

The Ballad of Tumelun Tombs
2021

Note:

This 400-page novel will be out soon. Set in *The Mongolian Book of the Sky* universe, it takes place roughly 2 years before the events of *The Hounds of Harujin*. Like the novellas of *The Moon Panther*, it serves as a prequel. But it also diverges from the series – this novel is predominantly a mystery-thriller, set in a post-apocalyptic universe.

This chapter takes place at a theatre in Sydney. The narrator, Lars Vallens, is running late to meet up with his family, wife Lauren and daughter Sophie, and arrives when the play has already begun. As for the murder mystery of the book, at this point the victim has already been found by police and Lars assigned to the case.

Beta-reading is happening now for *The Ballad of Tumelun Tombs*. With luck, by late this year or early next year, the book should be out.

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The lobby of the Royal Fūjin, lanterns everywhere and red carpets lining the floors, is mostly empty as I come stampeding through. There's a refreshment counter over there, popcorn and candy available, and it looks like there's a wine bar on the far side. I ignore it and fumble in my pocket for the ticket.

I'm late, I'm late, I'm goddamned late, I think to myself, my eyes darting back and forth for the theatre door.

Finding it, I present the stub to the usher, who looks it over, then opens the door. "Seventh aisle, third seat from the left," he whispers, stepping in the door and pointing in that direction. "Just coming to the end of the first act."

He hands me a brochure. I'm pretty sure it's the same one Lauren has had on the kitchen counter for two weeks.

I nod. Sneaking in, I catch a brief glimpse of the stage. The battlements of a walled city, archers in medieval helmets and chest plates behind the crenellations, is off to the far side. The backdrop looks like a desert. An orchestra, just off the stage to the left, is playing a dramatic piece.

Scanning the seats for my wife and child, I see an arrow, from the corner of my eye, flying across the stage. Then the orchestra becomes dour, serious, and a woman shrieks, her wail filling the entire theatre, which is huge.

The Royal Fūjin is massive. There must be three thousand seats in here, with a mezzanine and balconies and red carpet everywhere. To think, this play sells out every goddamned night; Lauren had to buy the tickets early.

There's another shriek from the stage. The lungs on that actress must be huge for her voice to echo all the way to the back. I take a brief peak at the stage behind me. Currently it's the battlements again, and two olive-skinned men are reporting to a duke or baron or some such.

"My lord," the one says, out of breath. Their clothes are dishevelled, dirty, and they carry no weapons. "Yonder marksman made an impressive shot. 'Twas one of the Accursed One's kin slain t'other day. The vanguard hast pulled back, m'lord."

Keeping low, I hurry my way to the stairs and slink into the seventh aisle.

An older couple is at the end of the aisle, then an open seat with a bag of popcorn sitting in it. Sophie hardly notices me coming up the stairs; her face is glued to the stage. Quickly, the lighting changes, and a deep, commanding, impossibly baritone voice declares, "*This shalt not stand!* Thou, findeth mine scion! Aye, Tolui, godsdamnit!"

It's in English – sort of. I hadn't been sure about that – one collector at the precinct told me most of it would be in Mongolian. But it looks like they've kept things simple. I speak a little Mongolian – I can get by on a good day – but I wouldn't exactly like to try and watch an entire play in the language. Sophie, bless her, already speaks more than I do, and will be completely fluent by the time she's in secondary school.

I sneak in past the old couple, mumbling a polite apology, pick up the bag of popcorn and slip into the seat. Sophie realizes I'm here only when I set the popcorn in her lap.

"Dad!" she exclaims, only half in a whisper.

I'm immediately holding my finger to my lips in a shushing gesture.

Beside Sophie sits my wife, decked out in a gorgeous green dress, low neckline, her breasts pushed up. Those long, dangly earrings I'd gotten her two Christmases ago. She looks good – damned good. How did she find the time to change between soccer practice and here? To do her hair up like that?

And here I am wearing the same denims I'd gone to the violin recital in.

"What did I miss?" I whisper.

The curtain is falling on the current scene. Sophie now lowers her voice to match mine. "Eurydice just found out about Toghachar and wept oceans. Her dad's sworn unholy revenge!" She's nearly giddy.

I say, "What's a Eurydice?"

"She's the lead, dear," says Lauren, leaning over our daughter to whisper.

Right. She must be the sheila on the posters and in the newspaper adverts.

The curtain rises again and there she is, a young Asian-Australian, raven-black hair, wearing little more than a metal corset and miniskirt, black greaves and vambraces covering her shins and forearms. She looks good, too.

With fury on her face, the actress bellows, "Brother! Forget thine golden throne. There dost be no one that hast laid eyes upon it that shalt be alive to tell the tale, a fortnight hence." The actress is slender, petite, has a high, very feminine voice. I don't really buy her as a military commander – especially dressed in that getup – but despite the softness of her voice, she can bark commands.

I pull out the brochure out of my pocket. Eurydice Moon – that’s her name, playing the eponymous Tumelun. Has won two awards for this role. One in Perth, one in Melbourne.

Lauren had picked up the tickets for this. Ilsa’s sister, sixteen or seventeen and off to school in Wodonga, saw this production a few months back when it was being performed there, and Ilsa has been ravenous to see it herself. So too, therefore, was Sophie. I haven’t followed it, save seeing the routine adverts in the paper.

Currently on stage a drunken Asian man about the same age as Moon comes stumbling out from stage left. He holds a bottle in his hand and swaggers back and forth. “Thou slattern!” he spits, pointing at Moon.

I cringe a little, inwardly. Glancing at Lauren, she seems unperturbed. I’ve been known to swear from time to time, and every now and then Sophie will repeat one of those words. She even once repeated a certain word for her crotch that a teacher gave me earful over. I’ve been pretty careful these past few years, and we’ve tried to shelter her from the worst of things. Lauren and I were discussing just last week when we should be having ‘the talk’ with her, and we still haven’t come to a decision on it.

My wife had told me this wasn’t a children’s play, rather a general audience production, but still.

For many years now, Sophie’s favourite piece of media has been Nyoko Nabarlek, a series of picture books and childrens’ novels focusing on a pygmy rock-wallaby who wears bookish glasses, a scarf, and a bonnet with holes for her ears, who goes on a series of adventures with her oddball mates throughout the rural north. I used to read to her before bed, complete with bad attempts at different voices. She’s even written book reports on the Nyoko novels for school, with which I helped her to correct spelling mistakes. These stories are chocked full of preteen moral lessons – like that real friendship is better than faux admiration, revenge is unsatisfactory, the bunyip may look scary but sometimes the real monster is the cute quokka, crime doesn’t pay – and are surprisingly mature when it comes to things like destruction of the environment, time travel, death and grief, and gender swapping. But they are childrens’ stories. The gender bending novel, wherein Nyoko became a bearded quoll named Naoto and had to play on the boys’ team, lift weights and volunteer with the local security firm, I think used the words ‘pee parts’, but mentioned it once in a completely innocent way.

Alas, Sophie is growing up, and picture books of an anthropomorphized wallaby aren’t going to hold her attention forever. By the look of her eyes glued to the stage, this sort of historical story might become her new passion.

At least this play is in that old-timey speak, so it probably won’t crop up on the playground at school.

On stage, the drunkard continues, “Father putteth *me* in charge of this, not thou. Mine throne shan’t but take – ah, here ’tis.”

Presently, eight bearers carry onto stage an enormous litter, grunting under the weight. A vast silken canopy covers a golden, incredibly glamorous chair. An ottoman sits before it, and on either side are silken... what look like slave girls, with vaguely Islamic facial coverings, though on the rest of their bodies is little more than underwear, holding fans and sitting coyly on the platform.

Again, I wonder about the appropriateness of this for an eleven-year-old. I glance at Lauren. She reacts to the scantily-clad slave girls as though two businesswomen in pantsuits had just emerged on stage.

The drunkard grabs hold of the side of the platform, heaves himself up by the shoulder of one of the litter bearers, kisses one of the slave girls on the cheek of her facial covering, and sits on the throne, sticking his legs out to relax on the ottoman.

Sophie leans over and whispers, “That’s Tului.”

I scan the brochure again. That would be Hamilton Wong, the lead male. Originally from Darwin, the brochure says. Recently dethroned Henry Davonsworth as ‘sexiest man in the khanate’. Had acted in a Shakespeare company before he landed this role.

I assume my wife will be fantasizing about him for the next few weeks.

I reach into the bag and grab some of my daughter’s popcorn.

“Cometh, dear sister,” Wong declares, the slave girls now fanning him, “Nishapur, verily, be just over yonder.”

The litter bearers pliantly march towards stage right, while Moon mounts a pony. A rather large tabby, black and white spotted, keeps close by the woman’s mount. A leopard’s growl echoes through the theatre which comes from some source other than the cat.

Next proceeds genocide.

More than once, I consider covering Sophie’s eyes, yet she is so rapt, so giddy watching, that I can’t bring myself to take this from her. Men, women, children, cats and dogs – all slain in vast numbers at the hands of Moon, who commands her own executioners, and butchers many herself. It becomes a musical number – instrumental and a choreographed, almost dance of slaughter, but no vocals. Wave after wave of the peasantry is butchered by Moon, her executioners, cats and dogs and chattel slaughtered like rats, a hail of arrows springing left, then right, as men and women die in choreographed droves. Fire spews from methane torches above, presumably representing naphtha hurled from trebuchets. The tabby is gone now, replaced by a wood cutout of a snow leopard in lunge, jaws open, rocketing across the stage and bowling over helpless peasants – all this while Wong watches maniacally, drinking from an enormous chalice, on stage right, his shoulders being massaged by one of the slave girls.

Flames erupt from methane torches at the edges of the stage, homes and shops and gardens turning to ash, and by the end of the next act, Moon is drenched in what I presume to be tomato juice.

Wong, on his golden throne, is drinking wine from an upturned human skull.

The shah, a fat, bejewelled, moustachioed man played by actor Carlton Hammad, is played to be the villain in all this. His name is Jalal ad-Din, son of the previous king, my daughter whispers to me, and was there when Toghachar

had died in the first act. Two of Tului's 'servants', Sophie says, had escaped in the first act, and ran back to Nishapur to tell ad-Din who his marksman had slain, and ad-Din was over the moon with joy. He'd ordered an instant celebration, with dancing girls and caviar, while the peasants in the streets begged for food.

Now, as his city burns, Hammad refuses surrender, refuses to pay his soldiers, hoards food from the people as they starve. His specialized death squads fire on crowds of his own people. And it's Moon, bloodthirsty for vengeance – and, to a lesser degree, her brother, drunk and diabolical – that come off as murky antiheroes.

Throughout all of this, Sophie's eyes never leave the stage. Lauren, who I catch in my peripheral vision again and again, never shows the slightest discomfort with her daughter watching genocide. With the giddy grin on Sophie's face, after tonight, Nyoko Nabarlek will be long forgotten, replaced in Sophie's fancy by Lady Tumelun. And Lauren is acting as though the cartoon wallaby were being replaced by nothing more than a hopping kangaroo in cargo shorts eager to learn about Aboriginal culture. Lauren had always been more of... well, more of an art douche than I – perhaps I'm just not seeing the art in the bloodbath on stage.

Hammad, along with his lieutenant, finally captured as they are trying to flee, are bound by Moon's executioners. Wong marches in from stage left, downing the rest of the wine from the skull before handing it to a slave girl. The lieutenant, Mujir al-Mulk (played by a talented newcomer named James Inalchuk), a second-in-command as brutish and contemptuous as ad-Din, is dragged forward and drowned in molten silver, the stuff being poured in his eyes, ears and mouth amid cries of mercy.

As for Hammad himself, he is forced at the prodding of a gleaming scimitar up stairs, begging, pleading. He is locked in a room, chests of gold and silver and jewels all around him, and beats on the inside of the door. The lights fade, flicker, fade again. Hammad is shown sleeping, then weeping, then beating on the door again. Days are shown to have passed. Hammad's robes become increasingly dishevelled and dirty. More beating on the door, in a weakened state now. Wong, through a small slot on the door, laughs at the shah, saying, "Cannot thou eateth thine gold?"

This second act comes to a close with Moon, red from head to toe, collapsing to her knees atop a heap of bodies, crying to a dark and stormy sky. "Wherefore is there still a void within mine breast?" she wails. "I have satisfied mine bestial hunger for vengeance and blood, only to be left empty and alone, without solace. Shalt it last forevermore?"

I can see why she won the awards.

Now the lights go out, flashes occur that I think are meant to be lightening. When the lighting comes back up, a man is suspended above her, hanging in the air.

Sophie tugs at my sleeve, whispers, "That's her husband, Toghachar."

I take it he's supposed to be dead, some sort of ghost coming to her from beyond the grave. I look at the brochure again. Sure enough, the description begins, 'Following the murder of her dearest husband...'

Toghachar speaks, "Dearest lambkin, wipeth thine tears from thine visage. I darest not keep thee entwined to mine spirit. Thou did loveth me, and I thou, yet time hast cometh and hast gone. Harvest dost becometh winter and winter becometh lencten. Seasons flow as though a river, and no maiden shalt cleanse her hands in the same water twice. Time dost, invariably, pass. Thou shalt never forgetteth me, nor I thou, but mine chapter on this Earth hast cometh to its close."

Now the lights fade and the stage goes dark. There is some hasty removal of the actors playing dead, and when the lights come up again, the scene is no longer one of blood and gore, a scantily-clad, blood-drenched woman weeping to the ghost above her, but a cheery meadow, children playing, picking flowers. There are five kids – a boy and four girls – probably between the ages of five and twelve, dressed in children's deels, a small pony in the background.

The scene fades again. Now Moon is decked out in an elaborate red and gold deel, with a fantastical headdress, her hair intricately braided and her face richly powdered. That's a Mongol wedding deel, by the looks of it. Another woman is assisting her with some eyeliner. Music is playing, a subtle, seasons passing sort of score. The second woman, taller than Moon, with auburn highlights in her hair, says, her voice barely audible over the orchestra, "Now, batteth thine eyelashes and maketh thine visage a kissy demeanour."

"Tumelun's sister," whispers Sophie, barely finishing that second word.

I blink. Is that...?

No, it can't be.

I go tearing through the brochure once more. It is. Qojin Beki, the eldest sister, played by Autumn Fujimoto. I dated her sister in college.

This was back before I'd met Lauren, of course. I'd met Autumn once or twice, had a family dinner at their house once when Maddie introduced me to her parents, but I never knew her that well. She'd been doing improv classes at school, trying to get into a low-budget comedy production. She'd grown up a little, aged some – she must be... what, thirty-five now? The character, Qojin, is clearly meant to be the vapid, 'slatternly' daughter in the royal family, dressed a little skanky for a wedding, a fair amount of skin showing at her neckline. She... by Erlik's manhood, has she had a boobjob?

I'm half-inclined to lean over and tell Sophie I know that woman. But I met Lauren right after Maddie and I had broken up. Maybe I'll mention it later.

Moon doesn't make a kissy face, but instead takes the bronze and looks at herself. Then she smiles lovingly and leans in to hug Autumn.

Now the lights fade again. Moon is now in a bed, a huge belly, breathing and sweating, her face red. Autumn is there, too, along with two other women that I think are also meant to be princesses, and a midwife. It's the interior of a ger. The orchestra is still playing that winter to spring, spring to summer score, though now it's louder. You can barely

hear the midwife yelling to push.

Darkness again, and now Moon holds an infant. The spotted tabby is back, sitting at her side, and she pets it gingerly. A new man is there with her, standing over her. She smiles up at him, cradles the child, and goes to unbutton her deal to breastfeed.

Darkness once more, and now we return to the five children in the meadow, picking flowers and playing.

You couldn't tear Sophie's eyes from the stage if the fire alarm went off.

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"That was magnifistupendous," exclaims Sophie as we file out of the theatre, throwing her arms up into the air.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, sweetheart," says Lauren, a giddy smile on her face.

We make our way outside. The sidewalk is jam-packed. There's a dozen or more valets taking tickets for horses, and already there's a herd galloping by of patrons which had filed out before us. I'm trying to make my way to a valet, but I'm also holding Sophie's hand so she doesn't get lost in the crowd.

I make my way to someone and fumble for my ticket, when from behind me I hear a woman's voice bellowing. "Justice for Bumelun Boobs, justice for Bumelun Boobs."

I'm not paying attention, instead trying to listen to the valet. The voice continues, louder now. "Justice for Bumelun Boobs. She was enslaved like chattel, defiled and abused – a victim of human trafficking in this very khanate."

The gentleman takes my ticket, and now I turn back. She's a young woman, looks like a uni student, little bigger in size than Special Inspector Li. She's Vietnamese, or maybe Thai, though, by her accent, was clearly born here. Petite, dark hair, wearing a black, collared shirt and dress slacks. A nose ring. She's handing out brochures to anyone that will take one.

"Justice for Bumelun Boobs, justice for Bumelun Boobs." She's got a set of lungs on her.

She appears right in front of me. "Sir, are you aware that human trafficking of the vilest sort is happening on this very soil?"

She's got all the salesmanship of a street corner preacher. Suddenly there's a brochure in my hand, I'm looking down, she's grinning like she's a huckster found someone to play her crooked card game.

Lauren steps up immediately. "Perhaps you could avoid shouting about mammary glands and human trafficking to my preteen daughter."

Sophie is right behind me, peaking out from behind my leg.

The young woman moves on, continues shouting a little down the road.

Lauren grumbles, "The rudeness of some people."

I take a brief glance at the brochure the woman had passed me. Anti-banditry human rights group, trying to raise awareness – and raise money – for survivors of outlawry in the far west. Justine Morneau, better known to her outlaw abusers and the newspapermen as Bumelun Boobs, is now the figurehead for this advocacy group. Couple of churches involved, a quote from Prince Hülegü. Morneau has a statement about the upcoming quirltai, the first time in a couple of years all the princes and prefects will get together in a continental convention.

I remember this in the newspapers, a year or so ago. It was in the winter, if I recall. Couple of sheilas rescued from banditry so far into the back of beyond that you might as well be on the moon.

The valet appears. We get our horses, I chuck the brochure in the trash.

Sophie is sitting behind her mother in the saddle. She's as gleeful as can be. "Can I go dressed as Tumelun this year for Halloween?" she exclaims.

"Of course you can," says Lauren. "We'll go to the thrift shops next weekend and start looking for things we can use in a costume, okay? Did you want to talk to Ilsa, see if she wants to go as the brother?"

"She wouldn't want to be Tului," says Sophie.

I can just picture eleven-year-old Ilsa Sheffield trick-or-treating with a Fu Manchu moustache and an upturned human skull.

We make it home close to eleven o'clock. Sophie is practically asleep in the saddle, and I carry her to her bed and tuck her in. In her drowsy state, she mumbles something that might have been a thank you as I bring the blanket up to her shoulder, and I whisper, "I hope you had fun tonight."

Returning to the kitchen, I see Lauren has stripped out of the green dress, is boiling some water for tea wearing nothing but her panties. She casts me a subtle smile as she reaches into the cupboard for a tea bag.

I can tell what she's thinking, and I start to walk towards her. I'm still wearing the satchel under my jacket, which I slip off and drop on the kitchen counter. Suddenly I remember there's three files in there I need to read, and be up to date on by tomorrow morning.

I step up behind my wife, reach around and give her a nice caress, kiss the back of her neck. She giggles softly.

Whispering, I say, "I wish I could, dear. But I can't tonight."

"Oh come on, what's more important than this?" she asks, spinning around, looping her arms around me, kissing me as she presses her breasts into my chest.

I hold her for a second, my hand on the small of her back. I want her so badly right now. I say, "It's this case. Jad's being reassigned, I'm on joint investigation with an agent from the Ballantine Enclave."

Her hands make their way to my zipper, slide it down. "We can be quick."

I've got a couple dozen pages I need to blitz through before meeting with Li tomorrow. Maybe I could scoop Lauren

up, rush her to the bed, go down on her quickly. She's ready and willing, I can tell.

No.

With reluctance, I push her back. "I'm sorry dear. I can't tonight."

She understands. Standing mostly naked in front of me, she gives me a peck on the lips, says, "Don't be up too late."

I sit down under candlelight to begin with the files, while she heads off to bed.

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