



CONN
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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KHAN

EMPIRE OF
SILVER

A NOVEL

KHAN
EMPIRE OF SILVER



A NOVEL OF THE KHAN EMPIRE

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CONN IGGULDEN

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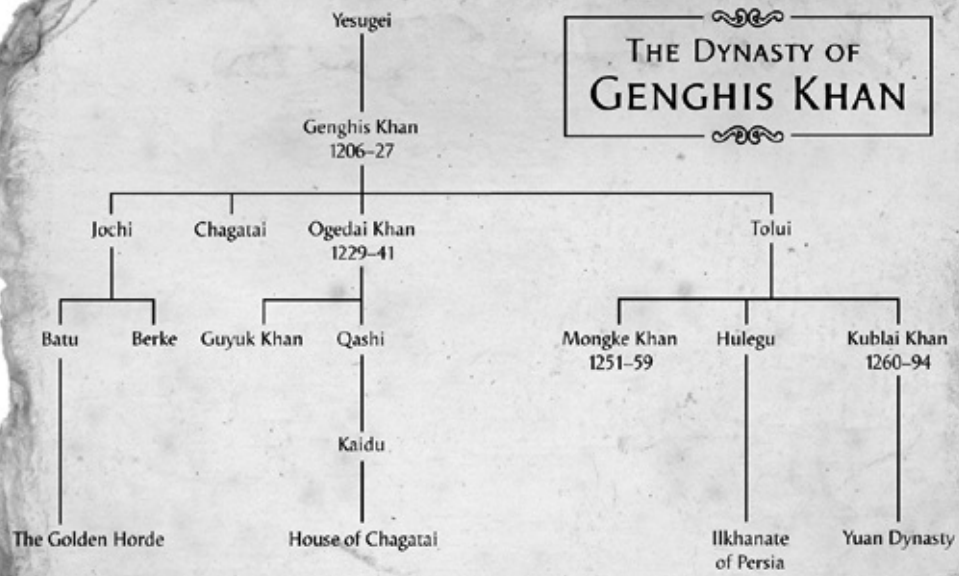
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THE DYNASTY OF
GENGHIS KHAN



PROLOGUE

He trudged through a landscape of gers, like grubby shells on the shore of some ancient sea. Poverty was all around him: in the yellowing felt, patched and repaired endlessly over generations. Scrawny kid goats and sheep ran bleating around his feet as he approached home. Batu stumbled over the animals, cursing as water slopped from the heavy buckets. He could smell pungent urine in the air, a sourness that had been missing from the breeze over the river. Batu frowned to himself at the thought of the day he had spent digging a toilet pit for his mother. He had been as excited as a child when he showed the results of his labor. She had merely shrugged, saying she was too old to go so far in the night, when good ground was all around her.

She was thirty-six years old, already broken by sickness and the years passing. Her teeth had rotted in her lower jaw and she walked like a woman twice her age, bent over and limping. Yet she was still strong enough to slap him on the rare occasions Batu mentioned his father. The last time had been just that morning, before he began the trek to the river.

At the door of her ger, he eased the buckets down and rubbed his sore hands, listening. Inside, he could hear her humming some old song from her youth, and he smiled. Her anger would have vanished as quickly as always.

He was not afraid of her. In the last year, he had grown in height and strength to the point where he could have stopped every blow, but he did not. He bore them without understanding her bitterness. He knew he could have held her hands, but he did not want to see her weep—or worse, to see her beg or barter a skin of airag to ease her misery. He hated those times, when she used the drink to hammer herself into oblivion. She told him then that he had his father's face and that she could not bear to look at him. There had been many days when he had cleaned her himself, her arms flopping over his back, her flat breasts against his chest as he used a cloth and bucket to scrub the filth from her skin. He had sworn many times he would never touch airag himself. Her example made even the smell of it hard on his stomach. When its sweetness was combined with vomit, sweat, and urine, it made him retch.

Batu looked up when he heard the horses, grateful for anything that would keep him outside a little longer. The group of riders was small by the standards of a *tuman*, barely twenty horsemen. To a boy brought up on the edges of the camp, it was a glorious sight for the morning, a different world.

The warriors rode with very straight backs, and from a distance, they seemed to radiate strength and authority. Batu envied them, even as he ached to be one of their number. Like any other boy of the gers, he knew that their red and black armor meant they were Ogedai's own Guard, the elite warriors of the tumans. Stories of their battles were sung or chanted on feast days, as well as darker tales of betrayal and blood. Batu winced at the thought. His father featured in some of those, which prompted sidelong glances at his mother and his bastard son.

Batu hawked and spat on the ground at his feet. He could still remember when his mother's ger had been of the finest white felt and gifts had arrived almost daily. He supposed she had once been beautiful, her skin fresh with youth, where now it was seamed and coarse. Those had been different days, before his father had betrayed the khan and been butchered for a traitor like a lamb in the snow. Jochi. He spat again at the word, the name. If his father had bent to the will of the great khan, Batu thought he might have been one of the warriors in red and black, riding tall among the filthy gers. Instead, he was forgotten and his mother wept whenever he talked of joining a tuman.

Almost all the young men of his age had joined, except for those with injuries or defects at birth. His friend Zan was one, a mixed-blood Chin who had been born with a sightless white eye. No one-eyed man could ever be an archer, and the warriors had turned him away with kicks and laughter, telling him to tend his flocks. Batu had drunk airag for the first time with him that night and been sick for two days. The recruiters had not come for him either, not with the betrayer's blood running in his veins. Batu had seen them out looking for strong lads, but when their gaze passed over him, they shrugged and turned away. He was as tall and strong as his father had been, but they did not want him.

With a shock, Batu realized the riders were not passing through. He watched as they stopped to speak to one of his mother's neighbors, and he took a sharp breath in amazement as the old man pointed in Batu's direction. The horsemen trotted toward him and he stood rooted, watching as they came closer. He found he did not know what to do with his hands and folded them over his chest twice before letting them dangle. From inside the ger, he heard his mother calling some question, but he did not reply. He could not. He had seen the man riding at the head of the group.

There were no pictures in the poor gers, though one or two Chin paintings had found their way into the homes of the wealthiest families. Yet Batu had seen his father's brother once. On a feast day years before, he had crept up close, peering between warriors for a sight of the great khan. Ogedai and Jochi had been with Genghis then, and time had not faded that bright memory, among the most bittersweet in all his young years. It had been a glimpse of the life he might have had, before his father threw it all away for some petty squabble Batu did not even understand.

Ogedai rode bareheaded, in armor lacquered shining black. He wore his hair in the Chin style, as a heavy rope falling from a topknot on a bare, shaved scalp. Batu drank in every detail of the man as his mother's voice called plaintively again from inside. He could see that the great khan's son was looking directly at him and speaking, but Batu was tongue-tied and dumb. The yellow eyes were bright up close, and he was lost in the realization that he was staring at his uncle by blood.

"Is he slow-witted?" one of the warriors said. Batu shut his open mouth. "My lord Ogedai is speaking to you, boy. Are you deaf?"

Batu found himself flushing with great heat. He shook his head, suddenly irritated to have such men ride up to his mother's ger. What would they think of the patched walls, the smell of the flies in the air? It was humiliating and his shock turned quickly to anger. Even then, he did not reply. Men like these had killed his father, his mother said. The life of a ragged soldier would mean little to them.

"Have you no voice at all?" Ogedai said. He was smiling at something and Batu responded

crookedly.

"I have," he said. He saw one of the warriors reach down, but he did not expect a blow and he staggered a step as a mailed glove connected with the side of his head.

"I have, *my lord*," the warrior said without heat.

Batu shrugged as he straightened up. His ear was burning, but he'd known worse.

"I have a voice, my lord," he said, doing his best to remember the warrior's face.

Ogedai discussed him as if he wasn't present. "It wasn't just a story then. I can see my brother in his face, and he's already as tall as my father. How old are you, boy?"

Batu stood very still, trying to collect himself. Some part of him had always wondered if his mother had been exaggerating his father's position. To have it confirmed so casually was more than he could take in.

"Fifteen years," he said. He saw the warrior begin to lean forward again and added "my lord" quickly. The warrior leaned back in his saddle and nodded to him complacently.

Ogedai frowned. "You're old to be starting out. Training should begin at seven or eight at the latest, if you're ever to draw a good bow." He saw Batu's confusion and smiled, pleased to be able to do such a thing. "Still, I will be watching you. Report to General Jelme tomorrow. He has his camp about a hundred miles to the north, near a village by a cliff. You can find it?"

"I have no horse, my lord," Batu said.

Ogedai glanced at the warrior who had struck him, and the man raised his eyes to heaven before dismounting. He passed the reins into Batu's hands.

"Can you ride at least?" the warrior said.

Batu was awed as he took the reins and patted the muscular neck. He had never touched an animal as fine.

"Yes. Yes, I can ride."

"Good. This mare is not your horse, understand? She will carry you to your post, but then you will take some old swayback and return her to me."

"I don't know your name," Batu said.

"Alkhun, boy. Ask anyone in Karakorum and they'll know me."

"The city?" Batu asked. He had heard of the stone thing rising from the soil on the back of a million workers, but until then, he had not believed it.

"More a camp than a city at the moment, though that is changing," Alkhun confirmed. "You can send the horse by the way-station riders, but tell them to go easy with her. I'll take an whip marks out of your hide. Oh, and welcome to the army, boy. My lord Ogedai has plans for you. Don't disappoint him."



A. D. 1230

The air swirled with marble dust that glittered as it caught the evening sun. Ogedai's head was full as he guided his horse down the main thoroughfare, taking in every sight and sound around him. There was a sense of urgency in the cacophony of hammer blows and shouted orders. The Mongol tumans had gathered outside the city. His generals, his people, had been summoned there to see what two years of labor had created: a city in a wilderness, with the Orkhon River tamed and bent to his will.

Ogedai reined in for a moment to watch a group of workmen unload a cart. Nervous under his gaze, the laborers used ropes, pulleys, and sheer numbers to maneuver blocks of white marble onto low sledges that could be dragged into the workshops. Each milky block was subtly veined in a light blue that pleased Ogedai. He owned the quarry that had birthed the stones, hundreds of miles to the east, just one of a thousand purchases he had made in the last years.

There was no doubt he had been extravagant, spending gold and silver as if it had no value. He smiled at the thought, wondering what his father would have made of the white city rising in the wilderness. Genghis had despised the anthills of humanity, but these were not the ancient stones and teeming streets of an enemy. This was new and it belonged to the nation.

There had never been a treasury like the one he had inherited, amassed from the wealth of China and Khwarezm, yet never spent by its khan. With the tribute from Yenking alone Ogedai could have sheathed every new home in white marble or even jade if he had wanted. He had built a monument to his father on the plains, as well as a place where he himself could be khan. He had built a palace with a tower that rose above the city like a white sword, so that all men could see the nation had come far from simple gers and herds.

For his gold, a million men had come to work. They had crossed plains and deserts with just a few animals and tools, coming from as far off as Chin lands or the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Kabul. Masons and carpenters from Koryo had made the journey, called to the west by rumors of a new city being built on a river of coins. Bulgars brought stocks of raw clays, charcoal, and hardwood in great caravans from their forests. The city filled with traders, builders, potters, foodsellers, thieves, and scoundrels. Farmers scenting a profit brought their carts for days of travel, all for the strings of metal coins. Ogedai gave them gold and silver from the earth, melted and shaped. In return they gave him a city, and he did not find it a bad bargain. For the present, they were the colorful crowds of his city, speaking in a hundred tongues and cooking a thousand different foods and spices. Some of them would be allowed to stay, but he was not building it for them.

Ogedai saw green-handed dyers flatten themselves against the walls, their red turbans dipping in respect. His Guards cleared the way ahead, so the son of Genghis could ride almost in a dream. He had *made* this place from the camp of gers his father had known. He had

made it real, in stone.

It still amazed him. He had not paid for women to travel with his workers, but they had come with their husbands and fathers. He had wondered for a time how he would establish the businesses every city needed to thrive, but traders had approached his chancellor offering horses or more silver to lease new properties. The city was more than a simple collection of houses. Already it had a vitality of its own, far beyond his control.

Yet not completely. A quirk in the plans had created an area of small alleyways in the south of his city. Criminal gangs had begun to flourish there until Ogedai heard. He had ordered eight hundred buildings torn down, the whole area redesigned and rebuilt. His own Guard had supervised the hangings.

The street fell quiet as he passed, the laborers and their masters bowing their heads as they saw the man who held the power of life and death and gold over all of them. Ogedai took a deep breath of the dusty air, enjoying the taste of it on his tongue and the thought that he was literally breathing in his creation. Ahead, he could see the towers of his palace, crowned in a dome of gold beaten thinner than the paper of his scribes. It raised his spirits to see it like sunlight trapped and held in his city.

The street widened as it grew before him, its stone gutters polished. That section had been finished months before and the bustling crowds of laborers fell behind. As Ogedai trotted on, he could not help glancing at the boundary walls that had so confused his Chin architects and laborers. Even from the low vantage point of a saddle, there were moments when he could see over them to the green plains beyond. The walls of Yenking had not saved that city from fire or siege, he knew. *His* walls were the warriors of the khan, the tribes who had brought the Chin emperor to his knees and razed a shah's cities.

Already, Ogedai loved his creation, from the vast expanse of the central training ground, to the red-tiled roofs, the paved gutters, the temples and churches and mosques and markets and homes by the thousand, most still empty and waiting for life. Scraps of blue cloth fluttered in the plains wind on every corner, a tribute to the sky father above them all. In the south, the green foothills and mountains stretched far away and the air was warm with dust as Ogedai rejoiced in Karakorum.

The twilight was deepening into a soft gloom as Ogedai handed his reins to a servant and strode up the steps to his palace. Before he entered, he looked back once more at the city straining to be born. He could smell fresh-turned earth and, over it, the fried food of the workmen on the evening air. He had not planned the herds of livestock in corrals beyond the walls, or the squawking chickens sold on every corner. He thought of the wool market that had sprung up by the western gate. He should not have expected trade to halt simply because the city was unfinished. He had chosen a spot on an ancient traders' road to give it life—and life had begun pouring in while whole streets, whole districts, were still piles of lumber, tile, and stone.

As he looked into the setting sun, he smiled at the cooking fires on the plains surrounding the city. His people waited there, for him. His armies would be fed on rich mutton, dripping fat from the summer grass. It reminded him of his own hunger, and he moistened his lips. As he passed through a stone gate the equal of anything in a Chin city.

In the echoing hall beyond, he paused for a moment at his most extravagant gesture. A tree of solid silver stretched gracefully up to the arched ceiling, where the center point was open

to the sky like the ger of any herdsman. It had taken the silversmiths of Samarkand almost year to cast and polish, but it served his purpose. Whoever entered his palace would see and be staggered at the wealth it represented. Some would see an emblem for the silver people, the Mongol tribes who had become a nation. Those with more wisdom would see that the Mongols cared so little for silver that they used it as a casting metal.

Ogedai let his hand slide down the bole of the tree, feeling the metal chill his fingers. The spreading branches reached out in a parody of life, gleaming like a white birch in moonlight. Ogedai nodded to himself. He stretched his back as lamps were lit by slaves and servants around him, throwing black shadows and making the evening seem suddenly darker outside.

He heard hurrying footsteps and saw his manservant, Baras'aghur, approaching. Ogedai winced at the man's keen expression and the bundle of papers under his arm.

"After I have eaten, Baras. It has been a long day."

"Very well, my lord, but you have a visitor: your uncle. Shall I tell him to wait on your pleasure?"

Ogedai paused in the act of unbuckling his sword belt. All three of his uncles had come to the plains around Karakorum at his order, gathering their tumans in great camps. He had forbidden them all from entering the city, and he wondered who would have disobeyed him. He suspected it would be Khasar, who regarded orders and laws as tools for other men rather than himself.

"Who is it, Baras?" Ogedai asked quietly.

"Lord Temuge, master. I have sent servants to tend him, but he has been waiting now for a long time."

Baras'aghur made a gesture to indicate a sweep of the sun in the sky, and Ogedai pursed his lips in irritation. His father's brother would be well aware of the nuances of hospitality. Simply by arriving when Ogedai was not there to greet him, he had created an obligation. Ogedai assumed it was deliberate. A man like Temuge was too subtle not to grasp the slightest advantage. Yet the order had gone out for the generals and princes to remain on the plains.

Ogedai sighed. For two years, he had readied Karakorum to be the jewel in an empire. He had had a splendid isolation and he had maneuvered to keep it so, his enemies and friends always off balance. He had known it could not last forever. He steeled himself as he walked after Baras'aghur to the first and most sumptuous of his audience rooms.

"Have wine brought to me immediately, Baras. And food—something simple, such as the warriors are eating on the plain."

"Your will, my lord," his servant said without listening, his thoughts on the meeting to come.

The footsteps of the two men were loud in the silent halls, clicking and echoing back at them. Ogedai did not glance at the painted scenes that usually gave him so much pleasure. He and Baras'aghur walked under the best work of Islamic artists, and it was only toward the end that Ogedai looked up at a blaze of color, smiling to himself at the image of Genghis leading a charge at the Badger's Mouth pass. The artist had asked a fortune for a year's work, but Ogedai had doubled his price when he saw it. His father still lived on those walls, as well as in his memory. There was no art of painting in the tribes he knew, and such things could still make him gasp and stand in awe. With Temuge waiting, however, Ogedai barely nodded.

to his father's image before sweeping into the room.

The years had not been kind to his father's brother. Temuge had once been as fat as a feasting calf, but then lost the weight rapidly, so that his throat sagged into flaps of skin and he looked far older than his years. Ogedai looked at his uncle coldly as he rose from a silk-covered chair to greet him. It was an effort to be courteous to a man who represented the end of his time apart. He had no illusions. The nation waited impatiently for him and Temuge was just the first to breach his defenses.

"You are looking well, Ogedai," Temuge said.

He came forward as if he might embrace his nephew, and Ogedai struggled with a spasm of irritation. He turned away to Baras, letting his uncle drop his arms unseen.

"Wine and food, Baras. Will you stand there, staring like a sheep?"

"My lord," Baras'aghur replied, bowing immediately. "I will have a scribe sent to you to record the meeting."

He left at a run and both men could hear the slave's sandals clattering into the distance.

Temuge frowned delicately. "This is not a formal visit, Ogedai, for scribes and records."

"You are here as my uncle then? Not because the tribes have selected you to approach me? Not because my scholar uncle is the one man whom all the factions trust enough to speak to me?"

Temuge flushed at the tone and the accuracy of the remarks. He had to assume Ogedai had as many spies in the great camps as he had himself. That was one thing the nation had learned from the Chin. He tried to judge his nephew's mood, but it was no easy task. Ogedai had not even offered him salt tea. Temuge swallowed drily as he tried to interpret the level of censure and irritation in the younger man.

"You know the armies talk of nothing else, Ogedai." Temuge took a deep breath to steady his nerves. Under Ogedai's pale yellow eyes, he could not shake the idea that he was reporting to some echo of Genghis. His nephew was softer in body than the great khan, but there was a coldness in him that unnerved Temuge. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

"For two years, you have ignored your father's empire—" Temuge began.

"Do you think that is what I have done?" Ogedai interrupted.

Temuge stared at him. "What else am I to think? You left the families and tumans in the field, then built a city while they herded sheep. For two years, Ogedai!" He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "There are some who say your mind has broken with grief for your father."

Ogedai smiled bitterly to himself. Even the mention of his father was like tearing the scab off a wound. He knew every one of the rumors. He had started some of them himself, to keep his enemies jumping at shadows. Yet he was the chosen heir of Genghis, the first khan of the nation. The warriors had almost deified his father, and Ogedai was certain he had nothing to fear from mere gossip in the camps. His relatives were a different matter.

The door swung open to reveal Baras'aghur and a dozen Chin servants. In moments, they had surrounded the two men, placing bronze cups and food on a crisp white cloth before them. Ogedai gestured for his uncle to sit cross-legged on the tiled floor, watching with interest as the older man's knees creaked and made him wince. Baras'aghur sent the servants away and then served tea to Temuge, who accepted the bowl in relief with his right hand, sipping as formally as he would have in any ger of the plains. Ogedai watched eagerly as re-

wine gurgled into his own cup. He emptied it quickly and held it out before Baras'aghur could move away.

Ogedai saw his uncle's gaze flicker over the scribe Baras'aghur had summoned, standing with a respectful attitude against the wall. He knew Temuge understood the power of the written word as well as anyone. It had been he who had collected the stories of Genghis and the founding of a nation. Ogedai owned one of the first volumes, copied carefully and bound in hard-wearing goatskin. It was among his most prized possessions. Yet there were times when a man preferred not to be recorded.

"Give us privacy, Baras," Ogedai said. "Leave the jug, but take your scribe with you."

His manservant was too well trained to hesitate, and it was but moments until the two men were alone once again. Ogedai drained his cup and belched.

"Why have you come to me tonight, Uncle? In a month, you can enter Karakorum free with thousands of our people, for a feast and a festival they will talk of for years."

Temuge studied the younger man before him. The unlined face looked weary and stern. Ogedai had chosen a strange burden for himself, with this city. Temuge knew there were only a handful of men in the camps who cared more than a bronze coin for Karakorum. To the Mongol generals who had known Genghis, it was a colossal conceit of white marble and Chinese design. Temuge wished he could tell the young man how much he loved the creation without its seeming like greasy flattery. Yet he did love it. It was the city he had once dreamed of building, a place of wide streets and courtyards and even a library, with thousands of clean oak shelves lying empty for the treasures they would one day hold.

"You are not a fool, Ogedai," Temuge said. "It was not by chance that your father chose you over your older brothers." Ogedai looked up sharply and Temuge nodded to him. "A thousand times I wonder if you are a strategist like General Tsubodai. For two years, the nation has been without a leader, without a path, yet there has been no civil war, no struggle between princes."

"Perhaps they saw my personal tuman riding among them, my scribes and spies," Ogedai replied softly. "There were always men in red and black watching them for treachery."

Temuge snorted. "It was not fear but confusion that held them. They could not see your plan, so they did nothing. You are your father's heir, but you did not call them to take the oath. No one understands it, so they wait and watch. They *still* wait to see what you will do next."

Temuge saw Ogedai's mouth twitch as if he wanted to smile. He longed to know his nephew's mind, but with this new generation, who knew how they thought?

"You have built your city on the plains, Ogedai. The armies have gathered at your call, but now they are here and many of them have seen this glorious place for the first time. Do you expect them simply to bend the knee and give their oath? Because you are your father's son? He has other surviving sons, Ogedai. Have you considered them at all?"

Ogedai smiled at his uncle, amused at the way the man seemed to be trying to pierce his secrets with his gaze. There was one he would not find, no matter how closely he peered. He felt the wine spread its glow inside him, easing his pain like a caress.

"If that was my intention, Uncle—to win two years of peace for myself and build a city—well, I have done it, have I not? Perhaps that is all I wanted."

Temuge spread his hands. "You do not trust me," he said, genuine hurt in his voice.

Ogedai chuckled. "As much as I trust anyone, I promise you."

"A clever answer," Temuge said coldly.

"Well, you are a clever man. It's what you deserve," Ogedai snapped. All the lightness had gone from his manner as he leaned forward. Imperceptibly, his uncle eased himself back.

"At the new moon," Ogedai went on, "I will take the khan's oath of every officer and prince of the blood in the nation. I do not have to explain myself, Uncle. They will bend the knee to me. Not because I am my father's son, but because I am my father's chosen *heir* and the leader of the nation."

He caught himself, as if he was about to say too much, and Temuge watched a shutter drop over his emotions. Here was one son who had learned the cold face early.

"You did not tell me why you came to me tonight, Uncle," Ogedai went on.

Temuge let out a sigh, knowing the moment had slipped away. "I came to make sure you understood the danger, Ogedai."

"You are frightening me," Ogedai said with a smile.

Temuge flushed. "I am not threatening you."

"Where can this terrible danger spring from then, in my city of cities?"

"You mock me, though I traveled here to help you and to see this thing you have built."

"It is beautiful, is it not?" Ogedai said.

"It is wonderful," Temuge said, with such transparent honesty that Ogedai looked more thoughtfully at his uncle.

"In truth," Ogedai said, "I have been considering the need for a man to oversee my library here, to collect scrolls from all corners of the world until men of learning everywhere know the name of Karakorum. It is a foolish dream, perhaps."

Temuge hesitated. The idea was thrilling to him, but he was suspicious.

"Are you still mocking me?" he said softly.

Ogedai shrugged. "Only when you blow like an old sheep with your warnings. Will you tell me to watch my food for poison, I wonder?" He saw Temuge's face grow mottled as his peevishness resurfaced, and he smiled.

"It is a real offer. Any other man in the tribes can herd sheep and goats. Only you could herd scholars, I think. You will make Karakorum famous. I want it to be known from sea to sea."

"If you set such a value on my wits then, Ogedai," Temuge said, "you will listen to me, this once."

Ogedai sighed. "Speak then, Uncle, if you feel you must," he said.

"For two years, the world has waited for you. No one has dared to move a soldier for fear they would be the first example you made. Even the Chin and the Sung have been quiet. They have been like deer who smell a tiger somewhere close. That has come to an end. You have summoned the armies of the nation, and a month from now, if you live, you will be khan."

"If I live?" Ogedai said.

"Where are your Guards now, Ogedai? You have called them back and no one feels the suspicious eyes riding through the camps. Did you think it would be easy? If you fell from the roof tonight and broke your head on all this stone, who would be khan at the new moon?"

"My brother Chagatai has the best claim," Ogedai said lightly. "Unless my son, Guyuk, is allowed to live. Tolui too is in the line of my father. He has sons grown strong: Mongke and

Kublai, Arik-Boke and Hulegu. In time, they could all be khans.” He smiled, amused at something Temuge could not see. “The seed of Genghis is strong, it seems. We all have sons but we still look to Tsubodai. Whoever has my father’s unbeatable general will carry the army, don’t you think? Without him, it would be civil war. Is that all those with power? I have not mentioned my grandmother. Her teeth and eyes are gone now, but she can still be fearsome when roused.”

Temuge stared at him. “I hope your actions are not as careless as your words. Double your personal guard at least, Ogedai.”

Ogedai nodded. He didn’t bother to mention that the ornate walls concealed watching men. Two different crossbows were centered on Temuge’s chest at that very moment. It would take only a particular gesture of Ogedai’s hand for his uncle to be ripped from life.

“I have heard you. I will consider what you have said. Perhaps you should not take on the role in my library and university until the new moon has come and gone. If I do not survive it, my successor may not have such an interest in Karakorum.” He saw the words sink in and knew that at least one of the men of power would be working to keep him alive. All men had a price, but it was almost never gold.

“I must sleep now, Uncle,” Ogedai said. “Every day is full of plans and work.” He paused at the moment of rising and went on. “I will tell you this much. I have not been deaf or blind these last years. My father’s nation has ceased to conquer for a time, but what of that? The nation has been fed on milk and blood, ready to be sent out into the world with fresh strength. And I have built my city. Do not fear for me, Uncle. I know everything I need to know of the generals and their loyalties.”

He came to his feet with the suppleness of youth, while his uncle had to accept his outstretched hand and winced as his knees cracked aloud.

“I think your father would be proud of you, Ogedai,” Temuge said.

To his surprise, Ogedai chuckled.

“I doubt it. I have taken Jochi’s bastard son and made him a prince and a *minghaan* officer. I will raise Batu further still, to honor my brother’s memory. Genghis would never forgive me for that.” He smiled at the thought. “And he would not have loved my Karakorum, of that I am certain.”

He called for Baras’aghur to lead Temuge out of the dark city, back to the stifling air of treachery and suspicion that was so thick in the great camps.

Ogedai picked up his jug and cup, filling the goblet once again as he walked to a stone balcony and looked out at the moonlit streets. There was a breeze blowing, cooling his skin as he stood there with his eyes shut. His heart ached in his chest and he gripped his arm as the pain spread. He felt fresh sweat break out as his veins throbbed and pulsed at frightening speed, soaring for moments until he felt dizzy. He reached out blindly and held the stone silently, breathing slowly and deeply until the weakness left him and his heart beat slowly once again. A great pressure released in his head, and the flashing lights dwindled to mere points of shadows that only he could see. He looked up at the cold stars, his expression bitter. Below his feet, another chamber had been cut from the stones. At times, when the pains came with the force that left him trembling and weak, he had not expected even to finish it. Yet he had. His tomb was ready and he still lived. Cup by cup he emptied the jug, until his senses swam.

“How long do I have left?” he whispered drunkenly to himself. “Is it days now, or years?”

He imagined he talked to the spirit of his father and waved the cup as he spoke, spilling some wine. "I was at *peace*, Father. At peace, when I thought my time was at an end. What did you care for your generals and their ... petty struggles? Yet my city has risen and the nation has come, and I am *still* here. What do I do now?"

He listened for an answer in the darkness, but there was nothing.

Tolui stroked his wife's damp hair idly as he lay back and watched his four sons whoop and splash in the waters of the Orkhon. The sun was warm as they lay there, and only the presence of his guards nearby prevented complete relaxation. Tolui grimaced at the thought. There was no peace to be had in the camp, with every man wondering whether he was a supporter of Chagatai or Ogedai or the generals—or perhaps one who would inform for any of them. At times, he wished his two older brothers would settle it somewhere quiet, so that he could enjoy being alive on such a day, with a beautiful woman in his arms and four healthy sons pleading to be allowed to swim over a waterfall. He had forbidden it once, but he saw that Kublai had dared Mongke once again and the two of them were creeping closer and closer to the bank, where a goat path led up to the source of the roaring river. Tolui watched from under half-closed lids as the two older boys glanced guiltily at their parents, hoping they were asleep in the warm sun. Arik-Boke and Hulegu were in on it, of course, their bony boys' frames almost shaking with excitement.

“Do you see them?” Sorhatani murmured.

Tolui smiled. “I am half tempted to let them try it. They swim like otters, both of them.”

It was still a new skill to tribes raised on grassy plains. For those who learned to ride before they could speak, the rivers were the source of life for the herds, or an obstacle when they were swollen in floods. Only recently had they become a source of pleasure to the children of the tribe.

“You won't be the one who has to soothe their wounds when they take the skin off their backs,” Sorhatani said, relaxing into him, “or splint their bones.”

Yet she said nothing as Mongke suddenly darted for the track, his naked body gleaming. Kublai shot a last, sharp look at his parents, but neither moved, and in an instant, he was out as well.

Tolui and Sorhatani both sat up as soon as the boys were out of sight. They exchanged a private look of amusement as Arik-Boke and Hulegu craned to see the top of the plunging falls above.

“I don't know who is worse, Mongke or Kublai,” Sorhatani said, pulling a grass stalk and chewing the end.

He chuckled and they both said “Kublai” together.

“Mongke reminds me of my father,” Tolui said a little wistfully. “He fears nothing.”

Sorhatani snorted softly. “Then you will remember what your father once said when he had to choose between two men to lead a thousand.”

“I was there, woman,” Tolui said, his mind leaping to her point. “He said Ussutai feared nothing and felt no hunger or thirst. That was why he was unfit to command.”

“Your father was wise. A man needs to feel a little fear, Tolui, if only to have the pride of conquering it.”

A wild shout made them both look up as Mongke came over the falls, yelling in excitement as he managed a crude dive and plunged into the pool at its foot. The drop was little more than ten feet, but to a boy of eleven, it must have been terrifying. Tolui relaxed and chuckled as he saw his oldest son surface, blowing and gasping, his teeth very white against his sun-browned skin. Arik-Boke and Hulegu cheered, their voices high as they looked up again for Kublai.

He came over backwards in a tumble of limbs, moving so fast that he left the torrent of water and fell through empty air. Tolui winced at the flat smack that carried clearly across the water. He watched as the other three looked for him, calling and pointing to one another. Sorhatani felt her husband's arms tense as he prepared to leap up, but then Kublai surfaced, roaring. His entire body was flushed red on one side, and he limped as he climbed out, but they could see he was panting with exhilaration.

"I'll have to beat some sense into them," Tolui said.

His wife shrugged. "I'll get them dressed and send them to you."

He nodded, only half aware that he had waited for her approval to punish the boy. Sorhatani smiled at him as he walked away. He was a good man, she thought. Not perhaps the strongest of the brothers, nor the most ruthless, but in all other ways, the best of the sons of Genghis.

As she stood and gathered the clothes her sons had left on every bush around them, she recalled the one man who had made her afraid in her life. She cherished the memory of the time when Genghis had looked on her as a woman, rather than just the wife of one of his sons. It had been on the shore of a lake, thousands of miles away in a different land. She had seen the khan's eyes brighten at her youth and beauty, just for an instant. She had smiled at him then, terrified and awed.

"Now, there was a man," she murmured to herself, shaking her head with a smile.

Khasar stood on the wooden base of the cart, leaning back against the white felt of the khangar. It was twice as wide and half as high again as the homes of their people, and Genghis had used it for meeting his generals. Ogedai had never claimed the enormous construction, so heavy that the cart had to be pulled by six oxen. After the death of the great khan, it had stood empty for months before Khasar made it his own. As yet, no one had dared to dispute his right to it.

Khasar smelled the fried marmot meat Kachiun had brought for the midday meal.

"Let's eat outside. It's too fine a day to sit in the gloom," he said.

As well as the steaming platter, Kachiun carried a fat skin of airag, which he tossed to his brother.

"Where are the others?" he said, placing the platter on the edge of the boards and sitting with his legs swinging.

Khasar shrugged. "Jebe said he would be here. I sent a messenger to Jelme and Tsuboda. They'll come or they won't; it's up to them."

Kachiun blew air from his lips in irritation. He should have passed on the messages himself to be sure his brother didn't forget or use the wrong words. There was no point in berating the man who was digging his fingers into the pile of steaming scraps. Khasar didn't change and it was both infuriating and comforting at times.

“He’s nearly finished that city of his,” Khasar said, chewing. “Strange-looking place, with those low walls. I could ride right over them.”

“I think that is his point,” Kachiun replied. He took a pouch of unleavened bread from another pot, waving his hand to clear the steam as he filled it with meat. Khasar looked baffled and Kachiun sighed.

“We are the walls, brother. He wants people to see that he does not have to hide behind stones like the Chin. Do you understand? The tumans of our army are the walls.”

“Clever,” Khasar said, munching. “But he’ll build walls eventually, you watch. Give him a year or two and he’ll be adding stones. Cities make you afraid.”

Kachiun stared at his brother, wondering if he had managed a bit of real wisdom. Khasar noticed his sudden interest and grinned.

“You’ve seen it. If a man has gold, he lives with the terror that someone will take it away from him, so he builds walls around it. Then everyone knows where the gold is, so they come and take it. That’s the way it always goes, brother. Fools and gold, together.”

“I never know if you think like a child or a very wise man,” Kachiun said, filling another pouch and chewing.

Khasar tried to say “wise man” around a large mouthful and choked, so that Kachiun had to pound him on his back. They had been friends for a very long time.

Khasar wiped tears from his eyes and took a deep breath and then a swig of airag from the bulging skin.

“He’ll need walls at the new moon, I should think.”

Automatically, Kachiun looked to see if anyone could overhear them. They were surrounded by empty grass, with just their two ponies grazing nearby. Beyond them, warriors were busy in the sun, preparing for the great competition Ogedai had promised. There would be prizes of gray horses and armor for wrestlers and archers, even for those who won footraces across the plains. Everywhere they looked, men were training in groups, but there was no one loitering too close. Kachiun relaxed.

“You have heard something?”

“Nothing, but only a fool would expect the oath-taking to go without a hitch. Ogedai’s not a fool and he’s not a coward. He faced me when I was running wild after ...” He hesitated and his eyes grew distant and cold for a moment. “After Genghis died.” He took another swig of the harsh spirit. “If he’d taken the oaths immediately, not a man in the tribes would have dared raise a hand to him; but now?”

Kachiun nodded grimly. “Now Chagatai has come into his strength, and half the nation wonders why he isn’t going to be khan.”

“There will be blood, brother. One way or another,” Khasar replied. “I just hope Ogedai knows when to be forgiving and when to cut throats.”

“He has us,” Kachiun said. “That is why I wanted to meet here, to discuss our plans for seeing him safe as khan.”

“I haven’t been summoned to his white city for my advice, Kachiun, have you? You don’t know whether he trusts us more than anyone else. Why should he? You could be khan if you wanted. You were Genghis’s heir while his sons grew.” Khasar saw his brother’s irritation. The camp was full of such talk and both men were tired of it, but Khasar just shrugged. “Better you than Chagatai, anyway. Have you seen him out running, with his bondsmen? S

young, so *virile*." He leaned over the edge of the cart and spat deliberately on the ground.

Kachiun smiled. "Jealous, brother?"

"Not of him, though I do miss being young sometimes. Now some part of me is always aching. Old wounds, old knees, that time when you completely failed to stop me getting speared in my shoulder—it all hurts."

"It is better than the alternative," Kachiun said.

Khasar snorted.

They looked round as Jebe approached, with Tsubodai. Both of Genghis's generals were in their prime, and Kachiun and Khasar shared a glance of private humor at the way they came, striding confidently across the summer grass.

"Tea in the pot, meat in the bowl," Khasar said without ceremony as they climbed the steps up to the old khan's ger. "We are discussing how to keep Ogedai alive long enough for him to carry the white tails."

The symbol of the united tribes still fluttered above his head, horse tails that had once been a riot of tribal colors, until Genghis had bleached them pale and made them one. No one had dared to remove the symbol of power, any more than they had queried Khasar's use of the cart.

Tsubodai made himself comfortable on the wooden edge, his feet dangling as he dug into the meat and bread. He was aware that both Kachiun and Khasar were waiting for what he would say. He did not enjoy the attention and he ate slowly and cleared his throat with airag.

In the silence, Jebe leaned back against the felt wall and looked at the city in the distance, a white haze in the warm air. He could see the golden dome of Ogedai's palace, and it struck him that it resembled a yellow eye staring out of the city.

"I have been approached," Jebe said. Tsubodai stopped chewing and Khasar put down the skin of airag as he was about to drink. Jebe shrugged. "We knew one of us would be, sooner or later. It was a stranger to me, wearing no marks of rank."

"Sent by Chagatai?" Kachiun said.

Jebe nodded. "Who else? But no names were mentioned. They do not trust me. It was just a light touch, to see which way I would jump."

Tsubodai grimaced. "You jumped here, in full view of the tribes. No doubt they are watching you now."

"What of it?" Jebe said, bristling. "I was loyal to Genghis. Do I demand to be known by my birth name, as Zurgadai? I carry the name Genghis gave me, and I am loyal to the son he named as heir. What do I care who sees me talking with his generals?"

Tsubodai sighed and put aside the final piece of his meal. "We know who is most likely to disrupt the oath-taking. We do not know how they will do it, or how many men will support them. If you had come to me quietly, Jebe, I would have told you to agree to anything they say and learn their plans."

"Who wants to go creeping about in the dark, Tsubodai?" Khasar said scornfully. He looked to his brother for support, but Kachiun shook his head.

"Tsubodai is right, brother. This isn't just a matter of showing we support Ogedai and all right-thinking men following us. I wish it was. There was never a khan of the nation before Genghis, so there are no laws for how he passes on his power."

"The khan makes the laws," Khasar replied. "I didn't see anyone complaining when he

made us all take an oath to Ogedai as heir. Even Chagatai got down on his knees for that.”

“Because his choice was to fall flat or die,” Tsubodai said. “Now Genghis is gone and the men around Chagatai are whispering in his ear. They are saying the only reason he was named heir was his struggle with his brother, Jochi, but Jochi is dead.”

He paused for a moment, thinking of the blood that had splashed on snow. His face was utterly blank and they could not read him.

“There are no traditions to tell us how to act,” Tsubodai went on wearily. “Yes, Genghis chose his heir, but his mind was clouded with anger over Jochi. It was not so many years ago that he favored Chagatai over all his brothers. The nation talks of nothing else. At times, I think Chagatai could press his claim *openly* and become khan. He could walk right up to Ogedai with a sword and fully half the army would not stop him.”

“The other half would tear him to shreds,” Khasar said.

“And in a stroke, we would have a civil war that would break the nation in two. Everything Genghis built, all our strength, wasted on an internal struggle. How long would it be then before the Chin rose against us, or the Arabs? If that is the future, I would rather see Chagatai take the horse-tail banner today.” Tsubodai held up his hand as they began to protest. “That is not a traitor speaking, do not think it. Have I not shown that I followed Genghis, even when everything in me cried out that he was wrong? I will not fail his memory. I will see Ogedai as khan, on my word.”

Once again he thought of a young man who had believed his promise of safe passage. Tsubodai knew his word was worthless, where it had once been iron. It was an old grief, but on some days he bled as if he had just been cut.

“You had me worried,” Khasar said.

Tsubodai did not smile. He was younger than both the brothers, but they waited patiently for him to speak. He was the great general, the master who could plan any attack on any terrain and somehow snatch victory. With Tsubodai, they knew Ogedai had a chance. Kachiufrowned at the thought.

“You should look to your own safety as well, Tsubodai. You are too valuable to lose.”

Tsubodai sighed. “To hear such words while I sit by the ger of my khan. Yes, I will be careful. I am an obstacle to the one we all fear. You should be sure that your guards are men you trust with your life, who cannot be bribed or threatened without them coming to you. If a man’s wife and children go missing, will you still trust him to watch you as you sleep?”

“That is an ugly thought,” Jebe said, with a wince. “You truly think we are at that point? On such a day, I can hardly believe in knives in every shadow.”

“If Ogedai becomes khan,” Tsubodai went on, “he could have Chagatai killed, or simply rule well or badly for forty years. Chagatai will not wait, Jebe. He will try to arrange his death, an accident, or he will try to take it by force. I cannot see him sitting idly by while his life and ambition is decided by others. Not the man I know.”

Somehow the sun seemed less bright after such cold words.

“Where is Jelme?” Jebe asked. “He told me he would be here.”

Tsubodai rubbed the back of his neck, making it crack. He had not slept well for many weeks, though he would not mention it to these men.

“Jelme is loyal; don’t worry about him,” he muttered. Some of the other men frowned.

“Loyal to which son of Genghis?” Jebe said. “There is no clear path in this, and if we c

not find one, the nation could be torn apart.”

“Then we should kill Chagatai,” Khasar said. The others grew still and he grinned at them. “I am too old to be guarding my words,” he said with a shrug. “Why should he have it all his own way? Why should I check my personal guards, to be sure no one has turned them against me? We could end this today and Ogedai would be khan at the new moon with no threat of war.” He saw their cold expressions and spat once again. “I won’t dip my head at your disapproval, so don’t expect it. If you prefer to watch your backs for a month and make secret, clever plans, that is up to you. I could cut right through it and see an end. What do you think Genghis would say, if he were one of us, here? He’d walk right in and cut Chagatai’s throat.”

“He might,” Tsubodai admitted, who knew better than most how ruthless the khan had been. “If Chagatai was a fool, I would agree with you. If there could be surprise, yes, it could work. I’d ask you to test it, but you’d get yourself killed. Instead, take my word on this—Chagatai is ready for such a move. Any group of armed men approaching his tuman is met with bristling weapons and warriors ready to charge. He plans murder every day, so he fears it as well.”

“Between us we command enough men to get to him,” Khasar said, though less confidently.

“Perhaps. If only his ten thousand responded, we could still reach him, but I think it has already gone further than that. Whatever game Ogedai has been playing, he has given his brother two years to whisper and make promises. Without a khan’s shadow, *all* of us were forced to rule the lands around us, to act as if we were the only voice that mattered. I found it enjoyed it. Did you not feel the same?” Tsubodai glanced around at the others and shook his head. “The nation is falling apart into tribes of tumans, bound not by blood but by the generals who lead them. No, we will not attack Chagatai. My purpose is to prevent civil war, not to be the spark that sets it off.”

Khasar had lost his keen look as Tsubodai spoke, subsiding with an irritated expression.

“Then we are back to keeping Ogedai alive,” he said.

“More than that,” Tsubodai replied. “We are back to keeping enough of a nation intact for him to have something to rule as khan. I hope you did not expect me to have an answer on a single day, Khasar. We could win here and see Ogedai with the horse tails, yet watch Chagatai take away half the army and half the nation. How long would it be then before two khans and their armies were facing each other on a field of war?”

“You have made it clear, Tsubodai,” Kachiun said, “but we can’t just sit and wait for disaster.”

“No,” Tsubodai said. “Very well, I know enough to trust you. Jelme is not here because he is meeting two of the generals who may be loyal to Chagatai. I will know more when I have exchanged messages with him. I cannot meet him again—and yes, Khasar, this is the sort of secret game you despise. The stakes are too high to make a false step.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Khasar said thoughtfully.

Tsubodai shot a sharp glance at the older man. “I will also need your word, Khasar,” he said.

“On what?”

“Your word not to act on your own. It is true that Chagatai runs every day, though he does not go far from his warriors. There is a small chance you could arrange archers in place

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