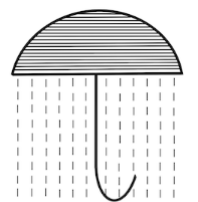


# The Six Ex-Lovers

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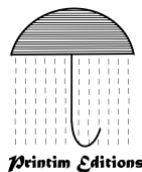
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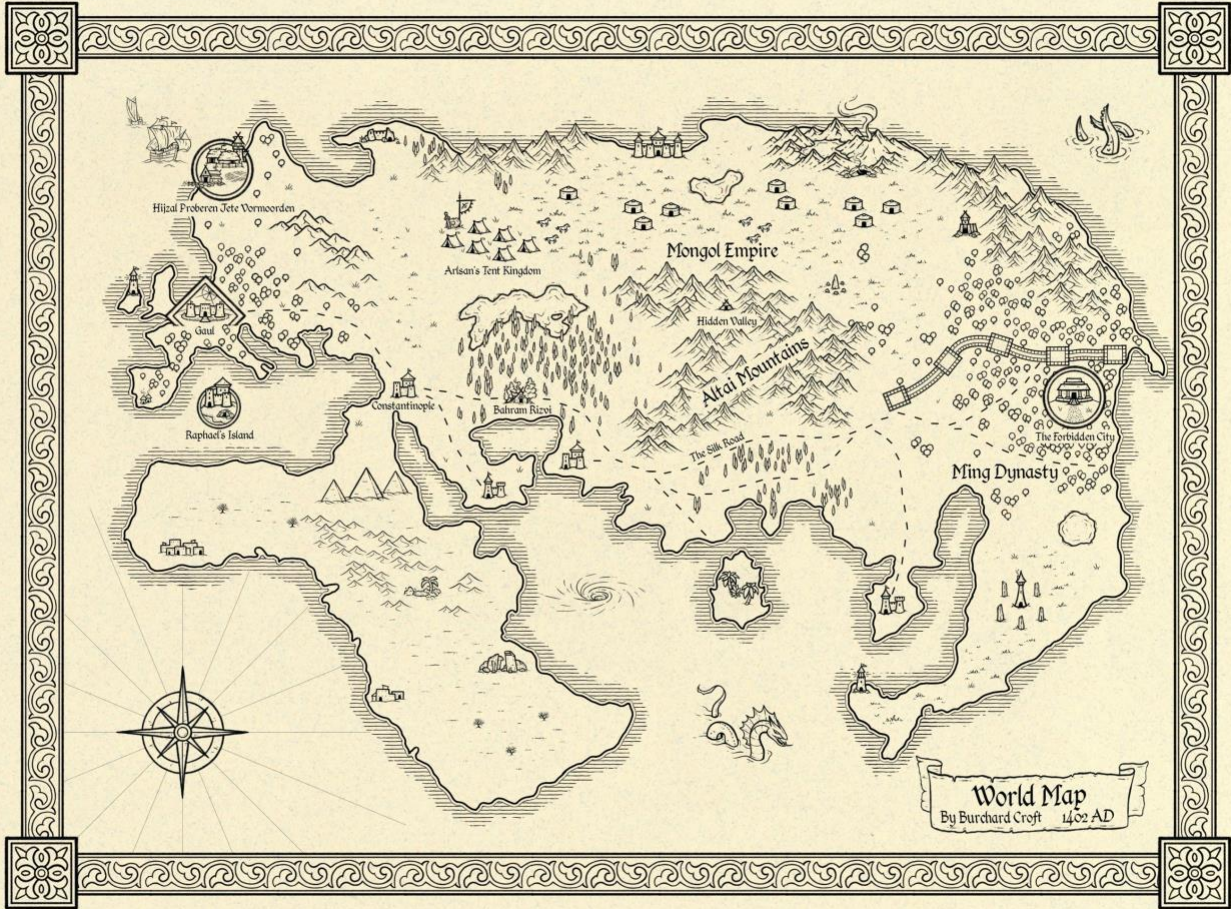
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Hijal Proberen Jete Vermoorden

Gaul

Raphael's Island

Constantinople

Bahram River

Mongol Empire

Hidden Valley

Alai Mountains

The Silk Road

Ming Dynasty

The Forbidden City

World Map  
By Burchard Croft 1400 AD

## I

It was the year 1402 and the Mongol Empire was being ripped apart by warring fragments. The Mongol Yuan dynasty had fallen in 1368 and the Chinese Hang Ming dynasty had taken control of the Mongol capital. The Golden Horde, which had been defeated in the west by Poland and Lithuania, was breaking into competing khanates. Farther south, in Persia, the death of Abu Sa'id Bahadur Khan in 1335, the heirless ninth ruler of the Ilkhanate, had caused the region to descend into political chaos.

The economic and political unity of the Silk Road was collapsing. In the south-west, Turkish tribes invaded and captured parts of the Silk Road from the Byzantine Empire, planting the seeds for a Turkish culture that would grow and eventually become the Ottoman Empire under the Sunni Faith, conquering Constantinople in 1453.

Europe was rotting and dead. In the previous century, the black plague had taken fifty million lives and the flourishing trade that had existed between the east and the west had disintegrated. Europe was only beginning to crawl out of its grave and to take feeble refuge in the shadows of the dark ages.

The construction of the Great Wall of China had been revived by the Ming Dynasty at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of risen mounds of earth; stones and bricks were used to keep the Mongols out and to prevent a cavalry invasion. Twenty-five thousand watchtowers were installed. As raids continued, the Ming dedicated substantial resources to repair and rebuild the wall, and after centuries of Mongol rule, China was plunging itself into centuries of isolation.

It was a violent, terrible period in human history. The Mongol Empire had been the largest empire the world had ever seen, providing coherence, stability and tranquility for more than a quarter of the world's population, and now this empire had been defeated and was falling into ruin.

To live was to survive, and the blood of betrayal and deceit flowed steadily into the rivers and lakes throughout the land.



Terbish Ganzorig grew up as an only child in the Altai mountains. She had the same wild, savage spirit of her great-grandmother, Khutulun, a powerful Mongolian warrior who was described by Marco Polo during his travels in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Since Terbish's father, Chuluun, had desired a son and missed his dead wife every day he unconsciously raised his daughter with a militant brutality. He began training her to ride a horse at the same age she learned to walk. He trained her to shoot an arrow at the same time she learned to write. They wrestled together, Chuluun defeating his daughter mercilessly every time. They climbed the nearby mountains with rocks on their backs. Chuluun taught Terbish that the world was cruel and full of sorrow. He told her that she could never leave the hidden valley in the Altai mountains.

Terbish resented her father's warnings and protection and feverishly desired adventure. As she grew into a woman, her distaste for boredom and her familiar surroundings grew bitter. Chuluun became increasingly anxious as his daughter's rebellion and curiosity for the outside world intensified. When he went on scouting missions, he observed that more and more hordes were passing through the mountains. He feared for his daughter and in order to try and quench her desires for adventure, he attempted to find her a husband when she was fifteen. But each man he brought back filled her with disgust. She was blossoming into a powerful woman and the men she encountered were sordid and loathsome. They fawned, complimented, and groveled in her presence, and their courting gestures filled her with abhorrence.

Chuluun was desperate to find a worthy suitor, and began traveling farther and farther away from their home.

One night, when Chuluun returned from another expedition with a potential suitor, Terbish confessed her hidden desire as they were walking into her tent.

“I want to see the world, Father. And I do not need a man.”

“I will not let you travel outside of these mountains without a husband. Please show respect to our visitor and hold your tongue.”

“I am not marrying him. I can see in his eyes that he is weak and cowardly.”

The potential suitor, who wearing a silk deel with a red sash around the waist, leaned against the wooden post and began fiddling with a rusty dagger. Despite being insulted, he smiled, revealing black, rotting teeth. He was a scout for a horde of traveling thieves. He admired the treasures in the hut, which had been steadily accumulated over three generations.

“You will regret saying that,” said the thief. Terbish glared at the suitor.

“I do not regret anything I say.” The thief coughed with hoarse laughter. He admired her beauty which seemed to glow in the flickering candlelight. She was bare-chested and her firm breasts and smooth, soft skin seemed to pulse with energy and heat. He laughed because he imagined himself returning and taking Terbish against her will.

“Have a good night, my princess.”

The thief departed the hut and Chuluun exploded with rage. He had been searching six weeks for a husband and out of desperation blindly chose the thief. He was exhausted from his travels and his patience was worn thin.

“How dare you insult a guest in such a manner, after he traveled six days to ask your hand in marriage?”

“Father, did you see how he looked at us? I can find a man on my own.”

“You will not leave this home without my permission.”

“I am leaving tomorrow.” In a frenzy Chuluun began wrestling his daughter. They smashed into the furniture, growled, cursed, and woke up Chuluun’s parents, Yul and Tuya, who were sleeping next door. They were both half-deaf and thought they were in a nightmare.

For the first time in Terbish’s life, she defeated her father in a wrestling match. She pinned him down and immobilized his limbs. Chuluun struggled but his daughter was too strong. Acknowledging his defeat, and the inevitability of his daughter’s departure, he began to cry.

“Terbish, I love you so much, you cannot go, you are all I have.”

“But Father, I will return.”

“You are not ready. You need a husband to protect you.”

“I do not need anyone. Please, let me go.”

“I cannot.” Yul and Tuya heard Chuluun sobbing and left their hut.

“Chuluun? Terbish? What is the meaning of this disturbance?” Terbish let her father stand up and go outside. While Chuluun was talking with his parents, Terbish realized that she could not wait until the morning to depart. She grabbed two sacks from her part of the hut, which she had already prepared for the journey, and snuck out the back flap. She went to the outdoor stables, quietly saddled the fastest horse, and rode into the fields. Chuluun and his parents heard the commotion, but it was too late.

“Terbish! No!” Chuluun stumbled over to the stables, but he collapsed from pain and exhaustion. Terbish had broken one of his ribs while they were wrestling.

“Terbish! Come back!” He pulled himself up and tried to saddle a horse.

“Let her go, Chuluun.” Yul was hobbling over to his son. “She is too far. Do not waste your time chasing her.”

“But Father, I cannot let her leave like this.”

“Do not fear. She will return.” Yul put his arm around his son and helped him walk back to the hut. “You are hurt. You need rest.” He helped his son into bed. “You know my father rarely mentioned my mother. But I remember him sharing a story, soon after I found my wife. He said, ‘Yul, I could never control Khutulun. And I did not want to.’ I never forgot this. And now you must understand that your daughter is a woman. You cannot control her anymore. You must let her go.”

“Thank you, Father. Good night.” He returned to his ger and fell asleep.

Sixteen days later the thief and his horde arrived at the home of the Ganzorigs in the hidden valley. The thief had described the treasures in the hut and assured his comrades that the only obstacle was a man, his daughter, and an elderly couple. A group of thirty men, half the horde, broke into the huts. They captured Yul, Tuya, and Chuluun, dragged them outside, and tied them up with ropes.

“Where is your daughter? Where is she hiding?” screamed the thief. None of the Ganzorigs spoke or showed fear. “If that is how you answer my questions.” The thief took out a dagger and thrust it into Tuya’s heart, who did not make a sound, but only blinked rapidly and bit her lips. Both Yul and Chuluun struggled against the ropes that bound them. “Which direction did she go?” The thief approached Yul. “Tell me old man, unless you want to see your wife die first.” Yul spit in his face. The thief smiled, wiped the spit out of his eyes, and walked calmly to his horse. He retrieved a sabre, returned to the captives, and cut off Tuya’s head. He gripped the head by the hair and returned to Yul.

“Kiss your wife before you die, old man.” The thief pushed the bleeding head against Yul’s face, who writhed in despair and rage. As the thief tortured Yul, the rest of the horde arrived, who



had been signaled with a flaming arrow as soon as the Ganzorigs were captured. The leader of the remaining horde, the third in command, was Khulun Khan.

“Zhagro, what is the meaning of this?” Zhagro was the second in command and the animosity between the two men had been growing steadily for months. They both desired to become the leader of the horde and were waiting for their time to strike.

“I am using intimidation to discover the whereabouts of my betrothal.” He smiled and pulled out a dagger. He knew that Khulun was partial to mercy, and that if he did not kill quickly, a political conflict or a tribal mutiny could occur. Zhagro stabbed Yul in the neck with a dagger, the blood spurting onto his face. He licked the blood with a scarred tongue and walked over to Chuluun. “And now it is your turn.”

“Do not kill him,” said Khulun.

“You do not have the right to question my authority, orphan. I can still see your mother’s milk drying on your lips.”

“What will his death serve?”

“One less man hunting us for revenge.”

“Do you fear a man hunting you for revenge? No doubt his daughter will return. He will tell her what occurred here and they will try to find you. Then you can have her, if you are strong enough.” The men behind Khulun chuckled and began murmuring in agreement. “If you leave him alive, he will tell all who pass through this valley the extent of your power and cruelty, and the fear of our horde will spread. If you do not fear being hunted, you will leave this wretched man alive. The Mongols conquered the world by brutality, but they always left survivors so the memory of their strength would be sustained.”

Zhagro sensed something wrong with Khulun's logic, but he was a stupid man and could feel Khulun's supporters bracing for a fight. He would appease Khulun's request to avoid a conflict, but he would not give in entirely, to maintain his political clout.

"Yes Khulun, you are right. But a man does not need his legs to talk," and with a swoop of his sabre he cut off the legs of Chuluun. The supporters of Zhagro cheered. "Now take what you want! I saw gold beneath the old man's bed!" The thieves pushed and shoved into the dwellings.

"Bandage that man!" Khulun ordered his men to dress the wounds of Chuluun and carry him away from Zhagro and his looters.

The thieves set fire to the huts and gers after they had stolen everything of value. They slept in the valley and planned to leave at dawn. As the sun rose over the mountains, Khulun snuck to Chuluun and pressed a potion to his lips.

"Drink, this will give you strength." Chuluun was dying, and drank the mixture out of hope and necessity. "I have hidden water, bandages, and food on the north side of the ashes of the huts. It is buried beneath a red stone. That is all I could do. Zhagro is a cruel man, and I will kill him when I have a chance. Your tragedy will not be forgotten. If I find your daughter, I will tell her of your courage and strength."

Chuluun could not speak, but with his eyes he expressed his deepest gratitude. Soon after the thieves rode off into the sparkling mist, leaving Yul and Tuya's heads on pikes, and a flag that was the symbol of their clan.



Khulun Khan became an orphan at two years old when his mother, Gerel, was killed by an arrow in the neck by a band of traveling thieves. He was going to be abandoned but the third wife

of the clan leader claimed she wanted the child, because she could not bear one herself. The clan leader noticed that the dead woman must have been of high rank in a Mongolian army or an aristocrat, based on the quality of her horse and her clothing. He let his third wife adopt the child, who could someday become a useful warrior for the tribe.

Khulun's childhood and adolescence was rife with hardship and trial. The other children in the horde would not accept him because he was an orphan, and they were jealous of his superior capacities. From an early age, Khulun excelled in everything he attempted, and began teaching himself the skills necessary for a Mongolian warrior: horse-back riding, archery, wrestling, scouting, corralling livestock, and sparring. He observed the other men in the horde and learned quickly and easily. There was an old man who had been a scribe, and with his help Khulun learned to read and write. To Khulun's peers, he always seemed to be living in a distant dream or a different world unlike their own, and this increased their hatred towards him. And unlike his peers, Khulun did not share their predispositions for unprovoked cruelty or unreasonable violence.

Khulun's adopted mother loved him and cared for him with dedication and sympathy, but she learned early on in his childhood that he did not need her. When he was still a boy, she began relying on him for advice and counsel.

When Khulun was ten, the other children in the tribe took turns sneaking into his mother's hut at night and throwing horse manure on them. Khulun learned to sleep lightly and to punish his peers harsh enough to prevent reoccurring episodes of malice.

When Khulun was fifteen, his adopted mother was murdered by the leader of the horde. She had been caught making love to another man, and the leader killed them both with an ax while they were still in bed. Khulun considered leaving the tribe and surviving on his own, but he desired to someday kill the leader of the tribe in order to avenge his adopted mother's death and to take over the horde. Despite the hatred from Khulun's peers, the older men and women in the

tribe had a growing respect for him. Khulun believed he could change the tribe from grasping scoundrels into honorable heathens, and decided to wait and bide his time. Khulun also had numerous lovers in the tribe, older women who hungered after his quiet charm and youthful vitality, and he preferred their pleasure and affection and the potential power of leading a horde to the untethered life of wandering in the wilderness.

Men argued over Khulun's battle exploits, claiming that he could shoot arrows with deadly accuracy while riding his horse at top speed, and wield a sabre as if it were a knife. Men claimed that Khulun was always on guard, always aware of potential traps, and that he was impossible to assassinate. As the years passed and more and more men witnessed Khulun's power in raids and fights, his following grew and the stories of his life became whispered fables.



A week after the Ganzorig home had been ambushed and destroyed, Khulun challenged Zhagro to a duel, and defeated him without sustaining a single injury. He cut off his testicles after three minutes of sparring, then watched him bleed to death and moan for compassion. The horde was split in half, the leader siding with Zhagro's men. There was a battle, where the majority of the horde was killed, and Khulun and his followers claimed victory.

“We must leave this part of the world,” ordered Khulun after the battle, with blood streaming down his face, “and travel with haste to the far ends of the Mongolian empire. We are known in this land as scoundrels. There are men hunting us as I speak, and we are not prepared to defend ourselves. When I was a boy, I befriended a Cossack in the far west. We will travel there, build our horde, and restore it to its former greatness.” The remaining women and men roared in approval. “We will no longer be thieves. We will no longer attack the helpless and the weak. We

will fight against the hordes that are ravaging the land and staining the Mongol name. In this era of chaos and strife, we will bring order through justice and the sabre, and we will become the greatest Mongol tribe on Earth.” After his speech, Khulun and his tribe packed their possessions, mounted their horses, and traveled for two months to the contracting border of the empire.



After Terbish had been traveling for three weeks on her own, she decided, while bathing leisurely in a pond, to return to the hidden valley. She believed that her departure, without saying goodbye to her father and grandparents, had been hasty and harsh. She wanted to show them that she could survive on her own and hoped that they would now support her decision.

Upon arriving in the hidden valley, Terbish saw mounds of ashes where the buildings of her home once stood, and the decaying heads of her grandparents, still on pikes, whose eyes had been picked out by vultures and crows. Terbish fell to the ground and wept convulsively. Her body shook and trembled as she gasped for breath, and she gripped the ashen earth beneath her, which seemed to be spiraling into oblivion. For the first time in her life she felt the sickening nausea of shame and the crushing weight of regret. She felt as if a knife was twisting deep inside of her soul, and that her surroundings were disintegrating into blackness. But in the midst of the horror and plummeting despair, she latched onto a possibility of hope, that was like a ray of light shining across the encroaching shadows.

“Father! Where are you? Father!” Something told her that he was still alive. She searched the wreckage for evidence. She found nothing. She followed the tracks of the horses that led to a nearby stream. She had no doubt that the thieves had traveled with their horses in the shallow water to delay the following of their tracks.

“Father!” At the edge of the stream Terbish saw him, blood seeping from the bottom of his torso, where his legs had been cut off. He had dragged his body to the stream to drink, and was starving to death.

Terbish collapsed at his emaciated body and turned him over. His face was pale, almost green, and there were already fleas and maggots eating away at his skin. His eyes were almost shut, infected with grime, but when he saw his daughter they opened slightly, and his swollen mouth twitched with the glimmer of a smile. On the edge of death, the sight of his daughter concentrated the last remnants of his strength into one, final effort.

“Terbish, my daughter, my love.” He imagined that he was already dead and that he had reached Eternal Heaven.

“Do not speak Father, please. I will save you.” Terbish took out a piece of qurut from her pocket, chewed it, put her lips against her father’s lips, and let the liquid flow into his mouth. Chuluun coughed and felt excruciating pain. He realized in the confusion of his suffering that he was still alive. He could not swallow. He knew that he would die soon, and focused all his remaining force on speaking.

“I love you Terbish. I am dying.”

“No Father, do not say anything, hold on. Please.”

“I am proud of you. Find the thieves, kill them, but there was a man who...”

“We will kill them together, Father. You will survive. Please.” She cupped water into her hands and forced him to drink. Chuluun coughed again and felt his eyesight fading. He stared into Terbish’s eyes and felt joy that he could see her once more before he died. That was the only thought that had been in his mind since the thieves had left five days ago, the only reason he held on.

“There was a man who...you must...”

“Father, I love you, I am so sorry, Father...” Chuluun’s eyes glazed over and his lips froze. Terbish pressed her head against his chest. She could no longer feel his heartbeat, and wept over his body for hours, as night fell. She passed out from exhaustion, awoke in the morning light, and carried his body back to the ashes of their home. She buried Chuluun and the heads of her grandparents in the charred remains of a field where she used to run and play as a child.

The thieves had taken everything. Terbish searched the valley for all possible traces of their horde. The only objective in her life was finding this tribe and killing every one of its members. She remembered the potential suitor, and knew that it was him who had brought the thieves to the hidden valley. She vowed to herself that she would stop at nothing to seek revenge.

Terbish knew that it would take many years to prepare herself for this task. She would be patient, she would become a great warrior, and she would build her own tribe. She would steadily purge the land of the kind of thieves that had taken away everything she loved.

She found a vial with peculiar markings, the same vial that Khulun had given her father to drink. She took the flag of the thieves off the pike, and packed it with all of her belongings. She would use these two objects to hunt and find the horde. In the afternoon she left the hidden valley and rode towards the western horizon.

## II

For the next twenty-nine years Terbish Ganzorig would hunt Khulun Khan and his tribe of thieves. Every night she dreamed of the day she would achieve her revenge. Soon after she left the hidden valley, she learned from a thief that the horde who killed her family had experienced a

mutiny, been divided in half, and had fled to the south-west, Persia, in order to gain strength. Terbish thanked the thief graciously, then slit his throat when his back was turned.

The false information led to ten years of dead-end searches. But during this time Terbish built a tribe of mostly women who had lost loved ones and who desired to bring justice to a world that was increasingly being torn apart by brutality and cowards.

As Terbish traveled the land she took many lovers. But once she satisfied her animal lust, she either abandoned these men, or killed them, depending on her whims. Not only did she hold on to an underlying hatred of the male sex, due to the memory of the thieves who murdered her family, but all the men she encountered filled her with apathy. They often gave her gifts and tempted her with luxurious goods. They often asked for her hand in marriage. But Terbish refused to be led astray from her mission by possessions or marital bonds.

Terbish's reputation as a savage, beautiful warrior who had spurned or killed all of her suitors attracted the flaming, bold desires of kings, scholars, explorers, bandits, and all who thought they were worthy of her passion. As a distant descendant of Ghenghis Khan, who had raped thousands of women during his conquests, she shared his wild lust and made love indiscriminately. She enjoyed breaking men who lost themselves in the pleasures of her body, then discarding them as if they were tattered garments, knowing they would never forget the pleasures she had given them. Whenever she became pregnant, she solicited the help of the women in her tribe to perform forced-miscarriages.

After ten more years of searching and traveling steadily north, Terbish learned from a wandering priest in Margraviate of Moravia that the markings on the vial were from the far



northwest, and she traveled with her tribe, that was now fifty strong, to Gaul. When they arrived Terbish saved a young man, whose parents had been killed by thieves and was left to die, who became her only friend. He was a peculiar man, considered deranged by everyone in the tribe. He spoke ten languages and was named Goman Rarnier. He became her tutor and advisor, teaching her to speak and write new languages. He was useful as a translator and became a loyal companion.

After failing to find Khulun and his tribe in the west, Terbish returned to Mongolia. She began wondering if the horde that killed her family still existed. She began spending more time with lovers that interested her, especially if they had knowledge to share or power that could be useful in her quest. And as time and battles blurred her distant memories, she took more pleasure in the vanities of the world: jewelry, clothing, expansive dwellings, furs, and books. But in the end, she always left her lovers. They were never enough, her mission was not finished, and she could never rest until she had killed the man who had murdered her family.

One day, after twenty-nine years of searching, Terbish received a promising letter claiming to know the location of the horde she was hunting. Terbish had received many letters such as this before, as her reputation had spread across the world, but after Goman had translated the letter, which was written in Latin, he told Terbish that he believed in its authenticity. The letter contained a drawing of the horde's flag that resembled the flag that Terbish always carried in her pocket, the flag she had discovered in the hidden valley. Only Goman knew of this flag's existence. The tribe of Terbish immediately departed and set off to find the man who wrote the missive.

Terbish and her fifty strong companions, using directions written in the letter, arrived at the north-western border of Mongolia. They discovered the man who had written the message living

alone deep in a forest. He told Terbish that he expected five-hundred horses and a woman for the location of the horde.

“If you speak the truth, you will receive your reward,” said Terbish. “Towa! Remove your clothes!” A woman standing nearby undressed. “Will this woman suit your tastes?”

The thief grinned and licked his lips. “Yes.”

“What do you know about this horde?”

“I was a young man, almost a boy, when we traveled to the hidden valley in the Altai mountains, where I saw the corpses of your grandparents. Your father’s legs were cut off.” Terbish shivered and gritted her teeth.

“Tell me the location of the valley.” The thief answered truthfully. “Where is the horde now?”

“Only after you fulfill my request.”

“I said where is the horde now!” Terbish drew her sabre and pointed the tip against his neck.

“If you kill me, you will not learn what you have been seeking to find.”

“You underestimate my patience.” A woman appeared from behind the man and held him still, as Terbish slowly pushed the blade into his skin.

“Please, I will speak.”

“I am listening.”

“They are located sixty miles west at the moment, but they are strong, and they are no longer thieves. They kill wandering groups of bandits. Their leader is-”

“That is enough. Tie him up.”

“Do not tie me up. Please. After your family was killed there was mutiny. I am the only one who knows the truth of what happened!”

“Enough! Gag him. I do not want to hear him squeal.”

“You need my help. You cannot do this!”

“I do not need anyone’s help. Goodnight, coward. Now it is time for your reward.” The thief was gagged with a cloth, then Terbish cut off his testicles. She removed the cloth, shoved the man’s testicles into his mouth, and watched him suffocate. After he was dead, Terbish turned to the naked woman. “You can put your clothes back on, Towa, I am sorry to tell you that your husband has passed away.” The women laughed, burned the man’s hut, and traveled off into the night.

The next day Terbish left on scouting missions with three of her finest female warriors and discovered everything she could about this tribe and their leader, Khulun Khan. The thief had spoken the truth that the tribe had changed from plunderers and scoundrels to protectors and saviors. Every village praised the men and called them the sacred defenders of the region.

Terbish became fascinated by the legends surrounding Khulun. He had never taken a wife, was impossible to assassinate, and was rarely seen. She met women who called him a god, men who claimed he was made of shadows, and priests who warned her that his soul was a spawn of hell. Despite the recommendations of Goman and the women she trusted, Terbish desired to assassinate the man herself. If her tribe attacked his clan as a group, she risked someone else killing her target. Terbish had not waited twenty-nine years for a member of her tribe to achieve the murder she had been seeking to commit. Terbish wanted to watch the man, who was responsible for her family’s destruction, suffer.

It was a full moon the night Terbish rode to the tribe known as the sacred defenders. She looked up at the sky, clear and full of stars, and reflected on how her entire past had led up to this assassination. All the searching, all the training, all the lost efforts would not be in vain. After she

killed Khulun, Terbish made a promise to herself that she would either travel to the distant edges of the world and retire into obscurity in northeast Siberia, or commit suicide.

After murdering three guards with her bow and arrow, Terbish snuck into the camp unnoticed. Her scouts had informed her which tent belonged to Khulun. She pulled aside the flaps and silently stepped into the dwelling.

Inside she saw a man whose back was turned, reading by candle light. She silently loaded an arrow. The man spoke,

“You found me. At last.” Terbish paused. In the corner of the room she heard a deep growl. She saw a wolf stand up from the shadows and bare its teeth. “Hano! Leave!” The wolf whimpered and trotted outside through the back flap. Terbish put down her bow and arrow.

“Did you know I was coming?”

“Did you believe that your scouting would not come to my attention?”

“So you know why I am here?”

“Yes.” Khulun stood up, his torso bare, and faced Terbish. She lost her breath. He was not large, but lean, and his muscles were cut by the sharp angles of the candle light. His skin was slashed with scars of battles. He had thick, black hair and dark, green eyes that seemed to devour her. A part of Terbish regretted that she would not make love to this man. She had waited too long to indulge in pleasure. “Would you like to talk before trying to kill me?”

“No.” Terbish reached behind her back and threw a dagger at Khulun’s chest. With a swift movement, he dodged the blade.

“I am not going to kill you,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I finished murdering innocent victims long ago.”

“I am not an innocent victim.”

“Yes, you are. I saw your grandparents die, and your father survive.”

“Do not talk about my father.”

“He-” Terbish lunged towards Khulun with another blade that she snatched from her waist. He caught her arm. They stared at one another as Terbish struggled to plunge the blade into his heart. “It is no use.” He knocked the blade out of her hand. She kicked him in the groin and he fell. Terbish jumped on him and they wrestled.

“I have killed men stronger than you.” They rolled into furniture. They heard shouts from outside the tent. Khulun took hold of Terbish and threw her across the room. “Do not come in!” he yelled. “She is mine.”

“I am not yours,” Terbish retrieved her bow and arrow and shot Khulun in the shoulder. He attempted to pull the arrow out, breaking off the end, then he leaped towards the assassin. He held her limbs against the ground.

“You have been warned. I can see that you are a mighty warrior. Leave this land and do not come back. The next time I see you, I will not show mercy.” Terbish spat in his face.

“Save your mercy.” Khulun struck the side of her neck, hitting her vagus nerve, and she fell unconscious. Then he pulled her arms over his shoulder and carried her two miles outside of the camp.

Hours later Terbish woke up in a field with her horse and some provisions. She climbed a hill and observed that the tribe had departed. She cursed her weakness and rode with haste back to her clan.

Upon arriving, Goman and Terbish’s trusted warriors advised her to forget this mission. They expressed the desire to attack the departed tribe as a group as soon as possible, before they lost the trail.

“No,” replied Terbish. “This is my purpose. I have waited twenty-nine years to kill this murderer. And I have a plan. I will travel back and enter the camp unarmed. I will kill him with my bare hands, or whatever I can find. If I do not return in five days, find the tribe and attack.”

As her companions argued against her plan, Terbish jumped on a horse and galloped off into the fields.

When Terbish arrived at the border of Khulun’s clan, two days later, night was beginning to fall. The sunset was a line of liquid fire on the horizon, disappearing into the blue-gray embers of the darkening sky. She raised her arms to signal that she was not a threat, and two guards escorted her into the camp.

“What is your business here, woman?”

“I have a meeting with your leader.”

“Is that so? He is currently occupied. In the meantime, we will tie you up.”

“Let her be.” Nearby, Khulun was eating mutton and having a discussion with some men by a fire. He stood up, motioned for Terbish to follow him and for the men to stay, and walked to the other side of the encampment to his tent.

Inside, Khulun started to make a fire while Terbish stood in front of the entrance flap.

“I told you not to return.” Khulun struck flint against a rock. “Which means that one of us will have to die tonight.” Terbish smiled. She slowly began removing her clothes. Khulun paused in his preparation to admire her beauty, her sensuousness, her voluptuous form. As each garment was removed Khulun felt his desire grow deeper, admiring her smooth skin, firm breasts, and round buttocks. He smiled and lit the fire.

“Do not go easy,” said Terbish. “You promised that you would not show mercy.”

“I will not.” Khulun took off his clothes, and Terbish observed with satisfaction that he was consumed by lust. She felt a wild hunger, a hot frenzy burning in her chest, and lunged towards Khulun. He grabbed her arms, pinning her to the ground as she struggled.