Arzu understood well enough.

"I'll tell her," said another, who spoke Uyghur. "It is too late to stop us anyway." The woman spoke to Arzu. "We are being rescued by Uzbek horsemen. But you aren't. So, you are so beautiful? You pig Uyghur, already getting favors from the tall man on the horse! Our men are rescuing us. But we aren't taking you."

Then Arzu heard whoops and hollers from what must have been outside the camp. She looked up as the Uzbek women jumped to their feet and fled through the door. They had packed their bags. Arzu took her bag and followed them.

At the edge of the camp, Arzu saw mounted horsemen in plain robes riding around the place where the poor women slept after the warriors had, for yet another night, finished with them. But the horsemen were not Mongol. They wore clothes the same as, or similar to, those of Uyghur and Uzbek men. The women who had been with the warriors, as well as the chosen women, ran toward the horsemen. The Mongols raised the alarm call and began to swarm.

Tao rode up to Arzu.

"Uzbek men are rescuing us," said Arzu. "I think Uyghur men may be there also. Here is my chance for freedom." She started to run.

Tao stopped her. "They won't get far. Or, even if they do, the end cannot be good for them, or for you. Do not try to go with them."

"I should stay here, as a captive?" Arzu yelled at Tao.

"That is not your only alternative," said Tao.

A man in Uyghur dress rode up. “Arzu?” he asked. “It must be you. I saw you in Kashgar. Come with me, now!”

“Who are you?” asked Arzu.

He threw back his hood. “I am Zulfiya. Do you remember me? We will take care of you, Arzu. But you have to come right now.”

Tao called out. “You will get caught,” he said to Arzu. “Come with me, to Taohua Yuan Ji.”

“Tao!” exclaimed Arzu. “You mean to that place that exists only in your head!”

“Come now!” Zulfiya called out.

Arzu started to run to Zulfiya. Then she saw the Mongol warriors begin to chase the retreating raiders. With a final glance, Zulfiya turned his horse and rode away. Arzu turned toward Tao, picked up her bag, and ran to him.

*

“Oh, Dao,” said Arzu. “I owe you my life.”

“No time to talk about it,” said Tao. Arzu sat in front of Tao on his horse, which was heavily laden. He was, in fact, prepared for a long trip. “By the way, you just called me a robber again. The name is Tao.”

“I am sorry I insulted you...” Arzu started to say, but Tao leaned forward and kissed her cheek. He held onto the reins as Arzu turned back to kiss him on the lips.

“The guards will notice my absence very soon,” said Tao. “I expected to get a full night’s travel ahead of them, but this raid has removed that possibility. As soon as they visit my tent, and find that I am not there, they will know I have fled. Maybe I *am* a robber. I took you.”

“Maybe they will think you fled with the raiding party?” said Arzu. “Maybe they won’t follow us, as we are going in a different direction?”

“If even one of the guards sees us, at least some of them will pursue us. The way we are going, however, they are unlikely to pursue us very far.”

Tao headed his horse toward the smudge of light that must have been the city walls of Ürümqi. They heard the sounds of escape and pursuit off to the west. Then he veered off to the east of the city, into another stand of tamarisks. Tao dismounted and helped Arzu down. He led her to her horse, which she could not see. It was tethered to one of the little trees and already saddled. She mounted it. Tao piled extra blankets onto its back and strapped them into place.

“Now,” said Tao, “we go around Ürümqi, trying to not alert the city guards. We will ride north. There is hardly enough light to see the rocks and gullies, so we must go slowly. I can only hope we get far enough before they find us.”

Tao and Arzu rode their horses, over silent grass, over noisy rocks, and through splashing water. It was still cool, but it felt like a spring night, unlike the previous nights on the Road. The first frogs croaked. Arzu and Tao rode through what must have been birch trees. Arzu could feel

their delicate hanging stems brush against her face. She felt their tender buds just beginning to burst. Soon she and Tao were climbing the foothills toward the Altai Mountains.

"We are almost there," said Tao.

"To the Valley of the Peach Blossoms?" asked Arzu.

"No. To a place that is as bad as the land of Taohua Yuan Ji is good."

"Tao," said Arzu. "I think I hear horses behind us. Are you armed?"

"I have a bow and arrows, but they are packed away. They would do me no good now. For if you hear one Mongol horse, you will soon hear several."

"Then what are we going to do?"

"Arzu, as I have told you, you will see. Just stay with me."

The sound of horses in pursuit became just a little louder. Before long, a wide area of white gloaming appeared before Arzu and Tao. They rode out into it. It was sand. Tao led them along some rock cliffs at the edge of the sand dunes. After a few minutes, they found a cave, one that Tao must have already known about, and hid. They watched the dunes.

Six Mongol horsemen came into the dune area and rode slowly toward where Arzu and Tao hid. They stopped. The Mongol who was in charge spoke to the others. Arzu did not understand what they said. The Mongols retreated back toward the city.

"What did they say?" Arzu asked, as she and Tao resumed riding northward, still staying close to the line of cliffs.

"It is best that you do not know," said Tao.

"I am your partner in this venture," said Arzu. "And I am a strong woman. You must tell me."

"Perhaps later..."

"Tao, I insist! You *will* tell me!"

"Keep your voice down," said Tao. "The Mongols are not near, but voices, even whispers, can sometimes carry across the sand. Some say it is the voices of demons, or, in your mythology, jinns. But it is just sound, reflecting off of rocks and sand."

They reached the crest of a dune. A shaft of light from a quarter moon shot through the clouds that had kept the night, until then, almost completely dark. Before them, to the north, stretched an unbroken plain of sand. The last of the rock cliffs were now behind them.

"What they said was what you now see," said Tao. "For two nights and two days of our journey, there will be nothing but sand. Nothing. No shade, no water, no place to hide. Not even any rocks. That is where we must go. I could not bring much water, since it is heavy. We will travel night and day. Only the night is cool. The day would be hot and make us faint even if we did not travel in it, so we might as well travel. You will be very thirsty and begin to see images in your mind. You will see vast lakes of inviting water which, when you approach them, will vanish. The Mongol soldiers made the assumption that no reasonable person would try to cross this desert. It is worse than the Taklamakan, though smaller. But we are, for the next two nights and two days, not reasonable people. We are desperate refugees."

"There must be shade and water at the edges of this desert," said Arzu.

"Indeed, there are," said Tao. "But that is precisely where the Mongol soldiers will be looking for us. If we elude them, we can reach Taohua Yuan Ji. The Mongols think all the land, people, pastures, and fields around here belong to them. But they do not know that Taohua Yuan Ji even exists. They will not know to look for us there. Besides, after a couple of days, they will stop looking for us. The caravan will lose too much money if they wait longer for the soldiers to return. They will command the local Ürümqi officials to watch for us, but these men will not pursue us here, even if they see us.

"For the next two days and two nights, my love, you will think that you have followed me into Hell. You will curse me. You will wish that I was dead. You will wish that *you* were dead. You will scream into the sands, your voice will resound across the dunes, but nobody except me will hear you. But I swear to you that if we cross this desert, we will reach Paradise."

PART TWO: THE VALLEY OF THE PEACH BLOSSOMS

Chapter 6

Tao stopped his horse and looked up a steep mountain slope. Arzu's horse stopped also. Arzu, barely conscious, clung to the saddle. Her thirst burned. It was the end of the second day, and the dunes were now behind them. The slope had rocks and little shrubs. Arzu had looked forward eagerly, as eagerly as a semiconscious person could, to the end of the dunes. But, during the few seconds that she opened her eyes, she saw no relief on the slope above her.

"We now climb," slurred Tao.

Arzu did not stir.

"Arzu, it is now time for you to get down from your horse."

"What?" mumbled Arzu as she sat up partway.

"The horses are as exhausted as we are," said Tao. "They cannot climb this mountain while carrying the burdens and us at the same time. I will help you to dismount."

Tao had to lift Arzu's leg and swivel her around. When she slipped off of the horse, Tao would have held her, but he was too weak. He let Arzu collapse on the ground.

"What was I thinking?" said Arzu, as she sat up on the ground. "My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."

"Don't try to talk."

"I can't move."

Tao crouched down to her level. "You can move, and you will. A poor, helpless Arzu? This is not the woman with whom I fell in love in the caravan."

"I was so wrong about you," said Arzu. "I thought you actually knew what you were doing."

"Was I wrong about *you*, Arzu? Maybe you are a weak and silly woman after all."

Arzu breathed deeply, crouched, and stood. Tao did not help her.

"We go up this slope," said Tao. "Take your first step. Once you have done so, your second will be easier, the third easier yet. Then you will walk a thousand steps without difficulty. The thousand-and-first step might be difficult, or impossible. But we may reach a place to rest and recover before that."

"A thousand is a big number," said Arzu. "In the Koran, the little bit that I remember, the Prophet recalled the story of Moses and the people of...whoever his people were, lost in a desert. They needed water. Moses struck a rock with a stick, and a stream of water flowed out."

"That won't work here," said Tao. "There are no rocks big enough to hit, and no sticks to hit them with."

Arzu looked up. "The slope disappears into a bank of clouds."

"It does," said Tao. "Taohua Yuan Ji is always hidden behind that cloud bank. That is the main reason it has not been discovered by anybody except me. I found it by being lost in that cloud bank."

Arzu said, “Clouds, mists. They are made of water. Maybe we can get water from the mist.”

Tao smiled. “At last, this is the Arzu I love. You are brilliant!”

“The only reason you say that,” said Arzu, “is that you had already planned to get water for us in this way. That is why my idea made you happy, but did not surprise you.”

“This is true. But we must get started.”

They walked with what seemed to Arzu, who anticipated the taste of the mist, like excruciating slowness. She had to consciously gather the energy for each step. She stumbled, but so did the horses. An hour later, they turned and saw the sand dunes spread out below them. The layer of mists, however, seemed to be as far away as it was before.

“When will we reach the mists?” asked Arzu.

Tao was silent.

“I asked you a question,” she said.

Tao remained silent.

“Why don’t you answer me?”

Tao was as angry as his weakened condition permitted. “We are supposed to already be there.”

“Well,” said Arzu, turning back to the mountain. “We should keep going.”

Tao sat down on the ground.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking at him.

“I am not a man to say this lightly,” he answered. “But I think I have reached the end. We have no water. We have food, but it is useless without water. I think my muscles are becoming as rigid as those of a man who has died. My joints feel like solid blocks.” By now he was whispering. Arzu came closer. “I’m sorry, Arzu. I have not only brought myself to the point of death, but I will have caused the death of the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“I don’t feel dead, yet,” said Arzu. “Maybe I can...”

“Only I know the way,” said Tao. “This is the end. Call upon your Allah, and I will call upon...something. I’ll figure something out.”

Arzu sat down beside Tao. She felt numb, unable to believe what he said, and unable to not believe it. She looked at the grains of sand and the pebbles. She imagined that each grain of sand was a different color, and that the smallest deposit of sand was, therefore, a small world. She imagined herself very small, in a world of glass beads like the ones she used to include in her embroidering, or, better yet, a world of crystals. The overcast sky made the colors of the grains show up more vividly.

Arzu looked up. Overcast sky? The mists, higher up in the sky, had moved between them and the sun. And she imagined that the mists were descending toward them. Arzu, with full sincerity for the first time in her life, poured forth prayers to Allah. *I am not asking much,* she beamed her thoughts to Heaven. *I only ask that you send the mists down to us. Not even rain. Just mists. Is that too much to ask?*

When Tao looked up, he saw it also. A quiet torrent of mist flowed down a valley to the east of them. Little tendrils of mist, like vines, crawled down the slope toward them. Maybe, thought Arzu, she was dreaming, or maybe her vision was absurdly clear, but it looked as if a sharply defined mist encompassed each rock and grain of sand. A few moments later, the mist arrived at the place where Arzu and Tao sat. Arzu breathed the mist with exhilaration, but it did nothing to quench her thirst.

"One cannot drink mist," said Tao. "But there is something you can do."

"I'm ready to do it, whatever it is," said Arzu.

"Do you have some silk fabric?"

"Just one small piece."

"Get it out. Then fly it around in the air as if it were a Mongol banner."

"What good would that do?"

"As the cloth moves through the air, the tiny droplets of water will gather on it and it will become damp. Keep doing it. When the cloth becomes sufficiently damp, you can wring water out of it, right into your mouth."

Arzu started waving her silk cloth around in the mist. She barely had the strength to do it. To keep herself motivated, she imagined, as Tao had suggested, that it was a banner being led before a great force of warriors. Only instead of Mongols, it was a horde of farmers, herdsmen, weavers, embroiderers, leathermakers, bricklayers, masons, all on their way to build a new city, one that was not sullied by the sins of humankind. She stopped and let the fabric hang from her hand. It was not just damp. It was saturated. She called Tao's name and told him to open his mouth and stick out his tongue. It was his tongue that received the first drops of water.

Soon Tao was able to stand up, and he gathered water for Arzu. They took turns sweeping water out of the air. They started laughing as if they were having a feast alongside a glinting stream. They kissed wetly.

*

"We must continue," said Tao. "Not much further, I think, and we will be in the land of Taohua Yuan Ji, where the water really does flow freely." They had quenched their thirst and given a little water to the horses.

The mist thickly surrounded them. They had no sense of direction, except up the slope. After a while, however, the slope was so gentle that it was not clear which way was up.

"Now, what do we do?" asked Arzu, looking back down the slope just behind them.

"This is what I did," said Tao. Tao picked up three rocks. He placed the first on the ground. He walked upslope, and placed the second rock. A little further, he placed the third.

"What are you doing?" asked Arzu.

"For the moment, we can tell which way is up," said Tao. "But soon we would lose all sense of direction, and maybe wander sideways or, worse yet, back to where we started. If we

wander off the path, we may fall into The Fire." Arzu was too weary to ask Tao what The Fire was.

Tao walked back to the first rock and picked it up. He walked in the direction determined by the two other rocks, and placed the rock where a fourth rock should be. "This way, we always go in the same direction, which must be upslope."

"Why did you go back and pick up the first rock?" asked Arzu. "Remember, Tao, we are nearly dead, and have no time to take extra steps."

"I do not believe any Mongol scouts come up here," he said. "But if they do, and they see a line of rocks, they will follow it. I must efface all evidence of our passage." Once again Arzu marveled at how beautifully Tao spoke Uyghur.

They continued moving stones until late afternoon, or what should have been. The horses took slow steps beside them. Whenever Arzu looked ahead, she just saw more mist. Then the mist began to look a little bit pink. When she pointed this out to Tao, he smiled.

"What is it?" asked Arzu.

In response, Tao picked up the rocks and threw them aside. Then he walked toward the color, faster and faster. Arzu and the horses followed him.

When Arzu first saw the tree branch heavily laden with pink flowers, she thought it was another hallucination caused by thirst. But she didn't just see them. She smelled them, felt them, tasted them. The petals tasted even better than the abundant droplets of water that fell from them into her mouth.

Tao buried his face in the blossoms and slurped up the droplets of water. He looked back at Arzu. "Didn't I tell you? Taohua Yuan Ji, the Valley of the Peach Blossoms."

"This is not a forest," she said. "It is an orchard. Which means there are people."

"Yes," said Tao. "The legend says that the peach trees are always blooming. Of course, that cannot be true. But it is late springtime, and we have arrived at the peak of the blossoming."

They heard moving water and ran toward it, almost forgetting the horses. When they reached the stream, which was right at the edge of the orchard, they stumbled down to it and splashed the water in each other's faces as they drank. The horses followed and buried their muzzles in the precious water.

It was several minutes before either Tao or Arzu looked up. The mist was starting to clear ahead of them, though still thick the way they had come from the south. Arzu saw a deep and narrow gorge to the north. At the north end, a high waterfall drained water that melted from a glacier, creating a rainbow. Tall cliffs rose on the east and west. Trees grew along the stream that flowed from the gorge, just inside of a band of reeds.

"What are those?" she asked as she pointed at the base of the cliffs.

"Those are terraces," he answered.

"I've heard the word, but have never seen them," she said. "What do the people—oh, look, there are the houses, over there—raise on these terraces?"

“Rice,” he said. “We raise a lot of it in Cathay. It is usually too cold to raise rice in the mountains, but the people of Taohua Yuan Ji raise a lot of it. There is no flat land for fields, so they create flat land by making terraces.”

“And what...” began Arzu.

Right then, a young man appeared from behind a peach tree. He wore ragged goat skin clothes. “Who might you be?” he demanded.

Arzu became excited. “He spoke in Uyghur,” she said to Tao.

“These people are Uyghur. They came here when other tribes chased them from their original homes. Now, nobody remembers that they ever existed.” Tao knew the story, but it had been so long since he heard these people speak, in a classical form of Uyghur, that he found it difficult to explain it to Arzu.

“I did ask of you...” began the young man.

An old man, similarly dressed, came up behind him, and told the young man, “He has returned.” The young man stepped back and let the old man approach Tao.

“Alimjan,” said Tao. “Is it really you?”

“Welcome back, Tao.”

Chapter 7

"This must be your wife," Alimjan said to Tao as they stood outside of his house.

Tao looked at Arzu. She nodded. "Yes," said Tao. "Her name is Arzu."

Alimjan looked surprised. "No, it cannot be," he said. "Arzu?"

"She is Uyghur," explained Tao.

"You mean, one of our people," said Alimjan.

Arzu looked puzzled. Tao whispered to her, "They have not been in contact with other people for a long time. They simply consider themselves *our people,* and everyone who speaks a different language as a stranger."

Arzu whispered back, "What shall we call them?"

"The people of Taohua Yuan Ji? When talking with each other, we can call them Taohuans. When we talk to them, we will just call them people, or villagers."

"Welcome to my house," said Alimjan to his guests. "Again. And this time with your beauteous wife." He led them inside the house. The house was built of willow poles and branches. Animal skins, draped on the inside of birch frames, kept out the winter winds. All but one thin layer of skin was folded in the corner as the house welcomed springtime. It had only two rooms.

"I am glad you are still here," said Tao.

"Where would I have gone?"

"I am glad you are still alive."

"Of course, I am still alive. No one has died except old Yusup, who was a very old man when last you saw him. You must be very tired."

"You couldn't know," said Tao.

"I can imagine, though," said Alimjan. "Once, when I was a young man, I did a very brave thing. I walked to the edge of the mist and looked out across the desert you crossed last time and, I assume, this. Was that not a brave thing to do?"

Alimjan's wife Aynur greeted them. She remembered Tao as well, and was introduced to Arzu. "I am glad Tao found his wife and brought her to us," Aynur said.

When Aynur retreated to the other room, which was the kitchen, Alimjan said, "And you, Arzu. You must be very tired also."

"I could sleep on the ground," she said.

Alimjan looked confused. Yao said to Arzu, "That's where everyone here sleeps."

"And you must both be very hungry," said Alimjan. "I do not know what it feels like to be starving, but that must be how you feel."

"It is strange," Tao told him, "but after we have been so long without food, we actually will not be able to eat very much. Until tomorrow. Please, have your feast for us tomorrow. If we ate a lot now, we would probably just vomit. Just some koumiss, please."

"They just want koumiss for now," Alimjan called to Aynur.

"So, it is," she answered.

Alimjan said, "We already have a festival planned for tomorrow. You came at just the right time."

Arzu made a face when she tasted the koumiss. "This is goat milk koumiss?" she asked. "It is very thin." She quickly added, "But I like it."

Alimjan smiled. "We are glad you like it. We save all the fat to make a special cream with peaches in it."

Arzu immediately perked up. "That sounds delicious," she said. "Maybe I do want a little bit of it now."

Alimjan called to Aynur, "She wants the *shaptul* cream." He spoke to Arzu. "The *shaptul* are dried, from last year. I regret that you cannot taste them when they are fresh. You will, of course, in summer. Our peaches are the best."

"I heard that Georgia peaches are the best," said Tao. He referred to the little kingdom that calls itself Sakartvelo, just north of the land of the Turks. "But we will never taste them. So, for us, your peaches are the best."

When the bowl of peach cream came, Arzu asked about the little crackers which they dug into it. "They are rice crackers," Tao told her. "Just flour from the rice, made into a slush and dried in the sun."

"Like mulberry paper," Arzu whispered to Tao. She hiccoughed quietly.

Aynur came and sat beside her husband. Arzu dug into the peach cream with the crackers, one after another. Tao pretended to be polite, but soon ate as voraciously as Arzu.

"What brings you back to us?" asked Alimjan.

"We had to flee from the Mongols," said Tao, with his mouth full.

"I have heard of Mongols," said Aynur. "They live far to the east, in the dry hills. They raise animals and ride horses. They pretty much keep to themselves."

"That was true, back when your people first came to this valley," said Tao. "But about eighty years ago, many thousands of Mongols rode their horses over the plains, conquering everything, killing more people than you can imagine."

"More than I can imagine?" asked Alimjan. "I can hardly imagine one person killing another, so whether they killed many or few, it is beyond my imagination. At any rate, I am glad you escaped from them. I suppose they will look for you. And for *you*," he said to Arzu. Then back to Tao. "But they cannot find you. They would not dare enter the mist. Or, if they did, they would become lost and fall into The Fire."

"I think a famine hit the Mongol land, and they wanted to conquer other lands to get food," said Tao.

"Famine? We had one back in my father's time. It was a horrible time. My father urged everyone to simply eat less and wait for the food to return. That way we could all survive. But Burhan insisted that any family that had more than one child throw the others into The Fire."

"Into the what?" asked Arzu, stopping to breathe before slurping down more koumiss. She burped loudly. "You've said that twice. The Fire. What is it?"

Tao explained, “It is a narrow, dark gorge near the head of the valley where we entered. At the bottom, the rocks are so hot that they glow red. Sometimes great booming noises come from it. Anyone who falls in, or is thrown in, dies immediately.”

“So, that is what you meant,” said Arzu. “We could have fallen into it when we came through the mist.”

“That is one of the reasons we moved slowly and followed the rocks,” said Tao.

“But it was Burhan who was cast into The Fire,” said Alimjan. “The rest of our people shriveled up in hunger, but lived. There is only one other reason, besides disturbing our peace, for which someone can be cast into the fire.”

“This may be too much for Arzu to hear right now,” said Tao. “It would be for me, except that I already know the story.”

“I need to hear it,” said Arzu, putting down her bowl and burping again.

“You have no children,” said Alimjan. “How long have you been married?”

“About an hour,” said Tao.

Alimjan looked shocked, then he smiled. “You are still good with the jokes, Tao. At any rate, when you begin your family here, you must know that you can have only two children. After having two children, you will need to satisfy your urges some other way. This is why the Great King of the Sky gave us hands.”

Arzu was shocked and thought she heard him incorrectly. But she concluded that he was perfectly serious. She looked at Tao.

“Come, now, my dear,” Tao whispered to Arzu. “You certainly don’t think goats and sheep would be a better substitute.” They all started to laugh, until Arzu stifled another loud hiccough.

“Well, Arzu,” said Alimjan. “Any family with a third child must throw that child into The Fire. That, of course, has never happened.”

Tao spoke again to Alimjan. “But starving together during a famine is not the Mongol way. Nor is it the way in Cathay, or in Samarkand...”

“...nor in Kashgar,” added Arzu.

“Their way, and the way of everyone except your people, Alimjan, is that the rich people continue to have food, and the poor starve. And then they go on wars of conquest...”

“I know the word *war*,” said Alimjan. “But I’m having trouble picturing it in my mind.”

“It is like murder, only bigger,” said Tao. “Now, don’t tell me you don’t understand murder.”

“Very well,” said Alimjan. “I won’t.”

Chapter 8

"I believe you now, Tao. The Valley of the Peach Blossoms is not imaginary. I didn't believe it at first."

"You mean, you didn't believe it the moment you saw the peach blossoms?"

"No, Tao. It was all too good. Even the peach cream was too good to be true. I thought maybe Allah had taken me to Paradise." She stretched herself as she lay on her back on the floor on a thick blanket. She and Tao were lying together under a lighter blanket. Sunlight came through the sticks at a low angle.

"What happened to make you realize that this is reality?" Tao propped himself up on his elbow and looked at her face.

"It was when, you know, the cream and koumiss hit my guts and made me...I mean, I don't think the Blessed Spirits have diarrhea in Paradise...Tao, why did Alimjan insist that we dump in that special hole, rather than just somewhere away from the houses?"

"That is his night soil barrel," said Tao. "We cannot leave wastes anywhere around here. Taohua Yuan Ji is a tiny valley. There is no such place as *away*. Every little space is filled with terraces, orchards, and houses. Wherever you might dump would inconvenience, and insult, someone else. If you wanted to run out into the forest, which you did not seem inclined to do, you would have to be a goat and scamper up the cliffs."

"What is inside the barrel? I mean, besides our wastes."

"You must have noticed the leaves underneath the orchard trees."

"Yes. Raked into very nice piles."

"Every once in a while, the people throw dead leaves and branches into their waste pits. Then when they remove the barrels, the wastes do not smell as bad. The wastes turn into a kind of compost." He had to use a word in the language of Cathay. "Then, before each planting season, they spread the compost on the terraces. This is why the rice grows so luxuriantly."

"Luxuriantly," said Arzu. "You speak Uyghur better than I do, Tao." Then she asked, "Why not just dump the wastes in the stream, like everybody else?" asked Arzu.

"They used to. But it made the water turn foul. It smelled bad, and also green slime started growing in it."

"Where does the water go?" asked Arzu.

"It bubbles into the sandy ground just at the edge of the slope where we saw the first peach trees," answered Tao.

"Well, they could just dump the wastes there, where it wouldn't bother anyone."

"Once in a while this is exactly what they do, Arzu, when they have too much waste."

"How did they figure out to use the night soil on their terraces?"

"Well, it used to make the river turn green, so maybe, they figured, it would do the same for the rice paddies."

"Well, Tao. We are married now, I guess. Sorry I was sick last night. On our wedding night, no less."

"I was sick, too. But, well, I feel really good now. I feel renewed. We can get started now, if you want to, Arzu. I understand you are a virgin. I won't make you rush into this." He lifted the blanket and looked inside at their naked bodies.

"I am a virgin, Tao. But I assume you will be gentle with me. Are you a virgin?"

"No," he said. "But right now, I wish you were my first." He ran his hands over her body, then, crouching over her, bent his head down and kissed her lips.

Arzu said, "How different it would have been if my first experience had been to be raped by one of the Mongol warriors. But here we are in Paradise!" When Tao nestled down on her, supporting his weight gently, they resumed kissing. When gasping for a moment's breath, Arzu said, "There will be some blood. You probably know that. The Mongol woman back at the camp told me."

"No, I did not know," Tao said into her ear. "The women I have had before were very experienced. I was young, and they were much older. It was part of my training as a mandarin. I know nothing about virgins. But you, Arzu! Virgin or not, I worship you."

"If Allah heard you say that!" whispered Arzu into his ear.

"Allah isn't here," moaned Tao. "This is Paradise, a world apart. Now, make sure you let me know if I am hurting you."

As they continued kissing, their breaths synchronized. Arzu felt Tao insert, move, and then shiver. He began to relax, and his weight collapsed fully on her.

"I think I am supposed to feel something more," she said.

"You are," said Tao, who started working on her again.

Alimjan entered the room. His cheerful voice rang out, "You two are still in bed? The sun is up! It is a beautiful morning!"

"Please, give us a few moments," said Tao.

Arzu started to feel some tension building up within her. She felt as if she was standing on a cliff, looking down at distant orchards.

"Well, don't be too long about it," said Alimjan.

Aynur entered. "They're still in bed?"

Arzu began to tremble. She closed her eyes.

"We can leave them alone a while," said Alimjan. Arzu could barely hear him say something about the festival.

When there were no more voices, Tao began kissing her again and pressing himself against her. Arzu jumped off of the cliff. She could see nothing, but she felt as if she, for a moment, was not even in her body, as if she had died. Then she saw something that, at the edges of her vision, looked like the meteors she had seen one night out in the desert outside of Khorgas. She grasped Tao powerfully. When she regained her senses, Tao was massaging and kissing her.

They must have fallen asleep, because the sun was coming through the little branches of the wall at a sharper angle than before. Alimjan's voice called from outside the room, "Get up!

Everyone is waiting for you." Arzu felt herself almost cramping with emptiness. She sat up, the animal skin blanket falling away from her.

Tao slipped out from under the blanket and sat looking at her. They were alone. "You are even more exquisite than I imagined when I was idealizing you," he said.

Arzu turned back the blanket and started to reach for her robe. Alimjan entered.

"Ah," said Alimjan. Arzu grabbed her robe and held it against her body. "You are such a beautiful woman," continued Alimjan. "I can imagine how happy Tao must be. It reminds me of the pleasure I had long ago with Aynur." Arzu looked into Tao's face and was surprised that he seemed so calm. Alimjan left.

In response to Arzu's confusion, Tao said, "There is something about Taohuan life I was going to tell you soon," he said. "Nudity does not bother them. They have little privacy except when visiting the night soil barrel."

"That's something, I suppose," said Arzu, calming down.

"And they do not usually have sexual relations where someone else can see, or walk in on the relations of someone else. But right now, we are late for the festival. Otherwise, they might have left us alone. And it is their house.

"The Taohuans wear clothes most of the time," continued Tao. "They are not innocent. They know all about sexual feelings. They do not want to be distracted by sexual thoughts while they are working. But...well, you will see what I mean. We must hurry up and join them."

"Tao, I think I want more."

"Later, my love," he answered.

Arzu smiled. "The Mongol woman told me that men...The way she put it, women can keep flying around, but men crash upon the ground and have to pull themselves back up to the cliff. I think I now understand what she meant. Except, she added, the Great Khan. He is so powerful, she said, that he can keep making love for hour after hour, with woman after woman in his harem. I suspect that she was just making that up."

*

Everyone in the village had gathered near the little huts where the sheep and goats sheltered during the winter. The female animals had given birth to their young, it appeared to Arzu, about two weeks earlier. Most of the men stood among the animals. All the people, who stared in amazement at the newcomers, wore the same kind of animal skin clothes. Arzu ran back inside, put on her richly embroidered four-cornered hat, and joined Tao outside.

When he turned and saw her, he said, "What are you doing?"

"I am joining the festivities, as you said," she answered.

"I mean, with the hat?"

"A festival is the perfect time to wear it," said Arzu.

"Put it away," said Tao, looking around. "Nobody wears any fine clothes here. You would stand out and make yourself look like you do not belong here."

Arzu saw that many of the women were looking at her. Arzu interpreted their stares as hostile, or covetous, or both. She pulled off her hat and took it back inside the house.

By this time, the men started to work in pairs on the newborn male animals. One man held the front legs together and spread the hind legs, the animal's underside exposed. The other man pushed open the sac that concealed the testes, with one hand, and cut them away with the other. The knives were gleaming, new steel knives. Arzu had seen many livestock castrations. It was the knives that surprised her.

"Where did they get the knives?" she asked Tao.

"I brought them," said Tao. "The ones they used before were almost completely worn down, having been sharpened and re-sharpened for over a century. The last time I was here, I decided that, if I ever came back, I would bring them new ones, and I did so. They have no metal technology here. As far as I know, they do not even have a place where they can get good flint rocks for stone technology. There are probably flint outcrops in the mountains above the cliffs, but nobody ever goes there."

Once the male newborn sheep and goats were castrated, except for the ones chosen to become rams, the women took bowls of what they called sheep eggs and goat eggs into their kitchens. The total amount was not very much. When they cooked stew for the festival, it consisted mostly of fish, dried mutton, and rice. The livestock-eggs were impossible to taste, almost impossible to see.

"At least," Arzu said to Tao, "they must have plenty of fish to eat."

"Actually, they do not," said Tao. "Fish live in the river, but not very many. The men catch a lot of fish, all of them large, just for this festival, then let the remaining fish replenish the stock. Back at the time of Burhan..."

"Him again," said Arzu.

"Yes, him. He told everyone to catch all the fish they wanted, and that Allah would keep providing them with more. Like your Moses did with the stuff called manna and with the quails. You know the story?"

"I have heard it from the Koran," said Arzu. "Not directly, since the Koran is in Arabic, which I cannot understand. But the village leaders told us the story."

"In the time of Burhan, then, the people almost wiped out their stocks of fish. Now, they follow very strict rules. No fishing except in the spring. This is the time of year when the little fish swim around to grow into new ones."

"How did the fish get here? This river is not connected to any other river, I think."

"You are right. The water comes from the glacier, is warmed by the earth, then sinks into the sand."

"Well, Tao, I suppose Allah must have put the fish here."

"Arzu, that is one explanation. But it does not satisfy me. My mind wants a better answer."

"You mandarins."

"Most mandarins are also satisfied with easy answers," said Tao. "But I think that, when the ducks come through, they bring fish eggs on their feet from wherever they have been previously. They leave the eggs in the mud when they walk around. The eggs hatch. That is how the first fish got here."

"Do the ducks come to this valley every year?"

"No. They stop here very rarely. When they come, it is time for the biggest celebration of all."

"They catch the ducks and eat them," said Arzu.

"A few. The Taorans run out and grab the ducks in the water."

"No bows and arrows?"

"No. Nothing of the kind."

"Then, they do not get very much duck meat."

"You are correct, Arzu. But you have already seen how the Taohuans can make a feast out of very few lamb eggs and fish. That's what they do with ducks, too."

Arzu added, "And, in the spring, there are plenty of onions for the stew."

Tao stopped eating and looked seriously at her. "Just remember this. Nobody gets to eat more than anybody else. Except, of course, the kids eat a little less. Nobody has higher status than anybody else. That is why you had to put your hat away."

*

When their work was done, all the Taohuans sat on the ground and talked. Most of the people sat in pairs, except for some boys and girls. They looked at Arzu and Tao.

"I already love these people," said Arzu. "After just one day, I feel more comfortable with them than I ever did in Khorgas. Certainly, more than I would ever have felt with the other captive women."

When they all finished eating the stew and rice, they lined up at barrels to wash their bowls and their hands with tallow soap. When Arzu got to her barrel, she could smell the scent of the peaches that flavored the soap.

Alimjan was dressed and acted like everyone else. But Arzu realized that he must be a village leader, because when he began walking north, upstream toward the snowpack, Aynur got up to follow him. Only then did the other people follow. Arzu and Tao followed the others. She looked up at the high cliffs and down at the clear water just past the reeds. New green reeds grew amidst the brown stalks of the previous year.

They all walked toward the north, approaching the high waterfall. It did not have much water—just enough that it filled the river that flowed through Taohua Yuan Ji and created a susurrus that was so gentle that even Arzu had begun to ignore it. The water flowed in cataracts over smooth stones before coalescing into a smooth river. The people seemed to hardly notice the waterfall, even though it produced a rainbow every day, except when the mists covered the

whole valley. Since they saw the rainbow so often, Arzu reasoned, the Taohuans noticed it no more than she had noticed the deep blue sky each day back in Khorgas.

By the time Arzu and Tao got to the north end of the river, the people who arrived first had already removed their clothes and laid them aside. The men, old and young, dove into the river, while the women stepped softly in the mud and out into the current. One man carried his woman in his arms and walked out into the river and dropped her in. The people splashed each other. All of the people were skinny, but only the oldest ones were wrinkled. And all of them had flawless skin, just like Arzu's.

Then, one couple at a time, the Taohuans waded over a little rock ridge, just above the water level, into a tranquil pool. Alimjan stepped over to his animal skin bag and removed some whitish lumps and handed them to others, starting with Aynur. Soon everyone lathered themselves with tallow soap. Soap bubbles floated slowly downstream.

"I love this peach soap," said Arzu.

Tao said, "There are two things the Taohuans have in abundance: tallow and peaches." Tao stood tall and bare. He walked toward the river. Arzu slipped off her clothes and followed.

One young man, the only one who was unpaired with a woman, sat off to the side and looked intently at Arzu.

As they dunked themselves in the river, Arzu's head asked Tao's, "Why is that man looking at me?"

"What man?"

The young man had vanished. "He was right over there."

"I don't know everyone here yet," said Tao's head. "But I know that the bonds of respect and responsibility are so strong here that you will be safe. He may look at you more than the other men do, but he will not touch you. Ignore him."

Arzu's head thought of another question. "Why is the river water so warm?"

"It is even warmer in the pool," he said. "Heat from the earth warms it. The same heat that creates The Fire. This whole valley is warm. First, as I said, the heat of the earth. Second, the wind does not blow here very much, because high cliffs are all around us. The warmth of the sunlight is trapped here, as if the whole valley is a shallow pool in the afternoon sun. That is why the peach trees bloom earlier here than in other places, even though we are high up in the sky where it is normally very cold. These trees bloomed at the same time as the almonds in Ürümqi, even though Ürümqi is down on the plain. Everything here is warm, but nothing is hot. The scorching winds of the desert stay down below the bank of mists. And while I have seen many rice paddies on the foothills of Cathay, I have never seen them up in the high mountain valleys. Snow covers the mountains around us here in winter, and falls on the roofs of the houses, but whenever snow falls in the river, it instantly melts."

Tao and Arzu were the last ones to get a chunk of soap. Tao led Arzu into the pool. The people who remained started to move back toward the river.

"Their teeth all look as good as mine," said Arzu. "I thought my good teeth were a blessing, especially for me, from Allah."

"Everyone here is healthy," said Tao. "This includes their teeth. I only wish I had grown up here." Tao took good care of his teeth, but they showed evidence of bad health in childhood.

"Everyone acts as if it is such an ordinary thing to see one another's nakedness," said Arzu. "If this happened back in Khorgas, the men would be at least looking closely at the women, imagining themselves in bed with them. I don't think it would be safe for the women."

"Oh, the men here look at the women, all right. But they don't stare. They were probably staring at you because you are newly arrived."

"That one young man, though..."

"Forget about him, whoever he was."

Tao pulled Arzu back toward a secluded area of the pool. They were now the only ones in the pool.

"Why has everyone except us left the pool?"

"This is why," said Tao. He lathered himself all over, then lathered Arzu. She giggled the way she thought she never would again. She had repressed giggles as she approached womanhood in Khorgas, then did not feel like laughing very much after her capture. But now her peals of laughter echoed from the cliffs. Tao pressed her down against a sand bank. The water held up his weight as he embraced her again. This time, there was no hurry. The sky darkened, and she heard the laughter of the Taohuans drift further and further downstream.

*

"What is in this stew?" asked Arzu as she ate a different kind of stew the next day with their hosts.

"You mean, besides onions?"

"Yes. No more lamb eggs, and no more fish."

"Dried mutton," said Tao. "They make the thickener from lotus nuts. The lotus plants grow along the river. Right now, the beautiful pink flowers are just about to open. In the summer, a seed head emerges above the water. It is a disc with seeds embedded in it. It is on a long nodding stalk. This plant is beautiful at all stages of its life: the flat green leaves float right on the surface of the water. Then come the big flowers, followed by the astonishing seed head."

"Where do they get the salt?" asked Arzu. "We have plenty of salt down in Khorgas, but where to the Taohuans get it?"

"They import nothing, as you can imagine," said Tao. "Certainly, no salt. But every summer, they send out six young men to find salt in the desert. Not in the sand dunes, but in the dry mountains to the west. They go to a salt plain north of Alma-Ata, although the Taohuans do not know any geography. They just remember the way. They do not want anyone to see them, so the men who make the journey hide in scrubby woodlands, and then rush out into the desert by the light of a full moon."

"And they bring the brine home in jars or something?" asked Arzu. "That sounds like a lot of work, to get enough salt for a whole village."

"No. They gather plants that grow around the brine pools," said Tao. "The plants look like little green sticks. I have actually chewed on these plants, and you can taste the salt. You have to gather a lot, though. That is why the men go in the summer, when the plants have dried out a little. They gather the plants and cram them as tightly as possible into their sacks. Back at home, the Taohuans dry the plants all the way, then burn them. They get salt from the ashes."

"They let the plants gather the salt for them," observed Arzu.

"Precisely. The plants are not nearly as heavy as brine would be. Each household receives some of the ashes, and puts them in a pot of water to create their own year's supply of brine. By about this time of year, they have to put new water in the pots. The salt is usually very weak by this time."

"But this stew," said Arzu, slurping, "has plenty of salt."

Tao smiled. "It is I whom they can thank for this. It is the fine salt from Khorgas. I brought them not only knives, but salt. If I had brought nothing with me to give them, we could have packed more food on our horses. And more water."

"As it has turned out, Tao, you made the right decision. You made the right decision to bring less food and water for us, and more gifts for them. And I made the right decision also. A few days ago, I was on my way to be an unwilling concubine. Tonight, I am married to a man who is not only good but is a..."

"Mandarin."

"Yes. And I am feasting, I am clean, and I feel better than I ever remember. What is the green spice in the stew?"

"It is the needles of the trees above us. Pines and spruces."

"I've seen them from a distance in Khorgas," said Arzu, "but I never went that far into the mountains."

Aynur came over to them and said, "We regret that we had to stir you so early yesterday morning. But it was the day of the festival. Tonight, however, why don't the two of you sleep under the peach trees? Let their perfume cascade down upon you. The petals will be gone ere long."

"I wish I could speak Uyghur like her," Arzu whispered to Tao.

"This time you can sleep as long as you wish," said Aynur. "On your bed of peach blossom petals."

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There was now just enough light that Tao and Arzu could barely detect the pink color of the flowers overhead. After embracing again for a long time, they fell asleep just before dawn.

Later, Arzu said, "Ah, Tao, just let me sleep. There will be time for us later." She sighed. "Tao, quit prodding me. I promise, we can do it more later."

Tao turned toward Arzu. "What did you say?"

"I said, quit prodding me. There, you did it again."

They both looked up and saw a sheep nuzzling Arzu's head. Arzu gasped, and then started laughing. "Ah," she said, "so this is how the sheep graze, when there is no pasture."

"Yes," said Tao. "There are always plenty of wildflowers for them to eat in the orchard." There was now enough light to see succulent weeds with yellow flowers all around them. The sheep moved along and ate some of the plants, flowers, stems, and all. "When the sheep have eaten most of these plants, and the others have set seed, then there are other kinds of plants in the early summer, then others in the late summer. Only in the late fall and winter do the Taohuans need to provide hay to the sheep. They make hay from the grasses near the reeds in the river, where they do not let the sheep go. The sheep would stir up too much mud."

"They have sheep and goats. No horses? Donkeys?" asked Arzu. "No cattle?"

"How would you ever get cattle up into this valley?" asked Tao. "We barely got our two horses here. They had horses many years ago; that's how the people got here. But they don't have horses any more. Even this is asking quite a favor from the Taohuans, to let us keep our horses. The horses will eat some of the forage that is meant for the sheep. And what can we use the horses for? They're both males, so we cannot make any of that mare's-milk koumiss you Uyghurs like so much."

"They have goats," said Arzu, who still did not like the koumiss made from their skim milk.

"They let the goats graze on the mountain slopes, where no human can go."

"And the goats always come back?"

"Usually," said Tao. "The goats come back so they can lick salt. This is yet another way in which salt is precious to the Taohuans."

"But they don't all come back," said Arzu.

"No. They probably get lost, or fall off of cliffs."

"That doesn't sound like a goat to me."

"There are legends," said Tao, sitting up. "There are supposedly people, or maybe monsters, who live up in the mountains, and who occasionally capture and eat one of the goats."

"Has anyone ever seen one of these people?"

"Burhan claimed to have seen them."

"Was he the one who was cast into The Fire a long time ago?"

"Same guy. You know how much to believe *him*."

"I would like to explore the mountains," said Arzu.

Tao looked closely into her face. "Why would you want to do that?" he asked. "You are in Paradise, right here. Look for yourself up in the mountains. There is nothing up there that could compare to what we have here."

"It is not for physical comfort or pleasure," said Arzu. "I just want to know what's up there."

"The Taohuans love you," said Tao. "They now think of you as one of them, as they think of me. And one thing that they never do is climb into the mountains. Oh, some of the men will climb partway up the cliffs, to cut down pine or spruce trees, just the old trees that can be

used for firewood. But not even very much of that, especially since their old hatchets are wearing out. They can't burn the willows, all of whose branches they need for building houses. Or, rather, repairing them. We will have to build a house, but it will be the only new house built in Taohua Yuan Ji in many years. Even though the earth warms this valley, the winters can still get pretty cold, and it would be nice to have more firewood, but they prefer to be frugal with the firewood they have rather than to go further up the mountain to find more. They do not want to lose sight of the village. I think you do not want to do so, either."

"Though you are my husband," said Arzu, "it is not your place to tell me what I should wish. I cannot stop wondering what is up there.

"But you are probably right," she sighed. "We have everything here that our bodies need, and our minds, too, I suppose. At least, our bodies. What do you say?" She pulled Tao down on top of her.

Chapter 9

One morning, as summer was just beginning, Arzu slipped away from bed. She put on her clothes and, unlike nearly every other morning, she cinched the robes with a belt. She watched Tao as she lifted a saddle and blanket. He did not stir even when she picked up the bridle and reins.

A few moments later, she found one of the horses standing underneath the peach trees. She threw the blanket over its back and secured the saddle. She inserted the bit and adjusted the reins. She imagined that the horse felt, as she did, a sudden invigoration.

She woke the village to the galloping of hooves, a sound that they had never heard. Heads popped out of houses to see Arzu riding swiftly along the path, north toward the great waterfall. She had quit braiding her hair; like that of the other village women, her hair flowed free and wild. Sometimes the wind blew it. But wind was rare in this valley; the last strong breeze occurred over a week earlier. Today, Arzu's hair rippled because of the speed with which she rode. When she turned around to come back, her neighbors were all standing in the path. She rode more slowly, giving them time to get out of the way. Then she stopped and let some of them touch the reins and smile. Only the oldest people, not including Alimjan and Aynur, seemed afraid of what they saw.

Tao did not get out of the way as Arzu rode up to him, turned the horse around in a full circle, and leapt off of it.

"What are you doing?" asked Tao.

"Didn't you notice the saddle was missing from the corner?" she asked.

"Why are you doing this?"

"It felt so good," Arzu said, approaching Tao and kissing him lightly. "It has been so long since I rode like that, the way I did back in Khorgas. Our horses have not had a chance to run. You and I had to ride slowly as we crossed the desert and climbed the hillside. Our poor horses will get weak if we do not exercise them. That's what Muhemmet always said."

"Well, I suppose he is, or was, a very wise man," huffed Tao.

"What is wrong with you, my husband?" asked Arzu. "First you act as if it is a strange thing for me to ride a horse. Then when I mentioned Muhemmet... I was supposed to marry him, but that is part of a world that, for me, has passed. Why should you react that way to him? Scarcely more than a boy, nothing to compare to you! But he did know about horses.

"I got up early," continued Arzu, "because I did not want anyone to be in the way. Besides, if I waited, and asked you if I could do this, you would have said no. I prefer to ask forgiveness rather than permission."

"The Taohuans do not remember anything about riding horses, and they don't want to. We are in Paradise. Why would you need to ride a horse in Paradise?"

"That doesn't matter," said Arzu. "We already have the horses. What do you want to do—eat them? What if we need them to..."

"To escape?" asked Tao. "Why? Where?"

"I don't know," said Arzu. "And neither do you.

"Listen, Tao. I am going to ride the horses. I enjoy it. I enjoy it a lot. I will get all my work done, as well as keeping our horses in good shape. You're welcome."

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And Arzu did her work. The men cut wool from the sheep, using Tao's new knives. The women showed Arzu where to find thistles, on some of the drier cliff faces. The flower bases of the thistles were excellent for carding the washed wool. But the women had forgotten how to make spindles. They twisted the carded wool into yarn by hand. Arzu fashioned a spindle from wood. It wasn't pretty, the way it would have been had a turner produced it, but it worked well enough. She put a hook on the end of it, the only hook she had in her sewing materials. She wound a strand of plain wool that she already had around the spindle and through the hook. She twisted the new carded wool into the end of the yarn, held it up, and spun the spindle. The women gasped as the strand of yarn grew longer before their eyes. Arzu pushed the new yarn down around the spindle, and spun it again. The women of the village used yarn just to tie together animal skins. They knew how to knit, and several women had ancient knitting needles, but it had been so difficult to make yarn that they had stopped knitting. Arzu changed all that.

The women, and Arzu, picked up little green peaches that fell from the trees. After soaking the green peaches in water, the villagers ate them—one of the few foods that Arzu actually hated, especially after they started to ferment. Arzu helped the other women fill whole barrels with them. They had to be eaten before they fermented too much, which meant lots and lots of little green peaches. It was a good time for night soil production.

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"There's got to be something other than koumiss and green peaches to eat," said Arzu. "And not even very much koumiss." By now, most of the milk fed baby sheep and goats.

"We cannot spare any of the sheep or goats just now," said Tao. "Later, after the lambs have been weaned and have grown more, we can kill some of the older animals, and have feasts. But for now, it is just green peaches." There was no more of the old peach cream, which would have become rancid by that time anyway.

"Tao," asked Arzu, "where are your bows and arrows?"

"Why?"

"I'm going hunting."

"I don't want you to do this," said Tao, turning toward her.

"That was exactly the wrong thing to say, husband," said Arzu. "If you did not intend for us to use the bows, why did you bring them? They were packed away and of no use to us during our flight."

"As I already explained to you," said Tao, "we will not do anything that the Taohuans do not do."

"Even if it can help them?" retorted Arzu. "I can bring fresh meat. For all of us."

"This is not done."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Arzu, "that the Taohuans don't know how to hunt? They don't know about bows and arrows?"

"They used to," said Tao. "But that is part of the world of misery and strife that they have left behind."

*

One day, Tao was part of the crew that shoveled the night soil from each house out to the terraces. Rice seedlings grew on some of the terraces, and the men put night soil onto the rest of the terraces.

Arzu looked for the bows and arrows. It didn't take her long to find them. She held the bows and pulled their strings. They were still strong. She chose the smaller bow, and took some arrows in the quiver—not all of them, in case she spilled or lost them. She went to a little cleft of a cliff where she would be unobserved. She slung the quiver over her shoulder, slipped her arm through the bow, and started to climb. She found new muscles that she had not used in her the quotidian labor. It was a feeling of exaltation. She became more careless as she climbed, and dislodged a rock from the pine litter. It rolled downhill to the village path. She hid behind a tree as one of the men looked up to see where the rock had come from.

When the man continued on his way, Arzu resumed climbing. Soon she was beyond where the goats grazed. She had to hold onto the trunks of young, or at least small, pine and birch trees to keep from slipping. She stopped to rest near an opening from which she could survey the village. She did not go into the opening, not wanting anyone to see her. She looked around for prey. She saw a mountain goat, similar to the ones she had seen years back at Khorgas. It was too far away for her to shoot it. She preferred, at any rate, to just admire it. It jumped around from one cliff face to another, finding footholds that she could not see. Its skill took her breath away. She felt as happy as she had ever been. She lived in Paradise, and then climbed out of Paradise just long enough to see a magnificent animal that Allah had created to live in a way that no human could imagine, to see something that one in Paradise could never see. Then she could go back to Paradise. What could be better?

Arzu climbed some more, reaching a little glade. She still saw no prey, although she saw some scat. She became briefly worried, because the scat was pretty big. This was not from a deer. She climbed further and checked among nearby cliffs. She found bones, and smelled the scent of old excrement, both presumably from the kind of large animal she was following. She found a skull. She had never studied skulls, and realized she would not know a goat from a caracal from a wolf. It was probably a mountain goat, she thought. All she knew was that the

animal was not human, and was too big to be a hare. For just a moment, she imagined herself hunting with Muhemmet, even as Tao shoveled compost.

Muhemmet, who would have gotten himself killed in Kashgar, and who certainly would not have led her to Paradise. If Muhemmet could see her now! If he could only know that she was the wife of the scribe he had seen in Kashgar on that fateful day, rather than a captive woman on the way to Cambulac.

Arzu looked in a little cave. She saw another animal skull, but this one was broken. It looked as if it had been hit with a rock. It also had little scratch marks on it that reminded her of the cut marks from knives on bones when she helped to prepare meat back in Khorgas. She began to suspect that a human being was somewhere around. But maybe, she thought, these were the tooth marks of a predator.

Then Arzu saw charcoal under the overhanging cliff. She was, even before she saw the stone tools, certain that someone lived here. Someone must, therefore, know about the Valley of the Peach Blossoms down below. The presence of a band of hunters would, at least, explain why some of the goats disappeared from the village. But hunters that used stone tools? All hunters about whom Arzu knew used metal tools. She picked up one of the small ones and slipped it into a little pouch that she kept between her breasts.

Then she found a larger cave, one in which the charcoal was still warm. She saw the scattered bones of what could only be the missing goats from the village. She decided to get back home, as quickly as she could without losing her footing. She had to warn the village about hunters in the mountains.

She saw a hare. Though she was in a hurry, she decided to kill it. She smiled and thought of Muhemmet. Meat is meat, as he said. The hare was further up in the glade. She advanced slowly, got her bow and arrow ready, and aimed. The metal arrowhead pierced the hare right through the middle, and pinned it into the ground. She ran up to it.

The man she saw standing before her was very large and strong. He stank. Arzu looked at him, slowly upward from his bare feet. The soles of his feet looked as thick as leather. Healed wounds and unhealed sores covered his strong legs. He wore an animal-skin robe like those of the villagers, like the one she wore. But it was not of sheep or goat skin. It was a single, large skin, which reminded her of the mountain goat she had seen. His arms were powerful. He held a spear, onto which animal tendons and pine resin held a stone spearhead. His face was exceptionally ugly. His nose, indeed his whole face, was big. His eyes were yellow and bloodshot. Filth clotted his dark hair and ragged beard.

Behind him stood a woman. She looked just like the man, except for the beard. Her animal skin fit sideways on her body, exposing one nipple, at which she nursed an infant. The breast itself was almost nonexistent. The infant was scrawny and barely alive.

For just a moment, Arzu imagined that these people might be from some race of giants that lived in a vanished world, the world from before the Great Flood about which the Koran spoke. A race that everyone assumed had vanished.

The man said something to her in a language she could not recognize. It was not Uyghur, nor any related language like Tajik or Uzbek. It did not sound like Mongolian, nor the little bit of the language of Cathay that she heard from Tao. The man repeated his words, this time a little more forcefully. Arzu held out her palms to show that she had no weapon ready to use. The man repeated his words again. This time, he scowled, revealing broken, yellow teeth.

Arzu screamed and started running downhill. She stumbled several times. She kept imagining that she heard the big spear whizzing past her, or footsteps in pursuit. Footsteps of the man who would surely catch her, a man who was perhaps able to hunt a mountain goat. Her lungs burned and she had to stop. When she heard no one pursuing her, she looked back up the mountain. She saw the man pulling the hare from the arrow. He handed the meat to his woman. Then he looked closely at the metal arrowhead, touching it carefully and, Arzu imagined, admiringly.

Having determined that the big man was not pursuing her, Arzu relaxed and continued downhill. But she lost her way to the little path by which she had ascended. Instead she was on a big cliff covered with loose leaves and needles. She slid right over the cliff and down onto the village road.

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Arzu awoke in her old bed in Alimjan's house. Tao sat beside her, his back propped up against one of the poles. She started to move, and Tao jerked into wakefulness. He scrambled over to her and took her in his arms.

"My love," said Tao, "I was sick with worry for you."

"I cannot remember too clearly," said Arzu, after kissing Tao. "I think I fell off a cliff."

"No ordinary cliff for you," he said. "You had to go and fall off the highest one, from above the trees. You have been unconscious for two days."

Arzu put her hand to her head and felt the warm swelling.

"Do you feel any broken bones?" Tao asked. "I looked carefully all over your body, and saw no evidence of broken or protruding bones. But I cannot know if you might have an internal injury."

"I shall have a better idea once I begin to move," said Arzu.

"Take it slowly." Then Tao cleared his throat and continued, "You went up on the cliffs to hunt."

"Yes. I told you that is what I was going to do."

Tao looked into the air and smiled tensely. "Yes. Did you catch anything?"

"I seem to remember that I shot a hare. But I fell down the mountain before I had a chance to retrieve it. I think I had your bow and some arrows with me when I fell."

"You did. I got them back, with one arrow missing. Perhaps I should destroy the arrows. The bows too. But that decision is for later. First, I want to know anything else you would like to tell me."

Arzu started to tell him about the man, woman, and child. But she stopped. She was the only one who knew about them. Perhaps it was best that way. She decided to lie. “No.”

Tao relaxed, closed his eyes, then grabbed Arzu’s shoulders and spoke, with an intense whisper, right into her face. “While you were mumbling in your sleep, you said something about a man with a spear.”

“I must have been dreaming.”

“Arzu, you must understand. I gave up everything to save you. Everything. And now, you are lying to me. You must tell me everything. We will be careful...” He whispered very quietly. “We will be careful about what we tell the Taohuans. They think that there is nobody up there. If they learned that there was, they would feel that their secret paradise has been violated. They would no longer be able to ignore the outside world. But if you saw anyone up there, even if we do not tell *them*, you must tell *me*.”

“Well...”

“I knew it! I knew it! You were lying to me.”

“I will tell you nothing unless you forgive me for lying to you, and for going up the mountain in the first place.”

Tao exhaled and hung his head. He sat next to Arzu. “I see no reason to refuse your request.”

“My demand.”

“Arzu!”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Arzu. “Yes, I saw a man.”

“A Mongol?”

“No. I am absolutely sure of this. A Mongol would have been on a horse, and no horse could ride on that mountain. And no Mongol could possibly look like him. Even a Mongol could not be that ugly.”

Tao relaxed. “Then, who was it?”

“He had a woman and child with him,” said Arzu. “He was really big, as was the woman. And even smellier than a Mongol. I found their hearth, and bones, which I assume were from the missing goats. I think these people are barely alive, Tao. I do not think they represent a threat. They make stone tools. The man acted as if he had never seen metal.” She told Tao about the man taking the hare. “I wonder if they might be from some primordial race.”

“Every culture has legends about ancient races of giants,” said Tao. “Which means that the legends might be true, in general, though not in the details.

“You must never do anything like this again,” continued Tao. “We cannot disturb this peaceful society. They are totally separate from the rest of the world...”

“Are they?” Arzu’s voice rose a little. “Are they indeed? They were, and then we came. Now, suppose I *had* seen a Mongol up there. Don’t you think the Taohuans would need to know? And how can they know unless someone—me—goes up the mountain occasionally to check?”

“I think we should just stop where we are. I forbid you to climb the mountain again.”

"We are not in my Uyghur culture, or in your land of Cathay, where a husband can tell his wife what to do," said Arzu, more loudly than she had spoken before.

Alimjan entered the room. "This is true, Arzu. Tao cannot tell you this."

Arzu smiled at Alimjan, until she saw the look on his face.

Alimjan continued. "But the village can tell you what to do. I have talked to the other people. Men and women. We all agree with Tao. We cannot permit you to climb the mountain again." He fended off Arzu's objections. "Fresh meat for us? We appreciate it. But we cannot allow something like this to happen again. You could have died by falling off that cliff. We thought that you were dead, and then we thought you were dying. You see, Arzu, nobody dies here except of old age. We cannot let the whiff of death enter our valley."

Then another man entered. Arzu recognized him. He was the young, unpaired man who had watched her in the river. In his hand, he carried something that Arzu had completely forgotten about. It was her pouch.

"That is Arzu's pouch," said Tao.

"Of course," said Alimjan. "We found it on the ground when Arzu fell."

"Check inside," said the young man.

Alimjan opened the pouch and found the stone tool. He had never seen anything like it, and he marveled at it for a long time. Though he lived in Paradise, he had an analytical mind. He touched the edge, and felt its sharpness.

Then Alimjan said, "You did not bring this with you. It is some kind of knife. You brought metal knives, for which we have repeatedly thanked you. But this is from somewhere else. You found this on the mountain."

"Not necessarily," said Arzu.

"She did," said Tao.

"This changes matters," said Alimjan, who left with the young man.

*

People left their work early to assemble on the riverbank outside of Alimjan's house, the same riverbank where Arzu and Tao had drunk the cool water after their ordeal. The people formed a semicircle around Tao and Arzu, behind whom sat Alimjan and Aynur. Tao and Arzu held hands as they sat.

"Our world has been changed forever," began Alimjan. "Not for the first time, but the first time that even the oldest of us can remember.

"Arzu found people living up on the mountain, as I am sure you have all heard. We do not know who they are. We cannot guess if they mean us well or ill. They can see us, but we cannot see them. From this point forward, we will need guards."

"I will lead them," said the young man who brought the stone tool to Alimjan.

"You are young," said Alimjan.

"I am unpaired," said the man. "I can fight without fear. If I had a wife, I would hold back from fighting because I would be worrying about her."

"It can't be as serious as all that," said someone.

"I assume not," said the young man, smiling. "But the rest of you brave and valiant men..." He spoke to men who had never heard themselves described in this manner. "The rest of you would hold back, should a battle occur, thinking of your wives, children, and homes. This is right. But I would not hold back. That is why it is right that I should lead you."

"Very well," said Alimjan. "Any objections? Hearing none, I announce our consensus that Bayanchur should lead the guards."

"Does anyone object to the use of Tao's knives, should weapons be necessary?" asked Bayanchur.

No one objected.

"And now," said Alimjan, "the decision that we dread the most." He looked at Arzu. "You have brought trouble upon us. We now have to decide whether to expel you from our midst." Arzu kept looking down at her hands. Alimjan looked at Tao. "I assume you will go with her, should this prove to be our decision." Tao nodded.

"We will now decide," said Alimjan. "Aynur and I will not now participate. I would ask that you all close your eyes so that the choices of your neighbors do not influence your vote. Good. Now, raise your hand if you believe Arzu and Tao should leave us." Some of the people raised their hands. Alimjan counted them. So did Tao. Tao, counting fast, was amazed that there were exactly fifty people in the village, counting Alimjan and Aynur, and that twenty-four raised their hands.

"Thank you. And now," said Alimjan, "raise your hand if you believe they should remain."

Twenty-four again. No one abstained.

"This is unusual," said Alimjan, as people looked up. "Exactly half. You all know what this means." He turned to his wife. "Aynur, it is now up to you. Should Arzu and Tao leave, or should they stay?"

Aynur kept her eyes closed and spoke softly. "They should stay, if they wish."

Chapter 10

Arzu and Tao now had their own house, but were visiting their hosts. Arzu got out her embroidering tools and colored yarn. She had requested and received squares of sheep leather. Arzu wore one of her square caps, one that she had brought with her, and was completing a second one. She worked on it slowly and lovingly. “Aynur,” she asked, “why did you vote to let me stay here?”

Aynur stood in fury. “You are not permitted to ask that question.”

Arzu looked up in surprise. “Please, Aynur, I did not mean anything by it. It was, you know, two months ago? I did not know that I was not supposed to ask. I was just wondering.”

“That is her problem,” said Tao, who sat against the wall. “She is always wondering things.”

“You’re a fine one to talk,” Arzu shot back at Tao. “You and the little school you are starting.”

“I stand correctly accused,” said Tao, in classical Uyghur. He held his sheaf of papers and a slim piece of charcoal. He had tried to mix up new ink, using charcoal, water, and tallow, but the tallow just made it clump, no matter how much he ground it. He went back to charcoal.

“I apologize again, Aynur,” said Arzu. “If you will permit me, I wish to give you this second hat when I finish it.”

Aynur looked at both the new and old hats. She smiled. “They are really beautiful. We are surrounded by the beauty of our valley,” she said. “But I had not imagined that we could create beauty ourselves, much less that we could wear it.

“Of course,” continued Aynur, “we cannot wear it outside. I would not dare to wear something that other women could not.”

“Then wear it inside,” said Arzu. “Like me. I have so long missed the chance to produce works of art. That is all I want to do. I do not want the other women—or men other than Tao—to admire me for it.

“Tell me, husband,” continued Arzu. “Are any of the people, or their children, interested in being your students?”

“There is only one who has told me he is interested,” answered Tao. “It is Bayanchur.”

“Oh, him,” said Arzu. “The leader of the guards. I think he wants to be the leader of the village.”

“He won’t be,” said Aynur. “Every leader has to have a wife. We do not want a leader who thinks only of himself, rather than the well-being of families.”

“Well, whatever reasons he may have, he sounds like he wants to learn anything I might teach him,” said Tao.

“Which is?” asked Aynur.

Arzu put down her work and looked up. “Good question, Aynur. I should have asked my husband what he was planning to teach. Why have I not done so?”

"Perhaps you have been thinking about other things," said Aynur.

Arzu looked at her abdomen and rubbed it. "Yes," she said. "About three months along, I think. And we all have lots of work to do. Now that we have all eaten our fill of fresh peaches, we all have to cut the remaining ones up and dry them."

"The thinner we cut them, the faster they dry," said Aynur. "With the new knives you brought, Tao, we can cut them very thin. This year, we will lose none of the peaches to the rot."

"Soon all the lambs will be weaned, and we can begin to slaughter some of the older lambs." Arzu looked hungrily into the air. "Feasts! And dried meat for the rest of the year."

"With all of this work," Aynur said to Tao, "who would have time for learning?"

"Learning is itself a kind of hunger," said Tao. "For Bayanchur, it may be a way of gaining status."

"In a people to whom status does not matter," said Arzu.

"But for others, learning is a true hunger, a true desire," said Tao. "Like the desire for sexual love, only not as strong."

"You started to tell us what you would teach," Arzu reminded him.

"My mandarin training in Cathay," said Tao, "would be of little use here. The old writings. Poetry, in a language they do not know, for example. History of a country they will never see. Some of the philosophy might possibly be useful. But I suspect much of it is wrong. For example, the study of the stars. We give names to the stars, and believe that they influence what happens in our lives. But nobody really knows what the stars are. Maybe they are like the sun, only very far away."

*

"How far away?" asked Bayanchur, Tao's first student. They sat outside. Arzu sat with them, sewing together some animal skins.

"Nobody knows," said Tao.

"Then, how could one find out how far away the stars are?"

"How would you find out how far away *anything* is?" Tao asked his student.

"Well," said Bayanchur, "at the risk of sounding simplistic..."

"Go ahead. Sound simplistic if you like. Nobody to hear it except Arzu and me."

"You walk toward something. If it gets bigger quickly, then it is not far away. But if you walk for a long time, and it is no larger than it was before, then it must be far away."

"Go on," said Tao.

"If I walked toward the stars...no, stars just look like points of light. But take something that actually looks like it is a certain size. The moon, that's it. Walk toward the moon, and if you walk a long way and it gets no larger, in your perception, then it must be far away. But," he anticipated his teacher. "You cannot walk toward the moon."

"Are you sure?"

"Unless...unless you climbed the mountain. If I climbed the mountain for a day, and the moon appeared twice as big, then the moon must be two days' climb away."

"No," said Tao. "After your second day of walking, the moon would be four times as big, but you would still not have reached it. But I think you have the right idea."

"Did they teach you this for your mandarin examinations?" Arzu asked her husband.

"No, nothing quite so practical as that. Except how to work with numbers. We needed to know about numbers so that we could keep records of the agricultural fields and how much they produce."

"Why?" asked Bayanchur.

"So that each family can pay taxes on its field."

Bayanchur held his hands against his temples. "Slow down. First, how can a family have a field? Here, all of our land belongs to everyone. Second, what is a tax?"

"As I said, they taught me things that were not very practical, at least for your people."

*

A couple of nights later, Arzu could not sleep. She pulled her skin away from Tao's as softly as she could. He stirred, but fell back asleep. She slipped on her robe and walked out of the house and out under the sky. The moon was full, or very close to it, making the stars appear dim. She thought about this. Maybe we do not see the world the way it really is, she thought. Maybe our minds trick us into thinking the stars are dimmer when the moon is out. Maybe for our eyes the moon is too bright, and our eyes adjust the light so that it, and the stars also, are dimmer. This would be something to talk to Tao about tomorrow.

She saw Bayanchur looking at the moon. Bayanchur had not seen her. He was holding something up in his hand toward the moon. He put it down, then held it up again. When he saw Arzu watching him, he came over.

"You can probably figure out what I am doing," Bayanchur said.

"You speak as if I am a scholar like Tao," she said. "But I'll give it a try. Show me what is in your hand."

"A short piece of reed, and one of Tao's knives."

"You held the piece of reed up to the moon," said Arzu, "but I do not know why."

"Each time I hold it up, I lower it, and cut a little bit off of its length, then hold it up again."

"Ah," said Arzu. "You are trimming the piece of reed until it appears the same size as the full moon."

"Exactly. That is, when I hold it at arm's length."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I can't tell you just yet."

"Can't? Or won't?"

"Have a good night, Arzu," said Bayanchur. "There is a man back in your bed whom I suppose really wants you to be with him."

*

"We don't have enough colored yarn to decorate everyone's hat as much as we did ours," Arzu said to Aynur during dinner as the four ate together.

"But everyone needs one of these hats," said Aynur.

"Including the men," said Alimjan.

"In the village where I come from," said Arzu, "both men and women wear them, this is true. But if I make that many of them, I can add only a small bit of colored decoration to each."

"And you must remove the intricate decorations from our hats," said Aynur.

"I cannot do that without ruining the yarn," said Arzu, exasperated. "Besides, I wanted to make the most beautiful hats that I could. That is what I have always wanted to do. Even back when my father wanted me to embroider more hats, rather than to embroider each hat as beautifully as I could. Why don't I just make a few hats, and whoever has them can wear them in private?"

"We have our own homes," said Alimjan. "But we do not have complete privacy. All the women know about the beautiful hats that you and Aynur wear at home. And not only that. Your pupils, Tao. Their learning is making them proud."

"I instruct them to remain humble," said Tao, who was using his charcoal on some of his remaining paper. "Their learning is a gift to them from the earth itself, which shares its secrets with them."

"It is one thing for them to think this, and another for them to feel it. Though I cannot look inside their hearts, I see them acting proudly. I wonder," said Alimjan, "whether we need to put a stop to these new things."

"You want me to stop making hats?" asked Arzu.

"And to hide those you have already made," said Alimjan.

"What about the wristbands?" asked Arzu.

Alimjan and Aynur looked up in silent surprise.

Tao had to explain. "I told my pupils that Arzu would make leather wristbands for them."

"This is just getting worse and worse," said Alimjan. "I think you should close your school right away, Tao." Bayanchur was no longer Tao's only student.

"But the pupils have expressed to me, in passionate terms, how much they enjoy learning. Not so much from me, but by searching out answers for themselves.

"And it has already started to benefit the whole community," added Tao. "Right now, the women are ready to transplant the rice seedlings. They have always done so the same way. But some of my female pupils..."

"I have heard them call themselves your fellow scholars," said Aynur.

"...they want to use some of the terraces to try out a new way of transplanting."

"The old way has always worked fine," said Alimjan.

"Except when it hasn't," said Tao. "You told me that, one year, you almost ran out of rice. The harvest was bad. You were all very hungry that year."

"It happens from time to time," said Alimjan.

"It does not need to ever happen," said Tao. "You can store up more rice from the good years. In Cathay, we have big granaries."

"Where you can store up food for decades, I suppose," said Aynur.

"Not really," admitted Tao. "The rats get into them and eat the grain."

"What are rats?" asked Alimjan.

"Everybody knows what rats are," said Arzu.

"The people here do not," explained Tao. "There were no rats with them when they came. And rats cannot cross the desert. I saw little mice out in the desert we crossed, hopping around in the moonlight, but they can only live in the desert, I think."

"Actually, it sounds like, in Cathay, you can store up lots of food to keep the people from starving. Everybody gets a portion during hungry years," said Alimjan.

"Not quite," said Tao. "The rich people have the granaries, and continue eating as much as they want, while the poor people starve. The granaries are a source of power and wealth to rich people. Including, I hate to admit, mandarins such as myself."

"What do your female fellow-scholars wish to investigate about transplanting?" asked Aynur.

"You transplant the seedlings so that they will have room to grow. If they are too crowded, they will not grow as well, and will not produce as much rice. If they are too far apart from one another, they will grow large, but the space between them will be unused. There must be a density that is just right for them. This is what one of my pupils wishes to study.

"Another young woman has noticed that some of the rice plants grow bigger and produce more rice grains than others. Maybe the big plants are just lucky, but maybe it is something in the nature of the plants themselves. That is, just by nature, some rice seeds grow into big plants and some grow into small plants. This young woman thinks that we should save back the grains from the big plants and use them to plant next year, rather than just saving rice grains more or less by chance."

"But the bigger plants might need more space," said Arzu.

"Brilliant, Arzu," said Tao. "I would invite you to be one of my scholars, only I already tell you everything I know, and listen to everything you say. You started being my first scholar the day we met.

"Indeed," continued Tao, "there is no end to investigation. If the second woman is right, then the first must redo her investigation, to find the best density for the larger rice plants."

"There is no end to it," said Alimjan. "That's just the problem. We must limit ourselves to this valley. Burhan did not believe this, and his ways of doing things nearly destroyed our fish stocks. He also wanted us to climb the mountain and cut down as many trees as we could. If we had done this, we would today not have enough firewood. This must stop."

"But these studies will help us to live better within the limits of our valley..." Tao began.

Before he could speak further, one of the young women stuck her head into the room and asked permission to enter. Alimjan nodded. The woman said, "We men and women have carried buckets of water from the river to about half of the terraces," she said.

"You mean," Arzu asked Tao, "rain does not fill the terraces?"

"You may have noticed," Alimjan said to her, "that there is very little rain here. The water mostly comes from the river, fed by the snow to the north, and from the mist, which drips from the peach leaves down into the soil. A few weeks ago, we filled a few of the terraces, in order to start the seedlings growing. Now we need to fill the other terraces, for transplanting the seedlings." Then he said to the woman, "I am glad to hear this. You will finish, perhaps, in a few days?"

"That is not what I came to say," said the woman. "Some of us were talking together..."

"You, and those with whom you talked, wouldn't happen to be Tao's pupils?" asked Alimjan.

"They are," said Tao.

"We have thought of a better way to carry the water from the river to the terraces," said the woman. "Instead of each of us carrying a bucket of water, we could form a double line of people. At one end of the first line, someone scoops water into a bucket. Then he or she passes the bucket to the next person, who passes it to the next, and so on, to the terrace. Then the last person pours it in. This person hands the empty bucket to the person at the head of the second line, who passes it to the next, to the next, and so on back to the person who scoops the water from the river."

"What is wrong with what we were doing before?" asked Alimjan. "Besides, it doesn't seem fair. Some of the people are working hard, especially the poor man or woman scooping up the water. The people passing full buckets have more work than those passing empty ones. Not fair!"

"We trade off for the heavy labor. But it means less walking for everybody."

"It sounds as if you have already done this," said Aynur.

"We have. That is why we are nearly half finished. We will be able to begin transplanting tomorrow."

"I have carried many buckets of water in my day," said Alimjan. "I did not complain."

"We are not complaining, Alimjan," said the woman. "I am just telling you about our new way of doing it."

"I cannot permit this," said Alimjan. "At least we need to ask the people of the village about it." Aynur leaned over and whispered to him. He looked embarrassed. "Unless, that is, most of the people in the village already know about it, and have already approved of it."

"They have," said the woman. "And if you spent many years doing it the old way, I am sorry to hear it. But this is no reason for us to make the same error." She bowed. Before she left, she glanced at Arzu. "That is a lovely hat. Can you make one for me?"

"No," said Alimjan.

Then the woman saw Tao's drawing of Arzu. She gasped. "It is so beautiful! I have heard about Tao's drawings. I want a drawing of myself!" She giggled.

"No," repeated Alimjan.

"Oh," said the woman. "Sorry. I wish you a pleasant evening." She slipped away.

"Well, this new freedom of thought that you have brought us has already begun to cause some disruption," said Alimjan. "And there is more, Tao. I have hesitated to tell you, because I thought I was the only one who knew about them. Your images, Tao. You draw them beautifully."

"Beauty, like knowledge, is a hunger," said Tao.

"My point exactly," said Arzu.

"Nobody else can draw images as you do," said Alimjan.

"How do we know?" asked Tao, putting his charcoal and paper down. "If I teach people, whoever wishes to learn, how to draw, then some of them will be able to draw as well as I, or better."

"And most will not," said Alimjan. "Those who cannot will feel inferior."

"Maybe it is because they *are* inferior," said Arzu.

Tao dropped his face into his hands. Alimjan and Aynur both tensed up. They scowled.

"What is it? Did I say something wrong?" asked Arzu, looking around.

Tao looked back up at her. "Everyone here is equal."

"Even in private," said Alimjan.

"Please, hand me the portrait of Arzu," said Aynur. When Tao did, she said, "This is truly beautiful." She looked at Arzu. "It is even better than the woman herself."

"I thought that drawing might get us into trouble someday," Arzu said to Tao.

"It is *not* better than Arzu herself," said Tao, a little more loudly than he might have intended. "It is true that I have taken all of the best times and assembled them together. The times when her eyes are the brightest, her smile the best, her hair the most luxurious. There is no single time when she is utterly beautiful in all of these ways at once, but she is utterly beautiful in all of these ways, at some time or other."

"This means it is not the truth," said Alimjan. "Now, what should we do with it?"

"I must keep it," said Tao. "If for no other reason than that, someday, when Arzu is older, I can remember the beauty of her youth."

"You had better apologize for that," said Aynur, turning on him. "I was very beautiful when I was young. Right, Alimjan?" He nodded. "But I am perfect for him as I am right now. As he is for me. Do you remember Alimjan from your earlier visit, Tao? He was much better-looking back then, even though it was not many years ago. If we had drawings of one another from our youth, those drawings would stand in accusation against us as we are now. Now, apologize."

"It was not my intention to make youth seem better than old age," said Tao, looking down.

"Is this what you call an apology?" hissed Aynur.

"I ask for your pardon, Aynur," mumbled Tao.

"It matters little if it was your intention," said Alimjan. "Behold. The discord that has erupted in this very room is greater than any to have occurred since Burhan."

In the silence that followed, Arzu said, "Well, it looks as if I will be helping the other women transplant rice seedlings sooner than I thought."

"It appears so," said Alimjan.

Aynur handed the drawing of Arzu to Alimjan, who and looked at it again. Alimjan said, "You are, indeed, Arzu, like one of the Heavenly Beings come down to join us."

"More heavenly than I was?" huffed Aynur.

Alimjan looked at his wife. "I don't remember," he said. "Does it matter?" He looked at Tao. "Now, what should I do with this drawing?"

"I will keep it hidden," said Tao.

"The knowledge of your drawings has, as you can see, spread throughout the village. Perhaps I should destroy it?" asked Alimjan.

"If you do, I will simply make another," said Tao. "When our child is born, I will draw both Arzu and our child."

"While she is nursing?" asked Aynur.

"I hope so," said Arzu.

Aynur sighed. "Now that, husband, would be a drawing to keep. A drawing of beauty, yes, but also of love."

"Or, perhaps," said Alimjan, "You can take it with you when you leave."

"What?" asked Tao.

"I will call another meeting of the village tonight. I want to hear their opinions."

"About what?" asked Arzu.

"About everything," Alimjan answered. "When they were actually working with buckets of water, they were tired. After they have rested, they might reconsider this new way of doing things. And we might as well try to reach consensus about the hats, the wrist bands, and the drawings. If we cannot reach consensus, we may have to vote."

"Another vote about expulsion?" asked Arzu.

"I cannot say," said Alimjan. "If so, I want one of the others, not me, to propose it."

*

After they had finished their cold suppers, the villagers assembled by the river as before. The sky was just beginning to darken.

"Look," Arzu heard Aynur whisper to her husband. "The scholars, or pupils, or whatever they are. They are wearing wrist-bands."

"They already had them before we had our discussion today," Alimjan whispered back.

Alimjan stood. The crowd became silent. "Is everybody here?" he asked.

"No," said a man. "My brother Bayanchur is missing."

"When did you last see him?" asked Alimjan.

"He vanished before dawn."

A man named Maqsud said, "He said he was planning to be gone. He did not tell me where or for how long. But he asked me to lead the guards. At least, he did not desert his post without finding a substitute."

"We might need to wait for his return before we have this meeting," said Alimjan. Alimjan turned to Tao. "Do you know where he is? He is your first, and principal, pupil."

"He did not tell me," said Tao.

"He will probably be back soon," said Alimjan. "Until tomorrow night, then." The people began to disperse.

Later, Arzu looked at the glow of the full moon, which had not yet risen above the cliffs in the east. "The moon will be bright tonight," she said.

"I think I know where Bayanchur is," said Tao. "Remember those times when we talked with him about the moon?"

"Yes," said Arzu. "I saw him looking at the moon last night. He was measuring the moon. Wait. You mean, he actually climbed the mountain to measure the size of the moon?"

"I suspect that this is the case. We shall soon find out."

*

The next evening, just as the people assembled again for the meeting, Bayanchur strode into their midst.

"You have returned," said Alimjan.

"I have. And I have much to tell."

"Does it involve an imminent threat to our village?"

"No."

"This meeting is not about you, Bayanchur. I can talk with you afterwards, if you wish. But please just sit down and join the others."

"What I have to say is not about danger, but about wisdom," said Bayanchur, holding his right arm, the leather band on its wrist, in the air.

"It is not your time to speak," said Alimjan.

"I want to hear him," said one of the young women scholars.

"I too," said another.

"What can it hurt to listen to him?" asked Aynur.

"Be quick about it," said Alimjan.

"I wish to show you this," said Bayanchur. "It is just a simple length of reed." It was, in fact, very short. "Yet this small piece of reed will change the way you see the world. You see, it is exactly the same size as the full moon appears to be. When I hold this reed at arm's length, it fits exactly into the moon's circle."

"You were right," Arzu whispered to Tao.

"I measured the full moon from here in the village two nights ago," said Bayanchur. "Then I climbed the mountain yesterday."

"What have you done?" Alimjan might have said this, but it was Tao. Everyone seemed to echo his sentiment. "Someone might have seen you."

"By noon, I was so high on the mountain that I could no longer see the waterfall. I had a clear view of all the surrounding valleys. Then I continued to climb all the way to the top of the mountain. It was a difficult climb, and I fell several times. I even had to cross a field of hard snow. I camped. The wind was very strong and cold. From the top I could see all of the surrounding mountains. I could see how small our valley is."

"We already knew our valley was small, and the rest of the world large," said Tao. "This is no excuse for climbing the mountain."

"Do you not remember our conversation, my teacher?"

"Yes, of course. But I did not know you might actually try it."

"Which conversation was this?" interjected Alimjan.

"At midnight," continued Bayanchur, "I measured the moon again. It was exactly the same size from the top of the mountain as from here.

"Which means," Bayanchur concluded, "that the moon must be very, very far away." The scholars cheered. The other people were silent. "And this means," he said to Tao, "I now know more about at least the moon than you do."

"This is not surprising," said Tao.

"Nor is it interesting," said Alimjan. "We never had any opinions about how far away the moon is anyway."

"In the land of Cathay," said Tao, "there are legends about a man named Wan Hu who built a small ship that lifted itself into the sky. He rose so high that he touched the moon. Nobody really believes it, but it is part of the old writings that mandarins must learn. Bayanchur's discovery would be considered disruptive in Cathay. I would not even guarantee him his life if he made this announcement among the mandarins."

"But to us," said Alimjan, "it is disruptive because he climbed the mountain, not because he measured the moon. And so," he addressed the rest of the people. "Here we are again. Last time, we had to decide whether to evict Arzu because she climbed onto the mountain. This time, we have to make the same decision about Bayanchur."

"Or not," said Bayanchur. "Maybe someone else in the village, aside from you, Alimjan, might want to propose that I be evicted. I suspect that nobody will. I suspect that they know how much we will all benefit from studying the world, as Tao has shown us. I trust that he is prepared to lead us in this direction. And if not, I will. Does anybody have any objections?"

"Not so fast," said Bayanchur's brother. "Let us see what other discoveries you and your fellow pupils have to offer before we make the choice about whether you, or they, or Tao, can stay. I say that we should wait and see what happens."

"I agree," announced Tao. Nobody objected to what Tao said.

Alimjan sat down, staring at the ground. Aynur put her arm around his shoulder. The people began to disperse. Bayanchur walked over to talk to him.

"I am sorry if I have caused you any trouble," he said to Alimjan. "This was not my intention. Lately, I am feeling so much frustration."

"I think I know what it is," said Alimjan. "You are the only unpaired man in the village. You need a woman. There are none, however, who are available at this time."

"How long am I going to have to wait?" asked Bayanchur.

"One of the girl children will have her first moon one of these days."

"That could be a long time, Alimjan."

"You have little choice, Bayanchur. I realize how tempting it must be to attempt to have carnal relations with one of the married women.'

"And would that be such a bad thing, Alimjan? If the woman wanted it.

"That sort of thing happened a lot in the old days, before we came to this valley," continued Alimjan. "But it was always, without exception, a source of strife, even when there appeared to be consent. Once the practice gets started, men would fight one another over women. It wasn't just the unpaired men. Some of the more powerful men would take more than one woman. Your group of defenders can protect us from outside threats, but not from the carnage that would occur within our village."

"I feel as if I am burning, Alimjan."

Alimjan put his arm around Bayanchur's shoulders. "Did I ever tell you why the Great King of the Sky gave us hands?"

*

When Arzu went home, Bayanchur approached Tao and touched his shoulder.

"I need to talk with you," he said to Tao.

"You are a fool and have made me look like one," said Tao, "by climbing the mountain, What makes you think I ever want to talk to you again? This is not wisdom."

"I am sorry for the disruption I have caused," said Bayanchur.

"Are you sorry? Or do you just want me to think so? Not that it makes any difference. You are no longer my pupil."

"But you planted the seed of curiosity in my spirit, Tao. You cannot draw knowledge and the spirit of discovery back once it has escaped. I will remain forever grateful to you for this."

"You have a strange way of showing gratitude."

"Tao, I am a young man, and I have an impetuous spirit. I let my spirit get out of control. I don't expect you to believe me, but I have told you."

"In that case, our conversation is at an end."

"No, it is not," said Bayanchur. "I have to tell someone. When I was on the mountain, I smelled smoke. I saw no campfire, but what else could it be?"

*

As Arzu grew great with child, she could no longer ride the horses, as she had made a habit of doing, a habit that the Taohuans came to ignore. Bayanchur exercised the horses for her.

After a few months, as the summer advanced, a very slender and beautiful girl named Mihrigül joined Bayanchur. She was not quite a woman, but would become one so soon that Bayanchur decided to go ahead and befriend her. As soon as she had her first moon, her parents announced the engagement. They were married when the first snow fell.

Chapter 11

The next spring, Bayanchur took many trips up the mountain. He did not always go to the top. A couple of times, he let Mihrigül know that he was going to climb partway up, to the place where he could look down into Taohua Yuan Ji. Both of these times, she waited for him and waved up at him. He made no attempt to remain concealed. Alimjan knew that there was no point in trying to stop him from his journeys. A few times Bayanchur even took a freshly killed goat and left it near a cliff that Arzu had told him about, to leave it for the ugly man. The goat's carcass always vanished.

After one of these ascents, Bayanchur scrambled quickly back down into the village and went straight to Alimjan, who was with Tao.

"I saw someone," he reported.

"I already told you about the ugly but harmless people I saw on the mountain," said Arzu.

"No, it wasn't one of them. What I saw this time was a horseman."

"Was it a Mongol?" asked Tao.

"I have no idea what a Mongol looks like," answered Bayanchur.

"Did he see *you*?" asked Alimjan.

"I didn't stay to find out," said Bayanchur.

"It was probably a Mongol scout," said Tao. "The people that Arzu saw on the mountain did not have horses, or much else, except the stone blade that you saw." He spoke to Alimjan. "If he was a Mongol scout, and if he saw Bayanchur, he would certainly begin to explore the valleys around here."

"Lots of valleys," said Alimjan. "Maybe even some with people. But ours is hidden by the mists."

"Only from the south," said Tao. "Not from other directions."

"The mountains to the east and west are very steep," said Bayanchur. "And that waterfall to the north? No one is going to come in that way."

But Bayanchur, and all the people, knew that they had to be ready. The guards practiced shooting arrows against tree trunks. At first, the bowstrings reverberated as the arrows fell to the ground without going anywhere. Then, the arrows flew wild. At last, the guards could hit the tree trunks, though they could never hit the small target for which Bayanchur told them to aim. Even Bayanchur was not a very good shot. *Now would be a good time to have Muhemmet,* thought Arzu—the first time in many months she thought of him.

*

Every two or three weeks, the villagers slaughtered one of the older sheep, the ones too old to have lambs later in the spring, and had a feast. The guards practiced archery on the goats and sheep that had been chosen for slaughter, as well. Their shots were so imprecise that the men had to rush in and break the necks to end the animals' misery.

When Ismail, Arzu and Tao's little baby, was born, the village had a feast of dried meat, rice, and koumiss with dried peaches. This was soon after what would have been, in Cathay, the lunar new year.

Soon after the first peach buds began to show color, the people heard an unfamiliar sound in the sky. The younger ones had never heard it. It sounded like bullfrogs. But Alimjan knew what it was. "The ducks have returned," he announced.

When the people saw the ducks settling on the river surface, they were nearly immobile with amazement. They sneaked down to the river, slipped off their clothes, and ran into the river as fast as they could. Most of the ducks flew away, but two or three people caught one duck apiece. Bayanchur, always seeking to outdo everyone else, caught one, then reached for the legs of another, losing both.

The ducks, not being very smart, did not leave the valley. Every couple of days, the people repeated the duck harvest. And they got better at it. Some would startle the ducks from one side, while others would be ready to catch them on the other side. Duck meat was very fat and delicious. Aynur said that dried duck meat would probably become rancid, so they should eat the meat while it was fresh.

Bayanchur, now gaining a reputation for wisdom, not just for action, told the people, "We have now caught about a dozen ducks. We should leave the others alone. We do not want to frighten them away from making future visits."

This was, Alimjan announced, the Year of the Duck. They would begin counting the years from this one. This announcement puzzled Arzu. Why would people who lived in a timeless paradise need to count the years? Each year was like the last except in ways that could not be predicted and which there was no reason to remember. Even human age was not important. Physical changes announced when a boy became a man and when a girl became a woman, regardless of how many years it might take. Tao told her that the Mongols had just started the tradition in Cathay of naming the cycle of years after animals, none of which the Taohuans would ever see, except goats. The Taohuans would never have a year of the rat.

*

By the time the peach blossoms opened, everyone had forgotten about the horseman Bayanchur had seen. At least, until Arzu and Tao heard something strange one day. They sat under the burgeoning peach trees near the south end of the valley, where they had emerged almost a year previously. It was an unusually warm day, and Arzu had shuffled off the upper

portion of her robe as she nursed Ismail. Tao sketched them on one of his last blank sheets of paper.

Both Tao and Arzu heard the sound. Tao carefully slipped the drawing into his leather pouch. The sound suggested horses' hooves, moving slowly but relentlessly. Tao stalked around to identify the source of the sound. It was coming from the rocks. Arzu expected the Taohuans, when they heard it later, to think it was ghosts, but, she realized, they probably didn't believe in ghosts.

"I don't recall ever having heard this," Alimjan told Tao when Tao brought him and Aynur to hear the sound a few minutes later. "Of course, we might have just not noticed it. It is very faint."

"Did you hear our approach last year?" asked Tao.

"That doesn't prove anything," said Aynur. "You and Arzu were almost dead when you got here, and must have been moving so softly and slowly that you made no sound. That is, until you started gurgling and laughing in the water." She smiled.

"Besides," said Tao, "the sounds are too fast to be the hooves of horses traveling through the mist. Arzu and I had to travel very slowly not only because of our exhaustion, but also because we had to lay stones in the path to make sure we went the right direction."

"But if it is a small band of horsemen, three or more," said Arzu, "the horses themselves could point the way through the mist." When the others froze into silence and stared into space, Arzu asked, "What? What did I say this time?"

"We should be ready," said Alimjan. "Call Bayanchur and the guards." Bayanchur, now married, remained the leader of the guards—in fact, Mihrigül had joined the guards. They even had bows, though they were just poor imitations of the ones Tao brought. "The sounds might be horsemen, and if these Mongols are as evil as you say they are..."

"Oh, they are," said Tao.

When Bayanchur listened to the sounds, with his top assistants and with Mihrigül, he struck a philosophical pose, one he had probably copied from Tao. "These sounds," he said, "are no louder than when you first heard them?"

"No," said Tao. "But that was less than an hour ago."

"If you were hearing the approach of the horsemen themselves, the sound would be getting louder," said the man who had measured the moon.

"Unless," said Mihrigül, "it is the sound of hooves coming through the rocks from down the hill."

Everyone turned and looked at Mihrigül and knew, right away, that she was right, and what they had to do. Bayanchur silently summoned his principal men, who summoned the others. The men of Taohua Yuan Ji, who expected to rest after dinner, instead found themselves hiding in the pink mists near the south entrance to the valley, with knives ready. The guards had their bows and Tao's arrows ready. Arzu hid with Tao, Alimjan, and Aynur in Alimjan's house. They took turns looking through a gap in the sticks of the wall.

*

What emerged from the mists was totally incomprehensible to the Taohuans. But it was Tao and Arzu's worst nightmare. It was a Mongol horseman, helmeted and with sword drawn. Behind him came five more horsemen. All of them, except the first, had very strong Mongol features. The leader did not look Mongolian, even though he dressed like the others. The horsemen looked all around them and scowled, even as they began to laugh.

Tao whispered to Alimjan what their words meant. Arzu heard his words. "They are Mongols. And they know we are here. They see a fire that is still burning. And they see that we are very poor, in terms of what they want to take with them. Whenever that happens, the Mongol warriors simply destroy everything. They think it will not take them very long at all to destroy the houses. Usually, when they destroy a village, they cut down all the trees. But they are saying that the trees are too big and it would be too much work for the six of them. They will get all their enjoyment from just killing us.

"They are going to kill all of us. This is the end, Alimjan.

"Unless...unless. Alimjan, I have a plan that might work," said Tao. Alimjan made no movement and had no expression. Neither did Aynur.

Tao turned to Arzu and said, "You must save our child. You know how to do that."

"No, I do not," said Arzu.

"You have friends up on the mountain," said Tao.

"Tao," said Arzu, "what if I do not see you again?" She began to cry, silently, intensely, for the first time that she could remember. She had never before tasted her own tears.

"You certainly will not, unless we kill these Mongols." Then Tao stopped and listened carefully to the invaders. The invaders to whom this was just a small adventure, rather than the destruction of a Paradise. "Their leader. His name is Alim. That is not a Mongol name."

"No, it is not," said Arzu, struggling to control her tears. "It is Uyghur, or maybe Uzbek."

Tao started to turn away, when Arzu touched his shoulder with the hand that was not clutching Ismail. She was looking through the gap in the wall. "I think I know him," she said.

Tao turned back, astounded. "How is that possible?"

"I think he is my brother," said Arzu. "My brother Alim left on The Road many years ago, and we never heard back from him. Tao, I think I know what I have to do. You cannot stop me. I must try it. If it does not work, they will kill me. But if I survive, I will take Ismail and flee up the mountain, as you said. At that point, it is all up to you and Bayanchur. May Allah be with you."

Arzu said to Aynur, "Here, hold Ismail. If I die, please take care of him as much as possible. If I do not die, I will be back for him in a few minutes."

When Arzu emerged from the house, she wore one of the square green-and-white caps from Khorgas. All of the horsemen saw her. The five started to ride toward her, bloodlust on their faces. Alim held out his sword to stop them. Arzu approached him, holding out her arms. Alim slipped off of his horse.

"Alim. I am your sister," she said in Uyghur. She took off her cap, waved it, and knelt. Alim lowered his sword and froze. His eyes widened monstrously. Until that moment, Arzu had not felt any confidence in her belief about who he was. But now she was nearly certain. "I am Arzu. Surely you remember me. Our father Murat never knew what became of you."

"Arzu?" said Alim, softly. "From Khorgas?"

Arzu was now absolutely certain who he was. There were many men named Alim and most of them knew of Kashgar, but who else but her brother would know of Khorgas? She said, "Now, you and your men can put down your weapons. You have come just in time for dinner. We would be honored to have you as our guests." Even as she spoke, she did not know whether she loved him, or whether she just wanted to give the guards a chance to stab him and his men as soon as they sat down to eat. He had, after all, left her family without a word. As Alim stood before her, she and the Taohuans gained at least a few more seconds of precious life.

The five horsemen behind Alim became restless. They shouted. Their horses stomped.

Arzu approached closer, her arms still out. An invitation to embrace.

Alim smiled. But he had been among the Mongols so long that his smile looked like a grimace. The Mongol-style moustache did not help his appearance any.

Had Alim approached Arzu a little more slowly, or a little more gently, everything might have turned out differently. But one of the leaders of the guards, perhaps Bayanchur himself, interpreted Alim's approach as a threat. For the first time, Bayanchur got a good shot. The arrow slipped right between the helmet and the padded armor. Alim slid to the ground in a heap.

Arzu turned and scrambled back into the house. She heard the remaining Mongols whooping. She grabbed Ismail from Aynur and slipped out under the trees. A Mongol arrow barely missed her. She kept running. When she looked around again, all she could see was mist—the mist that had mercifully moved into the valley. She could hear some men screaming, and others in the throes of death. She did not know which were Mongol, which Taohuan. She followed the edge of the cliffs until she found the place where she first climbed the previous year.

The last time Arzu had climbed the mountain, she carried a bow over her shoulder. This time, she thanked Allah that she had converted her leather bag into a sling with which to carry Ismail. She started to climb, as slowly and silently as possible. When she got to the vantage point where she could survey the village, she stopped to watch the events unfold beneath her. Not very far beneath her. She could hear the voices of the Mongols echoing off of the cliffs. Taohuan women who had never before screamed fell before the galloping horsemen. She saw two of the warriors entering houses, from which wails arose. She saw one warrior chase a Taohuan woman on his horse and bring his sword down upon her. He sliced her, vertically, into two halves, as far as her breast. Another warrior took coals from the fire and started some of the houses burning. The mist was so thick, however, that it was mostly smoke rather than fire. Arzu counted four warriors, not including her dead brother. Arzu did not see the fifth warrior. Had one of the Taohuan arrows gotten him?

Then Arzu saw Tao standing near the end of the valley. He raised his voice and waved his arms, to get the attention of the warriors. He yelled something to them in what must have been Mongolian. Whatever it was that he said made them stop what they were doing and look at him. Tao smiled and taunted them. The four horsemen started riding in his direction, ignoring the pile of bloody rags that were Arzu's brother. Tao vanished into the mist.

For a moment, Arzu wondered if Tao had fled. Like a coward. She felt sickness and shame for just another moment. She saw the four Mongols ride their horses after Tao into the mist. She watched and listened. She heard Taohuan men and women weeping as they discovered the bodies of the slain. But she also heard voices from the mist at the end of the valley. One of them was Tao's. The others were of the Mongols, mingled with the galloping hooves.

Then Arzu heard screams of terror. Silence followed. Tao walked back out of the mist. Arzu waited and, when there seemed to be no Mongols remaining, she hugged Ismail more closely and started back down the mountain. She had to hear Tao's story.

Then she saw the fifth Mongol. He climbed up the cliff the same way Arzu had come and which she had almost begun to descend. The Mongol saw her and contorted his face into a wild grin. Arzu turned and climbed higher on the mountain, toward the upper cliffs. But the Mongol climbed faster and was closing in on her. She looked back and stumbled. The Mongol raised his sword and approached her and her baby.

A spear pierced right through the Mongol's padded armor.

Arzu did not wait to see the rest, but took another route back to the way she had climbed. Only then did she look back to see the big ugly man walk up to the Mongol. The warrior was not quite dead. The big man pressed his strong foot against the Mongol and pulled his spear out. He then pushed the padded armor away and, with a strong thrust, pinned the Mongol to the ground.

*

Arzu emerged from the trees. She saw Tao and Alimjan standing together over the dying body of one of the Taohuan men. She approached silently and listened.

Alimjan said, "Maqsud, you are a hero and will live on in our new legends."

"Hero, Alimjan? I killed not a single invader. Do you want to know who did?"

"Yes, my friend. It is possible that you, and nobody else, knows. We must keep this knowledge alive."

Maqsud laughed thickly. "It was Mihrigül. The Mongol tried to rape her, but did not count on her knowing how to use one of the knives. She got him in a place what was not protected."

"You will enter into the land of the sky triumphantly," said Alimjan.

"Triumphantly?" asked Maqsud. "That is not a word I have ever heard any of us use. We learned it, without knowing its meaning." He coughed blood.

"It will now be a constant refrain when we recite our new legends," said Alimjan.

"I have one request," said Maqsud.

"Please, tell us, and we will honor it as best we can," said Tao. They heard loud mourning from throughout the valley.

"Mihrigül," he said. "Let her lead the guards. That is, if any remain."

"About half of them are still alive," said Alimjan. "That includes Mihrigül and her husband Bayanchur."

Maqsud said, "We have killed the invaders," and breathed his last.

"No, actually we haven't," said Tao. "The body of Arzu's brother is over there, and four horsemen followed me into the mist, never to return. But there is still one around here somewhere."

This was when Arzu walked up to them, holding Ismail. "The fifth horseman is dead," she said.

Tao whirled around to see her and his son. "You are alive!" he said, running to embrace her.

"Wait, Tao," said Arzu. "I have to tell you what happened." She explained that the fifth man's horse was somewhere in the peach grove, and then what had happened to the man. It was after hearing Arzu's story that Alimjan made the decision that someone should carry sacrificial goats up the mountain and leave them on the cliffs every couple of weeks.

Chapter 12

Tao and Arzu found that one corner of their house had been damaged when a Mongol horse trampled it.

"And you, Tao," said Arzu. "I saw you vanish into the mist, and three horsemen follow you. They did not come back out. Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"You are the only one who does not yet know," said Tao. "Word got around right after I returned, and while you were still on the mountain.

"When I entered the mist, I turned off to the side. The west side."

"Toward The Fire?" asked Arzu. She lifted herself up on her elbow. "You mean, The Fire is real?"

"I wasn't sure, but I didn't have time to think about it. I walked carefully, checking every step I took. I did not wander at random, but slowly moved toward the warmth. I could hear the warriors lost in the mist.

"When my foot finally felt a nothingness under it, I crouched, and reached my leg down further. It was The Fire. I could smell it. It was then that I began to taunt the warriors in the same way that I did before."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, whatever came into my mind. About how rats are smarter than they are. And how their odor was worse than all the night soil in the world. That sort of thing. Mainly, I told them that their mothers would be ashamed of their cowardice right now, if they did not kill me. That the legends at the Khan's court would be about how their shafts had withered. That got them.

"They followed the sound of my voice. Then I shuffled off to the side, out of their way. They came riding at full speed. Before they knew what happened, they had leapt into the chasm. I heard their screams, and the sizzling of their flesh. And the flesh of the poor horses who knew no better."

*

The next day, all the Taohuans, as well as Tao and Arzu, mourned the dead. The Taohuans were mostly stunned and confused, as they had never seen people die unless they were old. They told stories about those who had died, then retold them, to commit them to an imperfect tribal memory. Since the villagers were illiterate, Tao did not offer to write the stories down.

Alimjan stood and said, "We do not have room to bury those who have been killed. Tonight, I am beginning a new custom. We will burn our dead. We can store their ashes, and then scatter them on the fields next spring. We can no longer avoid the whiff of death, but we can at least avoid its stench."

That evening, as the survivors met, Alimjan rose to speak.

"Burning our dead—that was my decision," said Alimjan. "And it will be my last. Unless any of you object, I wish to name my successors. I have chosen Bayanchur and Mihrigül."

"This is a good choice," said Tao. Arzu, who was nursing Ismail, looked up and nodded agreement.

Alimjan sat down beside Aynur. Bayanchur and Mihrigül stood before the people. Mihrigül spoke. "The invaders killed only three of the women, but nearly half of the men. This can mean only one thing. Most of the remaining men will have to marry women in addition to the wives they already have. I have told Bayanchur that I want him to take at least three wives, including Maqsud's widow, in addition to me. This is a decision that only a wife can make.

"We must raise a new generation," continued Mihrigül, "that knows only peace. What has happened today will live in legend. We cannot un-remember what has happened. We must, however, erase its effects on our lives.

"But we cannot go back to the old ways," she continued. "Bayanchur will climb the mountain and will teach the students, after the tradition of our revered Tao."

Arzu started to ask why Tao could not do this himself, or, for that matter, why Tao was not invited to have additional wives. But she decided to wait and ask later.

Mihrigül sat down and Bayanchur remained standing. "The time has come," he said, "to make a decision I hoped we would never face. Mihrigül and I have talked with many of you. We did not ask for your decisions in the matter, but we did get a consensus that we would talk about this matter tonight." He turned to Tao and Arzu. "My friends, we all love you. But in the year since you have come, our society has been totally disrupted. You did not mean to make this happen. I believe that we must ask you to leave our people."

Arzu gasped and could hardly breathe. She was not accustomed to being rejected by anyone for anything. She clasped Ismail closer to her breast. She turned her wide eyes on Tao, whose face remained calm.

Bayanchur sat down, and Mihrigül stood to speak. She said to Tao and Arzu, "We wish to do this not just for ourselves and our way of life, but for you, as well."

Arzu started to rise and say something, but Tao pushed her back to the ground.

Mihrigül continued. "We feel that whatever the beings of light in the sky might wish for you, Tao and Arzu, it is not something that can be fulfilled here. Heaven does not desire for you to shovel night soil, Tao." This got a few laughs. "Nor can we expect either of you to be satisfied here, where we will henceforth have no decorations and no art. As for learning, my husband..."

"With your assistance, my beloved," said Bayanchur.

"...will lead us into new discoveries. We will make our own learning. This is your gift to us, Tao. Furthermore, Tao, by going away tomorrow morning, you will leave with an almost godlike reputation. If you stayed here, you would just be another man. But after the astonishing victory which you brought to us yesterday, you will always be with us in legend."

"Now," said Bayanchur, standing beside his wife, "the time has come for us to decide. I ask you to close your eyes. Good. Now, all who wish—no; that is too strong a term—who have reluctantly decided that Tao and Arzu should leave, raise your hands." This time Alimjan and

Aynur voted. Bayanchur started counting, quickly at first, then more and more slowly. He looked at Mihrigül in amazement, but said nothing. “Now, all of you who wish them to stay.” He counted again. He looked almost upset when the people opened their eyes again. “There are twenty-eight of us here. Not counting Arzu, Tao, Mihrigül, or myself, there are twenty-four. Twelve voted one way, twelve the other. Mihrigül, you know what that means.”

“I do,” said the young woman who had become spiritually mature almost overnight. “However thankful I am that Arzu and Tao have come, I must now vote for them to leave.

“But I have one further request, if nobody objects.” She stood and walked over to Arzu and sat beside her. “You must know, Arzu, that you will be going out into a world of extreme danger.”

“Back out,” said Arzu.

“Arzu, I ask something that no man could ask of you. I ask that you leave your infant son with us.” Arzu became tense. “Gülbahar has a baby, and will nurse Ismail as well. Our whole village will raise Ismail, the son of legends. Now, Arzu,” said Mihrigül, her voice becoming very soft, “how could you not want your son to grow up in Paradise?”

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“Do you wish to say goodbye to your son?” Mihrigül asked Arzu as she mounted on her horse.

“No,” said Arzu. “If I saw him again, I would change my mind. I would throw myself at you and fight you with the fury only a mother can have.”

“It is a wise decision to not see your son again,” said Alimjan.

“Besides,” said Arzu, “he would probably die out in the dunes. We nearly did. Like the mother of the Ismail I heard about in the Koran, I could not watch him die. And, regardless of what the Koran which has been of so little use to me may say, I would not expect an angel to rescue me.”

“What’s an angel?” asked Aynur.

“We will not go through the dunes this time,” said Tao. “But Ismail might die anyway if we took him. Our path as we leave will be only slightly less deadly than the one by which we came. We will travel through the mountains. At least, this time, we should be able to find water.”

“Where are you going?” asked Alimjan. “Not that we would know where it is, wherever it is.”

“We are returning to Ürümqi,” said Tao. “Once we get around the dunes, we will take the main road south. Someone will see us.”

“And then?” asked Bayanchur.

“We have no idea,” said Arzu. “But Tao and I will figure something out. We always do, as you may have noticed.”

Everyone in the village stood silently as Arzu, Tao, and the horses vanished slowly into the mist.

*

Arzu and Tao's route took them through mountains, where they could hide amidst pine trees. It was cold. They could have even used firewood, had they dared to let anyone see them. They lay together under an animal skin blanket, pressing their bodies together. They kissed long and wetly.

"I will never enjoy you with the scent of peaches again," said Tao. "If they accept you back as a woman destined for Xanadu, you will wear perfumes. If not, you will have no soap at all. But, either way, you will not have the scent of peaches."

Arzu said nothing as they clung to one another. But after they had joined together three times, and the night was about half over, Arzu said, "What will happen to you?"

"They are more likely to kill me than to kill you."

"I do not want to live without you, Tao."

"That is ridiculous, Arzu. You did it before. You can do it again."

"I suppose that is true," said Arzu. "I'm not ready to die just yet. But for this past year I have never thought of myself apart from you. What is going to happen to you?"

"Remember what I told you before, Arzu. A year ago, though it seems much longer. I said I could claim to have kidnapped you. In that event, I will be the only one who has to die. You, they will take to Xanadu."

"If you die, Tao..."

"Don't assume I am going to die. I am not sure what I am going to do, but I know my way around in this world of The Road. Just trust me, Arzu. And trust yourself. You are a wise woman, and will know what to do, even if I am not with you for a while, or ever again."

*

At last, they saw Ürümqi below them to the south. They went down to the dusty road leading to it. It was just a small road, since there were no major cities north of Ürümqi. They saw people coming from the city. It was soon clear that it was a group accompanied by Mongol warriors.

"Here is the death to which we have resigned ourselves," said Arzu.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," said Tao.

As Tao and Arzu approached the group, the Mongol warriors rode ahead to surround them and usher them into the group. There were a couple of merchants. But there was also a man from Cathay, who looked at Tao. His eyes widened.

"Tao? Tao Zhi-Ji?" the man asked. Then Arzu assumed he asked *Is that you?* in the tongue of Cathay. He and Tao got into deep conversation. Then the other man from Cathay said something that pleased the Mongol warriors. They all turned back toward the city.

When they camped, under guard, outside of Ürümqi that night, Tao and Arzu were out in the open, under the cold stars, where guards could watch them.

Tao told Arzu what happened. “The man from Cathay knew me. His name is Li Zhang-Wei. We were both mandarins in Cambulac together. And as for you, they knew right away who you must be. A year’s absence has not erased your fame as the most beautiful woman in the land of the Uyghurs.”

“I do not understand this,” said Arzu quietly. “I thought they were going to kill us, or, at least, kill you.”

“No,” said Tao. “I had a story all ready for them. And they believed it! You know that we vanished at the same time that the Uyghur and Uzbek raiders took the women. Well, I told them that the raiders kidnapped us.”

“That is clever, Tao,” said Arzu.

Tao smiled. “You haven’t heard the best of it. I told them that we were then kidnapped by the assassins who work for The Old Man of the Mountain.”

“I have heard a little of this story,” said Arzu.

“Most people have heard a little about him, but not enough to detect my prevarications. The Old Man of the Mountain rules, according to legend, a mountain paradise. I don’t believe it even exists, but that makes no difference. There are several versions of this legend. The Old Man of the Mountain has a horde of assassins who come down out of his mountain stronghold and attack people, and occasionally kidnap them. I simply said that his assassins stole the two of us from the raiders.”

“And took us up into his mountain paradise, where we have spent the past year,” said Arzu. “Not too far from the truth, actually, except the kidnaping part. Why are the kidnapers called assassins?”

“Because they smoke hashish,” said Tao. “Hashish comes from a plant. It alters your mind. It makes these men fierce and fearless.”

“The Old Man sounds like someone the Mongols would want to conquer,” said Arzu. “The Mongols will make us tell them how to find The Old Man’s paradise, which we cannot tell them, since it does not exist.”

“We will not remember how to get there,” said Tao, “because hashish also puts you into a dreamlike state. We can say the assassins kept us more or less permanently befuddled on the way up. And to keep the Taohuans safe, we can tell the Mongols that this dreamland is far away to the west.”

“Pretty clever, Tao.”

“Guards are approaching, Arzu. We have little time. They will ask us lots of questions about this paradise. We do not have time to work out a story. Just leave that part to me. If they ask you something, just say that they kept you on hashish the entire time and you do not remember any details. Part of the legend is that the Old Man’s paradise is full of beautiful women. You can always say that this is why they kidnapped us—one look at you, and they knew they had to have you.”

When the guard had nearly reached them, Arzu said to Tao, “Why did they send us back down here?”

“I’m still working on that part,” he said. “Maybe I can just say we escaped. You seduced one of the guards and I attacked him. But I won’t say this unless they ask me.

“One more thing. Other mandarins have taken over my previous responsibilities. But I think I can talk the Mongols into letting me be your supervisor and translator. I do not know if this has any chance of working, but if it does, I will always be close at hand.”

“I would perish without your help,” said Arzu.

“The only thing that will be different,” said Tao, “is that we can no longer be married. They will assume you have been raped, but will probably believe that Kublai Khan will not know the difference between a virgin and a victim. You will be Kublai’s concubine, not my wife.”

“Which means, Tao, that we cannot touch one another.”

“This is a small price to pay for being alive, and together, Arzu.”

As the guard walked up, Arzu looked toward Ürümqi. “Tao, the walls are dark, and no light is coming from within the city.”

“After the raid, the Mongols destroyed the city.”

“They did *what*?”

“They put everyone to the sword. A few people, mostly from Aksu and Kashgar, have started to repopulate it. The Mongols knew they were unlikely to actually find the raiders themselves, so they slaughtered everyone in the city. This is their way, Arzu. They create terror, rather than worrying about justice.”

Tao stood and talked with the guard. He turned to Arzu. “You are going to be taken to a special, and very sumptuous, tent, and given fine food. An attendant will bathe you. Tomorrow, wearing fine clothes—but not silk, not yet—you will begin your journey to Cambulac. Messengers have already been dispatched to take the news to Xanadu.

“And, as for me, I will ride with my friend, my fellow mandarin Li Zhang-Wei, and discuss many things, most of which I will make up as we go along. I hope to see you often on this journey, every day if possible, but I cannot guarantee anything. In the unlikely event that I do not see you again, please know that you will always be my beloved one, the one for which I would willingly give my life.”

PART THREE: XANADU

Chapter 13

The Honored Ensemble of the Eunuch Trumpeters lined up on the low stage and began to play a tune that was somewhere between a fanfare and a jolly melody. Some of them played the *ikh büree,* a trumpet that was about two cubits long, and the rest played the *tsordon büree,* less than a cubit in length. Other musicians clashed cymbals and struck gongs, using leg bones reputed to be from vanquished enemies. The men, like most eunuchs, were tall and strong. There were no Mongols, for whom masculinity was as essential as air, among them.

Kublai Khan sat on his elevated cushion, a smile on his old round face, his eyes closed. His harem of several hundred women, all in silk robes, with gold and jewels, sat in the courtyard of Xanadu, underneath the fruit trees and pines. Most of the women came from Cathay, although a few came from far to the south, and even fewer from the west. About once a month, when older women retired from the harem and went to live in luxury in their native cities, a new crop of concubines was initiated into the harem. Mongol guards stood motionless all around the garden.

The music swelled to a long-held, climax note. Then the trumpeters lowered their bürees, bowed, and filed off the stage. A mandarin took the stage and began reciting what Arzu, seated with the other new concubines under a canopy, assumed was a poem. She could barely tolerate the boredom. She focused on the words, noticing that each syllable had its own intonation, something Tao had taught her about, but which was absent in her Uyghur language. This occupied her attention for only a short period. Perhaps, she thought, it would be more interesting if she understood the words. But most of the other women in the new batch of concubines were from Cathay. They must have understood the words, but looked just as bored as she. Then there was another Mandarin with his asphyxiating poetry. Then another. Even though they came from different ethnicities, most of the new women seemed to understand one another as they chattered between mandarin recitations.

Tao had already introduced the new women to one another. A woman, one of many from the Han people, whispered something to Arzu, who could not understand her. The woman fluffed up her red silk gown a little and sighed. Arzu agreed with what she thought the woman meant: it was very hot, and would have been intolerably hot had their clothes been made of material other than silk.

Finally, Tao ushered the new women onto the stage. The Mongols cheered as gongs rang out. Arzu and the other new women were even more sumptuously clothed than the rest of the harem. All wore scarlet silk gowns, though each of them also wore something from their own ethnicity. The Yi women wore large pearl-fringed headbands of blue, red, white, and purple silk. The Zhuang woman wore a white head scarf with peach blossoms embroidered on it—this made Arzu's heart skip a beat. The Hani woman had a headdress covered with silver bells. The Miao woman even had her hair wound up into what appeared to be horns. One of the women, the only one besides Arzu who did not speak with the others, was an Uzbek named Aida. Her bright red hair made heads turn. Arzu still had, and wore, her four-cornered hat, and she used her scarf as a

sash, both of them embroidered in green, white, and black. All the women turned their small dark eyes downward, while Arzu's large dark eyes looked out on the spectacle below her.

Tao introduced each new woman to the audience. Kublai Khan nodded and smiled at each. When Arzu walked up on the stage to Tao, they did not dare to look into one another's eyes. When she looked out from the stage, she immediately knew that her life was going to become very interesting very soon. For the first time since the women came on stage, the Khan sat up tall and opened his little eyes widely. A gray beard hung down from the chin hidden on his round face. He wore a simple robe of white. Arzu looked down at the harem women and recognized hostility in their faces. She looked into Kublai Khan's eyes with neither delight nor hostility. He nodded at her eagerly.

The next event in the afternoon's activities was for the new women to gather into a small, inner courtyard. They removed their clothes and sat on little tuffets. The Mongol warriors looked outward, away from the women, and stood absolutely still. Tao stood with the Khan and his principal wife Narantsetseg.

Arzu could feel the sunlight prickling her skin and smell the perfume arise from it. Kublai Khan strode among the women, smiling a little bit at each. Narantsetseg walked proudly beside him, her dark hair streaked with gray. The Khan said nothing, but his wife barked out a running commentary in Mongolian. Tao shouted out a translation for each woman to hear in her own language, except for those whose language he did not know, which was only the Miao and Zhuang women. But they appeared to understand what Tao said in the language of Cathay.

"Where did they find this woman? Her skin is bad. Ah, well, we must work on that," said Narantsetseg, and Tao translated. "Now, this woman has fine skin. Very smooth. My husband, you will enjoy stroking her ample tender regions. Just don't look at her face." Tao translated. "And this woman. Her skin is white and she has red hair. What are those splotches all over her skin? They don't look like pimples, at any rate. And this woman. She has the most beautiful face I have seen. Her skin is not bad either. But those breasts! You call those breasts? A squirrel has larger breasts. Ah, but you will like them all the same, won't you, husband? I know you. You like all women the same."

When Narantsetseg got to Arzu, she stopped. Arzu could not meet her gaze. "What kind of woman is this? Her hair is not quite black. It is some kind of dark brown like a marmot. Look at me. Look at me, woman!" Tao had to translate her command into Uyghur as well. Arzu looked up. She showed no fear of the Khan, but her large dark eyes almost cried as she looked up at Narantsetseg, who laughed and said, "I see trouble in your face. Stand up." Tao translated again. "Your abdomen sags a little bit. Have you had a child?" Narantsetseg grabbed Arzu's abdominal hair and shook it a little.

"No," said Arzu.

When Tao translated Arzu's answer, Narantsetseg yelled, "You are lying to me, woman."

But as soon as Tao translated the wife's words, Kublai Khan spoke up. "I don't care if she has had a child or not." His voice was not strong. While Tao translated, a look of

astonishment crept over Narantsetseg's face. "And I don't care what color her hair is. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I want to be with her. Now."

"But, husband, you have not seen the others," objected Narantsetseg.

"I glanced at them already. I don't need to examine them closely. I am sure they are just fine, just fine, and I will get around to all of them. But I want to start with this one, right here."

"She has not been prepared for you," said Narantsetseg.

Kublai Khan looked over Arzu's body closely. "Well, get her ready," he said, and walked back toward his chamber.

Narantsetseg clapped her hands twice and ordered the women to get their clothes back on and return to their chambers. When the women had all put their clothes back on, the guards turned back around. Narantsetseg spoke brusquely to a servant woman who approached, eyes downcast.

"She is ordering her to prepare you," Tao told Arzu.

"This is so sudden," said Arzu.

"Get it over with now, so you won't have to worry about your first encounter with the Great Khan," said Tao. "To worry about something beforehand is to experience it twice."

Arzu asked him, "What is this preparation I must undergo?"

"Your skin needs to be prepared."

"I have been massaged with perfume and unguents by the servant women already. What more is needed?"

"The Great Khan likes for his women to remind him of a good meal. You will now be massaged with koumiss."

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It was not the first time Arzu's skin had been rubbed with koumiss. It was a way the Uyghur women had of softening their skin. Arzu had always applied the koumiss to her own skin. But she was accustomed to washing it off with scented soap afterward.

Arzu sat in her room. It was a small cubicle, but it had nice furnishings. The bed was softer than any she had ever experienced. The bowls, made of beaten brass, reflected shards of candlelight in all directions. She tried not to think about what was about to happen. She took some comfort in the fact that Tao had given her no warning that Kublai Khan might be brutal or rough with her, and he would surely have known about this and warned her. She thought about how secure she was. She was in Xanadu, the safest place for a woman in Cambulac, which was the safest place in Cathay, which was the safest place in the Mongol Empire, except possibly back home in Khorgas. She thought about Dilnaz, probably dead now, weeping outside of Aksu. She thought about the many women she had seen camped out with the warriors. Not nearly as many women as warriors—this could mean only one thing: a nightly series of rapes for each of them. Arzu sat, as instructed, with her silk robe draped lightly about her body.

A guard opened her door, and Kublai Khan stumbled in. He said something to Arzu, then said it again. She stood and he smiled. He walked up to her and slipped her robe off her shoulders. He motioned her toward her bed and removed his own robe. The man who stood before her, as she lay on her back with her legs still together, had once been powerful. But now his skin sagged. He occasionally muttered something. She correctly guessed each meaning, including his command to spread her legs. His face just above hers, Kublai started to work on her, but didn't get very far before he shivered and fell on her. He snored.

Now what do I do? She wondered. *The most important man on the face of the Earth is lying on me, naked, and I can't move. This could go on for many hours. I forgot to pee before he came!* Her chamber pot was a beautiful white ceramic vessel decorated with blue peacocks, the finest chamber pot in the world, which did not matter if it was under the bed.

More out of boredom than anything else, Arzu started to massage Kublai's shoulders. They still had some musculature of their former prowess. He woke just briefly and moaned in pleasure. She kept massaging him. Then she began to speak quietly to him. She assumed he did not understand Uyghur even when he was awake.

Oh, Master, what an astonishing heap of flesh you are.

Oh, Great Khan, what a delectable meal you would make for vultures.

Oh, Great One, your snore sounds like it comes from the caverns of ultimate darkness.

Kublai Khan kept stirring and muttering something. Once, he seemed to awaken completely and lift himself a little. Arzu used this as a chance to slowly push him off her. She straddled over him. He reached for her, then fell asleep.

It was Tao's voice from outside the door. "Has he fallen asleep?"

"Yes," said Arzu.

"I'm coming in now."

"Just you? Because if it is just you, my beloved, I'll leave my robe off."

"You'd better put it back on as soon as you can," said Tao. He entered the door, walking backward. He had a royal robe over his shoulder. He dropped it onto the Khan's body. The Khan now stirred. When he rose, he slipped the new robe on, tied the sash, and turned to Arzu, who had put her robe back on. He said something and smiled. Arzu waited for Tao to translate.

"The Exalted One wants to visit you every day," said Tao.

As the Khan stepped out of the door, he turned to look at Arzu. He smiled and came back to her. He kissed her arm. Then he turned and a guard led him away. Tao closed the door.

"Tell the shriveled corpse that he can do whatever he wants but I don't have to like it," said Arzu.

"You will address him as The Exalted One."

"I will call him whatever I wish, and you will translate it as The Exalted One."

"I suppose that is so," smiled Tao. "So long as the Uzbek woman is not close enough to hear. Your languages are similar enough that she would report what you said."

"I doubt that The Exalted Mudhole would believe her."

"The Exalted Wife might."

"Well, let them talk. It is quite clear that I am the Khan's favorite, and after only one day."

"That is not necessarily a good thing," said Tao. "Things are moving along very quickly."

"Moving along? What is supposed to happen next?"

"I have no idea. You are his favorite concubine, this much is obvious. But the complexities of court life are beyond even my ability to understand. The Khan thinks he will spend a lot of time with you, but his advisors make up his schedule for him. We must just remain watchful. It is possible that, for the rest of our lives, every day will be exactly like today, with some minor variations."

"Or not," said Arzu. When Tao said nothing, she started to open her robe.

"Better not do that," said Tao. "A guard could walk in at any moment. They knock before entering when you are alone, but the guard who is outside now knows I am in here and might barge right in. They are a little resentful of me, my access to the royal presence, and would love to discover me enjoying one of the Khan's concubines. They would love seeing me executed."

Arzu closed her robe back up. She said, "So, what about you? You don't have physical access to me anymore, my husband."

"The Khan has promised me access to some of the servant women," said Tao. "Of course, they will never replace you."

"Of course not," said Arzu, "But please enjoy them, since it is clear that we are not going to be together again. I know that I will always be in your heart."

Chapter 14

The woman in charge of the harem—not Narantsetseg—showed up at Arzu's room to apply the cosmetics. She tried to explain it all to Arzu, who could not understand a word of it. Tao was not available. Arzu sat back and let the woman do whatever she had to do.

The powder base wasn't too bad. The woman then applied the light facial coloring, which was very similar to Arzu's natural color. Why bother hiding, then repainting, her natural color? Then the woman painted Arzu's eyebrows black and applied rouge to her cheeks. Then she started painting something on Arzu's forehead. Arzu stopped her and looked in a silver mirror.

"I do believe this is the ugliest I have ever looked," Arzu said in Uyghur, smiling. The woman smiled back at her. "The Great Cesspool liked me just the way I was. I see no reason to have myself painted like a statue." The woman had started to paint a peach blossom on her forehead. "As soon as you leave, I am going to wash all of this off. Except the peach blossom. I will keep that." She lay back down and let the woman finish her work.

At the great banquet that the Khan held every evening, Arzu was the only woman without makeup. Tao, however, noticed the peach blossom.

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The next day, Tao and Arzu sat in the center court of Xanadu, outside of the marble pavilion, under a wisteria trellis. Someone had told them that big clusters of purple flowers covered these vines in springtime, but now there were only leaves. Arzu wondered if she would still be here to see the flowers the next spring. Arzu worked on the most lavish clothing she had ever made. She had red silk, blue and green silk threads, and even shining gold thread. She had a few pearls and two ovals of mother-of-pearl.

"Nice silk," said Tao.

"It is a brighter red than any that we had in Khorgas," said Arzu. "How do they do it? I know. It is a trade secret. And instead of using small quantities of silk on leather or wool, I have whole sheets of silk. Whole bolts of it if I want."

"What is that circular frame you are using?" asked Tao.

"It is an embroidery hoop," said Arzu. "I had heard of them, but never used one. It is just a frame to stretch out the fabric and keep it taut while I embroider it. When I worked on thick leather or wool back in Khorgas, it didn't matter much. But if I embroider on silk without this hoop, the fabric would just sag and wrinkle up."

Arzu put down her sewing. "Tao, I am still amazed that they believed the story we told them about how we escaped from The Old Man of the Mountain. About me seducing the guard."

"That part is believable," said Tao. "But what makes you think they all believe it? Or any of them? The Khan believes it because he wants to. That's all that counts. No one will challenge our story now, unless they get some actual evidence that we are lying.

"The Great Khan also wants you to write some poetry for him," said Tao.

Arzu sighed wearily. "He probably thinks himself a great poet," she said.

"He does," said Tao, pulling a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Here is a sample." He cleared his throat. "I ascended Fragrant Hill in the friendly season of spring. Flowers shone bright rays, and auspicious colors gleamed like a rainbow. Raindrops were like bubbles on jade bamboos. The blowing wind played a song among the green pines..."

"That's awful," said Arzu. "I suppose the fact that my poetry would be worse makes little difference." Arzu resumed sewing. "What makes him think I can write literature? Besides, you would have to translate it. That's it. You can write it. I can say any foolish thing I want, and you can turn it into sublime poetry.

"So, let's get started." Arzu looked up into the sky as if inspiration would descend from it like falling leaves. "What's that up in the sky?"

"Where?" asked Tao.

"That's the first line of the poem, Tao."

"Oh." He got out paper—he now had plenty—from his pouch, and real ink. "How about, I lift up my eyes unto the heavens." He wrote.

"It is the sun, which reminds me of The Great Ball of Wax."

"The golden shafts of light are like the Great Khan..."

"Who comes pounding on my door, huffing with lust..."

"Slipping through the cracks of the door, shining with desire..."

"And who has never taken a bath in his life..." Arzu made a disgusted face.

"And whom time has ripened into sweetness..." Tao started to sound impatient.

"And who then gets his dirty hands all over me..."

"Who then embraces me with his powerful hands..."

"And expects me to swoon in desire for him..."

"And I fall into his powerful embrace..."

"His voice is like the croaking of a bullfrog..." Arzu giggled.

"His voice calls forth like a great falcon..." Tao said seriously.

"Catching a fly with his tongue..."

"Swooping down on his prey...Arzu, slow down a little. I have to translate all this and write it down." He wrote for a while, then put down his pen. "I guess maybe you should let me write it after all."

"Whatever you wish, husband. I have gotten quite a few stitches on this fabric while we have been talking."

"Isn't that a lot of work?" asked Tao. "It seems to have taken you all day to fill in about a hand's-breadth of blue silk embroidery. Wouldn't it be easier to just sew in some blue silk fabric?"

"It wouldn't fit perfectly," said Arzu. "It would bulge up. After I sew the blue silk embroidery, I will sew the gold thread around the edges. The pattern is what you people of

Cathay use for drawing dragons." Her eyes brightened. "Here is some more poetry. The Great Belcher brings his face toward mine, his breath like the fire of a dragon..."

"His power is like that of a fire-breathing dragon," said Tao as he wrote some more. "This is terrible poetry. Of course, the Khan will not be able to tell the difference."

"The two mother-of-pearl ovals go on the front side of the shoulders," said Arzu, holding up her silk and admiring it. "I will weave flames of gold coming from them."

"And his eyes are like flames of gold..."

"Bloodshot, more like it," said Arzu. "I was describing my sewing, Tao, not writing more poetry. And on the inside of this robe, I will embroider big pink circles that are supposed to represent my breasts, each tipped with gold. Just as no man except the Great Groper will ever see my breasts again, so no man will see the pink inside of this red robe. The Khan's going to like it when I tell him *that*. I might as well feed his ego.

"Tao, what is that tree over there?"

"It's a lychee tree."

"Lychee? You mean like those wonderful white sweet fruits we eat at our banquets?"

"The same."

"But the fruits are red and have hairs coming out of them."

"That's the outside of the fruits, which you remove before you eat them."

"So, we eat the soft inside," said Arzu. When Tao nodded, she added, "Sort of like the lamb eggs from the land of the Eternal Waterfall." Tao smiled. Arzu looked at the lychee tree and said, "It is quite a handsome tree. Its branches come all the way to the ground."

"What's so unusual about that?" asked Tao.

"Tao, everything about trees is unusual to me. Remember, I come from the desert."

"We have a lot of trees that look like that here in Cathay. For example, camphor, a tree with fragrant leaves. And orange trees. Their branches do not just come all the way to the ground but form a solid wall. You could hide inside of them."

"Yes," said Arzu. "I finally got to taste an orange. One of them would taste good right about now."

"I happen to have one," said Tao. He pulled a small orange from his robe and began to peel off its thin rind. He pulled apart some of the segments. Arzu stopped sewing, closed her eyes, and opened her mouth, into which Tao slipped the juicy pulp. "The whole tree is wonderful," continued Tao. "The leaves, not just the fruit, are pungent. Even the flowers have a unique fragrance. We press the flowers in water and use it as a flavoring in cream."

"Like the peach cream in that little valley that doesn't exist."

"Even better."

"If that is possible," said Arzu. While she concentrated on the flavor of the orange, Arzu dropped a little ball of gold thread. It rolled a little way on the ground. With a loud screech, a hawk descended upon it. Tao jumped up, nearly spilling his ink, and beat the hawk away. The hawk left a bloody spot on his wrist.

"I'd better put some camphor ointment on this wound," said Tao. "The Great Khan has hundreds of falcons and hawks in this garden. They have caught every little animal and are so bored that they attack anything that moves. The Khan's gamekeepers have to bring in animals, mostly hares, to keep the hawks occupied. Pheasants too. The Khan used to keep monkeys here."

"Monkeys? What are those?"

"Monkeys look like little people, but they have very long legs and can climb around in the trees more rapidly than you can blink. But the monkeys kept coming in the windows and stealing things, including the jewelry the Khan gives to you fine ladies. The monkeys would hide the jewels up in the branches. Then they would jump over the walls of Xanadu and go out into the city of Cambulac. Some of the people there started training the monkeys to bring them jewels. When a monkey stole a favorite broach from the Khan's wife, she exploded. Didn't we all hear it! No more monkeys."

"The streams that run from one pool to another," said Arzu. "Their water is so fresh. And the fountains."

"The water is diverted from a clean stream that runs north of the city," said Tao. "No one is allowed to live near it, so the water stays fresh. The stream murmurs down into deep caverns. That, and not just the soughing of the wind, is the source of the susurrus you hear all the time."

"Murmur? Susurrus? You speak Uyghur so well," said Arzu. "I cannot imagine that your language of Cathay is more beautiful than Uyghur the way you speak it. And the lotus flowers in the pools are so beautiful," said Arzu.

"You're not supposed to know what lotus flowers are, remember? There are none in Khorgas. You only saw them in the little valley where our son is growing up."

"We'll say that I didn't know about lotuses until just now, when you told me what they were."

They heard a thrashing in the shrubs that were near the walls of Xanadu. Tao and Arzu then saw the Great Khan bent over on his horse. A dozen bowmen ran with him. When the Khan reached an open space, Arzu leapt up and almost screamed. She saw a leopard. This was no caracal; it was a huge and ferocious beast. It had a collar, and the Khan held its leather strap. The strap was also connected to the saddle, in the event (increasingly likely as the Khan grew older) that he lost his grip on it. The leopard pounced on a small animal; Arzu could not see what it was. The leopard tore into it, throwing brown fur into the air. Arzu watched in fascination as the men cheered the hunting prowess of their great ruler. After a few minutes, the leopard stopped eating and started licking himself. Some of the men took the remains of the little carcass and strung it up from a tree. The falcons immediately descended upon it, striking it and at one another.

"Am I safe?" asked Arzu.

"From animals? Safer than you were up in the mountains near Kashgar," said Tao. "And so long as you stay in the zenana you are perfectly safe from men, too." The zenana was the inner sanctum of the women, inside the marble pavilion. The women were allowed to wear very light clothing, or none at all, in the zenana during certain hours of the morning.

Then Arzu looked at Tao directly. “Why do they let you just sit around in Xanadu and talk with me?”

“They may not for much longer,” said Tao.

“Explain,” said Arzu.

“The rebellion that started when the raiding party attacked the caravan when we camped at Ürümqi,” said Tao. “Well, it has gotten worse.”

“You mean, among the Uyghurs?”

“If only it were just the Uyghurs,” said Tao. “But the Kirghiz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks are involved also. They are likely to need someone with the language and diplomatic skills that I have. They will probably send me to the front line of that war. We have been able to spend much time together, but I suspect that blessed time is about to end.”

*

“We will try it again,” said the director, first in the language of Cathay for most of the women, then in Mongolian for the musicians, then in Uyghur for Arzu. He was a mandarin like Tao and Li. He looked back at the musicians. This time it was a full ensemble. Arzu recognized the lutes, although none of them were exactly like those she had known at home. One of the lutes was a *tovshuur*, the two strings of which the player plucked. Another one, which looked identical to her, was played with a bow. It was a Chinese *arhu*. Playing a stringed instrument with a bow was a mind-blowing concept to Arzu. There was also a three-holed flute, the *tsuur*. Instead of the loud trumpet-like *bürees* that had greeted the new women, instrumentalists played small *ever bürees*.

“Line up again, women,” said the director. The new women in the harem wore whatever light silk robes they wished, but for the real performance they would wear white robes, all of them the same. All the women, that is, except Arzu, who was the special performer in what the director called *Stranger in Paradise*. She would wear a red robe and her four-cornered hat. The women lined up, as instructed, forming a double crescent around Arzu.

The music enchanted Arzu with its beauty, not so much the timbre of the instruments but the haunting melody, which reminded her of the music from Khorgas. Arzu listened so closely that she almost missed her cue. The other women swayed back and forth, their arms undulating like waves in water. Arzu had never seen the ocean, so she thought about sand dunes, shifting, whispering.

When Arzu began to dance, making her own swaying motions, the other women began tripping over their own and one another’s feet. The conductor stopped the music. He sounded exasperated as he spoke to the women. He looked into their faces and saw hostility. One of the women yelled at the director, who tried to calm her down.

The director turned to Arzu and spoke in her language. “We have tried this five times, and each one has been a disaster. It is not your fault, Arzu. But the other new members of the harem do not want to dance around with you as the center of attention. What was I thinking, to

arrange a piece called *Stranger in Paradise*?" The conductor thought for a moment, then continued speaking to Arzu. "The Khan's instructions were to give a musical performance with dance, and that you be the star. He did not actually say that all of the women had to be involved. Maybe they can perform *Stranger in Paradise* by themselves, and then you could do another piece, solo. With that in mind, Arzu, I have another idea. Could you sing a song by yourself?"

"Which one?" Arzu asked.

"The one in the Mandarin language, of course. You have learned it, have you not?"

"I have gone over it a few times with Tao."

"Well, let's hear it." The director called for the arhu player to come down to the platform where he stood with Arzu. The arhu player sat on a chair and began to play the melody. The sound of the arhu reminded Arzu of a woman's voice. The player nodded his head to cue Arzu.

Arzu began, "*Hao yi duo mei li di mo li hua*..."

The director stopped them. "You have not pronounced the words correctly." The other women giggled quietly. "The first word is *hao*, which means good. You didn't do such a bad job on that one. The second word, *yi*, means *one*, but the way you said it, it means *intention*. Do you hear the difference? *Yi* and *yi*." He did not wait for Arzu to not answer. "And *duo* means flower. But you said *many*. And then, *mei* means *beauty*, but the way you said it, it means *little sister*." The women were laughing loudly now, even though they did not understand what the director was saying. Except, that is, for Aida.

"I am very sorry," said Arzu.

"And you haven't even gotten to *mo li hua* yet. It means *jasmine*. But I can only imagine what you will make it mean. And, before the performance, get some makeup on! Well, let's try it again." He raised his hand and the arhu player started the melody.

Right then, the Khan entered. Arzu did not see him at first. She heard the surge of whispers and saw the director and the arhu player stop. Then she looked up into the Khan's face. She realized she was in the worst possible position for a woman who wanted to impress the most powerful man in the world. If she made the same mistakes that she had just made, it would be like an archer dropping his arrow while the empty string twanged. Although the Khan was probably as ignorant as she of the Mandarin language—he would certainly not be able to distinguish *mei* and *mei*—somebody would tell him about it later.

The Khan said something and sat down on the floor near the back of the room.

The director turned back to Arzu and the arhu player. "Go through the entire melody this time." He raised his hand and started the arhu player. Arzu could not even remember the first words. *Hei mao?*

But Arzu sang no words. Instead, she began to dance. She cleared all thoughts out of her mind and danced in whatever way her body wanted to move. She fluttered her hands like butterflies. She moved her face back and forth while keeping a steady gaze right at the great man whom few dared to look directly at. When the song ended, the arhu player started over. Arzu waved, swayed, stepped, and at the end she whirled around.

Kublai Khan arose and walked up to Arzu, grasped her hand, and kissed it. All that Arzu could see was the frowns of the other women. The Khan then asked her something. The director translated it. “The Exalted One wants to know where you learned that dance.”

“Tell him that I just now made it up,” said Arzu.

When he heard the translation, the Khan said something else. He smiled and grasped Arzu’s hand more tightly. “He says you are a genius of dance,” the mandarin translated. He then interpreted some more of the Khan’s words. “He wants an entire concert of instrumental music with you dancing by yourself.”

*

“It is a good thing that you did not say *hei mao*,” Tao told Arzu when they were alone together afterward. “That means *black cat*. Of course, his Exalted Plenipotentiaryship would not have known, until somebody translated it for him. And even then...” Tao could not resist a little smile. “...he might have liked it. He seems to like everything that you do.

“But I do need to warn you of one thing,” Tao told her. “I overheard some of the women talking. I don’t know what they are planning, but they said they would make sure the concert does not take place.”

*

Tao had an urgent message for Arzu. “The revolt in Kashgar is escalating.” When Arzu had nothing to say to this, he continued. “The Khan is sending a large army to Kashgar.” Arzu knew what it meant. The Mongols were going to slaughter everyone in the city and all the surrounding villages. “But,” added Tao, “there is one person on the face of the Earth who can stop this.”

“I know who it is,” said Arzu. “He listens to me. I must convince him not to slaughter them. Or to, at least, wait. Perhaps,” she said, “my father was right.”

“In what way, Arzu?”

“He said that it was perhaps for this that I was born.” She looked at Tao and said, “I will watch for an opportunity to talk to him.”

*

Arzu saw Tao across the room at the nightly banquet. The Great Khan, for whom she had run out of insulting names, sat on a dais on the side of the room opposite the door, on a thick furry rug. Like all great leaders, he kept his back to the wall. The women sat to his left, the men to his right. She and Tao exchanged just one quick glance. Tao leaned against one of the gilt columns that supported the bamboo walls of the summer pavilion. Each column was carved to look like a dragon, its tail at the bottom, its head and claws supporting the roof. The bamboo

pavilion would be taken apart and put away when the Khan moved his retinue to the winter capital. Arzu knew this would happen soon and wondered if she would have a chance to talk with Tao before then. Eunuchs, in silk robes, brought food first to the Khan, then to his women, then to the men.

As Arzu ate with the other women, she saw the Khan's eyes looking for her. When he found her, he smiled. She smiled back at him just briefly before lowering her eyes. When she looked back up, he was motioning to her. She left her food on the low table, stood up, and walked toward the dais on which he sat. Tao walked over also. He translated the Khan's words to her.

"Nothing surprising," said Tao. "He just wanted to know if his visit pleased you this afternoon, and if everything in your living arrangements is entirely satisfactory."

"Those are two different questions," said Arzu. "Just tell him yes."

The Khan said something else, which Tao translated. "His Tottering Lordship wishes to express his sincere apology that the concert, in which you were to be the sole performer other than the musicians, has been postponed."

Arzu looked alarmed. "Did I do something wrong?"

"He implied that the request came from his wife."

Arzu slowly exhaled. "I was dreading that concert anyway. The other women are hostile, and this makes me very uncomfortable. That concert would have been too much for them to take. They already stay away from me. The concert might make them harm me in some way."

"I will watch over you," said Tao, "in case you need any further help."

When Arzu returned to her place, the Khan then sent a small bottle of koumiss over to her. Aida, the Uzbek woman with the red hair, noticed and glowered.

The entree was ginger chicken on rice. Arzu had eaten plenty of chicken, but ginger was still unfamiliar to her, having only eaten it once or twice since coming to Xanadu. She knew something was wrong. The food had a slight bitter scent to it. The only thing she could think to do was to signal to Tao.

When Tao smelled the food, he agreed that something was wrong. "Poison, I assume," he said.

"Poison? It's as bad as all that?"

"I'm not sure if it is poison, of course. Probably a slowly acting one that would hit you in the middle of the night. Nobody would want a dramatic death scene in the middle of the banquet. There is only one way to find out if it is poison. But I don't think we want to do it. It would involve alerting the immediate retinue of the Khan. I mean, other than me. The Khan would notice, of course. If it did turn out to be poison—and I would not want to be the food-taster—the Great Scorpion would lose his temper. He would not rest until he questioned everybody to find out who might have walked past your food, and everyone involved in preparing and distributing it. If your purpose is to not make the rift between yourself and the other women worse than it already is..."

"That's what I want more than anything else right now," said Arzu, "except to not be poisoned."

"...then I suggest that you feign illness and take your little bottle of koumiss and return to your room. I will ask around in the kitchen and have them make you some nice Uyghur flatbread and butter."

Chapter 15

Arzu sat in the garden embroidering and watching the little birds in the tree branches. All of the birds were small, and most of them brown, save for a purplish-red one that a falcon quickly nabbed. A voice called out her name. She looked around and saw a mandarin, dressed similarly to Tao, looking at her from a short distance.

"Yes?" she prompted.

The mandarin approached. He spoke in Uyghur that was almost as good as Tao's. "I didn't mean to startle you by walking right up. Do you remember me? I am Li Zhang-Wei."

"Yes, I do. You are Tao's friend who found us on the road near Ürümqi," said Arzu.

"The same." He came nearer and sat on a marble bench near hers. "If you do not mind, I want to talk to you about some things." He smiled.

"Well?"

"Yes. When I found you and Tao, you said that you escaped from The Old Man of the Mountain."

"We did. I have already said that I remember little of that time."

"But that is more than the rest of us know, Arzu."

"Why do you want to know, Li?"

"The Khan has a very strong interest in The Old Man," said Li. "He sees him as a threat."

"I thought Tao already told you everything he knows, which is much more than I do."

"There might be something that you remember that Tao does not," said Li. Arzu was beginning to distrust his smile. "Tao said that the assassins kept you in a pavilion. Can you describe it?"

"My mind was in a haze," said Arzu. "It seemed very much like the garden I am now in. This means that I might have replaced my vague memories of that land with my experiences in this."

"Was there anything provided to you in that pavilion that is not given to you here?"

"There were, as I recall, bamboo pipes that provided not just water, but wine, milk, and even honey." Arzu kept sewing.

"Isn't that a little hard to believe?"

"Yes, it is," said Arzu. Li's questions disturbed her, and right away she began to sew a little crookedly. "That's why I do not trust my own memory."

"Did you ever see the Old Man?"

"Often," said Arzu. "But never when my mind was clear."

"Can you describe him?"

"I can tell you what I remember, which is not much. He had a big mane of white hair."

"Tao mentioned dark hair streaked with gray."

"Maybe it was," said Arzu, stopping her work for a moment. "I just remember the gray hair. I mean, white."

"Was he tall?" asked Li.

Arzu sewed even more crookedly. "I do not recall ever seeing him in an upright position."

"I understand what you mean," said Li. "What did you eat?"

"Lots of koumiss," said Arzu, making a wild guess. "And peaches."

"Anything else?"

"Lots of bread," said Arzu. "How can this possibly be of interest to you?"

"I don't know," said Li. "The Khan just wants all the information he can get. Now, do you remember anything, anything at all, about the geographical location of this hidden mountain hideout?"

"I remember two very high mountains towering over us. That is all. To anticipate your next question, no, I did not recognize them. Mountains all look alike to me."

"Tao mentioned just one mountain," said Li.

Arzu pricked her finger and stopped sewing. "Maybe I saw the same one twice."

"That must be it," said Li. "You must understand that this would help us find the location."

"Yes," said Arzu. "I wish I could help you more. I am about to go to the zenana now."

"I will take my leave of you," said Li. "Please find this day as enjoyable as all the others." Li stood and walked away into the trees. Arzu looked at her work. She began to unstitch the crooked lines. She planned a new pattern, one in which she could cover the small blood stain with new thread.

*

At the next banquet, the women near Arzu noticed that a eunuch gave twice as much meat—rich, fat beef—to her as to any of them. The women did not smile as they watched. Nor did they smile at what happened next, though their hostile stares gave way to confusion. Arzu did not understand what the eunuch mumbled to her, but she assumed it meant that she enjoyed the Khan's special favor, something that all of them already knew. But then Arzu motioned to the eunuch and pointed to the vegetables and beans. He gave her an extra helping of them. She ate a small bit of the beef and left the rest untouched.

After a couple of weeks of this, the other women must have wanted to know what Arzu was doing. And to find out, they sent Aida the Uzbek woman to ask her. Aida was the only one whose language was even remotely similar to Uyghur. Aida also spoke Uyghur.

It was on a dry morning in early fall. Marble walls enclosed the zenana. Sunlight reflected from the gold leaf that covered much of the wall, which was painted with ornate, stylized representations of trees, animals, and birds. The boughs of the trees on the walls rose in magnificent arches from tiny trunks, which Arzu knew was a physical impossibility. A tall tree needs a thick trunk to support the weight of the branches and leaves, as well as the impossibly

large clusters of fruits. Large birds flew on impossibly small wings. The world in which the women lived seemed as unreal as the paintings on the wall.

Arzu had already looked at every plant and every painting in the zenana. She kept looking up in the event that another small red bird might fly in. She kept sewing, this being her only creative activity. She wore a plain white robe as she sewed on her red silk one.

Aida sat down beside her. Arzu was continually astonished at Aida's bright red hair.

"Arzu?" asked the woman. Arzu nodded an acknowledgement. "I am..."

"I know you, Aida," said Arzu, tying off a knot and cutting the silk thread with a little knife. "You are from Samarkand."

"Yes," said Aida. "So, the Great Khan likes you."

Arzu said, "It appears so."

"He likes you a lot better than the rest of us."

"Perhaps," said Arzu. "I do not keep track of what he likes or what he does."

"Why does he like you so much?"

Arzu put down her sewing and looked at Aida. "I don't know," she said. "I cannot speak his language, and even if I could, I would be afraid to ask him."

"We think we know why," said Aida. "It is your skin. It is perfectly smooth."

Arzu glanced at Aida's arms. Between her freckles were a few reddish pustules. The more she looked, the more of them Arzu could see. Aida's skin reflected the sun.

"How do you do it?" Aida asked her.

"Haven't you noticed what I do at the banquets?" asked Arzu.

"We have noticed that you eat a lot of vegetables and not much meat. Why is this? For the rest of your life, you will have rich food. How can you turn it away?"

"The rest of my life?" asked Arzu, beginning to sew again.

"Yes," said Aida. "Even after you retire from the Khan's harem, you will be rich and able to afford a daily banquet."

"At what point does a woman retire from the harem?" asked Arzu.

"Well, when she starts to get old." Aida brushed a dead leaf off of her chest.

"Old," said Arzu, "and a little chubby. This comes, I believe, from eating too much fat. I do not understand the body, but if fat goes in, some of it stays in. More and more as the years go by. Moreover, your skin is a little greasy."

"I suppose so," said Aida. "That makes it soft."

"It is the grease that causes the pimples."

"Is that so?" asked Aida. "From eating the fat beef?"

"I don't know," said Arzu. "But you could try eating less beef and more beans and see if your skin gets better."

"I'll think about it," said Aida. "But the beef is so good. I get hungry for it when I smell it roasting over the coals before we even enter the banquet hall."

"I didn't say it was easy to resist the beef," said Arzu. "But I will see to it that you all start receiving less beef and more beans every evening. You're welcome."

*

Arzu passed up many opportunities to talk to the Khan about sparing Kashgar and the Uyghurs. He came to her chamber, very happy, then left very happy, as she hesitated just a few moments too long. But finally, one day, she decided that it was time to act.

The Khan understood nothing of what she said, but she tried to make him understand that she wanted him to wait. She slipped her robe back on, the one on which she had completed the pink breast circles and the shoulder ovals. She opened the door and called for Tao. While she waited for him, she massaged the Khan's shoulders, through his thin robe, some more. But his eyes were suspicious. She kissed him over and over and breathed sighs of love all over him. She breathed a sigh of relief when Tao knocked and called.

"Tell him that what I want more than anything else is for him to spare the Uyghur people."

When Tao translated, the Khan turned on Arzu with a scowl, and said something.

"The Khan says that he loves you more than any other woman, and he knows that you are wise. And that you are Uyghur. But that decision is his and his alone to make."

"Tell him," said Arzu, swallowing nervously, "that I would never question his power. But if my people are killed, I will enter into an inconsolable sadness, and slowly wither away unto death. And how can he be happy if I am not?"

Tao translated. The Khan thought for a few moments and spoke. She heard her name. Then the Khan got up and left.

"What did he say?" asked Arzu as she trembled with fear.

"He said the army is on its way and its mission is clear. But," smiled Tao, "he said he would tell them to camp near Kashgar and await further instructions."

Arzu exhaled in relief. "Well, I guess that is the most we can expect right now."

"He also said," added Tao, "that before he calls off the slaughter, he needs to have some other plan for how to stop the rebellion."

"Well, I guess we have to come up with something. But at least we have a little time."

Tao now smiled grandly. "He said that no person or force in the world could change his mind, other than the love of his favorite concubine, Arzu."

Chapter 16

Every morning, when he came to the zenana, the Khan moaned with pleasure as Arzu rubbed his back. Even when the other women leapt around naked in front of him, he kept his eyes closed. Frequently he turned and looked at Arzu, even though her robe hid her figure.

And that was how Arzu ended up attending the council meetings.

She wore the most stunning silk robe that any of the men in the council chamber had probably ever seen. The ornamentations called perfect attention to her shapely chest. At the meetings, in the innermost sanctum of the marble dome, the Khan discussed what Arzu assumed were important items of state business—these were in fact the most important discussions in the whole world—of which she understood nothing. Her job was just to sit beside the Khan and massage his back when he asked for it.

It was finally too much for Narantsetseg. By custom from time immemorial, women were not allowed at the council meetings. Kublai, by insisting that Arzu sit beside him, had blatantly violated that custom. Narantsetseg was at the council meetings, but also *not* at them. She sat behind a curtain. She could hear everything and frequently made comments in a loud voice. All the men ignored what she said, until Kublai repeated it, sometimes word for word.

One day Narantsetseg almost screamed her words. Arzu ignored them as usual, until she noticed that everyone was looking at her. Tao, who sat across the blanket from her, cleared his throat and said, “The wife of the Khan has indicated her extreme displeasure at your presence.”

Arzu looked around at the men and said, “I will obey any commands that come from The Great Pervert, but not any commands from behind the curtain.”

Before Tao could say anything, the Khan spoke. Tao translated. “He says that you are here in the capacity of a beloved servant, and he is not aware of any rule against this. Nor, he added, would he care if there was.”

*

It was the next week before Arzu saw Li again. She had not recently spent any time alone with Tao, whom she now saw only at council meetings. Li approached her as she sat in the garden, embroidering. It was a cap, which would eventually be covered with gold ornaments.

“Good morning, my lady,” said Li. “I understand that you have become something of an important person in the court.”

“I did not seek that power,” said Arzu. “Which means that I do not know how I got it. Which means, further, that I could lose it at any time. But for now, thank you for your kind words.”

“I have something for you,” said Li. He pulled a little leather pouch out of a pocket in his robe.

“What is it?”

"Something that will make you feel really good, my lady."

"I already feel really good." Arzu smiled up into the cloudy sky from which a slightly chilly wind descended. Winter would come soon, but not today.

"I imagine this must be true," said Li. "Any woman who has received the favors that you have received, and has such fame for her skills, must be very happy. I have not come to rescue you from unhappiness, but to show you a new kind of happiness."

"The happiness I already have fills my time," said Arzu.

"This won't take long," said Li. "Put down your sewing." Arzu did. Li opened his pouch and poured a little bit of brown powder into Arzu's cupped hand. "Now, bring this to your nose and breathe it in. Powerfully and deeply."

"Can I trust you?"

"Do I look stupid enough to bring harm upon the Khan's favorite woman?"

Arzu nodded and did as Li had told her. Instantly, Arzu began to retch. She would have fallen to the ground if Li had not caught her. Mongol guards quickly rushed in. Colors billowed before Arzu's eyes, and the noises around her grew painful. She was on her knees with dry heaving coughs. The guards stood and watched.

When Arzu recovered, the guards were gone. "What happened?"

"I am very sorry, Arzu," said Li. "On pain of death, I assure you that I meant you no harm. I did not realize you would react as you did. I will not offer this powder to you again."

*

"He didn't say what it was," Arzu said to Tao when, at last, they had a chance to meet in the garden.

"It was hashish," said Tao.

"I had no idea that...oops," said Arzu.

"You are an amazing woman," said Tao. "This is the first mistake you have made. Perhaps ever. Your rise to fame has been astonishing, until now. I do not see how the Khan can possibly be prevented from hearing about what happened and what it means: that you could not possibly have been kept in a constant hashish dream in the harem of the Old Man of the Mountain. Our entire story is quickly unraveling."

"I could just say that I am no longer used to it, and that is why I reacted so strongly to it."

"Let's go with that story," said Tao. "I can say that, when I briefly saw you in the land of the Old Man, you seemed to be ill from the hashish. But the Khan and his retinue might not believe it, since we have never mentioned it before."

"I suppose there is nothing to do now," said Arzu, "but to trust the Khan's love."

Tao spat into the soil under a dusty bush. "Love? You think the Great Smut loves you? He can turn against you instantly and furiously. He has done so before to other women." A warrior's voice called to Tao. "We cannot talk any further. This may be the last time I see you, my beloved."

"Well," said Arzu, looking fully into Tao's face, her eyes big, "think of all that we have experienced. What a story it would make. Only, there will be no one to tell it. Not even our son, who will never know us."

"There is one chance," said Tao, retreating toward the voice that called him. "Li will speak in the council meeting today."

"I can flee," said Arzu.

"That is impossible," said Tao. "The guards not only keep nosy men out of Xanadu, but keep the women in."

"I can pretend to be ill."

"It will make no difference."

"What is the one chance to which you referred?"

"Maybe I can keep Li from showing up at the council meeting."

*

But Li was at the meeting. As always, Arzu sat beside Kublai Khan and massaged his shoulders. But today her mind wandered a lot, and she let her hands drop into her lap. The Khan kept looking back at her and whispering to her. Every time he did this, she resumed massaging him.

The discussions went on and on. Death, thought Arzu, cannot be any worse than the slow anticipation of death.

Then she heard a word she understood. A name. The name of Muhemmet the son of Erkin. Before she could think about what she should do, Arzu blurted out, "I know him!"

Nobody except Tao and Li understood what she said. Tao translated. The Khan moved away from Arzu and looked upon her in amazement.

Li spoke up. "How can this woman know him? I have reason to believe that her testimony will not be reliable, O Exalted One."

"I trust her," said the Khan, as Tao translated.

"But, Exalted One, our troops have searched for this man, Muhemmet son of Erkin, all over Kashgar, and have failed to find him," said the top general. "Wherever this man is, he is in disguise, and wears no accoutrements that identify him as their leader." Tao translated quietly for Arzu.

"That is because," said Arzu, "he does not live in Kashgar. He lives in Khorgas." Tao translated, then, it seemed to Arzu, explained what Khorgas was.

"How well did you know him? Can you recognize him?" Tao translated the Khan's questions.

"Tao, you can affirm this. The last time I saw Muhemmet, I gave my consent for him to marry me. That's how well I knew him. I know that I would recognize him. I think I could find him, and he would greet me." Tao translated.

The Khan said something, arose, and walked out of the chamber. The others stood and bowed as he left. Tao translated for Arzu. “He says that we must leave right away for this place near Kashgar—you, me, and a contingent of guards. The Khan himself wants to lead us. If his wife will permit it, of course. We will join the troops that are already there. You, Arzu, will sneak into the village and find out where Muhemmet now resides, and lead us to him. And when you find him, you will kill him.”

“Kill him? I don’t think I can do that.”

“You will try.”

Li stormed up to Tao. “I know that your story about The Old Man of the Mountain is a crock of night soil. And I am going to tell the Khan, before he rushes off on this crazy venture to have his favorite concubine assassinate a rebel leader, that you and the woman are totally unreliable. You and that Uyghur woman are probably part of the rebel movement and are leading the Khan into a trap.”

“You have drawn all these conclusions from the little event in the garden yesterday?” Tao asked Li. “No one will believe you, especially the Great Khan. He became great because of his shrewd judgment—by not listening to stupid stories such as yours. Besides, you know as well as I do that, once the Khan focuses on something, he will listen to nothing else. The rebellions in Kashgar and Samarkand have been irritating him. He was growing tired of sitting around in Xanadu while the rebellion in the west drags on. And now, at last, he knows what he can do about it. He feels a breath of fresh air in his military career.” Tao gave Li his angriest look.

Li growled, “When the Khan discovers that you have invented this whole story, he will return to a Cambulac that is ready to serve him under my guidance.” He stalked away.

PART FOUR: KHORGAS

Chapter 17

Arzu looked out into the snow, driven almost horizontal by the wind. Even though winter was nearly over, this was the worst snowstorm they had encountered on their entire trip from Cambulac to the outskirts of Kashgar. The little caravan stopped for the night. It took Arzu a while to become accustomed to the unremitting cold. She grew up with cold winters, but after spending the previous winter in the Valley of the Peach Blossoms and a summer in Xanadu, she had grown soft. She stood outside the large, sturdy wagon on which The Great Khan rode during the day and in which he slept at night—always with her, down between its low roof and its bed.

When Arzu saw a thickly robed figure leave one of the wagons behind hers, she watched its movements carefully. She tried to figure if it was Tao. In thick winter garments, everyone looked alike. She watched for the special signal upon which they had agreed: touching the hood first with the right hand, then the left. The figure gave the signal, and Arzu responded in the same way.

Arzu crawled inside the little wagon and turned herself around to face the door. The figure followed her inside and turned around. It closed the door most of the way, leaving it open just enough to admit some of the last daylight. No candles could be lit in this wind. The figure pushed back its hood and revealed Tao's face. Arzu opened her hood. Tao then reached inside his garments and pulled out a cloth sack.

A warm cloth sack. A cloth sack filled with warm stones from the Khan's fire, which smoldered just outside of his wagon. Normally, the wagons would circle, and a comparatively warm yurt would be erected for the Khan, but there were not enough wagons to make a windbreak, and the wind would whip the yurt into the sky.

Arzu closed her eyes and slowly kissed Tao on the lips. He grabbed her face in his hands, which were still muffled, and pressed his face against hers. She wanted to just rest in his embrace, but she knew their time together would be short. She said, "Tao, the reason I wanted to talk with you is that I have been thinking about joining the revolutionaries."

"I am with you, whatever you decide to do," said Tao. "But I have to ask, why would you do this? You would certainly be killed."

"Possibly, not certainly. What if the revolutionaries win? They don't have to defeat the Mongols, just make them decide that the Uyghur people are not important enough to dominate. Remember, Tao, these are my people. This is where I grew up. My family, whatever may be left of it, is in Khorgas. Don't you understand what I am feeling?"

"It was you who betrayed them to the Khan," said Tao.

"I spoke without thinking and have regretted it almost hourly ever since. You must understand what I am feeling, Tao."

"I will be honest with you, Arzu. I do not. I was taken from my family at such an early age I hardly remember them, or my hometown. My culture? It is the Han culture, which the Khan has incorporated into his dynasty, rather than destroying. Think about this. If you succeed,

the Khan will crush the rebellion without destroying all the people. But if you betray him, he will kill everybody. You will be his favorite victim. You can save your people more by betraying the revolutionary leaders than by joining them.

"And you had better decide pretty soon," said Tao.

"There's more," said Arzu. Tao listened silently. "Before I tell you, swear to me that you will not breathe a word of this to anyone else."

"Arzu, I already know enough to get us both killed. Can it get any worse?"

"Yes, it can." Arzu spoke into Tao's ear. "Nobody would ever know if I just happened to, you know, press my arm against the Great Snuffler's windpipe while he is sleeping. I would then scream and say that he died while we were having congress."

"Arzu, you managed to come up with an even worse idea than joining the revolutionaries. If Kublai died, his generals would immediately take charge. Nothing would change except that there would now be no chance, no chance whatsoever, that the Uyghur cities—any of them—would be spared. The Khan's delusions of love for you are the only thing that will keep any of your people alive. Besides, he is still pretty strong. I doubt that you could strangle him." Tao cleared his throat. "So, what are you going to do? Betray that petty revolutionary, as you have been commanded to do, or betray the Great Khan?"

"I will decide once I am inside Khorgas," said Arzu.

"Why don't you decide right now? What are you waiting for?"

"I have my reasons. I just wanted you to know what I was thinking. You cannot imagine how much I wish I had my plans all figured out. This part of our conversation is now at an end."

After a few moments with their faces close together, Tao asked, "Aside from contemplating at least two different ways to die, and being cold all the time, how have you been?"

"As happy as anyone could be on this journey," she answered. "Everybody, even the Exalted Fleabag, is miserable. Winter is the worst possible time to take this journey. But, of course, it was the only possible time. When I said I could find Muhemmet, and the Greaseball decided to leave without delay, it saved my life. And yours. Li was ready to expose us. But he and his suspicions are back in Cambulac. He may convince others while we are gone to turn against us, but when we return victorious, it will be the end of him."

"If," said Tao. "Not when we return. When I think about what might happen to you if we fail..." He began to cry.

"Stop it," said Arzu. "Just stop it. We decided months ago, when the journey began, that we would not speak again about the dangers I will face until it is over. Or, as you wish, if we are still alive. Remember, you were the one who told me that to dread something is to experience it twice. And stop crying. The tears will freeze to your nose and break it off."

"You can think of humor at a time like this?" Tao laughed a little between sniffles as he stopped crying. "Yes. That is what keeps you going. The spirit of hope. You never give up. And you have given me a reason to keep living."

"You aren't the only one who feels that way about me. I think—this is going to sound strange, even criminal—the Khan needs *me* to keep *him* from giving up. He cries when I hold him, Tao. He cries! I think I am the only one who ever sees him cry. He talks about what an ugly world it is. He told me once what his grandfather Genghis said. Genghis said the sweetest sound that anyone could hear was the wailing of tortured prisoners and the cries of their widows and orphans. But that was Genghis. Kublai is not like that. He also says that I have shown him that there is beauty in the world after all. He praises my pure character and my lofty ideals of love. He actually thinks I have these, and I never contradict him."

"Maybe you do have them, Arzu," said Tao. "The Great Compost Heap treats you well?"

"Too well, I think. The only way he could treat me better is by leaving me alone a little more. There is little for him to do on this journey. The troops are already outside of Kashgar. His stewards make all the arrangements for this little caravan. Is this caravan of seven wagons any way for the Great Khan to travel?"

"It's a good disguise," said Tao. "It looks like a miserable little group of merchants who were too stupid to wait until spring to travel. Nobody will bother us."

"The Great Shiverer holds me close all night. There is not much for him to decide, no meetings with his emissaries, no concubines except me, no banquets. He smells worse than ever. He is like a bear skin rug with the bear still in it. Warm, though. Except my feet." She thought a moment, then said, "I wish I could get back to sewing. I brought my sewing materials. I actually got to use them on that warm, clear, calm day outside of Aksu. Remember that day? I sewed decorations on a new hat."

"Which you will never wear, since we are going to be killed..."

"Stop it, Tao! Just shut up and hold me."

They shifted their thick robes and brought their bodies together. They clasped one another. It had been a long time since Arzu had felt Tao. They trembled together at the same moment. They would never have dared to take this time together, had it not been for the snowstorm that hid them from curious eyes.

*

While he was awake, sometimes in the day, sometimes at night, the Khan told Arzu everything. His emissaries wanted to put Kashgar and all surrounding villages to the sword. Every man, woman, and child. It's all the same to these Mongols, thought Arzu. But Kublai let Arzu see a little bit of his character, the character that made him a great leader. Whatever else Kublai Khan may be, thought Arzu, he is a great leader. He wanted taxes and tribute. A campaign of extermination was all cost and no profit. Once the revolutionaries were killed, and nobody else, he wanted to rebuild the Uyghur cities. He even admitted to Arzu something that he could never say in public: that putting Ürümqi to the sword had been a bad idea. Kublai Khan, admitting a mistake? Arzu told nobody about this except Tao. Destroying a city was something

that Genghis would not have hesitated to do, but Kublai knew that an empire based just on conquest could not survive the death of the conqueror.

Chapter 18

The Mongol encampment never ran out of torches. There was very little wood around Kashgar—even less than Arzu remembered—but the warriors brought whole wagonloads of torches with them. They camped outside Kashgar, their torches flaring, and did nothing. This was their plan: to strike terror into the hearts of the people. They brought whole flocks of sheep and goats with them and feasted every night.

All that the warriors needed to unleash destruction on Kashgar was an order from the Great Khan. Instead, they got the Great Khan himself. The Great Khan who put his faith in a woman to lead them to victory.

If anyone watched the Mongol encampment from the city walls of Kashgar, they would have seen the same thing every night. Until this particular night, when the warriors lined up in tens, hundreds, and thousands. Kublai Khan told his generals his plan: to send his beloved concubine not into Kashgar but into a little, unwalled village nearby, where she would find Muhemmet son of Erkin, assassinate him, and return quickly, letting the generals know where to find the other leaders of the insurrection. Once the leaders were killed, Kublai hoped, Kashgar would surrender, with no need to storm the gates and walls. Tao, the trusted assistant who knew the Uyghur language, was to accompany her partway. Should she fail in this attempt, there would be no further delay in exterminating the entire population.

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The next day, Kublai Khan sent Arzu, alone on a horse, to approach Khorgas from the south so that there would be no suspicion that she came from the Mongol encampment to the east. A troop of Mongol scouts, and Tao, waited behind a nearby hill, but would be of no help to Arzu once she entered the town.

Uyghur horsemen found Arzu on the road and escorted her into Khorgas. They looked around to see that she was alone. They did not go far enough to see Tao. Once Arzu entered the village, the men who found her told the village guards that the woman, whom they did not recognize, was alone.

The first woman Arzu saw as she entered Khorgas was the wife of Hoshur the singer. Arzu smiled and waved at her. The woman looked up at Arzu, not at first recognizing her. But when Arzu slipped down from her horse and called her by name, the woman turned and looked at her. “Arzu?” she asked.

“Yes! I have returned!”

The woman gave a little smile and called to another woman. “Look who has returned. Arzu, the beautiful daughter of Murat.” One after another, the women from the houses, then the men from their work, came streaming out into the street. Arzu hugged a lot of women and smiled at a lot of men. Even the ones she had never met knew of her reputation.

"We have to hear your story!" several of them said.

"The Mongols took me to Xanadu," Arzu told them.

"Yes, I remember the day it happened, in Kashgar! It was not so long ago. What was it, two years?"

"Yes, just two years. I have experienced so much during that time."

"You know about the large encampment of warriors just outside of town. They might have captured you."

"Yes. But they will not know I am here if you keep quiet about it." This was her first outright lie.

"What was it like being married to the Great Khan?"

"I wasn't married to him. I was just one of over a hundred concubines."

"They must have dressed you in fine silk clothes!"

Arzu spat in the street. "They can have their silk. I am done with their luxuries. I have come home." This was her second outright lie and would not be her last. Or was it a lie? She was still unsure if she would join the revolt.

"Why have you come?"

"I have come to join your resistance to the rule of the Great Blasphemer." Having uttered what might have been her third lie, Arzu wondered if she could keep from entangling herself in her own web of prevarication.

Arzu expected the people to raise their voices in cheer. Instead, they seemed to be busy doing something, and went back to it. She stopped one of the women.

"Where are my parents?" asked Arzu.

"I will bring them," said the woman.

A few moments later Murat and Alfiya came running up to Arzu. Each baptized the other with tears. Arzu's parents told her they never expected to see her alive ever again, and she said the same for them. "Allah is great," said Murat.

Then Arzu whispered to them, "I have to talk to you. In absolute privacy."

Murat said loudly, "I expect that you want to see your old bedroom, Arzu. We kept it ready just in case you should ever return. Now you have done so!"

When they were inside of their house, Arzu got right to the point. "Either the two of you are going to die, or I am going to die. Soon. Unless all three of us die." They listened closely. "I have been sent here to try to negotiate a peace between the Mongols and the Uyghurs." Another lie. "As you can guess, there is very little chance that I will succeed. Which means that, very soon, the Mongols will destroy all the Uyghur cities. You must leave. Go as far away as you can. It doesn't matter where."

"The Mongols sent you?" asked Murat. "For peace? That doesn't sound like something they would do."

"No, it doesn't. It was my idea, but the Great Khan went along with it."

"The Great Khan? He is here?" whispered Arzu's mother.

Arzu heard voices outside the door. "I can't explain it to you now."

"Tomorrow is the feast," said Alfiya.

"They will wonder where we are," said Murat. "But by then we will be gone."

*

Arzu thought it was strange that nobody asked where she had come from or why she was traveling alone. Her prepared explanation was not very good, but she didn't have to use it. She told herself that, since some big event was coming up, they were in too much of a hurry to ask her any details. She soon found out what the event was.

"You have come just in time," said a woman who came into Arzu's house just as she finished talking with her parents. "We have plenty of food. You must be starving."

"Yes, I am." Arzu spoke truly, for even the Great Khan suffered privation on the journey.

"You will come and help us prepare it?" asked another woman.

"I would be glad to."

"The feast is being prepared at Erkin's house."

"Then, let's go." Arzu got back up on the horse. She knew the way.

When Arzu entered the kitchen, the one she had seen the night before her abduction, she saw the women she had known all her life running around and preparing food. A young lady, dressed finely, by Khorgas standards, stood with her back to Arzu, directing the preparations. Flatbread, of course, and butter, but pastries as well. Fragrant meat, mostly lamb, goat, and chicken, with carrots, cabbage, and onions.

"What is the reason for this big feast?" Arzu asked one woman.

"Oh, that's right. You just got here. No wonder you haven't heard. It is a wedding feast."

"Whose wedding?" asked Arzu, but she already suspected the answer.

"Why, Muhemmet's, of course."

Arzu gulped in surprise. She said, "But this is a really big feast. I was unaware that Muhemmet's family was this wealthy."

"Things have changed a lot in the past couple of years."

"Whom is he marrying?"

The woman pointed to the finely dressed lady. Arzu approached her. She turned around. It was Dilnaz.

"Dilnaz!" exclaimed Arzu as she approached. Dilnaz did not return Arzu's smile. "I thought you must be dead. You must have thought the same about me."

Dilnaz crossed her arms and did not rush into Arzu's embrace. "We knew you were alive," she said.

"I don't understand," said Arzu.

"We will explain it to you," said Dilnaz.

*

Muhemmet greeted Arzu with a big hug, but she could feel the little space of resistance between their bodies. He sat on a fancy silk-covered cushion, as blue as night. His cloak, though not of silk, was beautifully ornamented. Dilnaz sat beside him, on her own cushion. They both smiled cordially, but not warmly, at Arzu.

"Welcome back," said Muhemmet, without enthusiasm.

"Congratulations on your upcoming wedding," said Arzu.

"Thank you," said Dilnaz.

"Dilnaz," began Arzu, "I saw you outside the gate of Aksu, and I was certain that you would die. I am so happy that you not only survived but have returned to a happy home. I thought about trying to rescue you outside of Aksu, but..."

"You needn't have worried, as it turned out," said Dilnaz. "I was rescued by the revolutionary forces."

"The Uyghur raiders?"

"And Uzbek," said Muhemmet. "How did you know about them?"

"That's how I first escaped from the Mongols," Arzu answered. "I escaped when the raiders attacked the caravan at Ürümqi."

"They did not tell me that you had been liberated," said Muhemmet.

"I didn't go with them. A very fine and faithful mandarin from Cathay took me away. You must remember him. He was the scribe who came to Kashgar the day I was taken."

"Yes, we remember him. But you still ended up in Xanadu," said Muhemmet.

"How did you know?"

"We have informants all over The Road. You see, Arzu, things have changed. When you last saw me, I was a boy who rode horses. Now, I am a leader in the revolutionary movement, as is my partner Dilnaz. I met her when we worked together on the raids. Once I got to know her, I was very sorry that I ignored her when we were growing up here in Khorgas. But now, we are partners. I command the raiders, and Dilnaz arranges the supplies."

"Which is as important as commanding the raiders," said Dilnaz. Muhemmet nodded in agreement.

"I remember," said Arzu, "that the night of the feast, before I was abducted, the men of Khorgas met here—I think it was this very room—to discuss the Mongol threat."

"You were there?" asked Muhemmet.

"I was behind a curtain," Arzu answered. "I saw you. I got the feeling that the men already knew you would become their leader. A horseman, but also a man of business. Above all, fiercely dedicated to their cause."

"I am their leader now," said Muhemmet. "But there are others. We have many leaders. If anything happens to me, another will take my place more quickly than you can imagine. They

follow me but can turn and follow my second-in-command as quickly as a flock of birds shifts direction in flight. This is why nothing can stop us. We will persist.

"Someday," continued Muhemmet, "the Great Khan will die. And, if my information sources are correct, he has no clear line of succession. The Mongols will be a headless monster, while we Uyghurs will be like agile foxes."

"The Khan will not die for a long time," said Arzu. "He can do a lot of damage while he still has power."

"If that army of his, camped outside of town, begins to move against us, we will simply vanish," said Muhemmet. "The Mongols are very good as horsemen out on the flat plains. But they cannot kill us all as we disperse into the mountains and valleys."

"This is what you told me two years ago," said Arzu. "But it depends on how quickly that army moves."

"Do you know something about their plans?"

"No. They do not even know that I am here." Arzu thought again about her web of lies.

"We have been told," Dilnaz said, "that you have come to join us."

"Yes, that is correct."

"I can put you to work," said Dilnaz. "Remember what I did two years ago, in this very place? I sent you out to serve beans. That was nice of you. Now I am in charge of provisions for the revolutionary forces, and I can give you steady work."

"You already know too much about us," said Muhemmet. "You realize that we cannot let you leave."

"Why would I leave?" asked Arzu. "Where would I go, and why would I go there?"

"Arzu," said Muhemmet, "don't talk to us as if we are ignorant. We know that you became part of the inner circle of the Khan's concubines. In fact, his favorite. We know you came with him in that little caravan that just arrived. We know that you came from the Mongol camp. Now you tell us that you have escaped from them, something they are unlikely to have let you get away with. You must admit that I have reason to be suspicious of you."

"It is true," said Arzu, "that I was the Khan's favorite concubine."

"How lovely," said Dilnaz, smiling.

"You cannot imagine his stench. But there is something you might not know about him."

"And that is?" prompted Dilnaz.

"He does not want to slaughter the people of our cities and towns. He wants us to surrender, so that we can be his servants rather than his victims."

"So, the Mongols *did* send you," said Muhemmet.

"No," said Arzu. "But, back in Xanadu, he told me this."

"This does not sound like Kublai Khan," said Muhemmet.

"He would never say this in public, but he told me in private. Now I am telling you."

"Servants rather than victims? This is not going to happen. You can tell him the next time you see him."

"I'm not going to see him again. I defected from them. They will kill me if they find me."

"Well, in that case," said Muhemmet, "welcome to your new home. Or, possibly, your tomb."

"It is too bad that you did not come sooner," said Dilnaz. "You could have done some nice embroidery on my wedding garments. Much nicer than the ones I actually have. But I have no doubt that your artistry will become famous in the new Uyghur empire.

"I have something more to tell you," Dilnaz said to Arzu. "You have returned, and everyone has noticed you. Enjoy your moment of attention. You have joined our cause, but you never were one of us, and never will be. When we were growing up, you had many admirers. Boys admired you eagerly, and girls resentfully. Including me, of course. But you had no friends. Was there anyone to whom you could really open your heart? Did anyone talk with you about their fears and hopes?"

"Muhemmet did," said Arzu.

"So much has happened since that time," said Muhemmet. "I wonder now just how much friendship we shared."

Arzu scowled in surprise. "Muhemmet? How can you say that? Our friendship, until I was taken away, was strong. And sacred."

Muhemmet smiled. "What we shared was not friendship. It was just me trying, in my adolescent delusions, to get you to love me."

Dilnaz said, "And now you return. You can expect even less goodwill now than you had when you lived among us before."

Arzu realized that Dilnaz was right. She was more right than she knew. Arzu had lived among the Taohuans, but there was always a rift between her and the women of the Land of the Peach Blossoms. She had lived among the other women of the Khan's harem, and they hated her. When she lived in Khorgas before, and when the merchants of Kashgar admired her, she was a princess, floating above all of them. The Princess of Kashgar. This, she could no longer be. She realized that Tao was the only friend she had ever had. Tao, who waited for her just outside of town. She felt the dagger on the leather strap, between her breasts. The dagger with Mongolian writing on it. Returning to the embrace of her people was no longer possible. The peace option was no longer possible. That left the assassination option. Maybe.

"Muhemmet, I need to talk to you. Alone." Arzu did not look up into his eyes.

"There is nothing you could say to him that I cannot hear," said Dilnaz.

"I will meet with you," said Muhemmet.

Dilnaz frowned and looked at Muhemmet. She said, "The preparations for our wedding are nearly finished. I will go to my own house. For the last time. Tomorrow is a big day, at the end of which, I will no longer go back alone to my own bedroom." Dilnaz stared at Arzu. "Make sure you get plenty of rest, Muhemmet."

"I will," said Muhemmet. "So will Arzu. I am sure her mother has prepared her old bed for her."

"Her mother, whom I did not see tonight in the kitchen." Arzu narrowed her eyes.

"She told me she was tired. After all, tomorrow is a big day," said Arzu.

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When Dilnaz left, Muhemmet had to talk with several other men. One of them said, “We have arranged a schedule. Some of the men will watch the Mongol troops even during the wedding feast. But fewer than usual, of course.”

“The warriors have been camped for months,” said Muhemmet. “How likely is it that they would attack us tomorrow? In the unlikely event that they should, you can interrupt the festivities, and all the men of Khorgas will be ready. We need only an hour to evacuate.”

The men left. Muhemmet said to Arzu, “Very well. We are alone. There is just one place we can go where we are sure to not be interrupted.”

“Let’s go,” said Arzu.

Muhemmet smiled. “I knew that’s what you wanted. I welcomed you with open arms. Now you can welcome me with open legs. I just hope that you do not think you can change my mind about marrying Dilnaz. As hard as this may be for you to understand, I love her companionship more than I ever loved your beauty. Also, she is herself a handsome woman. Not as beautiful as you, but good enough.

“As it is, though,” continued Muhemmet, “I am now blessed to have you as...” He whispered to her. “My beautiful little concubine. A concubine worthy of a Khan. This may be one of the important roles you will play in our new empire.

Muhemmet drew closer and spoke into her ear. “My delicious little whore.”

Chapter 19

The more times that Muhemmet called her his delicious little whore, as he lay on top of her, rage built up inside of Arzu's breast. As Muhemmet breathed deeply and slowly, Arzu knew that the moment had arrived for her to either be a heroine or a whore. She grasped the dagger hidden in the mattress. She thrust the dagger with all of her might into Muhemmet's side, right where the ribs would not block it from finding his heart.

At least, that is what was supposed to happen. But Muhemmet shifted just slightly. The dagger blunted itself against one of his ribs. The smallest of his ribs. She left only a shallow wound—plenty of blood, but no penetration. This is how the fate of millions of people is determined: a man shifts slightly in bed. When Muhemmet rose, though he was dazed from his pleasure with Arzu, he knew exactly what had happened. He grabbed the dagger from her hand.

Arzu expected Muhemmet to yell. But he remained silent. He breathed heavily but spoke softly.

"This dagger," he said. "has Mongolian writing on it. You came to assassinate me. The Mongols sent you to assassinate me. You have sold your soul to the Great Blasphemer."

Arzu tensed her muscles.

Muhemmet stood, grasping the dagger and pointing it at Arzu. "The survival of your own people means so little to you that you would do such a thing as this."

Arzu tensed her muscles more.

"I should kill you right now," he said.

Arzu leapt up from the bed and kicked Muhemmet in the knee—the knee that had collapsed two years ago when they were together on the mountain. Arzu was probably the only one who knew where to kick him. Perhaps even Dilnaz did not know. Muhemmet fell to the floor. Arzu scrambled for the dagger, but Muhemmet was faster. He grabbed the dagger. Arzu struck it from his hand, and it skidded across the rug. Arzu stood, unsteadily, and grabbed her robe as Muhemmet squirmed on the carpet. Arzu held the robe against her breast and ran from the room. She knew the house well and went directly to the kitchen.

Several women were in the kitchen. They shrieked when they saw Arzu, naked, run in.

"He tried to rape me," screamed Arzu, as she pulled on her robe. "He is running after me. Please, for the love of Allah, stop him!" She ran out the back door, barefoot, into the early spring chill.

She heard voices rising behind her. She knew she would probably be caught if she ran down the main street. But she knew the back streets of Khorgas. When she emerged onto the main road, she was nearly at the edge of town. The south edge.

*

Tao found Arzu as she ran down the road. He had approached the edge of town. Arzu stumbled, her feet bleeding. Without speaking to her, Tao jumped from his horse, helped her into the narrow Mongol saddle, then leapt behind the saddle. He rode her to the Mongol scouts.

"Did you kill him?" Tao asked her.

"No. I'm so sorry, Tao. I failed all of you. I didn't even wound him very much."

Tao translated her words to the scouts. Then, in response to them, he said to Arzu, "You must show us the house where the rebel leader lives."

"I could do this," Arzu said, "but you will have no trouble finding it yourselves. It is not far from the edge of town, and on the main road. It is the one that is preparing a feast that will never happen. Even now, I suspect, his rebels are gathering their horses around the house, ready to pursue me."

Tao consulted with the scouts, then said to Arzu, "I will take you back to camp. The scouts will wait here and shoot any of the rebels who come in pursuit. I will alert the army. They will attack soon."

Arriving at the camp, Tao rode right up to the Khan. Kublai reached up for Arzu. She nearly fainted as she slipped from the horse. The Great Khan held her tightly. His top general rode up to him and asked him a question. Tao relayed the news that now was the time to move against the rebels. The warriors were quickly in the saddle and ready to ride.

Chapter 20

"It wasn't supposed to happen this way," said Arzu.

"You did the best you could," Tao told her.

They walked amidst the smoking ruins of what had once been Khorgas. Arzu looked up to the horizon. Billows of smoke rose from the ruins of nearby Kashgar.

"It was my fault," said Arzu.

"But, how is that possible?" asked Tao. "You told the rebel leader that the Khan wanted them to surrender, and that if they did, they would not be slaughtered."

"I told him."

"You did what you could," said Tao. "*You* are the only person here who disapproves of your actions or esteems you anything less than a heroine."

"I should have known," said Arzu. "I found their leader, the man whose cause I almost joined, the man I might have married. But, among the Uyghur, if one leader falls, another instantly takes his place. Had I succeeded in assassinating him..."

"The outcome would have been exactly the same," said Tao. "Kublai now realizes that the Uyghurs have many leaders. That is why he will not deviate from his plan to destroy the city. You cannot change the forces of history. In Cathay, we have known this for a long time. Since the time of Kong Fuzi over a thousand years ago.

"This is what we in Cathay have learned," Tao continued. "You can fight against the forces of history, but by doing so you will only cause more bloodshed. And the blood will be yours. Your people—the Uyghurs, and the other people as well—haven't figured this out. But my people, the Han, know what to do. We could not fight against the Mongols and win. Instead, we incorporated them. They have adopted our culture rather than obliterating it. The Mongols have become just one more dynasty in our long history: we mandarins have started calling this time the Yuan Dynasty. That is how our history will remember this time."

Arzu looked fiercely at Tao. "Thank you for your wisdom, Tao. I am sure your words are all true, in the big picture of things. Meanwhile, the land in which I grew up has been devastated."

Arzu and Tao, watched over by guards, walked a little further. "This is where my house was," she said. She pointed to blackened timbers. Everything inside the mud apartment was broken and burned. "I don't think I want to see it."

"Your parents?" asked Tao.

"I warned them. They fled, I think."

"Then the Mongols will find them," said Tao. "But out of respect for you, they will be spared. Arzu, you failed to save everyone's lives. But you at least saved theirs."

They walked a little further. "This is where Muhemmet's house was," said Arzu, stopping at a pile of black rubble that looked no different from the rest, except that the fabric roof of the yurt lay like a burned piece of flatbread over it. It crunched as her feet stepped through it. She

went back to where Muhemmet's bedroom had been. First, she saw scattered pieces of fabric. One of them was a little fragment of the riding blanket she had sewn long ago. She picked it up and hid it in her pocket. Next, she saw light glinting on a metallic object. She walked over to it. It was the dagger. Arzu saw on the dagger just a little splotch of Muhemmet's blood.

*

"This is what happens to anyone who resists my will," said Kublai Khan as he looked out over his warriors, arrayed on their horses in the ruins of Kashgar. He crouched on his horse. Arzu was mounted on her horse beside him, and Tao on his horse behind her. Arzu wore her red silk robe and her square Uyghur cap. The weather had turned suddenly warm. The warriors cheered loud and long. Tao translated for her.

The Khan raised his arm and silenced the warriors. "We have conquered—again—but we have not found their leader. We can only assume he is in the pile of flesh that used to be the people of Kashgar. If we find him, however, we have exquisite tortures for him. Tortures that have not been used since the time of Genghis. Tortures that I abhorred until now. If anyone finds him, you must identify him, on pain of a death even worse than his."

After the troops grunted their assent, Kublai continued. "Some of you will stay here and start to rebuild the city. A Mongol city, not a Uyghur city. I am glad that you spared just enough men to serve as slaves, and several hundred of the women who will bear our seed rather than those of the rebels.

"Are the women ready?" asked the Khan.

"I don't want to see this," said Arzu.

"You have no choice," said Tao.

"I could have been one of those women. And when they glance up at me, they will see one of their own who, for anything they know to the contrary, betrayed them to a fate that makes death look good by comparison."

Led by a horseman, the line of Uyghur women began to move. They filed past Kublai's horse. Their robes were dirty and torn. The women turned when they got to Arzu's horse. She had to look right at them. Several glanced up at her. She did not recognize any of them. That is, until Dilnaz walked by. Arzu saw her face just briefly. Dilnaz spat on Arzu's red silk. A Mongol soldier rushed up and threw her down to the ground. She looked up even more hatefully at Arzu.

At that moment, one of the very few male prisoners rushed up to Dilnaz. It was Muhemmet. Soldiers tackled him as well.

One of the Mongol commanders rode up to Arzu. "These prisoners will die," he said. "The woman spat upon you."

Arzu turned to the commander and said, "Can you blame her? We have just destroyed her city, and we are leading her off to be raped. Just forget what happened! I already have."

"She is looking at you as if she knows you," said the commander. "Do you know her? And that man. Would he happen to be, perhaps, the leader we are seeking?"

For just a moment Muhemmet looked into Arzu's eyes. She returned his gaze. Then she said to the commander, "No. I do not believe I have ever seen either of these people."

Mongol soldiers pushed Muhemmet back to the little group of slaves and sent Dilnaz back to the straggling line of women. Arzu imagined that both of them would have looked back at her with gratitude. That sort of thing, however, happens only in the airy poetry written at the court of Xanadu.

Kublai rode up and asked what the commotion was about. Arzu said, "Nothing of any importance, my lord."

The Khan was impatient to get on with the scheduled events. The women assembled in an open field where they would soon be auctioned off to warriors, starting with the generals and working down until none remained.

The Khan was not finished with his announcements. "My retinue of generals will do an excellent job of administration. But I have an announcement to make about this." He turned to Arzu. "This woman is, in her way, a brave warrior." He held up the dagger that Arzu found in the rubble. "On this dagger is the blood of the rebel leader, blood drawn from him by the great, noble, and beautiful Arzu." The warriors cheered. The Khan continued. "And as much as I would like to take her back with me to Xanadu, I see that this land is her inheritance. It looks like hell right now, but the rain that will come this spring will make green grass grow, on which cattle and horses and sheep can graze. It will be a new world. I announce this day that Arzu is the Queen of Kashgar." This time, the warriors' cheer continued a long time. Arzu did not look up.

"Arzu cannot speak the Mongolian language," continued the Khan when the cheers died down. "When she issues her advice, regarding the fields and markets and crafts that will rise again from these ashes, someone will need to translate them, as well as to offer his guidance to her. I wish to introduce the Queen's chamberlain, Dao Zhi-Ji."

While the warriors cheered, Tao rode up and whispered to Arzu, "He called me a robber." Arzu still did not look up.

EPILOGUE

Arzu's heart was heavy whenever she looked at the desecrated streets of Kashgar. Khorgas was now a pasture. This is why, with the permission of the Khan, she and Tao moved their residence to Ürümqi, which had also been destroyed but at least held no memories for Arzu. The Khan built a magnificent castle for them there. The windows—all of them—had glass panes. They ate sumptuously every day, though they did not eat much fat. The furniture was all covered with silk and inlaid with gold. They had the finest table settings from Cathay. Orange trees would not grow in Ürümqi, but horsemen brought oranges from Cathay, in season and before they turned moldy. Musicians entertained them almost nightly, including some who played the rawap and the dutar. But none of them knew the words of the song that Hoshur had sung on Arzu's last night as a free woman in Khorgas.

Not only were Arzu's physical needs met, but her mental ones as well. Tao taught Arzu to read and write better than she had in Uyghur; to speak and write Mongolian; and to begin the nearly endless process of learning the writing and language of Cathay. After whole years of practice, she got the intonations right. In this way also she was, as per the Khan's decree, happy.

There was yet a third way in which Arzu was happy. Ürümqi was isolated from the cultural centers of the Yuan Dynasty—from Xanadu, and from the magnificent city of Qinsai with its bridges and canals. The leader of the mandarins in Xanadu was Li Zhang-Wei, the man who wanted to destroy her and Tao, but who was satisfied with their exile.

And a fourth way. Since he already had a large harem, and was unlikely to have any more offspring, Kublai Khan allowed Arzu and Tao to have a child.

Arzu was happy. Had not the Great Khan decreed that she would be happy?

As Arzu walked the grounds of her castle, however, she felt as if she was walking on a thin pastry crust over a void of peril. Everything that she saw around her was propped up feebly by Kublai's goodwill. If he should die, which he certainly would before Arzu reached even early middle age, she and her family might be thrust into poverty, if they were lucky enough to not be killed. And they would have to survive in a society in which they had no connections. She and Tao had no political power and, she could only hope, this would mean that nobody would see them as a threat to be eliminated. The best scenario was that she and her family would be forgotten.

*

One day, while Arzu sat on a luxurious chair, nursing little Bai. Tao came rushing in.

"They found them," he said.

"Whom?"

"Your parents."

Arzu leapt up, holding the child to her breast. “And our child’s grandparents,” she added. “When can I see them?”

“They live quite a distance from here,” said Tao. “West of Samarkand.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see them! I am so glad that they are safe and well. At least, I assume they are.”

“Completely, Arzu.”

“They can live here at the palace.”

“That’s up to them, Arzu, but I don’t think they want to stay where they are. I will send a messenger to tell them about Bai. They will certainly want to live near their grandchild.”

*

And then it happened. A messenger from Cambulac informed them that the Khan had died. His instructions were to bring Arzu to Cambulac for the funeral, and to wait for her while she prepared for her journey. She and Tao gave the messenger accommodation in a room away from the part of the castle where they lived.

Arzu immediately knew that they would have to flee from the castle, from Ürümqi, from the empire. This message was nothing other than an arrest. The Mongols would raise Bai as a warrior. And Li would have his last, though distant, competitor eliminated.

Arzu looked around at all of their riches. She said to Tao, “What are you going to take? Your drawings, perhaps?”

“No. Just the memories of them. I will pack food and water. And lots of gifts. And you?”

“A little plain yarn and needles. And the spindle, a really nice one this time.”

“We can send a messenger to your parents and tell them to turn back,” said Tao. “Will you tell them where we are going?”

“No,” said Arzu. “Except in very general terms.”

*

That very evening, after treating the Khan’s messenger to a nice dinner, Arzu sat in the saddle of one of the horses. She held Bai against her and looked up at the castle parapets in the light of the setting sun. Tao sat up straight on one of the other horses. Two other horses were laden with food, water, and lots of gifts. They were dressed to look just like anyone else in Ürümqi. She looked up into the Altai mountains and imagined that she saw a little bit of pink mist in one of the valleys. A mist that hid a paradise, whose presence she helped to keep secret. A paradise that might welcome her back to rejoin Ismail, who would now be six years old.

Perhaps, thought Arzu, it was this for which she was born.

Author's notes on Princess of Kashgar

Kashgar is now in the northwestern province of China. It was in the American news a lot in 2020: Mike Pompeo urged them (from over the border) to resist Chinese domination, and on July 17, then President Trump signed a proclamation calling on China to stop building its detention centers (concentration camps) for Uyghurs. China continues its efforts to eradicate an independent Uyghur culture. There were protests and an apartment fire in Urumqi in November, 2022. One of my books was translated and published in mainland China, but don't expect this one to be.

Part One:

The green dye was malachite of copper; the yellow was either oxidized iron or sulfur.

The Silk Road (I did not use this term) really did converge just west of Kashgar.

Paper money: a Mongol innovation, apparently. In Marco Polo's accounts, in all of the cities he visited, he said they use paper money, are pagans, and there isn't much else to say about them.

The secret of making silk was kept in China on pain of death until someone smuggled silkworms out inside a hollow walking stick.

Kublai became Khan in 1271. The philosopher Teng Mu was born in 1247.

Part Two:

The Valley is my idea of what paradise would be like if everyone was equally poor. The only thing I would desire beyond this Valley is the thirst for knowledge, which is what Tao ignited. As a science educator, I know the most important thing is for inquisitive minds to discover scientific truths for themselves.

"Utopias are based on the assumption that what is known today represents most of what can be known..." René Dubos, *So Human an Animal,* 1969.

Water dripping from peach leaves into soil: Water dripping from leaves in fog is almost the only available water in some deserts on the west coast of South America. Forests used to grow there when water dripped from tree leaves. When the trees were cut down, there was not enough water for new trees to grow. Local conservationists erected frames with fabric, on which water would condense and moisten the soil, in which tree seedlings could now grow, restoring the original water cycle.

Small, isolated populations can lose technology. The Tasmanians, isolated from the other aborigines as sea levels rose, lost the ability to make fish nets.

The Mongol soldiers really didn't ever bathe.

Taohuan Yuan Ji is an actual Chinese legend.

Altai Mountains: Denisovans (eastern Neanderthals) really lived there, though not in the 13th century. They are north of a large desert, just inside the border with Russia. It is actually steppe, with wetlands, and badlands; this is where tumbleweed originally came from

A man climbed a mountain to measure the diameter of the moon at the bottom and at the top, in late medieval Europe. This was an early scientific investigation of the natural world.

Women on blankets on the ground: based on what Japanese soldiers did to their Korean “comfort women” in World War Two.

The image of the blooming almond trees came from a 1979 photo calendar of the mountains of western Asia.

When I was a child, we really drank nectar from orange tree flowers.

My own research has shown that birch trees really are one of the earliest species to open their buds in the spring.

Sand really is all different colors, sometimes.

Compost toilets are really in use when plumbing is not available.

The species with little green sticks in the brine pools: genus *Salicornia*. “*Salicornia* accumulates salt in its pith and survives even at 2 M NaCl under field conditions,” according to an article on PubMed. I know from experience that you can sometimes taste the salt in its tissue.

The Ainu use spruce needles as spice.

Spring wildflowers with yellow flowers: family Brassicaceae.

Taohuans in this story were true communists. The only societies to come close to true communism were Native American and other tribes. The Soviets and the Maoists were not true communists; Stalin and Mao were rich, and their friends, while they kept most people poor. To learn true communism, study the Cherokees, not Marx.

Sound of horses from rocks: I got this from a YA novel, The Ghost Rock Mystery.

Warrior slicing a woman vertically: This actually happened when the Japanese invaded Shanghai in the 1930s.

I do not know if the Mongols destroyed Urumqi, but they destroyed many large cities.

Part three:

Genghis Khan was a bloodthirsty warrior, but Kublai embraced Chinese culture. He even wrote Mandarin poetry.

I made up Narantsetseg, but not the part about the woman behind the curtain.

What was inside Xanadu, the falcons and hunting and leopard; and the bamboo palace, are historical. The legend of the Old Man of the Mountain is from Marco Polo.

The story of eating beans instead of greasy meat is from the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 1.

Tao walking backward to cover the Khan’s nakedness: I got this from Genesis, Noah and his sons.

Wisteria is native to Asia.

I got some references to Xanadu, such as the underground rivers, from the Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem.

The arhu really does sound like a woman’s voice.

Overall: The literature that influenced this novel includes the Decameron story about Al-atiel, the beautiful west Asian woman; and, obviously, the Book of Esther. I used susurrus twice; I always use it at least once in every novel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.