

Bring on the Dancing Horses

On the vast, remote steppe of central Mongolia, an unlikely adventure camp has been created by an equally improbable visionary. Welcome to Mongke Tengri.

By SOPHY ROBERTS

Photographs by KEN KOCHEY

i first heard about Christopher Giercke from my uncle, who lives in Gascony, not far from the birthplace of D'Artagnan, the fourth of the Three Musketeers. Hence the name of Giercke's second son, who was born in 1997 while the family was staying with my uncle. It seemed deliciously eccentric to me—naming a son D'Artagnan—until I met Giercke myself, and realized that a predilection for fantastical worlds (and names) was just one aspect of a man who lives far beyond the boundaries of convention.

Giercke is German, though by now only nominally so. He spends most of the year in Kathmandu. From June to October, he relocates from Nepal to a camp on the Mongolian steppe, traveling lightly between the two with a beat-up canvas-and-leather tote. His library includes books on Tibetan Buddhism, Sanskrit, paleontology, and the history of perception. He smokes Cuban Robusto Cohibas. His hat is a white panama from Borsalino. He wears only two outfits: One is a bespoke black linen suit—long frock coat, plus fours—with purple silk buttonholes and purple lining. The other, worn on special occasions, is the same but in white.

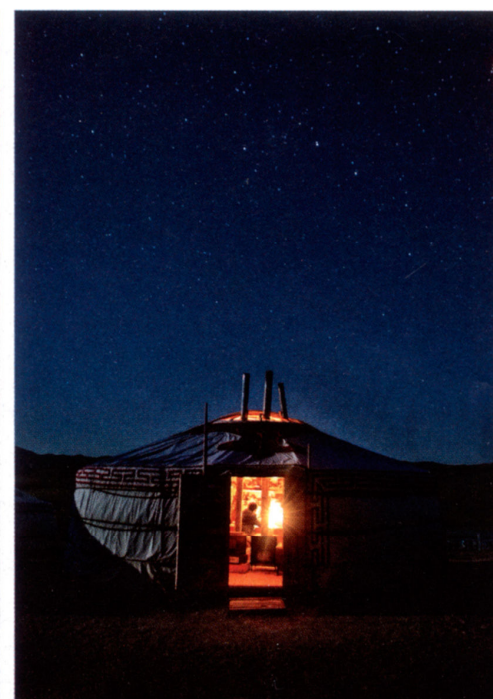
How he ended up in this part of the world is all the more curious. Giercke was a child actor in mid-century East Berlin, and later, in exile, a film producer (he worked on *Apocalypse Now* and produced *Cocaine Cowboys*, featuring Andy Warhol). In 1993, while scouting film locations on the Central Asian steppe, he fell in love with a young Mongolian woman named Enkhtsetseg Sanjaardorj and married her two years later. Relinquishing his peripatetic life in the movie business to raise their three children—Ich Tenger, now 20; D'Artagnan, 18; and Kristina-Alegre, 11—Giercke changed careers again to become a “precious-wool hunter” (his description), deriving most of his income from Mongolian cashmere. The wool is hand-spun, -woven, and -died in Nepal, and the finished products—scarves, blankets, coats, dressing gowns—are



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play,” Giercke said, “to see the horsemanship that once made Mongolia’s cavalry the most powerful on earth.”

Previous page: Local herder children compete in a horse race at Mongke Tengri. **Top, from left:** Christopher Giercke in the camp library; the chef prepares lunch; guests arrive at Mongke Tengri; Giercke's daughter, Kristina-Alegre. **Bottom, from left:** Taking turns in the cold soaking tub; camp manager Ang Tshering Lama; one of the guests; Giercke's wife, Enkhtsetseg, savors the quiet.



delivered to his principal client, Hermès. Wearing Giercke's cashmere is the closest approximation to being dressed in clouds. "I'm working on an endless thread," he once told me. "Technically, it is possible," he added, as if I might question the notion of infinity.

Mongolia's seemingly limitless expanses suit Giercke. He prefers "to live in big spaces, with the universe above me. I like to say aloud what I'm thinking and shout it into the Milky Way. Only then do one's thoughts—which might seem rather good at the time—begin to feel overwhelmingly tiny."

mongke Tengri, Giercke's seasonal camp, sits within Mongolia's Orkhon National Park, 200 miles west of Ulaanbaatar. I first visited in 2001, when the camp was raw and wild and fueled by moonshine vodka, buckets of caviar, and a rotating set of glamorous adventurers—from the art patron Francesca von Habsburg to Hamid Sardar-Afkhami, a formidable Sanskrit and Tibetan studies scholar of Iranian descent.

Back then, the camp was open only to friends and friends of friends—and Giercke certainly has plenty of those. But starting last summer, for the first time in Mongke Tengri's 20-year history, he decided to open the guest list beyond his social circle, to both individual travelers and groups who would book up the camp exclusively. Furthermore, 30 percent of earnings would now go toward supporting local education, as well as Giercke's long-standing vision of bringing polo back to the steppe.

Mongolia is, of course, a culture inextricably linked to horses. "Herder children can ride before they can walk," Giercke told me. "Nearly every Mongolian child still living on the steppe, however poor, has a string of ponies." His polo dream was not about European elites foisting a newfangled sport on the locals but about restoring deep-rooted social traditions. "Eight hundred years ago, a form of polo was used as a training game for the Mongol cavalry," he noted. "I've always felt Mongolia needs to hold on to that part of its history—and to compete in polo

on the world stage." Since its inception in 1996, the Genghis Khan Polo Club, founded by Giercke and based a few hundred yards down the hill from Mongke Tengri, has trained some 400 children. Youth teams have competed in Singapore, Thailand, China, Korea, India, France, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. (In 2014, the Mongolian team beat Harvard.) "You just have to watch the children play," Giercke said, "to see the determination and horsemanship that once made Mongolia's cavalry the most powerful on earth. With an army of just 100,000, the Mongols ruled over territory equal to the size of North and South America combined."

Last August I returned to Mongke Tengri, joined this time by my sons, aged 11 and 8. We flew 12 hours from London via Frankfurt to Ulaanbaatar, where we paused for a night at the gleaming new Shangri-La Hotel, an emblem of the astonishing new wealth, mainly derived from minerals, now swirling around the capital. From there it was a five-hour drive west, on new asphalt roads, to Giercke's camp in the Orkhon Valley. Along the way we passed Rashaant, known locally as Cosmos, after the town's most famous son: a herder turned cosmonaut named Jüggerdemidiin Gürzaghaa, who in 1981 made history as the first Mongolian in space.

Fifty miles on, we took in the ruins of Karakorum. The boys knew the stories—how, starting in 1220, Karakorum was the center of Genghis Khan's Great Mongol State, which stretched at its height from the Yellow Sea to the gates of Vienna; how, in the 1260s, Kublai Khan, Genghis's grandson, moved the capital to Dadu, present-day Beijing. Like most kids, my sons gaped at the horrors of the genocide without absorbing the numbers: tens of millions wiped out by the Mongol rampage across Central and North Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Nor did they appreciate the more benevolent side of Genghis and his descendants: In 1234, Karakorum was described by a French missionary as one of the most religiously tolerant cities of its time, with 12 Buddhist and Taoist temples, two mosques, and a Christian church all thriving within its walls. (Meanwhile, across Asia and Europe, the Crusaders were waging a holy war.) The Mongols may have had a penchant for impaling heads on stakes, but their violence was motivated by secular dominion, not religious zealotry.

Fathoming these contradictions from the ruins of Karakorum proved an imaginative leap too great for my children. All that was left was a run of whitewashed stupas, a small museum, and the 400-year-old monastery of Erdene Zuu, once home to several thousand monks, now dwindled to about 60. But today it was dead quiet: no music, no blowing of conch horns, just whistling wind and the bleating of goats.

I felt my sons' excitement collapse. To them, the one thing worth traveling here for—all the glory and drama of Mongol legend—had been swallowed up by a sea of grass. We'd been driving across open steppe for the better part of a day, and the landscape kept rolling out ahead of us. I worried that perhaps this trip was a mistake—that I'd pushed their limits of inquiry, that the poetry of lost kingdoms didn't move my children the way it moved me.

Then we passed over a high ridge crenellated with rocks, and all at once, like a grand piece of theater, Giercke's world opened up.



One of the camp's 40 traditional felt-walled gers, which are brought in and reassembled every summer.

HOW TO DO IT

Mongke Tengri is available for bookings between June 15 and October 15; rates start at \$500 per night for adults and \$200 for children ages 3 to 12, including all meals and activities and round-trip 4WD transfers from Ulaanbaatar. (Helicopter transfers can be arranged at extra cost.) For further information, visit mongke-tengri.com; for booking inquiries, e-mail Sean Nelson at Nelson Expeditions in the U.K. (sean@nelsonexpeditions.com).

This page:
Mongolian herder
children are often
riding horses even
before they can
walk. Here, a local
girl readies for
the five-mile race.
Right: The Orkhon
River flows beside
Mongke Tengri.



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eneath us spread a wide plateau cupped by mountains fringed in willow, larch, and pine. A silver river threaded through the Orkhon Valley. In the distance, a dozen horses charged across a bowl of grass; in the honeyed light of late afternoon, the dust thrown up by galloping hooves was as delicate as plumes of pollen. At the valley's heart sat Giercke's camp: a cluster of round tents, or *gers*, on the bright-green steppe, like mushrooms that had popped up after rain.

We dropped down from the ridge and traced a rough track to the edge of the camp. Giercke, who had traveled with us in convoy from Ulaanbaatar, emerged from the first car clad in his usual ensemble—the black one. A gaggle of herder children came running toward us. Giercke stood amid the throng like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Over the children's heads he passed us a welcome drink: fermented mare's milk—an unpleasant beverage I recall pretending to like before—in hand-carved bowls of maplewood and beaten silver.

Tsogt Tsede, the camp's archery master, lifted my youngest son into the air. I remembered Tsede from my last visit: a bear of a man, and a Buryat Mongol (Buryats claim they are descended from Genghis), he was also a Paris-trained opera singer with a habit of breaking into song after dinner. The boys noticed a row of mountain bikes across the field and a line of kayaks on the riverbank, and they scampered off in their excitement, only to be reprimanded for running over what looked like piles of stones. "Those," Giercke informed them, "are actually 4,000-year-old tombs."

In the distance I heard music—the tinkling of a piano coming from the largest *ger*, above the river. And so it happened: Giercke's beautiful vision that I had remembered from last time started to come alive again, although now everything was somehow brighter, more colorful than before, with our arrival heralded by a retinue of 30 staff, all dressed in embroidered silks and wools.

"It's like a movie," I remarked.

Giercke fixed me with a hard stare. "Fiction makes me angry," he replied. "There's no need to make it up."

Then I noticed the half-smile creasing his eyes, and recognized an unspoken irony: This was the man who named his son after a character in a Dumas novel.



In the morning, an attendant would bring firewood to reignite



From left: Giercke and his well-worn tote on Undersant Mountain; inside a guest *ger*.

the embers in our stove, along with organic Himalayan coffee.

We settled in quickly—the children with other kids who were staying for the week, and me with the mix of adult guests: bankers from Hong Kong, the U.S., and Australia; a Beijing-based art collector; an American filmmaker; two international polo players; a hotelier from Singapore and his French wife; a Tibetan living in Sri Lanka; and two Mongolian couples, one of whom had gotten very rich on vodka during the country's post-Communist entrepreneurial boom. Most of them were there at the invitation of the Hong Kong banker. As for Giercke, he was having a delightful time undoing the room allocations—suggesting unthought-of combinations for the single travelers—as the camp's manager, Ang Tshering Lama, struggled to match the luggage to the right *ger*.

"It will be so much easier when I can run this place like a normal camp," Ang whispered.

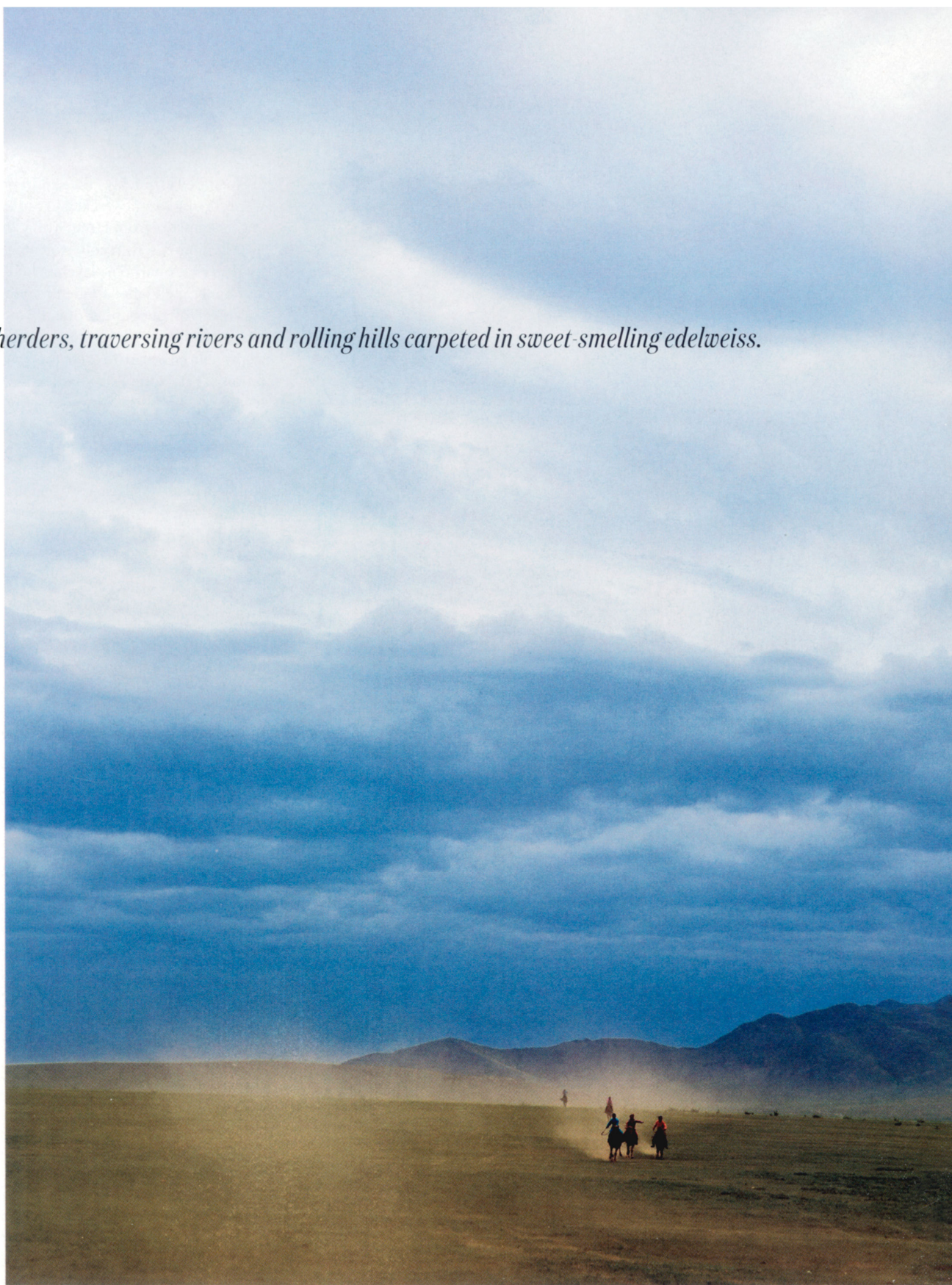
"Never!" Giercke declared, eyes glittering with mischief. "I don't want to attract *normal* people!"

Even as he courts a well-off clientele—guests pay upwards of \$500 a night—it's clear Giercke will never be a commercial animal. (He doesn't need the money, making enough with cashmere.) But he is keenly aware that he's sitting on a unique venture, albeit one that thrives outside the rules of the travel industry. Mongke Tengri is a supremely comfortable adventure camp with none of the usual luxury reference points (Frette linens, espresso makers, indemnity forms). But it does offer one thing every sophisticated traveler craves: an experience that is utterly unrepeatable anywhere else on the planet. For Giercke, opening the camp to a broader spectrum of guests not only means promoting his philanthropic goals among a global clientele; it means more young polo players having an opportunity to train overseas, and more herder children receiving quality educations.

The camp can certainly command the prices. Since my previous visit, Mongke Tengri had evolved a great deal: In place of that wild colony of nomadic canvas tents were 40 immaculately styled, felt-walled *gers*, their interior latticework held together by small knots of camel leather. There was handmade wooden furniture painted in luminous oranges and turquoises. There were pine floors covered with pretty rugs of felted sheep wool, bathrooms with sinks set atop colorful wooden washstands, and elegant wardrobes for more clothes than anyone would think to bring. "Our *gers* are a little more exuberant than others you'll find on the steppe," Giercke said with his usual understatement. "A nomad looks for a practical size. We have gone down the aristocratic line." Hermès blankets were scattered in generous profusion. ("This is how we test their rigor," Giercke said with a smile.) Each evening, an attendant in a silk *del*—the traditional

We rode with herders, traversing rivers and rolling hills carpeted in sweet-smelling edelweiss.

The race is on—
horsemen
charge across the
Orkhon Valley,
with the towering
Khangai Range
beyond.



Mongolian overcoat—came to light the iron stove before we turned in for the night; hot-water bottles warmed the bed sheets. In the mornings, she returned with more firewood to reignite the embers, along with organic Himalayan coffee.

On my previous visit we had to bathe in the freezing river. This time I took long, luxuriant soaks in Mongke Tengri's bath *ger*, outfitted with a wood-burner and a pair of high-sided wooden tubs that Giercke had imported from Japan. (I took one tub, the boys took the other.)

Breakfasts were served in the camp kitchen, where a cauldron of silky congee simmered over an open flame. The camp chef, Mingmar Sherpa, stirred the porridge with a giant wooden spoon, then scattered it with fresh herbs and house-made pickles. (Sherpa grew up in a mountain village in the shadow of Everest, where a community of Tibetan-Buddhist monks, including one of the Dalai Lama's early teachers, has been partly supported by Giercke for the past 30 years.) For lunch we gathered in the dining *ger*, its walls hung with family photographs, to feast on Chinese greens flash-fried in spices, hearty Tibetan dumplings, and pastas laced with wild Himalayan morels. Dinners—roasted lamb one night, spicy braised goat's intestine the next—were accompanied by French wines served in silver tumblers. (This was Giercke's cheeky idea, copying American throwaway cups in the finest Nepali silver.) One night the staff prepared goat *bodok*, a Mongol specialty in which a whole animal is disemboweled through the neck, stuffed with hot rocks, and cooked for hours from the inside out. I got the shoulder bone; considered lucky, it was also delicious.

Days at Mongke Tengri were a mix of improbable diversions, from Zumba lessons with Giercke's wife in the "gym" *ger* (there's also a yoga instructor on hand) to entire days of riding on stocky Mongolian ponies. We rode with the herders, traversing rivers and climbing rolling hills carpeted in sweet-smelling edelweiss. The boys gained enough confidence on horseback to gallop for up to 20 minutes on open ground, thanks to the tutelage of Shiva—the "bone-setter," as Giercke calls him, since he helps with the aftermath of riding accidents. (He is also the local shaman; one night he performed a private ceremony with my family, during which I was spat upon with flaming alcohol.)

We went for picnics at the summit of Undersant Mountain. We learned the basics of polo (a.k.a. "stick and ball"), practicing first on a wooden horse and working our way up to ponies. Other options included trekking expeditions to Naiman Nuur Lake, to Tuvkhun monastery (one of the oldest in the country), to the Orkhon waterfall, and to farther-flung corners of the vast Khangai Mountains. My sons mastered the art of mountain biking under the instruction of Tangi Rebours, a French pro, while I learned to relax, briefly, under the hands of Zolzaya Altanzaya, Mongke Tengri's iron-fisted masseuse.

As the week flew by, the boys and I discussed how much we still had left to do. My younger son was eager to join a horse race (no go; it was a minimum five-mile ride). The older one wanted to shoot marmots—steppe rodents resembling guinea pigs—with a bow and arrow (not allowed; the season didn't start until September). I wanted to meet the famous Mongolian circus contortionist who was coming in later that week from the capital. But first, there would be a recital.

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dgerel Sampilnorov, 29, was raised in a small Soviet-style apartment in Ulaanbaatar. Her father was a basketball player; her mother taught gym. She learned piano on a Russian upright from the age of seven. In 2005 she was recommended to Giercke as an instructor for his children. He invited her to Mongke Tengri, where her playing caught the ear of one of the guests—Gabriele Menegatti, Italy's ambassador to China. As a result of that meeting, the Italian government arranged to sponsor Sampilnorov at a conservatory in Perugia. She wound up training in Europe for nine years.

"Even before she went to Italy, she held all the major pieces of the European Romantic movement in her head," Giercke said. "Anything a teacher put in front of her, she could play by sight."

The evening was moonlit as we gathered in the dining *ger*, now illuminated by scores of flickering candles. The tent was packed with guests and staff. Shiva, the horseman-shaman, stood at the back, in leather boots and a full-length *del* of midnight blue. At his feet sat a group of wide-eyed local children. Everyone wanted to hear the young piano phenomenon.

A hush fell over the *ger* as Sampilnorov took her seat at the Yamaha baby grand. Candlelight shimmered off the ivories. Without sheet music, she launched into Bach's "Chaconne," working the pedals with her embroidered leather boots. The music consumed her, streaming out from somewhere deeper than memory. Like smoke from the wood-burner, it floated through the roof opening and into the night sky. I imagined the strains of Bach drifting down the valley and into the ears of herders living in tents along the Orkhon River, traveling across this empty country—larger than Western Europe, with a population smaller than Puerto Rico's—clear to the gates of Vienna.

The playing stopped, and the room went silent. Giercke leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"It makes me want to cry," he said.

"Her playing is extraordinary," I replied.

"Oh, it's not the music I'm talking about," he said. "It's the piano. That Yamaha isn't good enough. This camp needs a Lichtenthal, or a Becker—or at the very least, a Steinway." His eyes now danced with excitement. "Next year, we will find a piano worthy of Odgerel's talent. We must find her one of the lost pianos of Siberia!" ♦