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We scrambled down the other side of the dunes. They started to walk straight out towards the horizon but the wind was blasting in now, and bit by bit we ended up following the line of the dunes. I pointed out that since the sand was wet and muddy and there were shells and seaweed and even starfish, this was clearly the sea.

"So where's it gone, then?"

"Maybe it's vanished. Maybe your demon made it vanish. That's what it does, isn't it? Make things vanish."

"Will you stop talking about it? Don't you know it can hear you when you talk about it? If it does get us, it'll be your fault."

"If it does get you, I'll be fully surprised. Don't you know it's not real? And people don't just vanish."

"A lot of people just vanish. Practically everyone we know vanished. That's why we had to leave home - because people kept vanishing."

It was windy on the beach and I wished my jumper wasn't being used as a prayer flag. There was no one around and nothing seemed to be moving. I said, "Maybe we've already vanished. Maybe this is where you come to when you vanish."

"You'll get used to vanishing," said Chingis, who seemed to think he owned the whole beach.

I was worried that the tide would come back in without us noticing and sweep us all out to sea. Also, the wind was cold, even though Chingis said it wasn't cold and went on about how in Mongolia you knew when it was cold because there was frost and snow on the hump of your camel.

I led them back into the dunes, away from the wind and the possibility of sudden drowning. They never asked me where I was going or why. I was the guide and they were following.

"The less we know," said Chingis, "the less the demon can find out from us."

There was a rough path made from logs laid out on the sand, with gorse and nettles growing up in between the wood and on either side of the path. And poking out of the gorse there were one or two of the numbered wooden posts. Without saying anything, I followed them to the top of a high dune, where we stopped and looked down, and for a minute we didn't say anything, but they each grabbed one of my hands and squeezed it...

Down beneath us, sheltered from the wind, was a cluster of plump Mongolian yurts.

"How did you do this?" asked Nergui. "Are we home? Is this Mongolia?"

It definitely looked like Mongolia. I had no idea how I'd done it but didn't want to admit it. I just said, "Let's see."

