

One Night in Ikh Khulan
2019
Collected in "The Moon Panther"

Note:

One Night in Ikh Khulan is the second of four novellas published in my collection, *The Moon Panther*. About 40,000 words, it follows minor noble Dzöndzüükii as he meets with various officials in the imperial capital of Ikh Khulan. While there, he finds himself overwhelmed by the city's opulence, the scheming of various officials, and the Machiavellian web of the empress-concubine, Viola.

In this scene, he returns to his room to find two salacious women in his bed, and quickly leaves, where more trouble awaits.

To expound on the various characters interacting in this scene: Erdene is his wife, Lindsay his sole concubine, Sekhtani is Lindsay's private guard, Valeria is Lindsay's handmaiden, Emiliana is an Ikh Khulan secretary assigned to his case.

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He barged into the room, found the front entrance empty. "Erdene," he called, suspecting she was around the corner. There was no response. "Erdene," he called again, a little louder. He hoped she wasn't sleeping, didn't want to wake her.

He walked around the corner. The privacy curtain was open. Two half-naked Chinese women were perched on the bed. (Erdene was nowhere to be seen.)

For a half-second, he actually considered the possibility that he'd walked into the wrong room. These things were all the same, weren't they? Cookie-cutter suites? But no, of course he hadn't.

The ladies, each gorgeous, svelte, with intricately styled hair and ruby-red lips, arose from the bed. They wore panties, stockings and garters, one wore a lacy bra while the other had merely a loose-fitting see-through negligee. They approached him. "You must be Lord Dzöndzüükii," the one in the bra said.

"Uhhh..." he replied.

"My name is Qin," she said. Motioned to the other. "This is my sister, Hui."

"Uhhh..."

Qin smiled, took the lead. "Hui, dear, can you help me with this?" and hooked a thumb into her bra strap. Hui snaked in behind her, unclipped her sister's bra – with her teeth.

Both sets of breasts were perfect. He stared unabashed; couldn't help himself.

Hui touched her sister. There was a kiss shared between the two of them – a very intimate kiss. Hui said, "Do you like that, Lord Dzöndzüükii?"

"Uhhh..."

She had her sister's nipple between two fingers.

"Join us," said Qin.

He stumbled so far backwards that he nearly fell over. Hui made a move to step towards him, losing her practised composure, a little anxiety creeping into her face.

The woman named Qin said, "Lord Dzöndz—"

But he was already out the door. He had no idea what the fuck this was, where his wife was, what games the establishment in Ikh Khulan was playing.

He was back in the lobby. Lindsay was on the couch next to Valeria, they were talking about comic books and gambling. He was practically charging like a running bull.

"Dzöndzüükii?" his concubine asked, concern in her voice, appearing at his side.

"Where's that woman, Em... – Emiliana?"

Valeria was off, running to find their minder.

"What is it, Dzöndzüükii?" Lindsay was asking, trying to keep pace with him. They were out the front door and back out into that vast courtyard.

"Where's your Amazon?" he asked (demanded). "I don't want her to leave your side. She's to sleep at the foot of your bed, understand?"

Lindsay hastened back into the front lobby, reappeared only seconds later, the princess protector in tow. Sekhtani was prepared, as a proper Amazon should be, with her swords and a light vest of lamellar armour.

"What is going on?" Lindsay demanded.

"I need to find my wife."

Keeping pace, they descended the black steps to the grass. The vast Council ger loomed large thirty or so meters away. He turned away from it, went right. He passed around one of the other towers (he knew not which one) and headed for the back of the palace complex. Lindsay, still in her skimpy outfit, was practically jogging to keep up.

Valeria reappeared, Emiliana in tow. "Lord Dzöndzüükii," the woman began, "is everything all right—"

"There's two women in my room."

Emiliana wasn't privy to this, clearly. "They're... probably housekeeping, my lord."

"These were no maids. They were stripping each other and inviting me...."

He suddenly realized what he was saying, and, in turn, who these women were.

Emiliana beat him to it. "It sounds to me like they're concubines, sir."

"Of course they're concubines," he spat, trying to make it seem like he'd known that from the beginning. "*Whose* concubines? I only have one."

"Uh... I'll look into this immediately, my lord," she said.

He, his concubine and her Amazon and handmaiden, passed through the back gate of the palace complex, past a trio of palace Amazons, where all three of them had to flash their paizas and have titles and positions off them recorded at the gatehouse. He was still in a panic, needed to find his wife, needed to find John. He knew Mamai would be back here – there'd be a briefing in progress with the men.

The imperial stable complex was larger in area than the grounds of the Black Rock. It was also fenced in, a long line of stables up the left hand side, a series of villas interspersed along the right, and a fenced pen probably as large as the palace itself in the centre for walking and grazing the horses. Only a small number of animals from the imperial herds were housed here, kept at the ready for when royals needed them for this or that. There was maybe a hundred and fifty or so horses out in the field right now, heads to the ground, munching away. The vast majority of the imperial herds would be hours from here; they'd probably seen some of them on their ride into the city.

He headed right, towards the little village. He probably should have asked Ms Emiliana where exactly his men were being lodged out there. There was probably close to five hundred residences, grouped together in villas, in two- and three-storey tenements, in small bungalows, used by imperial stablehands, yam riders, low-ranking military men, and the staff of visiting diplomats like himself. There were even commercial areas set up in here, convenience shops and little markets.

"Where in the hell have they been put up?" he grumbled.

"Ms Emiliana mentioned something about Qara Qoyunlu hamlet," Valeria said.

It seemed that market square – seven or eight vendors selling fruits and vegetables and dairy – had a hamlet name, denoted by a sign erected at the centre of the square. They arrived at one, named Qongqor Moir, looked down the laneways leading either way, saw a couple of vendor booths another five hundred paces or so down the line, couldn't make heads or tails of this sprawling, poorly planned village.

He walked straight up to a dairy booth, a half a dozen different varieties of cheese for sale, asked the man where Qara Qoyunlu was. The man pointed him in the right direction, around to the other side of this market, past the man at the end with the drums of airag, then down the foot path another two hundred paces. He headed that way, down to the end of the row, saw the booth with three huge barrels and men filling up flagons, went to go around the gathering–

He saw the blade, gleam in the last light of the sun, ducked – fell to the ground.

"Make it quick," someone muttered.

Now there were three men there. He saw daggers. They had hoods, heavy cloaks. Someone was shouting – the airag salesman, probably. There was a commotion, women screaming.

He rolled, tumbled right into the legs of a man, saw a four-hundred-mil dagger in the man's hand. His eyes went wide–

There was suddenly a boot ramming itself into the assassin's chest; the man stumbled backwards. There were agile feminine legs scurrying about now – Sekhtani. She moved, the assassin, too impossibly quickly, lost his arm, the thing thumping against the muddy ground, fingers still clutched onto the blade.

It was now that he heard Lindsay's scream. She'd probably been screaming for some seconds now, but it only just reached his ears.

He was still on his back, saw legs charging for him, rolled once more, got to his hands and knees and suddenly felt a boot drive itself into his gut. He cringed in pain, nearly choked, felt it radiate outwards. This man also had a dagger, had it up now, plunging down–

The killer's throat was gone, ripped apart like dogs had gotten to it, by Sekhtani's hook blade.

He bore through the pain, got to his feet. There were three more men (the armless man now dispatched as well). Each of them was twice the size of the Amazon, who clutched a hook sword in either hand, half-crouched and ready to take them on. Two of them had daggers, while one had a full scimitar.

"Sekhtani," he gasped, trying to get the words out, "protect Lindsay."

He had his own blade, a dagger, which he fumbled for at his waist. The Amazon made no attempt to obey him and move closer to the concubine, who was huddling with her handmaiden under an awning.

"Waste this bitch," snorted one of the attackers, and suddenly Sekhtani was besieged by two of them, charging her. The one with the scimitar came in, the blade out in front – she smacked it with her own but didn't try to counter the weight of it. She came around, twirling like a godsdamned ballerina – she had kicked the first of them in the side of the knee, used that as leverage to fly through the air, raked the hook in her left across the shoulder of the second one. It got him right in the sweet spot, between the neck and the shoulder. There was blood, and there was a wailing coming from him; she didn't give him a chance to make too much noise. She punched the blade forward, driving home the sharpened peaks of the knuckle guard, right into his chest. It went deep – she practically had her whole fist in there – and then, still moving, momentum carrying her, she came round again, her other blade outstretched–

It was a gory death for the man with the scimitar, who'd barely had a chance to feel his broken leg. His head was half-severed, and he didn't even get a chance to choke on his blood.

The last one, who'd been watching, had seen two of his men die the last – how long, thirteen, fourteen seconds? – lost his nerve and ran. He shoved someone out of the way and bolted. Sekhtani moved to go for him, but Dzöndzüükii

managed to gasp through the pain in his gut. “Sekhtani!” he heaved. “Lindsay!”

It was one thing (he saw now) that she take on those men to protect both him and her charge, but leaving her mistress’ side to follow this bastard was out of the question.

Sekhtani obeyed, stopped where she was and went for Lindsay, didn’t argue the point, even though he was getting away. The airag man was there, asking him, from some distant place, if he was all right. There were a number of other bystanders as well – men, women – staring agape at the scene, the sudden gush of blood on the earth. He waved away the alcohol seller, walked, almost in a daze, to his concubine.

Lindsay was terror-stricken. Valeria was crying, sobbing in Lindsay’s arms. Sekhtani was standing over the women, her blades set down a meter or so away as to not frighten them. The Amazon was mechanical, direct. “Are you injured? Are you in medical distress?” She was being forceful with the question, asking it in both languages, because Lindsay wasn’t answering, just staring agape at the gory scene out beyond the awning.

Dzöndzüükii got to the women, told his concubine, “Lindsay, answer the question.”

She snapped out of her daze, blinked. “I’m... I’m uninjured,” she said. Shook Valeria a little in her hug. “Val, are you hurt?”

Valeria shook her head, still crying.

Dzöndzüükii, holding his gut, collapsed down next to the women, took Lindsay in an embrace, hugged both of them tight. The next thing he knew, there were soldiers there, men in official regalia, scimitars, helmets, had bows nocked and ready, securing the scene. The whole thing had occurred in probably less than five minutes.

He was detached from the whole thing, didn’t (on some level couldn’t) acknowledge the soldiers. Just hugged the girls tight, felt his own tears on his cheeks. From somewhere far off, he heard Sekhtani’s voice, speaking to one of the soldiers, dictating. “Get in touch With Lord Qorin-Üriangkhadai, Lord Dzöndzüükii has just survived an assassination attempt.”

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ISBN-13: 978-1724872029

ISBN-10: 1724872028