

# The Last Khatun

by Edith Lyre

Supplicants gathered to witness the khanum's address. In the flesh, beyond the contour-lights of her podium, stirred a crowd of some fifteen hundred. On her stream, eighty-five thousand supplicants had come, and on their screens the donate button was bright and readable, versus the irls, whose phones were only in-use if they were filming, or watching, reading, fixating on some other content in tandem with hers. The people who were there in person mattered, but less than the remote viewers. She felt the glaring lights as the glimmer of a portal through which she spoke, to a world beyond the real.

As always, she told them she loved them, and did not consider it a lie, for love is a word that never had any hope of meaning the same thing to all people. To her it meant less than just about anyone, but still, it meant something, and if – when she said it – fans mistook her meaning, in that she was blameless. Any other meaning was incomprehensible to Muchi, the name she took as a streamer, or Tamara Khan, or Tam, Mara, Tara: by any of which, on any occasion, she might introduce herself. Other significances, structures, emotions one might ascribe to love were things she simply did not feel and did not yearn for, so if the word were to have some use or meaning

for her in any world she could hope to know, this was it. To all her subscribers, Muchi pronounced her love, and swore to each that she treasured them in ways they could not know.

If rumours had reached, by whatever means, that today (with the assent and blessing of the conference-organisers) the first half of the hour would be devoted to a special announcement (with a friend of hers, yes, this friend was Mr. W. Len “Dublin” Harvist – save your boos, save your applause, save your punch-ups in the pit – to join her and discuss that announcement), then she was delighted or sorry or “whatever it needs to be for you” to confirm as much. If rumours had reached, too, that this announcement would affect her many offspring in the countless corners of the Earth, then that was another tick, check, pat on the back – “keep whoever’s spreading these rumours close, baby, they’re not telling lies.”

The Khanum Muchi dwelt sometimes upon the obvious frictions other people, people not like her, brought with them to the world, ever rubbing up on things and getting stuck, the adhesiveness of their social being, and wondered why she was not like that. When she was a teenager and first asked this question, the answer seemed obvious: she was a clone. To exist as a clone was to exist as a walking atrocity, the embodiment of a crime committed by someone else. People had traumatic childhoods, existences rewritten, essences reassigned, things like that, but she was no more traumatised than the average person. She bore the same dull ache as all, grown from prolonged exposure to and complicity with the bloody engine of capitalism, civilisation, life in general, the eternal, whirling, annular fractal of rapes and cataracts and gingivitic fangs. Nature? She was also much, much less traumatised than the average trans woman. Still, the clone theory held water: by the time Dr Erinchin Khenbish synthesised Muchi’s embryo and thus conceived her, the parameters of her being were long defined and legislated against. It was easy to think around what most people assumed was the greatest problem: in particular, that she was the clone of Genghis Khan. As in, the world changes and people with it. This reincarnation of the khan knew from a young age – showed all the definite signs; could have passed the surgeons’ evals in the 60s – that manhood was not for her. Said she was a girl before knowing that meant she was trans, was shattered near to pieces by the six months of male puberty she endured. Hoped someday to get a boyfriend, maybe a husband? If he were the right guy? So on, so on. Had she, in a past life, wondered the same thing? Nobody would ever know. Being a clone in general – one of but a dozen on the planet – was what brought these unshakeable traces, this resistless inertia in a world that felt made of dust: that was the theory she started on, when she was young.

“Beginning right now—it’s live as of now?” A thumbs up from tech, a nod from W. Len Harvist, scattered yesses from the crowd. “As of this moment, if you’ve got my genes, or you’re

the parent, guardian of someone who does, and you're in any of the affected regions listed on the site, or any of the situations described, this fund – look for yourself; right there on my site, or on my stream there should be a button right around, here, around the bottom of the window – this fund is for you. We will get you to North America. We can get you to Europe. You need medical care, wherever you are? If we can, we will cover it. The world is changing, but the commitment I made with every donation – to take reasonable steps to ensure my donees get meaningful opportunities, the freedom to make choices, to build their own lives – that commitment's unchanged."

The thing is, since then, she had met other clones, and however tight the metaphysics of the theory, in practice it did not hold up. Those clones, like near everybody else, held her eyes with the same needling longing to be loved, approved, validated: told they were real. In each of them – with no apparent tension or difficulty – lived that caring, that interest in life, the world, &c. which she could never equal. One meeting stood out as the occasion to finally dislodge her suspicion. Chen Yichen – who was the genetic reincarnation of Mao Zedong, albeit taller, thinner, teeth brightened and straightened, eyes shallow and furtive, skin smoothed, face barren of his predecessor's laugh-lines – joined Muchi for dinner one evening and, from the instant of her arrival at the restaurant, the craving, the fear which radiated from the man turned her stomach. It was as though she were not really there – indeed had no power to be. Yichen craved her presence, though he already had it, and dreaded her absence, not as something yet to come, but as something ongoing, a condition of being he must not think on overlong, a condition altogether unmarred by her reality, in flesh, before him. Rather, if anything, the problem of her absence was worsened by her presence. There. The moving touchable shape of Muchi, contoured by the same reddish-yellow ceiling lamps as his own real shape, the real veins in his hands, the real plate of gnocchi, the real shiraz. Her reality across the rim of the very table at which he sat was cause for an immense, world-shattering ecstasy surpassed only by the disgust it manifested. He was lucky she was the sort of person she was. Who else could withstand him?

She looked him, Mao Zedong's clone, in the face and said point blank, "What is this silence that seems to be waiting for you, everybody everywhere, that you're afraid to go back to?"

Yichen answered, "You would know it if you had ever left it," and she noticed for the first time that he was smiling, had been smiling the dinner through. His remark had not cracked that affect, had come without force, how the sane will address the insane, as visitors from a world with other rules, but from which their own was impermeably safe. They were content to play by the

madman's rules as long as he needed, because his rules were dust. And Yichen was right. What move had she, except to return the conversation to the rails she knew it to be on?

She would ask him: how do you feel about being a clone? He would give an answer that bore some structural similarity to her own but deviated entirely in its meditations and analyses. She would challenge that answer, ask did he not feel, as the manifestation of an illicit science, he was a permanent émigré to the human race, forever approaching but never completing connection? He would stare, then laugh and say, "You are the farthest thing from an outsider to the human race," and explain that he – as many teenagers do, clone or no – had felt like that, but then he made connection, understood what it was, was not, what love was, what it could not be and must never be mistaken for, and of course lost it again, but he understood it. "After a while, all of that, if you survive – it's important, but it can't change the essence. We're human. They're human. So long as there's no war on, one of you's not a fascist, hasn't wilfully given it up, then that's enough. Eventually it is."

"Is it possible, then," said Muchi, "to give up your humanity without meaning to, or to never be given it in the first place?"

"Every sort of thing goes wrong. Don't worry about "meaning to" or "wilfully." I think however that happens to somebody, it's the same thing. From what I've seen."

"Do you, then," taking advantage of the insanity he assigned her, "see it in me too?"

"Sorry, Muchi. Or Tamara. Which?"

"I don't know. Any."

"Sorry, I don't see you at all."

"You mean—."

"I'm eating here, I know, technically sharing dinner with you, but like..."

"—you're on your phone, watching the streamer you like because she's a clone, she's twenty-seven and you're a clone, you're twenty-six. You're not hearing yourself. You can't remember the last word you spoke. You're dissociating through this whole thing, so, so, so."

Her dinner with Yichen fixed nothing, and what had she been looking for, if connection – as she thought of it – was something for which she had no craving, not, in any case, like others craved it? Why do anything at all? Had she hoped for a secret, twelve-person communion with the world's clones, half of whom were temperamental opposites, believed things that would bring each

to the other's throats? She was embarrassed by the evidence, too obvious to reject, that she wanted something. She was even more embarrassed by the certainty that whatever it was, she had failed to get it. But Yichen wouldn't tell. There was a man she could trust.

"Your support is what makes it all happen, got us to this point, but the next step – I need to sit down, my legs – is all up to Mr. W. Len Harvist. And, I mean, unless you're like me (so busy you don't know what a single person who's not yourself's doing), you know his mission. CoRoT-7." She swallowed and recited the line fed by Harvist's team: "Our first small step to interstellar specieshood."

Before he could be declared "genghis" (universal) khan, Temuchin had first to crush the armies of his greatest love and oversee his execution. At eleven years of age (note: come the age of ten, Temuchin had already murdered one of his brothers), he and another boy, born to a tier of aristocracy greater than Temuchin's, a boy called Jamuqa, swore to each other as *anda*, blood brothers. Into their late teens, the two shared a bed, beginning this practice soon after their partnered rescue of Borte, a wife to whom Temuchin was married at age eight. For near two years, their camps travelled in unison, Temuchin and Jamuqa inseparable at the vanguard, and the first mists of an idea, a twinned empire of two chiefs, took shape at the fringes of the Mongols' dreams. But Temuchin resented Jamuqa's natural aristocracy – horse-breeders being a class of their own, far above the sheep-breeders from whom Temuchin was descended – and Borte resented Jamuqa, resented the affections, the attentions – the touch, the warmth – he received from her husband, and they were all sixteen, seventeen years old, these rulers of men, these commanders of armies, so what surer poison than resentment?

Winds thickening, the threat of a cold, bad night creeping into his furs, young Jamuqa and his lover got to talking about camping, and for whatever reason, Jamuqa said, "If we make camp along the hillside, it'll be better for the horse-herders to set up their tents. But close to the mountain stream would be better for the sheep-herders – for food." It was a choice, see, between food and shelter. See? But why even say it?

"I'm going to ride ahead," said Temuchin. "You camp wherever you like."

Their horse-breeding friends had no clue what had gotten into Temuchin, when he appeared the next morning at a faraway camp, having ridden his people through the ice of the night. He sought Borte's counsel, and she consoled him, swore he was not paranoid: Jamuqa did not see him as an equal – and never would.

"But what did it mean?"

“It means you’re food. He’s shelter. And being shelter is better. He was trying to remind you of your place. Little, plausibly deniable comments. Like they do.”

So, they stood apart, and when the tribes came together and named Temuchin khan of the Mongols, Jamuqa’s reply proved Borte’s words. Clash, defeat, exile, slavery, and triumph again, until a dozen years of conflict resolved in Temuchin above Jamuqa, fingertips tracing familiar collarbones, stubble coarser, thicker than Temuchin remembered, hands calloused, each of their bodies dulled to the other’s warmth, sensitivity spoiled, gripping, pulling, snapping. Lolling from Jamuqa’s lightless face, the tongue stretched black and bilious, looked nothing like the tongue Temuchin knew. Whatever Genghis Khan had loved, this man was not it.

There were times, when she was young, when Muchi’s hands would fill with a charged, molten heat, and each vein could be felt as though it were a leaden rod, a hundred such stitched beneath the skin. She would task these unwieldy objects, these blocks of agony, with opening the fridge, cracking ice into a bowl, then would dive her hands into it, let them sit so until they numbed. Shutting her eyes or looking anywhere else, a vision of callouses spreading like mould would torment her, and as the pain slipped away it was as if, at the last moment, she could feel the dead horse-breeder’s hairs among the icecubes. These episodes ebbed after she started blockers, and by the time she was on hormones proper, had ended altogether. But she thought of it then, after the dinner with Mao Zedong’s clone, and asked what would happen if she hadn’t frozen her hands, had let the burning ooze through. What waited on the far side of that agony? She regretted never finding out, but thought now, somehow, insanely: *there is nothing wrong with me*. That’s what the pain was for, washing that out. Her perspective was simply correct: there could, and should, be no communion with anyone but herself. Genghis Khan had no ice to put in bowls, okay, therefore he learned when he was young, had let the magma course through. Start with his example, and the wisdom would avail itself in the details. It was in the fit of this mania that she first registered as a sperm donor (had her cells frozen at eighteen; copying gametes was the one legal use of cloning, just never embryos). At once, Muchi’s samples rated among the five most sought after. She soon fought her way to the top of that ladder by making promises – none of which had any legal entailment – to the effect her donees, in the event of catastrophes and climate disasters, and so on, would benefit from vague “supports” – which drew the attention of the global precariat. Maybe she meant it. Maybe she didn’t. Whatever the case, it was better odds than you got from a donor who promised nothing, which was to say, every other.

“It was Dublin here,” she said, ice-white nails flicking, unfurling in Dublin Harvist’s direction, stood at her back, rimless glasses wedged in a thicket of papery skin, “who went over

with me this whole question of jus soli and jus sanguinis, all that, and the legality of the thing. Because I am an idiot – I am; sometimes I’m an idiot – I thought as, like, technically my children, the United States would welcome you. Forgive me if I address my donees a moment, other followers. I mean you’re not my fucking boyfriends. Can’t be all you all the time, not sorry. But, no! All sorts of legality things and the USA has jus soli and the jus sanguinis thing does not actually mean blood, I learned? Legally? Anyway? But an amazing option came up: we’ll pay for you to come in, if you like, on a tourist visa, but that’ll get you, max, three months. Depends where you’re from. But with the mission to CoRoT now, there are going to be ten ships. Lifeships?”

“Lifeships.” A faraway, bass-heavy grumble from Harvist, like a splat of oil against the mic.

“Ten lifeships, every month for the next twelve months. Twelve months?”

“Won’t be launching December, Jan. February and March the last.”

“Doesn’t matter if you’re on the first ship or the tenth, if you’re registered with the mission, you’re eligible for an employment visa. And Dublin wants any and everybody with my genes in them – also bring your family: there are, like, options for them, but they’re more than likely eligible for the mission too. You can be a part of the greatest project in the history of Mankind. Go further than I ever will. Further than my predecessor could ever dream. Sorry to do this too – I know! I know you love me! I love you too!” (The crowd murmured among themselves; were quieter than usual. As nothing better than shadows, adrift past the fluorescent shore of the stage, Muchi could not gauge whether any of the in-person attendees were donees, but some had to be, surely.) “But it’s important these details be covered! That’s why now the podium is going to Dublin – Mr. W. Len Harvist – followed by questions he will answer. We want to ensure this works! We want the best possible outcomes for all of you!”

She retreated to a little plastic chair at the back and side of the stage, near the techs. If this turned out not to work, that was okay: onto the next thing. Her drafts included a post to the effect: i’m 40. we all know what that means when you have a career like mine. god forbid any influence i still have gets used on something i care about. But, once again, it proved unnecessary to send. She had been updating that post every birthday since her thirty-fifth. It never got as bad as she expected. The criticism always came from the right places, from red-eyed zealots whose anger spilled over, half the time, into some or another bigoted comment about clones – or people who came with the whole intent of committing transphobia and simply succeeded, a process that waxed and waned and, for all it affected her follower-count more reliably than anything else, had become background noise, a force of nature. Nature, nature. Wilting and bloodless. Tooth and claw. All of

those whose remarks had substance referred to her as a symptom rather than wilful agent, complicit in, but not the machine itself. When she reflected on that, she supposed they were correct, but – as they themselves said, all the socialists, anarchists, communists, whatever they were – to redirect this one celebrity’s individual conduct was a poor use of energy. Muchi was but a consequence and her intent irrelevant. After all, every one of her projects depended on borrowed money. After all, after all. Today, yet again, everything online took that same shape, so she spat the drafted thanks and awe and magnified the praise. She had seeded a new world and it cost her nothing.

Even as she sat, on her little seat at the edge of the light, she realised this attempt – the experiment of cleaving to the khagan’s example – had failed. The film between reality and herself lay thick as ever, if not thicker. It was impossible to make sense of what Harvist was saying, but Muchi knew, when the time came, it would be no issue: her body would know when to stand, her lips what to say, and the day would subside. The question was already asked: could she join the mission too? And Harvist already told her no. She drifted and, as she drifted, she wondered: what she would try next? What new fix might spring to mind? To her surprise, the answer was nothing, no solution, just this. So, so, so.

At first, transmissions from the Harvist fleet were more or less as foreseen. Mental health struggled, but supplies were used-up and replenished at the expected rate. Acceleration gained apace. Then, ten years in, all transmission ceased. Speculation as to the cause ranged from extraterrestrial aggression to – of course – government coverups. For the next half a century, interest in the mystery declined and resurged and declined again until, on the thirty-second anniversary of Muchi’s death (to pneumonia, after years of dementia), notice was sent to the lost fleet informing them of plans to launch a second, faster fleet, to which their people could transfer if they liked. If they were still alive.

Three years later – a speed of transmission that should not have been possible – Earth received the two-word reply: “Race you.” Instead of a fleet, the decision was made to launch a lone, ambassadorial craft. Muchi’s cryofrozen remains were sealed onboard, on the off chance they had bargaining merit.