

This ebook is published by

Fictionwise Publications  
www.fictionwise.com

*The Short Fiction Leader*

Visit [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

This ebook copyrighted. See the first page of this book for full copyright information.



Fictionwise Publications  
www.fictionwise.com

Copyright (C)1995 Pamela Sargent

First published in *Ancient Enchantresses*, ed. Kathleen M. Massie-Ferch and Martin H. Greenberg, DAW, 1995

---

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines.

Fictionwise offers a reward of up to \$500 for information leading to the conviction of any person violating the copyright of a Fictionwise ebook.

---

The spirits came to Erdeni as she slept, their mouths contorted into grimaces, their sharp teeth showing in their smiles. Hair covered their long black arms. They hovered over a dismembered horse, tearing at the dead animal's flesh as a tiger circled them.

Erdeni crept toward the spirits, keeping her fears at bay. She had not seen the tiger before, only the spirits, who had tormented her in the past. As she lifted her hand, the evil spirits scattered, but the tiger stood its ground, gazing at her with its black eyes, daring her to come closer.

Erdeni woke, gasping for breath and clutching at her blanket. For a moment, she did not know where she was, and then remembered. She was in her husband's camp, inside the yurt she had brought there in her two-wheeled cart after her wedding fifteen days ago. She was a married woman now.

The spirits could not be tearing at her again. She would never be able to assent to their demands.

“Erdeni.” Jirghadai, her husband, stirred next to her. “You were dreaming, I heard you cry out. What were your dreams trying to tell you?”

“I don't know.” The sharp-toothed evil spirits had fled from her, so perhaps they were no threat to her or to Jirghadai. But the tiger had not run away, and the look in its black eyes had frightened her.

There were tigers in the Khingan Mountains to the east of her father's camp and the other Tatar grazing lands, but the big cats rarely showed themselves. Not long before her wedding, her father had glimpsed one while hunting with his men, but the creature had disappeared before he could take aim with his bow. Most of his warriors feared tigers. A tiger was treacherous and dangerous, and not always what it seemed to be; a tiger could be a ghost.

“Dreams shouldn't be ignored,” Jirghadai murmured, as Erdeni well knew. Dreams could be omens, one of the ways in which the spirits might make their wishes known.

“Evil spirits came to me,” she said at last. “They were feasting on a sacrificial horse. I moved toward them and then they ran away from me.” She did not speak of the tiger.

Above the yurt's smokehole, the sky was growing light. Erdeni sat up as her husband pulled the blanket back over his head.

Jirghadai and two of his comrades had ridden to the camp of Erdeni's father in early spring, when the snow was still on the ground and the Khalkha River south of their camp was clogged with ice. After introducing himself to her father, Goghun Bahadur, Jirghadai had gone on to say, while staring intently at Erdeni, that he had come there to see if the young women in that Tatar camp were as beautiful as those of his own Onggirat people.

Jirghadai was a handsome, sturdy, broad-shouldered young man with a quick smile, golden-brown eyes, sharp cheekbones, and the beginnings of a man's mustache. Erdeni had warmed to him almost immediately. His voice would grow softer whenever he spoke to her, and she had liked the way he sounded when he asked for her in marriage—respectful, but also confident, as though he was certain his request would be granted.

The marriage had been a good bargain for her father. For Erdeni, Jirghadai had given Goghun Bahadur four mares, three geldings, several fine sheepskins, a gyrfalcon he had trained himself, and a sable coat. Jirghadai was his father's only son, so eventually all of his father's herds would be his. Everyone had called it a good match. Only Erdeni had worried earlier that Jirghadai might not want her as a wife, that he would ride on to another camp without asking for her if he found out about the spirits that had once afflicted her.

She had been the first to tell him of herself, on a day when Jirghadai and his two Onggirat companions, on their way to the mountains to hunt, had stopped to talk to the Tatar women and girls watching the sheep. Jirghadai had dismounted to let his horse graze, and had lingered near Erdeni.

She had guessed then that he might ask for her, but could not allow him to bind himself with a promise of marriage until he knew the truth about her. Her parents were not likely to say anything that might discourage a suitor, and her brothers would not want to frighten him off, so it was up to her to speak. To hide the truth from the young man seemed almost as evil as deliberately lying to him.

“I thought no girls in other camps could be as beautiful as those in my own, but I was wrong.” Jirghadai's

warm smile grew broader. "I'll have to tell my father what I've found here when I ride home."

Now she knew that he would ask for her. Erdeni gazed past him at the flat grassland stretching toward the forested mountain ridge to the east. Koko Mongke Tengri, the Eternal Blue Sky that covered all the world, had sent a harsh winter, but was showing more mercy to the Tatars lately. The weather had grown warmer, the wind was dying down, and countless clumps of grass were poking through the last of the snow. The promise of spring was in the sharp dry air; soon blue and white flowers would dot the land, and the yellowish grass would grow until it reached to a man's waist. It might be her last spring in her father's camp; she was sixteen, old enough to be a bride, so there was no reason for Jirghadai not to marry her right away once they were betrothed. She did not want to speak, to risk driving him from her.

"I must tell you something about myself," she said.

"I already know what I need to know, that you're strong and skilled at a woman's tasks, and there's also a light in your eyes that tells me you would give me wise advice when I need it. You have six brothers yourself, so it's likely you can give a man several sons. And you're beautiful, Erdeni. What more could I want in a wife?"

"You should know this, too," Erdeni said softly. "Four springs ago, I lay in my bed, unable to leave it. I couldn't eat, and lay there crying until I was exhausted and no more tears would come. My mother summoned a shaman, but all his chants and spells couldn't restore me. An evil spirit must have been inside me, for life had become a burden I could not bear. My despair even made me long for death."

Jirghadai fluttered his fingers, making a sign against evil.

"Then other spirits called to me," she went on. "They whispered to me of all the power they could give me, and then drove me from my father's tent into the night. I wandered among the dead, and nearly died myself. A spirit in the form of a bird tore at me and stabbed me with its beak and scattered what was left of my body under a great tree."

Jirghadai drew in his breath. "You had a shaman's vision," he said.

"And other visions as well." She could not look at him. "My father found me more than a day's ride from our camp. He wept as he put me on his horse. He knew what my visions meant and how hard the way of the shaman is."

"A wife who knows magic can be useful," Jirghadai said.

"Even if her power might be troublesome? Even if she wanders off to go into trances and speak to the dead instead of preparing her husband's supper and gathering fuel for her fire?" Some men might be grateful for a woman who could cast a few spells, read omens, and knew the arts of the midwife, but a powerful shamaness was a woman to be feared, one who might use magic against even those close to her.

"That's for the spirits to decide," he said. "I couldn't stand against them."

"My mother told me that I should master the shaman's lore," she said, "but I was afraid. I didn't want the spirits to use me in that way. I didn't want to see those visions or hear those voices any more." She paused. "The spirits came to me again, a few days after my father carried me back to our tent. In their voices, I could hear the thoughts of everyone in our camp. That was how I first found out that my grandmother was near the end of her life—I heard her voice inside my head, whispering to me."

Erdeni took a deep breath, willing herself to get past this part of her story as quickly as possible. “I went to her tent,” she continued. “A voice was telling me that I could save her. My grandmother had taken to her bed. I could do nothing for her. The shamans couldn't save her, either. That was the last time the spirits spoke to me directly.” She had told him enough; he did not have to know more.

“Well.” Jirghadai's horse nudged him with its muzzle; he reached for the reins. “I won't hold it against you that you're not to be a shamaness after all.”

“It isn't that. I was frightened. I prayed that the spirits would leave me alone, and they did. I didn't think of how they and I might work together to help others—I thought only of myself. I am a coward, Jirghadai. That's what I found out after the spirits no longer spoke to me.”

“I think you judge yourself too harshly,” he replied. “I've spoken to brave men with many battles behind them who still fear those that lie ahead. We all have our fears, Erdeni.”

He would say that, she thought; he was an Onggirat, after all, and Onggirats, unlike other men, went out of their way to avoid fighting unless honor or their own defense demanded it.

By then, Jirghadai's comrades were in their saddles again and calling to him. There had been no chance for her to say anything more to him alone. He had returned that evening with the carcass of a musk deer; at supper, he had asked her father for her.

She had been impatient to be wed, waiting out the days after he had returned to his own people to secure her bride-price. The wedding feast in her father's camp had lasted two days; her mother and two of her brothers had ridden with her and Jirghadai to his Onggirat camp. She had rejoiced at discovering that Jirghadai could be gentle with her in their bed, and was content to have found such a good husband.

The spirits might still rob her of that happiness. They might return to torment her again.

Erdeni slipped from the bed and pulled on her trousers and robe. Her hearth, made of curved iron bands, rested on six metal legs in the center of the yurt. She warmed her hands over the glowing embers, then peered into the kettle of meat broth that sat over the hearth.

“Jirghadai!” a man shouted outside the doorway. Erdeni recognized the voice of Nayan Bahadur, Jirghadai's father. “Are you going to sleep the day away?”

Jirghadai groaned and threw his blanket back. Erdeni took a scarf from the top of one of her trunks, covered her braided hair, then went to the entrance and quickly rolled up the flap. “Greetings, Father Nayan,” she said, bowing from the waist. “Your son is awake, and you're welcome to join us for the morning meal.”

“I've eaten.” The skin of Nayan's face was lined and leathery, and the ends of his mustache hung past his chin, but his quick smile was like his son's. “Still, I wouldn't mind a sip of kumiss.”

The older man stomped inside and sat down on a felt cushion in front of the bed. Jirghadai was already in his trousers and long tunic; he tied a thin leather belt around his waist, then sat down to pull on his oxbide boots. “You've been married some days now,” Nayan muttered. “Time to start dragging yourself from your new wife's bed and getting up with the rest of us.”

Jirghadai laughed as he sat down next to his father. Erdeni brought a bowl of broth to her husband and a

goblet of fermented mare's milk to Nayan, who dipped his fingers into the drink, scattered a few drops in a blessing, then downed the kumiss in one gulp. "Dei Sechen wants us to ride out to the horses," Nayan went on.

Erdeni fetched herself some broth and sat down at her husband's left. Dei Sechen—Dei the Wise—was chief in this camp; his wife, Shotan Ujin, had been among the women who had helped Erdeni raise her yurt here after her arrival.

"Aren't there enough men watching them already?" Jirghadai asked.

"Dei wants us there now," his father replied. "One of the mares wandered away from the herd. Okin followed the tracks and found what was left of the horse near Mount Chegcher. Something had torn her to pieces. Okin said that the carcass bore the marks of a tiger's teeth and claws, but he found no tiger's tracks."

Erdeni's hands tightened around her bowl. "A tiger?" Jirghadai said. "Near here, and during summer?"

"And leaving no tracks," Nayan added. "The south wind might have covered most of the tracks with sand carried from the desert, but still—" He made a sign to avert ill fortune. "Okin rode back here last night to tell Dei what he'd seen." Nayan got to his feet. "I'll saddle our mounts while you finish your breakfast." He bowed slightly. "Thank you for the kumiss, daughter."

"You're welcome, Nayan-echige," she replied.

"Your dream showed the truth," Jirghadai said after his father had left the yurt. "Let's hope the spirits are satisfied with the horse they took."

"I also saw a tiger in my dream. I didn't tell you that before. Be careful, Jirghadai."

"I shall." He handed her his bowl, adjusted the braids coiled behind his ears, then tied a band of wool around his shaven head. His bowcase and quiver were hanging near the doorway, on its western side. He slipped them from the horn on which they hung and went outside.

Her husband might be gone for some time. Most of the horses were grazing a day's ride from the camp; this was the season in which the mares gave birth to their foals and the men decided which of the two-year-old horses should be gelded. Many of the men would be needed for that work even without a tiger threatening the herd. She would be in this camp without Jirghadai for the first time since coming there as his bride.

They were still strangers to her. All of the Onggirats in this camp—wise Dei, Nayan, Jirghadai's smiling, rosy-cheeked mother Doghuz—were all strangers. She would have to live out her life among these strangers, forever separated from the family and friends she had grown up among and loved. She caught her breath as a sudden rage filled her, anger against her husband and all the Onggirats who now claimed her as one of their own.

Something stirred at the side of the tent, in the shadows. Erdeni turned toward the movement, but saw only the chest and trunk holding her household goods.

What could she have been thinking? Such hateful thoughts were not hers. She loved Jirghadai, and had been relieved to discover that his people were as warm and welcoming as he had claimed they would be. How could she feel such rage at them?

She turned toward the back of the tent. Her ongghon, a carved image of a sheep's udder, hung over the bed next to Jirghadai's ongghon of a mare's udder. Above them were a pair of felt dolls that harbored two of their household spirits.

"Protect me," she whispered as she bowed to the images. The work of the day awaited her. She would not give evil spirits a chance to poison her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Dei Sechen's circle of mushroom-shaped tents was to the north of the camp, not far from Nayan's camping circle. His tugh, a standard of horsetails on a pole, stood in front of his yurt. Erdeni saw the Onggirat chief near a wagon, talking to his brother Hujuri. Dei's wife Shotan was sweeping vermin from the doorway of her yurt with a wicker broom; Dei's daughter Bortai and her cousin Ar dai were herding Dei's flock of sheep toward the Urchun River, where Nayan's sheep were already drinking under the watchful gaze of Doghuz and two of Nayan's black dogs.

Erdeni hurried toward her husband's mother. "Doghuz-eke," she called out. The older woman lifted a hand in greeting as Erdeni approached. "I should have come sooner, but there was dung to gather and dry for fuel, and then—"

"You needn't make excuses, child." Doghuz smiled, puffing out her red cheeks. She was a short, broad woman; her bocca, a tall square headdress of birch bark adorned with feathers and beads, was almost half her height. "I was even later than you getting up to go about my work when I was first wed." She laughed. "And Chelig is later still, even without a new husband to keep her abed."

Erdeni turned to see Chelig hobbling slowly toward them. Old Chelig, the widow of one of Nayan's uncles, was a servant to Doghuz and lived in her yurt. Doghuz smiled and bowed respectfully as she greeted the old woman. Chelig was partly deaf, and too feeble to do much more than tend the hearth fire and watch the sheep, but she also knew a midwife's lore and as an idughan had helped Doghuz give birth to her children.

"Stay with Erdeni, Chelig-eke," Doghuz said. "I must go help Shotan beat more of our wool into felt." She lifted the skirt of her long robe up to the knees of her trousers and hurried off toward Dei's circle of tents.

The barking dogs were herding a few strays back to the riverbank. Erdeni followed them, Chelig close behind her. Dei's sheep mingled with the others, bleating as they pushed their way to the shallow ribbon of the river.

Bortai turned toward Erdeni. The Onggirats were known among all the tribes for the beauty of their girls, but Bortai was more beautiful than any girl in this camp, with large brown eyes, golden skin, thick black braids, and a frame nearly as slender as Erdeni's. Their daughters, the Onggirats claimed, were their shields. They had no reason to fight against other peoples when they could marry their beautiful girls to chiefs and Noyans in other camps and thus secure alliances with those tribes. With the offer of the beautiful Bortai as a bride, Erdeni thought, they could have made a treaty with their worst enemy.

"It seems we're to watch the sheep together," Bortai said in her lilting voice. "How I wish I could go hunting with my brother's falcon."

"We might have been beating wool instead," Erdeni said, "which is much harder work."

Bortai laughed. "You're right. Maybe I should be grateful Mother sent me out with the sheep."

"She spoils you, Bortai," Ar dai said, "and after you keep ruining your father's chances at more prosperity. You'll never find another suitor as rich as your last one was."

"Oh?" Erdeni lifted her brows.

"It was just before Jirghadai brought you here, Erdeni Ujin," Bortai's cousin went on. "A Noyan, the son of a Kereit chief, rode here from the lands to the west. You wouldn't believe what he offered my uncle Dei for Bortai—horses, camels, falcons, jeweled goblets, so many sable pelts they couldn't be counted—enough wealth for a Khan."

Bortai blushed. "Ar dai, you stretch the truth. He didn't offer that much."

"He offered the largest bride-price I'd ever heard of," Ar dai said. "Said he'd ridden all that way because he had heard that the most beautiful of maidens could be found here." She wrinkled her nose at Bortai, who blushed still more. "Uncle Dei could have been rich, and Bortai the wife of a great Noyan with many servants and slaves, but she wept and cried and begged her father not to give her to that man. So here she is, still herding Uncle Dei's sheep."

Bortai narrowed her eyes. "You know why I couldn't accept him."

"Oh, I know." Ar dai was a pretty, copper-skinned girl, but there was jealousy in her black eyes as she gazed at her beautiful cousin. "You were promised to someone else. You don't even know if your betrothed is still alive, but you keep thinking he'll come back for you." Ar dai glanced at Erdeni. "Suitors have ridden here to ask for Bortai ever since her thirteenth year, and she'll have nothing to do with any of them. I would have accepted any one of them, but once they see Bortai, they won't look at any other girl in this camp."

"I made a promise," Bortai said, drawing herself up.

"You know what will happen?" Ar dai leaned toward her. "One of your suitors will get impatient and ride here with his comrades to carry you off. Uncle Dei won't have any bride-price for you then, and some of our men may be lost fighting for you, and it'll all be your fault." Ar dai shook back her masses of braids. "Or else your beauty will fade, and then your father will be lucky to get a couple of fallow mares and a few sheepskins for you. You're sixteen, Bortai. Your beauty won't last forever."

"Ar dai," Erdeni said, "some of your sheep are straying." As the wife of a Bahadur's son, she had some authority over the two unmarried girls, even though Bortai and Ar dai were her age. She gestured toward the river, where a few of Dei's sheep had wandered so far up the bank that they were small white clumps in the distance. "Take one of our dogs with you. Bortai and I will watch the others."

Ar dai sighed, then left them, one of the black dogs nipping at her heels.

"Every spring and summer," Bortai murmured, "it's the same. Men ride here and ask Father for me, and the other girls mock me afterward for not accepting one of them. But how can I, when I've been promised to someone else?"

"A dream," old Chelig said behind Erdeni. "A dream foretold her betrothed's coming. Dei Sechen had a dream, and the next morning, there were a boy and his father, riding to us from the west. The man didn't wait long to ask Dei if their children could be betrothed. He rode back to his own lands afterward, the

boy stayed with us for a few days, and then a comrade of his father's came to fetch him back to their camp. That was the last we ever saw of him. It all happened six years ago." The old woman hobbled toward the small, sandstrewn hill near them and sat down.

"He'll come back for me," Bortai said, in a low hard tone. "I know it."

Erdeni said nothing. Sometimes a father would pledge his daughter in marriage during her childhood, then keep her betrothed in his camp as a servant until it was time for the two to wed. Perhaps Bortai's betrothed had forgotten the child he had known so briefly long ago, and taken another wife, even if she were unlikely to be as fair as Bortai.

"Temujin," Bortai went on. "That is his name. Temujin, son of Yesugei Bahadur, who was grandson of one Mongol Khan and nephew of another. Yesugei was a Kiyat, a bone of the Borjigin clan of the Mongols, and was chief in his camp." Bortai's brown eyes shone; she hid her face behind her sleeve for a moment. "Temujin was quite proud of their lineage."

"Yesugei Bahadur," Erdeni murmured, remembering how often her grandfather had cursed the name. Yesugei and his Mongols had been enemies of the Tatars for years. There was even a story, which she did not believe, that a band of Tatars had treacherously poisoned Yesugei when he had stopped at their camp to claim the hospitality owed to all traveling strangers.

She reminded herself that these old Tatar grudges were no longer her own. Her loyalties now lay with the Onggirats.

"I had a dream foretelling Temujin's arrival." Bortai pushed one of the lambs gently toward a ewe. "That's how I knew he was no ordinary boy. I was standing alone on the steppe, and saw a bright light. A white falcon flew to me with a flaming light in one claw and a pale light in the other, dropped the lights into my outstretched hand, and told me that he had brought me the sun and the moon. And the falcon's eyes were brown and green and gold."

"Go on," Erdeni said.

"I told my father about my dream the next morning. He had dreamed the same dream. That very day, Yesugei Bahadur came to our camp with his son, and I saw that Temujin had the eyes of the falcon in my dream. Our dreams, Father's and mine, were omens. We dreamed of a falcon bringing us the sun and the moon, and a Bahadur of a Khan's noble lineage had ridden to us, seeking a wife for his son. Within two days, Temujin and I were betrothed, and Father became Yesugei's khuda, bound to him by that promise of marriage."

"And then?"

"Yesugei left Temujin with us and rode back to his own lands. A comrade of his rode to our camp some days later, saying that Yesugei missed his son and longed for him. Temujin left with the man, but swore to me that he would come to claim me as his bride, and I promised that I would wait." Bortai gazed past Erdeni. "We learned later that Temujin's father had passed away, and that Temujin's mother and all of her children had been abandoned by their people. Temujin was too young to lead and others wanted to claim his father's place as chief."

"His mother might have found a protector," Erdeni said. "Maybe he's only lying low until he can claim his rightful place."



“We've heard nothing of him since.” Bortai's eyes glistened. “But if anyone could survive such hardship, Temujin could. If he were dead, I would know it, I would feel it.”

“Then you should honor your pledge.” What she said to Bortai did not matter. Bortai's betrothed would either come to claim her, or Dei Sechen would finally lose patience and marry his daughter to someone else. Erdeni could not change that, but she could at least be kind to Bortai in the meantime. The girl probably needed some kindness, with no news of Temujin and jealous cousins and friends calling her a fool for holding to her promise.

Chelig was still sitting on the small hill. Erdeni wandered back toward the old woman, Bortai trailing after her. Chelig's head jerked up as they approached.

“You look frail, young Erdeni,” the old woman said, grinning. Despite her age, she still had most of her front teeth. “Fragile. Thin-boned. Even Bortai's bones aren't so bird-like as yours.”

“My grandmother had bones like mine. She was from the land of the Kin.” Erdeni did not like speaking of her grandmother.

“Your grandmother was from Khitai?” Bortai asked, obviously interested.

“My grandfather and his men sometimes fought for the Kin. Fighting for them was more profitable than raiding their villages, and they were rewarded well for the work. My grandmother was one of my grandfather's prizes. He brought her back to our camp and made her his second wife. He used to call her his jewel, his piece of precious jade.” Erdeni swallowed hard, recalling how her grandmother had called herself his prisoner. “My father became our chief because my grandfather's sons by his first wife had fallen in battle.” Some had whispered that her grandmother had laughed after hearing that her stepsons were dead, that she had wished their deaths on them.

Chelig showed her teeth again. “So it is your grandmother who lives in you, young bride. Yes. I thought I saw—”

“My grandmother no longer lives in this world. She went to her end willingly. No part of her is in me.” The words sounded more violent than she had intended; Bortai was looking at her strangely. Erdeni walked away quickly, to clear more sand from over the grass for the grazing sheep.

\* \* \* \*

Erdeni shared a meal of meat and curds with Doghuz that evening, then sat outside with her to sew until the sky darkened. “Take Chelig-eke with you,” Doghuz said as they stood up. “This will be your first night in this camp without my son at your side. You may be glad of some company.”

“I'm grateful, Doghuz-eke.”

The old woman followed Erdeni to her yurt. As Erdeni stepped over her threshold, Chelig lingered outside for a moment. “A strange night,” Chelig murmured, sniffing at the wind. “A good night for any spirits who haven't found rest to wander. Not that I know all that much about the ways of most spirits.”

“You're an idughan, Chelig-eke, so you must have mastered some of the shamaness's lore.”

“I have little power. I learned that long ago.” The old woman came inside and helped Erdeni lower the flap over the doorway. “But you may have more. I wonder—”

“I have none,” Erdeni said quickly.

Chelig made a bed for herself with a hide and two felt cushions as Erdeni stripped down to her silk shift. She felt exhausted as she got into bed and drew the blanket over herself, yet sleep did not come. She wanted Jirghadai here, safely at her side, instead of out guarding the horses.

“Erdeni.” Someone was calling to her. “Erdeni.” This voice was not the quavery one of Chelig, but another voice, an oddly familiar voice. “Erdeni.”

I am dreaming, she thought. She could not be hearing this voice. I am dreaming, she told herself again, clinging to that thought. Then invisible hands seized her and pulled her into the dream.

\* \* \* \*

“Erdeni,” her grandmother said. “Jewels. That is what your name means in your tongue.”

“Of course,” Erdeni replied. “Maybe the shaman guessed I would be Mother's last child, and chose that name so that she would treasure me all the more.” She was seven, and her mother had sent her to her grandmother's tent to sit with her as she sewed. Kuan was her grandmother's name, a word like the sound of a goose honking.

“Jewels,” Kuan said again. “What a strange name for such a wretched little girl-child.”

Erdeni kept her eyes on her sewing, not wanting to meet her grandmother's cold gaze. Kuan could silence anyone, even her husband and grown son, with her long cold eyes that were as black as kara stones. Erdeni thought of how, whenever she and her parents dined in her grandfather's tent, he would look from his first wife to Kuan, almost as if he were afraid of his second wife. Sometimes his fingers would flutter in a sign against evil, as though he were warding off a curse. A few in the camp whispered that Kuan knew magic. How else could she, the mother of a man nearing his fortieth year, still have the form and the face and the black hair of a girl?

“You resemble me a little,” Kuan said. “Perhaps you are not quite as wretched as you seem.”

Erdeni drew her bone needle through the soft deerskin. She did not want to be here with her grandmother, whom she avoided as much as possible. Kuan did little of a woman's work except for some embroidery. She never tended the sheep, butchered carcasses, cured hides, or gathered dung to dry for fuel, and her two old servants did all of her cooking. Whenever they moved camp, Kuan packed her belongings in her trunks and then sat under a shelter of hides to shield her from the sun and wind as her servants took down her yurt and loaded its felt panels and wicker frame onto a wagon.

“Do you know why I live among your people, Erdeni?” her grandmother asked.

“Of course.” Erdeni looked up from her sewing. “Because you were given to my grandfather by the Kin, and he fell in love with you and brought you here.”

Kuan's lips curved in a cold smile. “There is more to the story than that.” Her voice was high and light, and she often seemed to sing words as she spoke. “Your grandfather was a thorn in the side of Khitai, with his raids and his thievery and his slaughter of peasants. A Kin commander bribed him and his warriors to fight for them instead. Now your grandfather leads his men against other horsemen and no longer ravages Khitai. The Kin would rather have all of you barbarians fighting one another, you see—it keeps you weak and less of a threat to the land they rule.”

Erdeni bent over her sewing again.

“I belonged to the Kin commander once. He had tired of me, so he gave me to your grandfather. The commander had found me in a brothel. Do you know what a brothel is, child?”

“No.” Erdeni waited for her grandmother to tell her.

“It is a place where women welcome men to their beds for silver. I earned much silver for my master there. I cannot even remember how many men came to my bed before the commander bought me.”

Erdeni wanted to stop up her ears. She did not understand all that Kuan was telling her, but knew her grandmother should not be speaking of such things.

“I told that to your grandfather,” Kuan continued, “as soon as I learned enough words in your tongue to tell him. He said it did not matter, that I was his now, but I saw him swallow his rage. Your grandfather is a stinking barbarian.”

Erdeni tensed.

“And I am cursed, having to live among such people.”

“Grandfather loves you,” Erdeni said, finding the courage to speak. “He treats you kindly, he gives you whatever you wish.”

“Yes, he does.” Kuan tilted her head. “That is why I do not torment him too greatly. It does not take very much to wound him—only a show of disdain for a gift, or a warm enticing glance at one of his men. But I will not distress him too often as long as he lets me have what I want.” Her pale face was as still as a carving of white jade.

The scene changed. Erdeni was older now, sitting close to her grandmother's hearth fire. Even in the warmth of the yurt, Kuan was wrapped in a long fur coat. “You look a little like me,” Kuan said. “I can sometimes pretend that you are one of my own people.”

Erdeni did not know how to feel about this unexpected praise. There were times when she longed to see one of Kuan's smiles, or to hear a few of her rare kind words. At other times, she shrank from going anywhere near her grandmother.

“Your father has nothing of me in him,” Kuan went on. “I look at his bowlegged form and his ugly flat face and wonder that I could ever have given birth to such a son. My daughters are as big and clumsy as my husband's children by his first wife. But you, Erdeni—you might have been my child, even my sister.”

“I'm not like you,” Erdeni said. “My brothers say that my aim with the bow is nearly the equal of theirs. At the last obo festival, the horse I rode beat all the others in the children's race.”

“I must admit,” Kuan murmured, “that I have never had much skill at such pursuits as archery or horse races.” The way she spoke, in a voice like shards of ice, made Erdeni's accomplishments suddenly seem small.

“I must go, Grandmother,” and Erdeni found herself creeping out of the tent into the winter wind, hating Kuan and yet sick at heart because Kuan would never love her.

And then she was lying under the tree where the spirits had carried her. She sat up slowly, feeling at her limbs, remembering how the spirits had torn at them. How long had she been here? She could not tell. She had lain in her bed for days, oppressed with what seemed all the sorrow and despair in the world, certain that she would die and hoping that death would come. The spirits had granted part of her wish, and had sent her wandering among the dead, but now she was here, her life restored to her.

“Tengri,” she cried, praying to the Eternal Sky overhead. “Etugen,” she whispered to the Earth, the Mother of all.

The sky was reddening in the east. She wondered how long she had been here, lying under this lone tree. To her right, there was a hill with an obo, a shrine made of seven piles of stones with a spear jutting from the stones in the middle. Perhaps the spirit living in the hill was watching over her.

She could not see her camp anywhere. The grassy sand-strewn steppe stretched before her, vast and empty, and she felt what it would be like to dwell alone in the world.

Erdeni narrowed her eyes as the sun, the Eye of Tengri, peeped above the horizon, then saw the tiny black form of a rider in the distance. By the way he rode, she knew that the rider was her father, and remembered who she had seen among the dead in her vision.

“Father,” she called out to him when he had ridden closer.

Goghun Bahadur dismounted and hastened to her, crushing her in his strong arms as she pressed her face against his coat. “Erdeni. I thought—” He was trembling. “Even the night guard didn't see you leave the camp.”

“Spirits brought me here.”

“I've known of spirits that can get into a person and send him howling into the night. I have seen spirits harry a man into running on all fours, baying at the moon. I've heard of those who can change a man's body to that of a bird. That's the only way you could have come here, daughter, flying as powerful shamans are said to do. I've been searching a day and a night for you.”

She was still clad only in her shift. Goghun took off his coat and draped it over her, then lifted her to his horse. “Father,” she said, “I was roaming among ghosts. I—I—”

“Say it,” her father grunted.

“Grandfather was with them.”

Goghun gave a great shuddering sigh. “We were about to ride to you together. He saddled his horse, then fell to the ground in a trance. Some of the men pitched a tent outside the camping circles and carried him there. The shamans were tending him, keeping everyone away from the evil spirit that had entered him, when I rode out to find you. Now you tell me that he's gone.”

“He is,” she whispered, knowing it was true.

Her father disappeared.

Trapped inside her dream, Erdeni remembered that she had gone back to find her grandfather dead, his wives presiding at his funeral feast, and everyone in the camp gathering to carry his body to his final

resting place, a slope in the Khingan foothills.

Now she found herself lying in her father's yurt again, begging the spirits to stop tormenting her. Someone was beating a drum; she dimly recalled that Goghun had summoned Budjek, his favorite shaman, for her. The drumming sound stopped, and then the dark tent was filled with voices, all of them the familiar voices of her brothers and her cousins and her friends:

“Erdeni is afflicted.”

“Some say she put a curse on her grandfather.”

“Our chief was taken from us when the spirits came for her. Better that they had kept her and returned our leader to us.”

“She can take the form of an eagle and fly to Heaven.”

“Be careful what you say. She can linger near you unseen and listen to your words, she can overhear your thoughts.”

Too weak to rise from her bed, Erdeni listened helplessly to the thoughts of those in her camp, and then one voice, melodic but piercing, rose above the rest.

“Foolish girl,” Kuan was saying. “You think you hear the voices of spirits. I call them the sound of madness. You believe you may have the gift for magic. I have seen true magicians in my own land, and they could pull birds from empty boxes and make a woman float in the air. There are men in Khitai who possess the secret of the elixir of life, a potion that can make one live for three hundred years and more. I have not seen any such wonders among your wretched people.”

“I can't deny what the spirits will for me.” Erdeni struggled for breath. “They'll only torment me more if I do.”

“Give in to them, then,” her grandmother said. “Give in to your voices, to all the spirits that afflict you. I shall tell you what you will then become—a pitiful creature, ranting and raving and rattling your bag of small bones, thinking you are in command of your spirits while they feed on you.”

“No!” Erdeni cried.

“I am dying,” Kuan said. “A claw clutches at my heart and twists my entrails, giving me no rest. I am ready to leave this world.”

Erdeni sighed. “You want to go to Grandfather.”

“What sentimentality, child. I do not care what becomes of his spirit now. It is only that he is no longer here to make my life easier, and I have no wish to continue living among those who are now likely to make it harder. Farewell, child. Perhaps you are fortunate in your madness. It may keep you from seeing how truly poor and brutal your world and people are.”

“Grandmother!” Erdeni was suddenly on her feet. Budjek the shaman was still sitting near the doorway, his hand resting on his drum, his eyes wide with fright as he stared at her.

She reached for the tunic that lay on a chest near her bed, put it on, then tied a sash around her waist.

She said, "I am going to my grandmother."

"You must not," Budjek said.

"You can't stop me." She moved toward the doorway, not bothering to pull on her boots. The shaman shrank back as she went outside. The black night sky was dotted with stars, the smokeholes of Tengri. She walked past wagons and yurts and over ground scarred by ruts until she came to her grandmother's tent.

"Kuan," she whispered.

Another shaman sat outside the doorway. A spear with a ribbon of black felt had been thrust into the ground, a sign that a dying person lay inside and that everyone must shun this dwelling. "Go away," the shaman said.

"I have to go to her."

"You'll have a curse on you if you're with her when she takes her last breath."

"I can save her." It was true; the power to heal was in her. The spirits had given her that power. She entered the tent and crept through the darkness to her grandmother's bed.

"Leave me," a voice said inside her.

Erdeni slowly drifted outside her body until she was bound to it by only a slender thread. Her arms were tendrils of light; she reached toward Kuan and saw the glowing threads pass through her grandmother's body. She probed, feeling the wild beating of Kuan's weakening heart, the swelling of her lungs as she gasped for breath.

"Let me die," Kuan said as her ghostly form rose from the still form on the bed.

"I can save you, Grandmother. I can draw the sickness from you."

"You hope that you can work some magic to restore me to life, and that when my spirit returns to me, you will win praise and honor for yourself. You want to restore me to a life that is only a burden so that you can have others whisper of your power. You have overreached yourself, Erdeni."

Erdeni dug deeper, and was suddenly aflame. Her tendrils were burning, twisting into blackened cords; fire rose in her throat. She had touched venom in Kuan's body and soul, and drawn some of it into herself.

"You swallowed poison," Erdeni gasped from her scorched throat. "You knowingly tried to bring death upon yourself!"

"It's true." The shimmering form of Kuan grew to fill the tent. "I would rather die by my own hand than live among you any longer. Here is your choice, wretched creature. Go into my mind and heal me, draw the poison into your own soul. You may suffer for it, even cripple yourself or die for it, but those are the risks a true shamaness must take. Or you may allow me the death I seek."

Erdeni twisted amid the flames that licked at her, horrified at what Kuan had done, wanting only to flee.

“Get out!” her grandmother shrieked. “And may you and all your people be damned!”

A wall of flame hurled Erdeni from the tent. She screamed and found herself sitting up in her bed. An arm was around her shoulders, a hand gripping her fingers tightly.

“Child,” old Chelig murmured, “what is wrong? Why do you cry out so?”

“It's nothing. A bad dream.”

She had run from her grandmother's tent screaming, and had only a dim recollection of the months after Kuan's passing, when she had gone about her chores passively, feeling as though her grandmother had taken part of her spirit with her into the next world. Perhaps she had. Kuan had certainly taken whatever courage Erdeni might have possessed; only her fears and cowardice remained. She had thanked the spirits for abandoning her and allowing her to escape the life of a shaman. She had prayed that she would never hear their voices again.

“I think you had more than a bad dream,” Chelig said. “I sensed a presence creeping toward me before you cried out. You should speak to Nachin. He may be able to help you.”

“No.” Nachin was shaman in this camp, and one of Dei's closest comrades. His eyes had the look of the eagle for which he was named, and Jirghadai had told her that Nachin often flew to Heaven when he went to Mount Chegcher to pray and seek visions. She did not want those piercing eyes looking into her soul. “I am a coward,” she said softly.

Chelig did not seem to hear as she got up and made her way back to her bed.

\* \* \* \*

Doghuz's shouts woke everyone camped near her circle. By the time Erdeni had run from her tent to join Doghuz, who was huddled near a wagon, several men and boys were riding toward them from other parts of the camp.

Alghu, an uncle of Jirghadai's, dismounted and hurried toward Doghuz. “They came as soon as I told them,” he said. “Are you sure that—”

“Look for yourself,” Doghuz replied. The bloodied carcass of a sheep lay only a few paces from the older woman's tent. Next to it was one of Nayan's big dogs, its throat torn open.

“You heard nothing?” one man asked.

“Nothing at all.” Doghuz's hands were trembling; she thrust them into her wide sleeves.

Alghu studied the ground near the two carcasses. “It's clear what happened,” he said. “The sheep strayed beyond the wagons, the beast brought it down, and then the dog must have run here to drive the tiger away.”

“A tiger?” Erdeni asked.

“Look for yourself,” Alghu said. “Those are a tiger's tracks.” He gazed out at the flat grassland with its patches of desert. “What I don't understand is how the tiger killed the dog before it could bark a warning, and where it could have fled after making its kill.”

“First a horse,” Doghuz muttered, “and now this.” She looked up as Dei Sechen rode toward them, Nachin at his side. The two men dismounted and walked toward the dead animals. Nachin peered at the bodies; Dei scowled as he stroked the graying strands of his wispy beard.

“We'll have to set out a poisoned carcass,” Nachin said, “and hope that rids us of this tiger.” His small dark eyes were slits. “Let's hope that works, and we don't have to hunt the beast.”

“A hungry tiger might harry our herds in winter,” Dei said, “but I don't understand one coming so close to a camp in summer. The creature would find more game in the mountains, or in the forests to the north.” He glanced at his men. “Alghu, ride to the horseherders and ask if they've seen any more signs of a tiger. If not, tell Jirghadai to ride back here with my son.”

Alghu mounted his horse and galloped away. Nachin was still staring at the animal carcasses. He lifted his head; his eyes met Erdeni's. “Did you hear anything last night?” he asked.

“No.”

“She was dreaming,” Chelig said as she came up to Erdeni's side, “and awoke with a cry. I felt that something unseen was near us, but the young Ujin's cries must have scared whatever it was away.”

Nachin leaned toward Erdeni. “Was your dream of a tiger?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Not last night. But the night before—” She hesitated. “There was a tiger in my dream then, and evil spirits devouring a horse. The next morning, my husband's father told us that a tiger had killed one of the horses.”

“Have you had prophetic dreams before, Erdeni Ujin?” Nachin asked.

“Only once, before my grandfather died. I saw him among the dead, and found out later that he had completed his life.”

Nachin's eyes narrowed, and she suddenly felt that he knew all about her and the time the spirits had driven her from her father's camp.

“Erdeni is a strange one,” Chelig said in her quavering voice. “I wonder—”

“Half the morning will pass while we stand here talking,” Dei said. “It's time we were about our work.” He and the men with him were quickly in their saddles.

The fingers of Nachin's right hand moved as he turned away from Erdeni and walked toward his horse. He was making a sign to ward off evil, she saw then, and directing his spell at her.

\* \* \* \*

On the night Nachin left the poisoned carcass of a lamb outside the camp for the tiger, Jirghadai was with Erdeni again. She slept deeply, untroubled by dreams, soothed by his presence. The carcass was still untouched in the morning; the men on guard had seen no sign of the big cat.

Jirghadai was on guard the next night, keeping watch near the fires outside his father's camping circle. Erdeni, alone in her bed once more, dreamed that she was flying over the steppe, her arms now wings, her toes curled into talons. A star, twinkling in the blackness overhead, became a campfire as the wind bore her closer to the light.



Kuan was huddling near the fire, as she always had in life even on the warmest of days, her long black hair a dark mass covering her shoulders and back. “Your spirit wanders,” Erdeni said to her grandmother's ghost as she alighted. “It's because you weren't a good woman, because you took your own life.”

Kuan threw back her head and laughed.

“Get away from me, Grandmother. Stop haunting me, or I'll ask the shaman Nachin to cast a spell that will drive you from me.”

“Ask him,” Kuan said. “That pathetic chanter of useless words has no power over me. I have reason to keep near this camp of barbarians.”

“You have no cause to be anywhere around Dei Sechen's people.”

“But I do. Something has drawn me here. Do you know what is beyond this world, Erdeni? Chaos—only the disordered shards of a shattered cosmic jewel. One can follow any number of fragmented trails, each of them leading to a different world—and yet each of those worlds is this one. I have followed a trail that has shown me my granddaughter as an old woman, sitting in her tent with her sons and their sons, respected and honored. I have traveled over another trail to an Erdeni dying alone in her tent during a harsh winter, with no one to pray for her spirit. Along still another trail, I found an Erdeni who lived out her life never knowing that there is a vast world beyond this poor pasture. Would you like to know what the future may hold for you?”

“No.”

“But you have caught some glimpses of it when the future has cast its shadow into the past. There is much more you could see along these ever-changing trails.” Kuan rose to her feet, her black hair swaying. “It is one of those trails that brought me here, and you, Erdeni, will keep me here.”

“Leave me in peace, Grandmother,” Erdeni said.

“You are not the only reason I am here. You are nothing by yourself, only a woman destined to be another nameless soul forgotten by the world. But you are a tool I can use for my purposes.”

“I won't let you.”

“Oh, but you will.” Kuan laughed. “You are a coward, fearful of any powers you may have, remember?” Her laugh became a shriek.

Erdeni fled, soaring high over the Earth, then felt herself falling. Her limbs jerked; there was grass under her face. She was lying on her stomach, her hands clutching at stony ground. She lifted her head and realized that she was lying out in the open, outside her tent, far from her camping circle.

Erdeni stood up slowly, shivering in her silk shift, her knees shaking. Dei's camp was a few black mounds jutting up from the distant northern horizon. Not far from her lay the carcass of a dead calf.

She crept toward the dead animal, knowing what she would find. The tracks were easy to read in the dawn light. Perhaps this calf had wandered away from its mother during the night; it had been easy prey for the tiger.

She sank to the ground and covered her face. “Help me,” she whispered, terrified.

She sat there for a long time, hands over her eyes, looking up when she heard the sound of a horse's hooves, hoping to see her husband.

Nachin was riding to her, with another horse tied to the horn of his saddle by its reins.

He halted near her, untied the reins of his spare horse, and handed them to her. Erdeni said nothing to him as she mounted. Nachin trotted toward the dead calf, circling it slowly, then rode back to her.

“Your husband was on guard,” the shaman said. “He didn't know you were gone until he was relieved of duty and went back to his tent. No one saw you leave your tent. What did you do, woman—fly out through the smokehole?”

“I don't know.”

“Did you see a vision before you found yourself here?”

“I don't remember.” The dream was already fading in her mind. “I was near a campfire. My grandmother's ghost was there, telling me that she had a reason to haunt me, but I don't recall—”

“When did you last dream of your grandmother before tonight?”

She swallowed. “The night the tiger killed the sheep and the dog.”

Anger glinted in his eyes. “Then I fear that you and your grandmother's ghost may have brought a curse upon us.” He flicked his horse's flank lightly with his whip and began to ride toward the camp; she galloped after him.

\* \* \* \*

Nachin made her wait outside the camp while he and Jirghadai went to Dei Sechen's tent. When the men returned, Nachin led Erdeni between the two fires burning outside her camping circle. All who entered the camp had to pass between fires to purify themselves, but the shaman wanted more from her. Under his direction, she took down her yurt with Doghuz's help and loaded its panels, along with the trunks holding her possessions, into the two-wheeled cart she had ridden to her husband's camp.

By then, the sun was dropping to the west, and nearly all of the Onggirats had gathered to watch as Erdeni drove her horse-drawn cart between two larger fires and the shaman beat his drum and chanted. Nachin wanted everything she had brought with her purified, and even then would not allow her back into the camp. She was to put up her yurt downriver, away from everyone else.

She unhitched her mare and tethered the animal to the cart. She raised her dwelling alone, holding back her tears as she steadied the wicker frame and tied the felt panels to it. She did not deserve this. Only a person tainted by staying with someone who was dying, or a family whose yurt had been struck by lightning, had to go through such a purification. Only the worst of curses required one to live outside a camp for a time.

Nachin rode out to her that night. She put him in the place of honor in front of the bed and sat down on his left, handing him a horn of some of the kumiss she had brought with her. He murmured a blessing, scattered some drops to the spirits, then drank.

“I see,” she said bitterly, “that my kumiss is under no curse.”

“You and your belongings were purified, and I'm thirsty.”

“And I suppose you'll expect to be paid a horse or two by my husband for going to all of this trouble over me.” She sipped her kumiss. “Why do I have to stay out here if I'm now purified?”

“You'll be here only until I can find out more about what you may have brought to us. We'll soon be moving north to Lake Kolen. I don't want us carrying this curse with us to our summer grazing grounds.” He paused. “You seem to have a gift, Erdeni. It may be that you have the ability to master much powerful magic. Why aren't you following the way of the shaman?”

“Because the spirits who once spoke to me no longer do.”

“I don't believe you. They still call to you. They carried you from this camp. It is you who have turned from them and refuse to hear them. That makes you dangerous, because evil spirits may try to use whatever power you have for their own ends.”

She could hide nothing from this man. “I am cowardly,” she said. “The way is too hard. I saw the demands it would make of me when I tried to save my grandmother. I don't want to reach into others and draw their pain into myself.”

“How did you try to heal your grandmother?”

“I reached out to her soul, and felt poison inside her. She had swallowed it deliberately, to make herself die.”

Nachin inhaled sharply and made a sign. “The ghost of such a person can never find rest.” He stood up. “I must think of what we can do.” He glanced at the images of household spirits on the small table near her doorway. “I only hope your spirits can give us some protection.”

\* \* \* \*

Jirghadai rode out to her the next morning. She sat with him outside the yurt, wanting to bring him inside and feed him, wishing to caress him, longing to lie with him, all things that the shaman had forbidden her to do.

“How long will you be under this ban?” he asked.

“Nachin didn't say.”

“You're my wife, Erdeni. I won't abandon you.”

“Is there a chance of that?” she said angrily. “Is he saying that Dei and his people should leave me here?”

Jirghadai shook his head. “And if it came to that, I would choose to stay with you anyway.”

“There would be other girls for you to marry.” She looked away from him. “There will always be a woman to ride in your cart.”

“You are the woman I want there.” He reached for her hand. She drew back so that he would not

violate the ban by touching her. They sat together in silence. The longing in his eyes made her feel that he was embracing her, refusing to let the shaman bar him from reaching out to her soul.

At last he left her to ride back to the camp. She could still watch him from this distance as he went to help the men who were milking the mares tethered near Dei Sechen's circle.

In the afternoon, several of the cattle drinking upriver began to wander toward Erdeni's yurt. Bortai ran after them, a willow stick in her hands, her long black braids flapping against her back. She slowed as she neared Erdeni, then strode up to her and sat down.

Bortai said, "I must stay here and look out for the cattle. You don't mind if I sit with you, do you?"

"You could leave them," Erdeni said. "They'd find their way back by themselves."

"I wanted to speak to you anyway, Erdeni." Bortai shook back her masses of braids. "It's cruel, putting you under a ban. You couldn't do any evil to us—I know it."

"It's only for a while. If nothing happens, if the shaman finds that the curse has been lifted, I'll come back to my husband's circle and everything will be as it was." Erdeni wanted to believe that.

"I heard Nachin talking with Father," Bortai said. "They were arguing. Father said that he didn't believe you had any evil intent toward us, and Nachin said that you have to stay outside the camp until he learns more about what you might have brought here. I think—" Bortai lowered her eyes. "I think the shaman is afraid of you."

"That can't be so." But she was already remembering how he had spoken to her, as though wishing to be rid of her.

Bortai went on to chatter of her friend Goa's fall from a horse earlier that morning, a lapse that had brought much mockery from the other girls, and of plans for the feast they would soon have to mark the sixteenth day of the summer's first moon. Anchar, Bortai's brother, would have a new bow then, a man's bow that Arasen the bowmaker had been working on for years. Anchar was fourteen now, and it would not be long before he rode out to look for a wife. Erdeni listened, saying little, sensing that Bortai was trying to distract her from her troubles for a while.

Bortai left when the stray cattle began to make their way back along to the river toward the camp. Erdeni felt a pang of loneliness as she saw people going inside their yurts to prepare for the evening meal. A few men near Dei Sechen's tent were churning mare's milk into kumiss, pushing long sticks into large leather sacks; their guttural songs drifted toward her on the gentle evening wind.

She untied her horse, walked it for a while, then hitched the mare to the cart once more and went inside. She had some dried curds left, and strips of meat, but did not feel like eating. The glow of her hearth fire had faded. She took some fuel from the basket of argal near the doorway and fed it to the fire.

The drumming sound of a horse's hooves grew louder, then ceased. Someone was dismounting near her tent. "Erdeni Ujin," Nachin's voice said outside the doorway.

"You may enter," she replied.

The shaman came inside the tent. He had brought his drum with him. Three small pouches hung from his belt, and she heard the bones inside them rattle as they swayed. On his head, Nachin wore a hat of eagle

feathers, and his pale fur robe was made of the pelts of snow leopards. He had come here, she saw, to work magic, to ferret out the ghost of her grandmother. She knew what he would do if he found that he would have to wound her to subdue the ghost.

They sat down across from each other. He stared at her for a long time with his sharp eagle's eyes, then began to beat on his drum with the heel of his hand. He swayed, chanting words she did not know, casting his spells, and soon she was swaying with him, feeling the drumbeat within herself.

Something was near them, hiding in the shadows. She saw it from the corner of her eye, glimmering in the darkness beyond the light. A shriek pierced the silence; Erdeni tensed. A cat was outside; she heard the slap of its paws against the ground. The tiger shrieked again.

The shaman would kill her. She knew that now, she sensed it in his thoughts. He was drawing her grandmother's spirit to the tent, and waiting for it to take possession of her, so that he could be rid of both of them and dispel the curse.

Nachin abruptly stopped beating his drum. His head fell back; his body was suddenly wracked by convulsions as his arms flapped at his sides. He stiffened and then grew still, and the dark eyes gazing at her were no longer his.

“This mad bone-rattler troubles me greatly.” Nachin's lips moved, but the voice was Kuan's. “He is trying to overcome me with his spells.”

Erdeni drew back, terrified. “Go away, Grandmother,” she managed to say. “Leave these people in peace—they've done nothing to you.”

“Nothing? I have wandered far along this trail, and there is a branching here, in the camp of these barbarians. One branch leads to peace for my people and your Tatar tribes. The other has shown me suffering and death for those in my lands and extermination for the Tatars. If you saw what I have seen, you would be aiding me, not shrinking from me.”

Erdeni whispered, “Go away.”

Nachin's body twisted. He was struggling with the ghost inside him. She felt the tendrils of his mind with her own and realized that he needed her help to subdue Kuan. How had her grandmother's spirit gained such power?

“Hatred feeds me,” Kuan said inside her. “Contempt is a cloak that warms me. I am condemned to wander because I took my own life, because I could not bear to be a captive of barbarians any longer. The spirits force me to roam because I chose my end and did not wait for the death they might have brought me. By compelling me to wander, they have allowed me to see their future intentions. They should have granted me peace, and I would not now be haunting you.”

Nachin fell forward and writhed, nearly knocking over the metal hearth. Erdeni threw herself across him, knowing that he was her only hope now. “Nachin!” she cried out. “How can I help you? What can I do?”

“Nothing,” Kuan's voice replied. Nachin showed his teeth, his face contorting into a demon's grin.

Erdeni tried to push her spirit outside herself. She could feel the shaman struggling with the ghost. Hands closed around her throat; she gasped for air.

“Let me be,” Kuan said. “Let me have what I want from these people, and I shall no longer haunt you. Try to stop me, and you will suffer in ways I cannot describe.”

Erdeni could not breathe. She lay across Nachin's heaving body, panting for breath, unable to move and feeling faint. He shook under her, and then his arms were lifting her, holding her over his head.

He threw her against one of her trunks. Her head struck the lid, stunning her. Somehow she got to her feet. Sparks danced before her eyes; she pushed back her scarf, touched the throbbing spot at her left temple, and felt blood.

“You cannot stop me,” Kuan said through Nachin. “You are too weak, too afraid.”

A flame leaped from Nachin's open palm; he shaped a spear from the fire and hurled it at her. Erdeni screamed as the blazing weapon seared her, then fainted.

She came to herself in darkness. The fire of her hearth was still glowing faintly. Erdeni sat up slowly and saw that she was alone.

I must stay here, she told herself. Perhaps Nachin has won, and found a spell that will keep the ghost from us. He may still be struggling with Grandmother, or she may have defeated him at last. I can do nothing about any of it. Her hands shook; she wrapped her arms around herself.

“Erdeni!” That was Nachin's voice. She got up and scurried to the doorway. The shaman was standing near his horse. Feathers had been torn from his headdress; his face glowed, as if a fire burned within him. “I can't stop her by myself,” he said. “Help me, woman. Help me. Reach out to my mind and give me some of the power I know you have. I'll do the rest.”

A wall of fire sprang up from the ground. Erdeni shrank back. “I can't!” she cried as the flames licked at her. The poison Kuan had swallowed was inside her once more, burning her.

Nachin was on his horse. Through the flames, she saw him ride toward the camp and disappear among the yurts. The fire suddenly vanished. Her insides still felt raw, scorched by the fire and poison.

She ran to her horse, loosed the reins from the cart, threw herself onto the mare's bare back, then galloped after Nachin, knowing that she could do nothing, that it was too late. She leaned forward, hugging the horse's barrel with her legs, urging the mount on.

The southernmost yurts lay ahead; she veered to the east, knowing that she would have to go around the circles of tents and wagons, that the men on watch would not let her into the camp. No one seemed to be on guard near the fires; she wondered why. She slowed, trying to catch her breath.

She was nearing Dei's tents, and now saw that several of the men had ridden to his circle. They stood in front of Dei's yurt, two of them holding torches; near one of the carts, Shotan held a weeping woman. Nachin's horse was next to a wagon, unhobbled and unrestrained, the shaman's saddle still on its back.

Erdeni reined in her horse, slid from its back, then stumbled toward the yurts. One man with a torch turned toward her; she recognized Arasen. “Stay away!” he shouted.

“No.” Dei Sechen pushed his way past the men. “Pass between the fires, Erdeni. You may enter this camp. There's no reason to keep you under a ban now.”

She walked between the banked fires just outside his circle, then hurried toward him. The men parted to let her pass. Bortai, clinging to her brother Anchar, was standing behind their father; a body in a feathered headdress and pale fur robe lay near the doorway of Dei's tent.

"Nachin," Erdeni whispered, then covered her mouth, knowing that she should not speak his name aloud so soon after his death.

"The shaman came here," Dei said. "Naturally, those on guard let him pass. He came to my tent and called out to me, saying that he had to speak to me about the curse on you." She heard the sorrow in his voice; tears fell from his eyes as he looked down at the shaman's body.

"I told him to enter," Dei went on. "He came through the door, and then, so swiftly that I couldn't stop him, he seized Bortai and dragged her from her bed. His knife was at her throat. He said he would kill her if we didn't stay back. The spirit inside him was babbling by then, saying that she had to die, that much misery would come to the world under Heaven if she didn't die now." He sighed. "As he was backing out of the tent, Bortai jabbed him with her elbow. Then Anchar leaped at him and put his knife into him."

The woman with Shotan wailed, and Erdeni saw that the weeping woman was Nachin's wife.

"I heard him whisper, 'I never knew such power existed,' and then he was gone." Dei knelt by the body. "For a moment, just before he gave up his soul, I thought I saw the man who was my comrade and friend gazing at me once more from his eyes."

Erdeni could not speak. She should be telling Dei about the shaman's struggle, about the ghost that had been too strong for him, about how she had failed to aid Nachin during his battle. These were evil omens—a shaman's blood spilled, and inside a chief's tent. She noticed then that all of the men were surreptitiously making signs against ill fortune.

"Wife." A hand clasped hers; she looked up into Jirghadai's eyes. "There's been enough evil here for one night. Come with me. We'll mourn together, and you will put up your tent inside our camp again." He led her away from the others.

\* \* \* \*

The shaman was buried on the slope of Mount Chegcher, where he had often gone to pray and to harden himself in isolation. Dei, hoping to appease those spirits that had been Nachin's allies, had insisted that the shaman be buried with honor. His widow became part of his younger brother's household, as was customary. The mysterious tiger no longer troubled the herds; the evil spirit that had afflicted Nachin had apparently been vanquished.

The Onggirats held their festival marking the summer's first moon. Such feasts were usually times of drunkenness and high spirits, but the people of Dei Sechen's camp were subdued as they gathered around the pits where the lambs were roasting. The men who went to Dei's fire to bow and pay homage by holding out scarves for their chief to touch did not linger there long to banter. The young men showing off their skill in wrestling, riding, and archery competed listlessly, as though it did not matter who won.

Erdeni sat with her husband's mother by their fire. Even Doghuz, a woman with a hearty appetite, was not eating much of the food they had prepared. Two of Jirghadai's comrades rode to his fire to sample some of his mother's lamb; Doghuz barely smiled when the young men praised her cooking.

At last Erdeni got up and wandered to the small thicket of willows bordering the camp, slipped down her trousers, and squatted to relieve herself. Everyone here might believe that the evil spirit had departed after Nachin's passing, but they were acting as if they sensed that the danger was not yet past. This late in the day, most of the men and several of the women should have been very drunk, the women laughing and singing, the men dancing until their feet made ditches in the ground. There should have been people reeling among these trees, enjoying themselves, vomiting and peeing and passing out from their celebrations.

As she stood up, she saw Ardai and Goa coming toward the trees. "It's true," Ardai was saying to the other girl. "What else could it be? The shaman just didn't want anyone else to have her."

Erdeni stepped out from behind a willow. "Hush," the girl with Ardai murmured. "You don't know what you're saying."

Ardai looked a little drunk; she leaned against her companion for a moment. "Shut up, Goa," she said. "A lot of people are whispering the same thing."

"What are they whispering?" Erdeni asked.

Goa stared at her with bloodshot eyes; she looked even drunker than Ardai. "That the shaman wanted Bortai for himself," Goa said.

"It's true." Ardai took a step toward Erdeni. "He wanted her. But of course he couldn't have someone from his own clan, so he had to be certain no other man would ever claim her. That's why he tried to kill her."

Erdeni reached for the embroidered borders of Ardai's short tunic and pulled the girl toward her. "What are you saying?"

"You were with the shaman," Ardai said, "before he rode back to Uncle Dei's circle." Goa was taking backward steps and making signs against evil with her hands. "He wanted Bortai, and he was only distracting us by making us think you were a danger, by putting a ban on you. You must have known he was up to something. Once he had us lulled, he could ride back and do as he liked with Bortai—take her or kill her—maybe both. He might have been hoping to escape after taking her, or maybe by then he didn't care what happened to him."

"You poisonous bitch." Erdeni lifted her hand; Ardai shrank back. "How can you say such things about your cousin and about that brave man—" She steadied herself. "Where did you hear such talk?"

Ardai swayed unsteadily on her feet. Goa was still making signs and gaping at Erdeni. "It was whispered to me," Ardai said softly. "A voice told me that Bortai had drawn the shaman to his death, that her beauty had made him—"

Goa spun around and ran away. "I knew it was true," Ardai continued. "As soon as the voice whispered it, I knew that it was the truth."

The ghost had whispered the words. The ghost had crept into Ardai's tent and murmured this venomous story, and Ardai had been all too ready to accept it.

Why? Why had her grandmother's ghost possessed Nachin's body and driven him to strike at Bortai? Why would the ghost now be whispering that Bortai's beauty had driven the shaman to the deed?



Erdeni took a step toward Ardai and grabbed her by the wrist. "Listen to me," she said softly. "If you repeat this story, I'll put a curse on you. Do you understand? I can do it, I know some magic."

Ardai squealed, then hastened away. Erdeni sank to the ground. The ghost was still a threat to these people, perhaps even more of a threat now. And, for reasons she did not understand, the ghost was trying to strike at Bortai.

\* \* \* \*

Jirghadai was sleeping deeply, his breathing even and deep. Erdeni lay at his side, drifting between sleep and wakefulness. She kept her eyes closed, longing for rest, then opened them.

The silvery light of the full moon was shining through the smokehole. As she watched, a man floated down through the beam, alighted near the hearth, and came toward the bed. He wore a hat of eagle feathers and a cloak as pale as the moonlight.

"Erdeni," he said as he leaned over her, and his face was Nachin's.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"Because that ghost is still a menace. You brought her here, Erdeni, she took possession of a part of you and is drawing on your power. She could not have come among us otherwise. Are you going to stand by and do nothing?"

"There is nothing I can do," she whispered.

"She struck at Bortai through me. She will try again, using others as her weapons. If she succeeds, much will be altered, for our people and for the world." The light shining through his translucent face frightened her. "Of course, if you do nothing, no one will blame you for anything the ghost does. She'll do what she can to protect you, because you allow her to haunt you, and that makes her able to come among your husband's people. She knows how afraid you are, how you shrink from using any of your talents. She'll give you the coward's life you long for if you stay out of her way."

She covered her face with one hand. When she drew her hand away, the shaman was gone.

Erdeni sat up; Jirghadai shifted his weight next to her. "Go back to sleep," he mumbled.

"Jirghadai, there's something I must say."

"Can't it wait until morning?"

"No." She drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. "I must ask you for a good horse and some food. That's all I'll take with me. You told me that you wouldn't stand against what the spirits might want for me, and I must bow to the will of the spirits now. I'm going to ride out of this camp, and I have to go alone. Dei's people are still threatened by a troubled spirit. I am hoping that I can protect them somehow." She reached for his hand. "That's all I can tell you, my husband. I can't put you in danger by telling you any more than that."

He could forbid her to go. He was her husband; she would have to obey him. She could almost hope for that. The matter would then be out of her hands.

Jirghadai sat up slowly. "I won't stop you, Erdeni. This has something to do with the shaman and the tiger and all the other strange events that have happened. I don't need to know more." His fingers gripped her hand tightly. "When will you return?"

"I don't know."

"We'll be moving our camp to Lake Kolen in a few days."

"I'll ride to you there. If you don't see me before autumn—" She slipped her hand from his and climbed out of bed. "—you will have to burn an offering to my spirit and then find another wife."

"Erdeni." His voice was low, and filled with grief. She turned away and began to dress.

\* \* \* \*

She rode out before dawn. Jirghadai had said that he would tell the others that a dream had told her to leave them for a time. They would have to accept that, since it was the truth.

She rode at a trot until the camp was far behind her and the land ahead only flat yellow grass nibbled down by the horses. Toward evening, she spied the grazing Onggirat horse herds and the men on horseback guarding them to the north, but did not ride to them.

A strong wind was carrying more grit and sand from the desert to the south, strewing it over the grassland; she wrapped a scarf around her face. Mount Chegcher loomed on the western horizon, a piece of Earth thrusting toward Heaven. All mountains and hills harbored spirits, and Nachin had his last resting place on Chegcher's slopes. She knew then that she would have to stop there.

She did not stop to rest for the night, fearing that Kuan would only afflict her in her dreams; better to be where the spirit of the mountain might offer her some protection. Kuan had not tried to stop her from leaving Dei's camp. That could mean that her grandmother's ghost had grown weaker after the struggle with Nachin, or perhaps only that Kuan had little to fear from Erdeni.

She reached the mountain by the afternoon of the next day, following a slender stream to the eastern slope. A few willows grew along the banks of the stream; the mountain slope was covered by a sparse forest of pines and larches. She had not been with the funeral party that had gone to bury the shaman, but was certain that the small tattered yurt on the lower slope marked his grave.

Erdeni followed the trail that the mourners had left. She wanted to stay near the grave, and suspected that Kuan was expecting to find her there. I might die here, she thought as her horse climbed the piney slope. Even if she overcame the ghost, she might have no strength left to save herself.

"You don't have to fight," a voice said inside her. "You don't have to do anything at all. What are those Onggirats to you anyway?"

"My husband's people," she said aloud to the trees. "The people to whom my sons will belong." She was bound to them; if she forgot the loyalty she owed to them, any other vow she might make would be empty.

A movement caught her eye. She looked up to see an eagle land in a branch overlooking Nachin's grave. An omen, she thought, feeling reassured, and prayed silently to the mountain to protect her.

\* \* \* \*

She stayed awake until evening came and Mount Chegcher's eastern slope was cloaked in darkness. She made a shelter of branches and the sheepskin coat she had brought with her, put her pack of belongings under the shelter to use as a pillow, then went down the hillside to fill a skin with water from the small stream.

Sometimes sleeplessness brought visions, but she had seen nothing here except the eagle, which might be only what it seemed to be. She climbed back to her shelter and curled up under it. The eagle still roosted above her; her horse, now hobbled, stood under the trees. Too exhausted even to eat, she closed her eyes.

"You knew I would come," Kuan said.

"Yes, I knew," Erdeni replied. "I've been waiting."

Kuan was sitting near a fire; she beckoned to Erdeni to come closer. "You are a fool. You should have stayed with those wretched barbarians. Now you will only suffer more."

"I know your secret," Erdeni said. "You need me. You took possession of part of me, or perhaps my own weakness allowed you to enter me." She sat down and gazed into Kuan's black eyes. "You may be able to take the form of a tiger or enter the body of a shaman, but you are powerless without me. If I die here, you will have no way back to the camp of the Onggirats, no powers to draw on, no soul to hide in while you wait to do your evil."

"I can make you suffer." Kuan's eyes glittered in the light of the fire. "I can make you beg to go back to your husband and live out your wretched life while I accomplish my ends." Even as she spoke, Erdeni felt teeth gnawing at her insides, eating at her from within; she doubled over in agony. "But you will return willingly when I show you what I have seen."

Erdeni was suddenly in the midst of a group of wailing women. The land around her was covered with bodies; near the circles of tents were poles crowned with the heads of men. Warriors in lacquered leather armor moved among the women, dragging children from their arms. In an open space, a man on horseback gazed at the carnage; his eyes were the pale greenish-gold eyes of a demon.

"That is what awaits your Tatars," Kuan murmured inside her, "death at the hands of that man. He is commanding that all of the boys and men here be slaughtered. He will ride against you and make of you the ashes of a fire."

Erdeni stood on a wall. Below her, the ground was covered with human bones. Blackened stumps were all that remained of the trees that had once dotted the land, and the walled dwellings were heaps of bricks. The only signs of life were the black birds feeding on the dead.

"This is what that man will bring to my people," Kuan continued, "death and devastation. It is what he will bring to much of the world."

Erdeni was inside a large tent, sitting at the feet of a man in a felt-covered throne who could only be a great Khan. The tent was crowded with people, warriors on the western side, women at the east. The tables at which they sat were cluttered with jade and golden goblets, delicate pale plates, and painted vases and jugs. The people were adorned in strings of gold and pearls and wore brightly colored silk robes; they might have been wearing the wealth of the world. Erdeni turned toward the man on the throne and gazed into his merciless greenish-gold eyes.

“That man and his sons will rule the world,” Kuan whispered, “unless we set out a different trail for him to follow.”

Erdeni was at the fire again, sitting near her grandmother. “What does this have to do with Dei’s people?” she asked. “Why did you try to harm Bortai?”

“Because Bortai is promised to the Mongol boy who will become that man.” Kuan poked at the fire with a stick. “He will come to claim his bride, and take her back to his camp. He will fight his first great battle for her. He will subdue all your barbarian tribes and make an army of them and conquer lands to the east and west. And Bortai will be his consort, the wife who will advise him when he needs counsel and whose sons and grandsons will rule the mightiest empire under Heaven.”

Kuan put down the stick and made motions over the fire, as though casting spells; her small hands were like claws. “Or,” she went on, “we can keep Bortai from him. There are many ways for people to die in these wild lands, ways that would not lead Dei to suspect magic. And when Bortai’s betrothed comes for her, he will learn of her passing. Perhaps that will be enough to alter the trail along which he is riding, or perhaps we will have to take his life as well, while he is mourning his loss in Dei’s tent. I shall have to sort through the shards of chaos to find out.”

Erdeni stared at the fire. It would be easier not to struggle, to give in to what this ghost wanted. “What will I have for myself?” she asked.

“What you long for most—an uneventful life with your husband and children, doing your work and wallowing in your tales and legends, knowing that the spirits will make no more demands upon you. Dei’s people will go on living as they always have, moving from pasture to pasture and buying peace with the marriages of their daughters. Bortai’s betrothed and his Mongols will remain in the obscurity they so richly deserve, and another empire will rise instead of theirs, either to the east or to the west of these lands.”

Gray wings fluttered behind the ghost; an eagle alighted on the stick that Kuan had set down. Erdeni bowed her head. To give in to her grandmother’s ghost would be the easiest path to follow. Perhaps it was even the best, if what Kuan said about Bortai’s betrothed were true.

“Erdeni.” She had not heard that voice before in her dreams, but knew who was speaking to her. Jirghadai was calling to her, and through him his people. She had sworn an oath to them, had known that she was giving her loyalty to Jirghadai’s family and his chief when she married him. “Erdeni, Erdeni.” Those were the voices of Doghuz, and Nayan, and Dei Sechen and his family. “Erdeni.” That was the lilting voice of Bortai, who had reached out in trust to her, who had known Erdeni would not harm her.

Erdeni stood up by the fire and said, “Grandmother, I will die here, on this mountain, before I allow you to harm my tribe.”

Kuan shrieked and rose up. The fire flickered out; a black tiger was gazing at Erdeni. The tiger shrieked again, then leaped. Erdeni threw up an arm as a small feathery form hurtled past her and flew at the great cat.

“Erdeni!” Nachin’s voice called to her. The eagle flapped its wings fiercely as its talons dug into the tiger’s neck. “Reach into yourself! Use your powers to touch your own soul!”

She plunged into a black pool; the waters closed over her. A wizened creature was below, a rat with black eyes and long teeth; it clawed at the stones on the bottom of the pool, hissing as Erdeni swam to her.

“You are nothing,” the rat whispered. “You are a pitiful woman living among wretches who pretend to be more than they are. You are a despicable female who is deluded enough to think that she has some great power. You are a madwoman, useless to all, even to yourself.”

Erdeni seized the rat between her hands. “Die,” she screamed. “I cast you out!” She squeezed the rat's neck and saw blood spurt from its mouth, then hurled the creature from herself.

\* \* \* \*

Erdeni lay in a darkness as thick and black as felt. She tried to move, and felt her fingers flutter. She opened her eyes and saw sunlight through the needled branches of the pines overhead.

She sat up. The eagle was with her, perched on a rock just outside her shelter. Her thoughts felt raw and torn, scarred by wounds that still had to heal, that might never heal.

“What are you going to do now?” the eagle asked.

She shook her head, unable to speak, then reached for her skin of water, gulping it down. Her muscles were stiff, her tunic filthy with dirt, as though she had been rolling on the ground in a frenzy.

“What can I do?” she whispered. “I must go back to my husband.” She paused. “I must follow the shaman's way as well. I know that now, but there is no one left to teach me.”

“You are wrong,” the eagle said. “Ask Chelig to teach you her idughan's lore. After that, there will be much that you can learn for yourself. You have the power to do so.”

She lifted her arm. The eagle fluttered to her and landed on her wrist. “The ghost could find you again,” the bird said. “She is still wandering. Your doubts and fears could guide her back to you.”

“No. I won't let that happen.”

The eagle flew away. She rummaged in her pack for a jug of kumiss, then crawled out from her shelter and knelt. “Koko Mongke Tengri,” she chanted, calling out to the Eternal Blue Heaven that covered all as she sprinkled a few drops of the kumiss as an offering. “Guide me now, allow me to do your will.” It came to her that Tengri had always been as merciless as the Khan seemed to be in the visions Kuan had shown to her. If this great Khan was destined to rule the world in times to come, that could only come to pass by the will of Heaven. All she could do was to follow the path she had been given and honor the oaths she had sworn. “I cannot know what you want, O great Tengri, but allow me to accept it, to give my assent to it, to do as you wish.”

The spirits in the trees whispered to one another, and Mount Chegcher seemed to sigh in the wind, but she heard no other voices.

She got to her feet and removed her coat from the shelter of sticks, then went to her horse. The Onggirats would be on the move to Lake Kolen, to hunt birds near the marshes and fatten their herds in those richer pastures. She could be there in time to raise her own tent for Jirghadai, to greet Doghuz and Nayan and tell them that the spirits had called her to follow the path of the shamaness. Bortai would likely be one of the first to welcome her. She would think of the Onggirat girl's beauty and kindness and try not to remember the visions Kuan had sent to her.

Erdeni tightened the girths of her saddle, tied her pack to the horn, mounted her horse, and made her

way down the mountainside, knowing that she would do nothing when Temujin of the Mongols came for his betrothed.

---

At [www.fictionwise.com](http://www.fictionwise.com) you can:

- Rate this story
- Find more stories by this author
- Get story recommendations